

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Fire and Rescue Services

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Rt Hon Eric Pickles):

The Fire and Rescue National Framework for England, revised in 2012, defined the overall strategic priorities for fire and rescue authorities. These priorities are to assess the full range of foreseeable fire and rescue related risks their areas face; make provision for prevention and protection activities and respond to incidents appropriately; work in partnership with their communities and a wide range of partners locally and nationally to deliver their service; and be accountable to communities for the service they provide.

The Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 requires the Secretary of State to report every 2 years on fire and rescue authorities' compliance with the National Framework. The report was published on 3 July, and the government was pleased to report a picture of full compliance.

Compliance with the Framework demonstrates that the government's high level expectations are being fully met. Despite this excellent news, the public rightly expects fire and rescue authorities to continue to strive for excellence, and to demonstrate the best possible value for money. Sir Ken Knight, in his independent review 'Facing the Future' identified a number of ways in which fire and rescue authorities could make improvements and savings – up to almost £200 million in total – without compromising the quality of frontline services.

The Government welcomed 'Facing the Future' and I take this opportunity to thank Sir Ken for starting the debate on the challenges and opportunities facing fire and rescue authorities. We will seek to build on Sir Ken's findings by focussing on:

- fire prevention and protection. We are clear that fire prevention and protection is the front line for the fire sector. It will remain the number one priority. We will support fire and rescue authorities in their efforts to reach and better protect those most at risk from fire, working in partnership with other public sector bodies and local organisations, and, where appropriate, utilising relevant data held within government. We welcome the recent introduction of Primary Authority for fire safety, which allows businesses – both large and small - to benefit from greater consistency and assurance on regulatory compliance advice, and, which offers fire and rescue authorities the opportunity to increase efficiency and target audit and, if necessary, enforcement action on higher risk premises
- a modern and flexible fire and rescue workforce that will see an increase in the proportion of on-call firefighters enabled by an attractive, modern employment offer, with the right support and incentives for employers. As highlighted in 'Facing the Future' if the number of on-call firefighters increased by just 10% nationally, this would deliver savings of up to £123 million
- encouraging greater collaboration between fire and local authorities, and between fire, police and ambulance services to deliver better outcomes for the public

- the need for better and more sharing of services including senior staff between fire and rescue authorities and other organisations to drive efficiencies
- a more joined up approach to procurement. Government has already published research undertaken in partnership with the Chief Fire Officers Association, which – as highlighted in ‘Facing the Future’ – shows that fire and rescue authorities could make at least £18 million of savings simply by buying smarter, together.

Since ‘Facing the Future’ was published, this success story has continued with the total number of fires and other incidents attended in England continuing to fall. Calls are now 46 per cent lower than ten years ago. The Government is firmly of the belief that fire and rescue authorities must seize the opportunity to transform themselves in line with this changing environment.

To support fire and rescue authorities in driving efficiencies and transformation change, the Government has provided a £75 million Fire Transformation Fund for 2015/2016 on a bid for basis.

The level of interest shown in the Transformation Fund, and the growing evidence of fire and rescue authorities working collaboratively with other emergency services, has demonstrated the real progress that has been made in the sector since ‘Facing the Future’ was published.

To further support transformation in the fire and rescue sector the Department intends to commission an independent review of the conditions of service for all fire and rescue staff and the way in which they are negotiated and decided.

Firefighters are willing to put their lives on the line every day and they deserve to work in an environment where expenditure is properly focused on front line prevention and protection and on front line response. To achieve this, fire and rescue authorities must review how they operate and how they deliver, and must embrace the many opportunities for change they have. Sir Ken Knight highlighted a number of challenges – from the need for more collaboration between fire and rescue authorities and the wider sector, to making the best use of on call firefighters, to achieving the most cost efficient procurement. This statement makes clear our intention to work with the sector to meet these challenges, and by doing so ensure that fire and rescue authorities continue to deliver the very best service to the public in the years to come.