

Item 11

Notes of Decisions Taken and Actions Required

Fire Services Management Committee

19 July 2010

in Room 8.1, Local Government House, London

Present

Chairman:	Cllr Brian Coleman (LFEPA/LB Barnet) (Conservative)
Vice Chair:	Cllr Fred Walker (Greater Manchester FRA) (Labour)
Deputy Chair:	Cllr Paul Shannon (Greater Manchester FRA) (Liberal Democrat); Cllr Christopher Newbury (Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority) (Independent Group)
Conservative:	Cllr Richard Hobbs (Warwickshire CC); Cllr Paul Bryant (Royal Berkshire CFA); Cllr Kay Hammond (Surrey CC); Cllr Tony Arbour (LFEPA / LB Richmond); Cllr David Kirk (Hampshire FRA); Cllr Maurice Heaster (LFEPA / LB Wandsworth)
Labour:	Cllr Navin Shah (LFEPA / LB Harrow); Cllr John Joyce (Cheshire FRA); Cllr Brenda Forster (Cleveland FRA)
Liberal Democrat:	Cllr Jeremy Hilton (Gloucestershire FRS); Cllr Roger Price (Hampshire FRA)
In attendance:	Commissioner Ron Dobson (LFEPA); Dave Webb (CFO Leicestershire); Helen Murray, Sara Williams, Trish O'Flynn, Gill Gittins, Clive Harris and Paul Johnston (LG Group)

1. The future of national functions

Members agreed in principle that there is a role for the Local Government (LG) Group in coordinating and commissioning the limited number of functions that need a national perspective, and noted that the proposals in the paper represented a significant opportunity for the LG Group to take a greater role and responsibility within the fire sector.

Members emphasised in their discussions that it was important that the policy direction for the proposed transfer of functions be led by the Fire Services Management Committee, and that it was equally important that the LG Group take responsibility only for functions which could be reasonably accommodated and with minimum bureaucracy.

Decision

The Committee noted the report.

Members agreed that Committee Lead Members meet with the CFOA

presidential team to discuss possible joint working in this area.

Action

Officers to prepare a further paper on the transfer of national functions for the FSMC on 10 September.

Officers to liaise with CFOA to establish a meeting between Committee Lead Members and the CFOA presidential team.

2. Strategic review of the Fire and Rescue Service

Members noted the suggested key areas that the coalition Government's review of the fire and rescue service should cover, and suggested that focus should be given to a small number of areas on which there was broad consensus.

Members agreed that the LG Group should argue for greater local decision-making and flexibility for Fire and Rescue Authorities, and that the Government's review should examine whether some of the complex decision-making structures under current legislation could, where there was local agreement, be dismantled. Members agreed that they would not want the review to look at local government reorganisation.

Members agreed that the FSMC should play a leading part in the review

Decision

The Committee discussed the report.

Action

Officers to prepare correspondence to CLG following the Committee's discussions to be cleared by office holders.

3. Retained Duty System – project proposal

Members noted that certain, though not all, authorities were facing challenges with the Retained Duty System. These challenges included, for example, staff recruitment, retention and learning and development.

The Chairman said that there was a piece of work to be done to assist the sector in helping itself by identifying and sharing best practice across FRAs on the Retained Duty System, and that Members should feed in any comments to Cllr Hammond, who was leading this work on behalf of the Committee.

Action

Officers to update the Committee at the September meeting.

4. Transfer of ownership of New Dimensions assets

Cllr Hilton said that 32 Fire and Rescue Authorities had now signed up the New Dimension Transfer of Ownership Agreement which was enacted on 1 April 2010, and encouraged those remaining Authorities who had not yet signed up to do so. The Chairman noted that this was an issue for each individual FRA to consider.

5. The coalition Government's vision for the fire and rescue service

The Chairman welcomed Bob Neill MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Communities and Local Government, Sir Ken Knight, the Government's Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser, and Roger Hargreaves to the Committee.

