

# **House of Commons Select Committee Report**

**On**

**The Department for Communities  
and Local Government**

**The Fire and Rescue Service**

**Comments from the**

**Chief Fire Officers Association**

August 2006

**Approval**

**Prepared By:**        **David Brown**  
                                 **Chief Executive**

**Signature:**

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**Date:**                **14th August 2006**

**Approved By:**        **Phil Toase**  
                                 **CFOA President**

**Signature:**

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**Date:**                **14<sup>th</sup> August 2006**

## Glossary

Acronym	Description
CFOA	Chief Fire Officers Association
CPA	Comprehensive Performance Assessment
DCLG	Department for Communities and Local Government
E&D	Equality and Diversity
FiReBuy	Non Departmental Public Body - FRS National Procurement
FiReControl	DCLG Regional Control Centre Project
FiReLink	DCLG Communications System Project
FRA	Fire and Rescue Authority
FRS	Fire and Rescue Service
IPDS	Integrated Personal Development System
IR	Industrial Relations
IRMP	Integrated Risk Management Plan
LAA	Local Area Agreement
NJC	National Joint Councils
RCC	Regional Control Centre
RMB	Regional Management Board
RRO	Regulatory Reform Order

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## **1 Introduction**

### **1.1 General**

- 1.1.1 This considered response made by the Chief Fire Officers' Association (CFOA) is submitted to the Minister following the publication of the House of Commons Select Committee Report on the Fire & Rescue Service. CFOA submitted a range of detailed written and oral evidence to the Select Committee and welcomed the opportunity to influence this important inquiry. It is noted that this Inquiry provided the first formal opportunity since the enactment of the Fire & Rescue Services Act 2004, to take stock, celebrate the success and achievements of the Fire & Rescue Service (FRS) and also identify further areas for review and development.
- 1.1.2 Whilst a great deal has been achieved, much more needs to be done to secure a lasting transformation within the Service and CFOA is fully committed to meet the continuing and evolving demands now placed upon the FRS. CFOA will continue to provide leadership and work with all stakeholders to deliver safe and sustainable communities.
- 1.1.3 Whilst there are a number of issues that were not examined in the Select Committee's work, the thoroughness and level of comprehension of the complex issues involved, is a credit to the Committee and also to all those stakeholders who provided the extensive body of evidence.

### **1.2 Format**

- 1.2.1 This document is intentionally crafted to cover specific CFOA comments and observations on the Conclusions and Recommendations section from the Select Committee report and to assist in any cross referencing, this document uses the same headings.

## **2 Report**

### **2.1 Governance and Funding Arrangements**

- 2.1.1 CFOA welcomes the principle of scrutiny as applied by the Communities and Local Government Committee to the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). This principle and the examination of policy in public are an important democratic tool and one which local government has used for many years. We would be pleased therefore to participate in the forthcoming capability review.
- 2.1.2 Clarity about accountability and responsibility for successful outcomes can sometimes become a little blurred but is crucially important at a national level particularly if we wish to continuously improve our public services. Whilst CFOA has a number of concerns about some detail surrounding the modernisation process, it can no longer be said that the FRS is suffering from

