

A comparative study of governance changes on the perceptions of accountability in Fire and Rescue Services in England

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Abstract

Public organizations are increasingly held accountable by multiple institutions and standards. This study explores how key actors perceive accountability changes in Fire and Rescue Services in England. However, few studies have examined perceptions of accountability where long-established governance arrangements are changing. The UK's Policing and Crime Act 2017 provided for a new model of governance in the form of a single directly elected commissioner to replace the traditional indirectly elected fire authority. This study uses a comparative multiple case study design to understand the impact of the governance arrangements on individuals' perceptions of accountability within each service. It adds to the wider understanding of the influences of institutional structures on individuals' perceptions and actions, and it demonstrates that accountability perceptions change depending on the way public services are governed.

Abstrakt

Organizacje administracji publicznej są w coraz większym stopniu pociągane do odpowiedzialności przez wiele instytucji. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie jak straż pożarna w Anglii postrzega zmiany w zakresie swojej odpowiedzialności. Do tej pory niewiele badań naukowych przeanalizowało postrzeganie odpowiedzialności w przypadku zmiany istniejących od wielu lat modeli zarządzania. Ustawa

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Policing and Crime Act 2017 w Wielkiej Brytanii wprowadziła alternatywny model zarządzania strażą pożarną w postaci komisarza wybieranego bezpośrednio, zamiast tradycyjnego organu nadzorującego wybieranego pośrednio. W tym badaniu wykorzystano porównawczą metodę wielokrotnego studium przypadku, aby zrozumieć wpływ dwóch odmiennych modeli zarządzania na postrzeganie odpowiedzialności. Niniejszy artykuł wyjaśnia jaki wpływ mają zmiany w strukturach organizacji administracji publicznej na postrzeganie i działania jednostek, oraz dowodzi, że postrzeganie odpowiedzialności zmienia się w zależności od funkcjonujących modeli zarządzania.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Public sector organizations have increasingly been held accountable by a constellation of institutions and standards resulting in complex governance arrangements (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). Although there is a greater variety of governance arrangements elsewhere, for example in Europe and North America, the desire to create more accountable public services through new governance structures has been apparent across many public services in the United Kingdom (Murphy et al., 2019a). In the United Kingdom, local leadership arrangements, including the directly elected single person model of governance, have recently gained traction with the introduction of elected mayors and Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) after a long period of traditional local authority representational governance (Elliott et al., 2022).

After decades of working to one model of governance, Fire and Rescue Services across the United Kingdom have developed a variety of different governance arrangements. In England and Wales, the long-standing “stakeholder” model of a local fire and rescue authority (FRA), made up of local councilors accountable to local communities, has predominated as the governing body for the vast majority of Fire and Rescue Services, although occasional separate bespoke arrangements have emerged (Farrell, 2018). More recently, the UK’s Policing and Crime Act 2017 has facilitated a range of new collaborative governance arrangements across emergency services, including an alternative governance model for Fire and Rescue Services. In response to perceived accountability deficiencies within the fire sector (NAO, 2015; PAC, 2016; May, 2016), the legislation encouraged and enabled, but did not mandate, PCCs, who are single, locally, and directly elected politicians overseeing local police forces, to take on responsibilities for the governance of their local FRAs and become Police, Fire and Crime Commissioners (PFCCs). The introduction of a single-person governing body has been portrayed by the UK government as a way of increasing local fire services’ accountability to citizens, as part of the decentralization agenda. In addition to the new governance model, the 2017 Act also changed the fire and rescue organizational landscape by the creation of a new inspectorate (His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary & Fire and Rescue Services) and a strengthened focus on collaborative working across emergency services partners.

Few recent studies have examined perceptions of accountability where governance arrangements are changing or may change. Little is known about the impact of the new governance structures in Fire and Rescue Services. To date, only a few studies have examined the emerging nature of the new arrangements (Ashworth, 2019; Murphy et al., 2019b, 2020), and none have empirically examined them in relation to different notions of accountability. Previous studies of accountability also tend to focus on public bodies, in which senior decision-makers are directly

elected, such as local councils or government departments. Since most UK Fire and Rescue Services have no directly elected element, this changes the nature of their accountability relationships with local authorities, central government, other emergency services, and the public. Studying them enables us to increase our knowledge about the social construction of governance models and the accountabilities that individuals both create and are constrained by.

This article examines the increasing complexity of the governance arrangements in the fire sector, by investigating both the long-standing governance model of an indirectly elected local FRA and the new governance model, through which the PFCC assumes direct responsibility and accountability for their local fire service. Given the complexity of both governance and accountability concepts in the literature, and the number of alternative perspectives, this study is concerned with understanding the concept from the individuals' viewpoints within the service. The research question adopted for this study was:

How do internal stakeholders within the Fire and Rescue Services understand the notions of accountability in the context of the traditional governance arrangements and the new PFCC arrangements introduced by the Policing and Crime Act 2017?

This approach sought to compare both governance models in Fire and Rescue Services, to understand the influence of the governance arrangements on fire services' perceptions of accountability. It addressed calls by McDonald et al. (2022) and Elliott et al. (2022) for more comparative studies within public administration. This article draws on empirical findings, including interviews and focus groups with internal stakeholders within Fire and Rescue Services, to understand how the governance changes, or the prospect of changes in governance, brought in by the 2017 legislation have influenced their understandings of accountability under both governance models.

