

FIRE 2006 Conference Speech CFOA President Phil Toase

This year my address focuses on the broad theme of integration and cohesion, including Business Continuity, National Resilience, Equality & Diversity, and those vital relationships with key stakeholders throughout the Fire Community. In addition and fundamental to CFOA are the strong links with the devolved administrations, which allow us to look more broadly at initiatives in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Since our last FIRE Conference, the ODPM has been restructured into the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) with a strong remit to promote community cohesion and equality, as well as a responsibility for housing, urban regeneration, planning and local government.

The creation of this Department provides a great opportunity to respond to the challenges we all face in supporting integration and cohesion as well as tackling the issues arising from an increasingly diverse society.

I certainly value our working relationships with the Secretary of State, the Right Honourable Ruth Kelly's team, in particular Angela Smith MP as our Minister, Peter Housden the Permanent Secretary, Neil Kinghan as Director General and of course Peter Betts as the new FRD Director.

I was very pleased to note that Angela Smith recently commented and I quote

"Local government has now reached the stage where it can be proud of its success, with most councils having significantly improved their capacity to provide top quality services. It is right that this improvement is now recognised and rewarded, with more flexibility for well performing councils to manage their own business".

The provision of more freedom to authorities is good news for local government and the Secretary of State made clear in her speech at the LGA conference that government wants to move from a 'top-down state' to a 'trusting state'.

I too want government departments to realise that their job is to set clear frameworks for delivery and reporting, and not to interfere or micro-manage.

Before moving on, I would like to quickly reflect on some of topics covered in my inaugural speech made in April of this year.

First, the Practitioners Forum.

This is the Minister's strategy group made up of all the major delivery stakeholders in the Fire Community. It continues to be re-energised and focused on the key issues of the day, ensuring that advice to the Minister is readily available.

The Practitioners Forum doesn't however stand in isolation and more work needs to be done to ensure that there is some connectivity with the Business Community Safety Forum. That work is underway and we aim to meet once a year as two forums together. Please take the opportunity to have a look at the Practitioners Forum website and you will see the breadth and depth of the work being carried out.

Second, the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order.

I've always said that prevention is equally as important as suppression and this significant reform reflects the Government's continued focus on risk assessment and fire prevention.

I'm very pleased with the contribution made by our Association in assisting DCLG to implement and deliver this Order and in ensuring that enforcement is effective, transparent and proportionate.

Next is FiReControl and FiReLink.

These two projects are intimately connected, and CFOA is firmly supportive of the technological improvements that they should deliver to the fire and rescue service.

I also made mention of the Retained Duty System and the proposals that had been submitted through the Practitioners Forum to ODPM and subsequently DCLG to move the Retained Review forwards. A great deal of work has been done over the past twelve months with several regional seminars, a joint CFOA/DCLG seminar and also a workshop at this conference.

It is my hope that through the Practitioners Forum to ensure that the best practice models and initiatives across the country are managed and implemented in a coordinated way, with proper attention placed upon ensuring that the Retained Duty System remains robust and sustainable.

Lastly, FireBuy and the Fire Gateway (e-Fire).

Whilst there has not been quite as much progress as had been anticipated it is heartening to note that with both projects some initiatives are beginning to bear fruit and the direction of travel is right

So much for that short introduction – I would now like to concentrate on my keynotes

During my CFOA Presidency, I've chosen to make Equality and Diversity a central theme and I am very pleased to have been asked to join the DCLG Equality and Diversity Project Board. We all realise that the route towards achieving a more diverse workforce will require commitment and continued patience, particularly in a sector where recruitment and staff wastage levels are low.

As all of you will understand, diversity within the workforce and the appreciation and acknowledgement of diversity in the way that we deliver and offer our services is vital and an important part of properly reflecting the positive aspects of the communities that we serve.

We should also properly reflect Equality and Diversity issues when our service is measured under the current performance system.

To say that the recent CPA of Fire & Rescue Services focused our minds would be an understatement.

Although CPA is an excellent audit tool, it didn't in my opinion give sufficient weight to the diversity agenda and led to only a superficial look - rather than the deeper scrutiny

required. This was clearly a missed opportunity to embed Equality and Diversity into the CPA process at a time when these **very** issues were so very prominent.

Might I suggest that it would be entirely feasible to write a more searching diagnostic tool based on the customised Equality Standard for Local Government and I would now encourage DCLG, in conjunction with the Audit Commission, to carry this through as a matter of some urgency.

Let me now move onto the rather vexed question of employment targets and the debate whether or not having targets is a help or a hindrance.

My view remains the same in that I believe targets provide a useful focus for ALL organisations. Without them it would be all too easy for some to ignore this important part of the diversity agenda. If it can be measured it will be done.

I am personally disappointed that the work that has already been done to revise the diversity targets in order to make them more relevant and realistic has not yet been published. I will continue to urge the DCLG to publish a set of revised targets as soon as possible.

It would be wrong of me however, not to congratulate DCLG on the higher profile they have given to Equality & Diversity matters within the Framework Document. The establishment of the Diversity Happens Programme Board chaired and directed by Sir Graham Meldrum, has significantly raised the profile of Equality & Diversity matters within the Fire and Rescue Service.

In my own Association I'm pleased to see the diversity agenda reinforced by Area Managers and equivalent roles now becoming members of CFOA. Since September we have had over 60 new entrants.

Also the Association has made tremendous strides in the recruitment of women members, with 35% of new members over the past five years being women. In this changing environment, it's important for the CFOA Board members to take a positive lead as we develop, together, a common set of inclusive policies and practices.

