

Briefing Note

for

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services

Changes to the strategic and operational landscape of Fire and Rescue Services

by

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Note:

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Abstract

The organisational and service delivery landscape of the emergency services in the UK has been rapidly changing and is facing further change for the foreseeable future. The policy response to austerity continues to dominate service delivery, service deployment and the regulatory framework as the government demand ever more efficient and effective services. At the same time the resources organisations have available to deliver services has been reducing and is planned to be reduced further into the foreseeable future. Simultaneously, the emergency services are faced with a constantly changing pattern of risks, both natural and man-made, to national and local communities. This chapter will examine recent and ongoing organisational changes in the policy delivery and regulatory landscape of the emergency services. This is not to evaluate individual organisations or sectors but to identify the overall picture and the current disposition of organisations within the emergency services sector and potential opportunities for improvement or further investigation.

Introduction

As can be seen from any number of recent government publications, (e.g. the latest National Framework for Fire and Rescue Services (Home Office 2018a) the government's policies and its response to prolonged austerity in the UK continues to dominate public service delivery, service deployment and the public services regulatory framework. It is therefore an obvious starting point to examine the government's policy response to austerity as it affects the emergency services.

In practise, this policy response has two major parameters, the first is the resource package available to the services, and the second is the legislative basis upon which they can act and spend. However, before we examine these two major parameters, it is helpful to illustrate how these two parameters relate to the strategic and operational organisation landscape of emergency services and how all three relate to the three inter-related domains of policy development, service delivery and the regulatory environment designed to provide assurance to the public, the government and the sectors key stakeholders.

We have tried to show all of these relationships on the simple illustrative model below at Figure 1.

The starting point for the development of any public service model must be the public interest and the values and/or principles enshrined within public service. In the UK, this is relatively simple to identify since anyone who works as a public office-holder or a direct or indirect employee in the UK must adhere to the seven principles of public life known as the 'Nolan principles' (Committee on Standards in Public Life 1995). These are defined in table 1 and shown below as a large outer circle. In developing any policy developments or frameworks for delivery of Emergency Services, ministerial legislators and officials must adhere to and promote these principles in their work. The principles operate across and throughout any public activity, and across and throughout any public service context in the UK. They are not unique to the UK but they are universal to UK public services.

Table 1: Nolan principles (1995 p1.)

Standard	Description
1. Selflessness	Holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest.
2. Integrity	Holders of public office must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work. They should not act or take decisions in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends. They must declare and resolve any interests and relationships.
3. Objectivity	Holders of public office must act and take decisions impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias.
4. Accountability	Holders of public office are accountable to the public for their decisions and actions and must submit themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this.
5. Openness	Holders of public office should act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner. Information should not be withheld from the public unless there are clear and lawful reasons for so doing.
6. Honesty	Holders of public office should be truthful.
7. Leadership	Holders of public office should exhibit these principles in their own behaviour. They should actively promote and robustly support the principles and be willing to challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs.

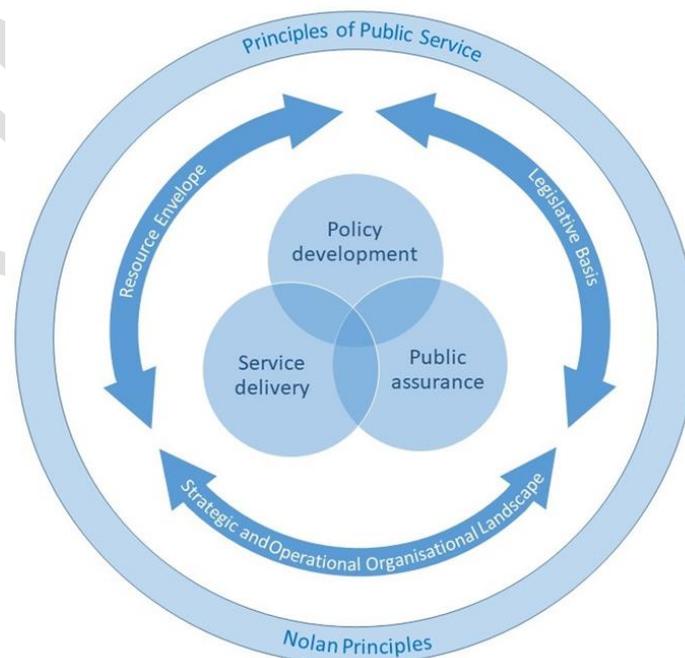
In addition to these values and principles, there are also situational or contextual constraints that act as the strategic parameters to the development of frameworks and other policy/service/assurance regimes. Most national policy documents and frameworks

