

Item 2

Priorities for 2013/14

Purpose of report

For discussion and direction.

Summary

This report provides a draft set of priorities and a draft programme for the work of the FSMC and the Fire Commission in the year to July 2014. The draft priorities reflect the on-going work of both bodies, informal conversations with member authorities, and the responses to the letter from Cllr Kay Hammond, Chairman of FSMC, to all Fire and Rescue Authority Chairmen and portfolio holders in county fire and rescue services.

Recommendation

Members are invited to consider and comment on the draft priorities and to agree a final version.

Action

Officers will develop a forward work programme to deliver the agreed priorities.

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Item 2

Priorities for 2013/14

Background

1. The LGA Leadership Board has agreed the following as the top priorities for local government in 2013/14:
 - 1.1. Economic growth, jobs and prosperity – councils are recognised as central to economic growth;
 - 1.2. Funding for local government – reform of the public sector finance system so councils raise more funds locally, have confidence their financing is sustainable and fair, and greater ability to co-ordinate local public services; and
 - 1.3. Public service reform – councils are at the centre, and seen to be at the centre, of public service reform and delivering more effective services for local people.
2. Subsequently, Rewiring Public Services was launched at the LGA Annual Conference in July, and set out 10 key demands to influence the incoming 2015 government and this will form the bulk of our campaigning work up to the next General Election. This suite of documents sets out the changes needed at both a local and national level so that public services can help communities to meet people's future needs and aspirations. It includes 10 big ideas (see **Appendix A**) and pursues its arguments through the following key areas: Independent local government; Growth; Adult social care and health; Children; Financial Sustainability and Transforming Local Government.
3. Fire and Rescue Authorities have a major contribution to make through the growth strand through their work to build safe and resilient communities, protecting people and places from harm and creating the conditions for economic prosperity. These priorities align closely to the challenges faced by Fire and Rescue Authorities, particularly around a sustainable funding system and Members of the FSMC will want to have regard to these priorities as it considers its own work programme for the coming year.
4. As with last year, Cllr Kay Hammond wrote to the Chairmen of all Fire and Rescue Authorities on 13 August inviting them to propose priorities for the work of the FSMC in the coming year.
5. To date we have received responses from:
 - Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes FRA
 - Dorset FRA
 - Durham and Darlington FRA
 - Norfolk FRA
 - Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire FRA
 - Suffolk FRA
 - Surrey FRA
 - West Yorkshire FRA.

Item 2

6. In addition, during her first year as Chairman Cllr Hammond has sought the views of member FRAs through a series of visits and regional meetings, conferences and networks and a programme of informal dinners for Chairmen/Portfolio holders across the country. These responses and discussions are reflected in the proposed priorities set out below.
7. In light of the further reduction to the LGA budget and resources, it is important that the work programme is focused on a defined set of priorities where we can deliver significant impact and demonstrate value to our member councils. We currently believe that this programme can be delivered within available resources.

Proposed priorities

a) Future funding

8. Future funding of the fire service remains a key area of concern for all Fire and Rescue Authorities. The 2015/16 spending round outcome confirmed the continuing decline in government funding for fire, with a reduction of 10 per cent, mitigated to some extent by the establishment of a competitive bidding fund aimed at generating greater collaboration across fire and rescue services and more broadly across the blue-light services. Although a small number of authorities have been able to be more flexible, for the majority of FRAs restrictions around increasing council tax levels remain. As we move towards the next full comprehensive spending review which is expected to be after the next general election, the sector will need to have marshalled arguments for a positive settlement that recognises the value of the service not just in terms of fighting fires and reducing fire deaths, but also in terms of the broader preventative and community safety work it does to contribute to economic and social outcomes. Over the coming year, FSMC may want to consider developing the vision for the fire and rescue service for the next 10 years. This area of work is very closely linked to the LGA's aims as set out in Rewiring Public Services and its key business plan objectives, both of which highlight the importance of financial sustainability for local services.

b) Reform

9. The Knight Review challenged the fire and rescue service to embrace reform as a necessity to dealing with reductions in public sector funding. The review set out a range of possible options for reform, ranging from a single national service to one where fire and rescue would be more embedded in local government. Although there was little analysis to underpin these areas of consideration, the debate which has followed the publication of the review indicates that there isn't a single view on the structural reform of the sector. Some have argued that while reform might be necessary this does not equate to a comprehensive structural change, which they argue would be expensive and potentially a distraction. Some areas have been attracted to one or other of the options suggested, or have begun to develop their own thinking, including how county led fire and rescue services could be enabled to precept, while still remaining under the oversight of the county. However, there does seem to be a consensus on the value of a sector led approach to reform rather than one which is top down and imposed from central Government. There is also a need to consider the increasing commercialisation

Item 2

within the sector and the role that the private sector can play. These issues, which feed into the wider LGA focus on public sector reform, are ones where FSMC has a key role to play in convening the discussions on reform.

c) Futuring

10. As well as the challenges that FRAs face as a result of reduced funding, there are other environmental and societal changes which will impact on the delivery of local services. Examples include the effects of climate change, changing demographics and the impact of demand management in other service areas such as adult social care. FSMC has a role in drawing out good practice and sharing it more widely so that the sector can better understand and respond to these and other changes.

d) Planning for risk: what does good look like?

