

## **Fire and Rescue Suppliers Association (FIRESA) AGM**

**Date of speech** 25 February 2009

**Location** Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service HQ, Liverpool

**Event summary** FIRESA Annual General Meeting

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*Draft text of the speech - may differ from the delivered version. (Courtesy of CLG website)*

### **Introduction**

Thank you Dave for those kind words of introduction.

When we met on 29 October 2008 you kindly invited me today to address the FIRESA members. It is a real pleasure for me to be here.

In the past you have met with a number of my predecessors (Parmjit Dhanda, Angela Smith, Jim Fitzpatrick and Nick Raynsford). I appear to be the first Fire Minister to have the privilege of being asked to give the key note address at your AGM. You were obviously saving this honour until I was in post which shows excellent foresight and good taste on your part.

I would like to begin by congratulating you today on reaching the impressive milestone of 60 members. This highlights the success of your Association which has grown considerably from the 15 members when you began in April 2005. I believe that I will be handing out certificates to the new members later. You should be proud that you have given a voice to so many suppliers of such varied equipment.

FIRESA includes both larger suppliers and Small and Medium sized Enterprises (SMEs), with nearly 30 companies within your group being classified as SMEs. Regardless of the size of firm many of the concerns that you are dealing with are the same.

I would now like to touch upon some of these issues.

### **Issues for suppliers**

I recognise that you are facing difficulties doing business in the current economic climate. We are all experiencing difficult times and that there is no certainty about when this economic situation will start to improve.

In the meantime it is important that all the stakeholders involved in the Fire & Rescue Service keep talking and working collectively at this time. Together we are stronger and can help each other.

The Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) recognise the concerns of SMEs and have launched a campaign of assistance including:

- advice on managing cash flow
- getting time to pay their bills
- getting a business 'health check'
- obtaining funding to support training and skills
- advice on managing or avoiding redundancies

On January 14 BERR also launched the 'Enterprise Guarantee scheme'. This £1.3 billion plan will enable UK businesses, with a turnover of up to £25 million, to secure loans between £1,000 and £1 million through the Government guarantee. This is available up to 31 March 2010.

Government is also considering initiatives to reduce administrative burdens which I know have caused you concern. This includes better use of existing electronic systems and sharing of data where possible. Some of these considerations are still at an early stage, but where possible I urge you to take advantage of available schemes.

I also urge you to consider more opportunities to export your products abroad. I am aware that there has been a greater reliance on American standards and that this does not always help UK firms that use National and European standards. However I believe that the UK Fire & Rescue Service has products that are world class and we should be offering these to wider markets.

I would now like to update you on the National Procurement Strategy for the Fire and Rescue Service.

### **National Procurement Strategy for the Fire and Rescue Service (NPS)**

I recognise that FIRESA was not centrally involved in the production of first National Procurement Strategy in 2005. We have learnt from this and have involved you from the beginning in drawing up the consultation on the new Strategy.

I believe that this approach has reaped benefits and that the new NPS will be a more strategic document which encourages collaborative approaches where appropriate. It also suggests the roles and responsibilities of all the FRS stakeholders, with the position of the suppliers being actively recognised.

I am grateful for your support for the concept of a national approach to procurement in the FRS though I acknowledge that there are different levels of interest and success from this for many suppliers here today. Going forward there is a need to get the balance right for national, regional and local procurement activities. I welcome your continued involvement to help us with this.

We are still considering the long term arrangements for national procurement especially in the light of the economic downturn and we are not yet ready to publish the new Strategy.

I recognise that you need certainty and stability at this difficult time and I can inform you that we are continuing to support Firebuy in 2009/10.

I know that the organisations here today have had different experiences with Firebuy and that there are varying degrees of support. Following my meeting with Firebuy on 3 December 2008 I have challenged them to clearly demonstrate the benefits and efficiencies they are delivering through their national contracts and activities. We have also been working with them to encourage greater engagement with stakeholders.

Firebuy are sitting amongst the audience today and they have been working with certain members on issues such as the current exchange rate. I welcome the chance for you to talk with them today and exchange ideas for how all FRS stakeholders can work together. It is not just down to any one organisation - we all have a part to play.

### **Summary**

In summary I am committed to supporting industry, especially the Small and Medium sized Enterprises, through this difficult economic time. There are already initiatives out there to help you and I strongly encourage you to take advantage of this support. I also welcome your suggestions and involvement on how we can overcome the challenges that we are facing today.

Further work is still required to consider national procurement in the longer term. In the meantime we will continue to support and work with Firebuy in 2009/10. I know that at this time you need some level of certainty and we will make an announcement on future delivery arrangements as soon as we are able to.

It is more important now than ever that all stakeholders involved in Fire and Rescue Service procurement work together. It is not the time to try and stand alone or to pull in different directions.

Though you will have different views and aims there should be a shared vision that the UK Fire and Rescue Service has world class products and services and that these should be promoted both here and overseas where possible.

Due to time restraints I will only be able to take a few questions at the end. If you have any questions that cannot be answered today then please let either the FIRESA team or my officials know.

I welcome the opportunity to talk to you today and I would like to continue this important discussion in the future. I would like to thank Merseyside Fire & Rescue Authority for their generous facilities today, Dave Russell and his team for the organisation of this event and most of all I would like to thank you all here today for your kind attention and support.

I said at the beginning that you had excellent foresight on your part in waiting till I was in post to invite me to speak. Unfortunately that foresight did not extend to the football fixture list. As an avowed supporter of Liverpool Football club I was very excited about coming to Merseyside today only to find that they are playing in Madrid tonight. I suggest better planning for next year's AGM.

Thank you.