

Local Government Finance Settlement 2020-21: Technical Consultation

If you are responding to this consultation by email or in writing, please reply using this questionnaire pro-forma, which should be read alongside the consultation document.

You should save the pro-forma on your own device, from which you can complete the survey at your own pace, and submit when you are ready.

There are 9 questions in this survey. You do not have to answer every question should you not wish to. The comments box will expand as you type into it should you need more space.

Should you wish to attach further evidence or supporting information, you may attach and send this with the pro-forma.

Please **email responses to:**
LGfsettlement@communities.gov.uk

Alternatively, **written responses should be sent to:**

Local Government Finance Settlement Team
 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
 2nd floor, Fry Building
 2 Marsham Street
 London
 SW1P 4DF

Your opinions are valuable to us. Thank you for taking the time to read the consultation document and respond.

Your Details (Required details are marked with an asterisk (*))

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Are the views Expressed on this form an official response from a:

London Borough

Metropolitan District

Unitary Authority

Shire County

Shire District

Fire and Rescue Authority

Greater London Authority

Combined Authority

Parish or Town Council

Local Authority Association or Special Interest Group

Other Local Authority Grouping

Local Authority Officer

Local Authority Councillor

Member of Parliament

Other Representative Group

Business

Business Organisation

Valuation Organisation

Voluntary Organisation

Member of the Public

Question 1

Do you agree with the Government's proposed methodology for the distribution of Revenue Support Grant in 2020-21?

Yes

No

No comment

Additional comments

With the 2020 comprehensive spending review, the fair funding review and the reform of business rates retention ahead against the ever-uncertain backdrop of Brexit and a potential general election; as much stability and certainty as is possible is needed. Given this the government's proposed methodology for the distribution of RSG in 2020-21 seems sensible.

Question 2

Should central government eliminate negative RSG in full through forgone business rates receipts?

Yes

No

No comment

Additional comments

the government's proposed approach regarding negative RSG seems consistent with the push for greater stability and certainty as stated above.

Question 3

Do you think that there should be a separate council tax referendum principle of 2% or £5, whichever is greater, for shire district councils in 2020-21?

Yes

No

No comment

Additional comments

Whilst the issue of shire districts' referendum principles has no direct effect on FRAs, the approach proposed seems sensible. Devon and Somerset FRA advocates for the government taking a similar approach for FRAs, allowing for a fixed increase to Council Tax precept. Similar referendum principles are required for FRAs to prevent the continued divergence of council tax, provide consistent funding protection for FRAs in all parts of England and importantly to invest in improving the service with a focus on fire protection.

Given the financial pressures faced by County Fire Services, the Authority would welcome an approach to precept flexibility which would allow all Fire and Rescue Services £5 flexibility on their element of overall precept.

Question 4

Do you have views on the proposed package of council tax referendum principles for 2020-21?

Yes

No

No comment

Additional comments

The government should set referendum principles which allow for consistent investment in reform arising from HMICFRS recommendations and fire protection activity.

Devon and Somerset FRA supports the National Fire Chief's Council (NFCC) proposal to allow an increase of £5 as this would level out council tax fire precepts, making

council tax fairer; would increase local powers and devolution *and* improve fire safety and save lives.

Investment in Fire Protection

The Hackitt enquiry and HMICFRS have highlighted the significant reduction in the number of fire safety audits in recent years. Across England in 2010-11 there were 84,575 fire safety audits, which by 2018-19 had decreased to 49,327. Whilst the proportion of audits resulting in a satisfactory rating has improved from 56% to 67% it is unknown whether this is the result of improving fire safety or just fewer audits. Clearly there is a need to invest in fire protection activity to increase activity in this area and outcomes for businesses and high risk properties.

Due to local Integrated Risk Management Planning the way in which Fire and Rescue Services deliver their fire protection activity can vary, with a mixture of delivery by firefighter crews and specialised business safety officers. Cost per audit will also vary as a result, with estimations being between £580 and £1150 per completed audit. As an illustration, just returning to 2010-11 activity levels requires an additional 35,248 audits, which would equate to an additional investment in excess of £30m. According to Home Office statistics, between 2010 and 2018 there was a reduction in FTE firefighters of 22%; in 2010 there were approximately 42,000 firefighters whilst in 2018 there were 32,000. As a result the ability for Fire and Rescue Services to delivery business safety activity using firefighter crews has diminished.

In terms of business safety officers, at a salary including on costs of circa £45,000, an additional £47.8m of funding for the sector (£5 increase) could pay for the recruitment of a further 1,062 staff to deliver this vital improvement.

Sector Pressures

As above, firefighter numbers have decreased by 22%. Over this same period (2010 to 2018) average response times to primary fires have increased by 31 seconds to 8 minutes and 45 seconds (a 6% increase).

If a fire of the scale of Grenfell Tower occurred anywhere other than London, it would be a significant challenge for any FRA to resource – even with mutual assistance. The reductions in firefighter numbers also directly impact the availability of personnel to support national resilience capabilities. Regarding fire and rescue operations post-Grenfell, FRAs faced additional requirements for inspections in high rise properties, even before the full impact of legislative change is known.

The sector needs to respond to the HMICFRS inspection process, with Tranche 2 findings that whilst responding to emergencies is a strength, Fire Protection is a concern and often under resourced whilst the inconsistent capability to respond to national incidents is highlighted. Investment will be required to work together across the sector to deliver improved outcomes.

In addition to those pressures that are specific to the FRS (outlined above) the fire service is also facing pressures like those in the wider public sector. Namely; wage inflation and the demands caused by an aging population; 42% of fire-related deaths occur in a home where the residents are aged over 65, despite making up just 19% of the population.

Any consideration of Fire Authority funding should also consider the need for the continuation of the Home Office's 'Fire Pensions Grant' received in 2019-20 as this will have a significant impact on the financial sustainability of the Sector; for Devon & Somerset FRA it creates a £4.1m funding gap.

Although the MHCLG has clearly looked to maximise certainty for 2020-21, it is unfortunate that there is no such certainty from 2021-22 onwards. Whilst recognising that this is an issue for the Treasury and is subject to the 2020 comprehensive spending review (which in turn is subject to many economic factors), the Authority asks that as much certainty as possible be provided to FRAs as early as possible regarding 2021-22 onwards.

Question 5

Do you agree with the Government's proposals for social care funding in 2020-21?

Yes

No

No comment

Additional comments

Question 6

Do you agree with the Government's proposals for iBCF in 2020-21?

Yes

No

No comment

Additional comments

Question 7

Do you agree that there should be a new round of 2020-21 New Homes Bonus allocations for 2020-21, or would you prefer to see this funding allocated for a different purpose, and if so how should the funding be allocated?

Yes

No

No comment

Additional comments

Question 8

Do you agree with the Government's proposed approach to paying £81 million Rural Services Delivery Grant in 2020-21 to the upper quartile of local authorities, based on the super-sparsity indicator?

Yes

No

No comment

Additional comments

Devon & Somerset FRA covers a significant rural area and as such faces unique service pressures, such as the availability of On Call firefighters and extended travel distances/times. The Authority welcomes the additional funding from the Rural Services Delivery Grant.

Question 9

Do you have any comments on the impact of the proposals for the 2020-21 settlement outlined in this consultation document on persons who share a protected characteristic? Please provide evidence to support your comments.

Yes

No

No comment

Additional comments

Fire and Rescue Services target their activity at the most vulnerable in society and therefore reducing resources is likely to have an impact on those needing additional support, such as elderly and disabled people.