Improvement Planning for Fire and Rescue Authorities 2007-8

Issued by:

Rebecca Pearse
National Framework and Performance Team
Fire and Resilience Policy Division

Addressed to:

Please forward to:

The Chair of the Fire and Rescue Authority
The Chief Executive of the County Council
The Clerk to the Fire and Rescue Authority
The Clerk to the Combined Fire and Rescue Authority
The Commissioner of the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority
The Chief Fire Officer

Summary

This circular sets out changes to Best Value Circular 09/2004. FRAs were consulted on the proposed changes (FRS Circular 57-2006 refers) and this circular sets out revised guidance incorporating views of consultees.

For further information, contact:

Rebecca Pearse
9/H10 Eland House
Bressenden Place
London
SW1E 5DU

Direct line 020 7944 4778
Fax 020 7944 5599
E-mail rebecca.pearse@communities.gsi.gov.uk

General helpline 020 7944 8194
Website www.communities.gov.uk
1.0 Best Value Circular 09/2004


1.2 This circular sets out amendments to Best Value Circular 09/2004 where it addresses improvement planning, improvement planning roles and poor performance to reflect the new performance assessment framework for the Fire and Rescue Service developed by the Audit Commission for 2006-7. Fire and Rescue Authorities were consulted on the proposed changes and this circular sets out revised guidance incorporating views of consultees.

2.0 Improvement Planning

2.1 Responses to the consultation indicated support for proposals to reduce improvement planning requirements for Fire and Rescue Authorities following the package of fire and rescue performance assessment measures in 2006-7. In particular consultees agreed that formal roundtable meetings to discuss authorities’ improvement plans are not necessary for those authorities receiving positive Direction of Travel, Use of Resources and Service Assessment outcomes. However, they requested greater clarity on the definition of a “positive” outcome in each of the assessments listed and how the decision on whether a roundtable meeting would be taken. The revised guidance below attempts to provide further clarity on these issues.

2.2 Improvement planning in the context of the fire and rescue performance framework 2006-7

Fire and Rescue Authorities will be expected to review their improvement priorities and existing action plans in the light of the outcomes of their Direction of Travel assessment, Use of Resources assessment and Fire and Rescue Service Assessment. They will wish to reflect changes in their performance plan, IRMP action plan and other business processes. It is important that improvement priorities are mainstreamed within the FRAs other plans and that the priorities are regularly reviewed so that they remain current. Following the publication of this set of outcomes it will be important:

- that there is a common understanding of the priorities and capacity building needs of the FRA and the actions the authority will be taking to address them, including conducting best value reviews;

- to ensure clarity on how the Audit Commission and, where appropriate, CLG will liaise with the authority to support and assess its improvement plans;

- to identify, validate and disseminate any innovative or potential new good practice indicated through any of the assessment exercises.
Where there is evidence from the assessment processes that there are significant further issues for improvement in a Fire and Rescue Authority following the 2006-7 performance assessment package, CLG proposes to adopt the same roundtable meeting process that followed Fire CPA in 2005. It will be for the Relationship Manager, in discussion with the Fire and Rescue Authority to determine whether or not issues have been raised in any of the assessments which make a roundtable meeting appropriate. However, it would be expected that any authority receiving the lowest score in any of the assessments should hold a round-table meeting. Where the lowest score is received for one or more key elements of an assessment (but not for any one overall assessment) a round-table meeting may be considered necessary. Where they do take place, roundtable meetings will be convened by the Relationship Manager to review with the authority its improvement plans, to discuss their performance issues, agree actions and establish an ongoing liaison process and the roles within this for all the organisations concerned. Where an authority is already working with the CLG Support Team, the Support Team lead for the authority will Chair any necessary roundtable meeting.

Where authorities receive positive Direction of Travel assessment results (scores of 3 and 4) and no urgent improvement needs are identified in the other assessments, the Relationship Manager will not be facilitating a formal roundtable meeting. However all authorities should review their improvement priorities, in discussion with Relationship Managers and other stakeholders and revisit any necessary plans according to the principles outlined above.

Where a roundtable meeting is needed, it is envisaged that representation at the meeting will consist of:

- Appropriate FRA personnel;
- The appropriate CLG Support Team lead if relevant;
- The Audit Commission Relationship Manager;
- The appointed Auditor or their representative;
- The appropriate Operational Assessment personnel where relevant;
- Other CLG staff depending on performance issues identified.

The guidance on improvement planning and the roundtable process issued in 2005 remains in place for roundtables taking place as outlined above. This guidance can be found at the link below:

3.0 Improvement Planning Roles

3.1 As the Memorandum of Understanding between CLG and the Audit Commission sets out (Annex C, FRS National Framework) improvement planning roles have changed since Fire and Rescue CPA. The most significant change is the introduction of the Audit Commission’s Relationship Managers for Fire and Rescue Authorities who provide an ongoing link between Fire and Rescue Authorities and the Commission to inform its audit and inspection work. The role of a Relationship Manager is to promote service improvement and to assess the delivery of that improvement when required to do so. They will therefore be a key stakeholder in helping authorities to re-assess their improvement priorities following this round of performance assessment.

