



FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE MATTERS

A PARLIAMENTARY BULLETIN FROM THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION | FEBRUARY 2017

POLICE, FIRE AND CRIME COMMISSIONERS

The Policing and Crime Act 2017 introduces the most significant change to the governance of the fire and rescue service in generations. The legislation places all three emergency services under a statutory duty to collaborate where it improves efficiency or effectiveness. It enables police and crime commissioners (PCCs) in England to take over fire and rescue services in their area.

PCCs may adopt the 'single employer' or 'governance' model. Under the governance model the fire and rescue service and police service will remain two distinct organisations with separate management structures. The single employer model enables a PCC to delegate fire functions to a single chief officer for policing and fire, integrate senior management teams and also harmonise conduct and complaints systems, as well as terms and conditions.

THE UNION'S POSITION

The FBU has consistently raised concerns that allowing PCCs to take over fire services could adversely affect the service by putting financial savings ahead of public safety. The union worked closely with Labour's shadow Home Office team in both the commons and the lords as the bill made its way through parliament. Despite compelling arguments against bringing fire services under PCCs and attempts to introduce vital safeguards to prevent PCCs engaging in "hostile" takeovers where there is public opposition or the introduction

of unsuitable single-employer models.

The legislation passed with few amendments accepted. The FBU will continue to campaign to secure the best funding, resources and conditions for firefighters and local communities.

EARLY ADOPTERS

To date at least eleven Conservative PCCs have expressed an interest in taking over fire and rescue services:

OPPC	FRS
Cambridgeshire	Cambridgeshire
Essex	Essex
Hertfordshire	Hertfordshire
Norfolk	Norfolk
Northamptonshire	Northamptonshire
North Yorkshire	North Yorkshire
Staffordshire	Staffordshire
Suffolk	Suffolk
Surrey	Surrey
Sussex	East Sussex
	West Sussex
Thames Valley	Buckinghamshire
	Oxfordshire
	Royal Berkshire

CoPaCC: Analysis of OPCC intentions (2017)

Eager to claim the accolade of becoming the first ‘police, fire and crime commissioner’, several PCCs have already begun to develop their business cases with the intention of taking over fire and rescue service governance as soon as possible.

BUSINESS CASES

PCCs seeking to take over a fire and rescue service are required to consult locally and submit a business case to the home secretary who will grant the order (irrespective of local opposition) if it is considered to be in the interests of “economy, efficiency, effectiveness or public safety.”

This process places the ball firmly in the court of empire-building PCCs who have no electoral mandate to take over fire services.

ECONOMY, EFFICIENCY & EFFECTIVENESS

PCCs have framed their motivation to take over fire and rescue services predominantly in terms of the efficiencies they intend to achieve by sharing facilities, merging “back office” support functions and through joint procurement.

Collaborative arrangements are already in place without the need for a statutory duty or change of governance. The FBU is concerned that mandating police-fire collaboration will cut across the successful partnerships already in place with neighboring fire services, local authorities and other organisations. Enabling a PCC to take fire and rescue services out of existing arrangements will have serious implications for all involved, and may even result in diseconomies of scale.

Collaboration works best when all involved enter an arrangement equally, as willing partners. Hostile takeovers and mandatory partnerships risks damaging relationships and established, successful working practices.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Since 2010, the government has reduced its funding for fire and rescue authorities in England by between 26% and 39%. As a result 10,000 frontline firefighters have been lost, 40 stations have closed and scores of appliances have been removed culminating in slower response times across the country and an increase in fire deaths.

Firefighters provide an all hazard emergency response attending floods, road traffic collisions, chemical spillages, civil contingencies, industrial disasters and terrorist attacks, as well as fires.

PCCs must not put financial savings before public safety. It is imperative that fire and rescue services are properly funded, with resources determined by risk, not cost.

OPERATIONAL DISTINCTION

The government’s austerity agenda has resulted in the police service facing similar unprecedented budget cuts.

The FBU is concerned that PCCs will use fire service resources to prop up ailing police forces. Although police and fire services will continue to receive separate funding, there is still room for budget flexibility on shared and joint costs.

Moreover, some PCCs have indicated their eagerness to develop the role of firefighters. While the legislation maintains the ban on serving police officers working as firefighters, PCCs have been eager to emphasise that there is scope for firefighters to undertake non-warranted police activities, such as work with vulnerable people, particularly around issues relating to mental health, which take a substantial amount of police time.

In some parts of the country, firefighters are already undertaking police constable support officer (PCSO) work. Firefighters provide an independent, humanitarian service. Operational and organisational independence from the police is a red line.