

Rising risks as assurance and support disappears

Peter Murphy and **Kirsten Greenhalgh**, Nottingham Trent University and University of Nottingham, report on the new challenges and opportunities for fire and rescue services in the UK

The continuing era of austerity and the disinvestment or dismantling of many established parts of the Fire Service's national infrastructure, together with the launch of a new national framework from the coalition government, has created new challenges and opportunities for the Service in the UK.

The government itself has asked Sir Ken Knight, the recently retired Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser, to undertake an efficiencies review of the 46 fire and rescue authorities in England, although the essentially reactive, short term and narrow remit is unlikely to allow or inspire the much needed long term and innovative and creative thinking that the Service requires to deliver its future responsibilities to the public.

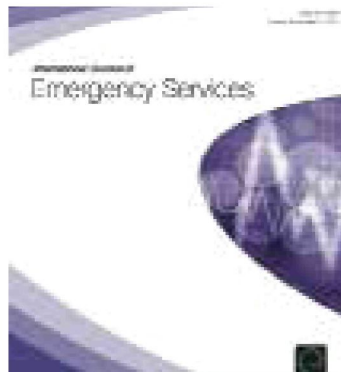
In this article the authors explore some of the less high profile parts of the organisational landscape and changing relationships that the Service finds itself confronting as it comes to terms with continuing austerity. Whilst in no way decrying Sir Ken's review, it suggests some long term sector-wide issues that have recently changed but that urgently need to be re-addressed if the sector is to provide economic, efficient and effective services in the long term.

Although, on first reading, Sir Ken Knight's remit appears short term and essentially a reactive response to the current continuing austerity in public finances, CFOAs initial response and early contributions from writers and the editor of this journal (Lynch 2013, Wright 2013), have commendably tried to broaden the debate, in the hope of inspiring some much needed, long term, innovative and creative thinking about the long term needs of the Service.

Do We Need Restructuring?

Almost inevitably, whenever a government minister talks about any service problem or the long term, the issue of restructuring, mergers or reconfiguration of the Service is their first (and often only) thought. So let us first get that potential issue out of the way.

The single major driver of the current government review is the financial crises affecting the external environment in which the Service has to operate in the UK. There have been no recent great technological improvements, no gross organisational or operational inefficiencies, nor any major recent



Above: the new *International Journal of Emergency Services*
Right: Authors Kirsten Greenhalgh and Peter Murphy



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emergencies that have generated a demand for significant change in the Service's thinking, the configuration of organisations or services, or the strategic approach of the Service. While the authors may think there might be a case for some limited individual mergers among some of the smaller services, wholesale restructuring, service privatisation or new business models are not what is required at this time. In short this is not a time for a Braidwood, a Riverdale or even a Holroyd report.

There is however an opportunity to think again about some of the recent changes to the less visible (but nevertheless vital) parts of the Service's organisational infrastructure in this country. Some of this essential infrastructure has been quietly dismantled, abandoned or subject to severe under-investment as a result of the continuing austerity in public finances. While short term cuts may have been necessary and inevitable, the complete loss of some roles and even institutions, and the associated loss of institutional and intellectual memory and resources will almost inevitably lead to long term inefficiencies and sub-optimal deployment of resources which, sooner or later, will have to be remedied if the Service is to aspire to the world class service we would all want it to be.

One key group of issues and institutions revolves around the infrastructure for supporting service improvement across all fire and rescue services. In a relatively homogeneous or standard public service like fire and rescue some of this infrastructure is always likely to be more effectively provided collectively, rather than expecting all services to provide it individually.



NTU Newton Building, Nottingham Trent University



Fire and rescue services in action

Since the 1880s, the Fire Service has always been a Service with a healthy thirst for professional knowledge that has valued operational research. It has consistently and conscientiously accumulated evidence of how it can improve itself and the protection of the public. Robust, quality assured, collective evidence has always been an intrinsic part of the Service's development.

Reconfigured Service Structure

External audit and an independent inspectorate have been essential to both public confidence and to previous governments' confidence in the Service. Research and intelligence have always been valued, acknowledged and embraced by the Service. Yet in a relatively short space of time, the DCLG have scaled down their research programme; the Audit Commission, with its unique programme of national reports and inspections, has been abolished; an independent Fire Service Inspectorate no longer exists, and the former Improvement and Development Agency for local authorities has been emasculated as it collapsed into the political advocacy and policy arrangements of the LGA.

In these circumstances we are bound to ask, where will the future standards and benchmarks be available for an informed public to compare performance and call individual services to account? Where will be the evidence to facilitate productive overview and scrutiny and open accountable governance? Who will develop the tools and techniques to disseminate good practice or the resources to intervene in poorly performing services?

The Service needs a national collective archive of the Service's data and intelligence that has to reside at a national base, acknowledged for its robust independence and transparency. Yet the Fire Service College has been outsourced to a private company, hardly well known for sharing its intellectual property rights, facilitating real time remote access to its databases, or promoting open source publishing. The relatively small research and development community both within the Service itself and within the universities is

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likely to contract still further and international cooperation, collaborations and networks are likely to be the next casualties. The globe may be shrinking but so is the UK's ability to lead and contribute to international safety issues and debates.

In a previous article (Murphy and Greenhalgh 2013) we looked at the latest national framework for fire and rescue services and noted the weight of obligations on fire services and authorities and the paucity of support from central government. Some of the most important previous support has in fact been swept away in the tsunami of the austerity cuts and the blind political prejudice that is personified by the Secretary of State Eric Pickles. Much of it is without any real consideration of the evidence and clearly contrary to the views of the Service – as anyone who heard or read Peter Holland's evidence to the DCLG Select Committee can testify (House of Commons 2011).

Rapidly changing technology, changes to the climate and increasing uncertainty over future patterns of development (resulting from the government's changes to the planning and development system), mean that forecasting and anticipating risks to our communities becomes more, rather than less, complex in the future. Whilst short term financial imperatives may have made reductions in services and institutions inevitable in the short term, the complete loss of some of these vital parts of the sector's infrastructure, and the associated loss of social and intellectual capital, cannot be good for the Service in the long term.

We need some of these roles, responsibilities, principles and duties back in place so that we can build on them for the future. This will not be a popular message with our partisan and adversarial politicians who will inevitably attack such a stance, but Sir Ken's review provides an opportunity to look to the long term as well as responding to short term government imperatives.

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