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- ‘benign neglect’ from the Government. The report clearly identifies Government’s leadership role but of course within a partnership setting.
- 2.1.3 The modernisation process within the FRS is to be welcomed. It has allowed FRAs the freedom to determine local response plans to meet local needs by way of IRMPs which is probably the most important issue concerning the communities we serve. However we are also faced with a complex mix of regional structures through RMBs, a National Framework document that arguably has too much detail and not enough focus on desired outcomes. In addition there is a lack of clarity with regards to some aspects of the Regional Control Centre project. This has to be carefully managed recognising the important links between RCCs and IRMPs.
- 2.1.4 The opportunity to examine options for size and structure of FRS (and associated quality of deliverables) does not appear to have been taken. The Secretary of State’s White Paper on Local Government, now planned for the autumn, may provide another chance to consider looking at a consistent governance structure/size but also taking account of other determinants including geography, social economic & environmental well being and the distribution of population.
- 2.1.5 If further Unitary Councils are formed, Combined FRS will be required. As outlined by the President of CFOA at the 2005 Fire Conference, some smaller FRS are struggling to find the capacity to progress the modernisation agenda and in addition, as a result of local government funding pressures, some have to operate within reducing base-budgets whilst others are factoring in growth, albeit within capping limits.
- 2.1.6 The benefits of working within a wider public protection arena could have been developed further by the Committee in terms of the contribution that is being made by the FRS with regard to community cohesion, social inclusion, community safety (not just community fire safety), resilience, environmental protection, trading standards, and other neighbourhood focused initiatives (neighbourhood policing/community wardens etc). Engagement with Crime and Disorder Partnerships and Local Area Agreements (LAA) needs to be further strengthened.
- 2.1.7 In terms of RMBs, it is true to say that effectiveness also varies considerably from region to region. Some are embracing the benefits of closer cooperation and collaboration, whilst others have adopted a more cautious approach and remain concerned about the legal accountabilities and government expectations of a model that sits outside of traditional County Council / Combined Fire Authority governance structures. We would support the view that if the existing RMB model is to continue, clarity as to government expectations in ‘outcome’ terms is necessary. We would go further suggesting that the resource implications of this additional tier of administration merits further consideration (**Recommendation 1**).
- 2.1.8 CFOA is also mindful that the opportunity may have been missed to join up modernisation of the three emergency services with the associated benefits in terms of cost and interagency working of possible shared control rooms and this may be something to return to, now the police service restructuring appears to have been shelved (**Recommendation 13**).
- 2.1.9 In terms of funding, the Fire & Rescue Service Act 2004 places new duties on the FRS as does the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. CFOA remains concerned

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that these responsibilities have attracted only limited additional support and no new additional funding. It still appears to be the view that the FRS is a “deep mine” of untapped savings and that massive change can be absorbed merely by tapping into these savings. New-burdens funding associated with FiReControl and FiReLink still remains unclear in some respects and in view of the rapidly approaching ‘go live’ dates and the associated need to plan ahead financially, this is less than satisfactory (**Recommendation 2**).

- 2.1.10 The Committee’s comments regarding the need to establish a baseline from which FireBuy can demonstrate efficiencies are supported. FireBuy offers an opportunity for savings for individual FRS who are forecasting efficiency savings to come from changes in procurement practices. However, the future funding of FireBuy remains undecided and clarity is required in this respect (**Recommendation 3**).

### **2.2 FiReControl and Regional Control Centres**

- 2.2.1 The DCLG has stated that costs will be neutral across FRS in terms of both FiReControl and FiReLink. However, it is probable that some will in fact incur additional costs whilst others will generate savings as a result. CFOA would have wished to see firmer direction from the Committee as to how funding in this respect would be redistributed and early indications from DCLG as to who will be the net gainers, alongside those who will have to find additional funding as three-year budgets are being prepared. There is also likely to be a reluctance to fund issues locally that are required as a direct result of the FiReControl and FiReLink programmes (such as convergence work) as the new-burdens funding is expected to be the mechanism to fund these new and additional commitments.
- 2.2.2 As previously stated, CFOA supports the Committee’s view that clarity must be given as to how new-burdens funding is to be applied along with conformation that ‘any cost over-run should be met by central government’.
- 2.2.3 CFOA remains committed to the principles of both FiReControl and FiReLink in delivering successful outcomes in terms of service delivery and value for money, as both will provide much needed investment into areas of the Service that may not have been provided otherwise. However, as identified within the report, concerns regarding the lack of detailed business case information, the need to continue to provide a service up to ‘cut over’ and a greater focus on the impact on staff perhaps could have been brought out in discussions.
- 2.2.4 The Interim National Coordination Centre has proved itself to be effective in mobilising New Dimension resources to support local FRS. CFOA supports the Committee’s view that further clarification is required in the context of the FiReControl project (**Recommendation 4**).
- 2.2.5 CFOA agrees that there is a need to ensure improved service quality of the new FiReControl and FiReLink projects; confirmation that each site location is suitable and that ‘out of scope’ activities (some of which are relied upon to provide a County-wide emergency planning contact/mobilisation operation) must be further considered and the way forward clearly determined (**Recommendations 6, 7 and 8**).

