Government white paper: “Reforming our fire and rescue service”

Purpose of report

For decision.

Summary

The report sets out the LGA’s draft response to the Home Office’s Fire Reform White Paper proposals. Members’ views are sought on the narrative response to the White Paper and the individual responses to the questions in the White Paper set out in the appendices.

Is this report confidential? Yes  No

Recommendations

Members are asked to:

1. Consider and comment on the LGA’s draft narrative response and answers to the individual questions in the Fire Reform White Paper; and
2. Agree in principle the draft narrative response and answers to the individual questions.

Actions

Members comments will be used to revise the LGA’s draft response, which will then be finalised with the Committee’s Lead Members.

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Government white paper: “Reforming our fire and rescue service”

Background

1. On 18 May the Home Office published their White Paper: “Reforming our Fire and Rescue Service: Building professionalism, boosting performance and strengthening governance”.
2. The White Paper covers a range of issues, including the Government’s priorities of People, Professionalism and Governance.

**Issues**

1. Following on from previous discussions at FSMC and Fire Commission, officers have put together a narrative response to the White Paper (**Appendix A**) as well as answering the questions set out in the White Paper (**Appendix B**). We also received a small number of responses from Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) directly whose views we have tried to reflect where possible.
2. Members are asked for their comments on the draft responses set out in the two appendices, and to agree their content in principle. In particular members’ views are sought on the following areas within the White Paper:
3. Governance
   1. **Transfer of governance:** The response emphasises the importance of local determination around governance and our opposition to mandatory transfers of governance from existing FRAs. As members will recall the White Paper invites suggestions on how the Home Office’s objective of having a single elected individual accountable for governance can be achieved. As agreed we have included two options for how the Government could seek to undertake reform while retaining the current FRA models.
   2. **Operational independence and balanced leadership model:** The response states that we feel that appropriate schemes of delegation and constitutions are sufficient to provide operational independence. In terms of the balanced membership model the response currently emphasises the importance of local approaches towards decision making and emphasised that there will often be strategic and operational elements to decisions, with both playing an integral part of making services better. We have not given particular feedback on what’s included within the table in the White Paper on page 31, however the response states that the LGA should be involved in any further discussions on the demarcation of decision making.
   3. **Corporation sole:** The response states that the LGA does not agree with the introduction of corporation sole, as operational independence can be achieved through other means. This is especially important in a county council context. In terms of ring fenced budgets we have received different views on that issue but have highlighted some of the positives for counties that can come as a result of being a part of county councils.
   4. **Clear distinction between strategic and operational planning:** The split between operational and strategic planning has received mixed views from membership, some feel that the IRMP should remain under the purview of the FRA, some agree with the split.
4. People
   1. **Industrial relations and pay machinery**: The response currently welcomes the independent review, however it also tries to provide a balanced picture of the workings of the tripartite agreements.
   2. **Modern working practices**: Whilst the draft agrees that flexibility is helpful, the importance of a locally agreed CRMP based on local risks is the basis for any further work. The draft also notes that flexibility is only possible within existing terms and conditions and questions and questions whether the proposals in the White Paper would achieve a significant difference in chief fire officers ability to deploy their services’ resources.
   3. **Nurturing new and existing talent:** The draft states we would wish to see that any new entry requirements are proportionate and the implications of raising entry requirements have been fully considered. We have concerns regarding their potential impact on equality, diversity and inclusion as well as on on-call firefighter recruitment.
5. Professionalism
   1. **21st Century Leadership course:** The draft suggests we need to understand what skills leaders and future leaders in Fire and Rescue Services will need in the future before designing leadership courses.
   2. **Core Code of Ethics:** The draft currently suggests that since legislation can take time to come into force FRAs should get on with embedding the Core Code of Ethics now to drive change. There needs to be some consideration of county staff within this as well.
   3. **The Fire Service Oath:** The draft outlines some potential concerns regarding the proposed Oath, and that other mechanisms could be used to achieve the same outcomes.
6. Other key issues
   1. **Funding and Pensions:** The draft outlines the impact the pension system is currently having on the ability of authorities to attract and retain senior officers including chief fire officers.

Implications for Wales

1. Fire and rescue policy is a devolved responsibility, and the White Paper predominantly only applies to English Fire and Rescue Authorities and Services. However some of the proposals in the White Paper, such as those to reform the industrial relations and pay machinery could have UK wide implications and impact on Welsh Fire and Rescue Authorities. Where the proposals impact on Welsh FRAs we will work with the WLGA.

Financial Implications

1. There are no direct financial implications arising from the report for the LGA, as any future work related to the White Paper and the Home Office’s reform programme will be taken forward through existing resources. There will be implications arising from the White Paper’s proposals for individual FRAs and the sector as a whole and we will seek to address these during our work going forward.

Next steps

1. Members’ comments on the LGA’s draft narrative response and answers to the individual questions in the White Paper will be reflected in the final version of the LGA’s response. FSMC’s Lead Members will then agree the final version of the LGA’s response before it is submitted to the Home Office.