

MINUTES

Date: Monday 11th September 2023

Time: 16:00 – 17:00

Venue: Held Virtually on MS Teams

Attendees:	Suzanne McCarthy (SMcC) – Chair Alison Sansome (AS) – Vice-Chair Ben Adams (BA) – Association of Police & Crime Commissioners (APCC) Jonny Bugg (JB) – Home Office Cllr. Nick Chard (NC) – Local Government Association (LGA) Mark Hardingham (MH) – National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC)
In Attendance:	Ben Ansell (BAAn) – National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) Emma Lawrence (EL) – Home Office Mark Hemming (MHe) – Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Nick Brennan (NB) – NFCC Implementation Team Jushna Chowdhury (JC) – Home Office (HO) Thomas Pinchbeck (TP) – Home Office (HO) Harry Palmer-Randle (HPR) – Association of Police & Crime Commissioners (APCC) Lucy Ellender (LE) – Local Government Association (LGA) Scott Marshall (SM) – Local Government Association (LGA)
Fire Standards Team (FST):	Joy Flanagan (JF) – NFCC Fire Standards Team (FST) Paul Henbest (PH) – NFCC Fire Standards Team (FST) Rachael Manton (RM) – NFCC Fire Standards Team (FST)

The Chair welcomed members to the meeting. No conflicts of interest were expressed by Board members. The group consented to the meeting being recorded.

**Resources: Proposed Fire Standard for Financial Activities
Paper 1 – For Decision****Chair**

The Chair gave a brief introduction as to the purpose of the meeting and the format it would follow. She reiterated that following the discussion, it will be the decision of the Board as to how they move forward with either a standard relating to Financial Management and Planning or an alternative option.

SMcC invited JF to provide the Board with an overview of the paper and the scope of the standard as currently conceived.

JF summarised both the paper and the discussion held at the July Board meeting including the agreement reached to hold this additional meeting with the relevant subject matter experts present. She outlined the progress made to date on development of draft standards covering the activities relating to the resources area of the services.

She commented on the concerns raised in relation to the proposed Finance Fire Standard. She confirmed that should the Board agree a standard for financial activities was required, it would follow the format of other Fire Standards and be principle based, setting out organisational level requirements. She also confirmed there would be no intention to conflict, contradict or replace the standards set out by CIPFA for managing finance within public bodies and local authorities.

She directed the Board to the revised rationale for a Fire Standard covering financial activities and proposed they consider this in their discussion and when making their decision about the best way forward. She also highlighted the view of HMICFRS shared with the Chairs and documented in the paper, expressing why would you not want a Fire Standard for this area of activity.

Finally, she invited the Board to consider the revised scope for a potential Fire Standard in this area. This had been requested at the July meeting and was at pages 4 to 6 of the paper.

The Chair advised that the purpose of the meeting was for the Board to review the information in the paper, hear from the subject matter experts and then decide on whether to endorse a standard relating to Financial Management and Planning or an alternative option.

SMcC invited the subject matter experts, BAn, MHe and EL, to speak.

They all expressed their support for the Fire Standards as a whole. They also agreed that whilst some items listed in the scope for the proposed standard were worthwhile, they did not believe there was a requirement for a stand-alone standard relating to financial activities.

They felt that other suitable guidance was already in place and referenced by services (such as CIPFA and the National Framework). They believed that a standard of this nature might create a risk by offering additional or further guidance which could cause confusion. They considered that there was a need for a standard which had as its focus achieving efficiency and productivity within services.

SMcC invited Board members to comment, and a short discussion took place. In relation to a standard for efficiency and productivity, JF advised that she could find no evidence of other organisations with similar professional standards including one about efficiency and productivity. She observed that improvements in productivity and efficiency were more commonly outcomes of organisations that manage their business well. In response BAn, MHe, and EL's all expressed the view that a standard focussed on efficiency and productivity would be beneficial.

NC and BA both expressed the view that a standard around finance could especially help governing bodies to benchmark how services are performing in comparison to others. They added that the Board had no intention of re-writing CIPFA or similar guidance. NC agreed that there was an increasing need for services to look at how efficiencies could be made.

MH felt that if the standard was not viewed by the services as being helpful, then it would not be utilised. He added that it could undermine the work of the Board and the positive support for Fire Standards achieved to date.

