

A series of options for the future of fire and rescue provision in England

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1. INTRODUCTION

The fire sector has changed significantly over the last few years. The introduction of risk management planning, the increasing emphasis on prevention and growing public awareness of the risks of fire as a result of increased fire sector engagement with vulnerable groups have all contributed to the fall in fire deaths since 1981/2. The FRS has met delivery challenges, including an increasing number of road traffic collisions, whilst assuring a professional, effective response to national crisis situations such as 7/7.

Yet despite these changes a number of significant issues remain. These concerns are now merging with a new set of challenges facing the sector, generated by changing political, economic, social and environmental factors which will all impact upon the future of fire provision. To continue delivering the professional service that the public expects, the fire sector needs to proactively adapt in order to face these challenges.

Launching the Fire Futures Review in July 2010, the Fire Minister, Bob Neill MP, invited fire partners to take the lead to generate wide-ranging options for the future of fire and rescue provision in England.

The Minister set the challenge for a short, focussed review that drew in options from across the whole fire sector. Over a hundred partner bodies and volunteers have come together to devote resource and expertise to present the Minister with the options included in these reports. We believe we have met the challenge.

These reports mark the outcome of the first stage of the review. They present a series of short, medium and long term options which can stand alone or, in many cases, be combined. The reports are not a blueprint for the future of fire and rescue provision; rather they are a menu of options which merit careful consideration and further development.

The workstream Chairs have welcomed the new approach Fire Futures has taken to engage more widely with the sector, though shared concerns with the Steering Group over aspects of the process and timescales. Despite the clear intention from the outset that this was an options generating exercise and a wide range of views would be put forward, the four Chairs also share significant disappointment that some members of the Steering Group felt unable to sign off the work as a single report, even with the inclusion of appropriate disclaimers. This could give rise to the impression that some sector partners are unwilling to consider wider views.

2. PROCESS

To date, Fire Futures has been an innovative, all-encompassing strategic review which has placed the sector firmly in the lead in determining where and how changes might be made to meet current and future challenges. At a launch workshop on 28 July 2010, fire partners came together and, with no issue left out of scope, identified a series of wide-ranging factors for consideration. These topics were grouped together and taken forward under four workstreams:

- Role of the FRS (Delivery Models);
- Efficiency, Effectiveness and Productivity (EEP);
- Localism and Accountability; and
- National Interests.

Four volunteer Chairs came forward to lead the workstreams, each responsible for coordinating the work of their groups and for ensuring that the whole sector had the opportunity to participate and present options. This was essential given the 232 volunteers and 53 representative bodies who devoted time and expertise to the review.

Workstream Chairs were as follows:

- Cllr David Milsted, Dorset FRA
(from September 2010)
Cllr Paul Shannon, Greater Manchester FRA,
(to September 2010) (Role of the FRS (Delivery
Models))
- CFO Max Hood, West Sussex FRS (EEP)
- Cllr Andre Gonzalez De Savage,
Northamptonshire FRA (Localism and
Accountability)
- Brian Robinson, Association for Specialist Fire
Protection (National Interests).

The workstream Chairs were each members of the sector-dominated Fire Futures Steering Group established to oversee the review. Over five meetings, Chairs kept Steering Group members apprised of workstream activity and responded to member suggestions and challenge on the direction of travel.

With Chairs and volunteers in place, workstreams set about dividing their topic areas into a series of sub-stream issues overseen by volunteer leads. As sub-stream topics were taken forward, each workstream developed its own working style to generate options. The Role of the FRS (Delivery Models), EEP and Localism & Accountability workstreams developed sub-stream papers as initial prompts for discussion, and seven workstream papers were prepared in the first few weeks alone. The National Interests

workstream expanded the remit of the group to include innovative thinking on decentralisation and its implications for the wider sector. As work progressed, the group commissioned eight working papers and a number of think pieces to inform their debate.

Organisations provided vital input into the review in two main ways; through providing submissions and through offering virtual sounding pool resource. A total of nineteen submissions were received from partner organisations, including the LG Group, providing organisational insight into Fire Futures which helped develop workstream thinking. In addition, 36 organisations offered ongoing support to workstreams, providing advice and challenge on emerging ideas via a virtual sounding pool.

