

Fire Futures

# Role of the Fire & Rescue Service (Delivery Models) Report

Workstream Chair: Cllr David Milsted, Dorset Fire and Rescue Authority

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## Workstream Lead Members

Cllr David Milsted (Dorset CFRA, Workstream Chairman)

CFO Martyn Emberson (Northamptonshire FRS)

CFO Paul Fuller (Bedfordshire & Luton FRS)

CFO Tony McGuirk (Merseyside FRS)

## Supporting papers

The supporting papers for this report are:

CFO McGuirk: *Fire – EMS Integration*

CFO Emberson: *Future Governance & Delivery Model of the FRS in England Emergency Planning Potential Future*

CFO Fuller: *Removing Barriers, Managing Obstacles*

## ➤ CURRENT & FUTURE CHALLENGES

The immediate and greatest challenge to the Fire & Rescue Service (FRS) is that of funding. Financial support from the Government is set to reduce by c.30% over the next four years, while income from Council Tax is unlikely to keep pace with inflation as measured by the Consumer Price Index (while being roughly half that currently measured by the Retail Price Index). If this grant reduction is applied at the same level across all 46 FRSs it will prove particularly difficult for those that have already achieved significant budget reductions over the last few years, and which benefited least from the last Comprehensive Spending Review (which produced, in some cases, 3-year settlements that were cuts in real terms in a period when capping limits applied to Council Tax).

For many and perhaps most FRSs, these funding reductions will imperil their ability to carry out risk-based budgeting and implement their local Integrated Risk Management Plans (IRMPs), let alone play an effective part in the National Framework. When all the frills have been removed, every spare ounce of fat burned off, and every possible efficiency saving identified and implemented, there will remain only real cuts to the core service and a real increase in casualties and property loss.

The FRS, along with other agencies in the field of Community Risk Reduction and Response, also faces an intensification of the challenges it already has. Principally these are:

**Demographic** The coming years will see a continuing increase in the size of the ‘vulnerable/harder-to-reach’ population groups.

- The 60+, 70+, 80+ and 90+ population groups are growing; meanwhile the younger working-age population (18 – 45) has diminished. This phenomenon is particularly acute in some of the FRS areas that have received the lowest grant settlement awards in recent years.
- The number of non-English speaking residents is increasing, and this trend is likely to continue (the number of non-English speaking primary school pupils in England has nearly doubled in the last decade). Engagement with these groups will be very challenging, particularly as FRSs are obliged to freeze recruitment.

- Rural FRSs report increasing challenges in engagement with the various Travelling Communities as the number of Travellers' sites (both official and unofficial) increases, as prevention work in this area is very demanding of resources.
- Historically high levels of drug and alcohol abuse continue to lead to an increase in the number of people at risk to themselves and others.

**Economic** In a period of continuing austerity household income (in real and/or absolute terms) is falling for many and will continue to fall, particularly in those areas most dependent on the public sector for employment.

- People are likely to cut back on (so-called) 'luxuries' such as smoke alarms and other precautionary equipment, just as funding for FRSs to provide them free of charge is ending.
- There is likely to be a growing number of people, especially young people, living in Homes of Multiple Occupation, much of which is unofficial and falls outside current HMO regulation, hence is very difficult to identify.
- There will be an increase in the number of squats.
- The number of non-domestic fires (accidental and deliberate) is likely to increase.
- Income from Council Tax and Non Domestic Rates is likely to fall as businesses and householders go into bankruptcy.

**Climatic** Climate change and general atmospheric warming is an irrefutable fact, irrespective of its cause. It leads to meteorological instability and greater extremes of weather.

- There will continue to be more (and more severe) heathland and forest fires, some of which will threaten property, particularly in the South. There is little the FRS, on its own, can do to prevent such fires and reacting to them is hugely demanding on resources.
- Floods will continue to be more frequent and more severe, their consequences exacerbated and in part created by several decades of building on land that is now effectively flood plain. The role of the FRS in such incidents is currently ill-defined and typically leads to a demand to pump water out when there is nowhere sensible to pump it to.
- 'Severe weather' of all kinds creates demands on the FRS to undertake rescue work.

## Other

- Reducing budgets and a public sector pay freeze may put local strains on industrial relations.
- There is likely to be a short-to-medium term increase in civil unrest, of which the recent student demonstrations are a foretaste.
- Although it may have become more difficult for terrorist organisations to carry out major atrocities, the risk of smaller scale (but still serious) attacks on vulnerable targets may increase.

The impact of all these challenges will of course be borne by the whole Community Risk Reduction and Response sector, not just the FRS. At the same time it is unlikely that the high expectations the public has of the sector (particularly the FRS) will diminish. The public is more demanding than ever of public services generally, and as the sector finds itself facing mounting difficulty in delivering its services to a diminishing budget, a growing gap – even if it exists in perception rather than reality – between expectation and actual service delivery will make it harder to engage with communities, particularly those that are already hard to reach.

