

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

SUBMISSION FROM FIRE BRIGADES UNION

1. The FBU can offer only our experience from inside our own service. It is our believe however that a fundamental element in any change, is to ensure that all parties are aware of why change is required and be given the opportunity to contribute and influence not only what the change is, but also how that change occurs. Discussion around partners very often misses the most important partners of all – those internal partners, employers, managers and employees. We would advocate a new approach to reform, based on a collegiate and collaborative approach. This is currently being tested within the fire and rescue service in Scotland as that service moves from the current 8 organisations into a new single Scottish FRS.

2. There will be an opportunity during any reform process to build in a more modern approach to service development and industrial relations. We believe the two are linked and that a progressive, modern and innovative service will operate better within a positive, collaborative and contributory framework designed around a formal coalition or partnership agreement. There are various examples that can be referred to, but ultimately the best option for the service will be an agreement that is designed by those closest to the organisation, so that it reflects the unique circumstances pertaining to a particular service. Those involved in restructuring a service should look to contribute to the formation of a partnership agreement that will benefit 21st century service delivery.

3. A service must be seen as a series of interacting systems. These systems should all be acting on the goals set by the organisation in order to move forwards towards achievement in a series of steps forming continuous progress. The first key step in this progress is to establish the aspirational goals of the service. This is best done by inclusion of all who will be asked to act upon the system and who will ultimately determine the success of failure of the effort. The goal setting should therefore be done in partnership with the key elements of the service. The first task then of any partnership agreement is to set the aspirational goals of the service.

4. Having set the goals there will now be a clear point of focus that can be used to set priorities. Knowing the current status and the priorities allows for collective problem solving beginning across the entire organisation, but in a consistent and structured way, by establishing and using agreed routines. If collective responsibility can be established then many of the barriers to contribution are removed, the ethos of the service becomes collaborative and problem solving becomes achievable.

5. Partnership working avoids the “them and us” attitude and empowers participants who feel they are contributing and that they can make a difference. This in turn increases the willingness of more participants to get involved. Using a partnership arrangement means that collaborative work can be structured throughout the organisation. It also brings with it an acceptance that if the employees are being

regarded as partners then they will feel comfortable in making their contribution. This kind of working arrangement could be established at each level throughout any new service structure as it brings with it benefits in industrial relations and in the potential for achieving much more than traditional thinking.

6. The ability to tackle a project or problem by bringing to bear the entire resource available makes the prospect of a successful outcome all the more likely. In practical terms, by having management and trade unions sitting together in partnership to consider any specific challenge allows all to contribute as both management and union will have utilised their internal processes to consider the subject and will be able to draw on the brain power of all who will be effected rather than relying on a minority of individuals. It also allows the topic to be the focus of attention rather than any of the players. This allows for more creative thinking because it removes restrictions caused by taking pre-determined positions.

7. The capacity to work in this way will not just materialise though because it does require leadership and support. The fact that this is a different way of working will require all involved to learn and develop new skills. This however can be supported by the principles around coaching and mentoring that when in place can change attitudes and allow much greater effort to be put into addressing the topic under discussion rather than in defending traditional views.

8. When the focus is placed on reaching a goal in a collaborative way the needs of all contributors will form part of the discussion. This is not the same as them being used to block or to force. The process should no longer be about winning or losing but instead should focus on the goals and should regard interests rather than positions. In working in this way we believe there is a very real possibility removing the suspicion that stifles discussion and also prevents the position taking that eliminates many possible solutions before they are even considered. In essence partnership working has the potential to dramatically improve industrial relations in the service.

9. In order for this to develop it is suggested, that organisations develop robust partnership agreements and processes and that these are augmented by functional agreements that operate throughout all layers and departments within the organisation. These processes should be supported by the mentoring and coaching arrangements and should form part of the learning and development of all managers and union representatives. The methods of working should be disseminated throughout the structures in order for them to become the standard methodology by which the service works. This clearly will require the appropriate direction and leadership as well as practical support and encouragement. What must be made paramount is that if any one aspect is causing difficulty then this is supported in such a way as to protect the underlying process. The partnership arrangement must be protected from failure. To this end we think it appropriate that there be a support mechanism agreed at the outset, including individuals whose sole task will be to support partnership working throughout the service.

10. The FBU has supported the introduction of some of these principles into the restructure of the fire and rescue services in Scotland. That process is at a very early stage and remains vulnerable. However the early results are encouraging. This has however required determination from both the FBU and senior managers, has taken cognisance of work done elsewhere, with particular reference to Ireland¹ and has also involved direct support and training.

Bibliography

- 1) LANPAG Strategic Plan 2008 – 11
- 2) LANPAG Partnership at Work 2009

¹ Local Authority National Partnership Advisory Group (LANPAG)
<http://www.lgmsb.ie/LANPAG.aspx>



Fire Brigades Union Scotland Aonadh Luchd Smàlaidh na h-Àlba

The Fire Brigades Union is a politically non-affiliated Trade Union that represents Professional Wholetime, Retained, Auxiliary, & Volunteer Firefighters, Middle Managers and Emergency Fire Control Operators in Scotland - over 90% of the Services' Uniformed Personnel.

Fire Brigades Union Officials are available to all sections of the community, to advise on any issue relating to fire and rescue service & public fire safety matters. Our role is not only to serve our members but, as the Voice of Professional Firefighters, to ensure that the public get the best possible fire & rescue service throughout Scotland that they rightly demand & deserve.

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