

Meeting with the Fire Minister – Bob Neill MP

This briefing gives members some priority issues to raise with the Minister.

Key messages:

- The LG Group has set out an open and comprehensive offer from local government to the new coalition government which has been accepted
- Local government is ready to work with the new coalition government to reduce spending and reform the state. We are ready to strike a deal with central government which will see local government take full responsibility for delivering *more with less*.
- We propose a radical reshaping of the state through place based budgets. These will allow Parliament to decide how national tax revenue is spent, while ensuring that local and accountable decisions on what public services are commissioned locally, and from where, can be made.
- We propose a new improvement framework with streamlined departmental and inspection structures alongside stringent local self-regulation.

1. Spending Review

a) The Spending Review will be published on Wednesday 20 October 2010 and will set out spending plans for the years 2011-12 to 2014-15. The budget showed that the bulk of deficit reduction will be through reduction in public spending rather than increases in taxes. Local government faces cuts of 25% on average.

The Fire and Rescue Service in England is one of the smallest public services, costing around £2 billion per year but the 2008 Audit Commission report indicated that there was room for further efficiencies in the service. We are working with the Fire Finance Network to prepare our submission to the Spending Review and a report will come to the Committee in September.

b) Members will want to explore issues relating to the Spending Review with the Minister:

- we accept that there will be cuts and we are working hard to improve productivity and value for money – we have voted for a 0% pay increase this year - but there is a level beyond which risk to the public, the economy and national resilience becomes unacceptable
- the Fire Service is a success – fire deaths are falling due to our fire prevention work
- 81% of the public believe the fire service is frontline service - the public are unlikely to accept a reduction in the emergency response with the ensuing increased risk to life and property
- Fires are bad for the economy - the Association of British Insurers research shows the cost of fire damage now stands at a record level. In the first half of

2009, insurers paid out £639 million - £3.6 million every day - for damage caused by fires.

- We will be seeking opportunities for a greater contribution from the private sector towards our fire prevention work. We will be looking at the feasibility of a levy on property insurance (as exists in inner London)
- Fires are bad for the NHS – each burn injury costs on average £175,000, a smoke alarm costs £5
- Tough choices will have to be made about charging for non emergency calls, or whether to carry them out all.

2. Fire Control

a) At its last meeting the Committee agreed, by majority vote, the following addendum to its earlier position (see below):

‘This committee reiterates the LGA’s position on FiReControl and urges the new Minister to bear in mind the views of the LGA and the Communities and Local Government Select Committee. We further urge the Minister to listen to fire authorities and Members’ calls for freedom and flexibility when deciding future Government policy in this regard.’

Earlier position, September 2009:

‘The Fire Services Management Committee is against the principle of the implementation of Regional Control Centres however will continue to engage with CLG to ensure FRAs are properly resourced, will afford effective oversight and review the programme regularly on behalf of the Fire and Rescue Authorities and will continue to promote good industrial relations where applicable and asks LGA officers to develop alternative options in the event of project failure, to be brought back to the Fire Services Management Committee at a future date.’

b) In his speech to the Fire Conference on 29 July in Harrogate the Minister made no announcement as to the future of the Fire Control project, but said that while the basic concept of Fire Control - a resilient national network of control centres, delivering modernisation and efficiencies - is sound, the project must be delivered to time, cost and quality. He said that the government is currently reviewing all major projects, including Fire Control, and that, if necessary, he will talk to the fire service community about a contingency plan.

c) Members will want to seek confirmation from the Minister that the policy of covering the costs of legacy systems due for replacement will be covered by the Government.

3. Strategic policy review of the Fire and Rescue Service

a) In his Harrogate speech the Minister proposed a strategic review to consider a number of aspects of how the Fire and Rescue Service may need to evolve over the coming years.

b) Members will have identified matters to propose to the Minister elsewhere on the agenda.

4. National functions

a) In his Harrogate speech the Minister said that the government is looking urgently at what it should stop doing and at what the sector can be expected to do for itself. He said that even if something needed to be handled at a national level, that does not automatically mean that it needs to be driven by central government. He suggested the sector, by sharing good practice and agreeing on priorities, should be able to do these things without government input.

b) Members will have identified matters to propose to the Minister elsewhere on the agenda.

5. Sprinklers

a) At the Fire Forum meeting on 18 June, members agreed that the Forum Chairman write to Lord Harrison to express the Forum's support for the Building Regulations (Review) Bill (HL) that make provision for a review of the Building Regulations 2000 with regard to the installation of automatic fire suppression systems in new residential premises. Members also agreed that FRAs would lobby in support of the Bill. A letter has been sent to Lord Harrison and a pro-forma letter circulated to FRAs.

b) In his Harrogate speech the Minister indicated his reluctance to create more regulation and suggested that if the sector felt more fire protection would be good for UK businesses then the case should be made to the business community, not to the government.

c) Members will wish to let share the views of the Fire Forum with the Minister.

Case Study: Wales

The Welsh Assembly Government has recently set out a Legislative Competence Order (LCO) which makes the installation of fire sprinkler systems mandatory in all newly built homes. The Order had enjoyed the support of a wide range of partners throughout with evidence showing that no lives had been lost in the UK due to fire in buildings fitted with domestic sprinkler systems. The cost of such systems when compared to the cost of fire was found to be minimal.

Case study: Scottsdale, Arizona

In Scottsdale, Arizona, a sprinkler ordinance was implemented on January 1, 1986. The cornerstone of the Scottsdale Fire Prevention Program is the installation of fire sprinkler systems in all commercial and residential units. Data, published by the Scottsdale Fire Department, shows the impact of sprinklers on life safety and fire damage:

- 41,408 homes (more than 50 percent of the homes in Scottsdale) are protected with fire sprinkler systems
- Between 1986 and 2001 there were 598 house fires, 49 of which were in houses with fire sprinkler systems: there were no deaths in sprinklered homes; 13 people died in homes without sprinklers.
- There was less damage in the homes with sprinklers: average fire loss per sprinklered incident: \$2,166; average fire loss per unsprinklered incident: \$45,019
- Annual fire losses in Scottsdale (2000-2001) were \$3,021,225 compared to the national average of \$9,144,442.

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