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Sector led improvement for Fire and Rescue Authorities

Decisions

1. Members are invited to consider the proposed approach to sector-led improvement for Fire and Rescue Authorities outlined in the discussion paper.

Actions

2. LGA to action as required.

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Summary

1. This discussion paper proposes an approach for sector led improvement support for Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) following the introduction of Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA). It is intended to be a starting point for exploring the best way of supporting FRAs to achieve real and sustained improvement.

Background

2. There is a commitment arising from the Local Government White Paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, for the local government sector to provide much stronger sector-led support and challenge to drive improvement in services. The move towards a sector-led approach to driving improvement, rather than prescriptive central government intervention is something the LGA has lobbied for over several years, because all evidence shows that improvement works best when it is led by the sector.

Under CAA, inspection activity will be risk based and tailored to local circumstances. Apart from two rolling programmes of inspection relating to children's services, other inspection activity will be triggered by the area and organisational assessments.

3. The Audit Commission has already highlighted, in its fire and rescue performance assessment report in January 2008 that it has concerns that performance amongst FRAs is starting to level off – see <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports/NATIONAL-REPORT.asp?CategoryID=&ProdID=65813F7C-C7DB-41f9-BAD6-3EA0EE82B6DE&fromREPORTSANDDATA=NATIONAL-REPORT> .

Some of the general improvement needs highlighted in the report include:

- The growing gap between the rate of improvement of the highest performers and the rest – services categorised as poor or weak in 2005 were found to be not improving as quickly as those that achieved higher fire CPA scores in 2005.
- The rate of improvement was found to have slowed in almost a third (14) of FRAs which have moved down a category; 5 FRAs (10 per cent) were found to be now improving strongly compared with only 2 (4 per cent) the previous year; and 18 FRAs (39 per cent) were found to have maintained the same rate of improvement (improving adequately or improving well) as the previous year.
- No FRA was found to be performing strongly on the value for money aspect of the use of resources assessment.

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- No FRA was found to be demonstrating good practice in its approach to equalities and diversity, with the lack of a diverse workforce remaining a major issue.
- The need for improved evaluation of community safety work with a greater focus on outcomes rather than descriptions of activities undertaken.
- In terms of operational performance, whilst all fire services were found to be on track to meet the government's target for reducing total numbers of fires and performing well against national targets to reduce arson, there are concerns that performance is starting to level off. On the service assessment, a third of FRAs were found to be performing adequately.

Therefore there are improvement needs in terms of organisational effectiveness and operational service performance.

4. It is in the interest of the fire and rescue sector to take a stronger role in shaping its own improvement processes. The challenge facing the fire and rescue sector is to develop a robust approach to sector led improvement support that delivers real and sustained improvement across FRAs and which has the confidence of all stakeholders. This includes supporting any FRA with specific performance issues and addressing the growing gap between the most successful FRAs and others, and the overall slowing in the rate of improvement identified in the Audit Commission's report in January 2008.
5. Any process that delivers less than this could lead to a loss of impetus for improvement in the service. The sector needs to be able to provide means to address these issues collectively, utilising both the existing improvement architecture across the local government sector and learning from across the wider public sector, if it is to avoid the risk of central government falling back on a more directive approach.

Proposed approach to sector led improvement support

6. The LGA has worked closely with CFOA and CLG over several months to develop a proposed approach to sector led improvement support that would involve the facilitation of support to FRAs, both on an ongoing basis and following the outcome of the CAA process. Further development work is needed to identify how the approach for FRAs would integrate with the work of the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships (RIEPs) and the IDeA.
7. RIEPs have been established to help councils and their partners drive improvement and deliver efficiencies. The National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy positions RIEPs as the hub for all improvement support in a region and part of their role is

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to help councils and their partners navigate the maze of improvement support. RIEPs are therefore a vital source of advice and support for FRAs and they have a range of specific and generic support programmes available at a regional and sub regional level which FRAs are able to access. Further work is needed to ensure that FRAs are fully plugged in to the RIEPs. The relatively small size of the fire and rescue sector – comprising 46 FRAs – means that there is an outstanding need to deliver some improvement support on a national level. For example, the geographical distribution of top performing FRAs may mean that it is not possible to match a less well performing FRA with a high performing FRA within the same region and a better match could be found in a different region.