The article makes two key contributions. First, it provides new insights into how governance structures that are in flux or operate under uncertain conditions can shape actors' perceptions of accountability. In particular, it identifies different accountability types to explore how changes in governance structures have changed accountability arrangements. Second, it contributes to the emerging, but still limited, empirically based emergency services literature by capturing changing governance arrangements and accountability interrelationships within emergency services organizations.

The next section gives a brief overview of the literature on governance and accountability. It then goes on to examine the research context, namely the recent reforms in English Fire and Rescue Services, before outlining the methods and findings. Finally, the article discusses key findings and their theoretical implications as well as identifying some further areas of inquiry.

2 | GOVERNANCE

In the field of public administration, governance has traditionally been considered as a combination of classic Weberian-style bureaucracy, based on hierarchy, rules, law, and representative democracy (Lynn, 2001). However, more recently, studies of governance have gradually placed more emphasis on collective interactions (Torfing et al., 2012) due to the changing conditions and expectations of an increasingly complex, dynamic, and diverse world (Haveri, 2006). Traditional forms of governance have been recognized as less adequate under these new circumstances, due to their formalistic, exclusive, and highly structured nature. Nonetheless, stable public governance, particularly in times of turbulence, have recently been gaining traction in modern public administration (Ansell et al., 2022; Trondal, 2022). The focus of administrative practice has moved towards less hierarchical and more decentralized forms of public governance (Elliott et al., 2022). Governance and management models based on collaboration and joint ways of working have increasingly been seen as more prominent modes of service delivery (Bianchi

et al., 2021). These changes raise important questions around the form and nature of new governance arrangements that has been growing in salience.

Governing boards as a mechanism for overseeing organizational strategy has been widely prevalent in the UK and internationally, across public, private, and voluntary organizations (Schillemans & Bovens, 2019). In the public sector, the role of governing bodies has largely been to separate the leadership and strategic direction of institutions from those responsible for their day-to-day operation. There is a rich and maturing discourse and literature featuring governing boards in the wider UK public sector, including health boards (Peck, 1995; Exworthy & Robinson, 2001; Addicott, 2008; Grubnic & Cooper, 2019), police authorities replaced with PCCs (Davies & Johnson, 2016; Cooper, 2020) and school governing bodies (Farrell, 2005; Farrell et al., 2017). In some cases, scholars found governing boards to be making only marginal contributions to the authorities' strategy planning and decision making (Peck, 1995; Farrell, 2005), and in others they were even found as largely redundant (Addicott, 2008). In contrast, PCCs, who have been solely responsible for governing local police forces in England and Wales since 2012, have been seen as powerful governing individuals (Eckersley & Lakoma, 2022), which in turn made police services reluctant to challenge them (Raine & Keasey, 2012; Cooper, 2020).

Law enforcement arrangements build upon political settlements established when countries were formed (Bayley, 1992). Most English-speaking countries, including England, the United States, Canada, and Australia have decentralized policing governance. Similarly, there has been an increasing trend of decentralized law enforcement arrangements in Europe. However, some countries, including France and Ireland, together with authoritarian regimes, remain under centralized systems of law enforcement with policing agencies at the national level. For example, in the United States, there is a unique decentralized structure, with over 12,000 local law enforcement agencies (local city police and sheriffs), which has created significant issues around police governance (Walker, 2016). England and Wales, by comparison, have a total of 43 police forces at the local level. As a result, the extent of decentralization in the US policing has hindered the development of consistent national standards across all police departments. Police governance in the US has been influenced by politics with directly elected sheriffs enforcing law (Sampson, 2012). Unlike PCCs, American sheriffs have also operational responsibilities, including prisons operation (Baldi & LaFrance, 2013). However, sheriffs do not have a specific police or crime mandate, as their responsibility is generally to hold public sector agencies to account (Mawby & Smith, 2013).

Governance of fire services in the United Kingdom has received only limited academic attention. FRAs operate as a traditional local board-style authority and are made up of local councilors overseeing the policy and service delivery of the Fire and Rescue Service in England and Wales (Farrell, 2018). This model of governance operated in most police services until its replacement with elected PCCs in 2012. The PCC governance model reflects the equivalent US sheriff governance model (Sampson, 2012; Baldi & LaFrance, 2013). The UK Government established PCCs claiming that they needed to replace indirectly elected police authorities because of dissatisfaction with the performance of police authorities and their lack of engagement with the public (Raine & Keasey, 2012). The experience of police reform was promoted by the government to indicate what was feasible in terms of reform of Fire and Rescue Services (May, 2016). The Policing and Crime Act 2017 introduced the most significant changes to the governance of Fire and Rescue Services in England in decades, by enabling PCCs to take over responsibility for governance of their local fire services. Although, the PCC model has been widely adopted in policing, little is known about its effect on changing arrangements in Fire and Rescue Services.

3 | ACCOUNTABILITY

Changing governance arrangements has significant implications for accountability and raises questions about which actors determine organizational strategy and to whom public servants should report. Accountability has been seen by many scholars as a cornerstone of public governance (Aucoin & Heintzman, 2000). Public sector organizations are accountable to a web of multiple stakeholders, including government, funding bodies, inspectorates, representative

bodies, and users of the services. Accountability within the public sector may involve a broad range of mechanisms, for example elections, legislative scrutiny, and external audit. Scholars have argued that nowadays public services have to manage combinations of multiple, different, changing, and often conflicting expectations from a variety of audiences (de Boer, 2022), within and outside their organizations in a highly politicized context (Willems & Van Dooren, 2011). Some argue that public organizations trying to face conflicting expectations within a web of overlapping accountability relationships are more likely to be dysfunctional (Koppell, 2005).

