Government Response to the Communities and Local Government Committee's Report on the Fire and Rescue Service

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£8.00

1   INTRODUCTION

1.   The Government is grateful to the Communities and Local Government Committee for their report on the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS). The report is a timely look at how the FRS has progressed since the 2003 White Paper *Our Fire and Rescue Service* and the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004. It has provided a helpful indication of how the Government and the FRS might better operate in the future. As this document sets out, we accept and will act upon many of the Committee's recommendations.

2.   The Committee's report summarises the history since 2002 of Government-led initiatives aimed at improving the FRS, and highlights a range of changes from the introduction of Integrated Risk Management Plans (IRMPs) to a review of the National Joint Council. Recent achievements have included: the publication of the new National Framework, taking us up to 2008; the signing of the Firelink contract; the appointment of the FiReBuy chair; the implementation of the new firefighter pension scheme; and the setting up of the IRMP steering group. Sound progress is being made with the FiReControl project, the Learning and Development Strategy, the Integrated Personal Development System (IPDS) and New Dimensions. Good progress is also being made in terms of efficiency gains alongside the continuing reductions in deaths and injuries from fire highlighted by the Committee.

3.   The Government remains fully committed to supporting the improvement of the FRS. Although the foundations of many of the above-noted initiatives are now firmly in place, the Government will continue to support the FRS and its various stakeholders as they now exercise their responsibilities in building upon those foundations. Where appropriate we shall continue to provide guidance and direction.

4.   The Committee's report is supportive of the thrust of Government policy, particularly the general shift towards and emphasis on fire prevention. However, the Committee has expressed concerns about some aspects of the FiReControl project and the Government's leadership in respect of equality and diversity. We recognise these criticisms and set out our responses to these key areas below, before tackling each recommendation in detail.

2   FIRECONTROL

5.   The Government's first duty is to protect its citizens. The FiReControl project – a new network of nine resilient Regional Control Centres (RCCs) – will deliver major improvements in public safety by building stronger resilience locally, regionally and nationally. It will also improve the quality of service delivered to the public and help save more lives. The scale and nature of incidents that the FRS is called upon to respond to has increased over recent years, both as a result of terrorism and climate change. It is important to ensure that the FRS has the capacity to deal with any incident from house fires to national emergencies. DCLG has put in place a number of programmes to do this. The FiReControl project is a key part of that enhanced capability by providing the ability to effectively control and co-ordinate the mobilisation of FRS resources.

6.   At present, Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) in England run 46 separate control rooms which rely on a wide range of differing technologies and operational procedures. The gap between the most advanced and the least is stark, with many approaching the end of their useful lives. Moreover the existing control centres are stand-alone. They cannot readily step-in for each other when systems fail or in times of high demand, and they cannot deploy both specialist resilience equipment and core firefighting resources flexibly and efficiently across boundaries and over larger areas.

7.   Taken together the existing control centres do not meet modern operational requirements and are not purpose-built to respond to large-scale incidents, including natural disasters or terrorist attacks. A strategy for replacing them is essential: doing nothing is not an option.

8.   It is right that the Government is taking the lead in ensuring that the replacement programme is comprehensive, coherent and nationally co-ordinated. The FiReControl project meets these objectives very effectively and no viable and credible alternative has been put forward.

9.   In terms of the quality of local service delivery, FiReControl's RCCs will bring all FRSs up to the standard of the best current controls:

- The precise location of a member of the public calling by telephone for help (whether mobile or landline) will be identified automatically, saving time;
- The control room receiving the call will be a fully modern facility, supported by leading-edge technology and data-bases;
- Satellite positioning equipment will tell the control centre computers which fire appliance(s) is closest to the incident in terms of travel time, with the correct equipment on board;
- The control centre computer-aided systems will enable the control room staff to locate the nearest available appropriate resources and mobilise them instantly and automatically, using data-transmission, not voice messages;
- Firefighters mobilised to the incident will have data terminals in their vehicles. These will be constantly updated, giving them a wide range of information in a standard format, including:
    - A map showing the quickest route to the incident, taking into account the latest information on traffic conditions, road closures, etc (using SATNAV technology);
    - Details of known risks and hazards in the building and/or the locality;
    - Floorplans and access details, where appropriate;
    - the location of the nearest hydrants and water supplies;
    - relevant standard operating procedures for the type of incident concerned – e.g. how to deal with particular types of chemical or how to dismantle particular types of car.

10.   We already know that supporting the public and firefighters with this type of technology will save additional lives – a similar system already operational in Merseyside FRA has saved five lives that would previously have been lost in the first

three months of operation. Performance of the new system will exceed the current standards as defined by the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA). The FiReControl systems will ensure that 98 per cent of calls are answered within five seconds, even during abnormally busy times.

11. So, once the roll out of RCCs is complete, all FRAs will have access to functions currently available in only a few areas. But in addition to this, FiReControl will also deliver entirely new capabilities leading to significantly higher levels of resilience than possible under the current arrangements:

- appliances will be able to be deployed across existing boundaries, flexibly and efficiently, on a regional and cross-regional basis;
- the nine RCCs will be linked together in a national network. If one RCC fails, receives a very high level of calls or is attacked, it can automatically transfer calls to another RCC ensuring the continuity of quick and effective responses;
- to deliver this, common technology and systems of work will ensure that each RCC has the capability and information it would need to step in for any other RCC, not just its neighbours. It will be possible to mobilise appliances anywhere in England, if necessary;
- the RCC buildings are designed to be safe, secure and resilient (with no single points of failure).

12. It would be wrong to settle for less than this in safeguarding the public, especially in the light of the increased risk of terrorist attack such as the London bombings, the increased incidence of natural disasters such as the flooding in Carlisle, and exceptional incidents such as the fire at Buncefield. We are committed to investing significantly to achieve these improvements for such a critical public service.

13. RCCs will also be cheaper to run than the current arrangements. We estimate that once the system is fully operational there will be savings to the FRS of around 30 per cent compared with the costs of running 46 separate control rooms.

14. 999 calls are already routed through regional centres before going to emergency services controls and the London Fire Control Centre currently works on a regional basis. It is not possible to run any control room relying on the right person with appropriate knowledge being available at the right time. Instead control rooms rely on geographic technology – and we will be providing enhanced technology of this type in the new RCCs.

15. Both CFOA and the Local Government Association (LGA) have expressed their support for the FiReControl project and are involved in its implementation. The FiReControl project team also contains a significant number of highly committed and knowledgeable secondees from FRS, including those with control room experience. This, together with the other technical, operational and project management expertise within the project, puts it on the strongest basis to deliver.

16. We do nevertheless accept that whilst significant effort has been invested in communicating the service quality and public safety benefits of FiReControl the

impact has fallen short of what we were aiming for and much more needs to be done. We agree that a wide range of stakeholders must be engaged more fully if the project is to be successful and we are committed to doing this. Integral to this, we accept that information about the financial, organisational and operational consequences of the project needs to be more widely communicated.

17.   Much information has been provided since the Committee took its evidence. For example, we have published *Concept of Operations* – a concise overview of how the system will work. An FRS Circular has been issued, giving guidance on the proposed governance arrangements. The results of our analysis of "out of scope work" have been made available to FRSs and published on the website, and some detailed financial information has been circulated.

18.   We will publish a final version of the business case after contracts are signed with the IT suppliers at the end of this year or the beginning of next. The IT suppliers submitted their best and final offers on 14 September and we have used these to inform a draft version of the full business case which we will publish as soon as practicable. We will continue to make other detailed financial information available to the FRS as it becomes available.

19.   We have reviewed how better to engage more effectively, recognising that there are a range of stakeholders requiring different approaches and different types of information. We will:-

- hold more frequents meetings between Ministers and Regional Management Board (RMB) Chairs;
- hold further meetings with MPs to brief them on the progress of the project;
- work more closely with CFOA to spread understanding of the project;
- hold more regional seminars with elected Members;
- ensure that the project team engages fully with each FRS, so that staff can understand the path ahead.

20.   The Committee suggested that more consideration should have been given to the co-location of the controls of the three emergency services. Tri-service controls may be an option for the longer term but reports in 2000 and 2003 from independent consultants concluded that they could not be a practicable option at present. They concluded that merger of fire control rooms offered optimum cost savings and should be implemented before any move to tri-service controls was implemented. The tri-service pilots in Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Cleveland have shown that the three emergency services have very different business needs that are not easy to integrate. Where more than one emergency service is required to deal with an incident there currently exist arrangements, in all areas, to share information and co-ordinate the response regardless of which service takes the 999 call. The FiReControl project will build on this foundation in developing common practice; additionally the Firelink radio scheme will improve interoperability by allowing police, ambulance and the FRS at the same incident to communicate on a common radio talk group. Moving the entire FRS to common control procedures would make it easier to move to tri-service controls at some point in the future if that was decided to be appropriate.

