

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.

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).
- An increasing trend of decentralized law enforcement arrangements in Europe and English-speaking countries
- 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 in England and Wales (Davies and Johnson 2016, Murphy et al. 2017, Cooper 2020), directly elected sheriffs in the US (Sampson 2012)
 - 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

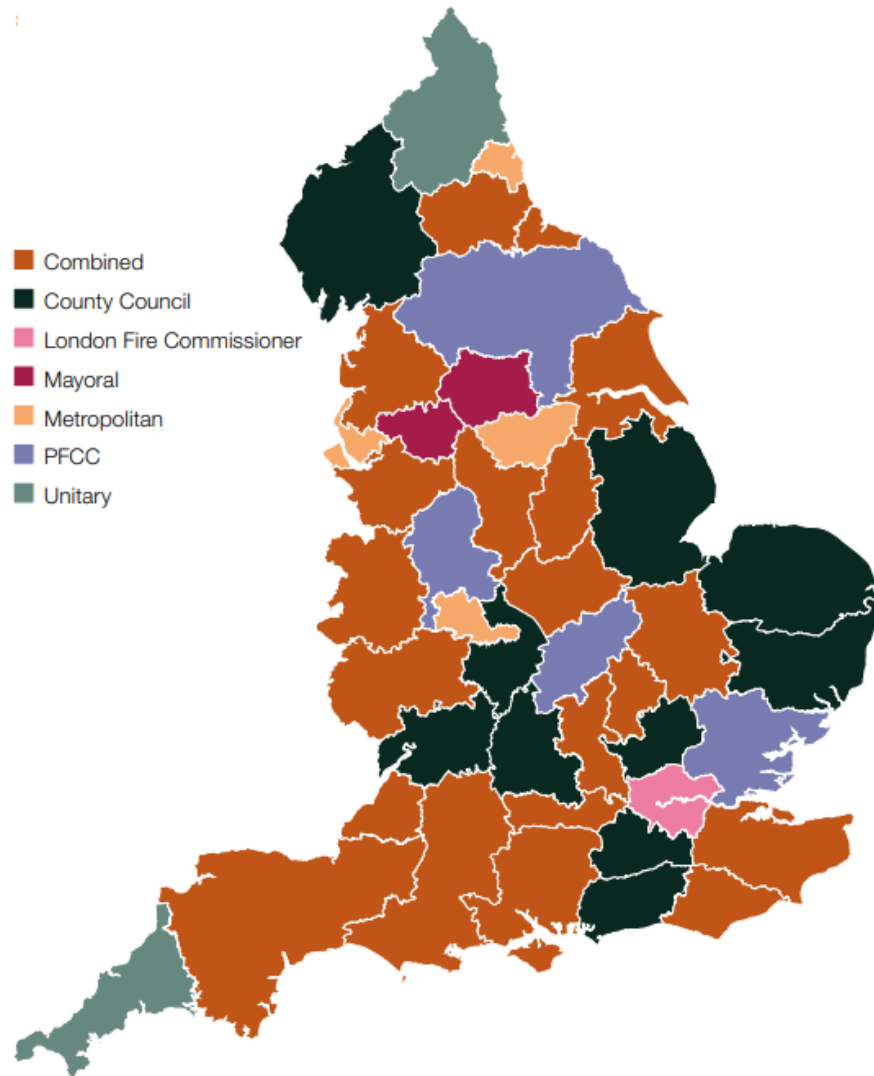
Governance and accountability in fire and rescue services have received relatively little academic attention

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

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

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

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



Research context

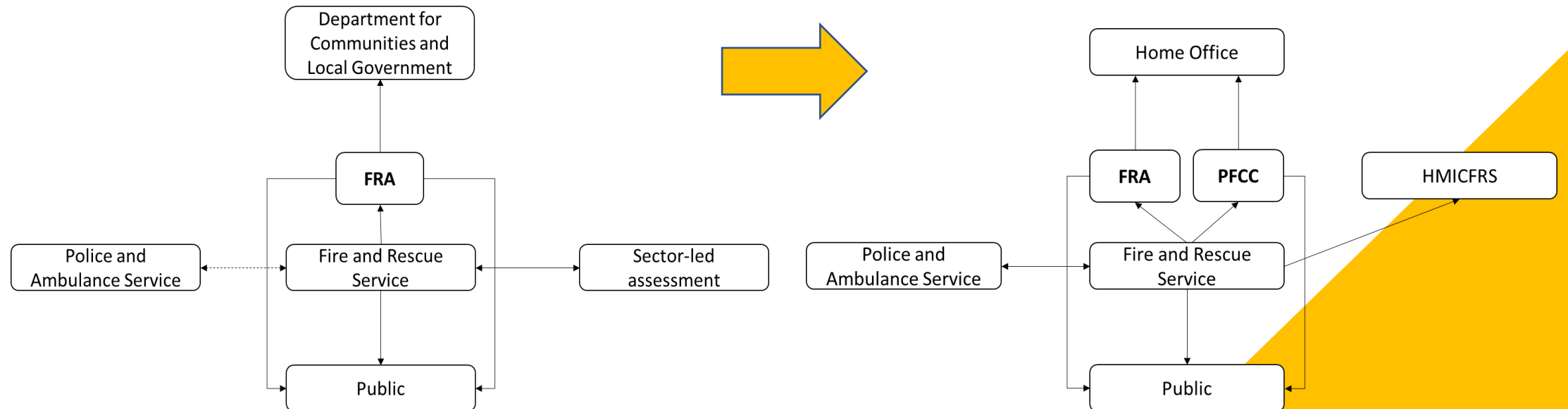
- Traditional long-standing governance model of the local fire and rescue authority, made up of local councilors
- Since 2017, an alternative governance model to improve accountability in practice (Policing and Crime Act 2017)
 - Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) have been able to make a case to 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