attempt to cover these situational issues at the start of the documents as they ‘set the scene’ for any proposals that follow in the main body of the policy or framework. They generally include the legislative basis that provide the authority and legitimacy for the proposals; the current or revised strategic and operational organisational landscape that the service operates within; the resource envelope deemed to be available and the timescales (short, medium and long-term) that the framework is expected to cover. The key components of the context for emergency services in terms of policy/service delivery/public assurance are shown in the second circle.

Since their introduction of ‘National Frameworks’ for Fire and Rescue Services it has become apparent that to be effective they need to be cognisant and make provision for three interconnected ‘domains’. These three domains are shown at the conceptual core of our model They are:

- The policy development domain – which determines the objectives of any policy, whether national regional or local; but also identifies what the parameters to its development are and whether its delivery feasible and realistic?
- The service delivery domain - which determines how the service is to be delivered and ideally how is its delivery to be optimised, continually improved, sustained, innovated and constructively monitored?
- Finally, the assurance or regulatory domain - how is the public to be provided with re-assurance that the money taken from them to finance the policy prescriptions and the strategic and operational delivery of the service, justified and does it provide value for money?

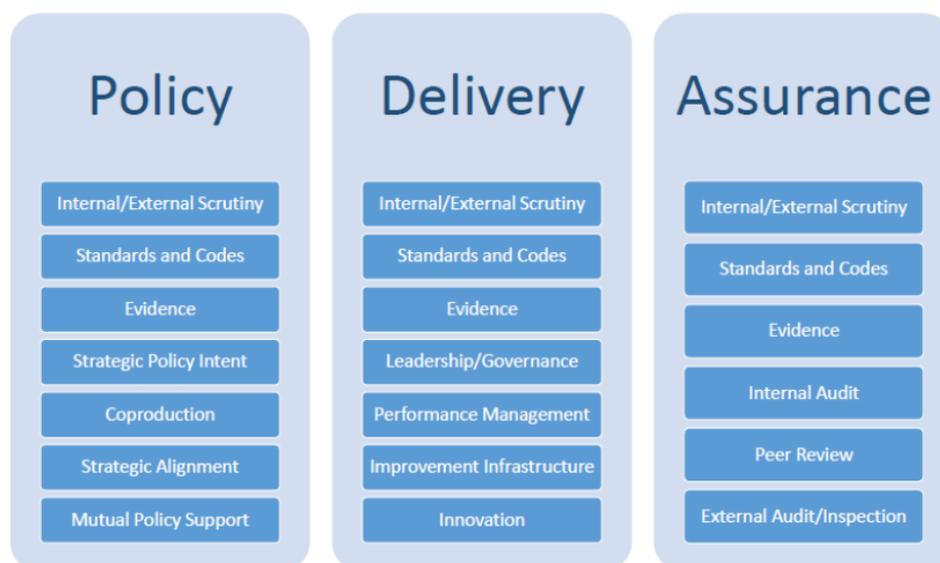
Figure 1. Three domains of the organisational landscape (Murphy and Lakoma).



Joined-up policy development (and preferably policy making) is particularly important in services, such as the emergency services, that have mutually inter-dependent responsibilities to the public at national and local community levels (Kozuch and Sienkiewicz-Malyjurek 2014, Sienkiewicz-Malyjurek 2017). Efficient and effective service delivery in emergency services is also equally interdependent at local and national levels; and the objectives of the assurance and regulatory arrangements need to transcend all three emergency services to address wider community or public goals and objectives such as public safety and security rather than narrow individual organisational goals and objectives.

These three inter-connected domains clearly have overlaps and some of their individual aspects in common. They also have some aspects that are specific to the particular domain. We have illustrated this in figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Components of the three domains (Murphy and Lakoma).



In our model these three core domains also inter-relate with the three broader parameters shown in the first circle.