21.   The Government's commitment to FiReControl has been reinforced by the successful implementation of similar initiatives in other countries. For example, the Swedish government uses similar facilities to those planned in FiReControl and has established a network of linked control centres. This system has been used successfully since 2004 and now covers all of Sweden. Similarly nationally scaled facilities are also in use by the German Federal Police who patrol and protect all airports, railways and federal borders. To deal with these demanding responsibilities they have successfully implemented similar mobilisation and communication facilities to those we expect to implement. The systems were put in place to meet the heightened needs generated by the World Cup Finals earlier this year.

22.   The Government is making a significant investment in FiReControl. This investment is essential, and for public safety reasons there was no alternative. RCCs are an important part of our civil resilience strategy, giving us for example the ability to respond effectively to terrorist attacks and other high impact emergencies. FiReControl will also enhance the capability of the FRS in dealing with every day incidents by giving all FRSs the full range of technology currently enjoyed only by the best. The end result will be faster mobilisation, better information for firefighters and therefore increased public safety.

23.   More detail about our future plans is set out in the responses to the individual recommendations below.

3.   EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

24.   The Government is strongly committed to developing a FRS which serves all communities to an equally high standard and itself reflects those communities through the diversity of its staff. The barriers to change are substantial in a FRS which was until recently largely unaffected by changes in local authorities and across the public sector. The culture of the FRS, one of the key barriers, has been perpetuated in part because of the low staff turnover in an overwhelmingly white male operational workforce. Promoting equality and diversity in this environment has often been extremely difficult and we pay tribute to those throughout the Service who have contributed so much to progress in recent years.

25.   The Government is committed to change on three fronts: changing the culture to one where equality and diversity are valued and respected; improving recruitment and retention from among those groups currently under-represented within the FRS; and increasing opportunities for development and progression.

26.   The groundwork has been done. We have:

- Amended the legislative framework to allow multi-level entry to the operational FRS, increasing opportunities for applicants from under-represented groups to enter the FRS directly at middle or senior management levels. This change has already started to increase representation of such groups at senior levels;
- Introduced the IPDS, which provides a modern, effective structure for development and progression within the FRS. Under the provisions of IPDS, an understanding of – and demonstrable support for – equality and diversity is a key requirement for progression, against which all staff are assessed;

- Supported the establishment of a Centre for Leadership which is helping the FRS to develop effective leaders at all levels of the organisation committed to equality and diversity;

- Designed a new process for the selection of firefighters, for use by all FRSs by April 2007, which will be fair, transparent and relevant to the job;

- Provided the FRS with detailed medical guidelines to support them in complying with the provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act both in recruitment and employment;

- Launched a successful campaign to encourage women of all backgrounds to think about the possibility of becoming firefighters. As a result of this campaign the London Fire Brigade has seen a record number of women applicants in its latest recruitment drive – 17 per cent as opposed to its previous record of 7 per cent; and

- Supported the development of a template and guidance on race equality schemes and impact assessment and the adaptation of the Local Government Equality Scheme for the FRS.

27.   We now need to accelerate the pace of change.

28.   We need to act urgently to improve diversity in the workforce and serve diverse communities better by reforming policy, procedures and practice. We are already working in partnership with the FRS employers, the LGA, CFOA and the employees' representative organisations.

29.   We will work with the Service and other stakeholders to develop a National Equality and Diversity Strategy against which all FRSs will be expected to report annually with details of the practical steps they have taken to promote equality and diversity. The work will be undertaken using project planning methodology, including a project board which will include representatives from CFOA and the LGA, and from wider stakeholder and advisory groups. In keeping with this Department's leading role on equality and diversity issues nationally we will ensure that the Strategy encompasses not only the requirements of current and impending legislation to promote race and gender equality but is also an exemplar on issues relating to the other major strands of diversity, i.e. disability, age, sexual orientation and religion. The National Strategy, which will be developed with the full involvement of FRS stakeholders and the Equality Commissions, will form a key component of the next edition of the Fire and Rescue National Framework in 2008 and will therefore inform future performance assessment measures implemented by the Audit Commission. We will publish an annual Equality and Diversity Report setting out a detailed analysis of progress against the Strategy by each FRA. This package of measures will require each FRS to review critically their current performance on equality and diversity, to determine how they can best meet the range of expectations set out in the Strategy, and to be publicly accountable for progress.

30.   To support the FRS in achieving the necessary culture change we will ensure that the review of the IRMP process currently taking place provides robust guidance on ensuring that equality and diversity issues are integral to the FRS planning process and that each IRMP is validated by effective equality impact assessment. In addition we will work through the new Centre for Leadership at the Fire Service

College to develop leaders at all levels who are committed to equality and diversity and embed it into all aspects of their role.

31.   The effectiveness of the National Strategy will be closely monitored and reviewed with the aim of determining whether further steps will be required to achieve our shared vision of a diverse and inclusive FRS.

32.   Again, further detail about our future plans is set out in the responses to the individual recommendations below.

4.   RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATIONS

GOVERNANCE AND FUNDING ARRANGEMENTS

Recommendation 1

Regional Management Boards, in the absence of the previously planned regional assemblies, are a confusing addition to the already complex governance and structural arrangements for the FRS. The FRS needs certainty over its future. The mixed messages from the ODPM on regionalisation, and the lack of consistency between its policy and those of the Departments responsible for the other emergency services, are fertile ground for those fearful of a hidden agenda. Further regionalisation of the FRS should not take place without full consultation with the relevant stakeholders and clear justification for its aims. (Paragraph 14 of the Select Committee Report)

Response

33.   The Government has noted the recommendations of the Select Committee on regionalisation of the FRS.

34.   The RMBs are essential to the delivery of FiReControl, and a number of RMBs have been working very effectively to that end. Angela Smith, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, met the Chairs of the RMBs in July, and reiterated that the Government will continue to work with them with a view to maximising the effectiveness of all RMBs and thus the FRS. There is an onus on all parties, including FRSs and FRAs, to contribute to that support.

35.   RMBs are joint committees established under local government legislation. Individual FRAs remain responsible for the disposition of fire stations and for employing firefighters in accordance with a local IRMP, and are accountable to their local electorates. It is a regional approach and not a 'regionalisation' of the FRS. Regionalisation implies the restructuring of the FRS into a regional service. The Government has made clear that it has no plans to regionalise the FRS. It expects FRAs to co-operate in the development of regional FiReControl centres and on regional resilience, and to work together through RMBs to deliver efficiencies in the same way as the rest of local government, ensuring that resources are concentrated on the front line.

36.   Government policy has been to encourage better joint working as a means to improved efficiency; and exploration of merger where there has been a local will to do so, supported by a robust business case.

Recommendation 2

We recommend that the Government fund fully from central resources any additional burdens on FRAs imposed as a result of the modernisation agenda which cannot be met through greater efficiency and other savings. (Paragraph 15)

Response

37.   The Government, under the 'New Burdens Principle', is committed to fully funding all New Burdens on local authorities – including FRAs.

38.   The 2004 spending review period has seen real increases in funding available to the FRS to support the modernisation process. General funding will have risen by 4.23%, 3.7%, 1.96% and 3.14% in the four years between 2004-05 and 2007-08. It is for individual authorities to decide how to apportion their budgets in the light of their IRMPs and the local community's views. The Annual Efficiency Statements show that many authorities are re-investing their efficiency gains in community safety work.

39.   In addition we have committed over £200m funding for the New Dimension programme; are bearing the cost of putting Firelink in place; in this financial year alone (2006-07) we have provided FRAs with £3.5 million of implementation funding for the FiReControl project; and we are investing up to £40 million on targeted community fire safety programmes, which includes dedicated funding to FRAs and government-led media campaigns.

40.   In addition to the significant additional funding we provide to FRAs, we have also made adjustments to the Fire Formula to better reflect the change in focus of the work of the FRS, such as in favour of fire prevention measures.

41.   We are now looking to the next spending review period, CSR07, and considering the further financial support necessary to embed the modernisation programme within FRAs, including the continuing costs of the New Dimensions equipment.

42.   The Fire and Rescue Service in England is currently on target to deliver its target of £105 million cashable efficiency gains by 2007/8. We believe further significant gains are achievable beyond this and will be working closely with the Service to support delivery

Recommendation 3

We recommend that the Government set a baseline against which the future performance of FiReBuy can be measured, drawing on international comparisons as appropriate. The sources for any data used should be clearly stated. Without such basic information, the Government's assertion that FiReBuy will result in savings on procurement will remain untested. (Paragraph 17)

Response

43.　Through the annual efficiency statements submitted by the FRAs to the DCLG it is possible to track the savings in procurement being made by FRAs. The 2005/06 returns that FRAs were required to submit in July 2006 will start to show savings made on purchases of smoke alarms, hand-held portable radios, vehicles and operational response equipment, manual handling software and e-procurement solutions as a result of the framework agreements Firebuy Ltd has already put in place. The savings will build gradually as FRAs make further purchases off these framework agreements and as Firebuy Ltd put further framework agreements in place, for example on insurance, clothing, vehicles and respiratory protection equipment. The returns form part of the overall Fire Efficiency target and are subject to scrutiny by the DCLG and the OGC efficiency panel.

