

Fire Service College - update

Purpose of report

For discussion / decision.

Summary

On 17 June the Fire Commission considered the options set out for the Fire Service College's future by the LGA working group chaired by David Cartwright. After debate, the Commission endorsed the working group's recommendations and commended the report to the FSMC.

The key conclusion of the report is that the best option to secure a sustainable future for the college is a contractual partnership arrangement with the sector providing governance and policy direction and setting standards and contracting private sector partner(s) to operate the College, deliver the training and provide much needed investment. Mr Cartwright emphasised that there has already been significant interest from the private sector.

Recommendation

Members are asked to:

1. Present the LG Group's position on the Fire Service College to the Minister and request further discussions with CLG to progress the proposals.
2. Endorse further collaboration between CFOA and LG Group officers to realise the agreed plan for a public-private partnership arrangement for the College.

Action

LG Group officers to progress actions as appropriate.

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Fire Service College - update

Context and background to the working group

1. The future of the Fire Service College is a central feature in any discussion of the training and development of the UK's Fire and Rescue Services. It was identified as a key component of the sector's National Function work on activities that require a collective approach from the Fire and Rescue Sector with important connections to other functions such as research, operational guidance and workforce development. The College also figured highly in the Fire Futures review of the Fire and Rescue sector initiated last year by the Fire Minister, Bob Neill MP, and has long been an issue of concern to the sector. Following a discussion at their meeting in February 2011, the Local Government Group's Fire Commission set up a cross-party working group to examine the strategic issues facing the College, explore options for its future governance, structure and financial operation and to report back with recommendations to the Fire Services Management Committee. A list of members of the working group and their Terms of Reference are attached at annex A.
2. The working group received a clear steer from members of the Fire Commission that the sector strongly supports the concept of a national training college for the Fire and Rescue Service. At the same time it recognised that the College is under-utilised, beset by debt and financial issues, in serious need of capital investment and continues to fall short of the targets agreed with the Department for Communities and Local Government to make progress towards a sustainable business model.

Endorsed option – public/private partnership

3. On 17 June the working group reported back to the Fire Commission. After some debate, the Commission endorsed the option for fire sector commissioning through a contractual partnership with the private sector.
4. The working group's conclusions were as follows:

Governance

5. The group identified a lack of sector strength and direction in the current governance arrangements. The existing College Stakeholders Board does not appear to have the power to set strategic direction, nor does it have the ability and funds to make necessary changes to management arrangements and investment needs. It is also clear, through the College's market share of fire authority training and the low take-up of training courses, that the College does not offer the service required by individual fire authorities.

6. Governance should be provided by a strengthened College Board made up of key partners including the LGA, CFOA and CLG and the private sector partner(s). This Board would have responsibility (as a limited company, or potentially as a social enterprise) for setting policy direction, letting the contract and ensuring the terms are met. It would also have a monitoring and auditing role to provide assurance on standards achieved.

Training specification

7. The College Board, via a CFOA-led working group would set the specifications for the training outcomes to be delivered by the College to meet the requirements of the IPDS. The College would concentrate upon those areas of training and development that cannot be readily sourced from elsewhere and make full use of its unique and valuable operational training facilities. This will enhance the College's national and international brand and reputation and will maximize the use of these facilities to provide cost effective training for fire authorities.
8. In order to ensure that training can be adapted to take account of emerging policy or risks, the College would collect and collate organisational and operational data from FRSs to provide a dynamic assessment of risks and training needs to be used to update specifications for training outputs. FRSs already produce much of this data and information; however at present there is no mechanism for collating it and interpreting it at a collective level to inform training needs. The group envisaged that a small team would be located at the College and would carry out this function, and manage the contract with the private sector providers, ensuring the College Board acts as an intelligent client. Funding of this function would be written into the contract, or through a profit share arrangement.
9. Data and information collated at the college provides additional benefit to the sector and to Government by:
 - informing operational guidance so that it is developed according to risk;
 - providing assurance of sector performance and identifying risks or potential failure; and
 - providing a structure of service-wide accreditation in operational skills and command training.

