Justice Committee

Post-legislative scrutiny of the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012

Written submission from the Highland Council

The Highland Council welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the Scottish Parliament’s Justice Committee on the subject of Police and Fire Reform. The Council has taken a keen interest in the operation of the new services since their inception and was one of the Pathfinder areas during the introduction of the new national services.

The Council highly rates our local police and fire services and the way in which they have responded to the national operating frameworks whilst retaining the essence of what makes policing and fire services in the Highland different. Service standards have remained high and reflect the needs of our communities. However, our experiences of the new national services have not been altogether positive and this response enables us to explain some of the ongoing challenges as a consequence of the Police and Fire Reform Act.

Police service

1. In your view, what have been the consequences of the 2012 Act for the police service?

1a) Benefits of the Act

Retaining Local Priorities within a Strategic Context

Whilst the national services have clearly defined strategic priorities and operating frameworks, the Act has allowed the retention of local priorities within this framework through the development of local plans. Through specifying that Local Authorities must be involved in the development of these plans, Police Scotland must take account of what is important within a local area and what local communities identify as their priorities.

Local officers within Highland have been exemplary in the way in which they have involved both communities and elected Members in the development of local priorities and, recognising the geographical challenges within an area the size of Highland, have developed local plans at a sub-Highland level to capture area-based priorities.

Improved local scrutiny

This Council welcomed the guidance around local scrutiny which accompanied the Act and was developed with CoSLA. The guidance was used to develop local
scrutiny arrangements and led to Member and officer development in this area. The attitude of the local police commander also enabled this to work well as he was genuinely open to scrutiny and challenge from the Council, providing good data and evidence and explaining where data needed to improve in order to support good scrutiny.

The arrangements evolved in Highland to have a local focus and much local scrutiny takes place at our eight local committees covering our region, recognising the diversity in our community safety concerns. These arrangements have been extremely effective. The guidance and flexibility around scrutiny arrangements have been helpful but are enabled also by positive attitudes to scrutiny from lead officers. It is a core competency for lead officers.

The Act has enabled this improved scrutiny to take place, however its success is a result of the way in which the local commander and his officers have responded and the arrangements agreed jointly between the Council and Police Scotland. Further detail on our local scrutiny arrangements are provided at question two below.

**Strategic command**

National - with the current security threat level at high, the national service has undoubtedly improved capability with regards its ability to respond and deploy to incidents and to strategically manage incidents. This is reassuring and important particularly within the current climate.

Local – the improved oversight and response is also true of general emergency response however, the Act has also retained the importance of geographical management and leadership and ensures that local incidents are still managed within local partnership arrangements.

**Role of the Local Police Commander**

The Council’s experience of this role has been extremely positive. The decision to designate the Chief Superintendent as the local police commander has been a helpful development. This has resulted in engagement between the Local Authority and Police Scotland taking place at an appropriate senior level and ensuring that, when issues arise, the local commander has the authority to effectively deal with these issues.

The Act, despite representations, did not specify the rank of the local commander. The way this has been taken forward by Police Scotland however has meant that there is sufficient seniority in rank to demonstrate leadership and that this is consistent across the country.
Maintenance of front line services
The numbers of front line officers within the Highland Council area have been maintained at the same levels pre the Reform Act. There have been some changes as a result of standardisation of line-management structures across the force area but the total numbers have remained unchanged.

It is also important to note that the high standard of policing in Highland has been maintained and if anything improved over the period, with new approaches and partnership models adopted.

Access to additional resources
The new model for policing has meant that there is a division between those resources that are managed locally and those managed nationally. The experience in Highland has been that access to national resources based locally has been positive and there exist strong working relationships between the locally based teams. However, this is not without its challenges and these are outlined below.

Partnership
Embedding community planning within the Act has assisted in prioritising this important area of work. It has provided strategic direction and placed community planning as one of the priorities of the national service. However, it is important to acknowledge that the leadership, approach and vision of the local commander has been fundamental to the level of involvement in community planning and this is discussed further in question two.

At the time of development of the Act, it was noted there were significant opportunities to improve the linkages of the two services and the wider public sector through the Act in shared approaches and joint service planning. The Act currently treats the two services completely separate. Since the introduction of the Act, the focus of community planning has changed and Police Scotland’s role within it. Any review of the Act should reflect this fundamental shift from participation to leadership and identify the opportunities increased partnership working can support.

