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LG Group response to CLG on the future of fire and rescue control centre services in England

Summary

This report summarises the LG Group's draft response to the Department for Communities and Local Government consultation on the future of fire and rescue control centres post-FiReControl.

Recommendations

Members are asked to agree the content of the draft consultation response.

Action

Officers to include member comments from both the FSMC and the Chairs' and Chiefs' meeting on 9 March in the revised draft and to circulate this to Lead Members for sign off.

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LG Group response to CLG the future of fire and rescue control centre services in England

Background

1. Following the Government's announcement in December that the FiReControl project was being halted, the Department for Communities and Local Government launched a consultation on the future of fire and rescue control centres in England on 13 January.
2. To inform the LG Group's response to this consultation, a special meeting was convened at London Fire Brigade Headquarters on 24 January to which the Chairman and Chief of each of the 46 English Fire and Rescue Authorities were invited.

Draft submission: general themes

3. The LG Group welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department for Communities and Local Government consultation on the future of fire and rescue control centre services in England.
4. The Group is pleased with the Government's commitment to not impose a solution on Fire and Rescue Authorities and with the proposed discussions with all FRAs on the future use of the control centre buildings. We see the Government's decision as being a positive opportunity for the fire and rescue sector to take responsibility for its own resilience options going forward.
5. Whilst accepting that the Government is seeking to achieve a balance between operational need, fairness and value for the tax payer, the LG Group urges the Government to clarify the amount of central funding that will be made available for upgrading control services as soon as possible to help FRAs make an informed decision about which model they may wish to adopt.
6. Regarding the prioritisation of funding, the LG Group agrees with the Government that completing the installation of Firelink must be the top priority ahead of funding restructuring costs to support shared control services, funding technical enhancements to improve resilience or funding accommodation or control room infrastructure costs arising out of delays in the project.
7. A diverse range of options are being considered by Fire and Rescue Authorities across the country, ranging from continuation or cooperation of all authorities within a region, collaboration of groups of authorities within regions, to partnerships with other emergency services. The Government must allow FRAs to decide on the solution that best serves their communities.

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8. The LG Group urges Government to recognise that Fire and Rescue Authorities are at different stages of considering their options. Some have already confirmed a preferred option and entered provisional agreements, whilst others are still considering a number of options. On this basis a centrally driven timetable must not be imposed; FRAs need to have sufficient time to ensure they make correct, well-informed decisions that benefit the communities that they serve.
9. Similarly, we urge Government to note that change will proceed at different paces in different areas determined by the current resilience of control arrangements (in some areas control systems have been recently updated and will not need reviewing for a number of years, whilst in others, systems require more immediate upgrading).
10. Some Fire and Rescue Authorities have a strong interest in taking over use of the Regional Control Centre (RCC) buildings, but this interest is not replicated across the country. Some areas had expressed a clear interest in taking on the RCC, subject to CLG agreeing suitable terms as has already happened in London. In other areas, the RCCs would not meet local needs and even if let on beneficial financial terms would not be the most efficient means for providing control services. The LG Group urges the Government to engage in discussion with FRAs on the future of Regional Control Centres as a matter of urgency to ensure that the most cost-effective solutions can be found for all parties.
11. Where continuation of regional working and use of the RCCs is being considered, Fire and Rescue Authorities are already putting arrangements in place that replace Regional Management Boards. Operational and governance arrangements for these should be determined at local level, without Government direction.

Possible models

12. The LG group would like to bring to the Government's attention examples of the different options that are currently being considered:
13. In one area, a provisional agreement had been reached to continue working with the regional control, subject to safeguards. Five control centres would be amalgamated into one, which, in a period of funding cuts, would realise savings. The Regional Management Board (RMB) is to be discontinued, but a replacement body with a more strictly defined membership will continue to meet.
14. Authorities within another region said there is also interest in collaboration among all four authorities in the region. Priorities for services include stabilising the systems, and addressing considerable deficits through closer partnership

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working with other services such as the Police. The Regional Management Board is to be replaced with a more informal meeting between Chiefs and Chairs

15. Other FRAs are considering a range of options, including partnership and collaboration with individual neighbouring services or in larger clusters and potential cooperation with non-fire services, including independent tri-service control buildings.

Consultation questions

Section 3 – Lessons from FiReControl

Q1 Do you agree with the assessment of FiReControl set out in Section 3? What lessons do you think we can learn from FiReControl – both positive and negative?

