

FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE MATTERS



FIRE BRIGADES UNION
The professional voice
of your firefighters

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POLICE AND CRIME COMMISSIONERS A THREAT TO OUR PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

On 25 November, the government published the 2015 Spending Review which outlined their intention to enable police and crime commissioners (PCCs) to take charge of English fire and rescue services.

The government's proposal has not been thoroughly thought through and has avoided proper scrutiny. The public consultation contained no substantial evidence and posed leading questions designed around the government's preferred outcome. It is very disappointing that the government has yet to publish its response to the consultation, given the volume of concerns a wide array of stakeholders have raised.

Enabling PCCs to govern fire and rescue services will neither deliver economic, efficient or effective emergency services nor optimise public safety. On the contrary, these proposals threaten to damage the well-earned trust of the public in firefighters, hamper innovation and will lead to the fragmentation of emergency service delivery across the UK.

Firefighters' humanitarian role – why PCCs have no place in the fire and rescue service

Firefighters enjoy the highest levels of public trust, satisfaction and confidence in the UK with the skills and expertise communities know they can rely on. Their role as independent and impartial life-savers enables them to reach all communities, in difficult political and social circumstances.

The public's view of the police, and reception to them, is often quite different. Association with the police through shared governance or service mergers could damage the reputation firefighters have built up in neighbourhoods over decades, which they rely upon in order to have access to people's homes for vital fire prevention and rescue work.

PCC control over fire - a costly experiment

PCCs have not proven to be particularly efficient to date with 40% of PCCs spending more than the police authorities they replaced.

Many fire and rescue services already collaborate with a range of public sector partners including local authorities and ambulance trusts. Forcing fire and rescue services to collaborate with the police at the expense of other stakeholders may result in substantial diseconomies of scale, particularly in cases where fire authorities are not coterminous and/or are part of the county council.

Nine fire and rescue authorities are county councils and 15 fire and rescue authorities are not coterminous with police force areas. Enabling PCCs to take control of these authorities would involve separating their functions from county councils, merging two or more fire authorities and/or restructuring the entire region. This would be a complex and costly exercise, fraught with practical and technical barriers.

Bringing PCCs into fire and rescue services is a smokescreen for the government's cost-cutting agenda that will lead to further outsourcing and privatisation within our emergency services.

PCC lack the expertise to govern fire services

PCCs do not bring any skills or expertise to the fire and rescue service. Some PCCs already have an unfortunate record for ill-judged interference in operational matters as highlighted by the Police Federation and Lord Stevens, the former head of the Metropolitan Police Service.

PCC control over fire will disrupt the fire and rescue service

Across the UK, fire and rescue services are evolving in order to adapt to changing patterns of risk, including environmental challenges and increasingly complex security threats which have placed new demands on our emergency services.

Firefighters are increasingly undertaking additional roles that complement their existing work including community engagement, medical response and flood rescue. The government's proposals do nothing to invest in fire and rescue services, or develop the role of firefighters to better meet today's challenges and deliver safer, healthier and more resilient communities. On the contrary, these proposals will undermine efforts by a range of fire and rescue service stakeholders to develop the service.

PCC control will lead to fragmentation of emergency service delivery across the UK

The government's proposal cuts across the devolution agenda by introducing competing models of policing and fire and rescue.

Due to the devolution of local government in Wales, the proposals would only enable PCCs in England to takeover fire and rescue services. Within England, it would be up to individual PCCs to make the case for a transfer of governance. Many PCCs have indicated that they do not wish to take over fire and rescue services and this will inevitably result in different governance structures, roles and responsibilities from area to area within England. This is further complicated by the introduction of metro mayors in some regions, some of whom will have responsibility for fire and rescue services and/or policing.

The disparity of policing and fire and rescue provision will have significant implications for ambulance trusts and other public bodies who will have to navigate their way through a fragmented landscape of emergency service provision. This will inevitably make collaboration more difficult, undermining government's stated aims.

Different models will also likely have a detrimental effect on the fire and rescue profession as inconsistencies in fire safety enforcement and operational response will make it difficult to assess the effectiveness of different services, a problem already highlighted by the National Audit Office.

PCC control over fire will diminish local democracy and accountability

PCCs have a miserable mandate for their existing activities given the low turnout of just over 15% in the 2012 elections. Abolishing fire authorities comprised of democratically elected councillors would sweep away vital democratic safeguards in the fire and rescue service.

In London where there is an additional layer of oversight, the proposals to abolish LFEPA would weaken the mechanism of checks and balances over the mayor. The majority on LFEPA were quite right in principle and representative of public opinion in

opposing the Mayor's fire cuts in 2013 – this is the real reason the body is targeted for abolition

PCC control would subordinate the fire service

Police forces are much larger organisations than fire services, and with the interests of PCCs naturally falling with the police, it is very clear that the police and policing issues would dominate the new arrangements proposed. Indeed, despite the government's assurance that policing and fire funding streams would remain separate, many PCCs advocate combined budgets in order to allow greater flexibility. There is real concern that this could result in fire budgets being used to subsidise policing activities at the expense of fire and rescue service provision.

Different employment practices and requirements

Police officers and firefighters perform very different roles and this is reflected in the respective management structures, human resource policies and support functions required to run an effective service.

The proposals seek to undermine these practices through the creation of a single employer. Transferring operational control to the chief constable would have a detrimental effect on both services. It would be inappropriate for chief fire officers to assume the role of police chief constables and for chief constables to take on the role of chief fire officer. There is no substitute for operational experience developed through career progression.

Police officers and firefighters are subject to separate procedures for safe systems of work and different arrangements for pay and conditions. The involvement of PCCs will disrupt industrial relations. The existing employment relations are fit for purpose; they can be improved through negotiations.

The different remits of the police and fire service have also presented practical challenges to integrating back office support functions. In Derbyshire, the joint Police and Fire HQ venture has encountered serious problems sharing IT infrastructure due to the security level requirements of the police service which do not apply to the fire and rescue service. Derbyshire PCC, Alan Charles, notes that this restricted how far IT systems can be shared and thus the potential for back office savings. This is why many fire authorities favour collaboration with local government bodies with whom there is greater compatibility and scope for efficiency savings to be made.

PCC control over fire – bad news for police service

The proposals will have a detrimental effect on police forces too. Will Riches, vice chair of the Police Federation of England and Wales, said the plans do not represent value for money and could jeopardise the continuity and resilience which the police service relies on to operate effectively.

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