



Response to the Minister Association of Metropolitan Fire and Rescue Authorities





Potential Impact of the 2013-15 Finance Settlement Association of Metropolitan Fire and Rescue Authorities

Introduction

On 16th July 2012, six senior officers from the six Metropolitan Fire Services appeared before the Communities and Local Government Select Committee and gave evidence on the unfair financial settlement imposed upon the Mets compared to other fire services, and the potential damage that could be caused should the same scenario be repeated in the next round of budget cuts.

It was then the turn of the Fire Minister and Sir Ken Knight, the Chief Fire and Rescue Advisor to face the committee. They were questioned strongly on why the funding formula produced such unequal outcomes and the thinking behind the settlement for the next two years.

Unfortunately, the officers did not have the opportunity to respond to the Ministers points at the time, and so the Association of Metropolitan Fire and Rescue Authorities (AMFRA) felt it would be helpful to give their understanding around some of the Minister's arguments and points. Each of the questions and the Minister's responses have been necessarily paraphrased but with the original meaning maintained. A full transcript of the Minister's evidence and the evidence of the Met Chiefs can be found at:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmcomloc/uc519-i/uc51901.htm>



Reason behind flawed formula

Was this disproportionate effect on the metropolitan authorities something that was done deliberately, or was it just one of the accidents of the formula funding arrangements?

Minister: I do not accept the premise of the question. The first part of the answer is yes; we applied the formula, which we inherited from the previous Government. There were a couple of technical adjustments that we made. It was clear that all areas would be expected to make savings and in the case of fire, the reductions were back-loaded over the whole of the Spending Review period to give extra time for some of the joint working, collaboration and efficiencies.

There were, in a couple of instances, some very small increases for one or two non-metropolitan brigades. However, we in fact applied damping to the formula across the two-year period; metropolitan authorities were protected by the floor damping to the tune of £26 million.

There are two further areas that worked to the Mets advantage – we included a population density weighting and also increased capital funding by between 50 and 82%. I don't think it is fair to say the Mets were singled out.

The minister has repeatedly said that his aim was to increase the amount of money allocated towards deprivation and we wholeheartedly support the minister's aim as it's in line with the governments own research linking fire risk to poverty (such as that carried out by Greenstreet Berman). However, the absurdity of the formula has meant that despite the ministers aspirations it was actually the most deprived areas that have faced the biggest cuts.

In reality, the extra money the minister put into deprivation (increasing the relative needs amount) came from a reduction in the relative resources block. The relative resources block takes account of the relative ability to collect council tax. The complexity of the formula meant that this, we presume, unintended consequence was not recognised because those authorities with least ability to collect council tax are the low property value, deprived northern conurbations.

As a result, the extra money going into deprived areas came from the deprived areas.



Table 1 - Percentage of Total Cut (excluding counties)

Cash Cut In Total Budget 2010/11-2012/13	£'m	% of total cut	Total Budget 2010/11 (£'m)	% Cut in Total Budget
Metropolitan Fire Authorities (x6)	35.6	84.2%	521.9	6.82%
Combined Fire Authorities (x24)	6.2	14.7%	1,024.2	0.61%
London*	0.5	1.2%	437.3	0.11%
Total Excluding Counties	42.3	100%	1,983.4	2.18%

Source: Local Government Finance Settlement 2011/12 and 2012/13

*These are estimated figures extrapolated from LFEPA's 2010/11 GLA grant

In addition, whilst some factors like density were changed which had a minor positive impact there were other changes which were negative – notably the expenditure data used in the regression analysis was updated. Because the Mets had made most savings and efficiencies we believe this leads the formula to reduce resources from those who have been most efficient and modernised the most.

Additional capital resources are welcome but the current resources are insufficient for the backlog of maintenance and repair on fire stations and appliances that most services have and in any case additional capital funding cannot help us with revenue costs

Since the minister and most commentators acknowledge the flaws within the grant formula the decision to set the floor at such a level that allowed enormous variations in grant arising from the flawed formula to feed through, seems unusual. This led to the perverse position that some authorities got grant increases.