16. The LG Group broadly agrees with the assessment of FiReControl set out in section 3 of the consultation. While all FRAs agree that there is a need to increase resilience in the control system, we have consistently argued that a centrally-dictated, one size fits all model was not the appropriate way of achieving this.
17. Unrealistic timeframes and deadlines were set on the project which were consistently moved or not met, undermining confidence in the project as a whole and Fire and Rescue Services as a whole were not engaged in any meaningful way at the start of the project to develop specifications and engage suppliers. The CLG Select Committee report published in April 2010 set out an accurate and detailed summary of problems the project suffered.
18. As is stated in the consultation, many Fire and Rescue Authorities were fundamentally opposed to the regional lines along which the project had been determined. A number of FRAs found the regional barriers to be counter-productive in that they could no longer work with FRAs with which they had previously enjoyed positive working arrangements. The Group is therefore pleased that the Government has removed this artificial regional approach which created additional bureaucracy and undermined existing relationships on the ground.
19. The LG Group notes that the Government will no longer pursue IT projects of this scale in the public sector. In any project of this size the Government must consult closely with local government to ensure the intended outcomes are realistic and to ensure that there is sufficient buy-in into the project.

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20. On the plus side, Fire and Rescue Authorities are both passionate and knowledgeable about fire and rescue and the communities that they serve. The LG Group urges the Government to utilise this expertise in developing projects of a similar scale in future.

Section 4 – Defining the policy objectives

Q2. Are resilience, enhanced technology and efficiency still as important today as they were when the FiReControl project was initiated? If not what has changed?

21. The LG Group believes that resilience, enhanced technology and efficiency are even more important now than when FiReControl was initiated. Fire and Rescue Authorities are facing reductions in their budgets, meaning efficient systems and ways of working are essential to making savings. However resilience can be achieved through other methods and as the document notes, enhanced technology, and more secure buildings can play an important role in both efficient ways of working and ensuring systems are as flexible and robust as possible.

Q3. Which aspects of resilience described in Section 4 are most important for control services? Are there other aspects which are not mentioned here?

22. Fire controls must be prepared for every eventuality, whilst accepting that some incidents, serious flooding for example, are more likely to occur in some areas. However, a national network of control centres is not the only way to achieve better resilience to a high level of calls. Individual fire controls are already brokering mutual arrangements to ensure they can respond both to national threats and to threats that relate to specific features and sites within their areas.

Q4. Do you think that there is a role for central government in supporting technical enhancements in fire and rescue control rooms – and, if so, what should this be?

23. There is a role for Government in ensuring that Fire and Rescue Authorities have resources and support to deal with issues related to national resilience. This is purely a strategic and enabling role, and not a day to day managerial role.

Q5. Do you think that there is a role for central government in helping fire and rescue authorities to achieve greater efficiencies in the delivery of control services – and, if so, what should this be?

24. Fire and Rescue Authorities must be given the freedom to identify where efficiencies can be made with regards to the delivery of control services. As we

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have seen with the FiReControl project, a centrally dictated, one size fits all approach will not work. Instead the sector must be self-supporting in terms of identifying and circulating good practice as well providing practical support to individual FRAs should they need it.

Section 5 – Central government support

Q6. Which of the approaches (or combination of approaches) for the delivery of control services set out in Section 5 would provide the best outcome for the fire and rescue community and the public? Please give reasons for your choice.

25. The LG Group believes that a common set of principles, agreed at the national level by Fire and Rescue Authorities and other stakeholders, would provide the best outcome for the fire and rescue community and the public.

Section 6 – Funding choices

Q7. Do you agree that the right funding priorities are set out in Section 6 and do you have any comments on the order in which these are presented?

27. The LG Group agrees with the funding priorities as set out in Section 6 of the consultation document.

Q8 Which of the technical options for Firelink (see Annex C) would best meet fire and rescue service needs? Please give reasons for your choice.

28. To use the responses of FRAs to answer this question.

Conclusions and next steps

29. Officers will amend the consultation response to further reflect the comments made by Members both at this meeting of the Fire Services Management Committee and the Chairs' and Chiefs' breakfast meeting on the morning of 9 March at the LG Group Fire Conference.

Financial Implications

30. Discussed in the main body of this report.