

Peter Betts
Director of Fire and Resilience
Department for Communities and Local
Government
Zone 9/G9
Eland House
Bressenden Place
London
SW1E 5DU
Tel 020 7944 6593
Fax 020 7944 8319
peter.betts@communities.gsi.gov.uk
www.communities.gov.uk

All Chief Fire Officers

24 August 2007



Cumulative Demands on the Fire and Rescue Service

Over recent months, a number of colleagues in the FRS, as well as some representatives of CFOA and the LGA, have raised the concern that the three major resilience projects (FireLink, FiReControl, and New Dimension), together with other initiatives such as electronic incident reporting and equality & diversity programmes, are stretching the capacity of FRSs to deliver.

We have listened to these concerns and have been thinking hard about how we can help mitigate and smooth the demands on local management. This letter sets out our thoughts on how we can do so.

I need to acknowledge three things up front:

- there is a vast range of activity that you deal with, and the great bulk of it is obviously way beyond my control to influence.
- all authorities are different, so it is not easy to find easy ways to help all
- despite the best efforts in this letter, we will not always get it right

Nonetheless here are our proposals.

Firstly, for the future, we recognise the strategic importance of using the process of developing the next version of the National Framework to ensure that the collective weight of national expectations we place on the FRS does not exceed its capability to respond; or that the pace of expected change is a threat to business continuity for individual FRAs.

We are, therefore, looking to lighten the burden on authorities by:

- fundamentally revising the structure of the framework to provide a shorter, more focussed document. This will aim to provide a clear statement of the national outcomes the Government expects the service to deliver over the next 3 years;

- reviewing the number and scope of absolute requirements expressed in the text as “musts” and “shoulds” and by evaluating the broad resource implications of these requirements both individually and collectively;
- working much more closely with the FRS and colleagues in the Local Government Association from the outset in revising the structure and developing the scope of the national objectives and performance expectations the framework contains;
- addressing this issue explicitly in our work with stakeholders and responding to their clear steer that most burdens arise from expectations of compliance with detailed process rather than through identifying clear national outcomes.

Accordingly we are involving CFA, LGA and others closely in the development of the draft Framework.

Secondly, we have commissioned a study to assess the impact of various initiatives on the FRS. The study will consider a sample of FRSs. Its aim will be to establish whether the demands being placed on FRSs from these programmes, are being properly weighed and phased, and to propose solutions where problems are identified. This study is being undertaken on a short timescale and we should be in a better position to assess the situation you are facing by the end of September 2007. I may have further thoughts to share with you at that stage

Thirdly, and more immediately, we have been looking hard at whether there are specific requirements or requests we could change to reduce burdens on FRAs. As a result of this, and following suggestions from some FRAs, I have decided to delay the end date for the switch to the Incident Recording System until 31 March 2009. This will have a significant financial implication for my Directorate's budget, but it is a decision I have taken in response to representations that this would ease the pressure on FRSs. I very much hope that many and perhaps most of you will find this helpful. Of course, we would encourage all FRSs to move over to the new system as soon as practicable in order to exploit the considerable benefits of electronic data recording, but the pace of this will now be your decision. A circular will be issued shortly providing more details on how FRSs can move across to IRS.

Some of you have suggested a longer delay – a further two or three years - to the roll-out period. I cannot move this far however as it would mean two systems running in parallel for a number of years. However, we will look at the scope for giving assistance to authorities who think they will have difficulties even with this revised timetable. Prior to joining IRS, all FRSs should conduct a full impact assessment as part of their implementation plan. Where this assessment highlights significant IT problems CLG may be able to offer assistance, whilst seeking to ensure that relevant skills are transferred to FRSs wherever possible.

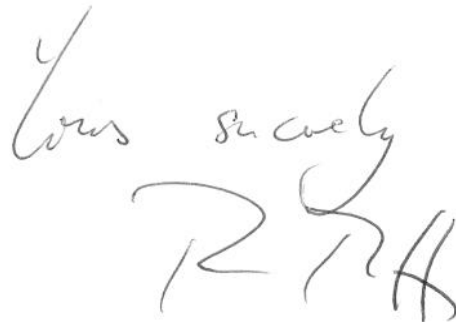
Fourthly, we are investigating how we in FRD can better manage the communication flow from FRD to FRSs so that information such as guidance and circulars are internally co-ordinated to ensure consistency and do not cause unnecessary burdens on FRSs. To improve matters, we now include guidance and circulars in our strategic communications planning which will improve the FRD oversight of information flow with FRSs. We will also be working with colleagues across the Department to co-ordinate all engagement with all FRSs. If you have any thoughts on this please contact Lorna Rowe, Head of Planning Performance and Delivery (Zone G9, Eland House ext 0050). I also recognise that we must always try to give you plenty of advance warning of future demands so that you can plan effectively, taking into account local priorities.

Fifth, With regard to operational doctrine, we have carried out a full review of all guidance issued by CLG and predecessor departments. From this we are identifying all operational guidance and are categorising this in terms of risk. You will also know that we have a number of manuals currently under review or development; our intention is to inventory all of this collectively and agree with CFOA a work programme for the next couple of years that meets the needs of the service. The resources required to undertake this programme and the impact it might have on the FRS will also be a part of our joint consideration.

Finally, and specific to FiReControl, we will provide clearer guidance on the assessment of funding by October 2007.

I am bound to say that in my view few parts of the public sector have undergone the scale and speed of change being experienced by the FRS. The challenge this poses for management teams locally, including yours, cannot be underestimated, or taken for granted. I recognize that this letter will only make a small contribution, and I am also conscious that – whatever our best efforts – we here will still fall short sometimes. I also know there will be times when we will need to make further requests of you. But I am committed to managing these as best we can collectively and to keeping the dialogue going. We will not always get it right, but I hope it is at least clear that we are committed to looking for ways we can raise our game.

I am copying this letter for information to chairs of FRAs and to Regional Management Boards.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Peter Betts', with a stylized flourish below the name.

PETER BETTS