

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

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# Governance and accountability in public services

- Public sector organisations have increasingly been held accountable by a constellation of institutions and standards (Denhardt and Denhardt 2015).
- Multiple accountability types identified in the public admin literature (e.g. Romzek and Dubnick 1987)
- Two main mechanisms in English local government – conformance and performance (Goddard 2005, Ferry and Eckersley 2015)
- Governance in the form of governing boards has been widely prevalent in the public services literature
  - health boards (Peck 1995, Exworthy and Robinson 2001, Addicott 2008, Grubnic and Cooper 2019),
  - police authorities replaced with PCCs (Davies and Johnson 2016, Murphy et al. 2017, Cooper 2020) and
  - school governing bodies (Farrell 2005, Farrell et al. 2017).
- The desire to create more accountable public services through new governance structures in the UK (Murphy et al. 2019)
- Little is known about the impact of changing governance structures on perceptions of accountability



# Literature on fire services

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Governance and accountability in fire and rescue services have received relatively little academic attention

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Farrell (2018) reviewed governance arrangements, focusing primarily on fire and rescue authorities as governing bodies

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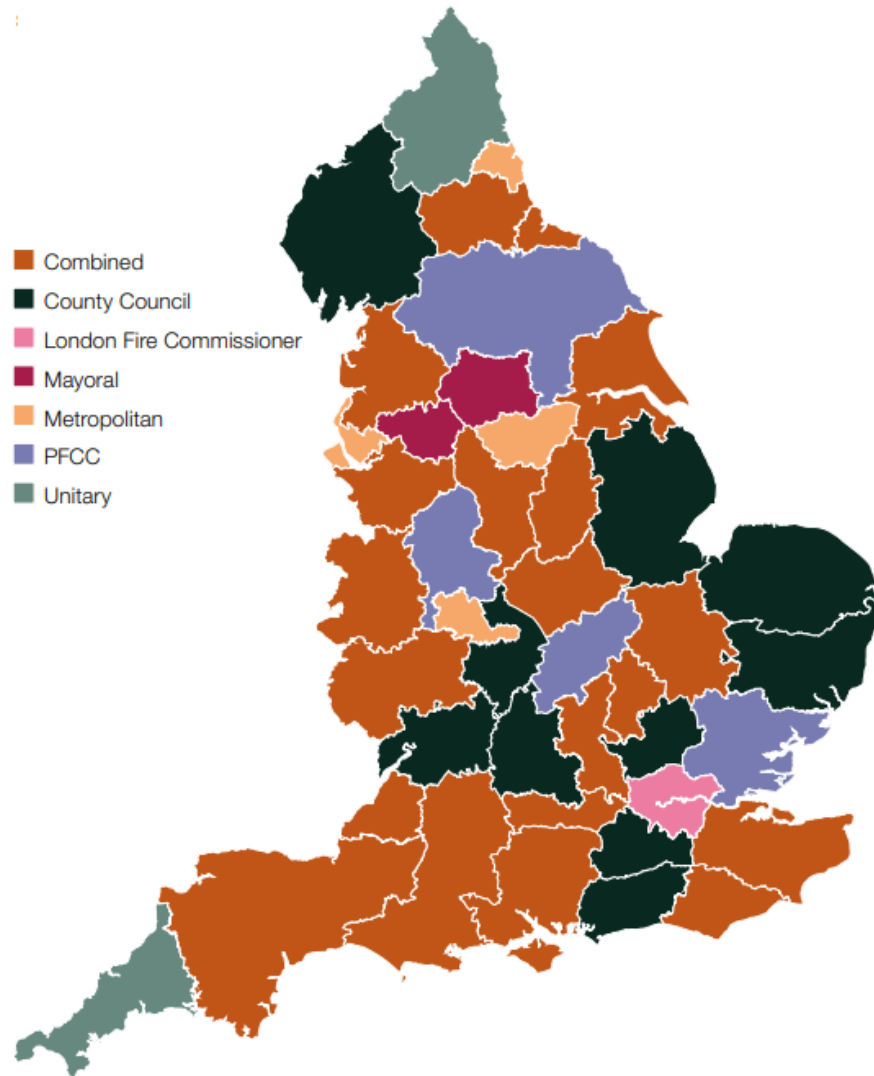
Most studies emphasise the importance of performance management frameworks in assuring accountability (Carvalho et al. 2006, Kloot 2009, Taylor et al. 2021).

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Other studies also emphasise the importance of financial reporting in delivering accountability (Spencer et al. 2019).

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Changes in governance arrangements may affect the nature of accountability within fire and rescue services (Clarke 2018).