Met Fire Services have been making reduction in staffing numbers for the past decade (Table 2), and are set to lose hundreds more firefighters as a result of the cuts suffered in 2011-13. By comparison London has had to make little in the way of changes.



Table 2 – Previous and predicted firefighter reductions

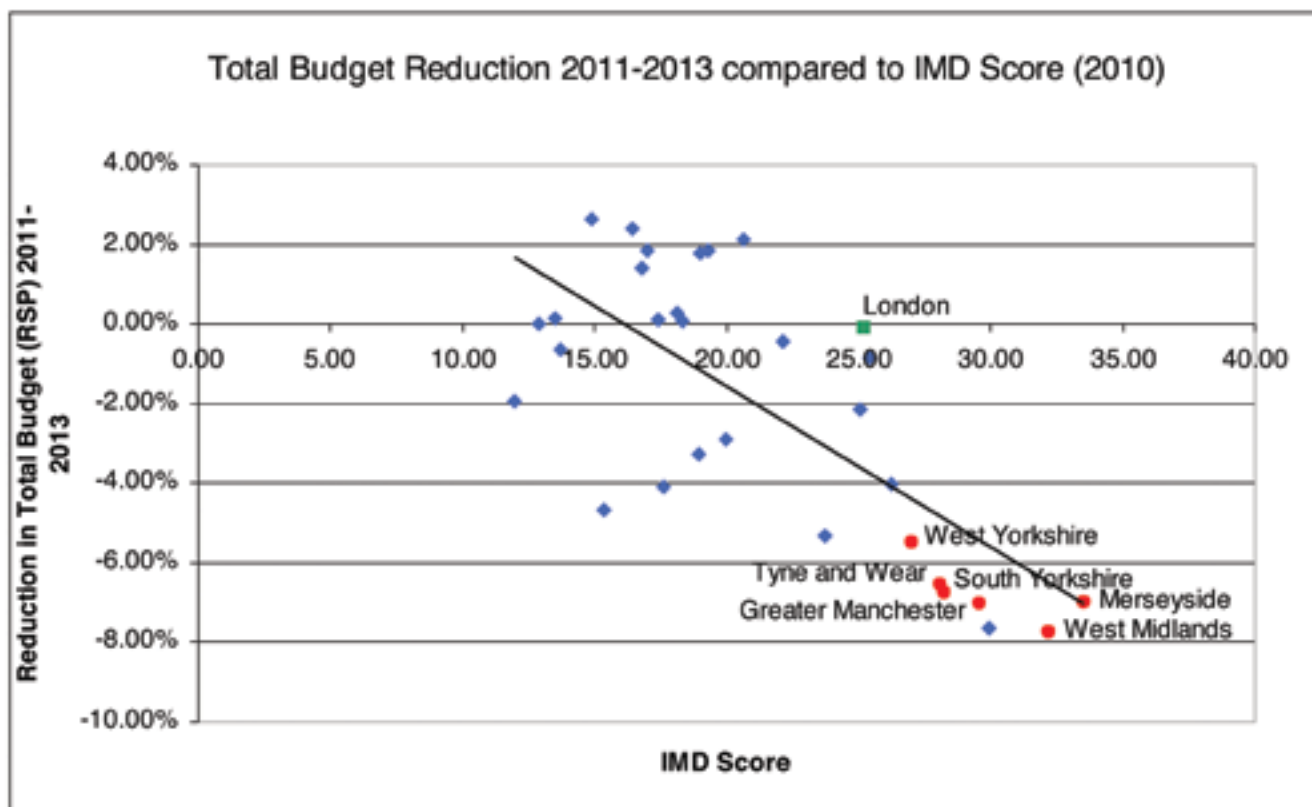
	Firefighters (FTE)				
	2000/01	2010/11	2014/15 (Based on cuts so far)	Change (%) 2000/01 – 2010/11	Change (%) 2000/01 – 2014/15
Greater Manchester	2,108	1842	1418	-266 (-12.6%)	-690 (-32.7%)
Merseyside	1420	972	847	-448 (-32.7%)	-573 (-40.3%)
South Yorkshire	960	840	700	-120 (-12.5%)	-260 (-27%)
Tyne and Wear	1035	872	792	-163 (-15.7%)	-243 (-23.4%)
West Midlands	2043	1788	1488	-255 (-12.5%)	-555 (-27.1%)
West Yorkshire	1847	1537	1279	-310 (-16.7%)	-568 (-30.7%)
London	5639	5789	5789*	+150 (+2.6%)	+150 (+2.6%)