1b) Negative consequences of the Act

Lack of local scrutiny over national policy
The introduction of the single force has led to a lack of local oversight or scrutiny on policy matters dealt with nationally; with decisions taken without sufficient oversight or scrutiny. On a number of occasions local commanders are left to explain, and be accountable for, decisions that have been taken nationally and where there has been no opportunity for engagement or scrutiny despite the wider public interest. For some of these, decisions were taken without SPA scrutiny either.
High profile examples of this include standing authority for armed policing in 2014, stop and search, withdrawing of traffic warden provision, relocation of call handling and temporary traffic restriction orders. Whilst some of these ultimately resulted in a change of policy and approach after Council and other lobbying, earlier engagement with elected members and a process for understanding local impacts could have enabled greater flexibility in how national policies are implemented locally. However, there is no mechanism within the current legislative framework to ensure that this takes place.

**Autonomy of Local Areas**

Closely connected to the issue of local scrutiny on national policing matters is how this impacts upon the autonomy of local areas and priorities. Where concerns have been raised, these have related to, at least a perception, that there is a lack of autonomy for the local police commander. The centralised handling and approach towards issues such as control rooms, armed policing in 2014, closure of police stations and road policing, has resulted in a strong perception that the views of the Highland community have not been taken cognisance off. It is vitally important that local police commanders have the appropriate authority to implement and adapt national policy to fit local circumstances. All of our local commanders have had an excellent understanding of the local area and the style and approach to policing here reflects this understanding.

One of the key aims of the legislation was to strengthen the connection between local services and communities. If this is to be realised then this needs to be reflected in the response from Police Scotland at a national level and empowering local police Commanders to respond to the needs of their communities and the freedom to adapt policies according to the approach to policing within that area. It must be understood that one size doesn’t fit all. It is reassuring that the approach and message from Police Scotland centrally in recent months, has been to emphasise the importance of local autonomy for police commanders.

The Police and Fire Reform Act 2012, notes that Local Authorities will be consulted on the appointment of a local police commander. At present, the Local Authority is asked to confirm the appointment rather than being consulted on it. It would therefore be helpful if, in the future, the Local Authority Chief Executive was involved, to some degree, in the recruitment process for this post.

**Disconnect between local and national Boards**

There is currently no direct link between local scrutiny committees and the SPA Board. On some occasions SPA members have attended Council meetings but this is not routinely done. This has led to a disconnect that is impacting upon policy making. As highlighted during the consultation phase of the Bill, it was extremely important that linkages be made between local and national scrutiny arrangements; however the Bill did not address this. The result of the current legislative context is
that decisions can be made at a national level, that impact locally, without any cognisance being taken of the views of those democratically elected to represent local committees.

For example, in 2017, the final phase of the Contact Command and Control Programme was due for consideration at the SPA Board. Of particular concern to this Council was the fundamental change in status of the National Database Enquiry Unit proposed and agreed originally, for location in Inverness. This change in approach was not scrutinised by the SPA Board but a sub-committee of it and in private. No attempts were made to elicit the views of the local scrutiny committee, and in the end, these were only heard as a result of effective lobbying. Mechanisms should be in place to ensure local views are reflected and understood to enable effective decision making.

This situation is exacerbated by the structure and make-up of the SPA Board, which has no direct link to scrutiny Boards, as suggested during the development of the Bill, and no geographical representation. It remains a significant concern that remote and rural issues are not given sufficient weight as a result of this deficit.

Since the introduction of the Act, the challenge of this disconnect between local and national Boards has been highlighted by the SPA Governance Review and also by HMICS but remains to be resolved.

Centralisation and control of resources
During the development phase of the Bill, concerns were expressed regarding the potential for a national service to concentrate resources within the central belt and not take the opportunity for the wider national resources to be dispersed across the country. To date, these concerns appear to have been realised. There has clearly been a dilution of specialisms into the central belt since the inception of Police Scotland and this has resulted in challenges in accessing resources based centrally. It is not clear whether this is as a result of national deployment approaches being incompatible with rural operational practices or a reluctance to ensure equal access to resources.

It is hoped that with recent commitments from the First Minister and the Interim Chief Constable, that this will result in a sustained period of decentralisation which will be important to ensure that the national force is truly representative across its communities.

Centralisation of certain policies and approaches also appears to restrict local approaches to policing. Safety Camera Partnership vans are a good example of this challenge, where a national policy dictates the criteria where and when resources can be deployed with no cognisance taken of local need, priorities or knowledge. The existing policy is extremely restrictive and dictated by a point based
system for previous accidents and not on a preventative basis. Due to this policy approach, the local commander has no say in the ability to deploy to best effect within their area. This is clearly a disconnect that is unhelpful and not best serving local communities.