8. As set out in paper 4a accompanying this item, under the CAA process a robust self assessment and peer review process will be used by a FRA to assess the operational performance of the fire and rescue service and identify improvement needs. The Audit Commission has indicated that it will incorporate the outcomes of robust self assessment/peer review in its assessment processes – reducing its inspection activities in this area. This approach can potentially be developed over time to cover a broader range of performance areas, providing a basis for further reduction of FRA inspection by the Audit Commission. Performance issues would also be identified through the organisational and area assessments. There may also be long standing areas for improvement to be addressed by particular FRAs.

The approach to improvement support, which would require close working with the RIEPs, would include facilitating:

- The provision of advice and support to FRAs in carrying out the self and peer assessments, as required;
 - The offer of a menu of support options from which FRAs could select, for improving operational performance which could include developing mechanisms within the fire and rescue service for mutual support;
 - The offer of a menu of support options from which FRAs could select, for improving organisational effectiveness e.g. leadership and capacity issues.
9. For operational service improvement, the approach to improvement support could involve pulling together good practice case studies and developing a body of effective practice models from strong performing authorities for FRAs to access. There is the potential to create a new, or develop an existing, national peer support programme which could include matching FRAs that are similar in profile but have been assessed differently and seconding chief officers. This kind of peer

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support process would be a key element of any sector-led support programme and would need the support and endorsement of the individual FRAs.

10. For organisational effectiveness improvement, the approach to improvement could involve a facilitation role to provide access to existing improvement agencies and programmes across the wider local government sector. In particular, strong links with the RIEPs would be crucial to ensure that there is joined-up approach to improvement support across the local government sector, and to enable FRAs to access the funding and expertise of the RIEPs.
11. It is proposed that rather than create any new body, an appropriate existing organisation takes the lead in facilitating better co-ordinated improvement support from within the sector for the benefit of FRAs, and that oversight is provided by an existing political body.
12. Following discussions with CFOA, CLG and other stakeholders, CFOA has expressed a willingness to take a leading role on co-ordinating improvement support, working with FRAs, RIEPs and other stakeholders to facilitate the mutual support measures outlined at paragraph 8. It is proposed that FSMC carry out oversight as necessary, with CFOA reporting formally on sector led support on a 6-monthly basis.
13. It should be emphasised that this would not involve any compulsion for FRAs and it is not about FRAs being told what to do. Rather, it would involve CFOA building capacity within its own organisation to facilitate work to enable FRAs to access the skills, capabilities and effective practice already present in the sector. Responsibility for performance and improvement would remain the responsibility of each FRA.
14. How any costs arising from these proposals should be met would need to be determined. However a key role of the coordination function would be helping FRAs access the expertise and funding streams that the RIEPs hold.

Conclusion and next steps

15. Whilst there is a need for the fire and rescue sector to develop a robust approach to sector led improvement to help drive sustained improvement, each FRA will retain ownership of and responsibility for its own improvement. The aim of these proposals is to help the fire and rescue sector achieve real and sustained improvement across the board, and to help individual FRAs address their own

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specific performance issues. However, it is recognised that in serious instances where FRAs are unable to achieve real and sustained performance improvement, central government reserves the right to intervene.

16. The four essential criteria for progressing these plans are:

- Securing political buy-in to the proposals, highlighting to FRAs the need for a robust sector-led approach to improvement;
- Ensuring this proposed approach complements the overall approach to improvement across the local government sector;
- Agreement of CFOA to coordinate improvement support working with FRAs, RIEPs and other stakeholders;
- CLG and the Audit Commission are supportive of these proposals in principle. Indication would be needed from the Audit Commission and central government that they consider these proposals sufficiently robust to help FRAs deliver real and sustained improvement. This would need to be matched by recognition of, and appropriate links to, these measures in assessment processes and a commitment that they will take a less interventionist approach as a result.

17. Members are asked to consider the approach outlined in this discussion paper.

Subject to the conclusions reached, officers will work with CFOA, the IDeA and the RIEPs to refine the details of how sector-led improvement for FRAs could work in practice.

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