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London Assembly Fire, Resilience and Emergency Planning Committee – response to Home Office consultation: Reforming Our Fire Service – Building professionalism, boosting performance and strengthening governance

The London Assembly Fire, Resilience and Emergency Planning (FREP) Committee welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Home Office’s consultation on a package of proposals for the reform of fire and rescue services in England. This letter is our response to the consultation.

The London Assembly is the democratic voice of London, with 25 London Assembly Members elected either to represent 14 constituencies or the whole capital. The Assembly scrutinises the decisions and actions of the Mayor of London. The FREP Committee is one of ten Committees in the Assembly which focus on thematic areas of scrutiny. For more information on the work of this Committee please do visit our website at <https://www.london.gov.uk/fire-resilience-emergency-planning>.

The FREP Committee reviews the priorities and objectives of the London Fire Commissioner (LFC) and scrutinises how the LFC exercises its functions. As part of this, the Committee has considered the performance of the London Fire Brigade (LFB) in response to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry (GTI) Phase 1 report; the challenges identified in inspections of the Brigade by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS); the LFC’s transformation programme; and its response throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

It has been a challenging period for the LFB, and while the Committee notes the progress it has made, it is clear that more work is needed to make sure the LFB is able to fulfil its core functions and is fully prepared to respond to the changing nature of risk in London. The Committee’s response

draws on evidence from sessions with the LFB and Deputy Mayor for Fire & Resilience (DMFR) and others. Transcripts of these can be found [here](#).

The Committee believes that all residents have the right to feel safe in their homes. The Committee broadly supports the proposals outlined in the White Paper to strengthen fire and rescue services. It urges the Government to consider and swiftly act upon the responses it receives to the consultation to ensure that fire and rescue services have the support, resources and structures in place to adapt to the changing nature of challenges. These include risks associated with the growing use of alternative fuels, and learning the lessons from major events such as the Grenfell Tower fire, Manchester Arena terror attack and terror incidents in London. As the climate emergency worsens, we can expect to see an increase in the frequency of major incidents being called by Brigades, due to fast-spreading grass fires during periods of extreme hot weather.

At the Committee's meeting in June 2022, London Fire Commissioner, Andy Roe, told Assembly Members that he welcomes the reform of fire and rescue services. He said that he has witnessed an "erosion" of professional standards and national frameworks and a "lack of inspection" that has "led for the need for reform". The Committee notes the reform that has taken place over recent years, and has welcomed the role of HMICFRS in assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of fire and rescue services, in particular the LFB. It agrees with the LFC that making the sector more regulated and more professional, supporting firefighters and staff with better training, and creating a code of ethics for the sector is welcome. Not only would this strengthen fire safety and protection work, it would also provide reassurance to Londoners that there are highly skilled fire and rescue professionals fully equipped to respond to operational need in the capital. At our June 2022 meeting, the Deputy Mayor for Fire and Resilience said 'fire tends to be a Cinderella emergency service in a lot of ways'. To ensure these structural changes work, they must come with investment and the Committee calls on the Government to properly invest in the sector as new regulations and legislation are introduced.

The remainder of this letter sets out the Committee's views on the White Paper set out under the three key areas: people, professionalism and governance.

People

The proposals in the White Paper to allow fire professionals to develop their skills are welcome. The Committee also agrees with the Government's vision "that fire and rescue employees are representative of the communities they serve and are equipped with the skills they need to reduce risk, save lives, and meet the challenges of the future." Further to this, the Committee was pleased to see that the LFB has made a commitment in its draft Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) to ensure its staff composition is reflective of London.

The Committee has regularly discussed the importance and efforts of the LFB to drive change around leadership, culture and behaviours and develop a trained, diverse and inclusive workforce. The Committee believes that fire and rescue employees are at the heart of fire service reform, and that fire services should have the flexibility to deploy resources to help address current and future threats beyond core fire and rescue duties. This includes responding to a range of issues, including terrorism and flooding, and the increasing use of alternative fuels, such as lithium ion battery fires. The LFB told the Committee that it is "on the front foot as far as leading the national response to this is concerned." The LFB has a Research and Development Team within its Operational Policy Department to keep on top of evolving technology changes so that it is "able to influence [its] own

operational response so that [it] can deal with these incidents when they occur.” The Committee urges the Government to work with fire and rescue services, such as the LFB, and the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) to ensure services are involved in the early identification of emerging issues and assessment of risk, and are able to adapt swiftly and respond to these evolving challenges.

