Conveners have focussed their evidence on the following areas:

- Proposed structures of local democracy and accountability
- Implications for the local resourcing of fire and rescue services as a result of the establishment of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.
- The relationship between local authorities and the new Scottish Fire and Rescue Board
- Issues relating to the transfer of fire and rescue service staff

Proposed structures of local democracy and accountability

1. In addition to establishing the single national service governed by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Board, the Bill seeks to establish a formal statutory relationship between the service and each of the 32 local authorities. The aim of increasing local accountability and engagement with elected members at local level is welcomed however, there are practical considerations that need to be carefully worked through.

2. There is a broad duty on the SFRS to ensure adequate local Fire and Rescue service provision but national and local views on the extent and detailed application of that provision could differ. The Bill states that the SFRS must submit a plan prepared for approval to the local authority and if approved the SFRS must publish it. As it stands, the Bill offers no recourse for any dispute arising between the national service and the local authority, which could seriously hamper the ability of the service to engage effectively at a local level. We need to be clear on whether the service is a national service delivered locally or 32 local services delivered within the context of a national framework. It cannot be both.

3. Local scrutiny and engagement arrangements are currently being piloted to test a range of mechanisms e.g. blue light committees through which elected members may play a direct and formal role in shaping local priorities and scrutinising performance however we need to guard against drawing the FRS away from the multi-agency approach which has been proven to work. In terms of Community Planning and Engagement, there is a need to remove duplication, build capacity and integrate services.

4. The Scottish Government is committed to strengthening community planning arrangements and that is also reflected in the Bill. Care needs to be taken if the current review of the SOA and CPP arrangements provide a more robust legal duty and partners are bound by joint plans and performance as a result. The need to separate out police and fire through their own stand alone committees should at least be examined to avoid police and fire working towards strategic objectives that sit outwith CPP priorities, duplication of activity and an unsustainable resource commitment for local authorities in the support of “blue light” committees as well as renewing a commitment to CPP and SOA arrangements.
Implications for the local resourcing of fire and rescue services because of the establishment of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

5. The reality of being able to shape priorities locally and engage more effectively with the service at local authority level is obviously influenced by the extent to which budget decisions are driven nationally or locally. In the context of a single national service, it must be assumed that the budget is held centrally and allocated based on the priorities established within the national strategic plan.

6. It is not clear what level of delegated budgetary control is envisaged and whether delegated responsibility will be provided to the local senior officer for the management of a local budget. It is not clear what recourse the local authority has should that allocation not be considered sufficient for its needs or indeed does not match the priorities for the area as determined through the single outcome agreement or the local service plan which must be approved by the local authority.

The relationship between the local authorities and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Services Board

7. It is not clear from the Bill provision what arrangements will be in place to formalise the relationship between local authorities and the national Board or how local committees can formally raise matters of concern. As referenced previously, in the context of the development of a 3 year national strategic plan prepared on the basis of a national integrated risk management plan and developed in the context of a national budget set for the SFRS, it is entirely possible that conflict could arise if any given local authority does not feel that the local plan is sufficient for its purposes in terms of resource allocation, engagement in local initiatives or indeed the role of the local senior officer.

8. There is a broad duty on the SFRS to ensure adequate local service provision but national and local views on the extent and detailed application of that provision could differ.

Issues relating to the transfer of fire and rescue service staff

9. It is welcome that the SG commits to all staff directly employed by the 8 services and relevant staff employed by the unitary authorities transferring on the day of establishment of the new service with a commitment to retaining their terms and conditions on transfer. Ministers have publicly made a commitment to no compulsory redundancies, which is a welcome commitment for our staff. However, the assumptions around costs and savings as set out in the Financial Memorandum are challenged by a range of stakeholders and the real financial impact of this commitment is not considered to have been accurately reflected.

10. There will be a number of local variations to national conditions (all groups) and these will be “protected” under the Transfer commitment and carry forward. Where national frameworks exist each of the existing 8 will have negotiated locally on content and there may be wording differences as a minimum and probably policy differences. It is of real benefit to obviously seek to harmonise critical policies at Day 1 but there will be many other areas of variation e.g. shift systems, additional
allowances, public holidays and so on where negotiation may take some time to achieve a satisfactory position. This could impact on costs and the timescales associated with achieving a standardised employment framework for the new SFRS.

PLEASE NOTE THAT THE CONVENER OF FIFE POLICE, FIRE AND SAFETY COMMITTEE DOES NOT ENDORSE THIS SUBMISSION

Scottish Fire Conveners Forum
2 March 2012