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Title: Accountability arrangements in English Fire and Rescue Services: Wicked problem or political blindspot?

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Abstract

Accountability in the public sector is extremely complex. Some academics have argued that this has always been the case (Sinclair 1995). However, politicians have only begun to realise it more recently. The UK government has introduced various legislative agendas in the fire sector throughout the 21st century intended to improve the sector's accountability. We draw upon government legislation, ministerial statements, parliamentary committee, audit, inspection and other publicly available reports to highlight the key issues that have been part of the accountability agenda in the Governance and Performance Management Regime and Financial Management Regime of English Fire and Rescue Services. Examining how this policy agenda has developed and been implemented reveals insights into the difficulties of improving accountability in practice. We argue that the Fire and Rescue Services' accountability issues have become particularly difficult for a government fixated on a reform agenda based upon New Public Management principles that have repeatedly proven to be ineffective. We argue that accountability issues in the Fire and Rescue Services need to be addressed through new approaches that embrace the concept of Public Value and are more akin to New Public Governance thinking.

Key Words: Wicked Issues, Governance, Accountability, Fire and Rescue Services.

Introduction

Previous studies have shown that both traditional hierarchical forms of public administration and the adoption of New Public Management (NPM) approaches have significantly failed to effectively address a wide range of wicked problems, not least because these problems are inherently complex, are often dependent on contextual circumstances and are inevitably politically contentious (Head & Alford, 2015; Head, 2022). Wicked problems are "ill-defined, never solved" (Rittel & Webber 1973, p. 106), and "complex, unpredictable, open ended, or intractable" (Head & Alford, 2015, p. 712). In response, governments and local authorities across the world have been increasingly looking to post-New Public Management (post-NPM) reforms as a possible basis to address or at least mitigate these problems (Liddle, 2018).

This paper investigates the Governance and Performance Management Regime and the Financial Management Regime of English Fire and Rescue Services, which appear to have become increasingly intractable and akin to a wicked problem for the UK government since the beginning of the 21st century. Serial reforms of the accountability arrangements in the fire sector, have been repeatedly criticized as being partial, inadequate or impractical, not least by successive governments and national assurance agencies (Audit Commission, 2008; Conservative Party, 2015; NAO, 2015; PAC, 2016; May, 2016; Redmond, 2020; Home Office, 2022). We argue that the Fire and Rescue Services' accountability

appears to have become akin to a wicked problem for a government that continues to implement a reform agenda based upon the principles of NPM (Entwistle, 2022; Wankhade & Murphy, 2023) which, to-date, has repeatedly proven to be a flawed and ineffective approach.

Drawing on archival evidence and the experience of the devolved administrations, we contribute to the debate on accountability of public services by providing insights on what elements of each of the two regimes can be successful when addressing the ‘wicked’ problem of accountability in the public sector setting. We argue that accountability issues in Fire and Rescue Services need to be addressed through New Public Governance (NPG) approaches and initiatives, which prove to be more successful in addressing wicked issues than NPM techniques.

Literature Review

Wicked Problems and Accountability

In the field of public administration, wicked problems have been extensively discussed. First introduced by Rittel and Webber (1973, p. 106), the concept of wicked problems refers to issues that are “ill-defined” and “never solved”. According to Head and Alford (2015, p. 712) they also seem “complex, unpredictable, open ended, or intractable”. Wicked issues tend to arise from deep-rooted policy debates on tackling significant problems, which seem resistant to various solutions. Previous research has demonstrated that instead of solving a problem, they tend to result in unforeseen outcomes. Over time, an extensive literature has developed on various attempts to tackle wicked issues, including climate change (Levin *et al.*, 2012), health care (Ferlie *et al.*, 2013), humanitarian crisis (Reinecke & Ansari, 2016) and forced migration (Geuijen *et al.*, 2017). What they all have in common are multiple stakeholders involved in tackling the problem, institutional complexity, and scientific uncertainty (Head & Alford, 2015).

A closer look to the literature on wicked problems, however, reveals a number of gaps and shortcomings. A controversial statement was made by Rittel & Webber (1973) who claimed that there are no reliable standards by which to assess whether solutions to wicked problems are successful or not. More recently, scholars have proposed various solutions and frameworks, which help to understand the complexity of wicked problems (e.g., Ferraro *et al.*, 2015). The proposed strategies generally tend to focus on deliberation and problem solving among a group of stakeholders at multiple levels. Others, such as Head & Alford (2015), suggest new modes of leadership and broader means of tackling wicked issues are needed.

Wicked problems have proven to be challenging not only due to their complexity but also because over the years changing public sector management and governance structures have been adding to the difficulty of tackling already complex issues. Public management has developed over time and each new approach to managing public services seems to overlap rather than directly replace the previous one (Hyndman & Lapsley, 2016). This suggests that changing public sector management and governance structures might have significant implications for accountability.