3.2 To reflect these changes paragraph 22 of Best Value Circular 09/2004 is replaced with the following paragraph:

3.3 Improvement Planning Roles.

Communities and Local Government co-ordinates the delivery of the National Framework which articulates national performance expectations for the Fire and Rescue Service. The Fire and Resilience Directorate within CLG remains in the lead on central government engagement with authorities over performance issues and reports to Ministers on the progress. Other bodies with an important role to play in FRA improvement planning include:

- The Audit Commission is responsible for the appointment of external auditors to FRAs and for appointing Relationship Managers to each Fire and Rescue Authority. The Commission will deliver the performance assessment framework and will provide feedback to Fire and Rescue Authorities on their performance. Relationship managers will advise Fire and Rescue Authorities on their improvement priorities and will facilitate roundtable meetings, providing a link between Fire and Rescue Authorities and other key stakeholders where there is no Support Team member engaged with the authority.

- Following the closing down of HMFSI at the end of January 2007, the transition team put in place to oversee the interim period, and subsequently the new Chief Fire and Rescue Advisors Unit, will provide authorities with assistance in accessing any necessary support to address operational weaknesses identified through the Service Assessment. Particular priority will be given to any risk-critical issues identified in the Operational Assessment of Service Delivery. The Chief Professional Adviser’s Unit will continue provide professional advice to support the Audit Commission Relationship Managers and the CLG Support team in their improvement work into the future.
4.0 **Capacity Building.**

4.1 The Best Value Circular 09/2004 sets out the arrangements for capacity building for Fire and Rescue Authorities following fire and rescue CPA. Since that circular was issued, Regional Improvement Partnerships have been formed in each region to determine each region’s capacity building strategy and allocate funds accordingly. More information about changes to the Capacity Building Programme and arrangements for accessing it following the departure of the Business Change Managers is contained in a separate Fire and Rescue Service Circular published in parallel with this.

4.2 Paragraph 23 of Best Value Circular 09/2004 is replaced with the following paragraph:

4.3 **Capacity Building**

*Although it continues to be for FRAs to address any capacity building needs identified following their CPA outcome or as a result of other performance assessment exercises, CLG is supporting a number of programmes to assist improvement and modernisation including:*

- **The Fire Service College continues to provide a key training resource.**

- **Regional Improvement Partnerships can provide Fire and Rescue Authorities with access to capacity building support. Authorities should discuss with the lead officer for their Regional Improvement Partnership whether their improvement priorities identified through fire and rescue CPA and any improvement priorities identified through subsequent performance assessment processes can be met through the capacity building programme. It is recommended that authorities consider their collective participation in Regional Improvement Partnerships through their Regional Management Board. However, each authority’s fire and rescue CPA category remains current and Regional Improvement Partnerships are responsible for working with authorities in the “weak” and “poor” categories to help them improve.**

5.0 **Poorly Performing Authorities.**

5.1 The Audit Commission’s performance framework for 2006/7 builds on fire and rescue CPA. Overall CPA categories remain current pending any re-categorisation process, where appropriate, in 2007/8. However, the Direction of Travel statement in particular will be an important indication of the level of engagement CLG needs to maintain with those categorised as CPA “weak” and “poor”. Since CPA, each CPA “weak” and “poor” FRA has received support for its improvement through the CLG Support Team. The support team has provided advice and guidance to each authority in identifying its improvement priorities and is now monitoring progress towards improvement, reporting back to central government as appropriate.
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5.2 Following the Direction of Travel assessment, CLG will assess the need for Support Team engagement with “weak” and “poor” Fire and Rescue Authorities. CLG will also want to consider whether there are authorities in the “fair” category who have improvement needs and may benefit from involvement with the Support Team into the future.

5.3 Paragraph 24 of Best Value Circular 09/2004 is replaced with the following paragraph:

5.4 **Poorly Performing Authorities**

If the performance assessment process identifies a lack of sustainable improvement since fire and rescue CPA, Ministers and the public will need to be assured that this is being effectively addressed. CLG will work with any authority in this position to restore an acceptable level of performance quickly and effectively. For those authorities who were assessed as “weak” or “poor” in fire and rescue CPA, the Direction of Travel assessment will be an indication of whether sufficient progress has been made to reduce or withdraw support team involvement. Where “weak” or “poor” authorities are assessed as having made little progress since CPA, the level of CLG’s engagement will be reviewed. Any use of CLG’s intervention powers would be proportionate, evidence based and in consultation with the authority. The Intervention protocol at Annex A of the FRS National Framework would apply to the exercising of these powers.

6.0 **Conclusion.**

6.1 Any queries about the content of this circular should be made to Rebecca Pearse using the details above.

Rebecca Pearse
National Framework and Performance Team
Fire and Resilience Policy Division