

For Publication

Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Authority
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SUBJECT: Home Office Response to the White Paper Consultation 'Reforming our Fire & Rescue Service'

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Background Papers: Home Office Response to the White Paper Consultation 'Reforming our Fire & Rescue Service'

Implications:

Implications	Yes/No	Impact/Reference
Financial	No	Any adjustments to budgets as a result of this paper will be discussed and cost implications reported to Members in line with our Members Handbook and governance arrangements.
Risk Management	Yes	Future outcomes of the White Paper may potentially involve significant work for the Service and will affect items on the corporate risk register.
Legal	Yes	The Home Office Response to the White Paper Consultation details potential changes to the Service's governance.
Privacy and Security	No	There are no Privacy and Security implications as part of the report.
Duty to collaborate	No	The Policing and Crime Act 2017 requires the Authority to consider opportunities for collaboration with the police and ambulance services
Health and Safety	No	Health and safety performance implications are discussed at the Health and Safety Steering Group. Any serious implications for staff and third parties will be reviewed by the Health and Safety Manager and reported to Members.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion	Yes	The Home Office Response to the White Paper Consultation details potential changes staff recruitment, development and progression to support a more diverse and inclusive workforce.
Environmental Sustainability	No	There are no Environmental Sustainability implications as part of the report.
Consultation & Communication	Yes	See the comments in the legal section above.

PURPOSE

To brief members on the contents of the Home Office Response to the White Paper Consultation 'Reforming our Fire & Rescue Service'.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That Members consider and comment on the contents of the report.

1 Background

- 1.1 The consultation paper “Reforming Our Fire and Rescue Service” was published on 18 May 2022 to seek views on Government’s ideas for reform, building on lessons from independent inspection, concerning national reports and the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. It laid out the Government’s vision for fire reform and was built on our ambition to strengthen fire and rescue services.
- 1.2 A total of 290 responses to the consultation paper were received and in addition to the consultation itself the Home Office conducted a programme of engagement with fire professionals. Discussions on the future of fire professionalism involved interviews, service visits and online workshops with over 220 people from 32 fire and rescue services.

2 Contents of report

2.1 The Fire Reform White Paper consulted on the government's vision for fire reform and centred around three main themes:

- People – improving systems, flexibility and culture.
- Professionalism – helping fire professionals to best serve their communities.
- Governance – strengthening oversight and leadership.

2.2 The report includes a summary the government's strategy for reform and the changes outlined to support both the public and fire and rescue professionals. The report also includes a detailed breakdown on the quantitative and qualitative responses to the consultation questions.

3 People

3.1 The aim of the White Paper was to outline plans to help fire professionals to further develop their skills and ensure that everyone could thrive in their work. This included clarifying the role of fire and rescue services, unlocking talent and improving representation within services.

3.2 Talent and inclusion

- The White Paper set out the government's intention to build effective leadership of the sector and building capability, embedding values and nurturing talent within services.
- Direct entry was a divisive issue for some consultation respondents; however, fire already has a strong track record in this area with several fire and rescue services being successfully run by non-operational leaders. The Home Office is funding the

development, and piloting of wider direct entry schemes through the NFCC, bringing new perspectives into services alongside the many talented professionals already serving.

- The Home Office will continue to work with the NFCC and others to develop talent management schemes for both new recruits and those already working in fire and rescue.

3.3 Pay and Role

- The government's fundamental position that the role of the fire and rescue service in England is clear – laid out comprehensively in legislation across three key acts of Parliament that address fire, community safety and civil contingencies.
- The government wants a flexible system to enable chiefs to make local level decisions about staffing, whilst working productively with unions. The aim is for fire and rescue services to be able to play a full role in protecting the community, working with health, police and other partners without getting tied up in red tape.
- The government wants to work with the full range of both fire employers and unions to address the call for change that has come through in the consultation responses in relation to the operation of the National Joint Council (NJC). In the first instance, government will support the fire and rescue authorities and unions to critically review the NJC's own mechanisms, operations and transparency. This should be an inclusive process and should be completed by early 2024. If this process does not result in meaningful change, the government will explore other routes to ensure a modern, fair pay system that constructively enables role reform in England.

4 Professionalism

- 4.1 Proposals in the Professionalism section of the White Paper centred around the creation of an independent body for fire professionals. These proposals will build on the work of both the Fire Standards Board (FSB) and the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC), who will have an enduring and important role in future.

4.2 Creating a College of Fire and Rescue

- A College of Fire and Rescue was proposed to strengthen the development of individuals and the overall professionalism of fire and rescue services, setting the direction on data, research, leadership, ethics and professional standards.
- It was proposed that a College of Fire and Rescue could be given powers mirroring those of the College of Policing, to help it drive change. The consultation showed an overwhelmingly positive response to the creation of a College.
- The Home Office will work openly with sector leaders, the frontline and existing comparable organisations such as the College of Policing, as we develop the most appropriate delivery model.

