Fire Futures

Localism and Accountability Report

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1. FIRE FUTURES – LOCALISM AND ACCOUNTABILITY CHAIR'S INTRODUCTION

The Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) has changed significantly over the last decade, embracing with great enthusiasm and considerable success new roles in prevention and partnership working, which has seen it at the heart of many communities working with vulnerable people. As with all local public services the FRS has significant further challenges to meet, and maintaining the status quo is not an option. The Service must deliver more with less resource and most importantly it must meet the evolving risks to communities and the changing needs of citizens. This cannot be done without bringing decision making and accountability much closer to citizens and communities.

The sector must demonstrate that it can collectively deliver these objectives better without central government direction and that it has the confidence to reshape political institutions and engagement processes whenever or wherever necessary in order to do so. The sector will need to develop new and effective collaborative mechanisms to achieve this and in return government must dismantle the components of a centrally controlled performance management system for the Service and remove legislative or other obstacles to local innovation and delivery. This is not to suggest, however, that the active engagement and support of ministers and government is not both welcome and necessary to enable this to be achieved and to ensure the continued effectiveness and capabilities of the Service at a local and national level. Contributors to this workstream have also stressed the importance of a direct channel of communication to ministers via an independent professional route as currently provided by the Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser. The independence and stability of the role in a professional capacity is essential in maintaining the equilibrium of advice on a professional basis between the Fire and Rescue Service and government. This role needs to exist independently of the professional associations and there would be merit in it being filled by a currently serving Chief Fire Officer on secondment

This workstream report offers three broad options for the sector and government to support the delivery of the localism and accountability agenda in the Fire and Rescue Service. It also describes various local delivery mechanisms to support the reform agenda which have been proposed by contributors to the Fire Futures work on this topic; and offers a potential model for assurance and data transparency.

In undertaking this work, the Fire Futures review has had regard to the essential inter-relationship between the various components of the reform agenda. Papers developed during the course of this work have sought to express this inter-relationship and its objectives as follows:

- The key practical issue in taking forward the localism and decentralisation agenda is in identifying measures to move decision-making processes to the lowest level possible and enable citizens to have an appropriate influence in the way Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) determine and deliver public services to communities;

- FRS work on the Big Society agenda should help in developing and capitalising on the will and capacity of citizens to take on the roles in shaping public services envisaged through localism and decentralisation;

- Transparency should help provide the understanding and information that citizens need to take on these roles effectively whilst accountability should provide the platform for public engagement with the services provided by their local FRS; and

- Both the assurance and transparency agenda should help equip citizens with the tools and information to hold local services to account in terms of delivery of outcomes and value for money. Within a Fire and Rescue context, the assurance function also needs to be able to provide, to the public and ministers, confidence about the Service's ongoing capability to respond to emergencies beyond the local level, to deliver national resilience and interoperability across FRAs and with other public services.

2. LOCALISM, DECENTRALISATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

To decentralise, government power should be given to the lowest level possible. This can be achieved by eliminating central targets and heavy-touch central control mechanisms whilst giving power over local budgets to people and communities instead. Central government can support this through cutting back on reporting requirements and inspection and eliminating direct intervention in all but the most exceptional circumstances.

Creating the Big Society is about re-prioritising government so that individuals and groups are in the driving seat in their communities, with government playing an enabling role. The state is smaller but still

has a role to play in strengthening the ability of people to look after themselves and others. Big Society is about everyone playing their part rather than always turning to the state for solutions to problems.

Avoiding a mismatch between improved opportunities for citizens and their ability to use them is crucial. Mechanisms which empower localism must ensure fair and even access to new rights and opportunities for all individuals and communities.

There are a number of ways local democratic accountability can be improved such as strengthening the electoral process, enhancing citizen participation in governance arrangements or spending decisions, polling local people directly including through better use of IT, or local public service providers putting in place more transparent and informative information systems. Other work within the Fire Futures review has focussed on major changes to the Fire and Rescue Service structure or delivery model, and some of these models would potentially significantly drive forward these objectives if implemented. The following proposals under this heading have therefore focussed on how these issues can be addressed broadly within the existing national structure – with the exception of Option 3 which raises the potential of a longer term option for provision of FRS services within a wider reformed local delivery model.

In developing options, contributors needed to consider these areas in terms of the potential role citizens could play at different spatial levels, eg FRA decision making, at perhaps a borough command or other area based level, and at a local station level. It was also helpful to consider options in terms of the possible scope of their application, eg:

- **Universal** – the same systems or structures are put in place in all areas, with limited variation – to be applied where, for example, equity considerations demand similar levels of service between localities;

- **Permissive** – local areas have the ability to develop their own approach within a set of centrally set parameters that apply everywhere – to be applied where, for example, change is needed everywhere but success depends on tailoring services to local circumstances;

- **Bespoke** – areas agree a specific approach for their locality with the centre or public service provider, often in response to an initiative from the area itself – to be applied, for example, where areas want to tackle an issue specific to them but need local or central government to unblock specific barriers for them;

- **Rights** – all communities or individuals are given rights to exercise as and when they wish – to be applied where, for example, there is most to gain from harnessing the energy and ideas of local communities and individuals.