44.　We will seek benchmarking information from each FRA by December 2006 on their fire and rescue equipment procurement spends for 2005/06 with the aim of setting a baseline. This is not a simple exercise as FRAs are not required to provide the DCLG with this information, and many do not hold fire specific procurement data and would have to undertake additional work to provide this data. We are already aware from the projects Firebuy Ltd are undertaking that spend on operational goods and services can be cyclical over periods of up to 10 years, so a one year snapshot may not give an accurate picture. We have already investigated whether international comparisons exist and have been unable to obtain data on fire specific procurement.

FIRECONTROL: REGIONAL CONTROL CENTRES

Recommendation 4

We recommend that the Government clarify the future role of the Interim National Coordination Centre, in particular in relation to RCCs. (Paragraph 21)

Response

45.　The Interim National Co-ordination Centre (iNCC) is a temporary body established to co-ordinate the deployment of specialist assets delivered under the New Dimension programme. It is a temporary measure, resourced to cope with major incidents until such time as a permanent centre can be established within the RCC network. The iNCC could not effectively co-ordinate the conventional fire service assets that would need to be deployed, in addition to New Dimension assets, in the event of a major incident.

46.　When the RCC network is established, one of the RCCs will be resourced to provide the National Co-ordination Centre (NCC) function (a further RCC will serve as a backup to the NCC). Unlike the iNCC, the RCC/NCC will not only be able to monitor and track the status of New Dimension resources, it will also be able to monitor, track and mobilise all other FRS resources, providing an extremely effective national mobilising and co-ordination capability. This will ensure that both New Dimension specialist assets and conventional FRS appliances are effectively deployed and co-ordinated across the country when requested in support of an affected authority/region.

Recommendation 5

The new technology that will be provided by FiReControl should allow operators to mobilise the fire-engine closest to the incident regardless of which brigade or service it is from, thus mitigating the risks of coordination across larger areas. (Paragraph 26)

Response

47.   We agree. This is a fundamental principle underlying the specification of the FiReControl IT system. We are working with CFOA and LGA to enhance the existing mutual assistance arrangements between FRSs to take maximum advantage of this way of working. The system is however flexible and can be configured so that it will enable individual FRAs' IRMPs to be delivered.

Recommendation 6

We are unconvinced that the Government can offer the assurance of maintained or improved service quality resulting from the FiReControl project and there is clearly widespread doubt across the FRS. If it can, we recommend it does so, and provides the evidence, immediately. (Paragraph 28)

Response

48.   FiReControl will bring concrete improvements in service quality. It is important to note that FiReControl will not fundamentally change the call handling process. Hence on the "average" call, where the caller can clearly state the address, and the nearest appliance is on station, little will change. What FiReControl can provide is the functionality to deal with a wide range of non-standard scenarios. Presently this functionality is enjoyed by only a few control rooms. In particular it will:

- enable the nearest appropriate appliance to be mobilised, even if even if the vehicle is not on station, or is across an FRS boundary;
- automatically identify the location of the caller - particularly useful if the caller does not know their location, or is prevented by language or disability from communicating;
- provide much more information (for example, maps, floorplans, hazards) to frontline firefighters through the mobile data terminals in vehicle cabs.

49.   The equipment in some control rooms already has this functionality, but in others the equipment cannot deliver this level of service and is reaching the end of its life. The system will bring improved service levels and save lives. In Merseyside, where a system similar to FiReControl has already been implemented, it is reckoned that in the first three months of operation five lives were saved that would previously have been lost. In addition to the step change in the quality of service that will be delivered every day, FiReControl will provide a resilient network of linked control centres which can deal with major emergencies.

50. We agree it is important that benefits are explicitly stated and measured. The processes that FiReControl will use are set out in the *Concept of Operations* document, produced with CFOA and available on our website www.firecontrol.communities.gsi.gov.uk. *Concept of Operations* identifies a number of benefits which we shall use to develop a baseline of present performance. This will enable us to measure the performance improvement achieved by RCCs.

51. We recognise that these benefits need to be better explained to some of our stakeholders and to the public. We are producing a document which highlights the key benefits, and the processes which will be used to deliver them. This should make clear the benefits to members of the public who rely on the FRS. This document will be available on the website.

Recommendation 7

We recommend that the Government ensure that the location of each RCC meets strict criteria on resilience. (Paragraph 29)

Response

52. We have done this. The locations for the RCCs were chosen by a fair and transparent process, carried out in accordance with European procurement guidelines. All sites had to meet published mandatory resilience criteria even to be considered for the later stages of the process. Elected members in each region were invited to take part in the final moderation meetings which chose the sites. With one exception this offer was accepted by the Chair of the appropriate RMB.

53. Meeting the guidelines involved posting a notice in the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU), a pre-qualification phase for developers and their sites, and then a tender in each region to a shortlist of developers.

54. At pre-qualification stage, the developers' sites were tested against strict security and resilience criteria, details of which were outlined in the initial OJEU notice. Some of those criteria were mandatory: if sites failed to meet them they were rejected outright. Other criteria were scored against a weighted scale.

55. The security and resilience criteria included:

- Risk from aircraft (mandatory) – the proximity of the site to areas that could be at risk from aircraft incidents;
- Risk from flooding (mandatory) – areas that could be at risk from flooding when considering flood plains and local mitigation measures;
- Demographics (mandatory) – proximity to areas with sufficient population to staff the RCCs;
- Accessibility – proximity to major roads and public transport;
- Proximity to IT communications – dual diverse routes to provide connectivity to tier one communications suppliers;
- Wireless communications – site not being located in an area that might restrict radio or microwave communication;
- Availability of services – availability of water, sewerage and drainage.

Recommendation 8

We are disappointed that the Government is unable to provide fuller details of duties that have been defined as out of scope. Removing some operations from control rooms should clearly result in savings in control room costs, but it is not clear where these operations will be transferred to, nor how the costs of the transfer and future operations will be met. There is no evidence to suggest any overall saving. As a result we, like many within the FRS, do not have full confidence in the Government's claim that FiReControl will achieve enhanced efficiency. We recommend that the Government complete its analysis of control room functions immediately and certainly before making further progress with the FiReControl project. (Paragraph 33)

Response

56.   The analysis of our survey of control room activities was completed in late February. A progress report was published in March and this is available on the FiReControl website www.firecontrol.communities.gsi.gov.uk. This analysis supports the view that RCCs will carry out activities more efficiently, without leaving FRAs with a heavy burden of activities that local control rooms used to perform.

57.   The analysis breaks down current activities into five different categories. We can use the categories to work out how current activities can best be fitted into the new arrangements. They are as follows.

- 'In scope' RCC: activities and processes that will be performed within the new RCCs, for example, resource management;
- 'In scope' FRS (data input to the RCC): activities and processes which are performed outside the RCC and which directly support the new control arrangements, for example, maintaining the gazetteer or updating contact lists;
- 'In scope' FRS (relies on data from the RCC): activities and processes which are performed outside the RCC and are supported by the RCC, e.g. provision of management information and statistics;
- 'In scope' FRS (no RCC interface): activities and processes which are set out or provided for in the FRS national framework as statutory duties and obligations, but have no direct dependency with the RCCs, e.g. management of community fire safety activity or reporting abandoned vehicles; and
- 'Out of scope': these processes are considered non-essential for the FRS and are outside the business case for FiReControl. For example, management of third party out of hours calls, maintenance of secondary control etc.

58.   Those activities that will be left with the FRS are expected to have relatively modest resource requirements, though every FRS is in a different position and currently uses its control room for different functions. We are discussing the transition arrangements with each FRS to help them to come up with an approach that suits their requirements.

Recommendation 9

We recommend that the 'end to end' testing of the technology include assessments of the likelihood of total systems failure nationwide. We further recommend that a resilient disaster recovery plan which addresses systems failure should be put in place. (Paragraph 37)

Response

59.   We agree. The business continuity plan that will be put in place will comprehensively address resilience, contingency and disaster recovery in the event of either partial or total technology failure at a regional or national level.

60.   Risk assessments will be developed that clearly identify and quantify the likelihood and effect of risks, threats and vulnerabilities that could result in partial or total technology failure. Test scenarios will be developed and implemented which replicate both partial and total technology failures both at a regional and national level and which exercise the business continuity plan.