A further example is considering joint partnership approaches to the efficient sharing of local resources, for example collaborative models for local buildings. Many of these elements are managed centrally by the SPA with no local opportunity for greater involvement in redesigning. This was an area of concern highlighted during the Bill development process and again appears to have been realised.

2. Have the policy intentions of the 2012 Act in relation to the police been met?

To protect and improve local services despite financial cuts, by stopping duplication of support services eight times over and not cutting front line services:

As noted above amongst the benefits of the Act, the numbers of front line officers within the Highland Council area have been maintained at the same levels pre the Reform Act. There have been some changes as a result of standardisation of line-management structures across the force area but the total numbers have remained unchanged.

It is also important to note that the high standard of policing in Highland has been maintained and if anything improved over the period, with new approaches and partnership models adopted. Local leadership, vision and direction have been the driving factors in this improvement and confidence in local policing remains high.

Having not scrutinised the service costs before and after the Act, we are not in a position to comment on the overall aims of greater efficiency. However, it is clear that not all the attempts to create efficiencies have been successful; notably the approach to closing and reducing the number of call centres. One of the original aims of the C3 Programme was to create greater efficiencies and reduce costs. It is our understanding that this has not been achieved. However, as noted above, that does not detract from the greater security benefits that have been achieved as a result of this programme.

To create more equal access to specialist support and national capacity where and when they are needed:

As noted above, the inception of Police Scotland has led resources being managed both locally and nationally. The experience in Highland has been that access to national resources based locally has been positive and there exist strong working relationships between the locally based teams.
However, there has clearly been a dilution of specialisms into the central belt since the inception of Police Scotland and this has resulted in challenges in accessing resources based centrally. It is not clear whether this is as a result of national deployment approaches being incompatible with rural operational practices or a reluctance to ensure equal access to resources.

It is hoped that with recent commitments from the First Minister and the Interim Chief Constable, that this will result in a sustained period of decentralisation which will be important to ensure that the national force is truly representative across its communities.

The Council would particularly like to highlight a number of issues related to roads policing matters. Whilst the increase in staffing of the specialist road policing units has been welcomed, the relationship with local forces and Members has at times been challenging:

Safety Camera Partnership - as noted above at 1b), there are concerns about the ability of local forces to utilise and deploy key national resources. The Safety Camera Partnership is a case in point. The reliance of nationally defined criteria, that is not sensitive to rural communities, means that despite local knowledge clearly identifying where the key priorities are, the local commander and his team are not able to deploy as they best see fit.

Roads Transport – there is a failure of the national team dedicated to supporting transportation and events on trunk roads. Despite requests, there is no local engagement or opportunity to comment on proposals and no reference to the local commander. Decisions are clearly taken elsewhere without any cognisance of local views.

To strengthen the connection between services and communities, by creating a new formal relationship with each of the 32 local authorities, involving many more local councillors and better integrating with community planning partnerships:

As noted in the response to question one, one of the clear benefits of the Act has been the improved scrutiny especially at a local level and a stronger connection between Police Scotland and local communities. This has been achieved in a variety of ways:

a) Local authority involvement in setting priorities and objectives:

The first local Highland Policing Plan was developed following engagement across Highland and through a variety of mechanisms. This included consultation with local groups including Community Councils and Resident Associations, the general public, Local Authority Councillors, MSPs and MPs, and local community planning partners.
A survey of residents was conducted and a series of ward forums held to specifically discuss local priorities.

In addition to the Highland plan, 22 multi-member ward community policing plans were also developed which respond directly to local needs and demands. Members across the Local Authority have had the opportunity to input into the development of these plans and set the priorities for policing within the Highland area.

The second local policing plan was also the product of extensive engagement across the area involving local communities, Community Councils, Local Authority members and community planning partners. Engagement was also incorporated into the development of the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan and therefore ensured that the policing plan aligned its priorities to the HOIP.

b) Strategic Scrutiny:
Following the introduction of the Act, scrutiny at a pan Highland level was achieved through a dedicated Council committee set up for this purpose. As localised security arrangements have evolved (please see below), this scrutiny now takes place at meetings of the full Council which ensures full engagement from Members across the area. The local commander is in attendance at each meeting to present the report and answer queries from Members. The Local Commander has welcomed this constructive challenge and responds well to Members’ questions. There is strong understanding from Members of the performance of policing services in the area, the challenges and successes.