* LFB have stated that no firefighter posts will be reduced as a result of 2011-13 settlement

We recognise that there are some other fire services that have received significant cuts but it cannot be denied that the Mets form six of the seven most heavily cut brigades. The vast majority of the cuts handed down have been shouldered by just six services with only one quarter of the budget. (Table 1 above). The other member of that unfortunate group is Cleveland FRS, which is also the most deprived non-Met. Using the same methodology as used by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in their analysis of funding for local councils the graph below (Chart 1) indicated clearly the perverse correlation between relative deprivation and budget cuts.



Chart 1



¹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (January 2012) Serving Deprived Communities in a recession

<http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/communities-recession-services-full.pdf> (page 16)



Balancing the cost per head

Met Fire Authorities have had an average cut of 12.5%. If the average for the country is about 6%, and some six authorities have had an increase, how and when we were going to be all in this together, do some appear to have escaped that general manifesto commitment from Government? Mets have a bigger percentage of their total spend from Government grant because they get a low percentage from Council Tax. Even if it was the same percentage cut across the board, the Mets would still have had a bigger percentage reduction in their spending capacity.

Minister: I think the public would also understand that if they looked at it on the basis of average funding per head of population for the Mets in this current year (2012/13), Mets received £26 on average, versus the funding in the shire brigades of £19 per head. There is a significant difference in funding, which I would be the first to say reflects some of the extra demand.

In terms of council tax, the situation is the same for metropolitan fire authorities as it is generally for most metropolitan authorities of all classes. We are looking at how we deal with the dependency local authorities generally have upon grant as such a principal source of income, hence our proposals for business rates retention.

The average funding per head point is a disingenuous argument because Mets have much lower council tax. In short, this reflects the different levels of dependency on grant and the different ratios that exist between different authorities in relation to council tax and grant. What is clearly taking place is a re-balancing as, currently, the overall revenue spending power per head is almost exactly the same on average as Shires in 2012/13 (£44 for Mets to £43 for Shires).

While we welcome the government's commitment to making local authorities generally less dependent upon central government grant, we do not believe that should be achieved by simply cutting back central grant until it is a lower proportion of funding compared to council tax. Such an approach will always cause problems for those areas which have less capacity to raise Council Tax (and Government's proposals to introduce tariffs and top ups into the business rates retention scheme means they clearly understand the need to differentiate between local authorities' funding on the basis of their ability to raise income locally).

We welcome the view that Mets should be less reliant on government grant and believe that they should be permitted to increase council tax to align their funding more closely with other fire services.



We would welcome confirmation that the Minister is to take different approaches to authorities' council tax strategies depending upon their starting positions.

The government claims to have given greater freedoms to local authorities to raise funds locally, but has heavily encouraged (and in reality directed) two temporary council tax freezes in 2011/12 and 2012/13 (which consequently benefit those Shires with high council tax precepts).

