

## Open Public Services White Paper

### Report of the Chief Fire Officer

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#### 1 Purpose of Report

This paper summarises the key issues raised in the White Paper 'Open Public Services', identifies areas where Members may wish to discuss changes ahead of any legislation and suggests comments Members may wish to make to the White Paper.

#### 2 Recommendations

The Committee is asked to:

- a) Note and discuss the issues raised in the White Paper;
- b) Discuss and task officers to progress any immediate action to take;  
and
- c) Task Officers to make any comments deemed necessary by Members.

#### 3 Background

The White Paper – Open Public Services, published in July 2011, set out the coalition government's view on how it wishes to change public services for the better.

It states that good public services are an essential part of everyday life, and being able to access those services is one of the most basic requirements that we as citizens demand from government in return for our taxes. So reform of public services is seen as a key progressive cause. The better our public services, the more government is helping those most in need.

This Authority has since its inception ensured that the Fire and Rescue Service meets public need and our motto 'Putting Shropshire's Safety First' reflects the fundamental theme of the White Paper – that of public services putting the citizen first.

The Paper states quite bluntly that:

*'...that is why those who resist reform, put the producer interest before the citizens' needs, and object to publishing information about how services perform are conspiring to keep our society less free, less fair and less united.'*

There are a number of areas within the Paper that suggest ways in which this Authority can improve on our already good record of being a consumer focussed and open Authority.

It is disappointing to note however, that in the 27,000 words discussing public services the ambulance service is mentioned once, the police on 20 occasions, but the Fire and Rescue Service is not specifically mentioned.

#### **4 Key Issues for the Authority identified in the White Paper**

The White Paper clearly sets out the Government's view on the Public Service. Some areas, such as community right to challenge or right to buy have previously been published in the Localism Bill and will not be discussed here.

The paper points out that whilst many areas of the public sphere demonstrate world leading performance and great examples of excellent public service delivered by committed leaders and their staff this is by no means universal.

The Government believes that too many of our public services are still run according to the maxim *'the man in Whitehall really does know best'*. It is stated that decades of top-down prescription and centralisation have put bureaucratic imperatives above the needs of service users, while damaging the public service ethos by continually second-guessing highly trained professionals.

The Government's vision of open public services, set out in the Paper, turns this presumption on its head and instead suggests ways to place power in the hands of people and staff, with additional power or incentives to help boost those who would otherwise be disadvantaged in the marketplace. To achieve this Government proposes to follow five principles for modernising public services:

- Wherever possible they will increase **choice**.
- Public services should be **decentralised** to the lowest appropriate level.
- Public services should be open to a range of providers (**diversity**).
- We will ensure fair access to public services (**fairness**)
- Public services should be **accountable** to users and to taxpayers.

The Paper then sets out in particular what these five key themes mean.

- a) People want a say in how their service is run.
- b) Government, through service leaders, needs to free staff to deliver the best service they can and give them freedom to innovate to achieve that.
- c) There must be fair access for all ensuring in particular that services improve outcomes for the disadvantaged.
- d) Services must be responsive to the people they serve and be held to account by both the individual citizen and their elected representatives.
- e) Services must publish more information on what they do, how and at what cost.
- f) The Government will oversee core national standards and entitlements, ensure fair funding and equality of access.

## 5 Commissioned Services

In applying the above principles to different public services, the White Paper recognises that there can be no one-size-fits-all policy prescription. They recognise that different public services have different characteristics, and the proposals are tailored accordingly. In essence, Government sees three different categories of public service:

- **Individual services** – These are personal services – for example in education, skills training, adult social care, childcare, housing support and individual healthcare – that are used by people on an individual basis.
- **Neighbourhood services** – These are services provided very locally and on a collective, rather than an individual, basis – such as maintenance of the local public realm, leisure and recreation facilities, and community safety.
- **Commissioned services** – These are local and national services that cannot be devolved to individuals or communities, such as tax collection, prisons, emergency healthcare or welfare to work.

Officers believe that primarily the Fire Service can be seen as a commissioned service, although some of our delivery could be seen as both **individual**, such as home safety checks; and **neighbourhood** services, such as road safety or arson prevention in housing developments.

Under Commissioned Services the White Paper wishes to see a clear division between the 'Purchaser' and the 'Provider' with the purchaser acting as the citizen champion ensuring that the services delivered meet the five principals set out earlier.

In addition the proposals suggest that commissioned services will be paid by results, monitored by a National Accredited body, such as the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence.

Transparency of public services has been a theme from day one of this new coalition administration and the white paper sets out further areas where both central and local government needs to be more transparent. In particular we will need to ensure that our business plans are acceptable to the public and include the costs to the tax payer of delivering the service.

To increase transparency it is suggested that staff will be approached directly to ask them how the service could be delivered better or more cheaply.