It is therefore essential that the whole Risk Reduction/Response sector be able to plan, deliver and account for its services in the most efficient and transparent manner possible, and that barriers to this be removed and an enabling framework created. The recommendations for delivery and governance in this Workstream report are intended to enable (but not compel) the sector to operate more efficiently and accountably in the ways that are best suited to the particular needs, aspirations and potential of their locality.

## ➤ REMOVING BARRIERS, OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

### • Choice in the creation of precepting FRAs

Outside London there are three FRA models: Metropolitan, Combined, and County, with the latter having no power of precept. Evidence from County FRAs and FRSs shows that, while some have evolved robust and sophisticated frameworks for developing their risk-based budgets, assuring the means of democratic accountability and scrutiny, and delivering a service across a wider field of risk reduction and response, (Gloucestershire, for example) others find they struggle unsuccessfully to compete for budgets with other services (Adult Care, Community Services, Libraries, Adult Education, etc.) within their County FRS portfolio. They are hence unable to provide more than the most superficial

level of scrutiny and accountability to the community. This tends to compromise their ability to develop a realistic and defensible IRMP and to play a full part within the National Framework.

Clearly the latter group may have useful lessons to learn from the former, and the IDeA – through its Peer Review and Leadership programmes, for example – can be of great assistance in this effort. There is, however, a frustration in some quarters that the ability to create a separate, precepting FRA is restricted to those that are created by combining the FRSs of more than one Local Authority. They believe that the gains – in terms of budget freedoms, scrutiny, democratic accountability and partnership working – would more than offset the set-up costs and the marginal increase in ‘democratic costs’ of Members’ Allowances and expenses, particularly if (as is the case with most Combined FRAs) the ‘back office’ administration is shared with the County authority. Once created, such County FRAs would then be free to work in partnership with their neighbours, this freedom extending to full merger if that is what they want to do.

We recommend, therefore, that the power to create a precepting FRA should be extended to the Counties to use if they choose to.

#### • **General Competence**

We recommend that the power of General Competence, currently restricted to County FRAs, be extended to all FRAs. The arguments for this have been well rehearsed and, we note, form a key recommendation in the submission of the LG Group.<sup>1</sup>

#### • **Differential Precepting**

The desire to carry out ‘differential precepting’ has been expressed by Combined FRAs and FRSs whose areas include (for example) a mixture of rural and urban communities. Rural FRAs tend to have a greater dependency on council tax income than on Government grant: a 60:40 (council tax:grant) split is typical. They find that, while most of their council tax income comes from their rural local authority area, most of their expenditure is in the urban areas; again, a split of 60:40 (rural:urban) in council tax income and of 40:60 (rural:urban) in expenditure is common. This being the case, they ask for the ability – or the confirmation that they already have the ability; they have unsuccessfully asked for clarity on this issue – to levy a higher council tax precept in their urban local authority areas than in their rural area.

We suggest that a small differential to what is already a very small part of household council tax cannot be regarded as excessive, and that such ‘differential

precepting’ be an option open to FRAs, whether combined or not, so long as the ‘top-up’ is justified by actual expenditure on the service within an area covered by a single Collecting Authority.

### **NJC: A Framework Approach**

We are happy with the role of the NJC as negotiator of the national wage; however we should like to see it adopt a ‘framework approach’ to conditions that can be adapted to fit the needs of local IRMPs (with regard to public protection and national resilience), and to industrial relations.

### **Flood and Water Rescue**

As intimated above, the role of the FRS in flood and water rescue incidents is ambivalent and ill-defined, with unsatisfactory outcomes in terms of operational efficiency and public perception. We recommend that the Minister make attendance at such incidents (as with road traffic collisions) a statutory duty of the FRS; that it should be funded through New Burdens (not be an additional duty to be paid for out of diminishing budgets), and that the FRS be granted the statutory power to control the inner cordon at these events.

### **Fire Risk Assessors**

We wish to see a unified scheme of accreditation and registration of Fire Risk Assessors to create assurance and resilience in risk assessment across the whole Risk Reduction sector.

### **Military Assistance**

Unnecessary bureaucratic delay was experienced during the Cumbrian floods in requesting military assistance in the provision of a temporary bridge. We recommend that FRSs be granted the power to request military assistance (including helicopter support) directly, and not through another agency.

### **Place-Based Funding and the Big Society**

We fully support the ethos and principles of place-based funding, for example in support of FRS initiatives and partnerships that involve other local public and voluntary organisations and the full integration of the FRS and its sister services into the life and work of the community.

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1. Links with the Localism Bill, which was introduced on 13th December 2010. More information can be found at <http://www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/decentralisation/localismbill/>

## ➤ **FRS/EMS: INTEGRATION OF FRS AND EMERGENCY AMBULANCE SERVICE**

A merger of the Fire and Rescue Service and the Emergency Ambulance Service has been considered in the past but never implemented beyond an ad hoc local level: in some FRAs, for example, there is a degree of co-responding on a cost recovery basis; while in others some fire stations also serve as ambulance stations. Our recommendation is to enable full integration to be made, subject to local choice, to provide a seamless and efficient Community Risk Reduction and Response Service using shared facilities. Such a Service would benefit from the best aspects of FRS and EMS training (with a potentially enhanced role for the National Fire Service College), mutual support, and (for the EMS) greatly enhanced local democratic accountability and scrutiny.