Furthermore, the referendum mechanism introduced to allow authorities to increase precept to "catch up" with those that have been increasing it above inflation for years is completely unaffordable for Fire and Rescue Authorities. The huge cost of running the referenda for such small authorities is prohibitive. Therefore, we stand little chance of readdressing this balance. As an example (based on CLGs own published figures for councils from the Alternative Vote referendum in May 2011) if all precepting fire authorities ran a referendum to raise their council tax precept by 5% it would cost £41m to raise £38m.

Local Government Resource Review Consultation

Can we just be clear what the submissions to the July 2010 consultation were from the metropolitan fire authorities at the time?

Minister: We asked whether we should add in annual cashable efficiency savings that had been reported between 06-07 and 08-09 by authorities. The majority, by 28 to seven, were against adding in the efficiency data. That included the Mets: Merseyside, West Midlands, West Yorkshire and Tyne and Wear. The main reason given was that it was felt it did not provide a consistent reflection of the ability of authorities to make efficiencies over the period.

The Mets did not oppose taking account of the large-scale efficiencies that we had already achieved in grant allocation but merely raised concerns about the adequacy of the mechanism that was proposed to take account of this. We would not have been opposed to properly audited efficiency savings data being used.

This was reflected in our responses at the time. For example, Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority stated at the time within their consultation response:



“The system for recording efficiency savings left flexibility to claim savings whilst not reducing expenditure, by reinvesting the savings elsewhere within the service. Therefore the adjustment for efficiency savings rewards those authorities that have reinvested the savings at the expense of those who reduced the base budget. The Authority cannot agree with this option until more robust information is available that fairly reflects the true position across all FRAs”

Finding efficiencies elsewhere

We have a series of different menu items where you have said you can see efficiencies happening. Given the number of fire authorities that there are, do you believe that there are too many and should we see mergers? Or should we see back-office functions merged across authorities? Where do you see these efficiencies coming from?

Minister: I think there will be a great deal more collaborative working. It is surprising in all but the very largest authorities to be expecting stand-alone, back-office functions. Exactly how they are shared and configured I would not seek to dictate from the centre, but I have made it absolutely clear to authorities that we will not do anything to impede any mergers operationally or, indeed, beyond. Some authorities have at least posited and discussed the possibility of a full administrative merger.

As we have argued before, we are already delivering joint services in a wide range of areas, including HR, Fire Control, Procurement, fleet management and so forth. These services are not purely shared across FRAs; there are many examples of back office functions shared with Councils and other partners, as well as co-location of front line services with other blue light providers.

However, as the largest fire authorities, serving a combined population of 11 million people across 36 Council areas, we feel we already offer an excellent model of the economies of scale which can be achieved in terms of management, support and service delivery.



Impact on staffing levels

How much was the impact on staffing numbers a part of your deliberations?

Minister: They are always in the deliberations. The key thing above all is always to ensure protection of the public. There is an interesting point in relation to the mets, when we look at risk and staffing levels. The nature of firefighting has changed and we are dealing not purely with fires and firefighting activity; there is also very good work around fire prevention and awareness work, the key objective being to stop fires in the first place. Therefore, over the last 10 year period, what we have seen in the mets, in effect, is a reduction in total incident attendance of 51%, and a reduction in the firefighter strength of 11%.

The minister's figures are incorrect – the reduction in firefighter strength in the six Mets of Greater Manchester, Merseyside, South Yorkshire, Tyne and Wear, West Midlands and West Yorkshire from 2001 – 2011 (before the current spending period) was 18%.

If, however, London is included (a brigade that received only 3% cuts) the figure is 11%. This is because London had exactly the same number of frontline firefighters in 2011 as they did in 2001 (5,444)

What is more, the relationship between staff numbers and incidents is not as simplistic as just cutting firefighters as fires reduce. While we are rightly proud that the total number of incidents has fallen sharply; this is only because our firefighters now do a great deal more prevention based activity than 10 years ago. The complexity of the incidents attended and the skillset of individual firefighters has grown hugely over the same period.