Recommendation 10

We agree that it is difficult for FRAs to have certainty regarding the financial implications of the move to Regional Control Centres without a full business case which includes information on what costs will be borne by whom over what timescale. We recommend that Government provide a full breakdown of the costs implicit in the FiReControl project and identify which of these will be met by central Government and which it expects local authorities and FRSs to meet. Any cost overrun should be met by central Government. (Paragraph 39)

Response

61.   We accept that we need to provide full cost information.

62.   We have made it clear that the Government will meet the up-front costs of the FiReControl project. These costs are significant and relate mainly to the IT procurement, both hardware and software, and the system implementation. We will not know what these costs are until the contract has been placed with the IT supplier. We have already made some cost information available to FRAs – for example, that relating to the rental charges for the new RCC buildings – and we will be able to provide more later in the Autumn.

63.   We published Fire Circular 63-2005 in December 2005 which set out the funding arrangements for financial year 2006-07 and 2007-08. A copy is available on the FiReControl website www.firecontrol.communities.gsi.gov.uk. The circular was developed in consultation with our finance working group, which includes regional FRS treasurers.

64.   The circular recognises that FiReControl will impose some New Burdens on local authorities, and commits the Government to meeting them. It identifies the items that we will pay for and those that local authorities will fund. At the same time, it states that we will provide additional support to FRSs in the event that the costs are greater than currently envisaged.

Recommendation 11

We note that the Government is consulting on the governance arrangements for RCCs and recommend that the final outcome, while seeking to achieve consensus among stakeholders, gives clarity on how FRAs are to retain their legal responsibilities within a framework giving clear direction to the RCC. (Paragraph 42)

Response

65.   We have completed further consultation on governance. Following previous consultation with all FRAs, ministers concluded that the preferred form of governance for RCCs should be a local authority controlled company model. The company would be controlled collectively by all FRAs within the region. The most recent consultation was on the details of the company structure. We have now analysed the consultation responses, and issued FRS Circular 44-2006 giving non-mandatory guidance to FRAs and RMBs on how companies should be formed.

66.   The model proposed in the circular allows for a high degree of local flexibility. FRAs will be completely free to decide who sits on the board in their region, and to work out how costs and voting rights ought to be apportioned between them. Where decisions had to be made at national level, the circular reflects the majority view expressed in the consultation.

67.   We agree that RCCs and FRAs must have clarity about their legal responsibilities. The FiReControl Legal Working Group (including lawyers representing each of the regions) has done a considerable amount of work on these issues. It is proposed, for example, that the RCCs will have a contract with each FRA setting out the performance standards they need to meet. This contract will act to ensure that statutory duties are met. Statutory duties on FRAs regarding control services are currently very limited. FRAs are required to "make arrangements for dealing with calls for help and for summoning personnel". Given that each FRA will be represented on the company board, and that FRAs will have a common interest in seeing this function discharged satisfactorily, they should have the means to hold RCCs to account.

Recommendation 12

The Government should provide the FRS with all the non-commercial information of the latest full business case for FiReControl immediately. Information on the full business case should follow as soon as possible consistent with commercial considerations. This will ensure that the final decision is informed by the knowledge of those expected to operate within the new structure and help build confidence in the new arrangements. (Paragraph 44)

Response

68.   We agree, and will release a draft full business case in September 2006 on the FiReControl website www.firecontrol.communities.gsi.gov.uk. The final full business case will follow when we have agreed the infrastructure services/technology contract.

69.   We have already provided the project's Finance Working Group (containing representatives of all regions) with the key non-commercial assumptions from our business case.

Recommendation 13

We consider that achieving a common location for command controls for the three emergency services would facilitate greater collaboration in responding to incidents. It is disappointing that the Government has missed the opportunity to further increase resilience through co-location of control rooms as part of the FiReControl project. (Paragraph 49)

Response

70.   Consultants (Mott MacDonald) were asked to look at the option of tri-service controls, as well as the integration of fire control rooms. Their report, *The Future of Fire and Rescue Control Rooms in England and Wales*, published in 2003, recommended the nine centres as the best option in the post-9/11 period. Tri-service pilots have shown that the three emergency services have very different business needs. This makes it very challenging to deliver genuinely integrated tri-service controls in the short and medium term.

71.   However, RCCs will learn the valuable lessons on joint working that arise from the pilots. In the longer term, it is possible that tri-service control centres might prove to be more viable, and we would review our policy at that time.

Recommendation 14

The fact that the FRS has not been given enough information about the detail, particularly the financial detail, of FiReControl, is at the heart of the opposition to the project. The absence of information means that fire authorities and representative bodies cannot give unqualified support as they are unconvinced that the aims of enhanced resilience and efficiency will be achieved. There are considerable risks associated with the project, identified in our evidence and in the ODPM's own business case. We consider the greatest of these to be the opposition to the project from the FRS itself. For FiReControl to have any hope of success, the Government should obtain greater support from the FRS. This can only be achieved through provision of greater information on both the project specifics and long-term plans for the structure of the FRS. The Government should also better communicate to the FRS that the FiReControl project is based on the findings of past reviews of the FRS, notably the 2003 Mott MacDonald Report. (Paragraph 50)

Response

72.   We agree with the Committee's view that we need to communicate better with the FRS to ensure that the project's objectives are clear and that stakeholders in the project are fully engaged.

73.   We need to be more open, and recognise that everyone wants to be re-assured that the project will be operationally effective. Control staff will want to know what the impact will be on their job, and their terms and conditions. Chief Officers and elected members need to know how they can ensure that the new centres meet their needs. They should have access to detailed information on how the project will work in practice.

74.   We have already put considerable effort into communications and engaging stakeholders. We have also put a lot of information into the public domain. For example, we have released business case assumptions to the Finance Working Group and will publish a draft version of the Full Business Case in the autumn. In responding to the governance consultation, we have listened to FRA concerns, and suggested a solution involving a high degree of local flexibility while retaining a sense of the network's unity.

75.   But we recognise that we have not won the hearts and minds of all stakeholders and must redouble our efforts. As the Committee points out, we need to explain that the project was based on the independent 2003 Mott MacDonald report, which concluded that RCCs were the best approach for reasons of resilience and efficiency. We will publish new material that explains better the improvement in service quality that FiReControl will bring. We will provide more financial information as it becomes available. We are examining how we have engaged with stakeholders so far, establishing what has worked well and what could be done better and developing a revised plan to improve our effectiveness.

FIRELINK

Recommendation 15

We welcome the attempts made by the Government to integrate FiReControl and FireLink, but also note that integration of the two projects will mean that FireLink will be subject to the same risks as FireControl. (Paragraph 53)

Response

76.   Firelink and FiReControl are complex projects and unavoidably their implementation will be attended by risks within and between the projects. For this reason project alignment has been a central feature of planning in relation to the definition of scope of phasing. It is further recognised that the detailed migration path for each FRS will have to be tailored to the precise local circumstances and the need to maintain operational effectiveness. Programme governance and management arrangements have been strengthened and further integrated in preparation for the implementation phase, supported by systems for risk management and mitigation. We have also appointed a Programme Integration Manager with expertise in systems integration to oversee this critical area of work.

Recommendation 16

We recommend that the Government communicate to the FRS the assurance that it gave us, namely that any additional costs incurred by the FRS as a result of slippage on the FireLink project will be met by central Government. (Paragraph 54)

Response

77.   We continue to take action to safeguard existing FRS wide area radio systems by replacing elements of existing systems which are at a high risk of failure prior to replacement by Firelink.

78.   There should be no net additional costs to FRAs as a result of any slippage. However, should FRAs consider there are additional costs we will consider any case presented to us.

Recommendation 17

It is essential that the Government learn from the experience of both the FRAs and other emergency services that have already migrated to the new technology. This will help to avoid repetition of difficulties involving technical teething problems and project specifications. (Paragraph 57)

Response

79.   The three primary emergency services have slightly differing wide area communication needs. However, where lessons come to light which have a potential impact on the FRS use of the system, we have and will continue to endeavour to learn from them.

80.   The Firelink project team has engaged with both Lancashire and Shropshire FRSs to understand better the challenges they have faced with their early introduction to the O$_2$ Airwave system. This has helped the team put in place appropriate action plans to avoid or reduce the impact of such challenges for Firelink rollout.

Recommendation 18

We recommend that the Government address the need for upgraded fire-ground technology to enhance resilience and the safety of fire-fighters. This should be done as part of the FireLink project. (Paragraph 59)

Response

81.   The Firelink wide area radio system will provide a mobilising radio link from a fire control room to a fire vehicle (appliances and officers cars), with the purpose of getting resources to the scene of an incident and receiving reports from the incident commander. These radios are fixed in vehicles. In line with the wishes of the FRS at the time the Firelink system was specified, Firelink will also provide interoperability at silver and gold command levels across the emergency services.