I'd now like to turn to two other significant issues;

First, National Resilience.

This important initiative is a multifaceted part of the modernisation programme. I welcome the centrally funded deployment of New Dimension vehicles and equipment, which significantly increase the service's ability to support the UK at times of major incidents and catastrophes.

To support this capability, new training and skills have been introduced together with a world class urban search and rescue facility located at the FSC and the National Coordination Centre in West Yorkshire to ensure that equipment and resources are deployed effectively.

I also look forward to CFOA continuing to play a key role in the Long Term Capability Management of New Dimension matters in the future.

Secondly Industrial Relations.

We can't ignore that in some areas, industrial unrest still raises its head and indeed I would readily accept that there are still some challenges that need to be addressed, such as NJC reform. We all now operate in a very different environment and there is little room for entrenchment.

Rather, I would wish to encourage a strong dialogue with representative bodies; jointly looking at the major issues together in meaningful consultation and finding lasting solutions for the betterment of the service and our communities.

Since become CFOA President, I've been able to visit a large number of fire and rescue services across the United Kingdom. The recurring impression that these many visits have left with me is the way the service is pursuing the modernisation agenda with great energy and enthusiasm.

I have to say that a great deal is being achieved and the leaders of the service both elected members and officers should be justifiably proud of the progress that has been made to date.

The culture of prevention and reducing risk is now firmly embedded in our day-to-day business. Many fire and rescue services are successfully reaching out and working with local partners to make their communities and people safer - particularly the most vulnerable and disadvantaged sections of society; National fire statistics show that fire related deaths are now the lowest since 1959 but we can still do more.

Since the election of the current Labour government in 1997, partnership working has become the organisational strategy most strongly espoused by government for a wide range of policy initiatives, including regeneration, public health, crime reduction and social inclusion.

I was extremely interested to read the recent Local Government White Paper - Strong and Prosperous Communities - published by the DCLG on 26 October.

The aim of this White Paper is to give local people and local communities more influence and power to improve their lives. It's about creating strong, prosperous communities, and delivering better public services through a rebalancing of the relationship between central government, local government and local people.

I believe that communities need strategic leadership to help bring together local partners to improve the services citizens receive and their quality of life.

For the Fire & Rescue Service to be successful we need to support this neighbourhood focused and joined-up approach to service delivery.

We need to support and be involved in Local Area Agreements.

We need to review best practice with regard to the manner in which we have developed our partnership approach to making places safer, how well we involve our frontline workers and the way we use information to solve local problems

One area of partnership working which needs some further development is the tripartite working group being formed between the DCLG/LGA/CFOA. This is a vital element in the

modernisation process, particularly for strategic problem solving and I strongly believe that this is crucial to future success.

I hope we all contribute to the initiative inspired by the LGA and led by Councillor James Ashton to develop a joint 10-year vision for the Fire and Rescue Service. I look forward to discussing this and other key issues with James, Mac Maguire and of course my friend and colleague Les Byrom in the near future.

Finally, I would wish to see the development of partnerships covering the campaign for sprinklers in schools and other vulnerable sections of our communities, co-responding and Road Traffic Collision reduction initiatives.

On 24 October, our Fire Minister Angela Smith was in Northamptonshire for the launch of a brand new national youth strategy which makes combating anti-social behaviour and reducing the fire risk faced by vulnerable youngsters a mainstream Fire and Rescue Service activity for the first time.

The new strategy feeds into over-arching Government initiatives by enabling the Fire and Rescue Service to make a stronger contribution to tackling disadvantage, reducing health inequalities and preventing crime, by targeting children and young people at risk of offending or in deprived neighbourhoods.

This is a very important initiative because children and young people - especially those from poorer backgrounds – are sadly most vulnerable to death and injury by fire.

Young people are also likely to be responsible for a large proportion of deliberate fires. Around 40 per cent of all property and vehicle arson is linked to youth crime and disorder while around 60 per cent of the 1,200 reported fires in schools in England each year are deliberate.

In addition; you will all recall that the Secretary of State, Ruth Kelly, launched the new Commission on Integration and Cohesion on Thursday 24 August 2006. This independent Commission will consider innovative approaches looking at how communities across the country can be empowered to improve cohesion and tackle extremism.

I fully support the aims and objectives of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion.

It should be recognised that the F&RS, as a UK resource, is ideally placed to be part of a national response to community tension, due to its high public regard, access to all of the diverse sections of society and its fundamental ability to leverage well-being power.

So how do we pull all this together?

We as an Association, recommend that the F&RS be given an essential role in the future of community cohesion.

I believe it is time now to engage in a refreshed and honest debate about integration and cohesion in the UK.

If we are to have an effective, progressive response to these issues, then we must be candid about the challenges we face and be prepared to meet these head on with a renewed vigour.

I feel privileged to work with you all, particularly at a time of immense change and challenge. One thing I would add is that we should also take time to communicate our evident successes. Throughout all of this significant change, it's worth pausing to remind our selves that the modernisation of the fire and rescue service is set against a backdrop of continuing reductions in Fire Deaths and Deliberate Fires - this achievement is down to **you** and the hard work of everybody.

Therefore in genuine partnership, and with a Service that is truly representative of the richness and diversity of all our communities, I know that we can be a formidable force when it comes to delivering a modernised, first class Fire and Rescue Service fit for the 21st century.

Thank you for listening and I wish you all well in your endeavours.