Previous studies have attempted to classify these multiple accountability relationships. Romzek and Dubnick (1987) identified four types of accountabilities: bureaucratic, legal, professional and political. In a bureaucratic form of accountability, there is a hierarchical relationship between a superior and a subordinate, in which the subordinate is accountable to the superior for the performance of delegated duties. The bureaucratic system refers to hierarchical relationships based on supervisions, whereas legal accountability systems involve relationships between two autonomous parties: an agency and a controlling party outside the agency, which can impose legal sanctions. Professional accountability stresses the power and control in the hands of skilled and expert members who are accountable for their job to agent leaders. Finally, political accountability refers to a relationship between an elected representative who is directly accountable to their constituents. If the elected representative fails to be accountable to the constituents, he or she can be substituted in democratic elections (Erkkilä, 2007). Over the past decades traditional accountability relationships, based on hierarchical structures, where the forum formally wields power over the actor (Bovens, 2007), have been challenged in both theory and practice. For example, New Public Management reforms have brought market accountability into the public sector (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2005), while post-New Public Management initiatives have focused on horizontal and social accountability (Christensen, 2012).

Two main mechanisms in English local government—conformance and performance, have been epitomized as financial reporting and the latter as non-financial performance reporting (Goddard, 2005; Ferry & Eckersley, 2015). As in the case of governance, accountability in Fire and Rescue Services has also received relatively little international academic attention, with only a few exceptions (Carvalho et al., 2006; Kloot, 2009; Clarke, 2018; Murphy et al., 2019b; Spencer et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2021). Most studies emphasize the importance of performance mechanisms in assuring accountability (Carvalho et al., 2006; Kloot, 2009; Taylor et al., 2021). For example, Carvalho et al. (2006) and Kloot (2009) argue that a lack of performance management tools and measures might negatively impact on the demonstration of accountability to communities and government. Taylor et al. (2021) echo these views by arguing that centrally imposed and independent performance management measures are stronger in providing accountability than primarily local tools. Although the performance notion of accountability prevails in the fire and rescue literature, other studies also emphasize the importance of conformance in delivering accountability (Spencer et al., 2019).

The empirical evidence presented thus far, however, pre-dates the implications of the Policing and Crime Act 2017, when governance arrangements for English Fire and Rescue Services significantly changed. The remainder of this article will therefore examine the context of the governance arrangements introduced by the Policing and Crime Act 2017, followed by the perceptions and understandings of accountability within the English Fire and Rescue Services.

4 | RESEARCH CONTEXT

4.1 | Pre-2017 Act

Recent studies have called for further research on emergency services organizations and, particularly, the need for a detailed evaluation of new models of fire governance (Murphy et al., 2020). Fire and Rescue Services across the United Kingdom in the last 20 years have developed a greater variety of different governance arrangements. In England, the long-standing model of the local FRA has been adopted in county authorities,¹ combined authorities,²

and metropolitan authorities,³ although separate bespoke arrangements have emerged in London (London Fire Commissioner) and Manchester (mayor-led system). In the devolved administrations, Northern Ireland and Scotland have opted for national services with an appointed board at the national level, whereas Wales has retained the more traditional local combined FRA model.

Figure 1 illustrates the main accountability relationships within English Fire and Rescue Services, based on Clarke' (2018) work on Fire and Rescue Services' accountability.

Fire and Rescue Services, prior to the Policing and Crime Act 2017, were accountable to:

- The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG),
- The FRA, which was the governing body,
- The public, and to
- The other emergency services with which they collaborate.

Their performance management regime was one based upon sector-led assessment comprising a “Fire Peer Challenge” (Downe et al., 2018) supplemented by an operational assessment.

4.2 | Post-2017 Act

The Policing and Crime Act 2017 has enabled four alternative governance options, in which a PCC can take on responsibilities for the governance of their local FRAs and become a PFCC. In ascending order of the scale of change that the various options would involve, they were:

1. Increased collaboration between emergency services without institutional reform;
2. The “representation” model, which involves inviting the PCC to sit and vote as a member of the FRA alongside appointed members of the authority;

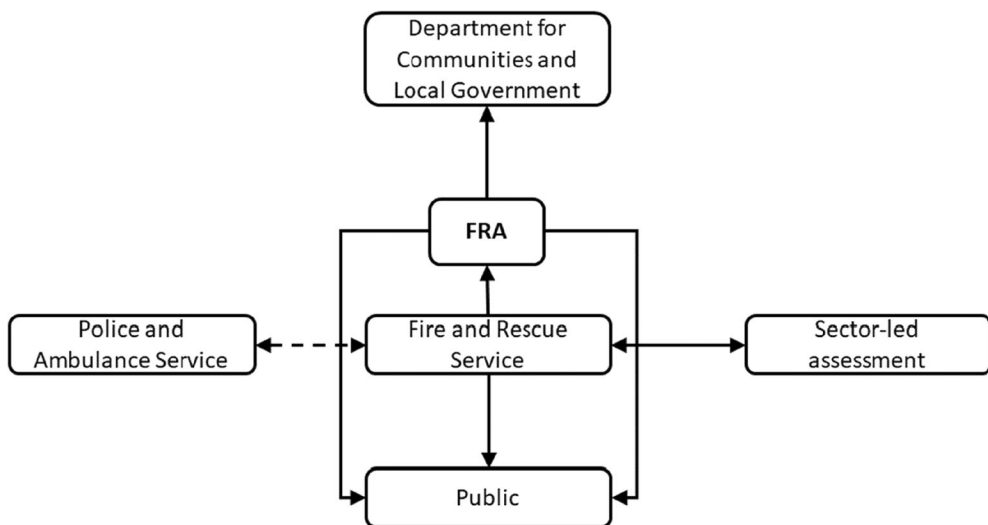


FIGURE 1 Governance arrangements and accountability relationships in English Fire and Rescue Services before the Policing and Crime Act 2017 (Adopted from Bovens 2007, Clarke 2018).

