

01 July 2016

## **21<sup>st</sup> Century Firefighter.**

### **Purpose**

For discussion and direction.

### **Summary**

The Home Secretary's speech on fire reform on 24 May identified reform of the fire and rescue service workforce as a key area of work going forward. This paper discusses potential changes to the firefighter role and workforce, and outlines a future work programme for Member's discussion.

### **Recommendation**

The Committee are asked to consider the proposals for future work set out in paragraph 19.

### **Action**

Officer to proceed as directed.

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## **21<sup>st</sup> Century Firefighter.**

### **Background**

1. Deepening collaboration and reforms to the workforce were identified as a key areas of work in the Home Secretary's speech on reform of the fire service on 24 May. While there had been increasing collaboration between the emergency services over the last five years, the Home Secretary argued that progress had been patchy and collaboration needed to be deepened.
2. The Government's proposals to give police and crime commissioners (PCCs) the power to take over Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) raise the related questions of how many of the anticipated benefits of collaboration with the police can be achieved without governance upheaval and how to ensure collaboration with other agencies is not reduced from its potential level by an increased focus on police collaboration.
3. In her speech the Home Secretary also identified the need for greater flexibility in the deployment of resources through the use of new shift patterns, greater use of retained firefighters in urban as well as rural areas, the recruitment of dedicated fire prevention staff, stopping a culture of bullying and harassment present in some FRAs, and a change to the overwhelmingly white male demographic of the front-line service.
4. The Home Secretary was challenged on how to alter the demographic balance of the service when financial constraints made recruitment difficult.<sup>1</sup> She argued that the age range of firefighters meant that recruitment would be necessary in the near future and that this offered an opportunity for change.
5. This paper will examine the current state of play and make proposals for future work.

### **Issues**

#### **Collaboration**

6. Members have previously discussed how to develop the role of the firefighter in the future. That discussion covered the work with health and social care. The LGA has continued to engage with NHS England, Public Health England, the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA) and Age UK on this work and has most recently contributed to the publication of *Working Together - how health, social care and fire and rescue services can increase their reach, scale and impact through joint working*. The document is aimed at encouraging further discussions between health and social care and fire and rescue

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<sup>1</sup> Fire and rescue service, along with the rest of local government, has had to make significant savings, with funding for fire and rescue authorities falling significantly over the last five years. The National Audit Office (NAO) stated that funding for stand-alone authorities had fallen on average by 28% in real terms and it found that the majority of savings in the sector to date had come from staffing reductions<sup>1</sup>. The NAO detailed that 77% of the cost base of the service comprised pay and pensions in 2011-12.

authorities and exploring further the role that fire and rescue authorities can play in health and social care at a local level. The LGA is a part of the continuing work of the group subject to agreement on priorities at the September FSMC.

7. The LGA has also produced *Beyond Fighting Fires 2* which looks at the transformation of the sector. This includes work with other partners including the police, health and social care. The number of medical incidents the FRS has attended increased by 47 per cent from April to September 2015 compared with the same period in 2014<sup>2</sup>.
8. There is therefore a significant amount of work on collaboration underway. The LGA should continue to support and engage in this work, but there seems no obvious scope for new initiatives on our part. There may be scope in the near future for LGA to support thinking on governance designed to further encourage and support collaboration.

### **Workforce and recruitment**

9. The latest set of fire operational statistics, published in September last year stated that there were 44,000 full-time equivalent FRA staff in England, including firefighters, support and control staff. This was 3.6 per cent lower than one year ago and 12.6 per cent lower than 10 years ago. The reasons for leaving the service varied across staff, however 70.3 per cent of wholetime firefighters leaving the service had left through retirement. This was supported by the findings of the NAO which said that all reductions in firefighter posts have come via 'natural wastage' or voluntary redundancy.
10. This means that FRAs are now increasingly managing an ageing workforce with 64% of the workforce aged over 40. Information obtained from the recent NJC Workforce survey, completed by all but one FRA and carried out in 2015 counted 33,565 whole and part-time personnel, split between 31,965 personnel in firefighting roles and 1,600 in control specific roles. Overall there were 49,111 uniformed personnel in the Fire & Rescue Service which includes 15,546 retained personnel (RDS). This figure is a reduction from 59,156 in 2010 (17%).
11. The firefighter workforce is also predominantly white and male. The proportion of female firefighters, both wholetime and retained, in March 2015 was 4.7% of the total firefighter workforce. The proportion declaring themselves as minority ethnic (of those who stated an ethnicity) was 4.4 per cent in March 2015. The NJC Workforce survey run about 6 months later provided the following: 5% of personnel in firefighting roles and 3% in control specific roles came from black and minority ethnic groups. Among retained personnel 1% came from a black and minority ethnic background.
12. Recruitment of trainee wholetime firefighters is currently not widespread, with many FRAs undertaking recruitment freezes. The last NJC workforce survey, carried out in 2015 showed that the levels of trainee and development firefighters are a very small proportion of the service of the whole, comprising less than 1% of the total wholetime firefighter workforce.