The major incident called by the LFB on 19 July 2022 highlights the significant challenge of how Brigades manage multiple concurrent incidents of fast-spreading grass and building fires during periods of extreme hot weather. The frequency of such incidents will probably increase due to climate change. The Committee recommends that the Government work with fire and rescue services, such as the LFB, to develop a clear strategy to deal with such emergencies. As part of this, there should be an evaluation on how call centres manage the increase in calls.

The Committee agrees that fire and rescue services have an active role to play in supporting the wider health and public safety agenda. It commends the work LFB has done through its Home Fire Safety Visits and its response during the pandemic, including driving ambulances and delivering PPE, food and medicine to vulnerable Londoners. The Committee would like to see the provision of Government-produced reading materials on fire safety in languages other than English, to increase levels of community fire safety in areas with diverse populations, such as London. The Committee welcomes further information on how the Government will work with fire and rescue services to allow flexibility in the role of a firefighter and ensure firefighters are properly resourced, trained and rewarded for these changing roles.

Professionalism

The Committee agrees with the five areas listed in the White Paper for professionalising fire and rescue services: leadership; data; research; ethics; and clear expectations. The Committee believes that focussing on professionalism will ensure fire service people have the status and the support they need to lead, strategically and operationally. The Committee also believes that investment in these areas will help strengthen operational response and better protect the public. While the Committee supports the proposed introduction of a mandatory and standardised training programme for senior leaders, it urges the Government to explore this model with experts in the sector to equip leaders with the skills required to manage complex organisations and support the development of an inclusive and diverse workforce.

The development of LFB staff and opportunities to progress into leadership roles, along with succession planning, has been a regular topic of discussion for the FREP Committee. At our June 2022 meeting the LFC, Andy Roe highlighted that a greater focus on professionalism and corporate leadership could aid succession planning which poses a risk in the coming years due to the number of chief fire officers approaching retirement. A focus on corporate leadership should not however dilute the openness, transparency and accountability of the LFB as a public service. The Committee is pleased to see that the LFB is “rolling out a new training plan for managers within the Brigade with the aim for LFB staff in leadership positions to have access to the training and support that they need to best manage their teams.” This is recognised in the LFB’s draft CRMP which includes a commitment to “ensure LFB staff are given the training and resources to manage their services and teams effectively.” The Committee looks forward to receiving further information on how the Government’s proposals to nurture new and existing talent will enhance the work already undertaken, and further work planned, by the LFB in this area.

Similarly, the Committee has discussed issues of culture within the LFB and welcomed the appointment of Nazir Afzal OBE to chair a comprehensive independent review of culture in the LFB. The Committee urges the Government to consider the findings of this review as it develops its proposals to reform professionalism within fire and rescue.

As a scrutiny body, the use of data is essential to the work of the London Assembly. The FREP Committee draws heavily on LFB performance data and regularly uses it to examine the work of the LFC and make recommendations to the Mayor. The Committee welcomes proposals to help improve the use and quality of fire and rescue service data, ensuring the sector has a better understanding of data, and looks forward to receiving further information on how the NFCC can help set a common direction for services and the provision of central digital and data support.

The Committee welcomes the proposal to explore the opportunity to establish a College of Fire and Rescue. It believes that focussing on the five areas of professionalism identified in the White Paper, a College of Fire and Rescue would address the need, highlighted by the Grenfell Tower fire, for research to be central to decision making. This is even more important for London, one of the most high-rise built environments in Europe. Once again, a new College of Fire and Rescue must be supported with proper investment to provide the fire and rescue service with a clear and recognisable status, informed by robust research and supported by clear expectations and ethics to improve the implementation of best practice across the sector.

Governance

While the Committee welcomes the view that the oversight of fire and rescue services in England needs to change, it urges the Government to be mindful of the governance structures in London, the role the London Assembly plays in holding the DMFR and LFC to account and to be clear what the model proposed in London means for the capital. The oversight and scrutiny model provided by the Assembly's FREP Committee has worked well for London and as the DMFR told the Committee in our June 2022 meeting, the current governance model works well for London and was decided through cross-party agreement (though that does not necessarily mean it will work everywhere). These principles of cross party agreement and acknowledging local circumstances and need must be at the forefront of developing governance processes elsewhere. The Committee looks forward to seeing your more detailed proposals for governance of fire and rescue services, but would add that in our view this core emergency service should remain a publicly run and operated service.

The Committee hopes that the points raised in this letter will help inform ongoing efforts to reform and professionalise fire and rescue, including fire safety, across England.

Yours,



Anne Clarke AM

Chair of the Fire, Resilience and Emergency Planning Committee