The Council has arrangements in place for seeking any amendments to the local police plan and any changes which have been sought have been accommodated by Police Scotland.

c) Area Scrutiny Arrangements:
As scrutiny arrangements evolved and taking the geographical challenges of the Highlands into account, the Local Commander agreed to provide more localised reports twice a year for each of the Council’s 8 Local Committees. This reflects performance against local ward policing plans. Local officers, normally the Area Commander, are in attendance at these meetings and are able to provide full responses on local issues raised at these Committees. This has been an extremely positive development and enables strategic scrutiny to take place at the Highland Council but for more local matters to be discussed within an appropriate forum. The positive contribution and engagement from Police Scotland in these local committees has been welcomed by Members.

From our experience, the positive attitude of Police Scotland officers in these scrutiny forums and their openness to challenge from elected members is good
practice in public service. We are learning from that approach in the redesign of our organisation.

The Act has enabled this improved local scrutiny but it is important to emphasise that the success within Highland has greatly depended upon the approach, openness and willingness of local policing staff to respond to the Local Authority and develop mechanisms to support this scrutiny. The flexibility and transparency of local officers has built strong relationships between local officers and members.

**Local Scrutiny and National Policy**

Although the Council would agree that the Act has resulted in stronger and improved scrutiny of local policing services, as noted in section one, there remain concerns about the relationship connection between local communities and police policy developed and set nationally. Whilst locally, there is clearly improved engagement and involvement in priority setting and greater scrutiny of police services, there often appears a disconnect with the national service. As highlighted earlier, significant policy decisions have been taken without giving due regard to local circumstances or engaging with local scrutiny committees in the process. The lack of formal arrangements, particularly between the SPA and local security committees was highlighted during the Bill development phase and also since through HMICS and the SPA governance review.

Recognition of the lack of formal structures has led to the introduction of the CoSLA Police Scrutiny Forum which identified the need for channels of communication between local scrutiny committees and national policing partners. More locally, the North Police Scrutiny Forum is a body that has attempted to enable discussions on national matters and raise issues where they arise. Both structures have emerged as a result of the lack of formal mechanisms and in recognition of the gap this has caused.

**Community Planning**

One of the key aims of the Act was to improve the connection and integration of policing with community planning. Embedding community planning within the Act has assisted in prioritising this important area of work. It has provided strategic direction and placed community planning as one of the priorities of the national service. The Act itself notes that the local commander must participate in community planning but went no further in terms of instructing in relation to joint plans, shared priorities or a leadership role in relation to community planning.

There has been a significant change in the role of police within community planning, however it would be difficult to identify this being a result of the Police and Fire Reform Act. The change recently introduced through the Community Empowerment Act – for Police to be one of the five partners to lead and the focus on addressing
inequality and prevention – can be said to have had a far greater impact in improving the connection between Police Scotland and community planning.

However, it is important to note that the first and subsequent local commanders within Highland have developed and strengthened the relationship between local partners and positively contributed to community planning. The force has shown real leadership in a number of key areas but particularly around the implementation of the Community Empowerment Act where the new roles and responsibilities have been embraced and the principles and ethos embedded within new ways of working. The new Local Policing Plan is structured around the aims and priorities of the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan.

Fire and rescue service

3. In your view, what have been the consequences of the 2012 Act for the fire and rescue service?

3a) Benefits of the Act

Retaining Local Priorities within a Strategic Context

Whilst the national services have clearly defined strategic priorities and operating frameworks, the Act has allowed the retention of local priorities within this framework through the development of local plans. Through specifying that Local Authorities must be involved in the development of these plans, the SFRS must take account of what is important within a local area and what local communities identify as their priorities.

Local officers within Highland have been exemplary in the way in which they have involved both communities and elected Members in the development of local priorities.

Improved local scrutiny

This Council welcomed the guidance around local scrutiny which accompanied the Act and was developed with CoSLA. The guidance was used to develop local scrutiny arrangements and led to Member and officer development in this area. The attitude of the local senior officer also enabled this to work well as he was genuinely open to scrutiny and challenge from the Council, providing good data and evidence and explaining where data needed to improve to support good scrutiny. The arrangements evolved in Highland to have a local focus and much local scrutiny takes place at our eight local committees covering our region, recognising the diversity in our community safety concerns. These arrangements have been extremely effective. The guidance and flexibility around scrutiny arrangements have been helpful but are enabled also by positive attitudes to scrutiny from lead officers. It is a core competency for lead officers.
The Act has enabled this improved scrutiny to take place however it is the local senior officer (LSO) who has delivered this in the way in which he and his officers have responded. Further detail on our local scrutiny arrangements are provided at question 4 below.

