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The future of national functions

Summary

There are a number of functions carried out at the national level by CLG and its agencies. This report set out discussions to date on the future of those arrangements and asks members for their views.

Recommendations

Members are asked to:

- note the report and feedback from members who attended the CLG workshop
- consider the suggested models at paragraphs 5 and 6 and provide comments.

Action

As determined by members.

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The future of national functions

Background

1. The Fire and Rescue Service has changed significantly in recent years. From a service driven by national standards and focused principally on response, it has become a proactive, risk based service driven by local needs and focused on prevention. This is positive and, as a result, performance has improved but we face challenging conditions ahead. Our communities rightly place increasing demands on FRAs, based on their rising expectations and ambitions. The service will need to be ever more efficient and find new and innovative approaches to drive delivery in a tighter financial environment.
2. In order to meet future challenges and become truly self-sustaining, CLG has initiated a debate on whether and how the FRAs in England might want to take ownership of key activities which directly impact upon the quality and efficiency of the service that is delivered. Such activities might include collaborative procurement, management of long term contracts, training standards, the Fire Service College, research, oversight of national resilience, guidance and technical standards. These functions are currently carried out by CLG and its agencies.
3. There is currently no substantive mechanism which enables the Fire and Rescue Service to take collective ownership of key issues or make 'national' level decisions on how best to drive performance forwards and maintain consistency where needed. It was in this light that last year CLG, LGA and CFOA started to look at how to address the gaps in the 'delivery chain' – that is ensuring that decisions are taken at the correct level and tasks are completed at the most appropriate level. It was considered that there are three elements in the delivery chain, with each element focusing their attention on the things they are best placed to do.
 - Central government: setting the long term strategy and vision for the Fire and Rescue Service and the appropriate institutional framework to allow this to happen at a national and local level;
 - The Fire and Rescue Service (possibly including the wider sector): having responsibility for and ownership of, national level activities related to the delivery of the overall strategic aims;
 - Individual Fire and Rescue Authorities: being accountable to their communities for delivering services at a local level.
4. The governing principles behind this work are to achieve an improved and robust delivery chain, within existing financial resources, able to work with different FRA structures and be accountable to Parliament and local

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communities. Currently there is no single organisation except central government which could immediately step into this national role. Discussions have moved to considering what alternative arrangements might be in place for delivery in the future. This involves working together to define the boundaries around what should be considered as 'national functions' and thinking about how these functions might be delivered.

Fire Protection Association and LGA proposals

5. In tandem with this work, the Fire Protection Association (FPA) set up a cross-sector steering group under the Rt Hon Nick Raynsford MP. The group comprises the Association of British Insurers, CFOA, Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser, Fire Brigades Union and industry bodies. This Group produced the document 'Building Capacity to Support National Functions' (attached at Appendix A) which proposes a social partnership model giving the wider sector (FRAs, industry, representative organisations etc) the ability to undertake key national functions.
6. As an early alternative, the LGA suggests a 100% FRA owned social enterprise that commissions those functions that can only be done nationally. Industry, individual FRAs or others could bid to carry out functions. FRAs would be able to buy into other offers as they choose or go elsewhere. This could be based on the ALMO model but allowed to trade for profit with all profits reinvested in the service. Wider stakeholders could be represented on the Board, but not as a majority.

CLG workshop

7. On 14 January members of the Committee took part in a workshop at CLG with stakeholders consider these ideas in more detail and develop next steps. Members will feed back to the meeting on the discussions.

Financial Implications

8. A transfer of functions should not include a transfer of risk. Any new arrangements would need to be based on a viable business model and fully funded for a reasonable length of time to ensure sustainability in the long term.

Implications for Wales

9. This only applies in England, so none identified.

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