Contributors to the Fire Futures review have helped identify a broad consensus on some of the key principles which should be adopted in taking forward this agenda and two overall options (1 and 2 below) in how government and the sector could support the FRS in doing so.

Option 1: Locally driven change

Individual FRAs can assess the needs and will of local citizens for additional, new and different levels of engagement, designing their own local processes to meet these needs and with effective practice spreading "organically" across the sector. The risks with such a completely unstructured approach is that it would be likely to lead to very little universality and variable pace of change – little or no change potentially in some localities, different local processes and levels of citizen involvement in services and decision making. This could be addressed to some extent by (i) incorporating clear citizen rights and expectations which FRAs would be expected to meet in a new FRS National Framework (if this document is retained) and/or (ii) active promotion by the sector and government of the most effective models developed locally.

Option 2: Supported locally driven change

To ensure faster and more consistent transfer of decision-making processes to a level closer to communities, and to provide a greater degree of citizen involvement, local measures could be reinforced through appropriate national or co-ordinated changes. These could be directed at the FRS governance structure, community engagement processes, and/or the way in which IRMP and resourcing decisions are made. They could be effected either through legislative change, concerted development action to be taken forward by the sector or other means, eg reflecting a revised National Framework approach.

Option 3: New structural parameters

These measures would require a significantly different framework for delivery of local services across the board empowered by government. They could potentially liberate services and might have three elements:

- **Integrated service commissioning** – for a locality this could cover a range of local services, not just FRS, through pooled funding, with

services commissioned shaped by local citizens and with a clear commissioning/provider split.

- **Supply pluralism** – both in terms of encouraging active citizen involvement in lower tiered interventions, and a plural supply of professionalised, reactive services, with varying geographical reaches and technical specialisms. For provision of FRS this might perhaps provide for supplier bodies under the ownership of firefighters themselves.

- **Negotiated mechanisms for strategic coordination**, arising from the needs of both local commissioning and national government, so that local control of services can be reconciled with other policy objectives.

3. DELIVERY MEASURES FOR THE FRS

In taking forward this work, contributors have identified a wide range of specific potential measures to enable FRAs to deliver this agenda. These are the types of measures FRAs may wish to consider locally in developing their own models and, within the context of Options 2 and 3, some might be considered for universal change to support the agenda more coherently at a national level. These have focussed particularly on the areas of:

- The way in which decisions on spending/resources are made;

- The planning of services;

- The governance structure; and

- The delivery of services;

Examples included:

Spending/Resources

This area can be split between funding and expenditure.

- Funding could arrive at the body from a number of sources, eg precept, grants or pooled funding. The most important issue here is transparency so that the community is aware of where it comes from and how it can be used. This will enable local accountability and so public engagement in determining the level of resources needed.

In terms of how funding is spent the same accountability and transparency agenda must equally apply, so:

- Some funding could be pooled into area-based funding streams with other public services. The level of pooled funding could be set by local engagement;

- The service must consult with communities, potentially collectively with other public services, to consider the current nature of provision and determine whether it is still possible/desirable to offer the services they currently provide;

- Some portions of funding could be delegated at a locality or even station level with communities directly involved in decisions on its use.

Planning

- IRMP is just one method of planning but it could be developed to become a core tool used in collective local public service planning, while also addressing national risk. FRAs could use it to engage with local citizens and develop a 'place map' of community risks, aims and priorities. The IRMP could potentially incorporate/recognise specific rights for citizens and include service level agreements with communities;

- Key to engaging local people is to encourage them to think beyond the provision of emergency response and how to reconcile what they want with what they need. Engagement needs to be an iterative process in itself in facilitating public awareness of fire service functions and these need to go beyond passive consultation exercises. But it is recognised that there are some areas where public decision making would be inappropriate, such as risk assessments.

Governance

- An option for combined/metropolitan FRAs might be to develop nationally/adopt locally an alternative structure with a smaller number of authority members overall together with the inclusion of independents to give a clearer voice to local priorities in line with other public service models;

- County FRAs could look at other mechanisms to increase local community and independent involvement in scrutiny and governance structures;

- An alternative for all types for FRAs would be to create a single form of governance within which they can work together in the national interest, whilst also meeting the localism agenda. The different governance arrangements currently in existence do not enable the widest opportunities for collaboration, as has been seen through the operation of Regional Management Boards.

- Such an alternative approach could incorporate better representation for all tiers of local government and the private, third sector and

even service management or the representative bodies. This would bring further local accountability as well as specific expertise to the governance arrangements.

- There are alternative mechanisms for appointing members of the governing body that are worthy of consideration. Such systems could include directly elected bodies or commissioners. Consideration should also be given to sharing the structures of this with the Government's plans for elected Police commissioners. Indeed, one might suggest that there should be one local Commissioner covering the entire area of Public Protection within a locality, not only are the responsibilities best co-ordinated together but it would also demonstrate good and responsible use of public funds.

- Citizen panels are a mechanism available to assist all forms of governing body structures.