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- 2.2.6 Testing of FiReControl and FiReLink systems and effective contingency planning (fall-back arrangements) is essential (*Recommendation 9*).
- 2.2.7 The need for more detailed financial information has been outlined earlier and the impact of not having such information should not be underestimated (*Recommendations 10, 12 and 14*).
- 2.2.8 Governance issues have recently been consulted upon and a consistent approach and clear direction is required.

### **2.3 FiReLink**

- 2.3.1 As stated earlier in our response, FiReLink and the associated investment are welcomed by CFOA. We remain concerned though, that as a result of the need to harmonise this project with FiReControl, local Fire Authorities in some cases have had to incur additional expense in order to maintain existing radio schemes until the date that a replacement system is available. This is an unavoidable expense and should therefore continue to be met by the new burdens principles (*Recommendation 15*).
- 2.3.2 In addition, whilst FiReLink is to be welcomed as it is a superior system to that in existence in many areas, there may be an additional cost for those Authorities who have cheaper systems currently in place. A mechanism for associated funding to cover not only slippage costs but also any increased costs as a result of adopting the FiReLink scheme should be given (*Recommendations 15 and 16*).
- 2.3.3 CFOA agrees that experience gained by some FRS who already use Airwave technology, along with other emergency service users who have similar experiences, should be included as the project comes to fruition (*Recommendation 17*).
- 2.3.4 Recommendation 18 is also strongly supported by CFOA to ensure that communication on the incident ground, such as hand held mobile 'fireground' radios, should be included within the scope of FiReLink. This will improve communication and safety at the 'sharp end'.

### **2.4 Prevention and Risk Assessment**

- 2.4.1 CFOA welcomes the Committee's recommendations which do directly reflect much of the evidence submitted by the Association. We believe that a national review of IRMPs to assess their impact and adequacy would be beneficial and hope this will include a particular emphasis on the Service's expanding role with regard to its new statutory duties focussed on the wider risk agenda.
- 2.4.2 We would welcome early guidance on priorities between local and regional planning, and a stronger co-ordination between the publication of the National Framework and IRMP. In addition, CFOA suggests that any review strengthens this alignment to ensure more robust and effective links are made with Local Authority financial planning cycles. However, we would advise caution in the extent to which guidance is prescriptive. It is clear that in some

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- FRS there is still resistance with the IRMP approach and any associated guidance, viewed as tools to attack, rather than enable change.
- 2.4.3 It is important to note that the IRMP Steering Group has recently been re-established and CFOA are working closely with other stakeholders on that committee, as well as providing a 50% funding commitment for an IRMP Steering Group Coordinator who has been nominated from within the FRS (*Recommendations 19, 20 and 21*).
- 2.4.4 The recent announcement of funding until 2008 is welcomed, but CFOA will be seeking further clarity as regards the protection of such grants for the future in the context of LAA developments and future pooled budgets proposals to ensure vital resources for community risk prevention are not diverted to other partner priorities. We would re-emphasise the need to revisit the power of well-being for Combined Fire Authorities, without which it is difficult to enable partnerships and virtually impossible to legally pool budgets (*Recommendation 22*).
- 2.4.5 We are pleased the committee recognised the significant impact of the introduction of the RRO and support close monitoring of this on a regular basis (*Recommendation 23*).
- 2.4.6 CFOA strongly urge the Minister to take early action as regards the Committee's recommendation on sprinklers in schools. We see this as a first and necessary step, and would reiterate the need for this approach to be extended to high risk residential properties, and other residential / domestic properties on a risk assessed basis to reduce further the number of lives lost, injuries sustained and costs caused through fire in our communities (*Recommendation 24*).
- 2.4.7 CFOA would re-iterate that the figures speak for themselves; the prevention agenda is already proving successful in saving lives. However, the wider statutory role of FRS must be recognised and any efficiencies generated through success in reducing fires, fire deaths and injuries must be seen in the context of the FRSs increasing responsibilities associated with its wider community safety responsibilities and their consequent costs (*Recommendation 25*).