Reforms often intend to be solutions to already existing problems and include various ‘promises’ in terms of accountability (Dubnick & Yang, 2011). Accountability in the public sector is extremely complex (Sinclair, 1995; Koppell, 2005) and context specific, as public organisations are increasingly held accountable by multiple institutions and standards. Existing research, however, does not specify what elements of accountability are important, and therefore how to get the balance between them right.

Public Management Reforms

The traditional model of public administration remains the longest standing theory of public management. The hierarchical model of bureaucracy is the fundamental characteristic of traditional public administration. Nevertheless, the last four decades have seen an ongoing dissemination and implementation of New Public Management (NPM) reforms all around the world. These reforms have incorporated commercial practices and concepts imported from private sector management into the public sector. This was based on the idea that organisations could identify how well they undertook specific tasks and make them accountable through targets, indicators and monitoring (Entwistle, 2022). Scholars also claim that NPM has failed to deliver the promised levels of efficiency and effectiveness in public services and has adverse side effects including weakened accountability (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994), unresolved and insignificant impacts on 'wicked problems' (Bovaird & Löffler, 2003), and higher cost of running public services (Hood & Dixon, 2015).

More recently, due to mounting dissatisfaction with the results of NPM, a new wave of post-NPM reforms have emerged (Entwistle, 2022; Wankhade & Murphy, 2023). New Public Governance (NPG) has been influenced by governance network theory, which addresses complexities, interdependencies, and reciprocity in public service delivery (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2012). NPG facilitates working with wide-ranging stakeholders across organizational boundaries to create value, which contrasts with the disintegration and 'silo working' driven by NPM (Christensen & Lægreid, 2007). It embraces the larger common good based on values such as citizenship, democracy, trust, and loyalty, which are prominent in the Social or Public Value approach (Lindgreen *et al.*, 2019). NPG has been seen as a reaction to both the fragmentation of the public sector and the pervasiveness of wicked problems that require addressing through cross-cutting collaboration in networks of a wide range of actors at different levels.

Each of these public management frameworks has its own unique approaches to key management functions, including different organisational structures, accountabilities, and governance mechanisms, as well as its own unique cultural norms.

The Governance and Performance Management Regime

In the field of public administration, the literature emphasises the significance of assessing local government's performance. Performance management has been widely used in public administrations, and more generally in the public sector since the introduction of the NPM reforms. Performance management describes the processes of an organisation moving towards its goals and objectives (Ferreira & Otley, 2009). It enables local authorities to use the data to inform their actions that ultimately ought to improve outcomes for local communities. Public management is also embedded in governance regimes, which enable different organisations to interact with each other to achieve desired results, as perceived by citizens and stakeholders (Bovaird & Löffler, 2009). Effective performance management together with key stakeholders' interactions has therefore been one of the most fundamental mechanisms of public sector accountability to the general public, in which local public entities can be held accountable for their own performance.

In the UK, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Western European countries, monitoring and reporting of data on local government performance has been a common practise to ensure high levels of public service standards and effective use of public funds.

The Financial Management Regime

Public sector performance affects everyone to some extent and is therefore the subject of public interest. All local authorities and public entities in the UK have an obligation to be responsible for their

use of public money, to achieve economy, efficiency, and effectiveness, and to operate transparently to allow taxpayers to understand how their money is spent. The obligation for governments, organisations, and individuals to be held to account for the expenditure of public money, formalised through bookkeeping and the discipline of accounting is centuries old. A seminal review of the value of auditing and the historical theoretical interpretations is available from Hay and Cordery (2018).

Local authorities are funded through multiple funding streams, including government grants, taxes, and charges for services. England has the most centralised control over local government finances of all Western European countries (Ferry *et al.*, 2015a). Local authorities cannot borrow money to finance ongoing expenses. Instead, they must either run balanced budgets or use their reserves to not exceed their annual revenue. Preparation of a sound annual budget is therefore crucial to ensure effective financial control in any local authority.

In England, financial audits for financial conformance have been a measure of local government accountability since before the introduction of the performance management measures. They included internal auditor and external independent auditor checks to ensure appropriate rules are being followed in every local authority. The role of internal audit has been to provide independent assurance that an organisation's risk management, governance and internal control processes are operating effectively. An external audit undertaken by an independent body examines the financial reporting statements of an authority. Both forms of audit enabled service providers to be held accountable to stakeholders, the government, and the public.

