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(May vary from delivery)

It's a pleasure to be asked to speak today. It's not often that the FOA is invited to speak at events such as this and I hope that it will be helpful to share our views on the present and future situation of the fire and rescue service.

The FOA's position in the service is, perhaps equivalent to that of the Police Superintendent's Association as we seek to represent middle managers, although arrangements within the fire and rescue service allow membership by any member of FRS staff. However, I am not here to speak about the FOA.

To begin, I feel that it is worth saying that the FOA certainly does not welcome or like the situation that the country and the fire and rescue service finds itself in at the moment.

However we have, so far, adopted a realistic and pragmatic approach believing that it is not our role to change governments.

We can argue for protection of the service and its staff but we recognise that 'we are where we are' and from this position we consider that government, employers, staff and other stakeholders need to work together to find the least painful route forward.

Whilst it can be difficult at times, we prefer not to see a future of doom and gloom and I believe that there are opportunities for the service to work better as a whole whilst remaining a key part of the local public service provision.

The last few years and those ahead might have been made slightly easier had the service been better at addressing issues and recommendations emanating from reports and studies, some going back as far as 1970. Incremental change over a long period might have been easier to deal with than the large-scale changes we are being faced with now.

We are still trying to deal with a 'modernisation' agenda whilst now also having to significantly reduce service costs.

Since 2003, the service has been subject to pressure to apply a centrally dictated model of service modernisation.

The Audit Commission appeared to be the main driver for change and there seemed to be an assumption that certain actions should be taken regardless of local circumstances and without an evidenced local business case.

We have not stood in the way of change but in many cases, we do not think that the process has been handled well. It is our opinion that change has been imposed rather than directly linked to IRMP and effectively 'change-managed'.

Even with such central pressure, we believe that inconsistency has increased, particularly in areas such as staff development and staff selection procedures.

Inconsistency between services, essentially doing the same things and dealing with the same issues, has been a long-standing source of frustration for the FOA.

From discussions with ODPM & CLG it appears that we have not been alone in our frustrations and we have sympathised with their opinion that Government should not be involved in matters of day to day FRS business.

The loss of central involvement direction seems to fit well with the Coalition Government's "Localism" agenda and we initially feared that 'Localism' would increase inconsistency,

However, we believe that there are sound business reasons for fire and rescue services to identify ways to work together and share effective practice rather than continually 're-invent the wheel'..

National standards and approaches need not conflict with localism.

For example, in relation to health care – surgical procedures are same across UK or the world but the need to use them is determined by local circumstances and risk. Choosing not to apply a particular standard medical procedure could have serious consequences for the patient and could see action taken by the British Medical Council.

So why should the FRS be any different?

It is particularly important to have a consistent approach towards national resilience and contingency planning and I cannot see how we could hope to deliver any national or regional response without a pre-defined level of inter-operability.

It is this area where, in our opinion, Government cannot absolve itself of responsibility for ensuring that statutory functions are delivered and to a satisfactory standard. Resilience is a UK-wide function and it is the UK Government that has responsibility for ensuring that the necessary capability is in place.

In other areas the service has consistently failed to take collective ownership of its own affairs

Where government has developed a system or process, it appears to morph into 57 varieties of approach taken after introduction.

IPDS is a classic example where a product was developed for the service and handed out with no central provision for monitoring and review. As a result, we have seen the model applied in varying ways.

Some services seem to have had little faith in the system's ability to deliver competent staff and additional elements such as practical and written examinations have been introduced.

Had the service been able to create a overseeing body, it should have been possible to consider concerns and amend the system as necessary to address identified areas of weakness and keep the system fit for purpose..

The production of operational guidance is another good example of something that was left to the service without any clear overall direction. Thankfully, CFRAU stepped forward to produce a collaborative, fully inclusive, approach to overcome the problem of fragmentation and inconsistency. Sadly, this provision will not be continued as a central government project and I suggest that it is essential for the service to take over ownership of this process.

Staff in many services are likely to be involved in projects and initiatives of a similar nature to work being undertaken elsewhere. Surely it must be more cost effective to for fire and rescue services to collaborate wherever there is overlap or duplication.

