

HIGHLAND AND ISLANDS FIRE BOARD

27 NOVEMBER 2009

Agenda Item	
Report No	

SCOTTISH FIRE CONVENERS FORUM

Report by the Clerk

Summary

This report briefs Members on key issues discussed at the Scottish Fire Conveners Forum.

Background

1. The Scottish Fire Conveners Forum first met in October 2008. The Convener has provided a briefing on Forum discussions at previous Board meetings.

Briefing

2. A briefing paper drawn up by the Forum secretariat and covering a number of issues is attached at Appendix 1, on which the Convener will comment.

Evidence to Justice Committee

3. Written evidence was provided by CFOAS, supported by the Fire Conveners Forum, to the Scottish Parliament Justice Committee debate on the draft budget process. A copy is attached for information at Appendix 2.

Recommendation

The Board is invited to comment on the issues raised.

Signature

Designation Clerk

Date 13 November 2009

Author Mrs R Moir, Assistant Clerk

SCOTTISH FIRE CONVENERS FORUM – KEY ISSUES

The following is designed to provide Conveners and Chiefs with some headlines for presentation to Boards to keep them apprised of the discussions within the Scottish Fire Conveners Forum.

Water Rescue Capability Review

The interim report of the Water Rescue Capability Review has now been released and is complimentary of SFRS water rescue capability, highlighting it as a benchmark against which others should be judged. FRSs are to be given the role of registering and vetting assets but Police will retain the overall co-ordination role. CFOAS was in discussion with ACPOS and COSLA to clarify the position as CFOAS still believed FRSs were best placed to perform the “operational” co-ordination role. Conveners supported that position, and emphasised the need for a comprehensive communication exercise with potential rescue agencies on the need to be assessed and registered.

Contingency Planning

Discussions had taken place at official level on preparedness in relation to the flu pandemic. Government officials were seeking further assurances and it was agreed the Chief Fire Adviser should be invited to assess individual Service’s preparations. Conveners agreed that the Forum should lobby for vaccination for firefighters or, at the very least, Control Room staff. It was agreed to raise this point with the Minister.

With regard to strike contingency, CFOAS was meeting COSLA officials on the industrial relations aspects affecting contingency arrangements and keeping a link into developments with CFOA UK on the position in England and Wales.

Resilience

All eight Services were scheduled to endorse the Resilience delivery plan by the end of the month. Conveners still had reservations regarding some of the planning assumptions in the Strategy but accepted that it was legitimate for SG to set its policy objectives and accept any associated risk. Constructive discussions were ongoing in relation to governance, assurance and asset ownership.

Concerns were expressed by Conveners regarding the delay in releasing the DIM vehicles and it was agreed that this would be raised with the Minister in the context of good progress being made overall.

Future Distribution of Capital Grant

Conveners expressed their support for the CFOAS paper on future distribution of capital, and endorsed it as the Conveners’ position going forward into discussions with COSLA and Scottish Government.

CFOAS evidence to Justice Committee

Conveners expressed their support for the evidence presented to the Justice Committee. The Forum also agreed to formally endorse the paper for circulation round Clerks to Boards and suggested that the paper be circulated to all MSPS

Governance Arrangements: COSLA / Councils / Joint boards

Fire Conveners agreed to develop an appropriate working relationship with COSLA which recognised Fire as part of the family of local government. While disappointed with some of the actions taken by COSLA, Conveners were focussed on developing a sound relationship for the future. Constructive discussions had taken place at officer level and it was agreed that work should be developed for presentation to SFCF and COSLA Leadership.

Scottish FRS: Shared Services

Conveners supported the national initiatives progressing under the auspices of CFOAS and emphasised that they wanted to see real benefits from the shared services approach with an annual report back into the SFCF. Conveners agreed that sharing of resources was as much about improving quality as it was about achieving savings. It was confirmed that the national approach did not undermine the Tayside, Central, Fife shared services project.

Practitioners Policy Forum

Conveners endorsed reports on Influences on Fire Losses and Multi Storey Flat Incidents from the Practitioners Policy Forum going forward to the Ministerial Advisory Group. Conveners raised issues around building design faults and domestic sprinklers. It was confirmed that these issues would be picked up in CFO Sweeney's Community Fire Safety Study which could be the subject of a broader report back to the Forum.



Scottish Fire Conveners' Forum

The following evidence was prepared by the Chief Fire Officers Association Scotland, presented to and endorsed by the Scottish Fire Conveners Forum at its meeting on 23 October 2010.

