1. Her Majesty’s Fire Service Inspectorate in Scotland is an independent body which provides professional scrutiny of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. The Inspectorate works closely with Audit Scotland – a relationship which is supported by a Memorandum of Understanding with the Auditor General. We also provide advice to the Scottish Government on fire and rescue service matters.

2. The comments below are informed by our inspection activity, interviews with managers and a large number of SFRS staff and judgements we have made arising from that work.

3. As part of my submission, I would draw the Committee’s attention to the Inspectorate’s report “An Overview of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service” which was laid before Parliament in November 2013. The report records our opinion that the direction of travel for reform of the SFRS looks good but that (at the time of writing) the Service was closer to the beginning of its journey than the end.

Impact at local level

4. Since the summer of 2013, the Inspectorate has been undertaking a broad range of field visits, so feels well informed on local level impact at this point in the reform process. Our initial concern was that the restructuring of eight fire and rescue services and the college at Gullane might cause disruption to service delivery. In our November 2013 report we record that we did not see any evidence of disruption to operational response. Our subsequent field visits across Scotland continue, for the most part, to support this view. We are also noting continuity of work in legislative fire safety enforcement and community safety work.

5. We have not yet undertaken any significant examination of engagement with local partners and therefore cannot comment on that at this point.

The SFRS’ Strategic Plan

6. The Inspectorate is relatively comfortable with the SFRS Strategic Plan. We would like to see more of a ‘golden thread’ in the Service’s planning and project management work and will be encouraging the Service to be clear about how it links proposed actions to performance monitoring and targets. In the longer term, our interest lies more with the implementation of change which we will continue to monitor. A major part of our scrutiny role is to consider the state and efficiency of the Service and one of our key indicators is how well or otherwise the Service is meeting Ministers’ expectations. The Strategic Plan seems to define well how those expectations will be met.

Proposals on Estate
7. Moves to reduce and rationalise estate fall within the range of our reasonable expectations. The Service will not have achieved one of the key benefits of reform until it reduces its estate and the cost of upkeep. The Inspectorate does not have a view on geographical locations other than where office facilities are also used as a strategic mobilising base for officers or where the span of control of a manager might be argued to be over-large or over-small.

8. On control rooms, our view is that it would be fundamentally wrong for the new national service to continue to operate 8 inherited control rooms – which would build an unnecessary complication and an increased risk of confusion and operational failure into the Service’s work. Concerns about a loss of local knowledge are understandable but do not stand up well to scrutiny.

9. The Inspectorate does not have a view on political debates – for example, on whether a particular area or region is fairly treated in relation to public sector jobs. Neither are we involved in staff consultation and negotiation. We have, however, stressed the risk of disruption to service continuity during what will be a very technically demanding change.

10. The technical key to designing a control room function is resilience and the decision to operate from 3 centres makes sense in that respect. Other than that, the Inspectorate has only a marginal interest in the technical functioning of the control room. We are mostly concerned with the operational policies and practices which are delivered through control room functions and the resources available for deployment. These things have already been subject to some standardisation across Scotland.

I would be happy to discuss these or any other matters as the committee sees fit.

Steven Torrie,
Chief Inspector of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
11 February 2014