The creation of policy and procedures must also offer some scope when services are, essentially, doing the same things; can we afford the luxury of doing the same things differently?

Whilst there may be disagreements about funding such collaborative ventures, the overall cost of doing so must surely be less than leaving each service to develop guidance locally. For safety reasons, doing nothing is not an option.

In my opinion, the service needs to apply the current operational guidance model to other areas such as learning and development or equality and diversity. I understand that discussions about ownership and leadership are taking place but these certainly don't appear to follow the operational guidance model of engaging with stakeholders at an early stage.

It is unfortunate that the opportunity to create a 'Centre of Excellence' was missed. If established in 2008, things might have been easier after some 3 years work on the development of common frameworks and standards. There is, however, some hope that recent proposals from the Fire Service College and outcomes from 'Fire Futures' will result in the creation of a similar body.

Regardless of what emerges, it is suggested that an inclusive approach could improve the quality of the process whilst also promoting collective buy-in and support. Whatever, groups might be created, the approach of bringing together the widest range of skills and experience must be beneficial.

Before moving on, I think it appropriate to comment on fire service control rooms – a key part of resilience arrangements. We believe that services need time to plan for the future rather than introduce quick fixes that might not provide the best long-term arrangement.. Government should be assisting with some interim funding to allowing proper planning whilst maintaining service provision until some direction emerges from the current consultation exercise.

Front-line services and setting local priorities - one of the key headings on today's agenda.

Use of the term front-line services is not helpful as everyone employed in the fire and rescue service plays a part in protecting communities be this through intervention or prevention.

In theory, priorities and actions are determined by the IRMP process and the assessment of risk within the fire Authority area. However, we are not convinced that IRMPs are particularly scientific or based on sound evidence.

In recognition of the economic situation fire and rescue authorities should be targeting identified risk and setting out risk control measures with some idea of the level of protection that will be provided by the resources available.

However, IRMP's tend to contain more non-specific and woolly objectives for which outcome measures are quite difficult to measure.

Broad-based actions, such as seeking to reduce the number of accidental dwelling fires do not really allow an authority to be held to account unless the anticipated degree of reduction is specified, e.g. a 5% reduction resulting from targeted home fire risk assessments.

I believe that much more work is needed in the area of 'cause and effect' evaluation before IRMPs can be considered as much more than a statement of intent.

It is therefore, worrying, that critical decisions about service delivery might have to be made on a best guess basis in many cases.

As a result, consultation on IRMP activities tends not to be focused on specific actions intended to deliver a particular outcome.

In terms of local accountability, an IRMP saying that we will review something does little to engage average citizens or allow them to hold a fire authority to account.

For example, if asked whether one supports a shift from emergency intervention to fire prevention, few would disagree with the principle. However, without some indication of what this means, in terms of station closures or removal of fire appliances, an IRMP will probably be accepted.

Once translated into specific proposals at a later date, contentious issues will emerge to be met with often negative or emotive reactions. The often favoured public meeting approach produces little in the way of balanced feedback at this stage.

With proper engagement that provides stakeholders with the business case and information about relative risk, consultees are likely to be more understanding and sympathetic to the service's arguments.

I include service staff in this reference to consultees and call upon service leaders to do more to convince staff that they and their opinions are valued. If asked, I suspect that the majority will feel that no-one takes the time to listen to their concerns or explain the reason why a particular course of action is being proposed.

Working smarter and with stakeholders will not remove the headaches but it might help to produce solutions that all parties can tolerate.

Done properly, the risk assessment process will always create a situation where a certain level of risk has to be accepted since resources will never be sufficient to remove all risks. This is true whether times are good or bad.

We currently find ourselves in a situation where financial constraints require service leaders to make difficult decisions about priorities and such decisions can only be made on a local basis according to local risk profiles.

With a tight budget it is, I believe, essential that all interested parties are actively involved in the process of determining where the priorities lie and this should improve the quality of decisions by ensuring that problems are viewed from a range of perspectives.

This type of engagement demonstrates a mature approach that does not detract from the authority of decision-makers, it simply ensures that they have a wider range of information available when forming proposals or deciding upon a course of action.

