

Fire Futures

Purpose

For discussion and direction.

Summary

This report provides Members with a summary of the Government's response to the Fire Futures review of the fire and rescue service in England; and a note of the key issues of interest to Fire and Rescue Authorities. Bob Neill, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State will address the Committee on this subject.

Recommendations

Members are asked to:

1. Note the contents of the paper and draw on the ideas presented in individual FRAs if appropriate;
2. Discuss key issues outlined in the report with the Fire Minister.
3. Note and comments on the proposed next steps at paragraph 15.

Action

As determined by Members.

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Fire Futures

Background

1. The Government published its response to the Fire Futures review on 12th April. The response can be found here:
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/fire/pdf/1881649.pdf>
2. The Government response argues that Fire and Rescue Authorities have been distracted from a primary focus on local communities by the previous Government's:
 - 2.1 Management from the centre
 - 2.2 Agenda to regionalise the service
 - 2.3 Confusion instead of clarity in central and local roles and in national resilience.
3. The Government intends to address this through:
 - 3.1 Restoring a focus on local communities instead of national targets and monitoring
 - 3.2 Ensuring local decision making on local services
 - 3.3 Let the Service and the wider sector – not Whitehall – manage its cross-sector functions collaboratively
 - 3.4 Providing clarity on national and local roles in resilience and ensuring the right structure and funding is there to support it.
4. The Government sets the broader context through reference to factors such as changing demographics and the need to meet risks arising from climate change and terrorist threat; calls for strong leadership. It also makes a number of references to 'different spatial levels', possibly a reference to mergers of FRAs, but very explicitly states that government will not impose national organisation but support the development of alternatives which improve efficiency and value for money.
5. The main theme of the report describes a rebalancing of the central/local relationship and there is also a welcome commitment to consult and involve the sector in specific projects going forward. The report also recognises the contribution the LG Group has made to driving service improvement and welcomes the leadership demonstrated by the Group to set up a Working Group to examine the Fire Service College.
6. The report also summarises how the ideas put forward in the Fire Futures reports have been considered. These are presented in four categories: an 'Ideas bank' the sector may wish to draw on; national resilience, sector in the

lead, supported by government; Government action; and ideas government has ruled out.

Overarching comments

7. The document is in line with the Minister's comments at the Fire Conference and therefore this is no real surprise. We can agree with much in the response. The commentary about CAA detracting significant resources away from service delivery; national targets making little sense at local level both chime with the LG Group's view; and certainly the Government's record of delivery of national projects and initiatives has not been strong and one of the contributing factors has been the inability to effectively engage with the sector.
8. The overarching thrust of decentralisation and a rebalancing of the central/local relationship is welcome and the indication that this philosophy informing decision making for the residual elements of the FiReControl, Firelink and New Dimension projects through the current work with the sector is an early demonstration of the willingness to move to a new approach. The challenge for CLG will be to translate the decentralisation concept into reality and to establish and embed different behaviours in civil servants' ways of working. Indeed one might have expected a discussion about the central/local relationship to be a two-way dialogue, ahead of publication of this document.

Specific issues of interest

9. There are a number of strategic issues and projects highlighted in the report and which will be central to the sector going forward.

The Local Government Finance Review

10. In the context of local decision making, the Government states its intention to consider funding mechanisms for the FRS. These will be considered through the Local Government Resource Review which is to consider the way in which authorities are funded with a view to greater financial autonomy and strengthening incentives for economic growth. Phase 1 is due to complete in July 2011. Members have already had a discussion about this at the Fire Commission and the LG Group has now issued two consultation documents: the first highlights the key strategic issues arising from the review and is aimed at a non-technical audience and the second paper is more technical and looks at modelling of how might work. Both of these documents are available to view via: <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pagelId=18228777>. We are keen that the views of FRAs are fully taken into account in moving forward so Members may therefore wish to input views from their own Authority's perspective.

A New National Framework

11. Currently, Government is required, under the Fire and Rescue Service Act 2004 to prepare a national Framework which sets out priorities and objectives for fire and rescue services and may also contain guidance in connection with the discharge of this function. The document is now due to be renewed. From our perspective the current Framework underpins the centralised approach the Government is clear it wants to move away from and it is no longer an appropriate basis if we are to deliver on our shared ambition for more locally accountable and responsive services.
12. The Government sets out a list of issues which a new Framework may contain, such as response and operational guidance to hazards and threats, clarity about national and local resilience roles, and a national communications capability and standards for data exchange. It is unlikely we will agree with all of these suggestions and therefore we need to be fully engaged in discussions going forward. Although we recognise the value of the Framework, Members may wish to challenge the Minister on a more radical approach which removes the statutory duty and Framework with a joint agreement which confines government activity to the national interest, and sets out a presumption that all activity is done locally unless there is a clear business case for national activity.

National functions

13. Although the Government welcomes the work undertaken by CFOA and LG Group on national functions, the document restates that although the sector should lead on a wide range of issues, it will maintain a strong interest in the outcomes. These include:
 - 12.1 assurance to local communities on performance
 - 12.2 measures to address serious service failure
 - 12.3 the maintenance and development of interoperability capabilities
 - 12.4 the development and interaction between local and national risk
 - 12.5 the development of operational guidance
 - 12.6 research
 - 12.7 national safety campaigns.
14. We are exploring how this will work as part of the detailed work programmes on national functions.

The Fire Service College

15. The Government recognises the strong value of a national college for Fire and Rescue Service training. It believes that the Fire Service College has unique facilities especially in relation to national resilience, multi-agency and

interoperability training and development. It acknowledges that there needs to be greater involvement from other sectors (whether private, public or voluntary) in its ownership, operation and governance. Since the document was published, we understand officials are setting up a pre-market engagement phase to explore views of the sector. The conclusions from the LG working group, led by David Cartwright, will feed into this.

Next Steps:

16. Members are asked to note and comment on the following means of taking forward specific areas of interest:
 - 15.1 Officers will ensure that views expressed by the FSMC are reflected in the LGA's consultation on the Local Government Resource Review
 - 15.2 Officers will consider for how the recalibration of the central – local relationships should be reflected in successor arrangements to the current national framework.
 - 15.3 Officers are working with CFOA and CLG officials to develop a detailed work programme on national functions.
 - 15.4 The LG Group Working Group on the Fire Service College will report its findings to the Fire Commission in June.