3. The “governance” model involves the PCC taking on responsibility for the governance of their local FRA. Subsequently, the PFCC, becomes in charge of both the fire and rescue service and police service, however they are two separate organizations with separate budgets; and
4. The “single employer” arrangement, through which the PFCC creates a merged organization with a single budget.

All services and authorities in England were to a greater or lesser extent affected by these changes. By autumn 2022, four English fire services had transferred to the “governance” model (at that time no service had opted for the single-employer arrangement) resulting in the current patchwork of governance models throughout England (Eckersley & Lakoma, 2022).

Another key aspect introduced by the Policing and Crime Act 2017 has been the establishment of a new external scrutiny arrangement for fire services. His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary, originally established in 1856 as an inspectorate for police services (Cowley et al., 2007), was re-designated to HMICFRS, to assess and report on the effectiveness and leadership of both police and fire services.

Taken together, the changes were intended to increase accountability and scrutiny across the emergency services landscape. Figure 2 illustrates governance changes brought in by the 2017 legislation, with the option for Fire and Rescue Services to be governed either by a FRA or a PFCC. It also shows an accountability relationship to HMICFRS and the Home Office.⁴

This study examines perceptions of accountability in English Fire and Rescue Services, where governance arrangements are changing or may change. The next section explains the research approach and the methods underpinning this article, as it seeks to understand the influence of the governance arrangements on fire services’ perceptions on accountability.

5 | METHODS

The study attempts to examine the social construction of governance models and the accountabilities that individuals both create and are constrained by (Overman & Schillemans, 2022). Given the various perspectives on accountability available, this study was concerned with understanding the concept from the individuals’ viewpoints

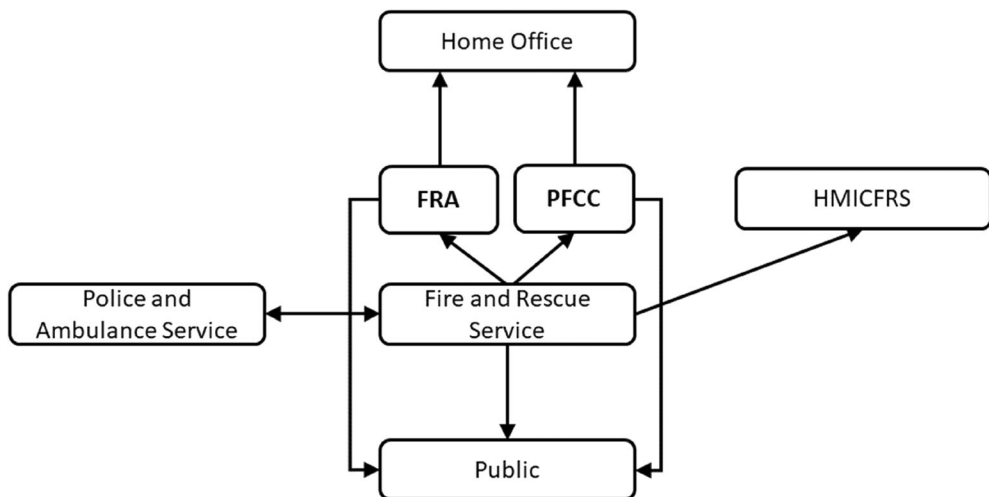


FIGURE 2 Governance arrangements and accountability relationships in English Fire and Rescue Services post-Policing and Crime Act 2017 (own interpretation).

(Bevir, 2009). The study therefore explored recent governance changes to understand their impact on individuals' perceptions of accountability.

A comparative multiple case study method has been adopted to help with theory-building since it links micro-level human interactions with how organizations function at a more macro level (Peters, 2017). The cases have been purposively selected (6 fire services out of 45 in England) with maximum variance on the governance arrangements that exist within fire services (Table 1). Three services had adopted the PFCC model of governance, and three continued to rely on the predominant and long-standing model of governance with an FRA made up of local councilors. For the purpose of this article, services' names have been anonymised. There was one each from the county, combined, and metropolitan groups of FRAs. London Fire Brigade and Greater Manchester Fire Authority with their distinct and bespoke governance structures that cannot be replicated across other cases, have therefore been excluded from the analysis.

The study was unable to include accountability perceptions from an ex-metropolitan FRA in its sample as there are none as yet established. Within the three case studies examining new form of governance, one was a former county FRA, and two were former combined FRAs selected as the representative sample. At the time of writing this article, only four PFCC governed services (one ex-county FRA, and three ex-combined FRAs), had been established. On the other hand, within the three case studies operating under the traditional form of governance, one county FRA, one combined FRA, and one metropolitan FRA were selected to differentiate between the traditional type of governance as far as possible.

Qualitative methods consisted of three elements—semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and publicly available documents. Thirty-five semi-structured interviews were held with internal Fire and Rescue Services' stakeholders, including senior management (Chief Fire Officers (CFO), Deputy CFOs, Assistant CFOs, and Area Managers in all cases; Heads of Finance and Human Resources or their equivalent). Five focus groups,⁵ and 3 interviews from Case Study 3 were conducted with front-line operational staff who had their own views on accountability arrangements within their service. These were all thematically analyzed to gain insights into governance arrangements and perceptions of accountability within each authority. Interviews and focus groups were primarily conducted online using Microsoft Teams from March 2020 to June 2021, with the exception of one focus group that was carried out in person. Each interview took on average 49 min, while each focus group (with 3–5 participants) lasted around 69 min. Questions on the interview and focus group schedule explored the implications of the Policing and Crime Act 2017 on governance and accountability in Fire and Rescue Services.

The analysis was not linear, as it involved a constant interplay between the data and the coding process to refine the themes and their subthemes. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo, where coding started with a deductive structure based on the theoretical lens of four types of accountabilities (bureaucratic, political, legal and professional) to understand potentially changing accountability perceptions. The original typology of accountabilities by Romzek and Dubnick (1987) was used in the study because of the amount and relatively unsophisticated nature of the evidence available. A secondary inductive and iterative analysis was applied to identify other emerging themes (Table 2).

TABLE 1 Sampling.

Traditional FRA governance model	New PFCC governance model
Case study 1 (combined FRA)	Case study 2 (former county FRA)
Case study 5 (metropolitan FRA)	Case study 3 (former combined FRA)
Case study 6 (county FRA)	Case study 4 (former combined FRA)

Note: Case numbers were numbered chronologically in the order that the case studies were carried out. Abbreviations: FRA, fire and rescue authority; PFCC, Police, Fire and Crime Commissioners.

TABLE 2 Second level coding within four accountability types.

	Pre-2017 act		Post-2017 act	
	FRA-governed services		FRA-governed services	PFCC-governed services
Bureaucratic	Supervision, Statutory documents, Regular meetings		Supervision, Statutory documents, Inspections, New scrutiny structures (Co-opted members on FRA)	Supervision, Statutory documents, Inspections, New scrutiny structures (PFCC in charge of the service)
Political	Indirect elections, Responsiveness to communities		Indirect elections, Responsiveness to communities	Direct elections, Party political allegiance
Legal	Statutory requirements, Council Tax, Reporting		Statutory requirements, Council Tax, Reporting (including inspections)	Statutory requirements, Council Tax, Reporting (including inspections),
Professional	Response, Sector-led assessments (peer review), Collaboration		Response, Collaboration	Response, Joint fire and police service delivery

Abbreviations: FRA, fire and rescue authority; PFCC, Police, Fire and Crime Commissioners.

In addition to the interview and focus group data, publicly available documents related to contextual information were collected from services' websites. These included governance frameworks, senior organizational charts, and statements of assurance. The documents were also analyzed using NVivo software to gain better insights into governance and accountability arrangements within each case.

6 | FINDINGS

6.1 | Bureaucratic accountability

Bureaucratic accountability involves a relationship between a superior and a subordinate, where supervisory control is applied to a wide range of agency activities. Fire and Rescue Services are in a supervisory control relationship with a number of internal and external stakeholders.

Bureaucratic accountability involves responsibility of Fire and Rescue Services to report to and be scrutinized by a governing body. Fire and Rescue Services operate with a range of locally determined governance bodies, including a board-style FRA, made up of local councillors, or an individual—either a PFCC (since the 2017 Act) or a mayor—having sole responsibility for being the authority for an area (the mayoral model of governance is outside the scope of this study). This in turn means that Fire and Rescue Services, with CFOs, having the ultimate responsibility for the operational side of their services, are accountable to their corresponding authorities.

In terms of reporting, Fire and Rescue Services must produce a number of documents that have to be approved by the governing body, including an Integrated Risk Management Plan, Annual Statement of Assurance and financial plans (Home Office, 2018). In the PFCC models of governance, in addition to these documents, a PFCC must produce a Fire and Rescue Plan (or a joint Police, Crime and Fire and Rescue Plan), which sets out the strategic vision, priorities and objectives for their Fire and Rescue Service (if joint, for both fire and rescue and police service).

Generally, the role of FRAs and PFCCs is to oversee and scrutinize the policy and service delivery of the service on behalf of the public. Opinions differed as to whether the governing body's ability to challenge the Fire and Rescue Service was sufficient. A common concern expressed among interviewees regarding scrutiny of their FRAs was

around local councilors having lots of different interests, and fire and rescue being only one part of that. Participants also attributed poor scrutiny to local councilors' inadequate understanding and knowledge of the fire and rescue environment. This was particularly notable in the fire services that are an integral part of county council arrangements (Case 2 and Case 6). This is because FRAs of this type have cross-functional responsibility for wider council service areas such as social care, education, public health, and highways. These views surfaced mainly in relation to the FRA members being over reliant on senior officers' expertise, particularly the CFOs'. This raised concerns around effectiveness of FRAs, as it suggested insufficient overview and scrutiny from a statutory body set up to give advice and oversee the service, to ensure it performs efficiently and in the best interest of the public and the community it serves.

In response to identified scrutiny deficiencies pre-2017 legislation (May, 2016), fire services have been putting in place various internal governance arrangements ranging from designated sub-committees and groups and formal schemes of delegation. A common view among interviewees was:

“That level of scrutiny isn't coming from the FRA, and if it doesn't come from the FRA, what we have to do as a service is almost scrutinize ourselves, which we do try to do.”