Private sector training provider

10. The College Board would commission, through a competitively-let contract, a private sector or social enterprise partner to deliver the specified training outcomes which would be subject to review and adaptation throughout the lifetime of the contract. Accreditation of the training is an important issue and one which private sector partners would be asked to address in their proposals.

11. The successful contractor (or contractors) would acquire the college site and brand for an agreed term and would have complete operational freedom over the way the College is run and be responsible for the College's performance, including the risk of underperformance. They would be able to invest in the upgrade and development of the College facilities and reap the benefits from that investment over the lifetime of the contract. They would be free to develop other markets as long as they delivered the outcomes for FRSs as specified by the College Board. Some form of profit share agreement with the College Board could form part of the overall contract.
12. The private sector training provider would be able to acquire and/or utilise other training sites across the UK to provide diversified training packages at other locations convenient and attractive to its customer base.

Private sector interest in involvement in the College

13. The working group held a series of discussions with representatives from the private sector to explore the level of interest in participating in a partnership with the College and to discuss their preferred approaches. These discussions revealed "huge" interest amongst the companies consulted, each of whom could see the value in the future business of the College. However, each had a different view of how their expertise could create a strong brand for the College as a national asset.
14. The discussions with the private sector were most positive and have reaffirmed the group's recommendations on its preferred option and helped it define some key areas it would be looking at in any successful partnership:
 - input of private sector financial investment and professional expertise;
 - management restructuring and the development of a market-facing strategy for the College;
 - develop competitive cost base;
 - provide an overall reduction in the overhead cost per fire authority student;
 - provide a strategy for future development that moves towards a broader concept as the core of a National Blue Light College or multi-agency UK Civil Contingencies Academy.

Issues for further consideration

15. There are a number of issues which will need to be considered in further detail and discussed with CLG in progressing the group's recommendations.
 - Ownership of land – as current owners of the asset, CLG will need to consider whether it is prepared to sell, transfer or lease the asset to a third party, or a company owned by the College Board, or to retain ownership and let the contract jointly with the Board.
 - Historic debt – the issue of historic debts and liabilities borne by the College would need to be resolved prior to the commencement of any partnership negotiations.

- Amalgamation with other agency training facilities – with increasing emphasis on the importance of interoperability and consistency across emergency services, a logical outcome would be amalgamation of the College with other agency training facilities. This should be a longer term aim for the College Board that takes into account differing timescales and sectoral pressures. Incremental development of the College's remit across Government sectors whilst concurrently capitalising upon opportunities provided by existing and emerging markets overseas will ensure training, inter-agency interoperability and inter-agency performance assurance is continually improved.

Next steps

16. The Fire Services Management Committee is asked to adopt the proposal set out in this paper and agreed by the Fire Commission in June as the sector position.
17. The Fire Minister has stated that he will explore the views and interest of the fire sector and other sectors in taking a greater stake in the ownership and/or running of the College. Currently, DCLG are working closely with the College to prepare the ground internally before beginning a formal discussion process. This is expected to commence shortly. The LGA wishes to be fully involved and will use the position agreed by the FSMC and the Commission as the basis for that discussion.
18. Endorse further collaboration between CFOA and LG Group officers to realise the agreed plan for a public-private partnership arrangement for the College.

18 July 2011

Item 1

Annex A

Membership

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|-------------------|---|
| Conservative: | Chair: Mr David Cartwright Councillor Mike Bawden (Wiltshire and Swindon FRA) Councillor Peter Abraham (Avon FRA) |
| Labour: | Councillor John Joyce (Cheshire FRA) Councillor Sian Timoney (Bedfordshire and Luton FRA) |
| Liberal Democrat: | Councillor Jeremy Hilton (Gloucestershire CC) |
| Adviser: | Ron Dobson, Commissioner and LGA Lead Adviser |

Terms of Reference

The Working Group's Terms of Reference were:

- a) Identify and examine strategic issues facing the Fire Service College;
- b) Develop options to resolve these strategic issues so that the training needs of the FRS in the future can be effectively met; and
- c) Make recommendations to the Fire Services Management Committee for a sector position on the future of the College.