# Research context

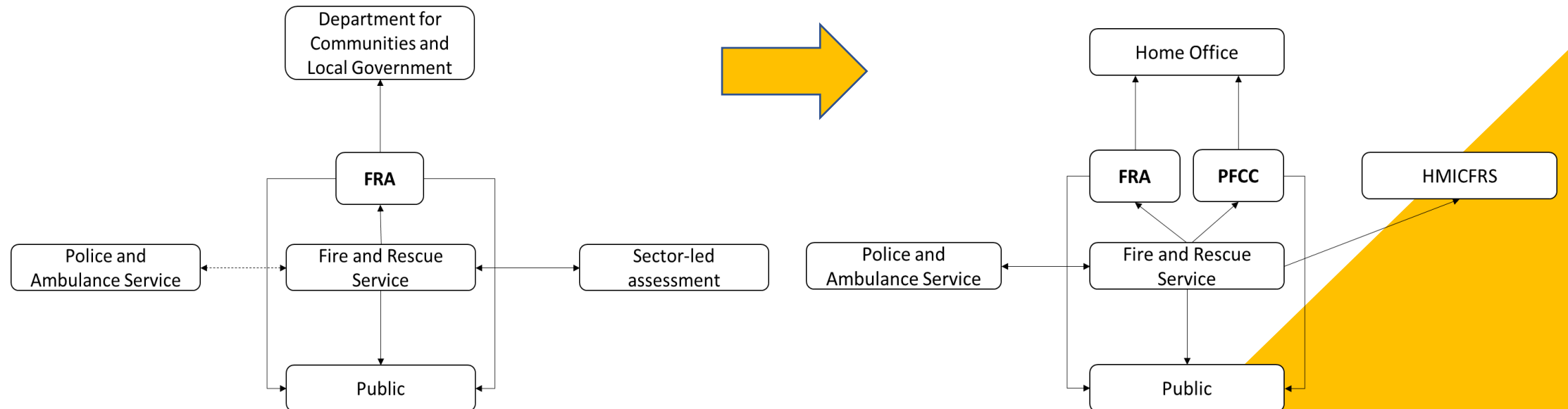
- Traditional long-standing governance model of the local fire and rescue authority, made up of local councilors
- Since 2017, an alternative governance model to improve accountability in practice (Policing and Crime Act 2017)
  - Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) have been able to make a case to assume responsibility for the governance of fire and rescue services within their force areas and become Police, Fire and Crime Commissioners (PFCCs)
  - Creation of a new inspectorate (for all fire services)
  - Strengthened focus on collaborative working across emergency services partners (for all fire services)
- A patchwork of governance arrangements throughout England

### Research question:

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?

Fig 1. Pre-Policing and Crime Act 2017

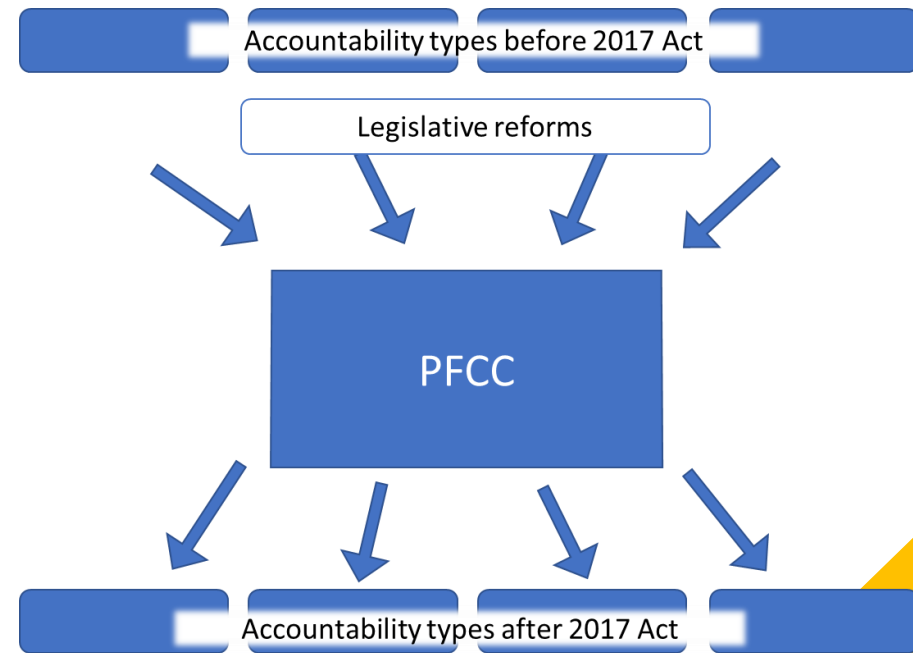
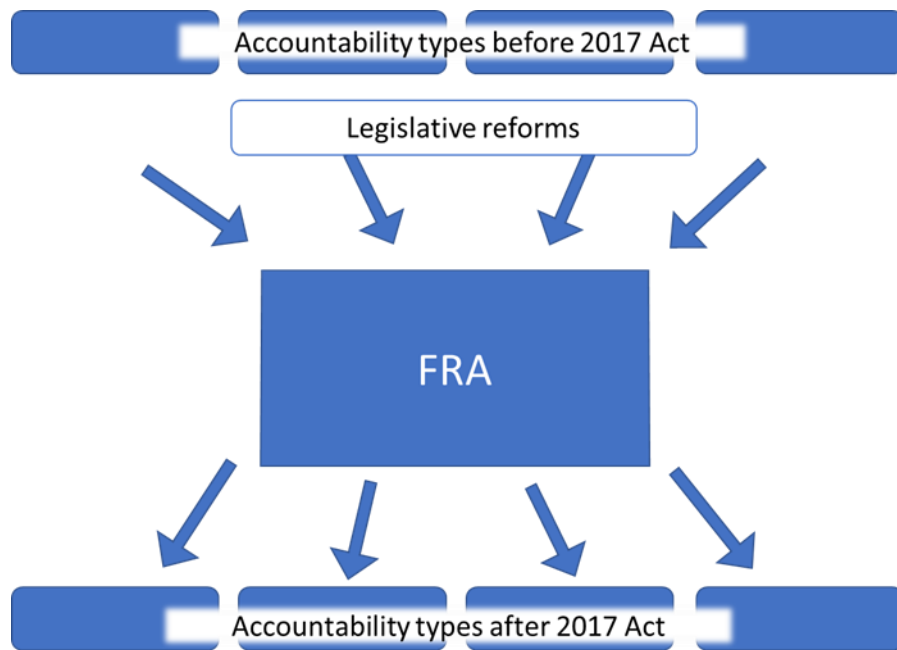
Fig 2. Post-Policing and Crime Act 2017