(Head of Risk Assurance, Case Study 1)

There were also contrasting views about whether FRAs are actually capable of holding the fire service to account. This was the case in two traditional FRA services (Case Study 1 and 6), which adopted the “representation” model of the Policing and Crime Act 2017 and appointed additional board members, including a PCC or a PCC representative, who brought “an objectivity” to the decision-making process. One service (Case Study 5) also reduced the number of members sitting on their authority.

“I think [that] just having a PCC represented on the FRA impacts, increases that accountability because we've got some extra scrutiny there, some challenge from a different perspective.”

(Head of Strategy and Organisational Intelligence, Case Study 5)

The presence of the PCC or the PCC representative on the FRA contributed to increased scrutiny within the services, this is because having an individual already experienced in emergency services governance, can challenge fire services and adds value to the FRA.

In terms of the PFCC governance, in all cases, the participants highlighted a tension in the relationship between the CFO and the PFCC due to the Chief's lack of operational independence (CFO being responsible for operational matters). Despite the lack of operational independence, participants agreed that the PFCC model of governance had added value to the scrutiny process. When asked about scrutiny, participants were unanimous in the view that the PFCC model provided an additional level of scrutiny when questioning the service's decisions. The expanded powers of PFCCs were reflected in more structured and detailed meetings, boards, and panels, mainly relating to public accountability and service performance. However, newly appointed PFCCs had no experience of the fire and rescue environment and required further education to understand the context they had to operate within. Nonetheless, PFCCs were found as effective streamlined single sources of accountability, although some were concerned about too many bureaucratic accountability requirements and political connections under this governance model.

Accountability within Fire and Rescue Services also cascades down from governing bodies and management hierarchies to front-line staff. Senior management are accountable to their staff because they have a duty of care to their employees, including front-line firefighters and professional services staff (HR, finance, communications, and IT). Each Fire and Rescue Service has their own CFO, who has responsibility for both managing the staff and ensuring the safety and well-being of their employees. Ultimately, CFOs are accountable to their staff because of the hierarchical nature of working in a uniformed service, as they are the most accountable individuals in the service:

“if somebody died or something went wrong, then it would be the Chief who would be responsible for that.”

(Firefighter, Case Study 4)

Front-line staff argued that CFOs are ultimately responsible for anything that happens in the service. This shows a bi-directional relationship, in which CFOs see themselves as accountable to the staff and the staff perceives themselves accountable to their CFO. Overall, perceptions on internal bureaucratic accountability within fire and rescue staff remained unchanged after the implementation of the 2017 legislation, as they primarily focused on the notions of supervision.

6.2 | Political accountability

Political accountability relationships afford managers the discretion of being responsive to the concerns of key stakeholders, such as elected officials and the general public. The key relationship under these systems resembles that between a representative and their constituents.

As stated above, Fire and Rescue Services are accountable to their governing bodies who are either directly or indirectly elected by the public. The FRA model enables the public to indirectly “choose” local councilors, as they are elected by the public and then appointed to sit on a FRA. Since 2017, in services that adopted the PFCC model, the public directly elects an individual in elections that occur every 4 years. In both governance models, the public hold to account their governing body in a form of political accountability relationship, but the FRA model provides an indirect accountability while the PFCC model offers direct accountability to the public. This means that the PFCC model enables the public to directly choose their preferred individual in charge of both policing and fire service, however, this may come with short-term decision making and the individual's party-political allegiance:

“if you don't like them [PFCC], you can get rid of them at the end of the day, and you can vote for somebody else”

(CFO, Case Study 2)

The public, under both governance arrangements, play an important role in electing their service's governing body. In addition to this, local communities are strongly encouraged to help to plan their local service delivery through effective consultation and involvement, for example, by participating in consultations on a local Integrated Risk Management Plan, which is the basis of the service's performance plan to create safer communities in the longer-term. In practice, however, despite high satisfaction rates, the level of public's interest and engagement in fire services, as reported by the participants, was relatively low. The 2017 legislation was created in order to get the communities involved in the decision-making process as it has enabled the public to directly choose their PFCC. However, participants indicated that the FRA governance arrangements provided more accountability to the communities than the PFCC model, as the FRA members had represented their local areas and had had direct contact with their communities. In contrast, the PFCC, despite being a politician elected to improve accountability to the public, had less direct engagement with the public than the FRA members:

“I'm going to be generous and say maybe a dozen e-mails that the PFCC might have had, which generally aren't from members of the public, maybe one or two have been, but I don't know of any member of the public that's contacted him to hold us to account for anything.”

(CFO, Case Study 3)

On the other hand, the FRAs, have largely adopted the “representation” model enabled by the Policing and Crime Act 2017, which not only allows PCCs to sit on a FRA and have voting rights, but also enables other co-opted members from partner organizations to contribute towards delivery of local services. This in turn, as reported by the interviewees, has enabled fire services to operate in a way that involves representatives of local communities in the service’s decision-making process, thus making the service more accountable.

6.3 | Legal accountability

Legal accountability is similar to the bureaucratic form in that it involves the frequent application of control to a wide range of activities. In contrast to bureaucratic accountability, however, legal accountability is based on a relationship between a controlling party outside the agency who can impose legal sanctions on members of the organization.

The Home Office as the department in charge of fire services in England, collects detailed information on incidents attended by each fire service. It also has a duty to produce a policy and operational framework for all Fire and Rescue Services. Fire services are required by the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 to follow the framework, which means that they are legally accountable in carrying out their duties.

