Innovations in the governance of Fire and Rescue Services in England

The case of Police Fire and Crime Commissioners

Local Government in motion – Local innovation in changing contexts

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Governance

Governance - regimes of laws, rules, judicial decisions, and administrative practices that constrain, prescribe, and enable the provision of publicly supported goods and services (Lynn et al. 2001, p.7)

Governance - the process of steering society and the economy through collective action and in accordance with common goals (Torfing et al. 2012, p.14)

- Traditional public sector provision increasing seen as inadequate
- New Public Management and New Public Governance
- Proliferation of innovative forms of public governance, e.g. networks, partnerships and collaborative arrangements (Klijn 2008)
- Focus on exchange of resources, negotiations, and trust (Ostrom and Walker 2003).
- Undermined democratic quality due to the influence of non-public actors, which could create power asymmetries (Papadopolulos 2003).

Accountability

- “A chameleon-like concept” - various meanings to different people (Sinclair 1995)
- A principal-agent relationship between the agent and the principal who can hold the agent to account for its behaviour and activity (Mayston 1993).
- Multiple, different, changing, and often conflicting expectations within and outside public sector organisations (Willems and Van Dooren 2011, Denhardt and Denhardt 2011).
- “Accountability paradox’ rather than a healthy balance between performance and other functions of accountability (Jos and Tompkins 2004).
- Increased accountability can result in a counterproductive effect of accountability “overloads” on service’s performance (Halachmi 2014)

The impact of governance on accountability

A better-governed world = more governance and more accountability (Pollitt and Hupe 2011).

Organisations largely enact their accountability through governance structures (March and Olsen 1983).

- Traditional hierarchical governance models provide clear lines of accountability
- In new innovative forms of governance accountability arises from the interplay of many actors, some of whom are not in hierarchical relationships.

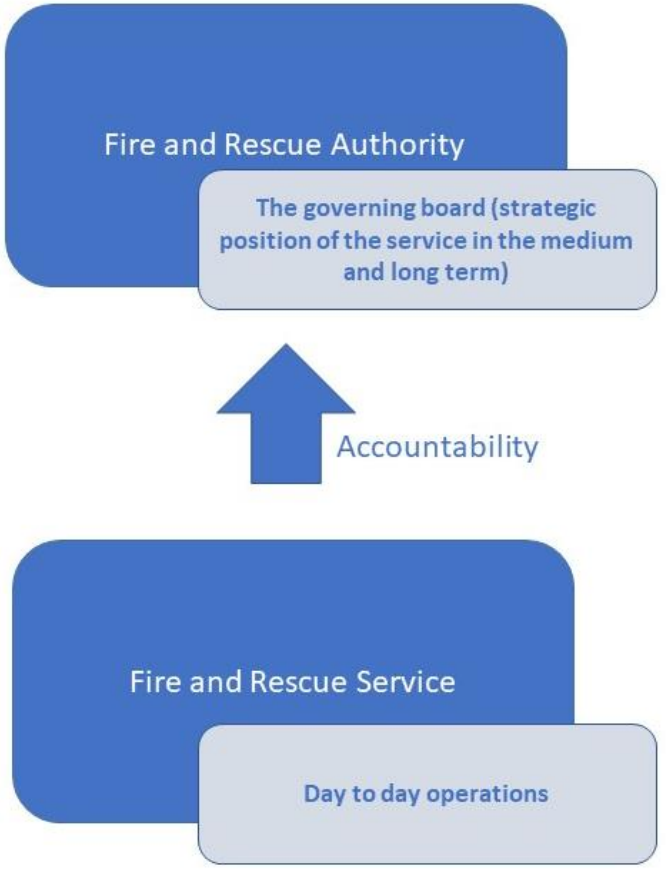
It becomes increasingly challenging to establish who is accountable to whom and for what because decision-making is shared among multiple actors (Bevir 2009).