## **2.5 Civil Resilience**

- 2.5.1 CFOA members either Chair or support Local Resilience Forums and as such are uniquely placed to consider resilience from a multi-agency perspective both in the response phase (blue light services) and in the recovery phase (local authority). The Committee's comments as to how local IRMPs should link to major incident planning/resilience, is a key issue. Local IRMPs are continuing to evolve and whilst, quite rightly, there is a greater emphasis than ever before on prevention and education activities, there is a significant need to ensure operational response preparation and planning for routine and major incidents is afforded a high profile. We fully support *Recommendation 26*.
- 2.5.2 CFOA continues to support the New Dimension project as this allows an effective response to terrorist and major civil emergencies to be made in a consistent manner across the UK. It is recognised that significant progress has

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been achieved to date, however resilience will be further improved with the addition of the Enhanced Command Support (ECS) system currently being progressed through the New Dimension work stream. CFOA remains committed to assisting DCLG to bring this aspect of the project to as early a conclusion as possible (*Recommendation 27*).

- 2.5.3 Collaboration between emergency services at a regional level will require further thought if co-location of emergency control rooms is not a practical solution. This could take the form of police and ambulance service liaison officers being located within the regional control rooms to support the mobilisation of fire resources in an integrated response (*Recommendation 28*).
- 2.5.4 CFOA supports the extension of mutual aid arrangements and will encourage Chief Fire Officers to maximise the potential that this opportunity presents, especially in the light of the scale of terrorist incidents and major incidents which have shown the need to consider regional/national support arrangements on occasions (*Recommendation 29*).

### **2.6 People Management**

- 2.6.1 Whilst the reasons behind the Committee's recommendation to maintain a distinction between uniformed and non-uniformed staff are clear, CFOA would urge caution in this regard as such an approach is somewhat counter-intuitive to the core principles of equality and diversity. We would welcome further discussion with Ministers on how best to inject greater urgency into the equality and diversity agenda.
- 2.6.2 We believe the Association could provide an excellent conduit for the sharing of best practice across the country, acting as a catalyst for delivering a step change in progress in this important area. The recently published CFOA HR Strategy, which can be accessed and viewed through the CFOA website, demonstrates our strong commitment to people management and our desire to take forward learning and development for our staff.
- 2.6.3 The argument put forward that a Fire and Rescue Authority should not achieve a Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) grading higher than good unless sufficient progress on Equality and Diversity (E & D) has been made, fits in our view, entirely within the principles expressed in our core values. Moreover the Association would like to emphasise that progress on E & D must also focus on behavioural and cultural change; increased representation is not enough and CFOA would want to work with other key stakeholders to support work on how best to effectively measure such more complex elements of organisational and cultural change (*Recommendations 30, 31 and 32*).
- 2.6.4 CFOA agree that all opportunities for re-deployment should be explored prior to consideration of redundancies. However, the resource impact of this approach must be recognised, as indeed must be the expectation on local employers to deliver Best Value. Currently there is no central commitment to fund the additional costs related to redeployment. In addition, it must be noted that RCC locations will determine that the burden of redeployment is likely to be disproportionate across FRSSs, and an appropriate mechanism for dealing with this must be sought (*Recommendation 32*).

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- 2.6.5 CFOA continues to give their unequivocal commitment to all equality and diversity issues, recognising that more needs to be achieved if we are to create a workforce that reflects and supports our communities. We now need to renew the pace and vigour on such necessary reform. CFOA would welcome renewed commitment and support from our partners on this important area of work but are unsure that a further review is the most appropriate way forward at this time as this approach may merely serve to delay progress yet further. Now is the time for action and CFOA is ready to play a key part in the delivery of progress as a matter of urgency (*Recommendation 34*).
- 2.6.6 CFOA are pleased to support the Committee's recommendations regarding the Retained Duty System (RDS) personnel and the acknowledgement of the vital contribution RDS firefighters make to the FRS. We would reiterate our view that seats on the NJC should be made available by right for the Fire Officer's Association, in addition to those recommended by the Retained Firefighters Union for the Committee. We believe that Government needs to provide a strong steer on this issue (*Recommendations 35, 36 and 37*).
- 2.6.7 CFOA will be pleased to contribute to any initiatives to strengthen the leadership of the Service and increase its capacity to respond at this exciting and challenging time of change (*Recommendation 38*).
- 2.6.8 CFOA is happy to contribute to any review of IPDS to ensure that it fully delivers its anticipated benefits to the Service and our communities (*Recommendation 39*).
- 2.6.9 Whilst the Select Committee did not comment on the Industrial Relations (IR) framework of the Service, CFOA believe it would be remiss of us in the context of people management not to draw your attention to the continuing confrontation characterising IR in the FRS. Our view is that the pay agreement in 2003 was only partially successful in advancing the cultural and organisational change necessary to modernise the Service. We consider there is a public policy dimension that needs to be considered as part of the 2007 review, and we anticipate continuing turbulence and tensions, the potential outcomes of which should not be underestimated.

