



We make life safer

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Hampshire Fire and Rescue Authority response to the report 'Facing the Future'

Thank you for your letter of 6 August 2013 regarding the report "***FACING THE FUTURE: Findings from the review of efficiencies and operations in fire and rescue authorities in England***". Hampshire Fire and Rescue Authority welcome the opportunity to respond to some of the points raised and to contribute to shaping the future strategic direction of the fire service, both locally and nationally.

The Authority considers that the report tends to look at the country's fire and rescue service as a whole. In practice individual authorities are different; operate in a very different context and taking this approach has led to numerous local examples of best practice having been overlooked.

Efficiencies

The Facing the Future report has contributed to the on-going discussion about driving up efficiency across the service. Contrary to the impression given in the report, Hampshire Fire and Rescue Authority ("the Authority") – and indeed a number of other FRSs – has taken a number of steps to improve its efficiency in recent years. Some examples were incorporated in the Authority's submission to the Review Team, including:

- a review of optimum staffing levels for operational firefighters with a reduction of over 40 firefighter posts;
- a comprehensive review of non-operational staffing to reduce employee costs by some 15%, whilst minimising the impact on front-line service delivery;
- various partnership working opportunities including an innovative shared services arrangement with two other key local partners, sharing premises with Hampshire Constabulary and South Central Ambulance Service, as well as a successful Ambulance co-responding service; and
- the establishment of a trading company to generate profits to help support front-line services.

All of these initiatives to drive greater efficiency have been planned, implemented, and £6m of financial efficiencies are being delivered.

Expanding the Authority's approach to partnership, HFRA, with its partners Hampshire County Council and Hampshire Constabulary have developed a Joint Working in Hampshire programme. A key part of this programme is the development of an Integrated Business

Centre, which will be a new, integrated and efficient service to deliver a range of key support services. The aim is to create a single joint working 'entity' to provide services across the three organisations, with joint direction, governance, control and senior management. The vision for Joint Working in Hampshire is "to drive efficiencies and tangible service improvement through joint working in a number of key service areas." Further to this, it will examine the value of a shared service platform for even greater integration of our specialisms to improve resilience, quality and innovation whilst remaining efficient.

These were explained further when the Review Team visited the Authority.

Looking ahead, being sighted on the medium term financial plan, and recognising the imperative to reduce public spending, the Authority is planning a number of additional measures to ensure that we continue to align our spending with our funding. These include:

- A further base budget review
- Efficiency programmes including:
 - a Carbon Management Programme which delivers on previous and current commitments to carbon footprint reduction made by the Authority. It identifies 'invest to save' projects which will save energy and fuel and therefore money;
 - the establishment of a networked fire control, and plans to continue this partnership in order to examine further efficiencies with Dorset, Wiltshire and Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Authorities; and
 - a fundamental review of risk across the county which will aim to optimise staffing levels, vehicles, and premises whilst continuing to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our response and the delivery of our service.

At this stage the Authority has decided not to comment significantly on funding and the funding formulae. However, as you will see from above we have been proactive in finding efficiencies against a clearly stated financial scenario. Therefore in order for us to continue in this way we would support changes which provide greater certainty for medium term financial planning, increased transparency and simplicity. We would consider that the current lack of clarity creates uncertainty and may encourage the holding of higher levels of reserves as a contingency. There are a number of changes being introduced across many government departments, which impact on the fire and rescue service. Members are also concerned that monetary reductions are being portrayed as efficiency improvements rather than the reality of being service reductions.

Strategic Direction

The experience of HFRA mirrors the national decline in the number of incidents. The HFRA recognises the need to adapt its services to continue this trend, and adapt to continue to improve public safety.

The Authority clearly understands the opportunities which its experience and expertise in addressing risk provide. The Service still needs to be able to meet the potential risks in an area if the number of incidents is falling but it has capacity to do that in more innovative and diverse ways.

Further integration and collaboration would be welcomed through:

- the opportunities to bring aspects of services across neighbouring FRS or in some cases whole services together to minimise management and support costs;

- closer working between emergency services where the benefits to the public are clear. This can range from sharing data around vulnerable groups to shared training, support services, shared premises and shared provision; and
- enhanced joint working with other aspects of the public sector to share skills and expertise.