Research context

- Under-researched governance in emergency services due to emergency studies focusing mainly on management and organisation rather than governance (Farrell 2018)
- Significant variations in emergency services governance, hence difficulties of international comparison (Wankhade et al. 2019)
- Lack of systematic analysis of fire governance models despite the development of alternative models in England

Policy context

- Traditional long-standing governance model of the local fire and rescue authority (a membership drawn from local govt)
- *"A fire and rescue landscape still beset by poor governance and structures… A service that requires further reform to improve accountability, bring independent scrutiny and drive transparency."* (Mrs May 2016)
- Since 2017, UK government has introduced an alternative governance model to improve accountability in practice
  - Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) have been able to make a case to assume responsibility for the governance of fire and rescue services within their force areas and become Police, Fire and Crime Commissioners (PFCCs)
- Directly elected individuals have not been a feature of the UK's local governance arrangements
- To date, 4 local fire services adopted the PFCC model (out of 45 English fire services)



Research Question

Academic debates: The relationship between governance and accountability remains relatively vague. Lack of systematic analysis of fire governance models despite the development of alternative innovative models in England

Political debates: The fire rescue landscape is characterised by poor governance and accountability structures that need to be improved. The Conservative Party in favour of the new PFCC governance model.

RQ: How do English Fire and Rescue Services understand the notions of accountability and their implementation in the context of the traditional governance arrangements and the new PFCC arrangements introduced by the Policing and Crime Act 2017?

Research Design

Interpretivist paradigm

Uncovering the social construction of governance models and accountability that individuals create and are constrained by

Qualitative approach

Understanding the concepts from the individuals' viewpoints

Multiple case studies

A comparative multiple case study of governance models within English fire and rescue services

Sampling

6 services out of 45. Purposive sampling (criteria – the long-standing governance vs the innovative PFCC governance)

"most different systems" design

The long-standing FRA model	The innovative PFCC model
Case 1 (combined FRA) - pilot	Case 2 (former county FRA)
Case 5 (metropolitan FRA)	Case 3 (former combined FRA)
Case 6 (county FRA)	Case 4 (former combined FRA)

County, combined and metropolitan authorities types of local government institutions (outside of London)

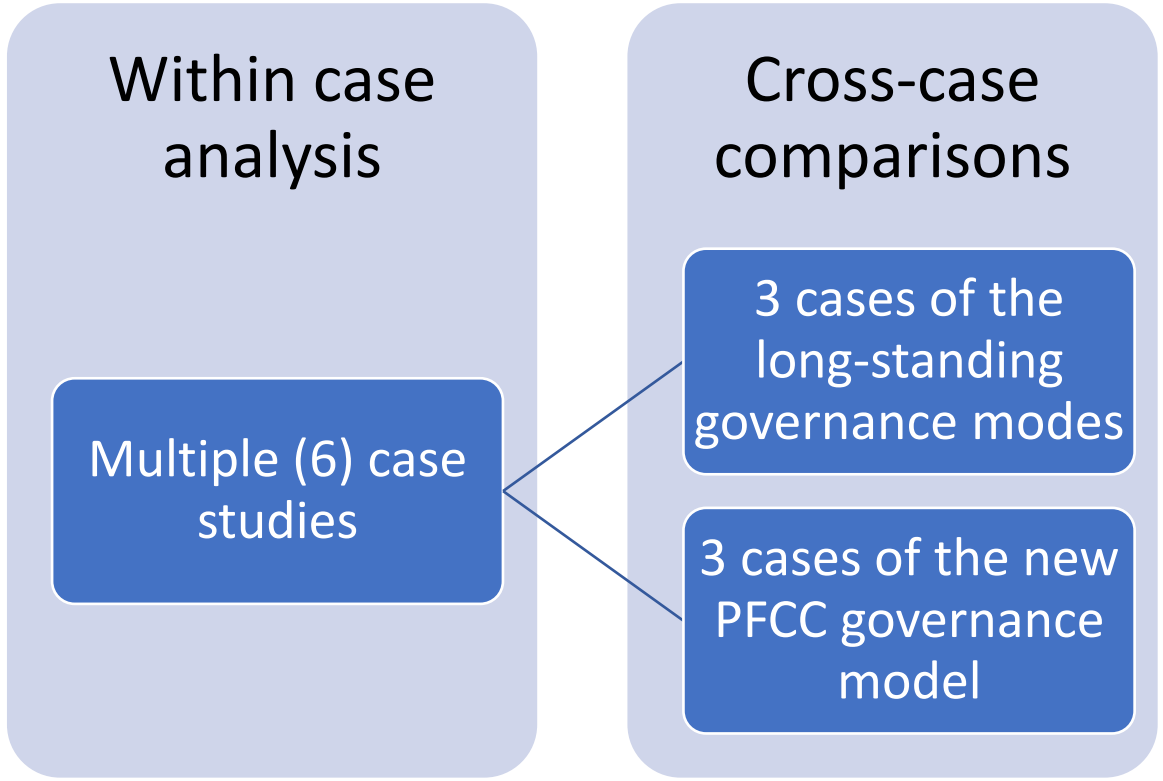
Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection

- 36 semi-structured interviews with senior management (min 5 per each case study),
- 5 focus groups with firefighters,
- Publicly available documents

Data analysis

- Thematic coding (NVivo)
- Abductive approach - a constant interplay between the data and the coding process to refine the themes and their subthemes.



Contrasting models of local fire governance

The new PFCC model
PCCs are democratically elected by the public

The long-standing FRA model
Fire and Rescue Authorities are made up of elected members who then get nominated for the fire and rescue authority along party political lines

Findings – emerging themes (contrasting perceptions)

Decision making

Collective "with the fire authority, at least you have a collective balance within the decision making " (Case 1)

Single "decisions are made quicker, so there's a bit more decisiveness having that single accountable person" (Case 3)

Scrutiny of the governing body

Limited scrutiny "There still potentially could be a lack of scrutiny from some areas of the fire authority" (Case 1)

Greater scrutiny "We now have a commissioner that is very, very focused, switched on, asked some very difficult and awkward questions." (Case 4)

Reliance on the Chief Fire Officer's expertise

Significant reliance "The FRA defer to Chief Fire Officer as the subject matter expert and won't challenge his strategic recommendations" (Case 1)

Limited reliance "You have a chief fire officer who's giving professional advice at the moment to a PFCC who doesn't take that advice" (Case 3)

Accountability mechanisms

Co-opted members on FRA "we've invited co-opted members into our FRA, so that our partner organisations are able to contribute to how we deliver services locally" (Case 5)

New meetings, panels and boards "The fact that we livestream public meetings and answer questions to the public wasn't promoted as much as it is now" (Case 4)

Accountability to the public

Local interaction "Elected members used to go out on to stations"

Less locally accountable "a PCC is possibly less locally accountable in terms of being able to engage with community members" (Case 5)

Findings – emerging themes (common perceptions)

Accountability through the scheme of delegation	• “accountability comes through the constitution and the scheme of delegations, which will exist in any and all governance models. So the focus really is on making sure the scheme of delegations and the accountability within them is very clear and is publicly available” (Case 6)
Accountability to the public distorted by the politics	• “the FRA feels that they accountable directly to the public when decision making is clearly politically based” (Case 5) • “our commissioner won’t make any unpopular decisions prior to the election period” (Case 3)
Public is not engaged with the accountability process	• “the public is perhaps not as engaged with that process as they could be, or they have the opportunity to be” (Case 5) • “the public aren’t interested in fire, as long as their house in on fire and a fire engine turns up, they’re happy with that” (Case 1)
Trust and informal accountability	• “Currently, we’ve got a very good, strong, trusting relationship with the current commissioner” (Case 4) • “The chief has been building a new relationship with the chair and the chair has a much greater focus on it in terms of performance” (Case 1)
Too much accountability	• “unnecessary barriers, hurdles and blockers to getting work progressed because we’re … it’s too over the top with accountability” (Case 6) • “capacity can be an issue because when you’ve got to prepare the next presentation for that public accountability meeting and we’ve got limited resource” (Case 4)

Provisional conclusions

- The innovative governance and accountability arrangements for FRS in England are more complex than the traditional arrangements.
- The expanded powers of PFCCs are reflected in new accountability mechanisms for the fire sector, however, the data reveals that does not necessarily improve accountability (Jos and Tompkins 2004).
- Excessive requirements – unnecessary barriers to accountability. Accountability overloads (Halachmi 2014)
- Both governance models are heavily influenced by the local political structures and discourse (adversarial or consensual)
- Next step is to understand the full implications of the 2017 Act (the impact of the new external inspectorate for FRS, the introduction of a duty to collaborate with other emergency services etc.) on governance and accountability arrangements.

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