

FIRE

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Guest Comment

A very political fix

Pete Murphy, Nottingham Trent University, says the consultation on blue light integration is deeply flawed

Proposals to put police and crime commissioners in charge of our fire and rescue services are nothing more than a convenient political fix that deserve more sophisticated public scrutiny than the government is currently countenancing. Snuck out at the height of Corbynmania, the proposals are like a budget speech that dazzles on the day only to unravel as reality rears its inconvenient head. The consultation process is flawed and the benefits illusory, oversold and will dissolve in the mists of time.

Fire and rescue services enjoy some of the highest levels of public trust and satisfaction in the UK and around the world. They are well earned, but like many of our public services, after five years of contempt from the coalition government, the Service needs to improve its public assurance, value for money and performance management system, yet these are mere side issues to the current political power grab.

Political control to PCCs; operational control to the Chief Constable, and a pup to the public. The proposals are built on assertion rather than evidence and fly in the face of history and experience.

In Scotland during the past two years the Fire and Rescue Service has transformed from a locally delivered service to a national service. According to a recent report by Audit Scotland, the Service has improved operational efficiency, captured economies of scale, improved inter-agency collaboration and made savings for the exchequer without compromising public safety. It has universally been considered a success, while a similar process in the police has generated controversy, bad publicity, declining public confidence and the resignation of the first Chief Constable.

The English proposals are intended to maintain the separation of operational or front line services, while promising the usual back office savings and efficiency gains. Yet back office and infrastructure costs such as IT, HRM and finance represent a much higher proportion of costs in the police than they do in the Fire Service and it is very clear which service will dominate the new arrangements.

The consultation document itself is full of leading questions that assume the preferred outcome. It asks what benefits will be achieved by empowering a PCC to create a single employer. Rather than asking whether a single employer is a good initiative still; less whether the power to create a single employer is best vested in a PCC.

The PCC has merely to consult locally and 'seek views' on whether the transfer should take place. There is no guidance as to whose views are to be sought, not even members of the local resilience forum, let alone the business community or the insurance industry. To inform this view, however, the PCC can (not 'should' or 'must') seek an independent assessment, and if they wish they can choose their own assessor. If a local fix (business case) is not forthcoming, the Secretary of State is to be afforded considerable discretion to determine the issue without the need to make the reasons public or have them formally tested.

The current proposals will neither deliver economic, efficient or effective emergency services nor optimise public safety. They are a triumph of hope over experience and deserve to be sent back to the drawing board if not consigned to the dustbin of history.