It should also not be forgotten that Fire Services collectively offer contingent capability and resilience that cannot be matched by any fire service alone or any private sector company – something the Defence Secretary recognised in relation to the Army after the failings of G4S at the Olympics. The Mets currently offer half of this contingency – and so to try and apply a lean management principle of simply matching resource to demand (rather than risk) is foolhardy.

It has been clearly recognised from activities from smoking cessation programmes to community policing initiatives that prevention is cheaper than cure. Stopping incidents happening reduces pressure on the public purse by a significant amount. The FRS nationally is in the vanguard of proving that this is the case; we are not just preventing fires but preventing all kinds of anti-social behaviour and supporting people to live independently at home, thus making savings beyond the budgets of FRAs. This does not just apply to Mets.



Pushing ahead with a flat rate cut

If we can accept that that the current formula has produced a pretty ludicrous outcome, and given that we are about to abandon the formula anyway, why don't we just abandon it for the current year, give the flatrate decrease as the fire authorities are suggesting, and then move forwards under the new system thereafter?

Minister: It is a superficially attractive argument, but we trailed it, Mr Hollingbery. In the 2010 local government consultation, we asked whether we should set the baseline at a flat level, as is the case for police. Two thirds of single-purpose fire authorities did not want to do that; they wanted it to be set in such a way as some change to formula grant came through

CLG's own Equality Impact Assessment (which acknowledges that "changes in funding for the FRS could impact disproportionately on some sections of the community") appears to assume that the cut will be evenly split:

"Over the first two years of the Spending Review period formula grant funding for single purpose FRAs, which makes up roughly 50% of their overall spend, will change by -5.8% in 2010-11 and a further -0.7% in 2012-13".

Interestingly, the Equality Impact Assessment does not appear to consider the impact of grant increases for some, and our local modelling illustrates some important deficiencies, as we have identified above, in explaining the relationship between deprivation and fire risk.

Furthermore, The Minister did not consult on a flat cut in grant like the police service, but instead consulted on setting the floor damping level "close to the average change". This was a question (Q17 in the Consultation) not specifically addressed to Fire Authorities but to Local Authorities at large. Only 65% of local authorities responded to the question but a majority of these favoured a flatter cut closer to the average.

At the time of the Spending Review, all services were working on the assumption contained in the EIA, that cuts would need to be made and had plans in place. Many have not been required to implement these. It would be fair to say that nobody expected an outcome where they would gain funding.



We should be clear that what we are asking for now is a flat rate cut in years three and four, which is on top of what has already happened in years one and two. As a result, we will still receive the highest percentage cuts overall as a result of our low council tax.

Table 3 opposite clearly shows that a flat rate cut in 2013-15 will impact the Mets Revenue Spending power the most, while still meaning that all services play their part. Including the County brigades, the government will still make the £138 million worth of savings from the Fire Service budget in 2013-15 that it requires.



