

Note of decisions taken and actions required

Title:	Fire Commission
Date and time:	Friday 14 June 2013, 11.00
Venue:	Westminster Suite Room 8.1, Local Government House

Item	Decisions and actions	Action by
------	-----------------------	-----------

Cllr Hammond welcomed members to the meeting, including recently appointed Fire Chairs following the May elections and hoped they would find the Fire Commission informative. She said that copies of the newly produced Fire bulletin were available and urged members to give their feedback on the content.

1. Attendance by the Fire Minister

Cllr Hammond welcomed Brandon Lewis MP to the Commission.

Mr Lewis thanked the Commission for the invitation and reported that DCLG are now in the consultation stage regarding Sir Ken Knight's efficiency review. It is intended that the Government's final response will be made in the autumn, so he invited members to submit their views either collectively or individually on behalf of their authorities.

Cllr Hammond proposed that questions from members fall under one of two themes: general questions and Sir Ken's review.

General questions

Members asked what the Minister was doing to defend the Fire Services' share of **the budget**.

Mr Lewis responded that while he was unable to reveal details of the forthcoming spending round. However, as part of the local government family it was expected that fire must take its share of the cuts. However, he said that he would rule out a debate on privatisation or the idea of a single national service, emphasising that it was recognised that differences existed between authorities.

Members expressed concern that the impact of current spending cuts would remove any slack from the Fire Service, with no option left but

to seek a **council tax rise** from the electorate via a referendum. They argued that the cost of a referendum meant any tax gains were marginal and said that there was a need to extend budgetary flexibility across sectors.

Mr Lewis contended that while authorities would need to seek the approval of the electorate, they have freedom to act on council tax and this was not currently capped by government. He said that he had received evidence that any referendum costs could be paid off within a year but emphasised that this meant that authorities need to be confident of their argument for a rise.

On **potential mergers between authorities**, Councillors from smaller, lower funded authorities pointed out that the much higher precepts charged by their larger neighbours precluded them from merging as this would mean a large increase in council tax.

Mr Lewis said that while the council tax complications of a full merger could be a challenge, this did not prevent two authorities from working together and receiving the mutual benefits of pooled resources without a full merger.

Members reported local work to try and get **sprinklers** incorporated into building regulations for all new houses and asked the minister if he would support this nationally. Mr Lewis responded that there were no plans to do this as the Government were reluctant to add any extra obligations which might increase the cost of house-building and dissuade investment.

On **flooding prevention**, members sought confirmation on whether there were plans to make it a statutory duty for fire. Mr Lewis responded that there were no plans to make this statutory at the moment but if it were considered in the future, fire authorities would want the funding currently held by Defra to go with it. Mr Lewis said he had no fixed opinion on the idea at the moment but was open to debate if FAs wanted to submit their views.

Questions on Sir Ken Knight's efficiency review

Members asked if the minister was prepared to take on communities regarding fire cuts and emphasised that consideration needed to be about the **effect on fire safety** rather than merely the bottom line.

Mr Lewis denied that the changes proposed were all about cuts,

arguing that they also looked at outcomes. He said that several aspects of Sir Ken Knight's review were intended to provide a better service, as well as a financial benefit to the authority. He said that prevention work carried out by the sector was fantastic and more could be done to harness this public trust in positive ways.

Members said that there was nothing in the report regarding a **review of national resilience**, but the substantial change in the cost of training and the types of risks and threats posed to the emergency services over the last 6 years merited a revaluation of whether resilience procedures in place were still fit for purpose.

On the **review data**, members said that this was based on 2011/12 data but much of the £196m savings identified by Sir Ken had already been made since then. Some Councillors felt that savings needed to target those authorities that cost the most.

Mr Lewis reminded the Commission that Sir Ken's report was independent from DCLG and was interested in what can make the fire service better rather than its processes per se. He cited the control centre model in the report as a potential means of providing better outcomes.

On **community budgets**, members highlighted the need to recognise that there were longer term financial benefits from investing in prevention and there were opportunities to work with local partners on this agenda.

On **scrutiny**, some members felt that Sir Ken's review had been misled in the suggestion that FAs do not have a scrutiny committee, saying that in some FAs the sub committees perform this function. One member said that his authority had recruited 8 non-elected members of the community to take on the scrutiny role to counter the perception that the FA was too inward looking in its governance structures.

On **peer challenge**, several members argued that there was no need to fundamentally review the current peer challenge.. While recognising that some officers had expressed a desire for inspection, they asserted that the inspection model was too bureaucratic and should not be forced upon authorities. Cllr Hammond said that there was a need to strengthen the corporate leadership review question by examining the statement of assurance.

The Chairman thanked Brandon Lewis for taking the time to come and talk to the Commission. Mr Lewis said if members wished to engage further on any issues, they were welcome to invite him to their authorities, feed into his quarterly meetings with Cllr Hammond or submit their views in writing.

