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Fire Service College Working Group – progress report

Purpose of report

For discussion and direction.

Summary

To share progress and emerging views with Committee Members ahead of the final presentation to the Fire Commission on 17 June.

Recommendations

Members to note progress to date; and to feed in views to the Working Group as part of the evidence collection phase.

Action

Chair and Members of the Working Group to take account of comments made, and to reflect appropriately in the final report.

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Background

1. The Fire Commission meeting on 11 February 2011 received a paper on the Fire Service College and briefly discussed preliminary views around the value of the College, along with possible difficulties around the debt and future financing. The Commission therefore agreed to set up a Members' Working Group to look further at the strategic position of the College, future governance, structure and financial viability of the College and report back to the Commission on 17 June.
2. The Commission agreed that the Working Group should be politically balanced and the following membership was subsequently agreed:

Chair: Mr David Cartwright (LFEPA)

Conservative: Councillor Mike Bawden (Wiltshire and Swindon FRA)
Councillor Peter Abraham (Avon FRA)

Liberal Democrat: Councillor Jeremy Hilton (Gloucestershire CC)

Labour: Councillor John Joyce (Cheshire FRA)
Councillor Sian Timoney (Bedfordshire and Luton FRA).

LG Group Adviser: Commissioner Ron Dobson (London Fire Brigade)

3. In order to meet the deadline for further consideration at the Fire Commission on 17 June, a total of three meetings for the Working Group were agreed.

Progress of the Working Group

4. To date, the Working Group has met on two occasions. The first meeting was at the Fire Conference in Gateshead on 8 March and was an opportunity to agree the scope of the project and the terms of reference as follows:
 - 4.1 Identify and examine strategic issues facing the Fire Service College;
 - 4.2 Develop options to resolve these strategic issues so that the training needs of the FRS in the future can be effectively met; and
 - 4.3 Make recommendations to the Fire Services Management Committee for a sector position on the future of the College.

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5. Background papers were also provided setting out the current position regarding the College's structure/management arrangements as a Government-owned Trading fund, and financing. Members also had information from the Fire Futures reports and the College's annual reports available. Kim Robinson, CEO of the College, also attended to give a presentation on the current challenges facing the College.
6. The second meeting took place at the Fire Service College on 14 April where Members met the senior management team and had an on-site visit to look at all the College's facilities. The President of CFOA, Peter Holland CBE, also attended to provide a perspective from the profession. Background papers included an analysis of competitor training provides and facilities within the UKFRS and set out a number of potential models for future operation of the College.
7. There is an open day on 18 May for any other Members of FRAs who wish to view the College for themselves and we have asked for comments and views to be submitted in writing to LGA officers following the event.
8. The Chair and advisors to the group will also consult with representatives from the private sector to test emerging ideas, identify potential barriers to partnership working and what would make involvement in the College an attractive business proposition.
9. The final meeting of the Working Group is now arranged for 24 May, and the final report from the Group will be presented to the Fire Commission on 17 June.
10. Members will be aware that the Minister announced the Government's response to Fire Futures on 12 April 2011, and this includes a reference to the College. The report recognises that provision of high quality training for FRS staff is vital in terms of both responding effectively at local and national level. It also recognises that there is no appetite within the Fire and Rescue Service to lose this resource and welcomes the leadership and commitment shown by the Local Government Group in terms of developing a sector-wide position. It concludes that the College has unique facilities especially in relation to national resilience, multi agency and interoperability training and development. Going forward, it calls for greater involvement from other sectors including the private sector and commits to exploring options to secure the future of the College.

Emerging Thoughts

11. The Working Group has proposed that the aims of a new model should be to:

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- 11.1 Improve the performance of the FRS, both locally and nationally, and to reduce the overall costs of training for the taxpayer.
 - 11.2 Generate capital investment in the College's infrastructure and facilities.
 - 11.3 Improve the performance of the College and its position within the market and to maximize the taxpayer's share of any future profits. A key factor will be securing involvement and investment from the private sector and creating commercial freedoms.
 - 11.4 Maximise existing training infrastructure across the UK where appropriate and cost effective to do so.
 - 11.5 Improve multi-agency interoperability (Category 1 and 2 responders, energy/transport industry, Local Resilience Forums etc), at local and national levels.
12. In looking at future models, the Group's starting position has been a closer involvement of the Sector in the operation of the College and a strong steer from the Commission about the value of the College. The Group is considering a number of different models, or combinations of models for the future as a means of balancing the interests and challenges of different partners. The options include closure of the College, outright sale / lease of the College, an FRA mutual model whereby the sector leases the College from central government, to different types of partnership with the private sector.
 13. However the Working Group has uncovered a number of issues that could impede the sector from taking a greater control of the college and discourage the private sector from becoming involved. These include issues of debt including the shareholder dividend and the expensive civil servant overhead; understanding existing and potential customer base and how to increase the market share; and the need for professional setting and ownership of standards of training and development within the service which can then be provided by the College.
 14. It is also clear that the College is in need of significant capital investment in its infrastructure and facilities if it is to become a world class provider of training and attracting the required investment will be a crucial part of a future model.
 15. Although Members are still developing the Group's recommendations strong cross-party consensus is emerging on the issues and potential solutions. Developing thinking is around a partnership with the private sector and the potential for a joint venture arrangement. The Group is considering a number of examples of where such partnerships have worked for other sectors, including the Emergency Planning College in Easingwold.

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16. The Group is also considering the potential for amalgamation of training provision for other emergency services which could result in economies of scale, improved interoperability and multi-agency working.
17. The group feels that the College is in need of stronger guidance and involvement from the fire and rescue sector. In terms of future governance, depending on the model chosen, the existing stakeholder group could be strengthened to become the key player in the setting of strong training policy, training standards and the auditing of performance.
18. The Group will hold its final meeting, and take further evidence and submissions from FRAs before completing its final report. Key recommendations will be circulated to FSMC Members in advance of the Commission discussion.

Recommendation

19. Members are invited to note progress to date, and to input further issues for consideration.

Financial Implications

20. This project has been incorporated into the LG Group's existing work programme. Wider financial implications are dependent on the final recommendation of the Working Group.