

Government Consultation Response to the Fire Reform White Paper

Report of the Chief Fire Officer

For further information about this report please contact Simon Hardiman Chief Fire Officer, on 01743 260201 or Scott Hurford on 01743 260265.

1 Executive Summary

The purpose of this Report is to provide an update to Members regarding the Government's response to the Consultation on the Fire Reform Paper. It provides an overview of the proposed reforms aimed at enhancing flexibility, culture, and professionalism within the fire service. Key elements include the establishment of a College of Fire and Rescue, a statutory code of ethics, and operational independence for chief officers.

The report also addresses the financial, legal, and community safety implications of these reforms, underscoring their potential impact on training, insurance, and public value, while emphasising the potential of operational and structural changes in the UK fire service.

2 Recommendations

The Fire Authority is asked to note the report

3 Background

The "Reforming Our Fire and Rescue Service" consultation paper was first published in May 2022 and the fire sector, stakeholders and the public were given the opportunity to respond with their views. The consultation has now concluded and the government has published its response.

The case for reform is considered with the consultation to the White Paper reflecting on the Independence Culture Review of London Fire Brigade, released in August 2022. Which amongst other published concerns to the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire resulted in commissioning His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) to produce a spotlight report on values and culture. This has led to further commissioned work to the HMICFRS in the form of a thematic inspection of the handling of misconduct in fire and rescue services.

The Government's consultation also reflects on the introduction of Minimum Service Levels Act 2023 which received Royal Assent in Parliament, ensuring workers maintain the ability to strike whilst giving the public access to essential services they need.

4 Government Proposals - Setting the course for reform

The Fire Reform White Paper consulted on the governments vision for fire reform, centred around three main themes:

- **People**- improving systems, flexibility and culture
- **Professionalism**- helping fire professional to best service their communities
- **Governance**- strengthening oversight and leadership

People

Talent and inclusion

The White Paper outlines plans to help fire professionals to further develop their skills and ensure that everyone could thrive in their work.

It also sets out the intention to build on existing progress to provide effective leadership of the sector and building capacity, embedding values, and nurturing talent within services.

Funding will be made available to support and widen the direct entry schemes which will allow more non-operational professionals to lead Fire and Rescue Services (FRSs).

Pay and role

The government will work with fire employers and unions to crucially review the National Joint Council (NJC) own mechanisms, operations, and transparency. This should be completed by early 2024.

If this does not result in meaningful change, the government will explore other routes to ensure a modern, fair pay system which constructively enables role reform in England.

Professionalism

Creating a College of Fire and Rescue

To assist in strengthening the overall professionalism of services it is proposed that a College of Fire and Rescue be created, with the most appropriate deliver model for this to be developed. Such a college would have responsibility for professional standards.

Raising standards

The White Paper will propose creation of a statutory code of ethics. Furthermore, the Home Office will place future responsibility for professional standards with the College of Fire and Rescue.

Governance

Governance Change

Although the White Paper outlined support for a single point of accountability for fire governance, it is not proposed to mandate the transfer of governance to Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs). Voluntary transfers and those facilitated in local devolution deals will be supported.

Operational Independence

Legislation will be introduced at the earliest opportunity to give chief officers operational independence, with FRAs retaining responsibility for their services.

Clarity will be provided on providing a clear separation of strategic and operational planning requirements, and overall governance.

Members can read the full document to be set before Parliament using this link: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/657888bc095987000d95df2a/E02947034_Fire_Reform_Consultation_Resp_Accessible.pdf

5 Conclusions

The report highlights a wide range of areas which the government will move to legislate on, with the aim of improving the UK fire service in its entirety.

The response represents a nuanced shift in focus. While maintaining the importance of operational and structural reforms, the government has decided against the mandatory transfer of Fire and Rescue Authority (FRA) functions to single elected officials like Police and Crime Commissioners. Instead, it emphasises the establishment of a professional body and a College of Fire and Rescue to elevate standards and training.

Additionally, introducing a statutory code of ethics to address integrity lapses and upholds operational independence for chief officers within the strategic framework of fire and rescue authorities.

6 Capacity

The proposals laid out within the report, will draw capacity from day-to-day activities to review and analyse the potential impact on the service.

7 Fire Alliance / Collaboration / Partnership Working

As the UK fire services moves to implement the outcomes of the newly laid legislation, opportunities will arise for partnership working with the Service's strategic partner HWFRS and more widely the regionally group of services.

8 Financial Implications

There are potential financial implications arising from this report, associated with implementing new standards and operational independence may require investment in technology and infrastructure. The move away from transferring FRA functions to single elected individuals might result in savings compared to the original proposal.

9 Legal Comment

Implementing operational independence for chief fire officers as part of the Fire Service reforms could have significant legal implications. This change would necessitate adjustments to the legal framework governing fire and rescue services, particularly in areas of decision-making authority, liability, and accountability.

The legal responsibility for actions and decisions made in an operationally independent environment would need clear delineation to ensure compliance with existing laws and regulations.

10 Communications

The Service remains committed to provide clear and current communications with all staff and stakeholders who may be affected by the changes proposed by the government.

11 Community Safety

The introduction of operational independence for chief fire officers and other proposed reforms could significantly enhance community safety. This independence might lead to more effective and tailored responses to local emergencies, enhancing the speed and appropriateness of reactions to community-specific needs.

12 Equality Impact Assessment

At present there are no equality or diversity implications arising from this report. Once the proposals have been enshrined into legislation, a e-EQIA will be required.

13 Fire Standard Core Code of Ethics and Human Rights (including Data Protection)

The Service has already introduced with a clear, “Core Code of Ethics.” It has promoted integrity and professionalism, ensuring decisions and actions align with ethical standards and human rights principles. This shift has already enhanced public trust, fostered a culture of respect and fairness within the service, and ensures that the rights and dignity of both the community and service personnel are upheld.

14 Insurance

With the introduction of the proposals within this report, in particular operational independence in the service. This reform introduces new dynamics and responsibilities, which might require updated insurance coverage to adequately reflect these changes in operational autonomy and the associated risks.

15 The On-call Service

The report highlighted a number of responses highlighted concerns regarding On-call firefighter recruitment and retention when the reforms are implemented.

The government has committed to work with key partners, including the NFCC to explore any implications.

16 Public Value / Service Delivery

The proposed reforms in Fire and Rescue Service's, especially operational independence, are expected to significantly enhance public trust and satisfaction. This autonomy could lead to more effective and locally tailored emergency services, resonating with community-specific needs and expectations.

17 Training

With the introduction of operational independence, there is the potential for more tailored and relevant training programs, directly addressing local risks and challenges. This could lead to a more skilled and adaptable firefighting workforce, better prepared for a diverse range of emergency scenarios.

Additionally, the introduction of a Core Code of Ethics may incorporate new training modules focused on ethical decision-making and human rights, further enriching the professional development of fire and rescue personnel.

18 Appendices

There are no appendices to this report.

19 Background Papers

Reforming Our Fire and Rescue Service

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/627d6b378fa8f53f93a4ae65/DRAFT_WP_consultation_HO_template_110522.pdf