The elements of the EMS most apt to be merged are those of urgent care provision and emergency response, including Hazardous Area Response Teams and Urban Search and Rescue. Co-location of assets would be essential and, in the short term, the extension of existing co-responding schemes is an obvious first step: this would be particularly beneficial in rural areas where emergency ambulance cover is patchy but there are Retained Firefighters permanently on call. Across the service, FRS/EMS merger would produce a more efficient and more flexible emergency response service while enhancing the role of ambulance crews beyond that of being 'merely responsive'.

Major incidents, such as 7/7, highlight the need for close working between FRS and EMS at all levels, and a thorough mutual understanding of operational procedures.

We note that the most recent study (Audit Commission, Co-ordination and Joint Delivery of Fire & Ambulance Services, October 2010) records that fewer than half of all Ambulance Trusts are meeting their response time standard. In an FRS, such a shortfall would be the subject of public scrutiny by democratically accountable elected Authority members which would lead to a programme of improvement; in the ambulance service it appears to pass without public notice. Our suggested governance model of a Community Protection Authority (CPA) would remedy this deficiency.

Making integration a realistic option at the local level will require agreement between the Department of Health and DCLG in order to enable local structural change. This must include the potential dissolution

of existing Ambulance Trusts in order to enable (for example) a CPA to be set up

While integration would, as stated, be a matter for local choice, we see the virtue in setting up pilot schemes to test its feasibility and evaluate the outcomes; a full business case and exemplar model for integration could then be drawn up. CFO McGuirk's paper suggests three specific FRS areas for such pilots; we suggest that willing FRSs nominate themselves for this work.

There is not, of course, 100% agreement on what model (or what degree) of integration would be best; hence the need to ensure local choice in these matters. However there is widespread frustration, across the sector, that the real but limited gains that have been made in some Authorities cannot be taken further and built on, particularly as local integration has an obvious part to play in National Resilience.

### **Governance**

FRAs – some more than others – operate on the basis of democratic scrutiny and accountability; functionally, Ambulance Trusts do not. They are not locally based, provide no public forum for decision making, and cannot be held to account by the people and communities they serve (other than, theoretically, through the Courts). While FRSs are required to meet their locally-grown IRMPs, Ambulance Trusts are expected to meet centrally-imposed targets and thus (in theory) progress to 'Foundation Status' – a concept most people do not understand. Set up to replace the old Ambulance Authorities, they are the product of a top-down ethos that is the antithesis to all that is implied by 'localism'.

Our recommended Community Protection Authority (CPA) model would enable existing FRAs to become accountable for the governance of the integrated Community Risk Reduction and Response Service. Locally this may be found to necessitate the transformation of a County FRA into a separate, precepting one; this would be a matter of choice, not compulsion.

Similarly, and by local negotiation, a CPA could expand its remit to take on other aspects of Risk Reduction and other local services, for example Building Control (which District and Borough Councils in particular struggle to deliver), Environmental Health and Trading Standards. It may be found advantageous for them to take over Traffic Control from their local Police Authority. Again, legislation in this area would be required to enable, not to compel.

A CPA would thus encompass response, prevention, protection (including legislative enforcement) and co-ordination of activities from a range of services. It would have full oversight of local civil contingency arrangements and have a single, unified, democratic governance structure. It would be able, through place-based budgeting, to harness effort and expertise from across its local community, including the voluntary sector.

There would, of course, be set-up costs in creating a CPA and a potential increase in running costs as compared with an FRA, for example with regard to its elected members' allowances and expenses. These, we believe, would be more than offset by the savings achieved by the abolition of expensive and democratically inefficient ambulance trusts.

Required government legislation to enable implementation of the CPA model would include: creation of enabling legislation for services to come together under a CPA; developing appropriate funding mechanisms, eg through place-based budgeting; granting CPAs legal responsibility and general powers of competence for services under their control; liaising with the Home Office on inclusion of specified Police Services; and adaptation of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS) to adopt a role similar to that of Federal Emergency Management Agency in the USA.

## ➤ FIRE FUTURES: THE FUTURE

We are grateful to the Minister for this unprecedented opportunity for the Sector to play a real and direct part in the shaping of policy and, despite the compressed time-frame and its associated logistical problems, we believe that we have made the most of it. We are convinced that this should be the beginning, not the end, of whole-sector involvement in policy, and that the Fire Futures programme must continue into the future and take its place alongside other senior partners to help deliver, in partnership, an effective, efficient, flexible, transparent, resilient, and fully accountable service across the whole spectrum of prevention, protection, and response.

**David Milsted**  
**FRS Role Workstream Chair**  
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