

Local Government Association Fire Conference

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Introduction

I would like to thank you for inviting me to be here today. It has now been 6 months since I took up post as the Fire Minister and it has been a fascinating journey - I have had the pleasure of meeting many staff and councillors across the fire and rescue service in England and am consistently struck by the dedication and professionalism.

Day in, day out, members of the fire and rescue service put their lives on the line. The statistics show that fire and rescue services are making a real difference. Together we are continuing to drive down the number of fire related deaths in the home, statistics show that the trend for accidental dwelling fire deaths since 1997 is downwards: in 1997/8 there were 349 fire deaths compared with just 215 ten years later. This downward trend is not only true in fire deaths, but is mirrored in the fall in fires and injuries as well as a reduction in arson, but more of that later.

Economic downturn

But as ever, there is no time for complacency. As a country, we are in a new period of unprecedented uncertainty and instability.

Within a couple of months we've seen:

- mid-range banks going bust and big banks needing a government bailout
- the biggest falls in the FTSE's 100 year history
- oil prices soar to \$150 a barrel then plummet to almost a third
- long- standing familiar shops disappearing from our high streets
- coordinated interest rate cuts by major central banks... now the lowest since the Bank of England was founded

Internationally, central banks across the world have cut interest rates. The G20 governments have backed the case for a fiscal and government spending boost and other countries are taking steps after the UK to put government capital in to banks.

As politicians, the challenges we all face in our jobs have been magnified through the lens of a global slowdown which means doing more with less money.

We also need to prepare for the possibilities of how this downturn may affect the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS). Clearly the tightening of public finances is going to be an issue, but there are also trends which could emerge as unemployment rises and people have less money. Based on experience from previous recessions we need to understand that there may be an increased risk of arson (vacant houses, abandoned cars, businesses) and perhaps temptation to insurance fraud which could present challenges that we all need to rise to.

Performance, Efficiency and Sector Led Improvement

However, on the tightening of public finances and it should be said that the Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) and FRSs are already rising to this challenge.

The recent Audit Commission national study "Rising to the Challenge" focused on the progress made by the Service in key areas of efficiency, modernisation and equality and diversity. It recognised that the Service has undergone rapid change over the last few years and that efficiency savings achieved exceeded the target set for the last spending review period. However, it rightly highlights that much still remains to be done and underlines the importance of a number of the improvement objectives set out in the current National Framework. It concluded that there is a growing gap between the best authorities and others, and that:

- efficiency savings vary considerably among similar authorities and there is still significant scope for further efficiencies nationally
- there is no common relationship between size, structure or locality in determining successful delivery - all fire and rescue authorities can and should be aspiring to excellence
- improved regional and local collaboration would lead to greater efficiencies and effectiveness
- the Service needs a more diverse workforce and still has a great deal to do to achieve this

To address this there is a vital role for leadership and action from within the Service. This must challenge those who are being unambitious, and harness the skills and knowledge of what works from the best and most successful to support improvement in those who may be falling behind. I know that the LGA shares this view of the importance of a robust sector-led capacity to support improvement and I hope that we can see real progress in delivering this in the coming year.

Comprehensive Area Assessments (CAA)

We will also shortly be seeing the introduction of the new Comprehensive Area Assessments (CAA) on the 1st April 2009 - an approach that will focus on outcomes rather than inspection-based assessments. CAA will provide a real opportunity for us to look at the collective outcomes delivered for local communities by public service providers and partners focusing on Local Area Agreements.

FRS Improvement

But it is always good to take stock and remind ourselves just how far we have come and how much we have achieved. Since the Bain Review of 2002 the FRS has taken major steps in changing its role, its capacity and ways of working. The White Paper in 2003 and the Fire and Rescue Act in 2004 laid the foundations for significant change. This has seen the FRS evolve from a response focussed delivery model, based on rigid national standards, towards community focus and prevention founded on local risk management.

The last few years have been a period of intense change for the FRS, but much has been achieved.

Delivery Chain

However, much more remains to be done, as I have already outlined, not only on biting the bullet on efficiency savings where we think more can be delivered, but also on leadership. Whilst the Fire Service has come a long way, it will need to continue to improve and for that improvement to be self-sustaining.

We need to get right the balance of leadership between that provided by central government and what is for the service itself to determine. New Challenges on the horizon, including those posed by the economic downturn, will I am sure bring about the need more than ever for there to be strong collective leadership by the service.

Equality and Diversity

No more so than is also now needed on the equality and diversity agenda. With the publication of the Equality and Diversity Strategy last May the Government and the LGA, together with all the other key stakeholders, gave the clearest signal of their collective commitment to transform the Fire and Rescue Service into an organisation:

- which is best equipped to understand and meet the needs of all our diverse communities and delivers a first class service to everyone;
- where the skills and contribution that every employee brings to the organisation are valued among its core strengths;
- where there truly is equality of opportunity for all; and
- which has eradicated all forms of discrimination and unacceptable behaviour from the workplace

The Strategy sets challenging performance goals; it demands that the Service should achieve the highest standards over the next decade, both as an employer and a key public service provider. But a strategy is worthless unless it's backed up by action and results - with a leadership determined to drive the pace of change.

We all have a responsibility to provide strong, visible leadership and the right environment to ensure that change happens. The LGA, Fire and Rescue Authorities and Authority Members all play a crucial role in this process. In signing up to the Strategy the LGA has demonstrated that it is prepared to lead, champion and be accountable for delivery. We welcome seeing this continue to be translated into real actions.