82.   Existing fireground communications use a different technology which has been standardised across the country for some years. The system allows same-service interoperability across Great Britain. This provides hand-held radios and includes functionality such as breathing apparatus communication links. It also operates on the London Underground.

83.   The Firelink contract will allow the FRAs to purchase hand-held radio coverage under the call-off framework contract arrangements as required. FRAs are already funded for their needs, including communications, through the revenue support grant.

PREVENTION AND RISK ASSESSMENT

Recommendation 19

We recommend that the impact and adequacy of Integrated Risk Management Plans is assessed on a nationwide basis. (Paragraph 62)

Response

84.   We agree that an assessment of the impact and adequacy of IRMPs needs to be undertaken. The national IRMP Steering Group comprises DCLG and all key stakeholders including employer and employee associations, commerce, industry, insurance, and community organisations. We will ask the Steering Group to oversee this assessment as part of the work recently commissioned by the Group to develop arrangements for the monitoring and review of the outcomes of IRMPs locally, regionally and nationally, including the development of a robust quality assurance methodology and performance analysis tool.

Recommendation 20

We recommend that the Government provide guidance to the FRS on priorities between local and regional planning and stipulates clearly how IRMPs should reflect those priorities. (Paragraph 63)

Response

85.   Work is already in hand to produce a detailed, quantified vision and strategy for IRMP and its outcomes for the next 3-5 years. This work will include:

- developing a vision and framework for IRMPs; and
- collaborative research to underpin and drive forward IRMP, including longer-term horizon scanning work.

86.   Specifically, the work will consider how the interactions between local, regional and national planning should be reflected by FRSs in the context of their individual IRMPs, and guidance will be issued accordingly.

Recommendation 21

We recommend that the government ensure that, in future, publication of the National Framework is co-ordinated with FRAs' planning processes. (Paragraph 64)

Response

87.   We agree with this recommendation in principle. Co-ordination with FRAs' planning processes is clearly desirable and we shall endeavour, for future editions, to co-ordinate publication of the National Framework with authorities' planning cycles. However, in preparing the Framework, the Government has a number of considerations to balance, including the currency and accuracy of the Framework. This is particularly challenging as the Framework moves to a longer lifespan, something that FRAs have universally welcomed. We will therefore balance these considerations, and as far as possible co-ordinate the publication of the National Framework with FRAs' planning processes.

Recommendation 22

We welcome the recent announcement that the Government will continue to provide grant funding to support prevention work until 2008. (Paragraph 65)

Response

88.   The £11.4m Fire Prevention Grant is specifically intended to support measures to reduce fire death and injury.

89.   This new programme will fund all English FRAs for 2006/07 and 2007/08 in their fire prevention work, including community fire safety, arson reduction and work with children and young people.

Recommendation 23

We welcome the postponement of the commencement of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2006 as a sensible precaution to allow thorough preparation. We recommend that the Government monitor the implementation of the Order, and assess its impact on a regular basis. (Paragraph 67)

Response

90.   The Government accepts this recommendation. We have reviewed and revised the statistical information we will be collecting from the FRSs to reflect the change in the law. Data collected will include the level of enforcement activity as well as details of contraventions and the types of enforcement activity undertaken. In addition we are setting a best value performance indicator for the number of fires occurring in non-domestic premises. This reflects the prevention based ethos of the new regime and the FRS. We will also be working with CFOA on other monitoring such as compliance surveys.

Recommendation 24

We strongly recommend that the DfES require sprinkler systems in all new and renovated schools. (Paragraph 69)

Response

91.   The Government recognises the potential benefits of sprinklers in schools where the risks of fire are considered to be high. That is why following public consultation DfES is currently revising Building Bulletin 100 (BB100) *Designing and Managing Against the Risk of Fire in Schools* which addresses those aspects of designing fire safety into schools that fall within the locus of Part B (Fire safety) of the Building Regulations (i.e. health and safety of people) and those that do not, such as property protection which is the prime impact of fire in schools. BB100 will now include a new risk assessment tool as well as a whole life cost model which will determine the true costs of sprinkler installation. DfES hope to publish BB100 later this year.

Recommendation 25

There is no evidence to suggest that the rescue role of the FRS function has been compromised by increased emphasis on prevention and risk assessment. If successful, prevention may lead to further efficiency savings as fewer fires would need to be attended. We recommend that the Government monitor the impact of diverting resources to fire prevention on FRS activity in other areas. (Paragraph 71)

Response

92.   We agree with the Committee's view that there is no evidence to suggest that the rescue role of the FRS function has been compromised by increased emphasis on prevention and risk assessment. We have not been presented with any evidence to suggest that FRAs are preparing their IRMPs other than in accordance with their responsibilities to determine policies and standards for prevention and intervention in the light of risks identified. However, we shall ask the IRMP Steering Group to monitor the impact as part of the assessment to be undertaken in respect of recommendation 19.

CIVIL RESILIENCE

Recommendation 26

We recommend that the Government give urgent consideration as to how the Integrated Risk Management Plans may be better linked to planning for major catastrophic incidents. (Paragraph 74)

Response

93.   Work previously undertaken for the IRMP Steering Group identified that there are many activities and initiatives underway that will have a significant impact on the development of IRMPs at a national, regional and local level. The IRMP Steering Group has therefore recently approved a further package of work which will see greater collaboration and multi-agency working on a national scale, including with the Cabinet Office and the Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS). This will assist in promoting a consistent and robust approach to risk management across government as well as better linking IRMPs and planning for major catastrophic incidents. As part of this package of work, risk assessments underpinning IRMP and planning for major incidents are being brought together and tools and techniques will be harmonised. Early deliverables should be:

- Guidance on the scope of IRMP and the Civil Contingencies Act;
- Development of common terminology for emergency responders; and
- Development of common terminology for risk assessments.

Recommendation 27

We recommend that the Government conduct a review of civil resilience equipment requirements across England in light of the experience of the July 2005 attacks on London. (Paragraph 77)

Response

94.   The Government keeps its resilience requirements under constant review. In July 2001 the Government set up the Capabilities Programme managed by the CCS in the Cabinet Office. This cross-Departmental programme of work is designed to assess and build response readiness to a range of disruptive events that could occur in England (and in some cases the UK). The CCS produces an annual national risk assessment on which the planning assumptions of the Capabilities Programme are based. From these flow the planning assumptions for our New Dimension programme.

95.   The New Dimension *Concept of Operations* document sets out these New Dimension planning assumptions and also the response targets expected of the FRS once the full capability has been delivered. These assumptions and targets are reviewed annually in line with the updated National Risk Assessment, lessons learnt from exercises and any live incidents. This ensures that the response capability of the FRSs remains sufficient to meet its resilience objectives.

Recommendation 28

The failure of Government to include an element of collaboration, or at least co-location, in its model of Regional Control Centres represents a missed opportunity for civil resilience. (Paragraph 79)

Response

96.   As noted at above in response to Recommendation 13, tri-service pilots have indicated that it would be very difficult to deliver genuinely integrated tri-service controls in the short and medium term. However, in the longer term it is possible that tri-service control centres might prove to be more viable. The matter will be kept under review.

Recommendation 29

We recommend that the Government encourage greater use of mutual aid agreements by FRAs to further enhance resilience. (Paragraph 80)

Response

97.   The Government supports and promotes FRA participation in mutual assistance arrangements. Whilst the Fire and Rescue Service Act 2004 preserves local autonomy for FRAs to participate in such arrangements voluntarily, the Government has done the following to promote their participation:

- Published an FRS Circular on 30 May 2006 giving general information for FRAs about mutual assistance arrangements. Drafted in collaboration with CFOA, it:
  – proposes activities which mutual assistance arrangements can cover;

  – describes the types of arrangements available under the 2004 Act; and

  – includes a model agreement for FRAs to use and adapt according to their individual needs and circumstances.

- Invited FRAs to participate in a national mutual aid protocol for serious incidents (issued on 20 July 2006). Produced in close consultation with CFOA and the Fire Lawyers Network, the protocol:
  - takes account of the new Fire and Rescue Service National Coordination Centre (FRSNCC) located in West Yorkshire, and
  - sets out the terms under which FRAs can support each other during major incidents such as a terrorist attack.

It is hoped that as many FRAs as possible will agree to participate by the end of September.

98.   We shall monitor the level of FRA participation in mutual assistance arrangements in the light of the above, exploring options to remove any potential barriers which prevent FRA participation.