**Transformation**

At a time of decreasing public sector resources, the SFRS has managed to maintain its network of fire stations across the Highland area whilst considering how to develop the role to better address the needs of the population.

The current SFRS transformation agenda is unlikely to have happened had the single service not developed. The national force has enabled a strategic look across the organisation in order to develop proposals which will fundamentally change the organisation whilst building on its strengths. It will continue to address the needs of communities but within a framework that recognises that the needs of communities vary across Scotland. Whilst it is a national force, the new direction embraces the diversity of communities and creates flexibility within a national framework.

**Role of the Local Senior Officer**

The Council’s experience of this role has been extremely positive. The legislation specifically notes that the LSO for a local authority area must be a chief officer and this has resulted in engagement between the Local Authority and the SFRS taking place at an appropriate senior level and ensuring that, when issues arise, the LSO has the authority to effectively deal with these issues.

**Partnership**

Embedding community planning within the Act has assisted in prioritising this important area of work. It has provided strategic direction and placed community planning as one of the priorities of the national service.

At the time of development, it was noted there were significant opportunities to more closely link the two services and the wider public sector in a shared approach and joint service planning. The Act currently treats the two services completely separate. The SFRS has responded to current changes in need and demand by taking a wider public service response whilst developing its transformation agenda. However, whilst this may have been enabled through the Act as a national service, it is not a fundamental direction of the Act.

Since the introduction of the Act, the focus of community planning has changed and the SFRS role within it. Any review of the Act should reflect this fundamental shift from participation to leadership and identify the opportunities increased partnership working can support.
3b) Negative consequences of the Act

Lack of local scrutiny over national policy
The introduction of the national fire service has, on occasion, led to a lack of local oversight or scrutiny on policy matters dealt with nationally. Whilst the scale of the challenge is not as significant as with Police Scotland, there remain occasions, for example the closure of fire control rooms, where local scrutiny committees have not had the opportunity for sufficient engagement nor scrutiny.

Earlier engagement with elected members and a process for understanding local impacts could enable greater flexibility in how national policies are implemented locally; however there is no mechanism within the current legislative framework to ensure that this takes place.

Autonomy of Local Areas
Closely connected to the issue of local scrutiny on national fire matters is how this impacts upon the autonomy of local areas and priorities. Where concerns have been raised, these have related to, a perception that at times there is a lack of local autonomy for the local senior officer. This has particularly related to the ability to adapt national approaches and policy to the needs to the local area, e.g. training and Retained Duty personnel, where no cognisance has been taken of the needs of the local area. It is important to note, that recent approaches from SFRS suggest greater autonomy for LSOs in being able to be more flexible in application of policy locally.

The Police and Fire Reform Act 2012, notes that Local Authorities will be consulted on the appointment of a local senior officer. At present, the Local Authority is asked to confirm the appointment rather than being consulted on it. It would therefore be helpful if, in the future, the Local Authority Chief Executive was involved, to some degree, in the recruitment process for this post.

Disconnect between local and national Boards
There is currently no direct link between local scrutiny committees and the SFRS Board. Within Highland there is an informal agreement with one Member of the SFRS Board to attend the Scrutiny committee but this is based on local circumstance. This has been extremely helpful and ensured a connection between local scrutiny and the national Board however this is informal and there is no legislative basis for this link.

Mechanisms should be in place to ensure local views are reflected and understood to enable effective decision making.

4. Have the policy intentions of the 2012 Act in relation to fire and rescue been met?
To protect and improve local services despite financial cuts, by stopping duplication of support services eight times over and not cutting front line services:

Within Highland the SFRS have been able to maintain their network of fire stations which are crucial within an area as geographically diverse as Highland. They continue to work to recruit and maintain the Retained Duty Service which is vital to the delivery of service within Highland. The high standard of service the fire service offers has been maintained, despite the reductions in public sector spending.

Of significant interest to this Council is the broader transformation approach the SFRS is now taking. This recognises the reducing budgets and the need to change in order to sustain the service and strengthen it within key areas. By diversifying and changing operating practices and structures, this will create a more efficient force whilst supporting other public services and addressing the needs of communities.