As part of its responsibility to support implementation of the Equality and Diversity Strategy, Communities and Local Government has committed to reporting annually on national progress and the performance of each Fire and Rescue Authority. I am therefore very pleased to be able to announce the publication of the first Annual Equality and Diversity Report, copies of which will be available on the Communities and Local Government stand during the course of the conference.

This report establishes a sound baseline for assessing future performance, providing an overview at national level and for each Fire and Rescue Authority. It also publishes for the first time the recruitment targets for each Authority.

As you will be aware, Communities and Local Government recently invited FRAs to put forward local recruitment targets for minority ethnic staff and female firefighters. I have considered very carefully the proposals put forward by each Authority and in doing so I have taken on board the advice provided by the National Equality and Diversity Delivery Partnership. I have been greatly encouraged by the way that many Authorities have challenged themselves by proposing ambitious, stretching targets. However, I was also disappointed to see that a small number of Authorities were not yet ready to take such a positive approach to this issue. I hope that we can encourage them to set their sights higher as we move forward.

I also welcome the fact that many of the Service's leaders are extending their gaze beyond issues of gender and ethnicity - a clear recognition of the many facets involved in being a successful public sector employer and service deliverer to widely diverse communities in the 21st century.

However much remains to be done if we are to achieve the Vision and Aims set out in the Strategy. There are a number of areas highlighted in the Annual Report where the Service ought to be making better progress.

For example, it's disappointing that over 70 per cent of Authorities have yet to achieve Level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government. And it's astonishing that the ethnicity of so many staff, well over three thousand - that's over 6 per cent of the whole Service workforce -

goes unrecorded. That is unacceptable. Only by having accurate information can you be sure that you are making improvements where these are really needed, to promote equality of opportunity for all.

So today I want to set you a few challenges:

- for every Fire and Rescue Authority to ensure that the methods it uses to record diversity information is captured and recorded effectively across all the strands of diversity;
- for every Authority to engage with the support groups who represent the interests of so many people in the Service;
- that Fire and Rescue Service representation on the 2010 Stonewall Top 100 Employers list should at least double from this year's achievement, and
- by 2011 all Fire and Rescue Authorities should, at the very least, be at a level equivalent to the Equality Standard for Local Government Level 3.

I know that the LGA is committed to promoting equality and diversity in the fire and rescue service and to supporting FRAs with their work on the ground. The LGA's Equality and Diversity Charter for FRA members is a good example of showing political leadership on this issue. If real and sustained progress is to be achieved on this key issue, elected members will have to show clear leadership, champion diversity and not tolerate any form of discrimination or bullying.

I am pleased that the LGA has set an ambitious target of a 75 per cent sign up rate for their charter. As a former elected member, I know how important these sorts of initiatives are as symbols of change and for getting buy-in. I would urge any members that have not already done so to sign up to the LGA Charter. And to those members that have signed up - I say thank you.

But alongside the work on equality and Diversity, there are other challenges ahead for the service. We need to look to our collective leadership on the way ahead.

FiReControl

And there are further challenges on FiReControl. I believe that the case for FiReControl is crystal clear. FiReControl will provide England with a first class national network to handle 999 fire and rescue calls— and every single community in England will benefit. Let me be clear, FiReControl is not about regionalisation of the Fire Service - it is about improving national resilience and equipping firefighters and control room staff with 21st century technology.

The network of nine new regional control centres will form an important part of England's Critical National Infrastructure. The network will improve the Fire and Rescue Service's ability to respond to large incidents such as flooding, industrial accidents like Buncefield and the on-going threat of terrorism, as well smaller everyday incidents such as road accidents and house fires.

This Government is committed to FiReControl because we believe it is the right thing to do to protect the public. We are working in close partnership with the FRS to ensure the network - and the upgraded kit - is the best we can provide. But I do understand that this project is not easy - change is not easy. FiReControl is a complex and demanding project for so many of us in this room - with difficult decisions we all need to take.

For my part, I announced in November last year (2008) that the project was being rescheduled. This was not a decision I took lightly but I am determined that we get the FiReControl network right first time.

We are now working towards cut over to the first three Regional Control Centres in the North East, East Midlands and South West in summer 2010, with the full system expected to be in place by spring 2012.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of you for your contribution - and to remind those who might not yet be so committed that FiReControl is going ahead. Following the conclusion of the three-month consultation period, I aim to publish the FiReControl Business Case as soon as possible.

This will set out the Government's final position on funding and I hope will persuade those elected members who are not yet convinced about the project that FiReControl offers them vastly improved national resilience and world class technology for the Fire and Rescue Service.

Conclusion

The kind of challenges the service faces, and the conditions in our communities, are changing. As the tragic events of the 7th July 2005 showed, we have to contend with a new type of terrorist threat.

The floods of 2007 floods were one of the worst in living memory, and in years to come, climate change is likely to make such extremes of weather more common.

Shifting patterns of migration bring new people to towns and villages across the country, so to keep on spreading the fire safety message it will be vital to build trust and confidence in those new communities.

And as I have mentioned the tough economic climate we all face and the challenges it brings.

I am confident that we have the best FRS in the world and that we will continue to do so if we work in partnership to meet the challenges facing us.

Thank you.