

National Framework

Purpose of report

For discussion and direction.

Summary

This paper outlines the process for developing the new National Framework and some of the key issues relating to its development and potential content.

Recommendation

Members are asked to consider the issues raised in this paper and to identify any additional issues that should be taken into account in the development of a new National Framework.

Action

Officers to progress work subject to Members' comments.

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New National Framework

Background

1. The Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 provides the statutory authority for the Fire National Framework and requires:
 - 1.1 The Secretary of State to prepare a National Framework for fire and rescue authorities
 - 1.2 The Secretary of State must consult with representatives of Fire and Rescue Authorities and their employees before making significant changes to the Framework
 - 1.3 The Secretary of State must bring the Framework and any significant revisions to it, into effect by statutory instrument subject to annulment in either of the Houses of Parliament
 - 1.4 Fire and Rescue Authorities must have regard to the Framework in exercising their functions.
2. The current Fire National Framework was developed in 2007 and was set to be in force from 2008 to 2011. A new National Framework is now being developed. Much has changed in the intervening years and the new National Framework will need to reflect an era of localism which is ushering in new relationships between government, fire authorities and communities.
3. The department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) has established a National Framework officer working group to consider a new National Framework and a sub-group to look specifically at the issue of how national resilience should be dealt with within the new National Framework. A formal consultation is expected to begin later this year.

Key issues

4. In the past the National Framework has set out expectations, but it has also contained detail on the approach to meeting those expectations. The new approach to localism now brings into question whether a National Framework should comment on operational delivery. It is expected that the new National Framework will be a much slimmed down document. It

will focus on key areas of partnership with central government, particularly in the area of national resilience and also on relationship that fire authorities need to have with their communities. Areas that the new National Framework might address include safer communities, both in terms of the expectations around prevention and response; resilience to risk; and accountability to communities. It will have much less to say on issues such as equality and diversity, training and development, and improvement, on the basis that these are operational matters.

5. The aim of the new National Framework is to set out high level expectations and not be prescriptive. We will need to ensure that these basic principles, which we support, are adhered to. Integrated Risk Management Plans will remain a requirement as the means of ensuring safe communities.
6. Such an approach which leaves operational matters up to the discretion of fire authorities is completely in line with localism and we can therefore agree with the general thrust of the new Framework. There remain, however, some more difficult issues to resolve around resilience and accountability.

National Resilience

7. National resilience is expected to be the major focus of the new National Framework, which is likely to set out the respective roles of national government and fire authorities. General discussions between government and the fire authorities have highlighted the expectation that there will be a significant transfer of operational responsibility for national resilience to fire authorities. This is likely to be reflected in the new National Framework.
8. Greater operational responsibility will in practice mean that fire authorities will need to ensure that appropriate capability is in place to respond to local and national risks and to undertake a gap analysis between existing capability and what's needed to meet nationally identified risks.
9. Fire authorities cannot be expected to fund increases in capability without recourse to additional government funding, or a debate with government about priorities. In any new National Framework there will need to be a mechanism for priorities and funding to be discussed. This might mean an expansion of the role of the National Resilience Board or a new strategic governance arrangement/body, which among other things would take on a

commissioning role and would be the place where government and fire authorities agreed the level of government funding needed to meet any identified capability gaps.

10. If a national body is going to take on this commissioning role then it would seem appropriate that decisions taken should be subject to scrutiny. Fire authorities will want to ensure that they have a key role in deciding the shape of any commissioning body and any accompanying scrutiny arrangements.
11. Intra and interoperability remain key issue for fire authorities. Government does not intend to update national guidance and it will be for fire authorities collectively to ensure that, practically, they can cooperate to meet national risks. This remains a challenge when it is not clear that any money is available to develop and update appropriate guidance. .

Accountability to communities

12. Making services more accountable to the communities they serve has become an increasingly important issue. It is likely that the new National Framework will include an expectation that all fire authorities have arrangements in place for independent oversight of decision-making. The tenets of localism should ensure that the method of scrutiny is a matter for local discretion and Government should focus on outcomes. There is a lot of good practice in the sector around scrutiny and it would be counter productive for the Framework to suggest a specific model. This is an area that Members will want to comment on during the consultation on the new National Framework, but it would be helpful to get initial thoughts on the issue of scrutiny, particularly in single purpose authorities.
13. It is generally accepted that fire authorities need to be accountable to their communities. There will be a range of views on how this can best be achieved. However, it is likely that government will want to see a greater level of transparency and some degree of standardization so that local communities can easily compare the performance of their fire authority with others. A publicly available annual report could be one method, but Members might want to suggest others.

Next Steps

14. A formal consultation on the new National Framework will begin later this year with the expectation that the New Framework will be in place by

spring 2012.

15. A paper will be brought to FSMC once the consultation document has been published.

Recommendation

16. Members are asked to consider the issues raised in this paper and to identify any additional issues that should be taken into account in the development of a new National Framework.