Table 3 - Impact of a flat rate cut in 2013-15

Local Authority	Fire Authority Finance Settlement 2011/13		Fire Authority Finance Settlement 2013/15		Fire Authority Finance Settlement 2011/15	
	Change in estimated 'Revenue Spending Power' 2011-13 (£million)	Change in estimated 'Revenue Spending Power' 2011-2013	Change in estimated 'revenue spending power' 2013-15 (£million)	Change in estimated 'Revenue Spending Power' 2013-15	Change in estimated 'revenue spending power' 2011-15 (£million)	Change in estimated 'Revenue Spending Power' 2011-15
London	-0.5	-0.11%	-35.1	-8.03%	-35.6	-8.13%
METS						
Gtr. Manchester	-8.25	-7.03%	-9.2	-8.42%	-17.4	-14.86%
Merseyside	-5.14	-6.99%	-5.6	-8.23%	-10.8	-14.65%
South Yorkshire	-4.05	-6.77%	-4.5	-8.03%	-8.5	-14.26%
Tyne and Wear	-3.88	-6.54%	-4.3	-7.80%	-8.2	-13.83%
West Midlands	-9.20	-7.73%	-9.8	-8.95%	-19.0	-15.99%
West Yorkshire	-5.09	-5.48%	-7.2	-8.16%	-12.3	-13.20%
SHIRES						
Avon	-1.92	-4.10%	-3.1	-6.92%	-5.0	-10.73%
Bedfordshire	0.03	0.11%	-1.5	-5.39%	-1.5	-5.28%
Berkshire	0.00	0.00%	-2.1	-6.15%	-2.1	-6.15%
Buckinghamshire	-0.56	-1.93%	-1.5	-5.14%	-2.0	-6.98%
Cambridgeshire	-1.42	-4.68%	-1.8	-6.09%	-3.2	-10.49%
Cheshire	0.80	1.84%	-2.6	-5.95%	-1.8	-4.22%
Cleveland	-2.54	-7.65%	-2.7	-8.87%	-5.3	-15.84%
Derbyshire	-1.21	-2.90%	-2.5	-6.15%	-3.7	-8.87%
Devon & Somerset	1.34	1.78%	-4.4	-5.74%	-3.0	-4.06%
Dorset	0.54	1.86%	-1.5	-5.26%	-1.0	-3.49%
Durham	-1.26	-4.04%	-1.8	-5.98%	-3.0	-9.77%
East Sussex	-0.17	-0.44%	-1.9	-4.95%	-2.1	-5.36%
Essex	1.80	2.40%	-4.6	-6.00%	-2.8	-3.74%
Hampshire	1.79	2.64%	-4.2	-6.01%	-2.4	-3.52%
Hereford & Worcs	0.44	1.39%	-1.5	-4.64%	-1.0	-3.31%
Humberside	-1.06	-2.15%	-3.6	-7.35%	-4.6	-9.34%
Kent	0.20	0.28%	-4.0	-5.50%	-3.8	-5.23%
Lancashire	-0.53	-0.84%	-4.4	-7.05%	-4.9	-7.84%
Leicestershire	0.03	0.07%	-2.6	-7.18%	-2.5	-7.12%
North Yorkshire	-0.21	-0.66%	-1.7	-5.47%	-1.9	-6.09%
Nottinghamshire	-2.56	-5.33%	-3.0	-6.68%	-5.6	-11.65%
Shropshire	-0.70	-3.26%	-1.0	-4.81%	-1.7	-7.91%
Staffordshire	0.90	2.12%	-2.6	-6.03%	-1.7	-4.04%
Wiltshire	0.03	0.13%	-1.3	-5.11%	-1.3	-4.98%



The 'surprising' nature of the formula outcome

Minister, you said you were surprised by some of the formula outcomes. If you were surprised, why did you not change it and adjust it at that stage?

Minister: It is one of the problems that we have to deal with, and why we argue in many ways that this is an immensely opaque system. It would be theoretically possible to unscramble every bit of the analysis, but I do not think that would have been practical in the time that was available. Therefore, as with previous Governments we used some judgment about certain indices and where we pitch the damping as the principal means of dealing with some of the issues that arise.

We would argue that the damping could have been employed to a much greater degree as it was with the Police so as to at least prevent any service getting an increase in their budgets. To not do so seems bizarre. The changes that the government did have time to make clearly had a big effect on the outcome, so it is unfair to argue that little could have been done to undertake the analysis properly.

We would add that the current consultation document, which has come out several years into the current government's tenure of office, is similarly opaque and we do not doubt that it is equally likely to produce unforeseen and "surprising" results.

Until such time as a more transparent method of allocating funding can be determined, we believe a flat rate cut is as fair a way of asking FRAs to contribute to deficit reduction as any.

Ensuring a fairer settlement next time

Given the previous outcome, what are you minded to adjust to ensure that we do not have a similar outcome in terms of the metropolitan areas being hit much harder than the shire authorities?

