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Date: 25TH June 2020

Dear Sir Greenhalgh

Ref: Letter to Chief's and Chairs 14th May 2020

Firstly, congratulations on your appointment to the role of Minister responsible for Fire and Rescue and thank you for the opportunity to share our views on these matters. As the political and professional leadership of Royal Berkshire we wanted to respond jointly to your letter. As an Authority and a Service, committed to transparency and continuous improvement, we welcomed the introduction of the independent inspection programme, delivered by HMICFRS. We were also really pleased with the positive findings of HMICFRS in relation to Royal Berkshire Fire & Rescue Service.

“Our first inspection of Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service revealed that it is performing to a high standard. We graded the service as ‘good’ in each of our three main inspection categories. The people of Berkshire can be confident that they are being well-served.”

We believe these findings validate the hard work of everyone in the Service but also the commitment of the elected Members of the Fire Authority, to collaborative leadership, for the benefit of all the people we serve.

On the specifics of Sir Tom's recommendations we would offer the following thoughts for your consideration.

“By June 2020, the Home Office, in consultation with the fire and rescue sector, should review and with precision determine the roles of: (a) fire and rescue services; and (b) those who work in them.”

We believe that it is best to consider the role of the Fire & Rescue Service from two perspectives. Firstly, the management of local risk and secondly the wider regional and national resilience role of the Fire & Rescue sector. In relation to managing risk locally we believe that Integrated Risk Management Planning (IRMP), based on robust evidence and transparent engagement and consultation, is a very effective way to develop and deliver local public services. We do not therefore believe that the current IRMP concept needs fundamental reform.

ROYAL BERKSHIRE
FIRE AUTHORITY

Councillor Colin Dudley • Chairman



However, given the ambiguity and age of some of the guidance, associated with IRMP, a comprehensive refresh is now overdue. This refresh should include the Fire & Rescue Service National Framework 2018.

On the wider regional and national role of the Fire and Rescue Service we believe there is scope for improvement. Perhaps Covid 19 has provided an opportunity to see how the Fire & Rescue Sector can play a much wider role in regional and national emergencies. The transferable skills of the sector have proven invaluable in this time of national crisis. In every Local Resilience Forum the sector has played a vital role in leading and coordinating the response. This work builds on the many previous examples of effective regional responses to flooding, wild fires etc. We believe that a more defined role, supported by appropriate resourcing would be very beneficial, in times of regional and national emergency.

It is therefore logical that the role of those who work in Fire & Rescue Services should be linked directly to local IRMPs and any broader regional and national roles agreed for Fire & Rescue Services. The current prescriptive and bureaucratic national process does not facilitate these requirements.

By June 2020, the Home Office, the Local Government Association, the National Fire Chiefs Council and trade unions should consider whether the current pay negotiation machinery requires fundamental reform. If so, this should include the need for an independent pay review body and the future of the 'grey book'.

The current mechanisms for determining pay are in our opinion no longer fit for purpose. As an Authority, it is unnerving to have a mechanism for determining pay which is entirely detached from the Service's budget and funding mechanisms. However, to consider pay in isolation would be a missed opportunity. The present system which is both too bureaucratic and prescriptive undermines the concept of developing local IRMPs. Having the roles of staff, terms and conditions and pay agreed nationally with no consideration of local risk removes the agility which local IRMPs should afford. Also national pay determination does little for staff in Royal Berkshire who are living and working in one of the most expensive areas of the country. We believe a more flexible system linked to both local IRMPs, guaranteed funding and regional pay would serve both staff and communities better. If a pay review body would deliver this we would welcome it.

By September 2020, the Home Office should consider the case for legislating to give chief fire officers operational independence. In the meantime, it should issue clear guidance, possibly through an amendment to the Fire and Rescue National Framework for England, on the demarcation between those responsible for governance and operational decision making by the chief fire officer.

We have listened to and engaged in a wide range of discussions about this recommendation. We, in addition to many of those we have discussed it with are not entirely sure that there is collective understanding of what the phrase operational independence means. It is clear however that it has become a metaphor for overcoming challenging or dysfunctional

relationships between the political and officer leadership in Authorities and Services. Perhaps, greater clarity on what is meant by operational independence could be gained by some thematic governance inspections by HMICFRS. We could also all be clear on what isn't working and what we need to fix before determining the solution.

In Royal Berkshire, we have worked hard to develop a collaborative leadership style for the benefit of the people we serve. We also believe that the present system has some useful and healthy checks and balances grounded in the best principles of democracy.

If as we think, operational independence, means clarity and an appropriate balance in decision making between the political and officer leaderships of Authorities and Chief Fire Officers, then we would be supportive. We also believe that this can be achieved through the transparent governance arrangements, clear schemes of delegation and an updating of the national Framework. We would both however be concerned about any changes which undermine the healthy checks and balances of our democracy for the purpose of expediency.

We thank you again for the opportunity to share our views on these matters. Obviously, this letter provides a very high level summary of our views on these complex issues. We would therefore be very happy to extend a warm welcome to you in Royal Berkshire to discuss the matters in detail. We wish you every success in your new role and hope the above points are helpful in enabling you to shape your thinking on these matters.

Kind regards



Councillor Colin Dudley
Chairman, Royal Berkshire Fire Authority



Trevor Ferguson
Chief Fire Officer and
Chief Executive