<b>Qualitative approach</b>	Understanding the concepts from the individuals' viewpoints (Bevir 2009)
<b>Multiple case studies</b>	A comparative multiple case study of governance models within fire and rescue services (Yin 2015)
<b>Sampling</b>	<b>6 out of 45 services in England</b> 3 traditional fire and rescue authority services and 3 new PFCC governance services
<b>Data collection</b> (March 2020 to June 2021)	<b>35 semi-structured interviews with senior management</b> (CFOs, deputy CFOs, Assistant CFOs, Directors of Assurance, Directors of Finance, Directors of Prevention and Protection) <b>3 interviews and 5 focus groups with firefighters</b> (3-5 participants), <b>Publicly available online data</b> (e.g. governance frameworks, senior organisational charts, and statements of assurance)
<b>Data analysis</b>	Thematic coding. Original typology of accountabilities by Romzek and Dubnick (1987) used as a theoretical lens. A constant interplay between the data and the coding process to refine the themes and their subthemes.

# Methodology and methods

# Conceptual framework



## Bureaucratic accountability

*“ultimately the authority are there to hold the organisation to account, they seek to assure our services on the public’s behalf”*

(Head of Governance and Strategy)

### **FRA-governed services - bureaucratic, slow decision-making**

**Since the 2017 legislation, co-opted members have brought extra scrutiny in FRA-governed services**

*“I think that the PCC being involved, I think that’s put some scrutiny upon the fire authority and around the governance”*

(Area Manager)

### **Since 2017, PFCC-governed services**

**New form of oversight over fire and rescue services, streamlined, single source of accountability, “**

*“I think it’s speeded up some of the decision making processes. I think it’s removed some layers of bureaucracy. “*

(Deputy Chief Fire Officer)



**Findings**



## Political accountability



- **FRA - indirect local councillors elections**

*“there is a view that the members of the fire authority have a direct link to the communities that we serve because they’re elected by those”*

(Strategic Enabler of Finance and Resources)

- **Since 2017, PFCC are elected in direct elections**

*“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”*

(Chief Fire Officer)

*“I don’t know of any member of the public that’s contacted the PFCC to hold us to account for anything.”*

(Chief Fire Officer)

Findings



## Legal accountability

- **Fire and Rescue Services** required by the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 to follow the National Framework
  - “[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)
- **Statutory requirements**
- **Funded by Council Tax, Business Rates and central govt funding**
- **Since 2017, HMICFRS inspections**

Findings



## Professional accountability

- Deference to professional expertise when responding to incidents
- Since 2017, the legislation has formalised the duty to collaborate with other emergency services (sharing estates with the police, shared services under the PFCC-governed service)

*“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 Chief Fire Officer)

- **New inspectorate informing local improvement and sharing best practice**

*“the outcomes of the report really just focus ... help us focus our intentions on areas to improve upon. So you know that itself makes us more accountable to the public.”*

(Deputy Chief Fire Officer)

*“the key for it all for me is sharing best practice, so what works in one fire and rescue service may or may not work in another, but if you don’t know about it, then you can’t make an informed decision as to whether or not it will work in your fire and rescue service”*

(Watch Manager)

# Findings

**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

# Conclusions

- This study shows how public sector employees perceive accountability demands in an under-researched public service experiencing governance reforms.
- Public governance structures shape accountability processes.
- Public services have to manage combinations of multiple types of accountabilities within and outside their organisations in an increasingly politicised context.
- Directly elected individuals, such as mayors or commissioners, responsible for a public service can change accountability relationships in the following ways:
  - can add a new scrutiny dimension,
  - can enable the public to directly hold the politician to account in elections (however, they might be deeply ingrained in party politics),
  - can result in a lack of increased accountability to local communities.



# ACCOUNTABILITY

Thank you

Questions?/Comments?