Minister: We accept that there are funding pressures, but not only on Metropolitan Services. Other areas are having difficulties as well, so we have to take into account other factors, such as sparsity. The Mets are not in a unique position and that is why we are changing the system.



The consultation indicates that the only significant change to the fire formula will be to add a “sparsity factor”. We question the legitimacy of such a measure, which the government’s own analysis shows will disadvantage the Mets, and for which the only evidence cited is the additional fuel cost of travelling longer distances in rural areas. Aside from this, we would question how the same outcome will be avoided if the government is not proposing to significantly change the formula.

Risk to life as a result of cuts

Speaking to Chief Officers before you arrived here, some of them believe, in a worst-case scenario, how you are handling their budgets could over time result in an increase in the loss of life.

Minister: I do not believe that is justified by any evidence that we have seen.

It is clear that if the Met fire services are cut by a hugely disproportionate amount as before, we will not be able to offer the same service as before. With 30% of our whole budget cut (even including precept) there is simply no way to meet them through back office efficiency and better procurement. Cuts will start to lead to fewer fire stations, fewer fire appliances and most importantly fewer firefighters. It logically follows that this will increase risk.

When frontline services are cut, it is likely that the need to maintain an effective response to a wide range of incidents will mean that it is prevention and protection activity which will suffer. The Minister acknowledged earlier that it is this activity which has reduced incidents, and with them deaths and injuries. It is this which leads us to the view that life risk will increase over time, as a result of continued disproportionate cuts.

Scope to reduce false alarm incidents

Sir Ken Knight: as you will know, if you look at the figures just published, while there are something like 223,000 fires, of all types, a year, from grass fires to bin fires to house fires, there are still 250,000 false alarms from automatic fire alarms. There is a lot more work to be done to drive out some of those efficiencies.



We are already making these reductions – in the West Midlands and Greater Manchester false alarms have been reduced by 50% - more so than many of those fire services which received much less in terms of cuts. This has saved money not just for us, but for the hospitals, businesses and other organisations whose resources are wasted every time they have to stop production, or stop delivering a service, to evacuate people unnecessarily. This preventative work is something we hold dear, and it is precisely this type of activity which will be threatened if resources are disproportionately reduced.

Impact on preventative work

If we see the same level of cuts in the metropolitan areas as we have seen in the last two years, what is your assessment of whether metropolitan fire services will be able to continue to do that really important preventive work?

Sir Ken: I do not think the outcome will be lessened; it may be done differently. We are seeing it done much more now in partnership with the rest of local government. Instead of a series of visits to people's homes, we have some joint partnership. As we are now seeing something like 86% of homes fitted with smoke detectors, which was something like 7% in the 1970s and 1980s, we are seeing a natural reduction in fire deaths and risk. I think we will gradually continue to see a reduction in fire deaths and fire injuries, and the fire service will be the prime deliverer and leader of that, but they will not be the only deliverer; there will be more partnership working driven by the innovation that has been caused by some of the savings that have to be made.

The 86% figure is a national average which does not take account of the difficulty of fitting and maintaining fire alarms in the most at risk communities. Despite much higher numbers of well targeted Home Fire Safety Checks in Met areas, smoke detector ownership is lower because a great deal more effort needs to be expended to succeed than in wealthy suburban areas, where smoke detector ownership tends to be very high. The government's own survey data (English Housing Survey 2008) shows that smoke alarm ownership is significantly lower amongst poorer communities and ethnic minority groups and in urban/inner city areas. These are all groups which we know to be at higher risk from fire, and are much more prevalent in Met brigade areas than elsewhere. We would also question whether the very most at risk, the so-called "hard to reach" are properly represented within survey data.