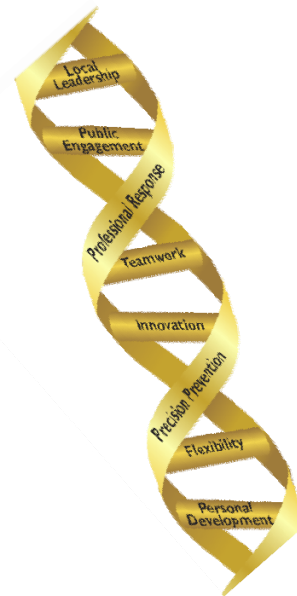
Finally for commissioned services it is proposed that Government would only intervene where there is severe management failure.

## 6 Implications

Members will recognise that many of the principles set out in the White Paper are already in place with the Authority. Members will recognise our 'DNA' (set out in our Service Plan) that mirrors many of the aspirations of Government:

In particular:

- We are increasingly communicating with members of the public, engaging with them and asking them what they want from their Fire and Rescue Service. Through public fora, LJC's and Neighbourhood Committees, through PACT meetings and other public events we have developed the new Public Value Measures adopted by the Authority and delivered by the Service. We will continue to seek better ways to learn from our communities.
- Officers are pushing decision making down to the lowest appropriate level and trying to allow local leaders to flourish through the new management structure and many years of management / leadership development.
- We have always worked hard to ensure fair access for all and our new Precision Prevention strategies are ensuring that we concentrate our efforts at those most at need.



- We are increasingly responsive to the communities we serve and being innovative and flexible in how we deliver our services. Most recent examples are how we dealt with the Ruyton-XI-Towns road closures and the English Defence League March in Wellington.
- We have already asked staff how we can deliver our service better and at lower cost in our Public Value consultation in 2010. We will be continuing to encourage dialogue between officers, Members and staff to secure the best and most cost effective service possible.
- We have opened up many of our 'back office' functions to competition including vehicle maintenance, payroll; legal services; occupational health and treasurer services. We will continue to seek the most cost effective means to deliver our service through external partners.

There are clearly areas where we can improve further.

Members have already agreed to review their community roles and how they can act as 'Citizens Champions' holding the Chief Fire Officer and the Service to account on behalf of the communities they represent. Officers are in discussion with Ashridge Business School to facilitate this development later this year.

We already publish more than many Fire Authorities. We were one of the first to publish all £500 + spending and have published salaries of officers and Member allowances for many years. We publish all our policies and budgets. Officers will look at how we can set out our budget in a more easily understood way, linking what we do with the costs, so communities can better hold us to account.

There are some areas that will need further information before any firm conclusions can be drawn:

- **National Accreditation Bodies** – these could be an excellent way to ensure equality of service levels across the country but they may also become another quango that replaces the very organisations this Government removed. Organisations that can identify international best practise and ensure real equality across the UK would be welcome.
- **Payment by results** – this might suggest that to measure results across the country and reward accordingly there might be standard performance measures or outcome measures. Clearly this would go against the theme of the Paper to free up local Services to deliver what local people need and not necessarily what Government wishes to reward.

- **Oversee core standards and entitlements** – the Fire Service moved away from national standards in 2004 and replaced them with locally devised standards based on local risk assessment. So the reintroduction of national core standards would be a surprise if they applied to the fire and rescue service.
- **Opening up Service to diverse providers** – as a Commissioned Service (as defined by the White Paper) the Authority will need to ensure that the Elected Members are Citizen Champions and that they are the equivalent of ‘Non Executive Directors’ holding the CFO and the Service to account. This might also suggest that the Authority could be encouraged to seek to secure a fire and rescue service from another provider from the public or private sector.

Generally therefore Members will welcome the majority of ideas set out in the paper as they apply to the Combined Fire Authority and the Fire and Rescue Service.

Members may wish to task Officers with developing / implementing the following in advance of April 2012 when it is anticipated the White Paper’s recommendations will begin to be implemented nationally:

- i) That the next Service plan should be clearly linked to cost so that the Public can see elements of cost attached to delivery of service outcomes.
- ii) That Members should review roles within the Authority to ensure that they become even more effective citizen champions as the ‘Purchaser’ of the services provided by the ‘Provider’ (currently predominantly the Fire & Rescue Service).
- iii) Task Officers with continuing to identify areas where we can become more transparent in the quality and cost of the Fire & Rescue Service.
- iv) Task Officers to find means to collect data on fairness of service provision especially data on service delivery to different social groups.

## 7 Legal Comment

This paper is comment on a White Paper and any significant changes to policy or service provision will be subject to separate legal comment once the provisions have been finalised and enacted.

## 8 Equality Impact Assessment

This paper is a comment on proposed national legislation / guidance and Officers will await sight of the Equality Impact Assessment related to this before making comment.

## **9 Appendices**

There are no appendices attached to this report.

## **10 Background Papers**

There are no background papers associated with this report.