Qualitative approach	Understanding the concepts from the individuals' viewpoints (Bevir 2009)
Multiple case studies	A comparative multiple case study of governance models within fire and rescue services (Yin 2015)
Sampling	6 out of 45 services in England 3 FRA governance model services and 3 new PFCC governance model services
Data collection (March 2020 to June 2021)	35 semi-structured interviews with senior management (CFOs, deputy CFOs, Assistant CFOs, Directors of Assurance, Directors of Finance, Directors of Prevention and Protection) 3 interviews and 5 focus groups with firefighters (3-5 participants), Publicly available online data (e.g. governance frameworks, senior organisational charts, and statements of assurance)
Data analysis	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

	Pre-2017 Act	Post-2017 Act	
	FRA-governed services	FRA-governed services	PFCC-governed services
Bureaucratic accountability	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 accountability	Indirect elections, Responsiveness to communities	Indirect elections, Responsiveness to communities	Direct elections, Party political allegiance
Legal accountability	Statutory requirements, Council Tax, Reporting	Statutory requirements, Council Tax, Reporting (including inspections)	Statutory requirements, Council Tax, Reporting (including inspections),
Professional accountability	Response, Sector-led assessments (peer review), Collaboration	Response, Collaboration	Response, Joint fire and police service delivery

Bureaucratic accountability

- A hierarchical principal-agent relationship between a superior and a subordinate (Romzek and Dubnick 1987)
- Primarily exercised through a governing body (either an FRA or a PFCC)
- Focus on scrutiny, oversight and performance management from top to bottom

Bureaucratic accountability

Before

- **Low level of scrutiny from an FRA (FRA-governance model)**
 - “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)

After

- **Medium level of scrutiny, as result of the PCC sitting on an FRA (FRA-governance model)**
 - “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)
- **High level of scrutiny from a PFCC (PFCC-governance model)**
 - “We now have a commissioner that is very, very focused, switched on, asked some very difficult and awkward questions” (Deputy CFO)

Political accountability

- Responsiveness of representatives to communities (Romzek and Dubnick 1987)
- Primarily through a governing body (either an FRA or a PFCC)
- Focus on elections, political parties, decision-making and public engagement

Political accountability

Before

- **Indirectly elected group of politicians accountable for decision-making (FRA-governance model)**
 - “they’re very fearful of change because any change that affects their seat, they are very worried about (Area Manager)
 - “you’ve got a Labour group and a Conservative group, so quite often they won’t agree, don’t agree, and that can make it difficult for us to deliver the best service to the public” (Deputy Chief Fire Officer)

After

- **Indirectly elected group of politicians (including a PCC) accountable for decision-making (FRA-governance model)**
 - “PCC in themselves around governance isn’t really making that much difference currently to us.” (Chief Fire Officer)
- **Directly elected single politician accountable for decision-making (PFCC-governance model)**
 - “if you don’t like them [PFCC], you can get rid of them, and you can vote for somebody else” (Chief Fire Officer)
 - “as it gets closer to an election, the PFCC is looking for more and more good news to put in their press releases. And good news stories are fairly short lived obviously in political circles, you’re only as good as your last headline at the end of the day, so they [PFCC] want to keep that going.” (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)

Legal accountability

- Based on a relationship between a controlling party outside the organisation who can impose legal sanctions (Romzek and Dubnick 1987)
- Exercised through number of external stakeholders (e.g. central government)
- Focus on statutory requirements, financial compliance and audit

Legal accountability

Before

- **Low level of legal accountability towards central government (FRA-governance model)**
 - “I didn’t feel like there was any accountability towards central government really, except through the management of the budget” (Area Manager)
 - “the push to localism that’s happened over the last ten years or so really at some points has enabled fire services to really do what they wanted, with virtually no accountability to anybody I think” (Area Manager)

After

- **Medium level of legal accountability towards central government (FRA-governance model & PFCC-governance model)**
 - “I think the legislation reintroducing an inspectorate was essential for the sector, and I think it’s essential that the sector has got ... an independent body that applies a known framework in a consistent manner to all fire and rescue services” (Chief Fire Officer)
 - “We’re not accountable to the inspectorate but we work with them on our improvement agenda, and they independently report against our progress.” (Assistant Chief Fire Officer)
 - “My concern is...there are different governance arrangements, services operate in different ways, in terms of their income and how their budgets are set, you know some authorities’ budget is set more so via Council Tax, others ... and business rates, others is more set by a central Govt grant, it ... and there’s so many variations, I think it dilutes governance to some extent.” (Area Manager)

Professional accountability

- Stresses the power and control in the hands of skilled and expert members of a professional group accountable for their job to agency leaders (Romzek and Dubnick 1987)
- Exercised mainly through fire and rescue services themselves
- Focus on values and principles, professional standards, development in an unsupervised context

Professional accountability

Before

- **Limited professional accountability of fire and rescue services (FRA-governance model)**
 - “no consistent standards in terms of training and performance” (Assistant Chief Fire Officer)
 - “with a peer review, to some extent it wasn’t published as widely, so there wasn’t as much awareness of what the outcomes were. Perhaps there was less need to necessarily respond appropriately to all or any of the recommendations” (Finance Director)

After

- **Greater level of professional accountability of fire and rescue services (FRA-governance model & PFCC-governance model)**
 - “the outcomes of the [inspection] 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.” (Assistant Chief Fire Officer)
 - “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)

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?