

Priorities for 2014/15

Purpose of report

For discussion and direction.

Summary

This report provides a draft set of priorities for the work of the FSMC and the Fire Commission in the year to July 2015. The draft priorities reflect the new Chairman's priorities which are based on a combination of ongoing work, recent policy announcements by central Government, and a forward look with the 2015 General Election in mind.

Recommendation

Members are invited to consider and comment on the draft priorities.

Action

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

Contact officer: Helen Murray
Position: Head of Programmes
Phone no: 020 7664 3266
E-mail: helen.murray@local.gov.uk

Priorities for 2014/15

Background

1. The LGA's Business Plan sets out the following as the top priorities for local government in 2014/15:
 - 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. With the General Election seven months away, a significant amount of the LGA's work will focus on lobbying the main political parties to ensure that future national politicians have a full appreciation of the value of local government and the need for a genuinely localist approach. This year's annual conference focused on *Investing in our Nation's Future: The First 100 Days of the next Government* and set out the types of challenges any new Government will be faced with and provided a local government offer on how to help them deal with the most pressing issues. Sections focused on: homes, school places, skills and jobs, shared prosperity and a healthy nation and made suggestions around the first Queen's Speech, first Budget and the first 100 days of the new Government.
3. Within this context, Fire and Rescue Authorities have a major contribution to make under the growth/shared prosperity strand through their work to build safe and resilient communities, protecting people and places from harm and creating the conditions for economic prosperity. Many of the other proposals in the publication would be beneficial to FRAs as part of the wider local government family. Examples such as a Fiscal Devolution Bill, an independent body to distribute funding to councils and the use of reserves for housing investment might all be applicable to FRAs.
4. The new Chairman of the FSMC and Fire Commission, Cllr Jeremy Hilton, is keen that the forward work programme focuses on a small number of strategic priorities to ensure we focus effort on really making a difference for our member authorities and ensuring the LGA is well positioned and plugged into any future government thinking about the fire and rescue service. Members are therefore invited to contribute to these overarching headings.

Proposed priorities

a) Work to assist resolution of the current industrial action

5. The FBU has been in dispute with the Government about pension reforms since September 2011. In August 2013 it announced the outcome of a ballot of its members on discontinuous strike action and a series of short and longer strikes has been instigated since September 2013. The LGA has worked hard through the NJC to develop a set of common principles on the matter of the FBU fitness concerns with the aim of providing a mechanism for resolution of this particular point within the wider dispute. Those principles have been agreed 'in principle' jointly with the FBT and are in accordance with the views expressed through a consultation with fire and rescue authorities. Given legal constraints it is not possible for fire authorities to put in place the complete resolution on fitness matters sought by the FBU, even if they wished to. We remain close to both parties and although there have been some positive movements on both sides, there is no sign of immediate resolution.
6. The prolonged nature of this action is now creating difficulties for FRAs in terms of funding contingency arrangements and planning longer term workforce strategies so FRAs are keen that this matter is resolved. The Government intends to lay new Regulations in Parliament in October which will mean that the changes are legally in force. Whether that will signal the end to the long-running dispute is unclear, but continuing to provide assurance to our communities about response remains important. It will also take time to rebuild relationships and take forward any new policies which arise from this dispute. We are well placed to do this with the Workforce team and a specialist pensions adviser for the fire service which we are now recruiting.

b) The Independent Review of Terms and Conditions

7. The Knight Review challenged the fire and rescue service to embrace reform as a necessity to dealing with reductions in public sector funding. Sir Ken found that the conditions of service for firefighters could be an actual or perceived barrier to changes that could otherwise provide a more efficient service to the public. The Government therefore commissioned Adrian Thomas, an expert in the field of personnel management, to undertake an independent review in England. The FSMC had a brief discussion about this Review in July, but a separate agenda item has now been tabled which requires FSMC's consideration, particularly around the questionnaires which have been issued to FRAs and firefighters. (see agenda **item 3**)

c) Political engagement

8. In the run-up to a General Election, it is vitally important that LGA leading politicians make contact and build relationships with existing and shadow spokespeople to ensure that they have a full appreciation of the work of fire and rescue and can understand our position on a number of important issues. The Chairman is therefore keen to institute a political engagement programme which alongside key politicians will include wider influencers and opinion formers such as Clive Betts MP, Chairman of the DCLG Select Committee. We are currently drawing up a forward meeting programme. These meetings will be informed by a First 100 Days document, drawn up specifically in

relation to the fire service and which will seek cross-party endorsement from FSMC and form the basis of lobbying for the year.

d) Transformation: blue light interoperability

9. 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, the Government announced a £70m Transformation Fund for the Fire Service which has been designed to accelerate these types of programmes. All bids have now been submitted and we expect an announcement of successful projects in early Autumn. This strand of work will highlight some of the more innovative programmes across the country and the LGA has a role in ensuring there is wider visibility of these projects, sharing knowledge and experience across authority areas. We will therefore be identifying a number of opportunities to showcase different projects, both through sessions at the Conference, and in our quarterly bulletins. There is also a new group chaired by PCC David Lloyd which seeks to provide an impetus for this work on co-ordination, collaboration and integration both within fire and with the other emergency services.

Communications

10. Picking up on Sir Ken's suggestion around sharing good practice, the former Chairman of the FSMC, Cllr Kay Hammond, initiated a quarterly fire bulletin which contains a section on good practice. After six editions we have reviewed readership and are pleased to report that there are around 1500 subscribers who regularly open this communication. Given the size of the community, this is extremely positive and we therefore plan to continue the Bulletin, and seek feedback on what more we might do to broaden our partners, and how the content might be improved.
11. We also have a dedicated section on the LGA website, 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. Over the past year we have worked more closely with the Chief Fire Officers Association, joining up on key policy areas to give added strength to our messages. The annual fire conference, due to be held in Gateshead next March has grown in size and reach and remains a key event in the forward calendar.

Conclusion and next steps

12. 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 2015.