



Report

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Report Title:

Audit Commission Report: Rising to the challenge (2008)

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Summary:

The Audit Commission have recently published a study concerning the fire and rescue service, entitled – ‘*Rising to the challenge.*’ The Commission, in their conclusions, state:

‘Fire services can also become more efficient and more effective by building on existing collaboration with one another and with other local agencies. There are good examples of fire services working together. But such collaboration is not systematic within the fire service, and national and regional initiatives have not encouraged it. RMBs in particular need to be refocused or abolished.’

This paper summarises the Commission’s observations and recommendations given in respect of Regional Management Boards.

Recommendation(s):

WMRMB are requested to:

1. Note the contents of this paper, and
2. determine any response or actions to be taken to address the issues raised.

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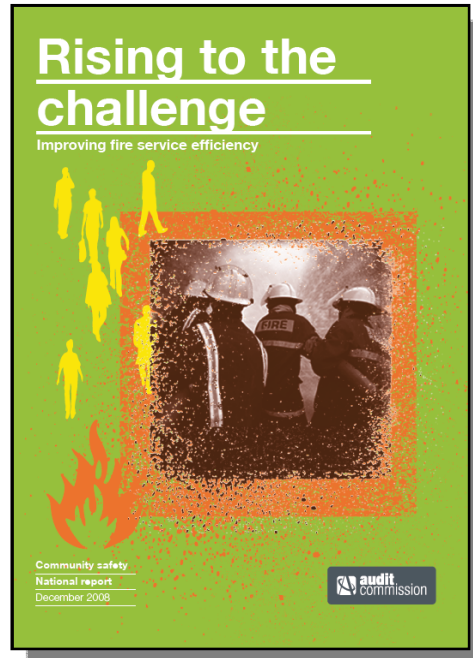
1. Background Details:

Introduction

In December 2008 the Audit Commission published their most recent study concerning the fire and rescue service. The report, entitled – ‘*Rising to the challenge*’ looks at how public money is spent on the fire service in England and encourages fire services to improve their value for money. It acknowledges the improvements in performance that the service has delivered in recent years, contributing to a declining risk of fire nationally.

This paper has extracted and brings to the attention of WMRMB the Commission’s comments solely in respect of ‘Regional Management Boards’ (RMBs) and seeks the Board’s views on any response or actions to be taken to address the issues raised.

This paper does not address the Commission’s comments regarding individual Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) or FRAs collectively in England.



The full report may be viewed at:

<http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/Products/NATIONAL-REPORT/EC882132-ECDD-4cae-9027-D7FC4760FF01/RisingToTheChallenge17Dec08REP.pdf>

It should be noted that the Commission’s observations and recommendations given in respect of RMBs are generic in nature and not directed at one or more specific RMBs. This is contrary to their earlier report of 2008 where at that time, the Commission stated:

‘The extent to which fire services are engaged in the RMB varies. In some regions, such as the North West and West Midlands, engagement is good and working together is bringing real benefits. In others areas, such as the South West, the fire services support their RMB but have been slow to exploit the opportunities of working together and are making less progress.’¹

Rising to the challenge - Methodology

The Commission analysed national and local data, reviewed national and local policy and planning documents, interviewed key personnel and partners in six case study fire services (Kent and Medway, Gloucestershire, South Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, West Midlands and Cheshire) and reviewed specific notable practice in four other fire services (Merseyside, Devon and Somerset, London and Greater Manchester). During fieldwork, the Commission conducted 42 semi-structured interviews with FRA Members; CFOs; and members of fire service senior management teams.

No known formal interviews were conducted with Members or officers representing WMRMB.