The Authority has considered the opportunities which closer collaboration and integration with other emergency services might provide. It considers that greater synergies exist between the fire and ambulance services rather than between the fire and police services. Whilst the latter may be easier to achieve because of locally based governance arrangements, it is the former that has more potential benefit of an improved service to the public. We know this through our experience of running the largest co-responder unit in the country. In addition, the public perception is very different between police and fire. The Authority will continue to explore opportunities to secure the benefits of working more closely with emergency services, but particularly the ambulance service.

It is important to maintain a focus on protection and prevention to ensure that incidents including fatalities and injuries do not return to previous levels. Indeed work in these areas will have an increasing role in the future to maintain the trend in public safety.

One important element which will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Service in the future will be investment in technology. This is not simply about more effective support services, (though this is important) but also about how technology is used to protect life, make the work of firefighters safer, and to communicate with and educate the public. This is an example where it is possible for individual fire authorities to innovate at a local level and promote successful developments. Government could contribute to investment in technology to improve safety and efficiency.

It is also important to recognise the social added value the fire and rescue services bring to the community. It appears that this is an area that all government departments have not fully recognised and it is the Authority's view that more work should be done in this area to truly understand and quantify the wider positive impact the fire service has in the community before funding is cut and this benefit is lost.

The Authority appreciates the economies of scale which derive from larger organisations. It will continue to be receptive to discussions about the possibility of merger with neighbouring services where there is a mutually beneficial business case. However the Authority would also like to see the government playing its part in removing the barriers which have been seen to stall these discussions in the past.

Governance

The Authority considers that there are strengths with the existing governance model which should not be ignored in formulating any alternative models. Currently the Authority is able to gain the benefit of the local knowledge and access to the community provided by its Members. The Members are elected as representatives albeit not directly to the HFRA. In addition they provide a range of experience and in some cases expertise which can contribute to the development of the Service.

Members also act as ambassadors both in their community and their originating local councils, to champion the Authority's work to promote fire awareness and steps to reduce risks. The sprinkler campaign is a good example of this. It has provided positive outcomes with a number of public buildings now sprinkler-protected via the influence of Authority Member involvement.

Whilst it can be improved, the current model does provide a basis for local, democratic control.

It is recognised that alternative models – including either a model similar to the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) in the police service, or a national fire service – do exist. However, although these might provide opportunities for redistributing resources or improved integration, they will lose some of the benefits of the current system. The Authority does not believe that the case for working under a single commissioner, and sharing governance arrangements with the police to improve public safety has been made. In particular, we do not feel that PCC's have been in place sufficiently long enough for outcomes to be properly evaluated. We have reservations about a mutualised model for the same reasons.

The Authority considers that there are a range of changes to the governance model which could be made and will continue to explore these locally to see which options are likely to best meet the needs of the public in Hampshire.

However the Authority also recognises that further improvements are possible in areas such as more proactive scrutiny of the Service's activities or engagement with the public. The Authority has recently reviewed its work on scrutiny and expanded the work of one of its committees to increase the scrutiny undertaken.

More recently Members have been proactive in shaping the Authority's sprinkler policy and demonstrating their community leadership role in promoting its implementation. Methods to demonstrate greater accountability and holding the Chief Officer to account are being examined. The Authority is also seeking to develop its engagement programme and use a wider range of options (including social media) to connect with the public.

The report identifies the importance of a clear understanding of the respective roles of Members and officers and ensuring an effective separation of the two roles. That exists in the Authority currently.

Overall the Authority welcomes the Facing the Future report. We understand its intention to raise the debate around efficiencies which we believe it has achieved. We look forward to the publication of the government's response following these submissions and the findings of the select committee.

Hampshire Fire and Rescue Authority has a strong track record of national contribution, which we continue to feel is important as one of the leading fire authorities in the country. We will continue to commit time and resources to ensure other fire authorities learn from us, which in our experience leads to us learning from them.

We believe the government response will develop this important debate and the Authority will continue to drive efficiency in Hampshire as it has done to date. This will ensure we continue to deliver the highest quality and most efficient service to the public.

Yours faithfully

Cllr Royston Smith on behalf of Hampshire Fire and Rescue Authority