PROVISION OF WRITTEN EVIDENCE Scottish Parliament Justice Committee – Budget Process 2010-11

Key messages from the Chief Fire Officers Association Scotland

Background

1. The Chief Fire Officers Association Scotland (CFOAS) is the professional voice of Scotland's fire and rescue services. Our members (including all chief, deputy and assistant chief officers) lead at the most senior level and are responsible for delivering the service.
2. Working closely with SOLACE, ACPOS and NHS Scotland, CFOAS is one of the four strategic partners on the National Community Planning Group and we are the professional advisors on fire matters to both COSLA and the Scottish Fire Conveners Forum.
3. Our well established portfolios and business stream structures ensure commonality and sharing of best practice across all eight fire and rescue services including the development of shared services and unified policies and procedures.
4. The CFOAS Policy Forum ensures that all Scotland's Fire and Rescue Services are working cohesively on all policy areas so that we provide a consistent approach across the fire agenda. CFOAS is integral to the effective and efficient leadership of the fire and rescue service in Scotland and for delivering that, through its membership, to our communities.
5. We are grateful for the opportunity to submit evidence to the Committee and are happy to provide further information or indeed clarify any aspect of this submission.

The Challenges – Changes to Patterns of Demand

Impact of Recession

6. Historically, economic downturns place increased demands on all public services including fire and rescue. Previous experience has shown a marked rise in social deprivation resulting in a breakdown in social cohesion that we often see manifested in attacks on crews and wider anti social behaviour, including instances of deliberate fire setting.

Demographic change

7. Projections for the Scottish population indicate an overall increase in the population of older people and a move away from care in clinical and institutional settings to more care at home. Statistics demonstrate that the elderly and the wider vulnerable members of society are more likely to die or be seriously injured through fire incidents in the home. We predict increasing demand on home fire safety visits and increased partnership working to mitigate the risk.

Climate Change

8. The impact of climate change and increase in number of severe weather events is with us now and will increase operational demand for fire and rescue services. Wide area flooding, more severe wild land and forest fires are only some of the consequences of climate change.

Importance of Prevention

9. The first key message we would wish to deliver to the Committee is that maintaining social cohesion is not only about social care, housing or health policy. The fire prevention agenda is vital and it is broadly recognised that we should be aiming to prevent incidents before they occur. Our primary focus, therefore, is to reduce fire injuries and fatalities and we would urge that the outcomes of the Community Fire Safety Study led by Chief Fire Officer Brian Sweeney are seriously considered and actioned in this regard. The message is not an attempt to start a false debate on prevention versus intervention but is merely emphasising that the consequential cost of fires to society and the economy makes a clear argument for early education and prevention activity. Indeed the cost indicator from Government statistics is approximately £1.55m per fire fatality.
10. None of that dilutes the need to have properly resourced and trained intervention services; indeed the challenge when the overall trend in the number of fires is going down is to maintain our capital resource and continue to develop skill levels and operational techniques.

11. Engagement with other emergency services, NHS partners, the wider local government family and business interests cannot therefore be seen as a luxury but rather a necessity to bring about the changes needed in combating anti-social behaviour, protecting the built and natural environment and keeping business working. In order to build on these approaches the Service at officer and Joint Board level is seeking to strengthen working relationships with constituent local authorities and with the local government organisation COSLA. We are also engaging with business community, insurers, and the universities (fire engineering and design) to ensure safe construction and renovation practices.

Protecting the front line

12. It therefore follows that for CFOAS protection of the front line is not merely about the most efficient and effective deployment of staff to emergency incidents but ensuring that prevention activity develops and grows in partnership with other agencies. We would argue that there can be no artificial boundary between prevention and intervention when “protecting the front line”. Reducing demand is an accepted strategy across all community planning partners and is particularly important as resources become ever scarcer.

Resourcing the Service

Revenue Funding

Ring Fencing

13. It should be noted that unlike Police Authorities, Revenue Funding for Fire and Rescue Services has never been ring-fenced or the subject of a specific Grant.
14. Until the signing of the Concordat and the removal of Grant Aided Expenditure, the Government published what, in its view, was the appropriate level of funding for Fire Authorities based on Firefighting Staff costs, Running Costs and Pensions. This level of expenditure (i.e. GAE) was the amount Government would support by way of Revenue Support Grant.
15. It was not mandatory for Local Authorities to fund Services at that level; some funded above, some funded below, therefore “horse trading”, as others have described it, has always existed with no suggestion that COSLA or Local Authorities treated Fire and Rescue Services unfairly.
16. The removal of ring-fencing and GAE was agreed by both Scottish Government and COSLA through the signing of the Concordat and there is no evidence to suggest that Fire and Rescue Services have suffered as a consequence.

Pensions

17. Similar to comments by Police colleagues, Pension funding is being changed from 1 April 2010. The cost of paying Pensions Transfers from local Fire and Rescue Services to Central Government, thus removing the volatility in local budgets and transferring the risk, this approach is welcomed by CFOAS.

Capital Funding

18. CFOAS has developed a number of key principles which it is currently discussing with colleagues in COSLA and Scottish Government to agree a mutually acceptable way forward on the future distribution of Fire capital funding. These are:-
 - Any method of distribution of resources should be fair, transparent and evidence-based; the present system is not deemed to be.
 - In accordance with the Concordat, resources provided for use by the local government family should not be ring-fenced and micro managed by Central Government.
 - In a similar way to Police, resources allocated for Fire should be passed to Fire and Rescue Services by local authorities.
 - The majority of Capital Grant (2/3rds) is required to maintain “business as usual” infrastructure and should therefore continue to be distributed by way of a formula.
 - An element of Capital Grant should be set aside to fund Scottish-wide projects of collective value and local projects requiring Top Slicing (1/3rd).
 - The Minister should be part of the decision-making process for Scottish-wide projects only.
 - The value of Formula funding has remained unchanged for 9 years – a cut in real terms of around 27%.
 - Over the next 10 years investment of £275m is required to replace existing assets with a further £104m for new Service provision.