To create more equal access to specialist support and national capacity – like murder investigation teams, firearms teams or flood rescue – where and when they are needed:

The SFRS, unlike Police Scotland, has not created a structure where national units and resources are managed outwith local areas. As a result, local resources are available to the Local Senior Office and he/she is able to deploy them as they see fit. This has worked extremely effectively in ensuring local access to key resources.

To strengthen the connection between services and communities, by creating a new formal relationship with each of the 32 local authorities, involving many more local councillors and better integrating with community planning partnerships:

As noted in the response to question three, one of the clear benefits of the Act has been improved scrutiny especially at a local level and a stronger connection between SFRS and local communities. This has been achieved in a variety of ways:

a) Local authority involvement in setting priorities and objectives

Both Fire service local plans have been developed as a result of extensive consultation and engagement with local communities, community councils and other community bodies and local elected members through public meetings and through survey based feedback. Elected Members have had the opportunity to refine and develop the priorities throughout the process, with the draft plans being considered by the Council prior to further public consultation. Changes requested at a Council meeting have also been accommodated.
Engagement on the second local fire plan was also incorporated into the development of the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan, to ensure consistency in priorities.

b) Strategic Scrutiny
Following the introduction of the Act, scrutiny at a pan Highland level was achieved through a dedicated Council committee set up for this purpose. As localised scrutiny arrangements have evolved (please see below), this scrutiny now takes place at meetings of the full Council which ensures full engagement from Members across the area. The local senior officer is in attendance at each meeting to present the report and answer queries from Members. The LSO has welcomed this constructive challenge and responds well to Members’ questions. There is strong understanding from Members of the performance of fire services in the area, their challenges and their successes.

c) Area Scrutiny Arrangements
As scrutiny arrangements evolved and taking the geographical challenges of the Highlands into account, the LSO agreed to provide more localised reports twice a year for each of the Council’s 8 Local Committees. This reflects performance against key performance indicators at a local area level. Local officers, normally the Group Manager, are in attendance at these meetings and are able to provide full responses on local issues raised at these Committees. This has been an extremely positive development and enables strategic scrutiny to take place at the Highland Council but for more local matters to be discussed within an appropriate forum. The positive contribution and engagement from SFRS in these local committees has been welcomed by Members.

From our experience, the positive attitude of SFRS officers in these scrutiny forums and their openness to challenge from elected members is good practice in public service. We are learning from that approach in the redesign of our organisation.

The Act has enabled this improved local scrutiny but it is important to emphasise that the success within Highland has greatly depended upon the approach, openness and willingness of local SFRS staff to respond to the Local Authority and develop mechanisms to support this scrutiny. The flexibility and transparency of local officers has built strong relationships between local officers and members.

Local Scrutiny and National Policy

Although the Council would agree that the Act has resulted in stronger and improved scrutiny of local fire services, as noted in section three, there remain concerns about the relationship connection between local communities and fire policy developed and set nationally. Whilst these concerns are not as significant as those identified regarding policing services, it is important to highlight that lack of formal mechanisms
contained within the legislation to ensure local scrutiny and engagement around national policies and approaches.

Whilst the Council has had concerns in the past regarding the approach on certain issues, e.g. call centres, it is important to highlight the very positive engagement the SFRS has undertaken recently with regards to its transformation agenda. This involved engagement during the development phase along with extensive consultation on the specific proposals. A key feature of this engagement was that this was led by LSOs within their areas.

**Community Planning**

One of the key aims of the Act was to improve the connection and integration of fire services with community planning. Embedding community planning within the Act has assisted in prioritising this important area of work. It has provided strategic direction and placed community planning as one of the priorities of the national service. The Act itself notes that the local senior officer must participate in community planning but went no further in terms of instructing in relation to joint plans, shared priorities or a leadership role in relation to community planning.

There has been a significant change in the role of the fire service within community planning; however it would be difficult to identify this being a result of the Police and Fire Reform Act. The change recently introduced through the Community Empowerment Act – for SFRS to be one of the five partners to lead and the focus on addressing inequality and prevention – can be said to have had a far greater impact in improving the connection between the SFRS and community planning.

However, it is important to note that the first and subsequent LSOs within Highland have developed and strengthened the relationship between local partners and positively contributed to community planning. The service has shown real leadership in a number of key areas but particularly around the implementation of the Community Empowerment Act where the new roles and responsibilities have been embraced and the principles and ethos embedded within new ways of working. The SFRS has responded to current changes in need and demand by taking a wider community planning response whilst developing its transformation agenda.

Highland Council
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