

19 January 2009

Summary

This paper proposes an approach to sector led improvement for fire and rescue. It follows on from discussion at the FSMC meeting in September.

Recommendations

Members are asked to consider the proposals set out in the paper and agree the way forward.

Action

LGA officers to action as required, in conjunction with the IDeA, CFOA and the RIEPs.

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Background

1. At the FSMC meeting in September, members received a paper proposing an approach to sector led improvement for fire and rescue authorities. Members agreed that 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 that has the confidence of all stakeholders. Members also agreed that the LGA should lead on the policy development. Following a roundtable event and further extensive discussions with CLG, the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships (RIEPs), CFOA and the IDeA, this paper proposes a way forward.

Introduction

2. There is a general concern that the rate of improvement across FRAs has slowed and that the gap between the strongest and weakest performers is growing. This was highlighted in the Audit Commission's fire and rescue performance assessment report in January 2008.

More recently, the Audit Commission national study report on the fire and rescue service *Rising to the Challenge: improving fire service efficiency* found that efficiency and performance across FRAs is variable and made a number of recommendations.

We need to encourage CLG to have confidence that in specific cases of under performance the sector is capable of providing the appropriate support.

3. The current approach to sector led improvement suffers from a number of difficulties:

- It is relatively unstructured and some FRAs report that they are not aware of the range of services that are available to them or how to access;
- There is a perception that many of the services offered are generic and not sufficiently tailored to the specific needs of FRAs and/ or they lack sufficient professional expertise;
- There is inconsistency across the country as to how FRAs have engaged with their RIEP;
- There is insufficient networking and sharing of good practice

4. The aims of a strengthened approach to sector-led improvement are:

- i. To address the slowing in pace of improvement overall and the growing gap between the best and the rest, by making available the skills of the most effective to support overall improvement on a coordinated and cohesive national basis;
- ii. More coherent engagement between RIEPs and national delivery bodies on fire improvement;
- iii. To ensure sector-led support is available in any identified cases of under-performance.

5. The underpinning principles are:

- All evidence shows that improvement works best when it is led by the sector itself;
- The support must complement the wider approach to local government improvement that places RIEPs as the 'single initial point of conversation';
- There will be synergy between the professional and technical advice of CFOA and the delivery and peer mechanisms established by IDeA.

Proposals

RIEPs

6. RIEPs are member-led partnerships of councils, fire authorities and other local services which coordinate and support improvement, innovation and efficiency work at a regional and often sub-regional level. They have a devolved funding package of £185m over the three year period, 2008-11. RIEPs work in partnership with the national sector led improvement bodies within the LGA Group (IDeA, 4Ps, LACORS, the Leadership Centre, LGE and the LGA) and act as a regional 'hub,' providing a central point of contact to enable local authorities to access the right support at the right time. It should be noted that RIEPs are embryonic and are evolving.

7. RIEPs should be the first port of call for all FRAs seeking improvement support. However, there is evidence that some FRAs remain unaware of the assistance available via their RIEP. Whilst many RIEPs have already set their immediate priorities, moving forward we will need to ensure that FRAs are integrated into their delivery plans, and as the relationship develops we can expect to see much closer working, facilitated in part by the IDeA. As a first step in increasing awareness of the RIEPs, CFOA and the LGA will publicise the role of the RIEPs and that of the RIEP Programme Office and encourage FRAs to ensure they have a member representative on the governance arrangements for the RIEP. The LGA, RIEP Programme Office, and the IDeA through Regional Associates also have a role in raising the profile of the improvement needs of fire and rescue with the RIEPs and brokering these relationships is an important building block.

8. The RIEPs are not identical - they set their own priorities which vary from region to region, and therefore there is no single model for how RIEPs engage with FRAs and vice versa, and the support that has been provided.

9. Part of the discussion on how sector led improvement should develop is to consider how different parts of the support architecture for the sector will be engaged in the process. This is to ensure that support is provided at sub regional, regional and national levels as appropriate, drawing on respective strengths, expertise and knowledge and making best use of existing sector support investment and infrastructure.

10. For the fire sector there is a need to supplement existing support with a coordinated and cohesive national approach. An enhanced programme of activity should be focused on addressing the issues highlighted in the Audit Commission National Study report. It is proposed that a CFOA/IDeA partnership offers national support to complement that offered by the RIEPs at the regional and sub regional level, with a range of services offered on a chargeable and non-chargeable basis.

IDeA

11. The IDeA as the LGA owned body that works for local government improvement, has an important role to play in sector led improvement for fire. The enhanced programme of activity will include:

- Peer review and bespoke support - the IDeA has a pool of accredited member and officer peers that will be developed and expanded so that it becomes a significant resource for sharing good practice and making available the skills of the most effective to support overall improvement;
- The IDeA already has a range of peer review and support services for local authorities. These will be tailored specifically for FRA needs based on professional advice e.g. FRS performance management review and mentoring;
- Networking and sharing good practice through the development of existing case studies, communities of practice and web pages;
- Further specific member support including more leadership academies.

CFOA

12. The fire and rescue service has its own specific technical and organisational performance requirements in relation to risk management, fire prevention and protection, incident response and performance and safety at incidents. Improvement support on technical and operational issues remains under-developed.

13. The CFOA Board has agreed to the creation of a specific directorate that will coordinate its operations in assisting FRAs with these aspects of improvement. Within the directorate, a resource will be designated to identify good practice and make it available to FRAs. This will complement the IDeA work that will include case studies and communities of practice and is therefore very welcome in ensuring a step change in this area.

14. There will be a much more structured approach to sharing good practice in these specific areas from within the sector by making available the skills of the best performers to drive overall improvement. Although this process will be beneficial for the host FRA and develop the skills of the officers involved in either the peer review or the improvement support on operational and technical issues, it may have short-term logistic and resource implications for those FRAs that are releasing staff.

LGA

15. There is an important strategic role for the LGA going forward to ensure a high level check on progress and a realistic appraisal of how the system is working. It is

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proposed that FSMC carries out oversight of sector led improvement support as necessary, with CFOA and IDeA reporting formally on a 6-monthly basis

Addressing serious under performance

16. Government has retained its intervention powers for instances of serious under-performance, and it is accepted that in the most extreme cases, central government intervention may be necessary. However, there is an immediate need to strengthen the support that the sector can provide so that the use of intervention powers is a last resort. An aim of the strengthened sector led improvement is that in future cases of specific under performance, the RIEPs would work with the IDeA and CFOA to produce a tailored package for the individual FRA

Communication

17. For the proposed approach to sector led improvement to be effective, FRA buy-in is essential. Subject to the agreement of the FSMC and further discussion at the CLG Fire and Resilience Programme Board in February, this approach will need to be communicated to FRAs.

Conclusion and next steps

18. It is recommended that the outlined approach is initially piloted with a targeted number of areas rated lower than average. Alongside this, in order to ensure the transition phase moves quickly, it is also recommended that the delivery organisations shadow any central government intervention that takes place to develop their skills and understanding

19. Whilst there is a need for the sector to strengthen its approach to sector led improvement to help drive sustained improvement, each FRA will retain ownership of and responsibility for its own improvement.

20. The outlined approach is not in any way about the creation of a new body. Instead it demonstrates an active approach to developing and better co-ordinating a national programme of support from within the sector supplement existing regional and sub-regional provision.

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