Economic Realities

19. We recognise that the Service, along with every other part of the public sector in Scotland will need to scrutinise its areas of activity and demonstrate real value for money in the efficient delivery of fire and rescue services. We are, of course, subject to the rigours of Best Value in that regard and each Service has been able to demonstrate real year-on-year efficiencies.
20. However the scale of the likely squeeze over the coming years on public spending is unparalleled and with a shared planning assumption of a 12% real reduction across the next spending review period, combined with a view that demand will continue to rise across the period, the question has to be how can we meet that gap?

Efficiencies and Shared Services

21. Fire and Rescue Services exceeded the Government's target for efficiency savings of 2% in 2008/09 achieving £5.826m or 2.09%. Efficiencies were achieved in areas such as Workforce Planning, Procurement and Asset Management.
22. The fact that such efficiencies could be reinvested in the Service was most welcome. Clearly, as efficiencies are required year on year, they will become much harder to achieve, however, CFOAS shares best practice in this area through its Finance Committee.
23. CFOAS has established a project to identify shared services' initiatives across the eight authorities that can improve the effectiveness of services to be delivered collectively as well as the efficiency gains that can be realised. Business models are also extending to sharing of functions between specific services with shared geographical boundaries in a bid to generate efficiencies and streamline operations.

Procurement

24. For many years now all eight FRS's have been working collaboratively on procurement through the CFOAS business stream.
25. The bulk of major 'fire commodity' procurement, fleet, uniform and personal protective equipment, to name but three from a lengthy list, are purchased from commonly agreed specifications.
26. Since the McLellan review of public sector procurement, the long established joint processes have been further improved to include environmental aspects. The introduction of a web based procurement portal in 2008 has significantly enhanced the procurement process for both suppliers and service users.
27. In November 2009 the service will formally establish shared service procurement entitled 'Fire Scotland'. The committee may wish to note that, unlike the very costly and problematic 'Firebuy' company set up to address procurement in England (underwritten incidentally by CLG), 'Fire Scotland' has negligible overheads and continues to be delivered through the CFOAS business structures. 'Fire Scotland' has already made significant financial savings through joint procurement and will continue to do that demonstrating all of the principles of Best Value and ethical procurement.
28. Other examples of collaborative working include joint procurement across the eight services of specialist equipment valued at £20million for national resilience programmes since 2002. In workforce recruitment and development, the services operate collaborative assessment and development centres and we are also considering introducing the local government recruitment portal which has been successfully piloted in Strathclyde and should realise efficiencies in recruitment costs.

The Way Ahead

29. In responding to the financial scenario that is likely to face us in the next few years we will continue to innovate and ensure value for money across all aspects of our organisations. CFOAS believes in line with partner professional associations that we need to respond to pressures on a collaborative basis, sustain investment in prevention, seek out further opportunities for greater efficiency and productivity, continue to develop shared services where the overarching purpose is to achieve outcomes more cost effectively and control the paybill.

Scottish Ambulance Service

30. CFOAS believes that real and lasting efficiencies could be gained through closer collaborative working with the Scottish Ambulance Service where we feel mutual benefit can be gained, not only in relation to maximising scarce public sector resources but, more importantly, in delivering effective services, particularly in remote and rural areas where we both face real challenges.
31. In many areas we are aiming to provide for the same section of our communities and the development of a strategy which enhances that provision is something we believe both organisations should be working towards. We believe the climate is right for the Scottish Ambulance Service (SAS) and Scottish Fire and Rescue Services to work closely together and would welcome a committed approach to closer collaboration given the range of models that currently exist across Europe. At the request of the SAS Board CFOAS has responded to its consultation exercise on future strategy and is in early discussions on some of these issues.

Public Sector Pay Policy

32. The issue of pay restraint is one that is currently on the agenda for local government and other partner agencies in the public sector. Like Police, a large proportion of budget is on staff costs (around 80% of budgets, excluding Pensions) but it should be noted that many staff throughout the country are Retained Duty Service or Volunteer Firefighters who are among the most cost effective in the public sector. Scotland has a higher proportion of retained and volunteer fire-fighters compared with other parts of the UK and taken together these two duty systems provide around 90% of Scotland's land mass fire cover. Over 40% of the total operational fire workforce in Scotland is employed on the Retained Duty System (RDS).
33. In general all public sector partners accept that pay restraint is a necessary part of protecting services and jobs but an early indication at national government level (UK and Scottish Government) on any potential public sector pay policy would assist in planning for the future.
34. We trust that the evidence outlined above demonstrates to the Committee that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Services are constantly looking to invest resources in a way that best deliver safe and secure communities and that we will continue to strive to deliver efficient and effective services throughout the financially demanding times ahead.