Both the submissions and the virtual sounding pool formed part of much broader engagement activity including the whole sector. All along, the review sought to include as many different viewpoints as possible, and to this end a concerted engagement process began in October with a series of workshops hosted by Chairs and sub-stream leads. Designed to challenge emerging thinking, each workshop held lively debates on developing themes and the review's wider direction of travel. The robust challenge offered by the 136 attendees helped hone workstream ideas as initial sub-stream reports were written and developed for still wider discussion.

With the sub-stream reports in place, workstreams highlighted their key themes in a series of questions which were shared with the whole sector for comment and challenge. From 22 October until 2 November, a 'Have Your Say' period was held in which all Chiefs, Chairs, interested organisations and individuals were invited to give their perspectives on the workstreams via email.

All of the 'Have Your Say' responses, partner submissions and sub-stream papers were then gathered together and used by workstream Chairs to shape their final reports. Although received after sub-stream leads had developed their reports, CFOA's submission was also considered by Chairs in this way.

3. THE REPORTS

The Fire Futures reports are presented from the four workstreams. A brief summary of the topics considered by workstreams is as follows:

a) Role of the Fire and Rescue Service [FRS] – Delivery Models

Constituted to examine the extent and current applicability of the FRS' role, the workstream investigated barriers to delivery, governance models and alternative service combinations. The Role of the FRS (Delivery Models) report offers a series of short and long term options conferring additional powers and responsibilities for FRAs and FRSSs to tackle the barriers faced by the sector and improve delivery. Looking towards the longer term, the report identifies a new Community Protection Authority governance model and outlines options for closer working between the FRS and some aspects of emergency medical response.

b) Efficiency, Effectiveness and Productivity

As its name suggests, the EEP workstream examined FRS resource balance and deployment, considering options to improve cost efficiency and the potential for alternative or additional areas of income generation. Through a series of sub-stream topics including funding, pay and conditions, balance of resources, delivery models and use of assets, the workstream report suggests efficiencies can be achieved by a series of measures including a new sector-owned procurement process, clear asset management strategies and a further consideration of charging and trading mechanisms. In view of the recent Spending Review, the focus of this work was more short term than other workstreams.

c) Localism and Accountability

Established to reflect on how localism and accountability relates to the fire sector, the workstream considered mechanisms for firmly embedding both concepts in fire provision. Substreams considered transparency, accountability, assurance, decentralisation and localism; and the workstream report reflects a range of options to drive these agendas forward. It offers an assurance model based on a sector-led approach and a series of proposals to extend localism, transparency and accountability of fire and rescue provision by offering communities a greater role in determining and monitoring local services.

d) National Interests

Established to consider the role of the FRS within the national context and the respective roles of the FRS and government in national resilience, the National Interests Workstream undertook wide-ranging work to consider decentralisation, pan-FRA arrangements, risk, national functions, the National Framework, interoperability, knowledge management, the Fire Service College and the built environment. The workstream suggests empowering citizens through better information and a decentralisation approach that separates commissioning and service delivery, whilst ensuring that interoperability is assured through national response arrangements and a defined assurance mechanism. The National Interests report also considers how the sector can change in driving forward this agenda, proposing a more joined-up approach to knowledge management, a more resilient built environment and a coordinated approach to training.

During the course of their work, each workstream identified a series of key issues and challenges which are likely to affect the future delivery of fire and rescue provision. Workstream Chairs have outlined these challenges in the opening sections of the reports.

4. NEXT STEPS

The Fire Futures Reports are just the beginning of the process to determine the future direction of fire and rescue provision. Outlined are a series of options which, either individually or in combination, are designed to address the challenges identified in the introduction, and we invite the Minister to consider the suggestions put forward.

The second phase of Fire Futures will begin when the Minister receives these reports. In his correspondence to the sector the Minister has called for reactions from sector partners on the options included in the reports while he considers them. The sector looks forward to working with the Government to develop these options as we shape the future of fire and rescue provision in England. We wish to see the Fire Futures process continue so that the sector as a whole may play a full and equal part, alongside other senior partners, in shaping and developing policy in the years ahead.

The challenges are immense, but England's fire and rescue sector has the professionalism and capacity needed to address them. By working together, both with partners and communities, we can deliver efficient, locally-driven services that meet the needs of the people we serve in a joined-up, proactive way.

David Milsted

Andre Gonzalez De Savage

Max Hood

Brian Robinson

