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Facing the Future: findings from the review of efficiencies and operations in fire and rescue authorities in England

Report by the Chief Officer

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1 Summary

- 1.1 On 17 May 2013, Sir Ken Knight CBE QFSM FIFireE released a report of the outcomes of work commissioned by Brandon Lewis MP, the Fire Minister. His remit was to 'explore the activity of fire and rescue authorities and see what the scope for change might be'. The report, entitled, "Facing the Future – Findings from the review of efficiencies and operations in fire and rescue authorities in England" is currently with the Minister, and his response is expected later in the year.
- 1.2 There are no recommendations in the report issued by Sir Ken Knight, but a number of key findings. Appendix A provides a summary of these.
- 1.3 The Performance Review and Scrutiny Committee has set up a sub-group comprising Councillors Pearce, Simpson, and Chadd, which is considering the report in more detail, potentially leading to a Member discussion of its contents and implications at a later date.

2 Recommendation

- 2.1 That Members comment on the report's findings to help shape the work of the Performance Review and Scrutiny sub-group.

3 Introduction and background

- 3.1 Until January 2013, Sir Ken Knight was the Government's Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser for England. Before that he had been London Fire Brigade's Commissioner. During his review, he visited the Service, and 14 others to understand changes and initiatives taking place locally. We also made a written a submission to the Review.

4 The report

- 4.1 The Report seeks to explore the way resources are used across all Fire and Rescue Authorities against a backdrop of a reducing number of incidents, and the future direction of the service.

There are five sections, and the headings are detailed below.

- 4.2. Chapter 1 What is efficiency and how efficient is the delivery of fire and rescue services in England?
- Chapter 2 Deploying resources
- Chapter 3 Collaborating for efficiency
- Chapter 4 Driving efficiency
- Chapter 5 What is the future for fire and rescue?

4.3 Appendix A provides an executive summary of the key findings. The full report can be found at the following link. [Facing the future - Publications - GOV.UK](#)

4.4 Since the report was published there have been a number of other developments including:

- Scrutiny by the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee (supported by a wide range of submissions including from the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA));
- Discussions with CLG about the data and its interpretation;
- Publication of a report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Homeland Security entitled “Improving Efficiency, Interoperability and Resilience of our Blue Light Services”; and
- Work initiated in the Home Office to consider future structural changes, possibly bringing Fire under the oversight of the Police and Crime Commissioners.

4.5 On 6 August 2013 the Fire Minister wrote to Fire and Rescue Authorities encouraging them to contribute their ideas and views by the end of August 2013 to allow him proper time for consideration. The Authority has made a response which is attached to this report in Appendix B.

5 Performance Review and Scrutiny sub-group

5.1 The Performance Review and Scrutiny Committee has set up a sub-group comprising Councillors Pearce, Simpson, and Chadd, which is considering elements of the report in more detail and will lead a Member discussion of its contents and implications at a later date.

6 Supporting our corporate priorities and aims

6.1 Depending upon the Minister’s response, the implications of this report may have significant impacts on:

- the future priorities and aims of the Service,
- the future governance of the Service, including the role of fire and rescue authorities, and
- the national organisation of fire and rescue services.

7 Risk analysis

- 7.1 Risks and opportunities will be identified and assessed as the report and its findings are considered and developed.

8 People impact assessment

- 8.1 The proposals in this report are considered compatible with the provisions of the equality and human rights legislation.

9 Environmental and sustainability impact assessment

- 9.1 No impacts have been identified at present

10 Resource implications

- 10.1 No extra resources are required to consider the report and work with the Performance Review and Scrutiny Committee, apart from the time required by the Member sub-group. Proposed actions arising from it will be determined and reported along with any resource requirements.

11 Conclusion

- 11.1 The report “Facing the Future” is being considered by the Authority, the Fire Service nationally, and the Government. All Members’ views and input are welcome during this period.

12 Background papers

- 12.1 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:

Facing The Future: findings from the review of efficiencies and operations in fire and rescue authorities in England, Sir Ken Knight CBE QFSM FIFireE, May 2013.

Knight Review of Fire and Rescue Services, House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, June 2013

Improving Efficiency, Interoperability and Resilience of our Blue Light Services, Tobias Ellwood MP and Mark Philips, June 2013

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

“Facing the Future” report – executive summary and key findings

Chapter one: What is efficiency and how efficient is the delivery of fire and rescue services in England?

