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Response by CLG to "Fire Futures"

Report by the Chief Officer

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1 Summary

1.1 This report seeks to give an overview of CLGs recent response to the 'Fire Futures' exercise undertaken during the latter part of 2010. The response gives a clear indication for fire policy in the future including setting a new relationship for central government and Fire and Rescue Authorities. It is clear that the key principles in this response will shape the forthcoming national framework due for publication in 2012.

2 Recommendation

2.1 That the Authority considers the government's intended approach to future fire policy and uses this to assist with their own deliberations around future Authority policy.

3 Introduction

3.1 The 'Fire Futures' project began in September last year with an invitation to the sector (FRAs, FRSs, representative bodies, LGA, CFOA and commercial and business bodies) to offer suggestions on how the service of the future might look. Following this initial suggestions phase, four working groups were established to collate these ideas and present these to government in a formal report. The four workstreams were entitled:

- Role of FRSs (Delivery Models)
- Efficiency, Effectiveness and Productivity
- Localism and Accountability
- National Interests (which relates to activities undertaken within the sector but above the FRA level)

3.2 The resultant workstream reports were produced in early 2011 and contained a vast array of suggestions, some radical, others conventional, both strategic and tactical. Not surprisingly given the wide variety of views, the reports lacked a single coherent or compelling argument to take the sector in a particular direction. As such the government's response has attempted to categorise these ideas into four groups:

- Category A: Ideas bank the sector may want to draw on. This is by far the largest group of ideas.

- Category B: National resilience - sector in the lead, supported by government.
- Category C: Government action to free the sector.
- Category D: Ideas government has ruled out.

4 A New Relationship Between Government and the Sector

- 4.1 It is clear that in the 'Fire Futures' response CLG has sought to articulate a resetting of the relationship between central government and the fire and rescue service. And beyond that to influence how FRAs and their services interact with local citizens.
- 4.2 The indications are that this recasting of the relationship will be a significant feature of the forthcoming national framework. Central government's role will be more permissive, helping to break down obstacles which would otherwise prevent reform or more efficiencies within the service. Beyond this, however, it will be seeking to promote the rights of citizens to be more involved in decision making around the service provided by ensuring there is greater transparency and community involvement. I would anticipate the vehicle to achieve this will be the local integrated risk management plan.
- 4.3 The drive for greater localism and decentralisation will also influence government handling of the resilience elements of national projects specifically FireControl, Firelink and New Dimensions. It is likely to manifest itself in sector bodies such as LGA and CFOA managing the steady state activities as the projects are closed.
- 4.4 The government response is divided into four broad areas:

4.4.1 Local Decision Making

Here the strong message is much greater local decision making around spending and service provision with increased and transparent democratic accountability. Within this is an indication that Fire will be incorporated in the local government resource review with its focus of reducing dependence on central funding. Only in relation to national resilience (effectively responding to nationwide threats such as climate events and terrorism) will government retain a key interest. Whilst it will not force mergers, it will encourage FRAs to think radically around new ways of increasing efficiency such as more use of the private sector, local enterprise bodies and mutuals.

4.4.2 Cross Sector Collaboration

Government recognises that given the nature of the service, certain functions and activities are best undertaken centrally. Whilst previously this tended to mean ownership by CLG there is a very strong expectation the sector will take greater ownership. Indeed this has been something Hampshire's Chief Officer has been heavily involved in for some time. Whilst there is a clear expectation for sector leadership there remains some significant areas where government retains a strong interest. These are:

- The development by the sector of appropriate processes to provide assurance to local communities on performance and to provide mutual learning/good practice and performance support.

- Measures to address serious service failure.
- The maintenance and development of interoperability capabilities.
- The development and interaction between local and national risk.
- The development of operational guidance.
- Research.
- National safety campaigns.

Notably though, a popular idea to create a combined fire emergency ambulance service has not gained government support, rather FRSs are encouraged to work more closely with Ambulance Trusts.

4.4.3 Fire Service College

Pleasingly there is a clear commitment to see the national training college at Moreton in Marsh continue. In line with previous sections though, there is a desire for greater involvement by the sector as well as commercial interests and voluntary bodies. Further work to explore how this can be achieved is heralded in the report.

4.4.4 Local and National Resilience

In a future of greater decentralisation and local accountability, Government is keen not to lose the resilience that comes from interoperability, cross border working, multi agency co-ordination and national standards for data and communications. Therefore it is likely to retain ownership of guidance which seeks to respond to:

- Large scale natural disasters (or local with a national impact).
- Events with potential large scale casualty implications or requiring large scale response or specialist capability, eg, building collapse, aircraft crashes, terrorist activity, etc.
- Chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear or explosive incidents.

5 **Next Steps**

5.1 It is clear that the response also sets the scene for a series of pieces of work which will ultimately build into 2012 National Framework.

5.2 Quoting from the response:

- “We will work with the sector to develop and consult on a new national framework that re-sets the relationship, enhances accountability, sets out citizens rights and expectations to be in place for 2012.
- Where required we will work with the sector on barrier-busting to support the delivery of the public sector reform agenda and improved cost effectiveness in service delivery.
- We will work with the sector to define roles in resilience and in developing appropriate resilience assurance mechanisms, reflecting these in a new national framework.
- We will undertake a review of the funding mechanisms for the fire and rescue service in the context of the local government resource review.
- Central government will withdraw from functions that the sector is better able to deliver for itself.

- We will explore with the sector and other organisations their views about and interest in taking a greater stake in the ownership and/or running of the Fire Service College, in ways which would secure the most advantageous delivery of the College’s training mission.”

6 Conclusion

- 6.1 Government response to the ‘Fire Futures’ project has brought forward some key planks for future fire policy. Emphasis will be on decentralisation and local decision making which is held to account by greater transparency and critical challenge. CLGs role beyond co-ordinating national resilience activities will be to support FRSs by removing obstacles which constrain greater efficiency and flexibility. The sector as a collective will be expected to take on those “national functions” previously the domain of the government and look to others, particularly the private and voluntary sectors rather than CLG to assist them in improving service to the public.

7 Background papers

- 7.1 The following documents disclose the facts or matters on which this report, or an important part of it, is based and has been relied upon to a material extent in the preparation of the report:

CLG Fire Futures Report - Government Response
www.communities.gov.uk/publications/fire/firefuturesresponse

Note: The list excludes: (1) published works; and (2) documents that disclose exempt or confidential information defined in the Act.