Rising to the challenge – Summary comments

The Commission state that the fire service could be more efficient and effective if it improved regional and local collaboration, stating that:

*'Formal RMBs have not driven effective regional collaboration; government and FRAs need to reform them or abandon them.'*²

Rising to the challenge – Recommendations

In respect of the Commission's recommendations, it states that:

- *'FRAs should define their objectives for RMBs, and participate beyond where required to in RMBs only where there is a good business case for doing so;'*³ and
- *'Central government should review the role of RMBs and their place in the improvement infrastructure; then define and communicate its expectations of them and their potential value to FRAs.'*⁴

The Commission also asks *'the fire service'* to consider how RMBs can help it deliver better collaboration.⁵

Rising to the challenge – Collaboration between fire services

The Commission acknowledge a concern that has been raised previously within WMRMB that whilst the National Framework encourages *'regional working'* via RMBs particularly through IRMP work, it should not impede cross-border working with other FRAs.⁶

Rising to the challenge – Governance

The Commission note that RMBs were established to improve fire service cooperation and collaboration in areas such as procurement, training, and sharing best practice. But almost all the senior officers and members they interviewed felt that the RMBs were not driving effective regional collaboration as well as they might, with one FRA member informing the Commission that:

*'I don't think [the RMB] produces any real results ... Absolutely you should be working with your neighbours and partners, but I think from our point of view it shouldn't just be [in the region] ... [and] I think we can do it without the formality of an RMB.'*⁷

This viewpoint was previously noted in the 2006 the CLG Select Committee commented that commented:

'RMBs... are a confusing addition to the already complex governance and structural arrangements for the fire service.' (Ref. 28)⁸

The Commission found that the efforts of many RMBS to date have been focused on implementing regional control centres (RCCs). But as responsibility for the RCCs will transfer to local authority controlled companies over the next few years the Commission believe that RMBs should therefore have more time to devote to other aspects of regional collaboration.⁹ Notwithstanding the above, the Commission believe it is an appropriate time to take stock of the role and powers of RMBs. Many senior officers and members interviewed by the Commission argued that effective collaboration at regional or sub-regional level could take place without a formal regional body. Others interviewed argued that RMBs functions on, for example, procurement, could be subsumed within existing regional bodies such as regional improvement and efficiency partnerships.¹⁰

The Commission state that the government could helpfully clarify its expectations of what RMBs could or must do. Most importantly, the Commission state that:

*'Fire services need to consider what role RMBs can usefully perform for them. Where there is no good business case for their continuation, RMBs should be dismantled.'*¹¹

Rising to the challenge – Conclusion

In their conclusions, the Commission state (in respect of RMBs) that:

*'Fire services can also become more efficient and more effective by building on existing collaboration with one another and with other local agencies. There are good examples of fire services working together. But such collaboration is not systematic within the fire service, and national and regional initiatives have not encouraged it. RMBs in particular need to be refocused or abolished.'*¹²

2. Legal Implications:

The report – *Rising to the challenge* arose as a study outcome conducted under Section 33 of the Audit Commission Act 1998. Section 33 places a duty on the Audit Commission to undertake studies to support recommendations aimed at improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the provision of local authority services.

The Fire Services Act 2004 stipulates that FRAs - ‘must have regard to the Framework in carrying out their functions’ (Part 3, Section 21 (7)).

The current (*and previous*) National Framework 2008-11 sets out the obligations for FRAs to collaborate through RMBs.

Subject to any future guidance from CLG, it is assumed that any decision to adopt the Commission’s recommendation to ‘...*abandon, dismantle or abolish RMBs...*’ would require amendment to the National Framework to ensure FRAs were not in breach of their statutory obligations (as set out above).

3. Financial Implications:

There are no financial implications arising from this paper.

4. Background Papers:

- Audit Commission (2008). *Fire and Rescue Service Performance Assessment*.
- Audit Commission (2008). *Rising to the challenge*.

5. Attachments:

There are no attachments to this paper.

Reference Sources:

¹ Audit Commission (2008). *Fire and Rescue Service Performance Assessment*. Page - 18

² Audit Commission (2008). *Rising to the challenge*. Page - 4

³ *Ibid* Page - 6

⁴ *Ibid* Page - 7

⁵ *Ibid* Page - 8

⁶ *Ibid* Pages – 60 & 61

⁷ *Ibid* Page - 62

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ *Ibid* Pages – 62 & 63

¹¹ *Ibid* Page - 63

¹² *Ibid* Page - 87