Justice Committee

Fire and rescue service reform

Written submission from the Scottish Government

Introduction

1. The SFRS has had an impressive first year, ensuring a seamless operational transition from eight services to one on 1 April 2013, and making significant progress towards building a truly national service. This was in the face of significant challenges faced during its formative months which included dealing with a spate of wildfires across the country, as well as a pension dispute and threat of industrial action. It was not envisaged that fire and rescue reform would happen overnight; the SFRS has, however, risen to the challenge of balancing merger and improvement whilst maintaining the same high levels of operational delivery in both prevention activity and emergency response. It is to the SFRS’s credit that the progress achieved thus far has been without any negative impact on day-to-day operations.

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

2. Fire reform has formalised the relationship between fire services and local authorities. Local Senior Officers (LSOs) have been designated for each local authority area, and have embraced their statutory role, contributing fully to Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) and other local community groups. Local fire and rescue plans have been developed with local partners and have been subject to consultation, which ended on 14 February.

3. The SFRS is an important community planning partner that collectively with other partners through CPPs deliver effective Public Service Reform in communities across Scotland: providing the shared leadership which drives the pace of partnership working, focusing sharply on prevention, and securing continuous improvement in service delivery. SFRS recognise that they and their CPP partners need to be clear about total collective resources available, and should now work to ensure resources are deployed towards priority outcomes jointly agreed in Single Outcome Agreements. The SFRS Chair has demonstrated personal leadership in national efforts to strengthen Community Planning through the National Community Planning Group which he chairs.

4. Communities across Scotland have seen no drop in operational service provision. Furthermore, early progress has been made on creating more equal access to specialist services across Scotland – one of the key aims of fire reform. Having a single service automatically means that resources from all antecedent fire and rescue service are now available nationally, and control rooms are beginning to
push information on these available resources to incident commanders whereas previously the onus was on the incident commanders themselves. A detailed report on specialist rescue assets and their geographical locations has been developed, which will ensure that moving forward, such resources are strategically placed for effective operational mobilisation.

5. Some specific examples of improved availability of specialist services and national capacity resulting from the single service are:

- **Go Safe**
  SFRS have supported the development of a new national interactive educational resource ‘Go Safe Scotland’ that delivers safety education to Scottish children. It covers a range of safety topics such as fire, road, home, rail, water, personal, outdoor and digital safety. The ‘Go Safe Scotland’ website was developed by SFRS in partnership with a range of other agencies including: SFRS, Police Scotland, Fife Council, Glasgow City Council, Crimestoppers, RoSPA, NHS etc. The on-line resource aims to engage and challenge children to develop their awareness of safety issues in order to keep them safe. It also allows for lesson plans, associated activities and home-learning to be delivered flexibly by teachers and youth workers.

- **Water rescue capability in the Highlands**
  In August 2013, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service launched a new flood rescue capability, based at Inverness, which will benefit communities in the Highlands and Islands, and add to the overall flood rescue resources available across the country.

- **Wildfire Forum**
  The SFRS has reinvigorated the Scottish Wildfire Forum, which was previously run by the former Highlands and Islands FRS. The Scottish Wildfire Forum is a partnership between SFRS and the land management sector, including public agencies and private estates, to tackle the increasing threat of damaging wildfires across the whole of Scotland.

- **Fire Investigation (FI)**
  Improved FI capabilities throughout Scotland allowing the mobilisation teams across former FRS borders. An example is the new, specialist Fire Investigation Team, based in Aberdeen, which was dispatched to Orkney following a fire in a children’s home in April 2013. The team was deployed to provide full investigative support to officers on the island as they worked with police to identify the cause of the fire. Previously, fire investigation trained staff would have responded from Inverness in the Highlands and Islands as part of their routine duties.
Clutha Bar Incident

- 125 fire fighters were at the scene of the Clutha Bar helicopter crash, rescuing people trapped in the building for hours after the incident. Specialist urban search and rescue firefighters from across Scotland attended the incident to shore up unstable parts of the building and to excavate the collapsed areas while conducting the search and rescue operation. Fire crews from Edinburgh, Falkirk and Dundee provided back-up while Glasgow fire crews were deployed at the crash site. Crews in Glasgow were able to access important equipment directly from former Lothian and Borders’ stores. The existence of a single FRS made this far easier to arrange and coordinate.