“[We are] directly [accountable] through to the fire minister, and things come from the national framework document, which is our sort of guiding light”

(Firefighter, Case Study 1)

The Home Office should also intervene, on behalf of the public, if a FRA fails, or be likely to fail, to act in accordance with the current national framework (Home Office 2018). The participants were unanimous in the view that English fire services are accountable to the Home Office. Interestingly, some argued that since 2017, PFCCs, as directly elected politicians in charge of the services, have been closer to the central government than FRA services:

“I think PFCCs are much closer to the Home Office than what FRA members are...I know for a fact my PFCC on various different issues has directly rung up the Home Office or spoken to the minister in person about things, whereas that’s very, very rare for a FRA member to do that, even the chair of a FRA to have that type of relationship direction with central government”

(CFO, Case Study 2)

This was also echoed by other interviewees who pointed out that the government has been in favor of PFCCs across the country, whereas FRAs, according to the participants, have been treated, like local councilors, who have not been regarded as influential.

Central government was traditionally the primary source of funding for Fire and Rescue Services. However, in 2012, accountability partially moved away from central government, as responsibility was transferred to FRAs as a result of the 2012 National Framework (DCLG, 2012), giving authorities theoretical freedom and flexibility to deliver services. As central financial support systematically reduced, the majority of Fire and Rescue Services’ funding now comes from Council Taxes and business rates (NAO, 2015). Although the amount and percentage has fallen since 2013, some funds do come from government grants (called “revenue support grants” and “top-up” funds), which means that Fire and Rescue Services are still partially dependent on central government.

Fire services are obliged to publish their annual accounts, which are internally and externally audited. Taxpayers therefore have the right to request an explanation of how their money is being spent in the fire service. In addition, FRAs, as well as PFCCs, must also comply with the statutory transparency requirements, including freedom of information requests.

With regards to reporting, independent inspection of Fire and Rescue Services has been re-introduced since 2017 by HMICFRS. The inspectorate has been providing part of the assurance function, reporting on how effective and efficient fire services are, how well they manage their people and whether they are fulfilling their statutory obligations. The participants reported an increased focus on performance measurement as a result of the inspectorate. This has increased accountability and scrutiny for fire services, as the HMICFRS' process has facilitated better benchmarking against other services. However, there were also views about the additional burden that HMICFRS has placed upon the fire services, with regard to the amount of information they are required to produce. Nonetheless, all services reported that HMICFRS has enabled them to be transparent about their performance and potential areas for improvement for all services have been identified by the inspectorate.

6.4 | Professional accountability

Under professional accountability, public officials must rely on skilled and expert employees to provide advice and appropriate solutions. Those employees expect to be held fully accountable for their actions and insist that agency leaders trust them to do the best job possible.

Prior to the 2017 legislation and the reintroduction of external inspection, Fire and Rescue Services were subject to the Local Government Association's (LGA) peer review process, which was part of the sector-led improvement arrangements. This process was voluntary and consisted of a self-assessment and an external peer challenge by a team from other fire services and the LGA who reviewed the service using their professional expertise (Downe et al., 2018). In all cases, the participants reported that there was lack of scrutiny and hardly any accountability under the peer review regime. Findings of the peer review process were not shared at the national level, as they had limited influence internally within the sector. Since 2017, the HMICFRS has been delivering external service inspections across the country.

Fire and Rescue Services' professional accountability comes primarily from statutory day-to-day activities, including emergency response, protection, and prevention. Local communities are mostly interested in fire services' turning up on time at accidents and incidents. Collaboration among emergency services can also be classified as a professional accountability relationship, where emergency services have the same goal of ensuring public safety, health, and wellbeing in responding to different emergencies. Collaboration has had a long history in English Fire and Rescue Services, with the Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Programme that focuses on collaborative emergency services' response to major incidents. The desire for stronger collaboration across emergency services has also been recognized in the Policing and Crime Act 2017. The 2017 legislation has required all emergency services to actively investigate further opportunities for joint or collaborative delivery of their services. Nonetheless, most fire services had already been collaborating with other emergency services prior to the 2017 legislation, as a result of their obligations under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004:

“We were already doing most of the collaboration previously anyway, there have been some new bits we've looked at between police and fire in particular.”

(Assistant CFO, Case Study 1)

The 2017 legislation has formalized the duty to collaborate and accelerated it into other areas. The evidence shows that the vast majority of new collaborative activities has been between police and fire services, in back-office support and sharing estates initiatives. The majority of participants indicated that the 2017 legislation established closer working relationship and joint decision making with the police. However, some interviewees felt that the police have been acting as the dominant partner in the partnership under the PFCC, due to the size of the police service.

Although the theme of accountability through supervision was one of the most recurring in the bureaucratic dimension of accountability, a perception of accountability for one's action was also seen as a distinct theme under the professional accountability dimension. The participants, particularly in the focus groups, highlighted that they are accountable for their own actions to their colleagues and senior officers:

“we're all equally as important and responsible for one another's action, how we train and how we develop ourselves. And it's all in our best interests to help each other, be accountable for each other, how we can improve each other”

(Firefighter, Case Study 6)

This highlights that firefighters are skilled employees who expect to be held fully accountable for their actions whilst responding to incidents.

7 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This article has presented Fire and Rescue Services' perceptions on accountability within both the traditional FRA and the new PFCC governance models, both before and since the Policing and Crime Act 2017. While to date, only a few studies have examined the emerging nature of the new arrangements brought in by the 2017 legislation (Ashworth, 2019; Murphy et al., 2019a), this article investigates them empirically to identify the influences of institutional structures on individuals' perceptions of accountability.