Fire and Rescue

Between the turn of the century and 2010, Fire and Rescue Services in the UK experienced unprecedented reform with the introduction of new performance management arrangements and service modernisation; greater emphasis on prevention and protection and the Audit Commission as the principle regulator. Co-production and collective responsibility for policy and service delivery was enshrined in successive National Frameworks in England (ODPM 2004, 2006, DCLG 2008) while Scotland and Wales experienced devolution. The need for better collaboration and pressure for greater 'blue light' co-operation was enshrined in the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act, that introduced Community Safety Partnerships; the Civil Contingencies and the Fire and Rescue Services Acts of 2004 and the introduction of Local Area Agreements in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2017. All this radically changed both the modus operandii and the organisational landscape of the Fire and Rescue Services in the UK (Raynsford 2016, Murphy and Greenhalgh, 2018).

This period was however followed by the austerity-localism and cutback management agenda of the Coalition Government (Lowndes and Pratchett 2012). This manifest itself in a systematic dismantling of the improvement infrastructure and centralised performance management arrangements in favour of ‘Sector Led improvement’; a retreat from evidence-based policy making and the abdication of leadership and management of the Fire and Rescue Services by the Department of Communities and Local Government under Secretary of State Eric Pickles (Ferry and Murphy 2015, NAO 2015b, Murphy and Ferry 2018).

A new National Framework for Fire and Rescue Services had been published in 2012. It identified a range of ‘new’ or increasing risks and challenges such as climate change, an ageing population and the threat of terrorism, but emphasised the need to reduce spending (DCLG 2012). There was a shift from co-production and collaborative working across the public sector towards a greater emphasis on individual organisational accountability and accountability to local residents. Accountability moved from central government as responsibility was handed to Fire and Rescue Authorities, giving authorities theoretical freedom and flexibility to deliver services while in practice unremitting spending cuts restricted their ability to act.

By 2015 the inadequacy of this approach had become evident to a government which had become discontent with the speed of change within the fire sector. It coincided with Mrs Mays increasing conviction that the introduction of PCCs had cross party support and were a potential catalyst for change (Murphy and Greenhalgh 2018). The conservative manifesto included a suggestion that police and fire should work together and the role of PCCs should be developed.

However, it was two critical reports into accountability and the financial resilience of Fire and Rescue Services from the NAO (2015b, 2015c) and the Public Accounts Select Committee of the House of Commons (2016) that ‘lit the blue touch paper’. These criticised the leadership, oversight and management of the sector by the DCLG. They noted the erosion of the evidence upon which policy and decision making was taking place and highlighted the lack of an independent external inspectorate.

After the first report in November 2015 the government announced the transfer of responsibility for Fire and Rescue Services back to the Home Office. After the second report Mrs May announced that she would be accepting all of the recommendations of the PAC report and including additional amendments in the Policing and Crime Bill then at its third reading stage in the House of Commons (Home Office 2016c). Thus chapters 1 to 4 of the Policing and Crime Act 2017, are some of the most radical potential changes in the organisational landscape of Fire and Rescue Services, but Fire or Rescue does not feature in its title.

Policy

It is a bit early to see how the policy development process will operate under Police Fire and Crime Commissioners but Mrs May, when introducing the new arrangements criticised the poor and deteriorating evidence base, available to policy makers and service deliverers (Home Office 2016c). Evidence-based policy development has been a characteristic of fire and rescue services throughout its’ history. Adequately assured, high-quality data is vital to this process. Effective tools, systems, and processes to capture, interrogate and interpret data and make it accessible to policy developers, service deliverers, and intelligible to the public are just as essential to national and local policy making as it is in the service delivery and assurance domains.

The first report from Dame Judith Hackitt’s investigation (Hackitt 2017) into the fire regulations suggests the current evidence base is insufficient for the task. In that case it has already been found

to be partial, contradictory, and no longer fit for purpose. The evidence base for the latest national framework was neither comprehensive nor compelling.

Whilst a new central body for standards, codes and regulations is one part of the governments' new sector infrastructure, as well as a dedicated website (similar to www.police.org), both of these initiatives are, at best, in the early stages of development. HMICFRS may contribute to this evidence base in future but in comparison to the research and intelligence provided by the former Audit Commission, the LGAs former Improvement & Development Agency (and its Knowledge Exchange); the Local Government Leadership Centre, the former Fire Inspectorate, and/or the Fire Service College, it is not likely to be sufficient.