The consultation process for local fire plans

6. The consultation period for local fire and rescue plans ended on 14 February and initial feedback, primarily through Scottish Government’s national advisors who support local scrutiny and engagement across police and fire services, has been positive. Consultation has been reported as well thought through, with many workshop sessions taking place involving Service Delivery Directors, Local Senior Officers, performance experts, Scottish Government and the Improvement Service. SFRS were keen to capture and respond to partners and the general public’s comments, particularly about local priorities for the SFRS. They have also used the opportunity to advertise their preventative approach and gauge general customer satisfaction. Further work is planned in March where discussions will take place around 'lessons learned' and where improvements can be made.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service’s strategic plan

7. The Strategic Plan was published and laid before Parliament in October, and sets out at a high level how the SFRS seeks to deliver the aims of reform and the priorities set out in the Fire Framework, referring to additional strategies and frameworks which provide more detail. Two such key strategies were the Prevention and Protection Framework and the Response and Resilience Framework were both signed off at the Board meeting in January 2014.

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

8. In September 2013 the board made the decision to consolidate control room functions to three centres, and to move to a single national training centre at Clydesmill – a purpose built, state of the art facility. The locations for the three control centres have been identified as Johnstone, Edinburgh and Dundee. The decision to reduce the eight existing fire control rooms to three was not taken lightly by the Board and an extensive programme of engagement with staff, local
stakeholders and MSPs was undertaken before the decision was announced. In addition the SFRS Board agreed to four strategically located asset resource centres (vehicle/equipment/ICT workshops), one main data centre at Johnstone (with a suitably located back-up centre), three service delivery headquarters and a national headquarters.

9. This ambitious programme of property rationalisation and investment will allow the creation of a fit for purpose, cost effective, support estate that allows the SFRS, to have a truly national footprint, with no cuts to frontline fire stations.

10. The control room rationalisation plans will provide an improved service with more up to date IT systems and better resilience. They will ensure the most suitable resources respond to incidents and will increase capability to meet the demands of responding to critical and major incidents, irrespective of location. SFRS is making these changes in the context of making firefighters and communities safer and investing in an infrastructure appropriate now and in the future. The geographical location of control rooms has no impact on the service that members of the public in local communities receive. Local knowledge is not vested in the physical location of the control room, but in the professional knowledge of control room staff, supported by sophisticated systems and technology. The Johnstone control room demonstrates this, currently serving the whole of the Strathclyde region, including islands, and handling over 50% of SFRS calls. Larger control rooms are less limited by artificial boundaries; can cope better with a peak call volumes; and have greater flexibility to cope with staff absences.

11. It is appropriate for the SFRS to consider rationalising its estate at this stage given the considerable assets it has inherited from the antecedent services. This supports the need to reduce duplication to ensure vital resources, in the face of Westminster cuts, are not diverted from achieving frontline outcomes – another key aim of fire reform. It is right that these decisions are for the Board to make based on expert advice from within the service. Parliament was clear on supporting minimal political intervention throughout the passage of the Bill, with Ministerial powers of direction designed to be used as a last resort only.

**Any other issues arising from fire reform?**

12. The Service continues to develop a clear role as a champion of specialist rescue. It is accepted that this is a complex area where time taken to get things right is beneficial, and I am aware that much valuable work is being done behind the scenes. At present the service is developing a Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) with other emergency responders.
13. The SFRS are content that their relationship with the Scottish Government sponsor team is a productive one, and I am equally happy to say the sentiment is reflected from a Scottish Government perspective.

Conclusion

14. It is evident to me that the Service has done an enormous amount of work over the last twelve months and I look forward to building on the constructive relationship we have established. I am also greatly encouraged by the positive and innovative changes SFRS are implementing as it works in partnership with local and national organisations to improve protection for communities across Scotland.

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27 February 2014