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Dear Andy

Annual assessment of fire and rescue authorities in England

1. Do you consider that the delay in publishing the Government's White Paper on reforming the fire and rescue sector (published in May 2022) had a negative effect on the sector? And do you consider that the subsequent delays to bring about reform have also affected the sector? If so, what consequences have there been?

We do not believe the delay to the White Paper has had a negative effect on the sector. There are however areas where resolution and progress would be welcome. This is particularly true of areas of reform where legislation is not needed. We set out our position on these areas in our response to the consultation on the White Paper.

As per our response to the consultation on the White Paper, there are some key areas the Service would like to see resolved:

- We do not support the proposed forced transfer of responsibilities from Fire Authorities to single elected individuals. It is not clear that there is a compelling case for this change currently. It risks unnecessary distraction and costs for the Fire and Rescue Service. In respect of the placing of Fire under a single Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner, we believe this would be detrimental to the attention given to Fire and Rescue Services. Any change in governance should be entirely for local decision.
- Fire and rescue services should have the flexibility to deploy resources to help address current and future threats faced by the public beyond core fire and rescue duties. However, unless the Grey Book contractually obliges firefighters to undertake duties beyond core fire and rescue activities they cannot be required to do so.



- A national data analytics capability would provide consistency in the way data is analysed and reduce duplication of effort across services. Benchmarking across services would be more meaningful and lead to better outcomes for the service and community.

2. How would a College of Fire and Rescue be beneficial to the sector?

A centrally funded College of Fire and Rescue has the potential to enhance the development of staff, be more inclusive and enhance the leadership of the fire and rescue service. We believe that the College must be separate from the College of Policing to ensure sufficient focus on the needs of Fire and Rescue Services.

3. What has your organisation done to implement the recommendations made in the Grenfell Tower Inquiry's Phase 1 report (published on 30 October 2019)?

As a result of the Grenfell Tower fire, the Service has undertaken a significant amount of work to enhance how it manages the risks associated with large, complex buildings across the Service Delivery functions of prevention, protection and response. Much of this work has been delivered in collaboration with partners ensuring operational alignment.

Of the 46 recommendations the Service has adopted 46 actions that were identified in the Phase 1 report. To date, the Service completed 37 of them and made significant progress in the 9 that have transferred to business as usual.

From a protection perspective, there are still a number of buildings within Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes which require remediation. The Service will continue to utilise its regulatory powers and work with partners such as DLUHC and local authorities to ensure that those responsible for the buildings have appropriate short term measures in place to keep residents safe, whilst also making progress with full remediation.

4. What challenges are you facing when it comes to making your service more efficient and effective and providing public value?

According to our most recent HMICFRS report the Service only spends £35.51 per head of population, compared to the national average of £41.88. Our Band D Council Tax is only £77.16 compared to the national average of £87.70. The additional precept flexibility afforded to the Service in the past two years has allowed us to significantly increase our operational establishment and we are starting to see the benefits of that in terms of operational effectiveness. However, as a Service we are still extremely lean in many areas.

The Service has an ambitious plan to improve efficiency, which exceeds the national target of 2% savings against non-payroll costs each year. However, uncertainty about future precept referendum limits, funding for urban search and rescue and lack of a longer-term financial settlement makes it difficult to plan longer-term transformational change with the necessary degree of assurance about our future financial position.



5. To what extent has our spotlight report on values and culture in fire and rescue services and our misconduct thematic inspection changed your prioritisation of work in these areas?

Following the publication of the report an extraordinary meeting of the Fire Authority was convened. At the meeting the Authority accepted the recommendations allocated to the Chief Fire Officer in full and resolved to fully engage and support the delivery of the remaining recommendations.

Furthermore, the Authority escalated the risk of poor culture to the corporate risk register. While values and culture have always been a priority for the Service, this provides an extra level of scrutiny and assurance to these areas.

6. For those organisations that have been subject to our values and culture spotlight report recommendations, what problems, if any, have you experienced when implementing the recommendations?

Not applicable.

7. What challenges do you think the current on-call model presents and do you think it is sustainable?

The main challenge is the ability to recruit and retain on-call firefighters. Availability of on-call appliances will become more challenging as the requirements for emergency response driver training become even more onerous on individuals. The traditional on-call model is becoming less and less sustainable, although variations to the model to suit local circumstances can ensure that on-call firefighters are still an integral part of any response model.

8. What do you see as your biggest challenges in making progress against your organisation's future plans?

The biggest challenge relates to the issues articulated in our response to question 4, namely the lack of capacity in key areas and uncertainty over precept referendum limits, specific funding streams and lack of a longer-term financial settlement.

9. What do you think your fire and rescue service is doing well?

Our most recent inspection report highlighted many areas where the Service is doing well:

Prevention - staff are good at completing fire and wellness visits for older people and are good at responding to safeguarding concerns. The Service works well with others to prevent fires and other incidents and has arrangements to tackle fire-setting behaviour. Prevention and Response teams have better direction and oversight of their productivity.

Commissioning of education of children, young people and adults in fire, road and water safety through a partnership arrangement with the 'Safety Centre MK'

Protection - the Service's protection team is well trained and resourced and responds well to building consultations and licencing requests. The Service is working with others when necessary, is able to adapt to new legislation and takes enforcement action when needed.



Response - the Service has good command of incidents and is making good progress to align its procedures with national operational guidance. The Service works well with Thames Valley Fire Control and attends incidents within a reasonable time frame. The Service is prepared to respond to major and multi-agency incidents and uses national learning to update its procedures.

Resources - the Service has a comprehensive financial plan, continues to have sound financial management and has identified financial savings from collaboration. The service has developed a range of future spending scenarios and has a sustainable plan for its reserves. The Service's fleet and estate are being improved.

People - the Service provides good well-being provisions to its workforce and has a positive health and safety culture. The Service provides learning and development opportunities for most staff and staff complete regular assessments in risk critical skills. The service has reviewed its equality impact process, is raising awareness of EDI and staff are confident in tackling bullying, harassment and discrimination. The Service has developed its promotion and progression processes and has improved how it manages individuals' performance. The service carries out robust background checks on its current and future staff.

10. What changes have occurred or are planned – both locally and nationally – in response to the second round of our inspections; what effect have they had, or do you expect them to have?

Following the second round of inspections the Service continued to invest in increasing the wholetime establishment. At the time of the third round of inspections the impact of this increase was not fully apparent. For example, the Service is now starting to see the benefits of this increase in terms of improved appliance availability and the significant increase in the number of home fire safety visits that are being undertaken on a regular basis.

As a result of the second round of inspections we brought forward the timetable to produce our next Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP). This will provide assurance to the public that resources are being allocated to prevention, protection and response activities in relation to risk.

Yours sincerely,

Simon Rouse
Chairman, Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority