Justice Committee

Fire and rescue service reform

Written submission from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

1. Introduction

1.1 The Government announced its decision to establish a single Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) in September 2011 and published a Joint Blueprint document setting down the model for governance arrangements and the operational landscape for the SFRS. SFRS was established with the appointment of the Chair in August 2012. The Chief Officer and other Board members were appointed in October 2012 and the Service took formal responsibility for the full range of functions on 1 April 2013. SFRS did not have the benefit of a shadow year - the transition from eight Services to one national service was therefore managed by a relatively small team of staff, appointed and seconded from antecedent Services. Together with great co-operation from the Chief Officers and the staff of the former fire and rescue services they delivered a seamless transition to the new single service – a tribute to the commitment shown by colleagues across the country.

1.2 There are four key elements in the wider strategic context which have been central to the journey of reform.

1.3 Firstly, public finances. From a peak in 2009-10 the Scottish Government budget, measured by its departmental expenditure limit, will decline by 10% by 2015-16. Economic commentators expect the downward pressure on funding to continue until 2020. The challenge for the national Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is to plan and organise its business, recognising the reality that its budget will reduce from £277.2m in 2013/14 to £259.2m in 2015/16, and the impact which equivalent reductions in other sectors will have upon partner agencies and the public.

1.4 Secondly, Audit Scotland produced a series of Best Value Reviews on the eight antecedent services in 2011. Their work showed some significant differences across the country in respect of governance, operational policies and practices, performance, workloads and costs. Not all of these variations were consistent with best and safe practice, nor with efficient service delivery. For example, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate, and Audit Scotland, identified that in the Highlands and Islands there were serious gaps in a number of operational areas. Whilst recognising the early good work to address this shortfall there remained a number of outstanding matters and SFRS has continued to focus on improving local service provision. The strategic challenge for the new single service is to bring consistent good practice to all parts of the country, to achieve efficiencies where it is safe to do so, and to deploy our specialist skills and equipment where and when they are needed in relation to identified risks. We are committed to explaining the rationale and potential impact of any changes, to the communities we serve.

1.5 Thirdly, the nature of Fire and Rescue Service activity has changed markedly in the last two decades. Improvements in building design, our education and prevention efforts, and the installation of smoke alarms mean that the volume of calls
and number of incidents is very much reduced; we are seeing fewer casualties and house fires in Scotland are at their lowest level in more than 20 years, which is a real success story. Those individuals most vulnerable to death or injury are now located in hard to reach groups – elderly people, those with drug or alcohol dependency issues, inexperienced youngsters in motor vehicles – and the challenge for us is to collaborate with partners to identify and reach these people with effective prevention services to reduce their risk of being involved in an incident. In the 21st century more is expected of the Fire and Rescue Service in planning for and responding to events such as floods, water and rope rescue, national resilience against major disaster or terrorist attack. The strategic challenge includes getting the resource balance right between resilience, response and prevention, and ensuring the right skill set and approach for effective engagement in the community.

1.6 The final element is the public services reform agenda. The Government and the Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services were clear that if we are to achieve improved outcomes in health, education and service delivery for the public we need to see more effective outcomes through community planning partnerships and a better focus on prevention efforts, especially in children’s early years, and in our most deprived areas. For a Fire Service newly established as a national public body, Board members and staff will demonstrate to our stakeholders and the public that we are committed to delivering for local communities and enhancing the reach, quality and consistency of our services. This can be most effectively achieved through a single national service which is delivered at a local level.

2. What impact there has been at a local level of the single fire service

2.1 Scotland’s risk profile requires an assessment of local and national needs to ensure the right resources are in the right place at the right time. The opportunities generated through the creation of a single service and removal of geographic boundaries allows fire and rescue services to be delivered in a more equitable and consistent manner to communities across Scotland.

2.2 The creation of the SFRS has provided an opportunity to examine incident trends across Scotland enabling an intelligence-led approach to partnership working and the development of information sharing protocols.

2.3 Local fire and rescue plans have been produced for 2014-17 which set out priorities and objectives for each of the 32 local authority areas. These plans have been developed and consulted on at a local level1 in order to ensure a direct correlation with local outcomes identified through local community planning.

2.4 Local level service provision across Scotland, delivered through local fire stations, continues to provide the highest level of prevention and intervention services to the communities we serve, aligned with local and national risks.

1 Evidenced by Local Plans consultation and feedback
3. **The consultation process for local fire plans**

3.1 Local plans have been developed in collaboration with local authorities and informed by engagement with local stakeholders. The plans were subject to an Equality Impact Assessment. The Service used a number of mechanisms to publicise the contents and assist with the consultation process and local stakeholder engagement. All the plans were published on the SFRS intranet and website and have been subject to a detailed consultation process, which ended on 14 February 2014. Local Senior Officers engaged proactively with a broad range of stakeholders and staff were also actively encouraged to participate. National bodies such as Scottish Police Authority, Scottish Ambulance Service and COSLA were also invited to feedback any comments.