4.3 Raising standards

- The White Paper proposed creation of a statutory code of ethics, the case for which is bolstered by inspection findings of HMICFRS and serious lapses of integrity in parts of our fire and rescue services. The majority of respondents were supportive of this course of action.
- The Home Office will place future responsibility for professional standards with the College of Fire and Rescue and will create powers to place elements of professional standards such as a code of ethics on a statutory basis when parliamentary time allows.

5 Governance

- 5.1 The White Paper detailed the government's position to open debate on strengthening or simplifying fire governance. It indicated government's view that single point accountability would allow for better link up between services, more efficient use of resources and clearer accountability to the public.

5.2 The White Paper identifies that the process of submitting business cases for governance transfers can be complex, costly and time consuming. The White Paper also confirms the government's intention to deliver on the independent inspectorate's recommendation that chief officers should be afforded operational independence, similar to their policing counterparts.

5.3 Governance change

- The Home Office states it is committed to supporting moves towards a single point accountability in fire. However, the government's position is it will not mandate transfer of FRA functions to Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs), Mayors or single elected individuals at this stage.
- The Home Office's intention is to encourage PCCs and Mayors who want to take on fire governance functions, where the areas are co-terminus, in order to enable the Home Office to assess readiness and support change.
- The Home Office will explore ways to simplify processes and incentivise voluntary transfers, which could be achieved by radically streamlining the business case process or exploring legislative means to remove them altogether.
- The Home Office, as part of the Government's Levelling Up agenda, intends to continue to support locally led devolution deals and any fire governance transfers that result from these deals.

5.4 Operational Independence.

- The government's position is that the proposals in the White Paper set out to clarify the responsibilities of fire authorities and chief officers and aim to create a framework that complements existing structures while providing greater clarity and transparency in the division of responsibilities.
- Under the proposal the fire and rescue authority will be responsible for their fire service at all times, with the chief officer effectively responsible for operationalising the authority's strategic directions. Operational independence would provide chief officers with the ability to make decisions on practical and management issues.

- The Government will seek to legislate, at the earliest opportunity, to give chief officers operational independence. The Home Office's intention is to take action to make the responsibilities of the fire and rescue authority and the chief officer clearer, with regard to a clearer separation of strategic and operational planning requirements and the governance of services.

6 Other notable 'next steps from the detailed analysis'

- 6.1 The Home Office Response to the White Paper Consultation 'Reforming our Fire & Rescue Service' also includes a detailed breakdown on the quantitative and qualitative responses to the 48 consultation questions. The detailed breakdown contains some statements of intent for next to be undertaken by the government, some of these are summarised below:
- The government's position is to work alongside fire and rescue services across the UK, DHSC, NHS England, NHS Wales and regional Ambulance trusts to support the work of the ambulance services in a way that increases public safety.
 - The government is taking action to introduce minimum service levels for fire and rescue services which are intended to provide a specified level of cover on strike days.
 - Following the consultation process the government does not intend to take the proposal for a fire and rescue service oath forward.
 - The consultation process considered alternative governance models proposed by respondents, particularly independent Fire Commissioners. However, the government will not be mandating governance transfers to models aligning to our criteria of a single, (directly) elected individual at this stage.
 - The Government will not pursue ring-fencing of operational budgets within fire and rescue services run by county councils and unitary councils. However, the government intends to amend the Fire and Rescue National Framework for England to the effect that FRAs with 'parent authorities' are asked to publish their allocated budgets on their website prior to the start of each financial year.

- Whilst the Home Office will pursue operational independence of chief fire officers, it does not intend to further pursue the proposal of chief fire officers having corporation sole status.
- The Government will explore legislation, when parliamentary times allows, to amend and clarify responsibilities with regards to the production of strategic and operational plans. The current legal requirement for a separate strategic plan is already set out in statute for Combined Authority Mayors (MCAs) and Police, Fire and Crime Commissioners (PFCCs). The Home Office wish to legislate so that this requirement applies to all categories of FRA listed in the FRSA 2004 and to clarify the name and responsibility for the operational plan, whereby the 'Integrated Risk Management Plan' (IRMP) will become the 'Community Risk Management Plan' (CRMP). The change in will be reflected in legislation at the earliest opportunity and updated in the National Framework.

7 Bedfordshire's Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC)

- 7.1 Is worthy of note that the next elections for Bedfordshire's Police and Crime Commissioner are planned in May 2024.
- 7.2 The current PCC, Festus Akinbusoye, has confirmed in the press that he is seeking re-election for a second term, stating he will not be pursuing previous plans to become the Conservative candidate for MP of Mid-Bedfordshire.
- 7.3 It is a foreseeable risk that if there is a change in Bedfordshire's Police and Crime Commissioner that a new PCC may have a different standpoint regarding single point accountability for fire. Should a proposed single point accountability wish to compile a business case for a change of governance the learning from other service's would indicate a significant resource requirement from the service to meet the required information requests.

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