

19 January 2009

Summary

This paper summarises the main findings of the Audit Commission National Study on the fire and rescue service *Rising to the Challenge: Improving Fire Service Efficiency*. It focuses on the recommendations for Fire and Rescue Authorities and the role of the LGA in supporting Fire and Rescue Authorities to address the issues raised.

Recommendations

Members are asked to:

1. Consider the role of the LGA in supporting Fire and Rescue Authorities to improve efficiency and performance in line with the recommendations in the Audit Commission national study report.
2. Agree to the specific actions for the LGA listed under section 5.

Action

LGA officers to action as necessary

Background

1. On 17 December, the Audit Commission published their widely anticipated national study report on the fire and rescue service *Rising to the Challenge: Improving Fire Service Efficiency*

Key findings

2. The key findings of the report include:

- The fire and rescue service could save £200m if all services adopted the good practice of the best (the current collective target is for fire and rescue services to save £110m by 2011);
- Four FRAs account for nearly half of all the efficiency savings achieved to date;
- Improved local and regional collaboration would increase efficiency and effectiveness;
- However the report itself recognises that 'not all changes that the pioneering fire services have made are feasible in all local contexts';
- The report challenges FRAs to consider those areas where they might improve efficiency and effectiveness further;
- There is scope for further efficiency savings by providing cover with fewer people, stations or appliances, or by changing shift patterns and crewing arrangements to more closely match cover to the time when it is needed;
- The picture on efficiency and performance is variable;
- There is no clear relationship between fire service type and performance. The report finds relatively good and relatively poor services of all types;
- Progress on equality and diversity will only happen with cultural change - especially changes in cultural attitudes on the watch;
- The role of the fire and rescue service is now about much more than just putting out fires;
- There is no evidence that the degree of broader community safety work is diminishing response capabilities – instead it is using the spare capacity available;
- Regional Management Boards have not driven effective regional collaboration. The report suggests that the government and FRAs need to reform them or abandon them;

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- The common factor in making changes is strong leadership by FRA members and CFOs - strong leadership is needed to overcome resistance to change;
- Many of the recommendations in the report have been made before in reports by the Audit Commission and others dating back over forty years. Implementing the recommendations could result in substantial reinvestment in prevention work or savings to the public purse.

3. The full report can be accessed at: <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports/NATIONAL-REPORT.asp?CategoryID=&ProdID=EC882132-ECDD-4cae-9027-D7FC4760FF01&fromREPORTSANDDATA=NATIONAL-REPORT>

Alongside the report, the Audit Commission published a data tool primarily designed for fire and rescue authorities to identify where they are placed in the comparative charts published in the national report.

4. The specific recommendations for FRAs are to:

- challenge themselves and their CFOs to improve efficiency as well as performance;
- lead their communities by taking hard decisions affecting staffing levels and deployment in the interests of efficiency;
- ensure that they have the right information to justify those decisions;
- defend decisions publicly once they have been made;
- challenge their CFOs to improve the diversity of their workforce;
- define their objectives for RMBs, and participate in RMBs beyond where required to only where there is a good business case for doing so; and
- provide leadership on equality and diversity issues, supporting and encouraging effective culture change within the fire service.

5. The FSMC has previously discussed the need for the LGA to provide political leadership on fire improvement. Members are asked to consider the role of the LGA in supporting FRAs to improve efficiency and performance in line with the recommendations in the Audit Commission report.

Specifically, members are asked to agree to the following actions for the LGA to support FRAs in addressing the above recommendations:

- An early discussion with the wider membership at the Fire Services Forum on 6 February on performance to date and the implications of the report;

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- An early discussion at RMB Chairs on 28 January on the general issues raised in the report and the specific recommendation relating to RMBs;
- LGA to publicise the data tool to FRAs and encourage its use, and liaise with Audit Commission to produce a more user-friendly version;
- LGA to develop a specific programme of action on equality and diversity;
- LGA to lead on the development of a strengthened approach to sector led improvement (see item 3);
- The IDeA to expand networking and sharing good practice through the development of existing case studies, communities of practice and web pages.

Members are asked to consider these and any further next steps for the LGA.

Financial Implications

6. All proposals for LGA work are to be met from existing LGA budget and resources.

Implications for Wales

7. There are no implications for Wales.

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