

LGA Local Government White Paper

Purpose of Report

For decision.

Summary

All LGA boards have been asked to develop proposals for inclusion in the LGA's Local Government White Paper. This paper sets out proposals for the Committee to suggest for inclusion under the key areas the LGA has identified.

LGA Plan Theme: Championing climate change and local environments

Recommendation(s)

That the Committee:

- (a) Notes the key areas set out in paragraph 5 of interest to the LGA as well as the emerging themes in paragraph 6; and**
- (b) Comments on the proposed approaches set out in paragraphs 8 to 13, and that these are then submitted by the Committee as its contribution to the Local Government White Paper.**

Contact details:

Contact officer: Mark Norris

Position: Principal Policy Adviser

Phone no: 020 7664 3241

Email: mark.norris@local.gov.uk

LGA's Local Government White Paper

Background

1. As members will recall from the Update paper taken to the Committee in October the LGA Chair announced the Local Government White Paper as a priority at the LGA's Annual Conference in July 2023.
2. The White Paper is a broad piece of work designed to allow the LGA to influence manifestos and the detailed delivery plans of both the first year and the longer-term programme of a new/returning government.
3. Feedback from the sector has suggested that the fundamental problem we need to solve is the relationship between national and local government. We need a relationship which enables us to maximise our delivery for the public. A general election provides an opportunity to reset this relationship.
4. Therefore, the aim of the Local Government White Paper as agreed at the Executive Advisory Board (EAB) in September is to *demonstrate how stronger and more empowered local government could deliver the public's priorities more effectively and strengthen the value that the public place on the UK's democratic structures.*
5. In order to provide a structure to the LGA's engagement with member authorities and stakeholders members agreed an analysis framework. There are 3 areas where the LGA is seeking specific feedback:
 - 5.1. **Public service reform:** How can fully empowered local government lead public service reform for better places and services?
 - 5.2. **Enabling local leadership:** How do we re-set the relationship with Whitehall?
 - 5.3. **Funding and resources:** What could local government "offer" in relation to any new resources?
6. From the feedback so far key emerging themes are:
 - 6.1. **Financial sustainability:** Continue to retain a focus on the issue of quantum. Some councils are keen to look at what reform of the existing system could enable councils to do ie business rates review, tourist tax options
 - 6.2. **Meaningful devolution/constitutional settlement:** An opportunity to use discussions about a new constitutional settlement to make the case for councils and greater devolved powers. Councils keen that devolution is meaningful and not just a means of reorganisation.
 - 6.3. **Accountability, transparency and assurance:** Wanting to be at the forefront of what this could look like. Can we make an offer as a sector?

- 6.4. **Statutory duties and role in prevention:** Councils are keen that we shine a light on prevention. Strong feeling that we could have a greater role in this. Some councils raising questions about whether we can fulfil all of our current statutory duties - does this lead to a broader debate?
- 6.5. **Partnership working/convening powers:** Councils feel that we should have a nationally recognised role as the convenor of partnerships in our localities.
- 6.6. **Recognising local leadership:** At a time when local government is more trusted than national politicians how do we use this relationship to deliver for our communities. Local leaders want to be able to deliver hope. What does that look like and how do we enable it? How do we get national government to trust us?

Proposal

7. Fire Services Management Committee needs to develop proposals setting out how a stronger and more empowered fire and rescue sector could deliver even more effectively than they currently do on the public's priorities around preventing and reducing fires and improving community safety. Arranged below under the three major areas where the LGA is seeking feedback are proposals for the Committee's contribution to the White Paper.

Public Service Reform

8. The Committee does not have a specific list of legislative changes it would like to make to the legislation underpinning Fire and Rescue Authorities, though it does of course have a developed position around the Fire Reform White Paper, which is covered under the Enabling Local Leadership section. Drawing on current priorities and existing work the Committee could propose the White Paper make the case for:
 - 8.1. A review of the statutory duties in the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 so they include responding to weather-related incidents such as flooding and wildfires.
 - 8.2. Fire and Rescue Authorities to be statutory consultees in the planning system, so services are able to comment on the fire safety issues arising from proposed developments.
 - 8.3. Introducing requirements to reduce the amount of toxic compounds used in building materials.
 - 8.4. Amending the Higher-Risk Buildings (Descriptions and Supplementary Provisions) Regulations 2023 introduced under the Building Safety Act 2022, to ensure regulators can consider mixed use residential and commercial buildings as a whole.

Enabling Local Leadership

9. The Committee has a long-established position around strengthening local leadership and governance within the fire and rescue sector. It is therefore proposed the Committee repeat its position that there should be no changes in fire and rescue service governance without local agreement.
10. As members are well aware we are still awaiting the Home Office's response to the Fire Reform White Paper. The Committee may therefore wish to make the point that in the Committee's view there is much in the White Paper that should be taken forward, and that we would want to see the Home Office working with Fire and Rescue Authorities to deliver these changes.
11. Specifically in the case of the College of Fire, the Committee may wish to make the point that there should be a stand-alone College for the fire and rescue sector, which is separate from the College of Policing, and which could be developed by building on the work of the Fire Standards Board.
12. The Committee has been briefed on emerging fire safety issues arising from progress to meet the country's goals of achieving a net zero target by 2050. These include the fire safety risks from lithium-ion batteries and battery storage facilities. The National Fire Chiefs Council also has work underway to better understand a range of other emerging risks. The Committee may therefore wish to make the point that there should be a cross-departmental approach to working with the sector to address these emerging issues, with for example further work to ensure we have the appropriate product safety standards in place and that government policies related to farming, biodiversity, landscape use and planning all consider the risks from wildfires going forwards.

Funding and Resources

13. Funding and resources for Fire and Rescue Authorities has been a Committee priority for some time, and we have undertaken collective work with the National Fire Chiefs Council and the Home Office to shape several recent Spending Reviews. EAB has been keen to stress that on funding and resources the White Paper should not simply demand more funding, but demonstrates how local government could make better use of funding. It is therefore suggested the Committee proposes the White Paper makes the case for:
 - 13.1. Fire and Rescue Services to be funded according to risk.
 - 13.2. Specific capital funding for Fire and Rescue Authorities.
 - 13.3. Setting a requirement for multi-year funding settlements for Fire and Rescue in order to provide services with certainty about funding arrangements.

Implications for Wales

14. The Committee may wish to consider seeking views from Welsh Fire and Rescue Authorities on the differing model of local/central partnership which has developed in Wales since devolution, and whether there is anything the LGA might learn on the delivery of fire and rescue services to inform the proposals it makes.

Financial Implications

15. There are no direct financial implications arising from this work for the Committee. In terms of impact on government and local authority budgets where possible the options developed by each board should concentrate on what could be delivered by reprioritising existing departmental budgets.

Equalities implications

16. As fire can have a greater impact on people with protected characteristics, the ability to fight fires more effectively and also to prevent them happening will improve equality, diversity and inclusion within communities, and the proposals set out in the paper will assist in improving equality.

Next steps

17. The proposals set out in paragraphs 8 to 13 which are agreed by the Committee will be submitted as the Committee's contribution to the development of the Local Government White Paper.