The Minister thanked Members for the opportunity to attend the Committee, adding that he felt that it was important for the Minister to be both visible to, and engaged with, the sector.

The Minister gave a brief presentation, in which he outlined the significant spending challenges facing the coalition Government, and, within these challenges, the need to reconsider and re-evaluate the future direction of the fire and rescue service. This would be considered by the strategic review to identify ways in which all partners within the fire sector could deliver efficiencies and promote the localism agenda. He hoped the review would be completed by spring 2011 and would cover value for money, enhancing resilience and maintaining frontline services.

The Minister also said that he looked forward to the LGA leading a full role in the debate about national functions and that he expected the sector to drive improvement itself. He confirmed that the Government wanted to maintain the UK opt out of the Working Time Directive and that he was unable to comment on the Spending Review. He asked that FRAs with PFI projects on hold because of the Spending Review to write to him. He said he would look into the possibility of a levy on property insurance.

Members enquired over the FireControl project. The Minister said that enhanced resilience options for the fire and rescue service were both positive and necessary, but that those parties contractually responsible for delivering the project needed to demonstrate that they could deliver the project to time, to budget and to quality. The Minister said that he was looking at the project in entirely practical terms, rather than from an ideological viewpoint. In response to concerns over control centres that needed refurbishment in the very near future, the Minister said that CLG was in discussion with those services to discuss how to alleviate any short-term difficulties.

Members asked over the coalition Government's review of the future direction of the fire and rescue service, and indicated that the Committee would be keen on legislation that removed statutory obligations on complex partnership and decision-making structures for local authorities and FRAs. The Minister said that the Decentralisation and Localism Bill would remove certain statutory obligations at the local level, and said that he was keen for Fire and Rescue Services' considerations to be taken into account within the review.

Members asked about the mandatory installation of sprinklers in properties in England, and said that Members of the Fire Services Forum supported the Private Members' Bill laid by Lord Harrison in the House of Lords. The Minister responded that the coalition Government's view was against the imposition of further regulation, and that previous investigations into legislation on mandatory installation of sprinklers had not demonstrated value for money, but that the Government would take an evidence based approach on this issue.

Members enquired on the launch of the Big Society concept by the Government, and how this might impact on fire and rescue services. The Minister said that he was keen to see the outcome of the pilots currently being run.

The Minister noted that the Government was committed to the transparency agenda, subject to certain boundaries.

Members enquired over equality and diversity within the fire and rescue service. The Minister said that this was an important area of work, and that the Government wanted FRAs to mainstream equality and diversity work. The Government was not convinced however that the central imposition of targets were the best means of meeting this aim.

Members asked over the future of inspection regimes in light of the abolition of the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA). The Minister responded that the Government would not seek to replace with another such regime, as Ministers were keen to remove centrally set targets on local authorities. The Minister added that FRAs would still be expected to comply with statutory obligations, and publish local indicators. He suggested that the LG Group might take a greater lead on improvement work and challenging poor performance.

Members cited the work that the FSMC was doing on Retained Duty System. The Minister noted that a Government-led piece of work on RDS was nearing completion and confirmed the Government's commitment to the RDS and developing it to be used in more imaginative ways.

The Committee thanked The Minister for his attendance at the meeting.

6. Fire Services Management Committee end of year report

Members noted the report.

7. The Working Time Directive

Members said that the LG Group had done important work in this area, and that it was important to continue to work with the various bodies of the European Union to secure positive outcomes for member Fire and Rescue Authorities.

8. Industrial relations – update

Cllr Maurice Heaster, Chairman of the NJC Employers' side, noted that discussions on pay for FRS staff were ongoing.

9. Notes of previous meeting

The note of the last meeting was agreed as a correct record.

Members noted a list of key milestones for the FiReControl project, as cited in the notes of the May meeting, had still not been made available.

Cllr Walker added that it was important for FRAs to ensure that the terms of office in relation to pensions for newly appointed FRS Chief Officers be determined prior to appointment.

Date of next meeting: 10 September 2010, Local Government House, London