The findings of this article contribute to the emerging, but still limited, empirically based emergency services' accountability literature. Prior studies into Fire and Rescue Services' accountability have demonstrated the importance of performance and conformance accountability (Carvalho et al. 2006; Kloot, 2009; Taylor et al., 2021; Spencer et al., 2019). This article looks at the nature and form of four distinct accountability types prior and post-2017 Act. Prior to the 2017 legislation, when fire services were governed by a traditional-style board, Fire and Rescue Services felt accountable for supervision (bureaucratic accountability), responsiveness to communities (political accountability), statutory requirements (legal accountability), and professional response to incidents and collaboration (professional accountability). Since the 2017 legislation, when directly elected politicians have been able to take over fire services' governance, greater emphasis has been put upon all four types of accountabilities. Political accountability has shifted from indirectly elected members of the FRA representing local communities to directly elected individual, who instead of enhancing local accountability to the public, have increasingly embraced party-political allegiance. Bureaucratic accountability has been observed in an additional level of scrutiny since the 2017 reforms. This is because both governance models have experienced changes with regards to new accountability arrangements. The introduction of an individual PFCC or co-opted members sitting on a FRA has provided additional oversight over the Fire and Rescue Service, despite the issues around the lack of CFO's operational independence. Legal accountability, although mostly enshrined in the statutory requirements, has been enhanced by additional mechanisms, including independent inspection of Fire and Rescue Services since 2017. The 2017 legislation has also formalized the duty to collaborate with other emergency services and accelerated it into other areas, including closer working relationship in a form of professional accountability, and in some cases, it broadened into joint decision making with the police.

This article suggests that changing governance arrangements has significant implications for accountability. These changing arrangements have resulted in a patchwork of governance and service delivery accountabilities, with some services adopting the new governance model, whilst others remaining under the traditional governance arrangements. This is consistent with the public administration literature that moves towards more decentralized forms of public governance based on collaboration and joint ways of working (Bianchi et al., 2021; Elliott

et al., 2022). The evidence suggests that public services have to manage combinations of multiple types of accountabilities within and outside their organizations in an increasingly changing politicized context.

The legislation gave FRAs, key stakeholders and local electors the opportunity to move to directly elected individuals. This was supported by a new performance management framework, and a new external inspection regime. It was meant to significantly increase accountability, improve governance and service performance. This article shows that relatively few services have adopted the PFCC model, and that although accountability perceptions of Fire and Rescue Services' internal stakeholders have changed under the new governance model since the 2017 legislation, other accountabilities, most notably the establishment of external inspection and greater focus on collaboration, have emerged in this study as arguably bigger factors for all fire services experiencing reforms. The Policing and Crime Act 2017 demonstrates that Fire and Rescue Services as an organization are statutorily obliged to be accountable to broader range of internal and external stakeholders with different interest.

The UK's government original intention was to encourage the new model of governance across the majority of Fire and Rescue Services in England. This has not happened and at the time of undertaking the research, there were only four PFCC-governed services (which is still the same at autumn 2022), despite the government encouraging more widespread application of the model. The study was therefore limited to researching a relatively small number of PFCC-governed services. Notwithstanding the relatively limited sample, this article demonstrates that there are many variations in the governance of fire services in England, which are difficult to compare. While the government's preference is clearly towards more directly elected individuals overseeing fire services in the foreseeable future (Home Office, 2022), greater efforts are needed to ensure that inconsistencies in terms of governance and accountability arrangements are minimized in Fire and Rescue Services. One solution would be to give the fire and rescue sector the opportunity as a whole to move to one governance model, which would reduce current discrepancies among different models and introduce common governance arrangements across all services.

This study suggests that making directly elected individuals responsible for a public service can change accountability relationships in the following ways. First, it can add a new scrutiny dimension from a single individual, who in effect, can streamline the accountability process. Second, it can enable the public to directly hold the politician to account in elections, however, this may come with the individual's party-political allegiance, which can ultimately have an effect on the service's strategic decision-making process. Third, a single person governance model can result in a lack of increased accountability to local communities in comparison to the traditional board style authority model. Overall, this suggests that the introduction of directly elected individuals responsible for providing support and overseeing public services has profound effects on accountability relationships within and outside the services. This adds to the literature on directly elected individuals, including the US law enforcement literature on sheriff governance, which has been long established and often politicized (Sampson, 2012; Baldi & LaFrance, 2013). However, further research into the directly elected individual governance models across different countries is needed to fully understand the implications on accountability relationships in public services.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/padm.12923>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions. The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The appropriate ethical approval has been granted by the College Research Ethics Committee (CREC) at Nottingham Trent University in December 2019.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ In county authorities, the council is the FRA. Fire and Rescue Service is integrated into the council and all members of the council are responsible FRA members, with one member in charge of the fire services portfolio.
- ² In combined authorities, a stand-alone FRA is established. Members of the combined authority are appointed by the leaders of the constituent councils.
- ³ In metropolitan authorities (with the exception of London and Manchester), arrangements are similar to those of combined authorities. Members of the FRA are appointed by the leaders of the constituent metropolitan councils.
- ⁴ Central government transferred government oversight and policy making from Department of Communities and Local Government to the Home Office in 2016.
- ⁵ Five, instead of six, focus groups were carried out because one CFO resisted - but agreed to three interviews with front-line operational staff.

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