1. Deaths from fires in the home are at an all time low; incidents have reduced by 40 per cent in the last decade, but expenditure and firefighter numbers remain broadly the same. This suggests that there is room for reconfiguration and efficiencies to better match the service to the current risk and response context.
2. Some fire and rescue authorities spend almost twice as much per person per year in some areas than others, but there seems to be little relationship between expenditure and outcomes.
3. If all authorities spending more than the average reduced their expenditure to the average, savings could amount to £196 million a year.

Chapter two: Deploying resources

4. Fire and rescue authorities have transformed themselves from organisations that dealt with fire response to organisations also covering preventative and wider rescue work and they have succeeded in reducing incidents. They now need to transform themselves again to reflect the completely different era of risk and demand.
5. The focus for the future must be on protecting front-line services; this does not mean a protectionist approach to jobs. Avoiding redundancies, station closures or reductions in fire engines is often the focus for elected members and officers, and there is anecdotal evidence of some self-censorship by Chief Fire Officers.
6. Innovative crewing and staffing models are being pursued, and there is some evidence that these are being shared – but there is little evidence of areas implementing learning from others.
7. Increasing the total ‘on-call’ firefighters nationally by just 10 per cent (to 40 per cent) could provide annual savings of up to £123 million. All fire and rescue authorities must consider whether ‘on-call’ firefighters could meet their risk – it is an invaluable cost-effective service.
8. £17 million could be saved if authorities adopted the leanest structure in their governance types.
9. The Grey Book can lead to some self-limitation by leaders not to introduce change that would require lengthy negotiation. It should be reviewed.
10. Authorities are right to capitalise on their reputation to help deliver other services to hard-to-reach communities. But this should only be where they are commissioned to do it, or have identified a clear cost benefit to their own aims.

Chapter three: Collaborating for efficiency

11. The 46 fire and rescue authorities, each with different governance structures, senior leaders, and organisational and operational quirks does not make for a sensible delivery model. Mergers can be a solution, but there is a lack of local political appetite and incentive to combine.
12. There is widespread duplication of effort in the design, commissioning and evaluation of fire-specific products. A greater level of trust between authorities is needed to ensure the rapid spread of good ideas and proven technology.
13. The challenge for fire and rescue authorities is to accept that to achieve interoperability, we all need to forgo an element of customisation. What I've seen throughout this review is that fire and rescue authorities are not yet prepared to take this step – but I hope that the future holds greater pragmatism.
14. Collaboration, co-responding and co-location with other blue-light services does happen and can deliver efficiency through consolidating public sector assets as well as closer working. But progress is patchy and driven or hindered by local relationships.

Chapter four: Driving efficiency

15. The major driver for change has been reduction in central government funding and the freeze in local council tax revenue. Fire and rescue authorities spend to their budgets, not to their risk. How to use funding to incentivise further change must be a key consideration for government.
16. Fire and rescue authority reserves increased from just over £200 million to more than £400 million in 2008-2012. These levels are well above the average for local authorities (including police). Prudent reserves should be held, but funding reductions were backloaded to enable authorities to invest in service transformation – reserves should be used to invest in spend-to-save projects.
17. Authority Members need greater support and knowledge to be able to provide the strong leadership necessary to drive efficiency. Scrutiny of authorities and services varies considerably, some more robust than others. Elected Members must ensure that local people understand their service and encourage an informed debate about change.
18. Greater sector leadership is needed to drive through a culture of learning from good practice and challenging services to rise to the level of the best.

Chapter five: What is the future for fire and rescue?

19. Where fire and rescue authorities can provide business cases for local merger, showing clear, achievable efficiencies, central government should step forward to provide financial support for transition.
20. The potential savings identified in this review are unlikely to be sufficient for some fire and rescue authorities to be able to live within their reducing budgets.

21. The scale of change needed to fully transform the fire and rescue service is unlikely to be achieved through local action alone. But authorities should not wait for national action before fully exploiting the large number of opportunities already within their grasp.
22. National level changes to enable greater collaboration with other blue-light services, including through shared governance, co-working and co-location, would unlock further savings.