Justice Committee

Fire and rescue service reform

Written submission from North Ayrshire Council

In response to the call for evidence on the Impact of Police Reform on Local Policing North Ayrshire Council comment as follows.

The Justice Committee have sought particular views on the following issues: -

- what impact there has been at a local level of the single fire service;
- the consultation process for local fire plans;
- the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service’s strategic plan;
- the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service’s proposals on its estate, including the proposals that there be three control rooms in Scotland and one fire college; and
- any other issues arising from fire reform.

Prior to responding to these particular questions it would be helpful to outline the arrangements in place for fire and rescue in North Ayrshire and the expected direction of travel.

North Ayrshire Council and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service are core Community Planning Partners. Audit Scotland conducted a review of community planning within North Ayrshire during 2012 and their conclusion was that community planning was well-embedded within North Ayrshire. The next stage was to deliver clear outcomes for the community.

In order to deliver outcomes the Council and its communities have worked in partnership with Fire and Rescue. For example, through the community planning partnership, funding is provided to support fire safety education.

In terms of delivering outcomes for the community there have been a number of key developments within North Ayrshire. A key strategy has been a six week multi-agency targeted intervention into particular areas. The Police, Council and other Community Planning Partners including Fire and Rescue will meet to map the issues facing communities and agree a six week targeted multi-agency intervention in a particular area. The aim is not just to break the back of particular issues, but to build up community resilience and community contacts which can be used to reduce problems on a long term basis. The interventions have also been very effective in getting different agencies and the community to work together, and creating an awareness of what each can do. In other words the aim is that the sum is greater than the parts. Performance evidence tends to suggest that these interventions are very effective in reducing levels of crime and anti-social behaviour, both on a short term and longer term basis.

During 2012/13 the Council had a Shadow Police and Fire Committee which dealt with issues relating to fire and rescue in North Ayrshire and the transition to the
national Fire and Rescue service. Since 1st April 2013 the Council has a Police and Fire & Rescue Committee. This meets quarterly with representatives of Police and Fire & Rescue present. In addition to dealing with local and national plans the committee receives reports from Police and Fire & Rescue Service on their performance in North Ayrshire. This has been effective in allowing issues effecting policing in North Ayrshire to be fully explored. On 27 February 2013 the Committee considered Strathclyde Fire and Rescue’s Local Plan and Local Monitoring Plan 2012/13. On 24 October 2013 the Committee considered and responded to the consultation on Scottish Fire and Rescue Service’s strategic plan.

It was our expectation that the direction of travel under Scottish Fire and Rescue Service’s would reaffirm, rather than change the approach to fire and rescue in North Ayrshire. As such we did not expect much change in the short term. This has been our experience.

Turning to the particular issues on which the sub-committee seek evidence we comment on these in turn: -

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

The Single Fire and Rescue Service has had no detrimental impact on the close community planning links between the Council and Fire and Rescue. While a number of the senior officers with whom the Council closely worked have moved on to other posts, new officers have adopted a similar approach. It is also worth mentioning that under the previous arrangements only a limited number of Local Authority Councillors attended the Fire Board. The new Police and Fire & Rescue Committee allows a greater number of Elected Members to scrutinise plans and performance information relating to Police in North Ayrshire. This also allows a spread of members across geographical areas and political groups to be involved.

2. The consultation process for local fire plans;

The consultation process has been good.

The Draft Local Plan for North Ayrshire shows continuity with the previous Local Plan of Strathclyde Fire and Rescue, both in style and content. The only point worth noting is that the outcomes are framed in terms of North Ayrshire’s contribution to national targets. To be meaningful local targets need to be reported through annual operational plans. This is happening in North Ayrshire.

3. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service’s strategic plan;

The consultation process was also good and the Committee’s view on the Strategic Plan was that it achieves the correct balance between providing strategic direction but not limiting local initiatives targeted at local needs. It showed a clear understanding of the importance of partnership, community and neighbourhood planning. If it was perhaps a bit light on the importance of prevention, it should be borne in mind that the Fire Service has been particularly effective at this over the last 20 years.
4. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service’s proposals on its estate, including the proposals that there be three control rooms in Scotland and one fire college;

One of the justifications for the creation of a national service was in relation to the savings which a national service might achieve. Each Fire Board had its own control room and training arrangements. This is no longer necessary. In our view the proposal to reduce to three control centres achieves the correct balance between efficiency and having sufficient control centres to ensure resilience. As regards the proposal for a single training centre this should also produce savings while at the same time ensure a standardisation of training across the national service.

5. Any other issues arising from fire reform;

In conclusion, there has been little if any change within North Ayrshire and the positive work between Fire and Rescue, Council and other Community Planning Partners has continued to blossom.

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