

Note of last Fire Commission meeting

Title: Fire Commission
Date: Friday 26 March 2021
Venue: Online via Zoom

Attendance

An attendance list is attached as **Appendix A** to this note

Item Decisions and actions

1 Welcome and apologies for absence

The Chair welcomed members to the meeting and thanked them for attending at short notice.

Apologies were received from: Cllr Paul Kirton, Cllr Jason Zadrozny, Cllr Byron Quayle, Cllr Frank Biederman, Cllr Rowland Rees-Evans, Cllr Jane Hugo, Cllr Tina McKenzie-Boyle, Cllr Peter Hogarth and Cllr Richard Rout. Cllr Nicolas Barlow was substituting for Cllr Peter Hogarth.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 Police & Crime Commissioner Review

The Chair welcomed the Minister for Building Safety & Communities, Lord Greenhalgh, to the meeting and invited him to address the Commission on the Government's proposals for reform outlined by the Home Secretary in a Parliamentary Statement the previous week.

The Minister thanked the Chair and the wider Commission for the opportunity to put forward the proposals and to address questions or concerns.

He said that a White Paper on fire reform would be published shortly after the local and PCC elections in May and would go out to a 12-week period of consultation, during which time there would be extensive engagement with the sector. He briefly outlined the 3 pillars of reform – professionalism, people and governance – and emphasised that although the proposed changes to governance had received most attention, the people and professionalism strands were fundamental to transforming the sector.

Members comments:

PFCCs and Governance:

- There was strong disagreement with the proposed mandatory

transfer of governance from the existing FRAs and county councils to Police & Crime Commissioners. Members spoke in favour of the LGA line that transfers to PCCs should only take place where they were locally supported and there was a strong business case for it. The Minister noted the Commission's views and acknowledged that mandation was controversial. He said that he would continue to listen to views during the consultation.

- It was considered that reform of governance was a distraction when there were many other more important issues for the sector to tackle around, for example, building/fire safety, diversity and inclusion, culture and the role of the firefighter.
- The current variety of governance models was not considered to be detrimental to service delivery and some members felt that it was a strength in reflecting different local circumstances across the country. HMICFRS had not identified governance as a major problem in the sector.
- The link between fire and local government was considered to be very important and could be lost, along with the experience and expertise in FRAs, with mandatory transfer. The Minister reassured members that continued local scrutiny and links with local government would be key to the success of the reforms.
- Concern was also expressed that a lot of excellent partnership working, for example in county councils where they were the Fire Authority, would be put at risk by transfer to PCCs. Collaboration was considered to be strong across all blue light services, especially since the Covid pandemic struck, yet the focus of this paper was on police and fire. The Minister responded that it was important that all governance models contributed to the consultation. There would be challenges in disaggregating fire services from county council structures which would need to be overcome. He disagreed that collaboration would be negatively impacted by transfer to PCCs and said that a silo mentality should be challenged in all governance models. Joint executive oversight of police and fire did not mean that the services themselves were being merged.
- There was a lack of evidence of the effectiveness of PCCs and PFCCs, particularly around value for money and democratic accountability, and there was currently very little diversity in the individual post holders.
- It was suggested that the transfer to PCCs was a *fait accompli* and the White Paper consultation was just a tick box exercise. The Minister responded that this would be a genuine consultation and he wanted the proposals to be improved by stakeholder input.
- Members asked what consultation had taken place with PCCs? Were they happy with the prospect of taking on the added responsibility of fire governance at an incredibly important time for the sector? And how would the respective roles of the PFCC, CFO and Chief Constable play out? What do PCCs feel about the

concept of operational independence?

- It was suggested that the potentially disruptive impact on the workforce of mandatory governance transfers had not been taken into account. They needed a period of stability following Grenfell and Covid.

Other areas of reform:

- Members broadly welcomed other proposed areas for reform, particularly around the professionalism and people strands. Improved training for Police & Crime Panels (or Police, Fire & Crime Panels) was welcomed.
- Members felt that further detail was needed on the proposal for operational independence for CFOs and what this meant in practical terms in relation to the current schemes of delegation. The proposed 'brighter line' between the roles of FRA and CFO was welcomed but the blurring of roles was not considered to be an issue for most services.
- Concern was expressed about the proposed change of electoral system to first past the post in that it would disadvantage and discourage smaller parties and minority groups. The Minister agreed that first past the post could be polarising but said that he didn't feel the change would have a big impact and could bring greater clarity for voters.
- Would the proposals lead to enforced amalgamation of services, such as East and West Sussex, which would then come under the umbrella of one PCC? The Minister said that there wouldn't be any Government enforced mergers but it would be down to the PFCC to consider how to best organise services in their patch and there may well be opportunities for greater efficiencies in such areas.
- In areas where there is no coterminosity of boundaries, what factors will the Government take into account when making decisions on PFCCs? The Minister responded that this was a difficult issue and he would be listening carefully to the views expressed in the consultation in order to find the best solution. He added that nothing was ruled out.
- It was suggested that industrial relations were the elephant in the room and were often the main barrier to reform rather than governance or lack of operational independence. The Minister agreed that industrial relations were very difficult and this was highlighted in the HMICFRS's second State of Fire & Rescue report. He said that the current arrangements were outdated and there was a need to separate out the role of the firefighter from the pay mechanism. The future of the NJC would form part of the forthcoming White Paper.
- Members made the point that services across the country were very different, and a one size fits all approach wouldn't work. For example, rural FRSs relied heavily on on-call firefighters and the PCC model wouldn't necessarily work in these places. The

Minister agreed that local variation in FRS's needed to be taken into account, but this was largely done through IRMPs, which were distinct from the strategic oversight function.