11. Sir Ken Knight expressed puzzlement at the array of cost profiles across the fire and rescue service and this was a central line of questioning at the Select Committee session last week. In fact it looks as if expenditure is very closely correlated to the number of incidents in any given area. However, the Knight review has raised a question about what good looks like and what is the definition of effective and efficient service. The fire service is recognised as being different from other services in that it plans on the basis of risk rather than demand. At the heart of the local approach, integrated risk management plans lead to different areas having quite different response times to common categories of fire and conversations about what the service is expected to provide – in its broadest sense - remain in their infancy. Fire authorities have asked for better comparative data and a better understanding of what good looks like in terms of response times and also staff safety. Many FRAs do not recognise the data underpinning the conclusions of the Review and more work needs to be done to understand this. LGinform provides some comparative data for fire and rescue services and organisations such as CIPFA lead on the correlation and analysis of financial data. In addition CFOA are doing work on the provision of comparative data. However, there is a role for FSMC in generating a debate among Fire and Rescue Authority members on the information they need to assess risk and the financial implications of an appropriate response.

e) Blue light Interoperability

12. There is now a good deal of national and local work underway which is seeking to achieve greater collaboration and interoperability across the blue-light services. Individual Fire and Rescue Authorities are exploring closer working with the police and ambulance services and at the national level initiatives like the Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Programme are seeking to improve collaboration at the operational level. However, a longer term vision for interoperability and greater collaboration is still to be crafted from these individual initiatives. There is a real need for debate and a better understanding of the strategic and operational opportunities and challenges associated with this agenda. FSMC can lead this debate from a fire sector perspective working closely with CFOA and the government. It is also in a position to broaden the debate to include Police and Crime Commissioners and NHS trusts.

Item 2

f) Sprinklers

13. Sprinklers has been a high priority for fire authorities and this is reflected in the work that the FSMC Working Group, led by Councillor John Edwards, did last year to raise the profile of this issue. This remains a priority and FSMC has already committed to supporting fire authorities in their use of the toolkit that has been developed. This is an important issue in relation to local economies and also the wellbeing of some of the most vulnerable in our society. Although the Government remains opposed to regulation, we have seen some change of tone and nuance from Ministers on this which is encouraging. We need to keep the pressure up on this.

g) Retained firefighter pensions

14. This is an issue which could have a large financial impact on fire authorities and could therefore impact on the future financial sustainability of FRAs with large numbers of retained staff. FSMC has been lobbying government on the issue of the allocation of the non-employee costs associated with providing retrospective access to the pension scheme to retained firefighters. We have recently responded to the consultation on the settlement between the government and Fire Brigade Union again setting out the concerns of the sector. It is likely that this will remain an issue in the coming year.

h) Sector response to Coroners' recommendations arising from incidents in high rise blocks of flats

15. The tragic fires at Lakanal House in Southwark and Shirley Towers in Southampton led Coroners to make a number of recommendations in Rule 43 letters to government, Fire and Rescue Authorities and Local Authorities. FSMC has already discussed its potential role in supporting the wider sector in implementing these recommendations and will seek to:

15.1 ensure that the operational lessons arising from these fires are communicated;

15.2 work with local authorities on the responsibilities to communicate with residents on fire safety matters; and

15.3 work with the sector and government to consider whether changes to building regulations might be required to allow more effective management of safety of high rise flats.

i) National negotiations

16. Some Fire Authorities have raised pay, industrial relations and the role of national negotiations around these areas as a significant issue. These areas are the responsibility of the National Joint Committee (NJC) for Fire and Rescue Services, which includes members nominated by the LGA. The Employers' Side of the NJC,

Item 2

including LGA members, will be mindful of the views of the LGA membership more widely in addressing these complex and important issues.

Communications

17. There are a number of internal and external communications channels available to help the Fire Services Management Committee promote the work it is doing and ensure key messages are received in a professional manner by as many stakeholders as possible. Members will be aware that we use the full suite of these tools and techniques to ensure that the safer communities and policing contacts are aware of, and support, our work.
18. The annual fire conference, due to be held in Cardiff next March has grown in size and reach and remains a key event in the forward calendar. We also have a dedicated section on the LGA website, bulletins, outside speaking events and interviews, Knowledge Hub, blogs, features and news items in First magazine, and twitter accounts which are used to keep in close touch with our members to hear their concerns, but also to ensure they are aware of the work of the LGA. We also work with some of our key partners such as the Chief Fire Officers Association to give added strength to our messages.

Conclusion and next steps

19. Following a decision by FSMC on its priorities, officers will prepare a detailed work programme to manage the day to day work and the Chairman will also communicate the agreed priorities to all members of fire authorities. These will feed into the wider LGA business planning exercise which begins early in 2014.

Item 2

Appendix A

Our ten big ideas for rewiring public services

1. Give people back a meaningful local vote on a wide range of tax and spending decisions, to establish a level of decision-making that allows each place to act as its own local treasury, managing local tax and spend and driving growth.
2. Drive local public service effectiveness and end waste and red tape at all levels by bringing local services and decisions together in one place, for each place, for issues ranging from economic development to health and law and order.
3. Reduce bureaucracy and remove artificial Whitehall silos by merging six government departments and creating a single England Office. Under this proposal the Department for Communities and Local Government, Department for Transport, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Department of Energy and Climate Change, Department for Culture, Media and Sport and relevant parts of the Home Office would be combined.
4. Share money fairly around the UK by scrapping the outdated Barnett formula and replacing it with needs-based funding.
5. Share money fairly around England by taking financial distribution out of the hands of Ministers and replacing it with an agreement across English local government.
6. Strengthen the say of local people by reducing Ministers' powers so that they cannot intervene in local democracy, boundaries and decisions.
7. End flawed and bureaucratic tick-box inspections and replace them with a process where genuine consumer champions focus on the service local people receive from schools, hospitals, policing or care homes.
8. Boost investment in infrastructure by re-creating the thriving market in municipal bonds which England once had and most other countries still have.
9. A multi-year funding settlement aligned to the end of the next parliament which will enable councils to invest in economic growth and prevention rather than cure.
10. Put this settlement beyond future Whitehall revision by giving formal constitutional protection to local democracy.