

FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE MATTERS

A PARLIAMENTARY BULLETIN FOR MPS FROM THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION | JUNE 2021

FIREFIGHTERS SAY "NO" TO PCC TAKEOVERS



In March, Home Secretary Priti Patel announced plans to consult on possible changes to fire governance. The Home Secretary proposed consulting this summer on "whether to mandate the transfer of fire and rescue functions to the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner model across England where boundaries are coterminous, unless there is an option to transfer fire governance directly to an elected Mayor".

The FBU is opposed to police and crime commissioners (PCCs) taking over fire and rescue services in England and Wales. Fire and rescue is a humanitarian service, not about law enforcement. Firefighters do not want to be swallowed up by police forces. Imposing the PCC model on local people is not democracy. The PFCC model involves less scrutiny and accountability than local government fire authorities.

THREAT TO FIRE AND RESCUE

A PCC takeover of fire and rescue services places public safety, local response and firefighters at risk:

To the public:

- Less transparency
- Less democracy
- Less accountability

To the fire and rescue service:

- Fire & rescue will be the second fiddle to policing
- Cuts will be passed from police to fire
- Loss of independence
- Loss of neutrality

To firefighters:

- Threat to terms and conditions.
- Threat to current contractual rights
- Threat of greater control by unaccountable chief fire officers
- Threat to the current collective bargaining structure, where firefighters' pay and terms and condition are negotiated

FIRE IS A HUMANITARIAN SERVICE

Shifting governance of fire to PCCs seriously blurs the lines between the role of the fire and rescue service and the role of the police, and the people who perform those roles. There is a clear distinction between the two, with the former providing a humanitarian service to the community and the latter carrying out law enforcement.

Firefighters are perceived differently by communities and can thus be uniquely more effective in certain situations, getting more community engagement. There are concerns that the fire and rescue service would lose some of its impact in the event of a loss of neutrality. By merging the two, the FBU is fearful that fire would become the insignificant junior partner to the police service, which is clearly larger in terms of personnel and resources. Should future funding cuts be proposed, it is fire which would likely take the hit. Firefighters see clear evidence for this as they recall that when the prime minister was mayor of London, he shifted money from fire reserves to fund police numbers and cut the fire service.

DEMOCRACY REDUCED

Although there are various models, currently, fire and rescue services in England are generally managed by fire authority of elected councillors. This is comprised of a board (of 12-25 members) of elected councillors from the local authority/ authorities, reflecting the political composition of the authority as a whole. This makes for an accountable and democratic system, where cross-party debate about fire budgets and other decisions takes place in public. By contrast, PCCs only have a weak, appointed scrutiny panel. Although fire authorities are far from perfect, the PCC model is significantly worse for democracy and accountability.

The proposal to scrap fire authorities and replace them with one single PFCC is damaging to democracy. Where a PCC has been elected, this has been on a policing ticket, where they would not have responsibility for fire. Yet the White Paper is likely to suggest that the PCC could take over governance, whether the local community wants them to or not; clearly a measure which would weaken local democracy. Furthermore, it means decisions are only being scrutinised by one individual, not an entire board of experienced councillors. The current system provides a political balance reflecting the views of local communities.

Ministers argue a PFCC model would ensure smooth collaboration between the emergency services. This is unnecessary, as collaboration already takes place across different fire and rescue service borders, and between fire and other agencies.

FIREFIGHTERS' CONDITIONS

PCCs may adopt the 'governance' or 'single employer' 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.

NO TO PCC TAKEOVERS

The Policing and Crime Act 2017 introduced the most significant change to the governance of the fire and rescue service in generations. The legislation placed all three emergency services under a statutory duty to collaborate where it improves economy, efficiency or effectiveness. It enables PCCs to take over fire and rescue services in their area.

However there has been little appetite from firefighters or the public for the PCC to take over fire service governance. At present, only four areas now have a Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (PFCC): Staffordshire, Essex, Northamptonshire and North Yorkshire.

Following the elections on 6 May, there are now 30 Conservative, 1 Plaid Cymru and 8 Labour PCCs. Ministers may be tempted by the majority of new Conservative PCCs to push on with the PFCC agenda. However, many local politicians – including Conservatives on county councils or on other fire authorities – do not want PCCs taking over fire services. The FBU again believes that there is no appetite from firefighters or the public for this change.

The FBU has strongly opposed the PCC takeover from the very beginning. Firefighters continue to oppose these unnecessary and undemocratic proposals that would compromise the fire and rescue service as an independent, humanitarian service. They would reduce the rights of local communities to have a say about their own local services.

The FBU wants MPs to speak to firefighters in their constituencies to hear their arguments against the proposed takeovers. MPs can also garner commitments from their PCC to maintain distinct governance arrangements for fire and rescue services and the police. Firefighters say "no" to PCC takeovers.



Bradley House
68 Coombe Road
Kingston upon Thames
KT2 7AE

For more information, contact:

Mary Wedgwood mary.wedgwood@fbu.org.uk