Delivery

- The potential role of community volunteers in the delivery of prevention, protection and response services must be taken forward;

- It is recommended that a local volunteer station model is developed to respond to community wishes similar to those successfully used elsewhere in the UK.

- Greater collaboration in delivery between services could be achieved by placing a selected number of organisations that all deal with safety related matters within the same governance arrangements. The three blue-light services are an example, but this could be expanded to cover all the preventative or legislative enforcement areas. Other models put forward as options elsewhere within Fire Futures propose placing a selected number of organisations that all deal with safety related matters within the same governance arrangements.

❯ 4. TRANSPARENCY AND ASSURANCE

The objective is for information about local institutions and public services to be transparent to people to make them more democratically accountable. By publishing information, taxpayers and users will be able to judge whether productivity is improving and government is delivering on its ambitions for better services for less money.

There are four key types of information on public services where the Coalition Government has indicated it would like to see transparency which supports the objectives of localism:

- Financial data (eg costs and expenditure, salaries, organograms)

- Performance information (eg impact/outcome indicators)

- Service information (eg library opening hours)

- Decision making (eg meeting agenda and minutes, planning and licensing applications)

Assurance processes need to support the provision of information by FRAs to their service users on the quality and value for money of their services. It also needs to provide for appropriate assurance about FRS performance, both locally and nationally in a decentralised environment.

There is a risk that some FRAs retrench into silo-based thinking focussed exclusively on the blue-light operational aspects of service delivery. Appropriate transparency and assurance measures covering the range of FRS functions will help provide external challenge to help authorities avoid this risk and provide communities with the tools and information to hold authorities to account for the services they provide.

The Localism and Accountability workstream of the Fire Futures review, in considering an appropriate new model to provide assurance and transparency, has built upon the existing work undertaken by the LGA and CFOA on a sector-led framework. This model would need to meet the objectives of:

- Helping equip citizens with the tools and information to hold local services to account in terms of delivery of outcomes and value for money; and

- Within a Fire and Rescue context to be able to provide, to the public and ministers, confidence about the Service's ongoing capability to respond to emergencies beyond the local level, to deliver national resilience and interoperability across FRAs and with other public services.

The proposed model builds on existing peer support structures to provide effective assistance and assurance and to maintain the positive performance trajectory of the FRS. This reflects shared principles of what a sector-led improvement framework should look like in recent iterations of the CFOA sector led improvement framework and the LG Group's consultation documents *Setting the Pace*, *Freedom to Lead* and *Sector Self Regulation and Improvement*.

There is already strong agreement for the development of a sector-led framework underpinned

by the principles set out above. The framework will have to be robust, with a consistent methodology and an agreed set of performance measures which allow local citizens to compare service costs and outcomes with those of other comparable authorities as well as reporting on key issues of local concern. The framework will promote higher levels of self awareness through peer reviewed self assessments, and recommended best in class diagnostic and improvement tools. Peer review teams can incorporate local community representatives to improve local challenge and accountability.

The challenge for this model of assurance would be for it to successfully develop and apply mechanisms to robustly identify and support those at risk of failure in meeting local community and national expectations. It will also need to provide appropriate assurance on resilience capabilities, interoperability and value for money in functions where this is best served through collective action at a spatial level above that of an individual FRA. The National Resilience Board may provide a potential model which could be developed further. This may require central government input and/or resourcing and, in view of the national risk critical role of the FRS, for the purposes of assurance of the public and ministers on these functions the Government may alternatively wish to have this function undertaken by an independent body.

In these challenging, resource-constrained times, consideration needs to be given to the frequency and the resource requirements of these processes linked to the initiation mechanisms. There needs to be a balance struck between the needs of all stakeholders.

The sector-led model also proposes that National Performance Measures to deliver transparency in the costs and outcomes of Fire and Rescue Services should be an integral part of a sector-led framework. These should be high level, not reinventing Best Value or National Indicators. They should drive outcomes not merely compliance activity. They should be adaptable to local context and allow for local differences in needs and priorities.

The merits of a government-sponsored alternative assurance model are explored within the decentralisation section of the National Interests Fire Futures report.

5. SUMMARY OF OPTIONS AND PROPOSALS

Localism

Three broad options are proposed to enable the localism agenda to be firmly embedded in the work of the FRS.

- **Option 1: Locally driven change** – encouraging a diversity of local approaches but reflecting within a revised FRS National Framework a clear set of citizen rights and expectations and the roles of FRAs, sector and government institutions in meeting these.

- **Option 2: Supported locally driven change** – reinforcing local approaches with a number of changes in national structures drawing on those highlighted above under Delivery measures for the FRS and others.

- **Option 3: New structural parameters** – a possible model for future local service delivery encompassing FRS.

Transparency and Assurance

- The development of a community and sector-led model of assurance and transparency measures for the sector.

KEY CONTRIBUTING PAPERS

Primary author(s) as shown but with contribution in terms of development and challenge from a range of wider sector contributors

Andrews, J., *Transparency and accountability*

Bowcock, W., *Localism and accountability*

Gunter, D., Hannigan, R. and Odin, N., *Localism*

Johnson, S., *Assurance*

McGuirk, S., *Localism think piece*