## **2.7 Performance Measurement and Management**

- 2.7.1 CFOA is pleased with the good progress made in the introduction of operational assurance as an ongoing element of the assessment of the FRS. The Association wishes to continue working with the DCLG and Audit Commission in further developing CPA for the FRS, with the service assessment element needing to become an integral part of a single process for the future. However, at a time when Service capacity is at a premium due to the extent and pace of modernisation, the assessment burden for 2006/ 07 continues to be significant. The impact of this extensive activity must be closely monitored to ensure any potential disruption of progress on modernisation is kept to a minimum. We will be happy to contribute to discussions on the future development of CPA, and would be seeking to reduce the audit burden to a minimum, whilst maintaining the strength which external audit and accountability brings to the Service (*Recommendations 40, 41 and 42*).

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- 2.7.2 We agree that further work is needed to develop an effective set of performance indicators to assess the full range of statutory responsibilities now covered by the FRS. The Association is committed to working with stakeholders and the DCLG to develop and test indicators which will better measure the effectiveness of the modern Fire and Rescue Service (*Recommendations 43 and 45*).
- 2.7.3 We are pleased that the positive progress the FRS has made on reducing accidental deaths is recognised by the Committee, with fire deaths now at their lowest since 1959. Work is already underway in CFOA to research those factors which impact on the number of accidental deaths and success in reducing these. The Association is well placed to develop a strong evidence base and would be pleased to support any further research and development work in this area (*Recommendation 44*).

### **2.8 Joint Working with other Emergency Services**

- 2.8.1 Improved national consistency in establishing effective co-responder schemes is dependent on the successful development of a national co-responding protocol and the resolution of outstanding resourcing discussions led by the Government in close collaboration with the Department of Health. CFOA would welcome the opportunity to contribute to making positive progress on this important recommendation of the Committee (*Recommendation 46*).
- 2.8.2 Recent developments with regard to proposed structural changes in the police and ambulance services have served to increase the uncertainty around future structural arrangements for the FRS, particularly in the context of current RCC developments and their implications for operational arrangements. CFOA would urge the Minister to provide clear leadership in establishing closer links across Government, and developing better aligned policies with regard to the structure, governance and funding arrangements across the emergency services. The development of a stronger evidence base through further impartial research into most effective future arrangements would be welcomed by CFOA and the Association would be pleased to contribute to any such work (*Recommendation 47*).

### **3 Summary**

#### **3.1 Overview**

3.1.1 CFOA consider that the Select Committee Report and its accompanying body of evidence, provides a thorough and comprehensive status report on the modernisation programme for the FRS.

3.1.2 The key issues that CFOA would wish to draw from the Select Committee's deliberations are:

- Major national projects such as FiReControl will have a significant and long lasting effect on the FRS. It is essential that all the stakeholders remain closely involved with the progress of the various projects and that stakeholder concerns are properly registered and managed;
- It is also essential that the long-term sustainability of these national infrastructure projects is considered from the outset - and especially the funding implications so as not to store up debt for local tax payers in support of national assets;
- Many of the problems being encountered within the FRS modernisation programme are associated with strategic management and ambiguity about leadership and better progress will be made if long outstanding matters were quickly resolved such as the future of HMFSI, the Centre for Excellence project, as well as the structure and functioning of the Fire and Resilience department;
- The industrial relations climate and context continue to create a very challenging environment for change and demand clarity and unity of purpose amongst the strategic stakeholders.

#### **3.2 Next Steps**

3.2.1 CFOA would be pleased to work closely with the DCLG Programme Executives and other parties, to expand on these comments and to analyse in more detail how to take them forward in partnership.

3.2.2 We accept fully that we have a leadership responsibility but also acknowledge the limitations of the existing institutional structures on the way we can exercise that leadership. The reality is that leadership is a collective issue for DCLG, LGA and CFOA and we would welcome the opportunity to expand on this in more detail.