
All Station/Brigade Reps – Briefing Note 03/17

RFU Circular Position Statement – Police and Crime Commissioners

In our view, the current model of strategic management and accountability undertaken by local councils via their fire authorities, has failed in its role to provide an efficient, effective emergency service, that is both safe to work in and free from discrimination.

While there are knowledgeable and well-meaning individuals within FAs, they are in a minority and hamstrung by an archaic system that is not conducive to overseeing an emergency service fit for the 21st century.

Equality and Diversity in the UKFRS lags woefully behind other comparative emergency services with little sign of any improvement, many types of discrimination are still strongly institutionally embedded within most FRs.

On far too many occasions we have witnessed the system fail both the employees and the public by its decisions and lack of any real direction, very limited scrutiny and non-existent accountability for performance and outcomes. There are a number of examples of FRs currently in a process of resolution or still under investigation across England highlighting the need for change.

Elected members historically have not had the depth of knowledge necessary to provide independent and informed scrutiny of senior officers' proposals, often these are deliberately designed to be very technical and over-complicated making them difficult for elected members to understand.

Members of fire authorities are not elected by the public, but merely selected by their local political group, they change regularly when there are local elections, so direct public accountability and oversight is very limited. This has contributed to the perpetuation of the existing inequalities, discrimination and institutional incompetence that so often comes to light even today.

The RFU has met with many elected members who sit on fire authorities, their level of understanding as to how the fire service works varies dramatically. Some are clearly knowledgeable and sympathetic as to how the Retained Duty System (RDS) operates and the support that is required to maintain the system, while others are in post for political reasons with no understanding or care for the employees of the service.

A great level of knowledge is required at fire authority level for elected members to understand the workings of their local Integrated Risk Management Plans (IRMPs) which range from lengthy complex documents filled with statistical information that would confuse the most knowledgeable fire service officer, to the other end of the spectrum whereby scant

documents are so vague in their content that they fail to inform the elected member/member of the public of any tangible information whatsoever.

The Knight report was correct to state that scrutiny varies considerably across fire authorities but we would suggest that by and large, effective and informed scrutiny is very limited.

Often On-Call firefighters are cut to preserve the jobs of whole time firefighters even though this is a vastly more expensive option, the Knight report identified massive savings across England if this policy was reversed, so far there is little evidence of this happening.

Our view is that a PCC could undertake a role of directly accountable leadership 'where a local case is made'. However, as it is unlikely that local councils would voluntarily hand over power to a PCC, it is more expected that there will be some outside pressures for a change to occur.

In some cases for a PCC to take on the strategic oversight of a fire service, there may need to be a merger of fire and rescue authorities, again we are not automatically opposed to such a move but would require further detail on a case-by-case basis. There are already examples of FRSs sharing chief officers so this shouldn't present insurmountable difficulties.

With this in mind, we do not dismiss the idea of a PCC taking over responsibility of any FRS and are open minded to discuss the potential change dependent on local needs.

Should any PCC decide to take on the responsibility of a local FRS, there would need to be the appropriate transparency of local data made available with which accountability can be held to determine how a service is being run, this would be a very welcome move.

There would also need to be meaningful benchmarks put in place to demonstrate how a FRS is performing, we expect such benchmarks to be part of the new Inspectorate and used by the electorate (and stakeholders) with which to hold a PCC to account.

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