PEOPLE MANAGEMENT

Recommendation 30

We consider that it is necessary to make a distinction between uniformed and non-uniformed staff as the need to increase diversity amongst non-uniformed staff is less pressing. A diversity target covering the entire workforce could take the pressure off FRAs to increase diversity amongst uniformed staff. (Paragraph 86)

Response

99.   In considering the approach to setting race employment targets in 1999 and gender targets in 2000, the Home Office considered the effect that might accrue from having overall workforce targets; hence the decision to set separate race targets for uniformed and non-uniformed staff and to set gender targets only for the operational sector of the workforce.

100.   One of the key FRS drivers for diversity is a reduction in fire deaths through effective community safety engagement with hard-to-reach groups and this is achieved in many cases through operational staff. However, this is far from the entire story as many other sections of the workforce play a vital role in this engagement, from non-operational fire safety officers, community advocates (as used for example in Merseyside FRS) and control room operators who usually have first contact in the case of an emergency.

101.   All FRS staff play a role in community engagement, providing the FRS with credibility and profile within minority communities. Whilst women are well represented within the fire control and non-uniformed sections of the workforce, those from minority ethnic backgrounds are not and it is vital to recognise the importance of diversity across all parts of the organisation. These issues will be explored in the proposals for the new employment target strategy which will be subject to a full three month consultation with stakeholders. The proposal is to ensure that all six strands of diversity (i.e. age, disability, ethnicity, gender, religion and sexual orientation) are included in the new strategy. It will be important to ensure that the targets are sufficiently stretching to encourage FRSs to make meaningful changes to the way they encourage, support and promote diversity in their own organisations.

Recommendation 31

It is important that the Government set both national targets and Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) which are consistent, making it clear exactly what is required of FRAs. The Government needs to reiterate that the national target for ethnic minorities relates to the entire fire service workforce, not just operational uniformed staff. The national target should be supported by separate BVPIs which distinguish between uniformed, non-uniformed, operational and non-operational staff. While it is important that the Government does not devalue, or appear to devalue, any particular section of the workforce and that its diversity strategies and targets apply to every area within the Fire and Rescue Service, the distinction between uniformed and non-uniformed staff needs to be retained in order to focus the attention and activity of FRAs. (Paragraph 87)

Response

102.   We refer the Select Committee to the Government's response to Recommendation 30. The issues raised within Recommendation 31 will be considered as part of the consultation process in formulating the new employment target strategy.

Recommendation 32

We recommend that redundancies should not be contemplated until every avenue for re-deployment has been explored. (Paragraph 89)

Response

103.   This recommendation relates to control room staff. We agree that every effort should be made to avoid redundancy of these staff when their jobs transfer to the RCCs. We have already recommended that FRAs fully explore re-deployment opportunities for those staff unable to transfer. We have recommended that any staff who cannot transfer to the RCC are put formally 'at risk of redundancy' within their current organisation which will enable them to benefit from redeployment opportunities. We are also recommending that any redundancies should be made by the existing employers (the FRAs) rather than by the RCCs because that should maximise the chance of finding other jobs for these staff within the FRS. The alternative approach would be to transfer all staff automatically to the new organisation under TUPE (Transfer of Undertaking, Protection of Employment, the regulations which protect staff terms and conditions during such a transfer). That would leave those unable to take up a position, or without a position, with no option but to be made redundant.

104.   As the Committee comments, this is a significant opportunity for the Service to increase its diversity by appointing capable experienced women to posts they would otherwise not have reached. However, final decisions concerning redeployment and redundancies will be made by the employers, not the Government.

Recommendation 33

We recommend that in future, a Fire Authority should not receive a Comprehensive Performance Assessment rating higher than good unless it can demonstrate that significant progress, in line with any revised Government targets, has been made on diversity issues generally and within the workforce in particular. (Paragraph 90)

Response

105.   Decisions on categorisation of FRAs within the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) Framework are a matter for the Audit Commission.

Recommendation 34

We are disappointed and dismayed at the lack of progress that has been made on diversity within the FRS and particularly at the Government's half-hearted and ineffective leadership on the issue. We recommend that the Government immediately (i) establish support groups for the Diversity Happens forum; (ii) reappoint a national adviser of equality and diversity for the FRS; and (iii) implement the long-promised new selection tests for fire-fighters. We further recommend that the Government conduct a thorough review of its diversity policy and initiatives relating to the Fire and Rescue Service, reporting within the next 18 months. We also recommend that the Government, within two years, publish and promulgate a nationwide strategy for promoting diversity within the Fire and Rescue Service that takes into account the experiences and expertise of all stakeholders. (Paragraph 92)

Response

106.   Progress with developing a FRS which provides an excellent service to all communities equally and is fully representative of our diverse society has been unacceptably slow. Cultural change is essential to the development of the FRS in achieving these expectations, making it both an employer of choice among currently under-represented groups, and a first class service provider protecting lives and livelihoods in every community.

107.   We have undertaken a number of key initiatives to provide guidance, leadership and support to the FRS in changing its culture and meeting its statutory duties.

108.   Many of the selection procedures formerly used by the FRS, either directly or indirectly, imported bias into the process, for example by attaching unnecessarily high standards to the physical tests, excluding many women and men. The new Firefighter Selection Process, which will be used by all FRSs by April 2007, tests only characteristics relevant to the role and will make the Service accessible to a wider range of applicants. The new process also requires all applicants to demonstrate that they both understand and are committed to diversity.

109.   Changes have been made to the legislative framework to allow multi-level entry to the operational FRS. Applicants from under-represented groups are now able to enter directly at middle or senior management levels rather than having to work their way up from the role of firefighter, as previously. We have also provided FRSs with detailed medical guidelines to support them in complying with the

provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act both in recruitment and employment.

110. The IPDS has been introduced to provide an effective structure for development and progression. Under the IPDS, an understanding of, and demonstrable support for, equality and diversity is a key requirement for progression, against which all staff are assessed.

111. Very few women or people from ethnic minorities currently apply to join the FRS. In May 2006 we launched a successful high-profile advertising campaign to raise awareness among women, including ethnic minority women, of a career as a firefighter. Over 1500 women have contacted DCLG directly to find out more about a career as a firefighter. Many others have gone direct to their local FRS for more information and FRSs which were recruiting during the campaign period have seen a significant increase in the number of applications from women. London Fire Brigade, which has never previously been able to attract more than seven per cent of women applicants, saw an increase to 17 per cent.

112. We will work with stakeholders including FRS employers, LGA, CFOA and the employees' representative organisations to develop a vision of the future of the FRS, with equality and diversity at the heart of its culture, policies, practices and planning processes, and with staff which reflect the communities it serves. By the end of 2008 we will publish a national Equality and Diversity Strategy which will set out that vision and give clear guidance on how the Service and local FRSs should be working to achieve it. The strategy will include a wider range of employment targets to drive progress in achieving greater diversity within their workforce. We propose that progress against the Strategy is reported annually, including qualitative and quantitative data on each FRS, e.g. information on the steps they are taking to increase diversity and how this is translating into their recruitment retention and progression statistics. We will seek to make much fuller use of the knowledge and good practice available beyond the fire world. We will draw on the expertise of the Women and Equality Unit (formerly DTI) and the Race Faith and Communities Directorate (formerly Home Office) which have now been incorporated in DCLG. We will work closely with all the national equalities bodies (EOC, DRC and CRE).

113. We have undertaken research to identify how other organisations e.g. the police, prison and ambulance services have developed their diversity strategies to encourage women to apply and remain within their organisations. To build on the this work we will shortly be undertaking further research to identify the key factors affecting the retention and progression of women firefighters in collaboration with key FRS stakeholders and with the support of the Equal Opportunities Commission.

114. We are already developing fast-track and multi-tier entry schemes in order to create a more diverse leadership group, through the work of the FRS Centre for Leadership, established at the Fire Service College in 2005. The Centre's remit will focus on the creation of leaders at all levels within the Service who embrace and champion diversity from first line management to elected members.

115. It will:

- train and develop first line managers to embed behavioural and cultural change across the FRS;
- raise awareness of elected members to remove perceived barriers at the political level; and
- provide networking, good practice and peer review on diversity for all senior leaders.

116. Views within the Service are mixed on some of these proposals, particularly those relating to access to senior positions, and there are resource implications which have yet to be quantified.

117. The Strategy will be included in the next version of the National Framework and therefore form part of national performance expectations informing the Audit Commission's performance assessment framework for the FRS. We are looking at how further to strengthen the message that FRAs and CFOs will be judged in the future on their performance on equality and diversity.

118. Development of the Strategy will include

- a full review of diversity policy and initiatives, as recommended by the Committee;
- analysis of existing diversity in the workforce across all levels of the service and all sectors (uniform, non uniform, retained and whole time); and
- the appointment of a national equality and diversity advisor.

119. We will also review stakeholder engagement on diversity. Much good work has been done through the Diversity Happens Programme Board and other stakeholder groups, but the Board has not effectively driven change. We will be seeking to establish a new framework which will support development and implementation of the Strategy.

