

Fire Futures – Government Response

Report of the Chief Fire Officer

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1 Purpose of Report

This report summarises the response to the Fire Futures Reports produced by working parties from the fire community.

2 Recommendations

The Fire Authority is asked to note this report.

3 Background

The Fire Futures review, instigated by the Fire Minister Bob Neill MP, provided everyone working within the fire sector with an opportunity to influence thinking about the future direction of the Fire and Rescue Service. The Government has now had time to analyse the reports and has responded in the document 'Fire Futures Reports Government Response'. The full report can be found at:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/fire/firefuturesresponse>

4 Main Findings of the Report

The Government's view is that it must reverse the fourteen-year culture, in which accounting to central government was the priority, and instead ensure that the Service is locally accountable to the communities it serves. Serving citizens and involving them more on decision making is at the heart of what the new Coalition Government requires of the Service. This also includes transparency and providing assurance information to our local communities. This desire matches the ethos of Shropshire and Wrekin Fire and Rescue Authority and the direction already taken in setting local targets and involving our communities in Public Value measures.

The Government will not impose national reorganisation of the Service but will support initiatives locally that improve efficiency and value for money to tax payers. We will be given the freedom to continue to explore collaborative opportunities with others. This allows us to continue to outsource functions widely, as we already do, and to continue with our collaborative working with Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue in fire control working and the sharing of senior commanders.

The Government will continue to give work back to the Service, which the former previously carried out. This includes work on 'National Functions', management of the built environment and competence standards for staff. This additional freedom may sound attractive but may well place additional financial burdens on each Fire and Rescue Service and, therefore, unless new burdens funding follows, onto local tax payers. Members may well be cautious about accepting new responsibilities without increased funding.

Government will, however, continue to have a strong interest in some areas particularly:

- Providing assurance to local communities that their Fire and Rescue Service is performing well
- Measures to address serious service failure
- Maintenance of inter service interoperability
- Development of operational guidance
- Research
- National safety campaigns

However, it is clear that Government intends the sector to take a lead in these matters, although it does not say if it will fund them.

Government supports the provision of the Fire Service College and places high value on the excellent facilities there. Members will welcome this positive statement. However, Government believes that the College can only achieve its full potential, if there is greater involvement from the public and private sector, and will explore with these sectors options to secure the College's future.

National resilience is recognised as a very important issue and decisions on how this will be funded will become clearer during the Local Government Resource Review. The New National Framework, due to be published in time for 2012, will place appropriate responsibility for resilience matters. It is interesting to note that Government may require Fire and Rescue Authorities to place resilience matters into their Integrated Risk management Plans, thereby ensuring local focus for national risks.

The Government has placed the vast majority of the ideas raised by the Fire Futures reports into four categories, set out on the following page.

Category A is an Ideas Bank, from which Fire and Rescue Authorities can draw ideas. These include many issues already explored by this Authority, including Retained Duty Service employment issues, but also contain some immediate ideas that officers will explore further, including:

- Developing a 'place map' of community risks, aims and priorities
- Improving consultation with communities
- Improving transparency of costs of running a Fire and Rescue Service

Category B relates to national resilience matters to be lead by sector partners.

Category C details areas for Government to action to free the Sector from central control. These include the clear message from Government that it will listen to any ideas from Fire and Rescue Authorities to remove burdens.

Category D details ideas ruled out by Government. These include:

- Charging for attendance at road traffic collisions
- Applying levies on car or home insurance to fund the Service
- Enabling differing precepting in Fire and Rescue Authorities
- Imposing a single governance model for Fire and Rescue Services

5 Conclusion and Next Steps

It is clear that there will be no sudden structural changes imposed on the Service and for many Authorities, such as ours, this will be welcome. Equally welcome to local Members will be the removal of top-down bureaucracy and the control that, on occasions, prevented us from delivering a service that local people needed. However, Members will be rightly cautious that this freedom could also be seen as a means to reduce central government costs, whilst passing responsibilities, previously owned by Communities and Local Government, down to Fire and Rescue Authorities without providing the necessary funding.

Communities and Local Government have set out the next steps clearly:

- Initially we will see a new Framework Document in 2012. It is hoped that this is not too prescriptive nor that it takes the Fire Authority away from its current strategy.
- Communities and Local Government will work with the sector on what they call 'barrier busting' to support cost effectiveness of the sector.
- They will undertake a review of the funding mechanism in the context of the local government resource review. It is hoped that any outcome does not make matters even worse for Shropshire by once again excluding the real costs of rurality, rural poverty and sparsity.

6 Financial Implications

There are no immediate financial implications arising from this report.

7 Legal Comment

There are no legal implications arising directly from this report, which is for information only.

8 Equality Impact Assessment

This is a report on a government response document and as such has no impact on policy or strategy.

9 Appendices

There are no appendices attached to this report.

10 Background Papers

The complete paper 'Fire Futures Reports' can be found at <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/fire/pdf/1881649.pdf>

Members are directed to the paper Fire Futures Paper for their reply to the consultation on this matter.

<https://www.shropshirefire.gov.uk/sites/alpha.shropshirefire.gov.uk/files/fra/11-fire-futures-report.pdf>