



Chris Williamson MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Bob Neill MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State

Department for Communities and Local Government

Eland House
Bressenden Place
London SW1E 5DU

Tel: 0303 444 3430
Fax: 0303 444 3986
E-Mail: bob.neill@communities.gsi.gov.uk

www.communities.gov.uk

6 December 2010

COMPREHENSIVE SPENDING REVIEW AND FIRE & RESCUE SERVICES

Your recent Freedom of Information survey to local fire and rescue authorities has been brought to my attention. As Fire Minister I share your interest in ensuring that the fire and rescue service is able to maintain the excellent standard of service that it provides to its communities and I thought you might find it helpful to hear about what the coalition Government is doing to support the service in this.

As a frontline service, the fire and rescue service has been given some protection within the Spending Review settlement and back-loaded. Although I recognise that there will still be some challenging choices for authorities to make, I believe they can be done without impacting on the quality or breadth of services offered to their communities.

I have secured capital funding to support the service in responding to challenging times. I am keen to work with the sector to ensure this investment supports the delivery of efficiencies and encourage change. I will be talking to the sector shortly to establish the best route to distribute and utilise this funding – I have already heard with interest that the sector is keen to explore the potential for some form of 'invest to save fund'.

Going wider, we are also playing our part in reducing burdens on fire and rescue authorities. We have made radical reductions in the bureaucratic reporting and inspection requirements which hold Authorities back. We are abolishing the Audit Commission, have ended Comprehensive Area Assessment, scrapped a large number of unnecessary Whitehall targets, and ended the National Indicator Set.

It is, of course, for individual fire and rescue authorities – not central government – to make local decisions on how to make savings. However we believe that it should be possible for authorities to make the savings largely through well planned efficiency savings. Fire and rescue authorities already have a strong record of delivering efficiencies and a range of tools through which they could achieve much of the saving required.

As I said in my letter to fire and rescue authorities after the publication of the Spending Review, areas where we believe significant savings can be found include, for example:

- Flexible staffing arrangements
- Improved sickness management
- Pay restraint and recruitment freezes

- Shared services/back office functions
- Improved procurement
- Sharing Chief Fire Officers and other senior staff
- Voluntary amalgamations.

Moving forward, the fire sector faces a range of new and evolving challenges, including and extending beyond public service funding. In recognition of this fact, I have commissioned the sector to undertake Fire Futures, a wide-ranging review of the fire and rescue service in England and to present me with options for the future direction of service provision.

Fire Futures is considering a number of innovative ways to re-engineer service delivery with a particular focus on role, structure, governance and efficiency. The project is due to report to me in December, and I am sure will offer a range of interesting options including clarity on those things that my Department could most usefully do to support the fire and rescue service and remove barriers to change. I look forward to working with the sector to take forward and develop some of these ideas together.

In the interests of transparency, I am placing a copy of this letter in the Library of the House.

BOB NEILL MP