Members requested roving mikes for future Fire Commission meetings.

Action

Officers to arrange roving mikes for future Fire Commissions subject to availability.

Steve Service

2. Community Budgets

Paul Raynes, Director of Programmes, LGA and Neil Sartorio, Director of Local Public Services, Ernst & Young gave a presentation to the Commission on Community Budgets.

Paul Raynes said that the rising cost of providing services for an increasingly ageing population meant that authorities needed to consider what changes could be made to the way services were provided, focusing on the factors driving cost increases. For fire, this would involve moving money from firefighting to investing in prevention. Paul said that the experience and reputation that the Fire Service already had in prevention work represented a huge opportunity for the sector to make savings.

Neil Sartorio gave an overview of the outcomes and learning from the Community Budget pilots. He emphasised that the exercise was not just about budgets but demand and distribution.

Members from some of the pilot authorities questioned the extent to which cross party involvement had been sought and argued that the focus was more on what the Chancellor would save than authorities. They asked what the rewards for FAs would be.

Neil Sartorio responded that for the model to work in practice, cross party agreement was needed. A sharing agreement could not be assumed from the outset.

Members said that while a shift in targets for FAs from the number of Fire deaths to the number of calls had reduced deaths, these figures were likely to rise again with the cuts being made. They argued that safety must be the priority.

Some members sought further information about how community budgets worked. Paul Raynes said that more information and examples of how they were used could be found at www.communitybudgets.org.uk , including details of investment agreements in Greater Manchester and West Cheshire.

Cllr Hammond thanked Neil and Paul for attending and urged members to check with their CFOs if they were involved in Community Budgets going forward.

3. Emergency Services Mobile Communication Programme

CFO Dave Webb introduced this item. He said that the current airwave contract covering FAs was due to finish at the end of 2016 and a replacement system was therefore being sought. However, the network was currently only used by the emergency services and unlike mobile phones, coverage needed to be consistent everywhere, hence it was very expensive.

Dave Webb asked members to consider nominations to the ESMCP customer group. He said it was anticipated that the group would meet monthly, but members would not necessarily be required to attend every meeting.

Members expressed concern of the potential cost of a new system in the light of current funding cuts if the bill came back to FAs.

Councillors advocated a collective approach to the issue between FAs. They argued that the role of technology needed to be examined more widely and lay members should be involved in the process, with regular progress reports.

Dave Webb said that the UK was not alone in facing this problem and discussion was currently taking place internationally on how to move forward. He agreed to report back to the Commission as the issue developed.

Cllr Hammond asked members to contact LGA Political Group Officers if they were interested in sitting on the group.

Action

Commission members to contact Political Groups if interested in sitting on ESMCP customer group.

All / Clive Harris

4. Sir Ken Knight's efficiency review

Cllr Hammond invited members' initial views on the findings of the Efficiency review.

Members made the following comments:

A "one size fits all" approach to reform was not acceptable.

FAs needed to be seen to show leadership, take action and drive efficiencies collectively as a sector, otherwise changes were likely to be forced upon them.

Members were opposed to the idea of Fire Commissioners replacing Fire Authorities, emphasising that the Fire Service was not the same as the police and that it was still unclear whether the introduction of PCCs had made a positive impact.

On collaboration, the idea of foregoing customisation to achieve interoperability was seen by some members as a false economy. They argued that if this was to be considered, the Government needs to ask if FAs are providing what is statutory rather than undergoing change for change's sake. However, others argued that greater standardization could provide economic benefits. Members felt that in many areas, collaboration work is already taking place.

Members argued that a 40% cut in deaths had been achieved by preventative work undertaken by the sector and that further improvement should be in the hands of the Fire Service.

Action

Officers to incorporate members' comments into LGA response.

Eamon Lally

5. FRA/PCC working group final report

Cllr Young gave a summary of the issues coming out of the working group's survey of Chief Fire Officers. She said that while some preliminary points had been raised, the general consensus was that the relationship between Fire Authorities and PCCs is still at a relatively early stage in development. The Group would consider doing further information gathering in 6 to 12 months time.

Cllr Hammond thanked the Working Group for the report, stressing that while this is a complex landscape, it was important that the Fire Service is seen to be proactive in implementing change and identifying partnership opportunities.

6. Industrial Relations

Members received an update from Gill Gittins, LGA Principal Negotiating Officer on industrial relations.

Members ***noted*** the update.

7. Fire Commission update paper

Members ***noted*** the update.

8. FSMC and Fire Commission notes of the last meeting

Decision

The notes of the last Fire Commission meeting were agreed as a correct record.

Date of next meeting: 11.00am, Friday 11 October 2013, Local Government House