Working on the assumption that no more money will be available to fire and rescue authorities, there can be little doubt that something will have to give. Unless areas of unnecessary expenditure can be identified there will be an impact on service provision. However, some fire and rescue services are already 'cut to the bone' and it is unlikely that additional savings will be found without looking across individual fire and rescue authority boundaries.

Otherwise, there is a risk that service level reductions will be disproportionate across fire authorities and between different elements of service provision.

From my understanding of the 'Big Society' concept, some CFOs may need to consider the development of Social Enterprises to reduce costs, or the introduction of wide scale volunteering initiatives. However, each presents a significant risk to society and professionalism and it might be prudent to 'tread carefully' if looking at such arrangements.

What does 'Big Society', mean in Fire Service terms. Does it mean that some elements of fire and rescue provisions will be delivered by the private and voluntary sectors? If so, should such organisations be looking at community risk based services or should the professionals who currently run and manage these services be encouraged to offer solutions that may address any perceived deficiencies?

I am sure that we are all waiting for greater clarity about 'Big Society' and its implications.

What is the service going do about the situation?

In my opinion, how the service looks in 5 years will depend on the service's ability to organise and deliver collective functions and the willingness and ability of service leaders to engage with staff and other stakeholders when determining priorities and shaping the future service.

In an ideal world - this would see good levels of co-operation with all parties being open to suggestion and considering innovative solutions that protect both communities and staff

Being realistic, the road ahead will not be without difficulty.

In a worst case scenario; failing to manage budgets whilst maintaining acceptable service levels, in my view, presents a real risk that some or all elements of local and / or national services will be outsourced as a way of transferring risk and avoiding difficult decisions about the way that services will be provided.

We have already seen the outsourcing of some contingency arrangements and I am sure that the private sector would be more than happy to tender for any contract for the delivery of primary services.

In the belief that quality of service would suffer in a 'for-profit' environment, we certainly hope that all FRS stakeholders will feel able to think altruistically when considering what is needed to protect the long-term interests of communities and staff.

As an example, the majority of Scottish FRS stakeholders appear to accept that the present arrangement with 8 services cannot be maintained and there is agreement that reducing their number might be the best way to preserve service levels.

Similar steps might be explored in England if barriers can be overcome.

Staff

Before concluding, I wish to express concern about the pressures being placed on staff (particularly middle managers) as a result of shrinking establishments. Many services have already reduced middle manager establishments without noticeably reducing the amount of work.

This often places people under a significant amount of stress and, even if there were minimal impact on health, there may be detrimental effects on performance and judgement where staff feel obliged to work long hours or undertake additional duties.

We are concerned that public and firefighter safety could be compromised and call upon services to fully risk assess any proposals affecting working hours or workloads. Again working closely with staff representatives would be beneficial.

It is also worth commenting that many services currently boast very low absence rates. We consider it likely that the financial situation will see rates reduce further as personnel feel more pressurised to attend work whilst perhaps not fully fit.

Apparent good performance may not result from better health or higher motivation amongst staff and low absenteeism might not be something to be proud of if it masks a bullying culture.

Fire and rescue staff are being expected to make a big sacrifice for the 'greater good' as they are taking a real-terms pay-cut which looks like being exaggerated by an increase in pension contributions.

It is hoped that fire authorities and Brigade Managers do not lose sight of this and I repeat my previous comment about showing staff that what they do for the service is valued.

Conclusion

To conclude: -

We are under no illusions about the extent of the problems being faced by fire and rescue authorities

In my opinion, the only hope of smoothing out the path ahead is to apply an approach of early engagement, honesty and no surprises. I commend the NJC Industrial Relations Protocol as a source of guidance when decision-makers are considering future plans.

Many services signed up to this when it was launched but it appears to us that some of them ought to dust it off and put it into practice.

I have no doubt that there will be job losses, indeed we have already seen some go following the demise of the FiReControl Project.

I doubt that anything the service does will prevent further staff reductions. The challenge is to deal with the situation in the most pain-free way possible with a mind to maintaining an acceptable level of service to the public.

No one organisation has all the answers and I suggest that collaboration between services and between stakeholders has to play a part at both local and national levels.