SMcC agreed that if the Board chose to progress a standard with services which was not supported, then it could have a very negative impact.

MH felt it was important to consider the necessity of the standard to ensure there was no overlap. He also agreed that it could be useful for Chief Fire Officers to have some guidance around financial activities. He added that it was perhaps more about the needs for leaders to consider issues pertaining to the finances of their service. He suggested that potentially the leadership standards could be bolstered by including those items listed in the scope. MH did not feel there was a need for each standard to be niche to the operating of a fire service but did need to reflect good guidance. Overall, he felt the Board should rethink the approach.

AS suggested that name of the standard might be part of the issue, and she urged the Board to reflect on the scope and therefore purpose for the standard. While AS acknowledged that some of the items in scope could possibly fit into other standards, such as leadership, she felt that the potential content of this standard would be important at a strategic level. She added that there was a potential for a gap in the suite of standards if the items in scope were not reflected somewhere. She stressed that the Standard would never be approved if it cut across existing guidance.

As it had been suggested that the National Framework provided sufficient cover for some areas listed in the scope, such as the need for Financial Reserves, AS went on to highlight that the current National Framework includes high level guidance covering many activities that Fire Standards have sought to expand and strengthen. Therefore, she felt it was not enough to say the content of the National Framework would suffice in matters relating to finance, when clearly if the framework was sufficiently effective on its own many of the issues experience would not have arisen and there would not have been a need for any Fire Standard development. However, she acknowledged that there had been an intent to review that

National Framework for some time and such work was being planned and provided opportunity to further strengthen Fire Standards.

BA said he felt the revised scope was very helpful and needed to be considered when the Board took its final decision. He agreed that perhaps the items set out in scope should be transferred into existing standards where appropriate. He also suggested that whilst a single finance related standard may not be required, consideration should be given to the strategic finance related aspects.

JB agreed with the views expressed by the Board. He felt the consensus in the room appeared to support an alternative approach and that a rethink would be advisable.

JF asked if HO colleagues could update the Board on the review of the National Fire Framework and how the Fire Standards may inform the review.

JB confirmed the review is planned and that the Fire Standards would form a focus and be at the centre of the revised framework. TP stressed that the alignment of Fire Standards and the framework was crucial.

It was agreed by the Board that the options being proposed were either to create a specific standard related to wider strategic financial activities or to consider how the elements identified by the Board from the revised scope could be reflected within the wider Fire Standards.

Considering all the points raised, the Board discussed how best to move forward. SMcC queried how quickly the revised scope could be considered by both the FST and BAn. BAn stressed that with current work related to the spending review submissions, finance colleagues would have limited time to be engaged.

JF proposed that a mapping activity could be carried out using the scope included in the paper and the current Fire Standards, both published and in development. She suggested that this activity could be carried out before the next meeting and the results presented to the Board in October.

SMcC invited comments from the Board. AS suggested that if a different approach was being taken and the finance specific aspects were not the focus, it may alleviate the situation for the finance subject matter experts. She suggested that if other Fire Standards were to be affected, NFCC lead officers or subject matter expert groups for those may be able to support some of this work.

NC stressed that this should be looked at from a cultural perspective with the need to focus on effectiveness, efficiency, and collaboration.

SMcC summarised the thoughts of the Board, stating that the importance of strategic financial activities within services was recognised by all Board members, but that they did not believe that a stand-alone fire standard was the only or best way to achieve this coverage.

She added that the Board agreed that the items they had identified from the revised scope during the meeting did need to be present within the suite of Fire Standards in some form.

She confirmed the proposal for the mapping exercise to be undertaken by the FST and and for this to be presented to the Board at its next meeting in October. SMcC asked if the Board was content with this proposal, to which all members agreed.

Action: FSB - A144 FST to undertake mapping exercise between the revised scope for strategic financial activities and the suite of Fire Standards.

Decision: FSB – D056 The Board agreed that a single Fire Standard for wider financial activities was not required at this stage, and that the aspiration would be to incorporate the scope identified within the paper into other Fire Standards.

Any Other Business

Chair

No further business was raised.

The next meeting will be **Monday 9th October**, held virtually on MS Teams.