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<sup>2</sup>[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/511628/Fire\\_Statistics\\_Monitor\\_April\\_to\\_September\\_2015.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/511628/Fire_Statistics_Monitor_April_to_September_2015.pdf)

13. Overall, the extent to which retained recruitment offers an opportunity to address the lack of diversity in the workforce is unclear. Retained recruitment is still underway in a number of FRAs, but in some cases this tends to be from the existing pool of whole-time staff.
14. The traditional whole-time/retained division is being eroded in some places, however attitudes to retained staff vary. Some FRAs are finding that recruitment and retention of retained firefighter numbers is challenging as incidents decline. Others have expressed concerns about the need for retained firefighters to keep up with training and the impact on operational resilience. Others are looking to recruit whole-time staff from the retained workforce.

### **Apprenticeships**

15. The apprenticeships levy and target will also have an effect on the sector's workforce in the future. The levy is expected to cost the fire and rescue service an estimated £5.5 million. The levy can only be used to pay for apprenticeship training from government approved training providers. Employers will receive their levy back through a digital 'apprenticeship' account topped up with government funding of 10p for every £1 an employer invests. The apprenticeships target will see the fire and rescue service need to start approximately 1,130 apprenticeships each year. Both the levy and the targets come into force in April 2017. These issues were discussed in further detail at the last Fire Commission.

### **Inclusive Fire Service**

16. The NJC-led Inclusive Fire Service Group has been set up to look at issues around equality, diversity, behavioural and cultural issues. A number of key stakeholders were invited to participate in the group, including the Chief Fire Officers Association, the Fire Brigades Union, the Fire Officers Association, the Retained Firefighters Union as well as NJC employee and employer representatives. The Group have provided fire and rescue authorities with a progress update which includes analysis of the Cultural and Behavioural survey commissioned by the Group. The Group is continuing its work, with further details provided under the workforce report on the agenda.

### **Next steps**

17. In terms of direction of travel, the future of the firefighting profession seems clear. The role of the firefighter, while unchanged in its core focus, will become broader and the demographic make-up of the service will become more diverse. What is unclear is how quickly this will happen.
18. Factors that may affect the pace of change include the rate of staff turnover, contractual issues and therefore the progress of NJC work on broadening the role of the firefighter, and the willingness and ability of FRAs to take matters forward at local level and to adopt best practice in terms of collaboration.
19. The issue of firefighters' roles is subject to discussion at the NJC and outside the scope of this paper. It is however recognised that FSMC members may wish to provide a steer in terms of strategic policy to its members who sit on the NJC and there are a number of other policy questions which require further consideration:

- 19.1. When and to what extent will an opportunity for large-scale recruitment arise and how can this be balanced with further funding reductions?
  - 19.2. What should we do now to ensure that this opportunity to increase the diversity of the front-line workforce is taken?
  - 19.3. To what extent is further use of retained firefighters an opportunity for recruitment?
  - 19.4. How can the apprenticeships levy and targets fit with this work?
  - 19.5. Is best practice on collaboration being shared effectively and acted upon?
  - 19.6. What can FSMC and the LGA do to accelerate the pace of change?
20. Members are asked to consider how we respond to these issues, given that the publication of the Thomas Review is likely to take place soon and will result in further discussion around the issue of workforce reform and the diversity of the frontline service. The Interim Director of Fire and Resilience has already indicated that he wishes to discuss with members the scale of the challenge to make the fire and rescue service more reflective of the communities it serves and how this issue can be addressed. The Home Office is looking for the sector to take a lead in this area. If it does not prove capable of doing so, there is the possibility that the Home Office will take the lead in driving reform, and that changes in governance become a preferred method for delivering changes in the workforce.
21. There are a number of different ways that the LGA can help the sector answer some of these questions:
- 21.1. Putting together a publication looking at some of these issues in further detail, bringing together case studies and good practice to help the sector prepare for when further recruitment is necessary. The proposed document will provide an overview of the issues facing the fire and rescue sector in recruitment, bringing together the work that is underway across the sector to establish a common view on whether and when the age profile suggests recruitment opportunities will occur. It will pose the question “What do we need to do now and in the next few years to ensure that when recruitment opportunities occur, we use them to diversity the workforce?”
  - 21.2. Examining how relevant retained recruitment and apprenticeship levy are to increasing the diversity of the workforce.
  - 21.3. Sharing best practice from across the fire and rescue service on diverse recruitment, as well as working with organisations with expertise in increasing the diversity of workforce such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and learning from other public services which have been successful in increasing the diversity of their workforce.

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- 21.4. Working with improvement colleagues on how we might provide resources to aid this work for example the Equalities Workbook for councillors. This was originally published in 2008 and provides a series of practical exercises around equality and diversity for councillors to complete.
- 21.5. Continuing to support the work of the NJC Inclusive Fire Service Group.
- 21.6. Working with improvement colleagues and CFOA to ensure that the peer challenge process considers equality and diversity issues in general and specifically in relation to recruitment.

**Financial Implications**

22. The work can be met out of existing budgets.