Recommendation 35

If Retained Liaison Officers (RLOs) are to have any effect, they must be given adequate information and training and should consult with colleagues in the retained service. (Paragraph 95)

Response

120. The Government agrees with the Committee's view that, in order to carry out their role effectively, retained liaison officers must be given the necessary training and information and that engagement with colleagues in the retained section of the service is vital. The report of the Retained Review Team envisaged that this would be best achieved by engaging Retained Duty System (RDS) staff to carry out this role.

121. We are aware that some FRSs have already appointed officers from their RDS workforce to fulfil this role (for example, Shropshire and Cheshire FRSs). In addition, several FRSs involve their RDS personnel in policy development. As an example of good practice, Northamptonshire have comprehensively reviewed all

aspects of the RDS using RDS personnel as key members of the review team. They have subsequently fundamentally restructured the FRS to provide an infrastructure and systems more supportive to RDS.

Recommendation 36

We recommend the Government ensure that retained firefighters are recognised as a vital bridge between the FRS and the communities they serve; their status should be enhanced by greater involvement in planning systems, for example with seats on the National Joint Council, and a clear role in fire planning, particularly in rural areas. (Paragraph 100)

Response

122. The Government values the contribution made by RDS personnel and recognises their vital role in protecting our communities. The Retained Review recommended that RDS should be involved in a wider range of roles including providing input into policy making, which would include issues such as those proposed by the Committee. The Government remains committed to seeing a more representative National Joint Council and we understand that negotiations are now making progress and will be discussed again by the NJC in late September.

Recommendation 37

We recommend that the Government provide a clear indication of the reforms it intends to be implemented affecting the Retained Service, including target dates for key benchmarks and completion. (Paragraph 101)

Response

123. The Government sees the implementation of the Retained Review's recommendations as the way forward for achieving effective integration of RDS personnel into the workforce and ensuring full recognition of their contribution in meeting the needs of our communities.

124. In leading the review of the RDS the Government made clear its commitment to cultural change within the FRS. However, the necessary steps to make this change happen must be taken by the Service itself.

125. CFOA, with support from DCLG and other stakeholders, is taking forward the issue of the implementation of the recommendations which came out of the Retained Review. CFOA will be submitting a paper to the Practitioners' Forum in the Autumn, with proposals as to how this can be achieved, which will include a project plan for implementation.

126. Since the publication of the Retained Review report a number of local projects have been developed and implemented across the FRS. We are capturing the emerging good practice to gain a better understanding of what is happening currently and how it can work with the FRS to enable delivery against the report's recommendations.

127.   To drive forward the process of change, DCLG and CFOA have jointly organised a two-day workshop in September for RDS champions and practitioners. This will discuss the potential solutions to the recruitment and retention difficulties; encourage innovation in meeting those challenges, and determine how an effective, ongoing mechanism can be established for sharing good practice. A DCLG-commissioned report of the key findings emerging from the workshop will be used as the platform for a seminar for senior FRS managers and elected members which CFOA, with support from DCLG, will hold in November 2006.

128.   To support FRSs in developing local recruitment strategies aimed at the business community, we recently published a report on the findings of the first national survey of RDS personnel profiling their main employment status and how those occupations are balanced with their availability to work for the FRS.

129.   To augment that study, and to provide further support to FRSs, we are now commissioning additional research to examine the motivational factors that prompt primary employers to release their staff for RDS duties and what benefits they gain from employing RDS firefighters. The research will also establish why some employers are unwilling to release staff. The project will be completed by Spring 2007.

Recommendation 38

The Government will be consulting on introducing initiatives to improve the quality of leadership; this should be done sooner rather than later. (Paragraph 102)

Response

130.   A Centre for Leadership has been established at the Fire Service College as part of the Learning and Development Strategy. As part of the ongoing process of development and improvement, the Government has already consulted with interested parties on Leadership and Development in the FRS (FRS Circular 61-2005). The Centre for Leadership is focussing on the following key deliverables for 2006-2007:

- Developing a leadership model for the FRS;
- Establishing a network of leadership champions across the FRS;
- Designing and developing a leadership toolkit based on the new leadership model;
- Developing a coaching culture throughout the FRS;
- Implementing a Chief Fire Officer/Principal Officer Development Programme;
- Providing an Executive Leadership Programme for strategic leaders;
- Delivering a series of improvement workshops for elected member development;
- The development of professional management in the FRS;
- Establishing a Chartered Manager Advisory Centre for FRS;
- A review of the National Incident Command System; and
- Development of strategic command and control training and assessment.

131.   As part of its governance arrangements, the work of the Centre for Leadership is managed by a Project Board, with support and guidance from a Stakeholder Panel with wide representation, including CFOA, the National School of Government, the Improvement and Development Agency, the Leadership Centre for Local Government, LGA and academia.

Recommendation 39

We recommend that the Government regularly review the FRAs' attitude towards the Integrated Personal Development System scheme to ensure that it is not viewed as merely a bureaucratic and burdensome exercise. (Paragraph 103)

Response

132.   IPDS is a competency-based approach that enables training and development to be targeted to the needs of the FRS and of individuals within the Service. IPDS has the potential to be a very cost-effective way of improving service delivery and the evidence is that many FRAs are using it very successfully.

133.   IPDS also provides the Service with a modern framework for managing the performance of staff (rather than using systems based on examinations and time served). This will help the Service become more effective, more efficient and a safer place to work. It will also support the Service's push for greater diversity within its workforce.

134.   IPDS originated with the Service and has since been developed in partnership with DCLG. It is recognised that the Service still needs to be supported in fully implementing IPDS so DCLG is continuing to fund (until December 2007) an IPDS stewardship team, based at the Fire Service College to help support the Service in this. The team, which is directed by a project board comprising representatives of the key FRS stakeholders, will as part of its remit continue to identify and disseminate good practice and to update guidance to reflect the experience of the Service as it works through IPDS implementation.

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT AND MANAGEMENT

Recommendation 40

We welcome the introduction of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment for the Fire and Rescue Service. We note its usefulness in highlighting areas where improvements are required. (Paragraph 108)

Response

135.   The Government welcomes the Committee's praise for CPA for the FRS. It has been a useful tool for driving modernisation and improvement within the FRS and for highlighting areas where there is still more to do.

136.   Fire CPA has provided all FRAs with a baseline for improvement. We believe improvement planning, following CPA, has been embraced by the Service and all authorities should now have a robust improvement plan in place, in many cases as an integral part of their overall planning processes. DCLG has been working hard to support authorities through this process. In particular, those authorities receiving a "weak" or "poor" assessment in CPA have been provided with additional support

through the DCLG Support Team. DCLG is also leading work to help identify notable practice following CPA, publishing a series of case studies jointly with CFOA and the LGA, to stimulate FRAs to share their experiences and approaches on a range of performance and efficiency issues.

137.   The Audit Commission's Direction of Travel assessment, which will be reported in March 2007, should provide FRAs with an assessment of their progress towards improvement since the Fire CPA results. This will be an opportunity for authorities to take stock of their improvement to date and to revisit and refresh their plans to address any outstanding areas for improvement. The Commission will then consider whether it is appropriate to re-categorise some authorities in 2007.

Recommendation 41

We welcome the plans for the independent operational assessment of fire authorities to be carried out next summer. The proposed assessment should be conducted by the Audit Commission and combined with the current CPA to minimise the audit burden on FRAs. (Paragraph 109)

Response

138.   The Government welcomes the Committee's support for the introduction of an operational assessment of the FRS in 2006. The proposed operational assessment will form one of the components of the Audit Commission's Service Assessment of the FRS to be conducted in 2006/7. At the Audit Commission's request, we will conduct the operational assessment in 2006. The operational assessment comprises a self-assessment by each FRA against an operational toolkit produced by CFOA and Her Majesty's Fire Service Inspectorate (HMFSI); followed by a review of those self-assessments conducted by teams of fire service professionals seconded to DCLG specifically for this purpose. We consulted FRAs on the toolkit and refined it as a result of their comments. The Service, like the Committee, broadly welcomed the introduction of the operational assessment and the peer review approach adopted by DCLG.

139.   We will pass the results from the operational assessment exercise to the Audit Commission which will combine them with an assessment of key performance information to produce a scored judgement for all FRAs in February 2007. The Service Assessment forms one component of a package of performance assessment measures for FRAs proposed by the Commission in 2006/7. In addition to the Service Assessment the Commission will conduct a Use of Resources audit of each FRA examining financial management and value for money and a Direction of Travel Assessment examining progress since Fire CPA in 2006/7. These proposals have been consulted on by the Audit Commission and the final framework was published on 27 July 2006. The results of each of these components will be published in a scorecard, alongside authorities' CPA result which remains current, in March 2007. These components supplement and complement the Fire CPA process; they do not replace it and will not be added together to produce a single scored judgement. They will, however, provide evidence that the Commission will take into account when considering CPA re-categorisation for some FRAs where they have demonstrated deterioration or significant improvement since Fire CPA.