Service delivery

The governance and management of fire and rescue services in England and Wales is likely to take a number of different forms as a result of the Policing and Crime Act 2017.

London Fire Brigade has had an elected mayor and bespoke policy and scrutiny arrangements for some time although statutory responsibility for the running of the brigade now lies with the London Fire Commissioner, who replaced the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority in April 2018. Manchester is following a similar path and other core cities such as Liverpool or Birmingham who have recently elected Mayors are investigating this among other options.

In the remainder of England and Wales, there is now discretion to transfer the governance of Fire and Rescue Services to the PCC, who would become the Police Fire and Crime Commissioner (PFCC), either as a governing body or as a direct employer of all staff. This is subject to an appropriate 'local case' being made by the PCC to the Home Secretary. It applies to existing single authority, combined authority and metropolitan authority fire and rescue services. As this process is discretionary, and the Home Office have to date received eight local cases, it is reasonable to assume that some existing Fire and Rescue Authorities will remain in the foreseeable future although the direction is clearly towards more PFCCs in the future.

As a result of Chapter 1 of the 2017 Act all emergency services are actively investigating joint or collaborative delivery of a greater range of their services or activities. Although all of the regional ambulance services are actively engaged in at least some of these initiatives, the vast majority of activity has been in police and fire services with back office support and estates service initiatives currently the most numerous.

One other change has been the loss of momentum towards combining Fire and Rescue Authorities and Services into larger service units, which was encouraged on a voluntary basis by previous Labour, Conservative and Coalition Governments but has made very slow progress in England and Wales in the past 30 years.

The organisational landscape for the delivery of fire and rescue services appears paradoxical. There are unlikely to be significant changes in the overall number of core service delivery organisations but the nature, scope, structure, governance, and disposition of the services they provide are going to diversify considerably.

Public Assurance

Concerns about the deteriorating public assurance arrangements and in particular whether the risks to fire and services achieving value for money in a period of diminishing resources from central government were at the heart of the NAO (2015a, 2015b) and PAC (2016) reports.

In May 2018 the government announced that a Fire Standards Board will be created to ensure standards are nationally coordinated to a high level across the sector. The proposal had been developed with the NFCC, the Local Government Association and other partners following the NAO and PAC reports.

In addition, a new central data repository with a dedicated website available to the public, will be created. This will be similar to the police website but is in the very early stages of design and development.

The most significant development was to be the creation of a new rigorous and independent inspection regime delivered by a new external inspectorate. In the event the new inspectorate emerged as an extended and rebranded HMIC, which has been renamed with the same Board as its predecessor reporting annually to the Home Secretary who would also have the power to direct inspections.

Ideally a truly independent external inspectorate and chief inspector, would be focussed on the public's interest and public disclosure. They would design and implement, hopefully in collaboration with the government and the services, a robust, comprehensive, risk based and proportionate inspection programme. Rather than reporting to government they should have independent reporting rights and responsibilities.

It will also be interesting to see the nature and development of the relationship between the emerging HMICFRS regime and the other key assurance regime namely the financial assurance arrangements. In public services generally, external audit arrangements have weakened and become less transparent in recent years with an increasing reliance on so called Armchair Auditors (Home Office 2016c). This partially results from the loss of the Audit Commission, from the narrowing of the scope and content of the external audit in the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014, and from clearly inadequate public reporting requirements (Murphy *et al* 2018).

Concluding discussion

This chapter has attempted to do two things to help our understanding of the organisational landscape of the three emergency services.

Conceptually it has attempted to identify the nature of roles and responsibilities that are involved in the three activities or 'domains' as we have labelled them, that are policy development; public service delivery and public assurance. It has tried to show how these are related to each other and to wider considerations such as public service values. It has suggested that each of these domains is made up of a sub-set of concepts and activities some of which are common to all three domains and some of which are more specific to a particular domain.

We have then taken that conceptual framework and attempted to map the changing organisational landscape of the three emergency services in terms of the three domains. Although it is not our purpose to evaluate the performance of individual organisations, past or current, we recognise that we may have strayed into subjective or evaluative areas when comparing the current landscape to ones that have existed in the past. Our purpose is to map the overall picture, so that future research can look at the strengths and weaknesses, and perhaps identify potential improvements in the organisational landscape or the conceptual framework.

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