

Plans to merge fire and police services have dodged proper scrutiny

Putting police in charge of firefighters could lead to neglect of emergency services – something the sham public consultation failed to mention

Pete Murphy

Director, public policy & management research group, Nottingham Trent University

Monday 2 November 2015 07.03 GMT Last modified on Tuesday 3 November 2015 10.03 GMT

The government's proposal to put police and crime commissioners (PCCs) in charge of English fire and rescue services has not been thought through properly, has avoided proper scrutiny, and could destroy the well-earned trust of the public in our firefighters.

The [proposals](#) would result in the transfer of political control of the fire services to PCCs, and operational control to the chief constable.

There has been [a public consultation](#) on the proposals, which began on 11 September 2015 and closed last week. But it contained no substantial evidence, was full of leading questions designed around the government's preferred outcome, and did not ask whether having a single employer for these two services is a good idea, still less whether that employer should be created by PCCs.

to be approved by the government, each PCC must create a local business case, although what it contains is not specified. PCCs must merely consult and then seek views from interested parties in their area. Where local agreement cannot be reached – and this is likely to happen because of political differences between leaders of local public institutions – then a decision is deferred to the secretary of state.

Although it is suggested as a possible idea, the PCCs are not required or obliged to seek independent advice or the views of other local interested parties, such as the local authority.

An essential resource for public leaders, offering news, commentary and access to a range of

The proposals claim to maintain the separation of operational or front line services while promising back-office savings and efficiency gains. Yet [back office and infrastructure systems](#) such as IT, HR and finance represent much higher proportions of costs in the police than they do in the fire service. The police are already much larger organisations than fire services, and with the interests of PCCs naturally falling with the police, it is very clear that the police and policing issues will dominate the new arrangements.

We only have to look at the experience of creating the National Offender Management Service, which was the previous time central government restructured two longstanding independent but related areas of public services with diverse objectives, strong organisational and service cultures, and very different delivery structures. The probation service was

effectively consumed by the prisons and this resulted in the [decimation of the rehabilitative objectives of the probation services](#).

Fire and rescue services enjoy some of the [highest levels of public trust and satisfaction](#) in the UK and around the world. Of course, no service is perfect and after five years of contempt from the coalition government, it needs to improve its public assurance, value for money, and performance management system.

But if the current plans are implemented there is a very strong chance that the fire and rescue services would go back to the “benign neglect” that characterised the service from 1974 to 2001 when the Home Office was last responsible for fire services. [Police](#), civil disobedience, immigration and criminal justice dominated the Home Office agenda, as well as its time and resources.

If this happens again, the long-term implications will include smaller fire crews with fewer appliances and older equipment arriving at incidents. Prevention and protection work, already significantly falling, will result in fewer school visits and fire alarm checks for the elderly, not to mention the effect on business, as insurance costs rise because of increased risks to buildings and premises.

These plans will neither deliver economic, efficient or effective emergency services nor optimise public safety. They deserve to be sent back to the drawing board, if not consigned to the dustbin of history.

Pete Murphy is director of the public policy and management research group at Nottingham Business School and a former editor of the International Journal of Emergency Services.