140.   The Audit Commission and DCLG are working closely together on all the elements of the performance assessment package for 2006/7 to ensure that the burden on FRAs is reduced and there is minimal duplication of effort.

Recommendation 42

We recommend the Government ensure the CPA process covers all the activities of Fire and Rescue Authorities. (Paragraph 111)

Response

141.   The Audit Commission is responsible for developing an appropriate performance assessment framework for the FRS. In working with the Commission on performance assessment, we are mindful of the Government's commitment to reducing the cost and burden of inspection upon the public sector and of the importance of applying a proportionate approach to all inspection activities undertaken. In taking forward performance assessment for the service, the Government has been clear that the framework must evolve to meet the needs of the Service as modernisation progresses.

142.   Fire CPA in 2005 set a baseline for FRAs to improve their corporate performance. The operational assessment being conducted this year will set a similar baseline for operational performance. Authorities will then need support to improve against this baseline and a mechanism through which their improvement can be periodically assessed and their CPA category revised where appropriate evidence of improvement or deterioration in performance exists. However, mindful of the burden of inspection on authorities and the progress on improvement and modernisation which is being made, we would not consider it to be desirable to rerun the Fire CPA process before changes to the wider public sector performance assessment framework come into place in 2008/9.

Recommendation 43

We recommend that the Government introduce performance indicators on community fire safety. (Paragraph 113)

Response

143.   As the Committee recognises and progress towards the Fire Public Service Agreement (PSA) target demonstrates, FRAs are making good progress on taking forward community fire safety work including work on reducing deliberate fires. The number of deliberate fires has fallen to 67,900 in the latest twelve months, which is 28 per cent below the PSA target of 94,000 by 2010. FRAs are delivering this reduction through a number of initiatives including partnerships with other local players.

 144.   Performance indicators should, as the Committee acknowledges, measure outcomes rather than inputs. The current set of indicators, implemented from 2005/06, were developed following a comprehensive review and the help of a working group including representatives from FRSs, the Treasury, the Audit Commission and LGA. This was followed by piloting and a full consultation exercise. DCLG made considerable efforts through this process to develop effective indicators to measure the effectiveness of fire prevention initiatives. Indeed, a number of the Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPI) do, in effect, measure the

impact of community fire safety initiatives: for example, BVPI No.142 (fires in the home), BVPI No.143 (fire related casualties), BVPI No.146 (malicious alarms), BVPI No.206 (deliberate fires) and BVPI No.209 (effectiveness of smoke alarms). The Government believes that the current suite of performance indicators goes as far as possible to measure the success of arson reduction and other community fire safety initiatives without substantially increasing the burden of collection on FRAs.

145.   Indeed, government policy is to streamline, not increase the collection of indicators. The indicators for the FRS need time to bed down before consideration is given to any changes to the current suite.

Recommendation 44

We congratulate the FRS on meeting the PSA target on accidental fire deaths. This is clear evidence that the shift to fire prevention is having a positive impact. The government should ensure that it identifies factors which have an impact on the number of accidental fire deaths (for example ethnic and socio-economic background) so that resources can be appropriately targeted in future. (Paragraph 114)

Response

146.   The Government joins the Committee in congratulating the Service on the progress they have made in reducing the number of accidental fire related deaths and incidents of arson. As the Committee suggests, this is due to the successful implementation of a large number of community fire safety initiatives by the Service and the acceptance of the importance of their role in preventing, as well as responding to, fires.

147.   The PSA target still presents the Service and central government with a challenge as fire deaths increasingly occur in hard-to-reach groups. Understanding how fires are caused and how they evolve is essential to developing strategies to prevent similar fires occurring. Therefore, continuing research is required to increase our understanding of what behavioural factors are known to increase the risk of experiencing a domestic fire, and being killed once a fire has started.

148.   In June, DCLG and the Arson Control Forum published research undertaken by Greenstreet Berman which examined the correlation between fire deaths and a number of socio-economic factors including age, smoking, alcohol abuse, household type, deprivation and mobility. We have for some time been targeting resources on those areas where fire deaths remain high. Our Community Fire Safety Innovation Fund gave £4.5 million to FRAs over the period 2003-06. These resources were made available on the basis of fatality rates from accidental dwelling fires. The impact of this funding will be fully evaluated by the end of 2006.

149.   People in households without a functioning smoke alarm are at greater risk of being killed or injured once a fire breaks out. Other factors can include whether householders are aged 65 and over, have a disability, have cultural or language barriers or a history of alcohol or drug abuse. The Home Fire Risk Check Initiative provides funds to all English FRSs to work up a programme of Home Fire Risk Checks combined with the installation of 10-year battery operated smoke alarms. We have a commitment to reach up to 1.25m vulnerable households by 2008. The FRS National Framework 2006-8 makes clear our expectation that authorities

should be targeting their community fire safety resources on vulnerable people and working with other local partners and agencies to make sure these groups are identified and considered within all IRMPs.

150.   In addition, since 1987, the Government has conducted effective campaigns aimed at the general public and promoting aspects of fire safety in the home, with particular focus on promoting smoke alarms. Ownership of alarms has increased from nine per cent in 1987 to the current level of 80 per cent. We will continue to run high profile media campaigns to promote the importance of having a working smoke alarm installed in dwellings. The media work will be underpinned with a programme of targeted work to promote fire safety to vulnerable groups in the community at higher risk from fire.

Recommendation 45

We agree that the first duty of the Fire and Rescue Service should remain providing a response to fires and civil emergencies. The introduction of a target directly relating to rescues would not, however, serve a useful purpose. Measuring performance could prove misleading because the number of rescues could decline as a result of earlier warning, avoiding the need for rescue at all, or, perversely, could increase as a result of effective community fire safety initiatives, such as smoke alarms. (Paragraph 115)

Response

151.   We agree with the Committee's conclusion on targets and measurements of performance in relation to the rescue role performed by FRAs. Outcome measures on rescues tend to provide a misleading picture of performance due to the perverse incentives outlined above. The Government has no plans to extend fire targets and indicators to include performance on rescues.

JOINT WORKING WITH OTHER EMERGENCY SERVICES

Recommendation 46

We are convinced of the life-saving benefit of co-response schemes and are concerned at the reluctance of some in the FRS to participate in them. We recommend that the Government, in conjunction with the Department of Health, develop a national co-response protocol which includes guidance on how co-response should be paid for. (Paragraph 123)

Response

152.   The Government is also fully supportive of co-responder schemes and would wish to see all FRAs working in partnership with their local Ambulance Service NHS Trusts to introduce such schemes if that is appropriate locally. We are working closely with the Department of Health to consider what can be done to encourage the two emergency services to pursue co-responder schemes and the increased use of defibrillators by firefighters. To assist in this consideration, a research project will be commissioned to gather and present information on co-responding, trauma care and community first responding, including information on the current co-responding equipment being employed both inside and outside the FRS and on the funding arrangements between Ambulance Service NHS Trusts and FRSs for call-outs.

Recommendation 47

Given the worries about the impact of possible boundary changes, we recommend that the Government commission research into the relationship between coterminosity and the likely workings of Regional Control Centres. (Paragraph 125)

Response

153.   The Government accepts the principle of coterminosity, and that boundaries of different agencies ought to be aligned as far as possible. When any of the emergency services considers changing the boundaries of its services, we will consult with our colleagues in the Department of Health and the Home Office to attempt to maintain coterminosity.

154.   Coterminosity is separate from the idea that different aspects of FRS business are better carried out at local, regional or national level. For example, training and control centre services can be delivered better if carried out at regional level. RCCs will be coterminous with Government Offices, RMBs and other agencies that operate at a regional level.

155.   In the light of the fact that we accept the principle coterminosity, and that RCCs conform with this principle, there is no need to carry out research into this area.

5. GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

BVPI   –   Best Value Performance Indicator

CCS   –   Civil Contingencies Secretariat

CFOA   –   Chief Fire Officers Association

CPA   –   Comprehensive Performance Assessment

DCLG   –   Department for Communities and Local Government

FRA   –   Fire and Rescue Authority

FRS   –   Fire and Rescue Service

iNCC   –   Interim National Coordination Centre

IPDS   –   Integrated Personal Development System

IRMP   –   Integrated Risk Management Plan/Planning

LGA   –   Local Government Association

NCC   –   National Coordination Centre

PSA   –   Public Service Agreement

RCC   –   Regional Control Centre

RDS   –   Retained Duty System

RMB   –   Regional Management Board

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