The Minister had to leave the meeting at this point and the Chair thanked him for taking the time to speak to the Commission.

The Chair then introduced Jonny Bugg (Head of Fire Strategy and Reform Unit) and Rachel Atkinson (the new Director of Fire, Resilience and Planning) from the Home Office and invited them to add to the Minister's remarks:

- Members' comments and views on the proposals were welcomed and individual FRAs were also encouraged to submit responses to the consultation. The best way of engaging once the White Paper was published was currently being discussed with LGA officers.
- PCCs were also being consulted on the reforms and their views taken into account.
- The Covid experience had emphasised the need for operational independence for CFOs as highlighted by HMICFRS.
- The proposals were about parity of esteem between fire and police services – this wasn't a 'police takeover'.
- The Home Office was very mindful of potential negative impacts on the workforce and the people and professionalism strands were all about supporting them.
- Any proposals for mergers of services would be looked at sympathetically if they could demonstrate improvements to efficiency and effectiveness, as had recently been the case with Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.

The Chair invited the new NFCC Chair, Mark Hardingham, to comment on the proposals from a Chief's perspective.

- Mark first introduced himself to the Commission and talked about his background and priorities.
- On operational independence, Mark said that Chiefs wanted to see greater clarity about the differing roles of FRAs and CFOs, not do away with political oversight. There also needed to be more clarity in the national space, for example over industrial relations. Operational independence would also put CFOs on an equal footing with police chief constables, which he welcomed.
- On PFCCs, Mark said that it was not up to the NFCC to determine future governance arrangements. What they wanted was clarity and good political decision making based on sound professional advice from CFOs.

The Chair thanked members for their input and concluded the meeting by reminding them that there would be a further opportunity to discuss the proposals at the Commission meeting on 11 June, by which time the

White Paper should have been published. He urged individual FRAs to write to the Minister with their detailed responses to the proposals and requested that LGA officers be copied in so they could collate feedback.

Appendix A -Attendance

Position/Role	Councillor	Authority
Chairman	Cllr Ian Stephens	Isle of Wight Council
Members	Cllr Brenda Massey	Avon Fire Authority
	Cllr John Chatterley	Bedfordshire Combined Fire Authority
	Cllr Lesley Clarke OBE	Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority
	Cllr Bob Rudd	Cheshire Fire & Rescue Service
	Cllr Paul Kirton	Cleveland Fire Authority
	Cllr Rob Nolan	Cornwall Council
	Cllr Rebecca Knox	Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service
	Cllr Carol Theobald	East Sussex Fire Authority
	Mr Roger Hirst	Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Essex
	Cllr David Norman MBE	Gloucestershire County Council
	Dr Fiona Twycross	Greater London Authority
	Cllr Christopher Carter	Hampshire Fire and Rescue Authority
	Cllr Roger Phillips	Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Authority
	Cllr Terry Hone	Hertfordshire County Council
	Cllr John Briggs	Humberside Fire Authority
	Cllr Nick Chard	Kent and Medway Fire and Rescue Authority
	Cllr Frank De Molfetta	Lancashire Combined Fire Authority
	Cllr Nikki Hennessy	Lancashire Combined Fire Authority
	Cllr Maggie Wright	Leicester, Leicestershire & Rutland Combined Fire Authority
	Cllr Nick Worth	Lincolnshire County Council
Cllr Les Byrom CBE	Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority	
Cllr Margaret Dewsbury	Norfolk County Council	
Paul Fell	Northants Police Fire & Crime Commissioner	
Cllr James Roberts	Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority	
Cllr Judith Heathcoat	Oxfordshire County Council	
Cllr Eric Carter	Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority	
Cllr Colleen Atkins MBE	Bedfordshire Fire & Rescue Service	
Cllr Keith Aspden	North Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service	
Cllr Robert Taylor	South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Authority	
Cllr Ruth Skelton	Derbyshire Fire and Rescue Authority	
Cllr Tony Damms	South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Authority	

	Cllr Carolyn Lambert	East Sussex Fire Authority
	Cllr Denise Turner-Stewart	Surrey County Council
	Cllr Cleo Lake	Avon Fire & Rescue Authority
	Cllr Adam Brook	Cleveland Fire Authority
	Cllr Duncan Crow	West Sussex County Council
	Cllr Luke Frost	Cleveland Fire Authority
	Cllr Barbara Jefferson JP	Humberside Fire Authority
	Cllr Peter Harrand	West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Authority
	Cllr Rachel Bailey	Cheshire Fire Authority
	Cllr Linda Taylor	Cornwall Council
	Cllr Lynn Hall	Cleveland Fire Authority
	Cllr Leigh Redman	Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Authority
	Cllr Shaun O'Neill	Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Authority
Apologies	Cllr Tina McKenzie-Boyle	Royal Berkshire Fire Authority
	Cllr Byron Quayle	Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service
	Cllr Richard Rout	Suffolk County Council
	Cllr Rowland Rees-Evans	Mid and West Wales Fire Authority
	Cllr Jason Zadrozny	Ashfield District Council
	Cllr Frank Biederman	Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Authority
	Cllr Peter Hogarth MBE	West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority
In Attendance	Lord Greenhalgh	Minister for Building Safety & Communities
	Rachel Atkinson	Home Office
	Jonny Bugg	Home Office
	Mark Hardingham	NFCC
	Neil Odin	Hampshire & Isle of Wight FRS
	Mick Osborne	Bucks FRS
	Stuart Errington	County Durham & Darlington FRS
	Andy Hopkinson	Beds FRS
	Chris Blacksell	Humberside FRS