Despite our successes other evidence makes it clear that we have further to go; In 2010-2011 government statistics show Smoke alarms were absent from the fire area in 37 per cent of dwelling fires (16,400 fires). Of the total of 306 dwelling fires fatalities in Great Britain in 2010-11, 37 per cent were in fires where there was no smoke alarm present, and a further 25 per cent where a smoke alarm was present but did not operate, there is still a great deal of prevention work required by all Fire Services and their partners.

We agree that partnership is key to delivering community safety, and FRAs have been at the forefront of using the highly valued firefighter brand to reach communities others cannot, with much of the most innovative work in areas like youth diversion starting in metropolitan areas in response to deep seated social issues.



Conclusion

As we mentioned in the introduction, the Select Committee hearing was a “one off” session with no report produced, and so we felt it important that there was a more open and transparent expression that balanced the issues raised by AMFRA with Ministers views.

The information above clearly sets out AMFRA’s position on a number of the key areas within the debate about fire service funding mentioned during the hearing. Moreover, we hope to move the debate on to discussing the real impact on individual authorities going forward.

However, there remain a few lines of inquiry on which we feel an answer is still required. We have set out below a short list of further questions for the Minister that will hopefully be addressed through the forthcoming Adjournment Debate.

1. We all agree that the future of community safety lies within effective partnership working. There have been many examples of such excellent partnerships involving FRSs in making their community safer.

How does the minister expect this to continue when we are already seeing local authorities and other partner agencies struggling to maintain their commitment to some partnerships due to their ‘frontloaded’ cuts; and if the unfairness of the FRS funding continues? Surely, the same will be seen during the ‘backloading’ period of cuts for the FRSs, especially within those areas most affected, such as the Mets?

2. In 2010 CLG consulted on changes to the formula. This lead to a ‘couple of technical adjustments’ to the formula by the minister, one of which was the increase in weighting around density which would tend to work to the advantage of more urban areas including Metropolitans. When the Minister was were asked why the outcome of the formula didn’t reflect this he stated that he too was ‘surprised at the time’.

We are now into the next period of consultation, which will possibly lead to changes to the formula, and a number of FRAs have a fear of Déjà vu. Can the minister confirm that there will be no more ‘surprises’?



3. Given the obvious fact that these cuts to Metropolitan Services will make it impossible to maintain existing response standards. Will the Minister and Chief Adviser please set out what they consider to be an acceptable response standard within deprived, multi-cultural inner city areas - and contrast that with less urban areas? In other words explain what exactly a "sparsity factor" is - and how it may be quantified and evaluated?
4. Does the Minister - and Chief Adviser - consider there are any risks to the country's resilience arising from the loss of such a large number of fire-fighters?
5. Is there a justification for the stark contrast in the reduction of posts in the urban centres, yet an increase of posts in London in the past five years?
6. Can the Minister rationalise the reality that just six fire services, with a total budget of £500 million, have already absorbed a cut of £35 million - the fire and rescue services protecting our major, urban regional centers and regulating the built environment in those crucial regional cities.

Yet, 24 combined fire authorities covering our towns, market towns and countryside - and spending over a billion pounds - are cut to the tune of just £6.5 million and London, with a budget of over £450 million cut by less than 0.5%?

Finally, when the coalition government came into power, there was a flurry of activity around the strapline/ term "Fire Futures". But there remains little clarity as to the government's future policy for this important public service - beyond a focus on localism and devolving responsibility.

The Fire Service has faced some significant issues in recent years; the collapse of the Regional Control Centre project, the sale of the Fire Service College, a fragmented performance management framework (arguably a non-existent framework) and a wide variety of governance models, now including one Fire Service for the whole of Scotland. All this, not just against an unprecedented funding crisis, but at a time when major risks and global phenomena such as climate change are increasing in significance and impact.

We need now to put in place a funding regime that is fair, realistic and provides a solid base for a coherent and co-ordinated approach to policy and funding for the Service, rather than a random approach that protects some, advantages others and disadvantages even more.