3.2 Comments will be fully considered by Local Senior Officers and, where appropriate, amendments will be made to the plans prior to submission to the local authority for approval. To help inform future consultation exercises we will evaluate the lessons learned and ensure best practice is identified and adopted by the Service.

4. **The SFRS strategic plan**

4.1 The first Strategic Plan for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service set out our high level aims and ambitions for the Service over its first three years, ensuring we continue to respond effectively while demonstrating greater flexibility through breaking down geographical boundaries and providing more equitable access to services and resources. Our four strategic aims are as follows:

- Improved safety of communities and staff
- More equitable access to fire and rescue services
- Improved outcomes through partnership
- Culture of continuous improvement

4.2 The Plan is set in the context of meeting the Ministers’ expectations of the Service as articulated in the Fire and Rescue Framework for Scotland bringing the best from the former eight services to create a modern, effective and efficient service. This is further complemented by a programme of service transformation which will ensure we deliver the benefits of reform.

4.3 The Plan will be formally reviewed in three years’ time, however, we will periodically undertake interim reviews to ensure our aims and activities remain fit for purpose.

5. **SFRS proposals on its estate including the proposals there be three control rooms in Scotland and one fire college**

5.1 SFRS developed detailed plans to rationalise its inherited property portfolio from the merger of the eight antecedent fire and rescue services. The immediate priority in year one has been to continue the merger and harmonisation of the previous eight into one, developing a strong foundation for efficiencies and improved practice. In year two we will continue to improve and change the Service through
innovative approaches and removing unnecessary duplication. This programme of property rationalisation and investment will create a fit-for-purpose, cost-effective estate that is situated in key locations across our communities, giving the Service a robust platform from which to deliver its strategic aims.

5.2 The decision to rationalise the number of Fire Controls in Scotland must be viewed in the context of the wider strategic intent to reduce duplication. Removal of boundaries between former fire and rescue services meant an important early task was for the Board to agree a ‘strategic intent’ document to indicate the direction of travel for the new service in rationalising its future property requirements for the functions of national training, Fire Control rooms, vehicle and equipment workshops, ICT data centres, office accommodation including service delivery area and national headquarters.

5.3 It has created the opportunity to identify a resilient model of Fire Control to support a national organisation that delivers services locally and continues to ensure community and firefighter safety. With Johnstone Control currently handling just over half of all fire calls in Scotland it was clear that it would not be appropriate to maintain a further seven Fire Controls to manage the remainder of calls.

5.4 The SFRS will now begin to develop detailed implementation plans towards putting in place a proven model that will ensure the safety of communities and firefighters right across Scotland. Changes won't happen overnight but over a period of three to five years, giving the Service the opportunity to address any concerns people may have and ensure that this is a carefully managed transition. The Service has written to key stakeholders including all 32 Local Authority Chief Executives, Council Leaders, Community Planning Partnerships, MSPs and other elected members to outline the rationale behind the reduction in Fire Controls and how it will ultimately lead to more efficient service delivery. The opportunity for further discussion with representatives from the Service has also been offered.

5.5 The strategic intent of the SFRS includes plans to maintain one, national training centre at Clydesmill, Cambuslang, with enhanced training facilities (technical and practical) complemented by a number of single and multi-scenario sites and facilities across Scotland to support a modern fire and rescue service’s long-term learning and development needs.

5.6 Our strategic intent in relation to the Service’s training facilities must contribute to the intended benefits of reform by providing staff with more equitable access to our training facilities across Scotland.

5.7 In November, the SFRS Board approved a Working Together Framework, formalising the ethos of partnership working with Trade Unions. A partnership working group was established between officers and Fire Brigades Union officials to consider the implications of estate proposals. The Service has taken steps to mitigate the impact on our employees by our commitment to no compulsory redundancies and the application of change management policies including

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2 Strategic Intent Board paper
voluntary severance, early retirement, relocation options, travel and subsistence support and re-training opportunities.

6. Any other issues arising from fire reform

6.1 The service has endeavoured to ensure that we learn from the outcomes of Audit Scotland's 'learning the lessons from public body mergers', planning effectively the transformational change process, operating within budget and meeting the required savings, ensuring business continuity and delivering the benefits of reform.

6.2 The Inspectorate for Fire and Rescue Services in Scotland undertook a recent review of the reform process and noted positive progress whilst highlighting that the Service was at the beginning of its journey; there has been no detrimental impact on expected service levels, and the direction of travel is good.

6.3 It is important the Service continues to maintain business as usual whilst significant transformation is taking place, ensuring a carefully managed transition to end state arrangements. We are reforming with the support of a service transformation programme to achieve the improvements needed to deliver the benefits of fire reform.

6.4 SFRS is aware of the challenges of bringing together different organisational cultures and is sensitive to the need for supportive change management policies.

Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
4 March 2014