Since the 1980s, it has been generally recognised that an appropriate balance between financial conformance and operational performance is essential for public sector governance and accountability, meaning that service outcomes need to be assessed alongside a financial audit (Ferry *et al.*, 2015b). Examining how the UK government's policy agenda has played out in the context of the Governance and Performance Management Regime and the Financial Management Regime, which together comprise the accountability regime of Fire and Rescue Services, reveals insights into the difficulties of improving accountability in practice. The next section explains the methods and the context of this study to understand what elements of accountability are important, and therefore how to get the balance between them right.

Research Context and Methods

The research adopted an exploratory approach, primarily based upon publicly available documentation and archival sources, to understand how the UK government's general policy agenda was operationalised in the Governance and Performance Management Regime and the Financial Management Regime of English Fire and Rescue Services since the start of the 21st century. We have chosen the example of the fire and rescue sector because it has attracted various legislative agendas aimed at improving accountability through governance changes throughout the 21st century.

We drew upon UK government legislation, ministerial statements, parliamentary committee reports, audit inspection reports, and other publicly available documents to highlight the key issues that have been part of the English Fire and Rescue Services agenda to-date. A key source, particularly for the period up to 2012, is the Audit Commission records contained in the National Archives. We analysed the collected data to differentiate between the NPM initiatives and the NPG initiatives to determine which tools and/or that government adopted, adequately or inadequately addressed the governance and accountability issues within English Fire and Rescue Services.

Examining how this policy agenda has played out has revealed interesting insights into the difficulties of improving accountability in practice. We argue that relying on NPM-based reforms has made

improving accountability an increasingly intractable and wicked problem, whilst NPG-based reforms and approaches might have been more successful in dealing with the sectors long-term governance and accountability problems.

Fire and Rescue Services across the UK in the last 24 years have developed a great variety of different governance arrangements. They currently operate under separate legislative and administrative arrangements in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. England has local Fire and Rescue Services, which are each overseen by a governing body known as a fire authority, which is either made up of a group of local councillors or is a single politician (Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner or a mayor). Wales has the former but not the latter. Scotland and Northern Ireland have single national Fire and Rescue Services, with authorities that are effectively nominated committees of the devolved parliaments. Previous studies note that accountability changes depending on the way public services are governed and as a result, certain governance structures are assessed more positively than others (Lakoma, 2024). This paper discusses what elements of accountability are important, and therefore how to get the balance between them right.

Findings

The Governance and Performance Management Regime

Before the start of the 21st century, the 1999 Local Government Act introduced the duty of 'Best Value', which stipulated that English local authorities (which fire services were part of) are required to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in their services and activities. 'Best Value' was part of the local government modernisation agenda launched by the New Labour government in 1997. Its main aim was to make local government more accountable to local communities through performance management (Tichelar & Watts, 2000).

Nonetheless, the fire service, as part of the local government, initially remained largely impervious to the idea of 'Best Value' and modernisation. Some argue that it was due to the well-established relations between the unions and the fire service (Davis & Norton, 1992), while others contend that reforming the fire service was not initially a government priority (Murphy & Greenhalgh, 2018). Consequently, the fire service for a while remained largely unaffected by the New Labour government's modernisation agenda.

Although 'Best Value' and the local government modernisation agenda were initially portrayed as the development of NPM, they were in fact more complex and wide ranging in both theory and practice, drawing from traditional public administration and NPM. The agenda was based upon a series of multiple and mutually reinforcing reforms across policy making and service delivery, with an extended and re-invigorated improvement and assurance infrastructure. By 2002, the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit was promoting the creation of public value (Kelly *et al.*, 2002) and its Office for Public Service Reform was proposing that future external inspections of both services and organisations should be focused on assessing the delivery of improvements in public services (OPSR, 2003).

Although the fire service was initially impervious to the local government modernisation agenda, two critical independent reports suggested that the fire sector required significant improvement (Burchill, 2000; Bain *et al.* 2002), which highlighted the need for change in governance and management. Subsequently, the fire sector experienced significant reforms, which were enshrined in the Fire and Rescue Service Act 2004. The 2004 Act introduced performance management systems (Andrews 2010), including new Integrated Risk Management Plans (IRMPs), upon which all strategies and plans were to be based. It introduced a new human resource management system (Integrated Personal Development System), and the first national policy and delivery framework for Fire and Rescue

Services. The reforms generally brought a renewed focus on performance management (Andrews 2010), including an emphasis on external audit and inspection, carried out by the Audit Commission, and coordinated in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) system that graded authorities on a performance rating scale (poor, weak, fair, good, or excellent). Since the 2004 Act, Fire and Rescue Services had a series of National Frameworks for policy and delivery (ODPM, 2004a, 2004b, 2006; DCLG, 2008), which were initially based on NPM mechanisms and techniques, however, by 2010 the emphasis was firmly on co-production, innovation, and improvement, creating public and social value, and involving multiple collaborations, partnerships, networks, and other key traits more associated with Public Value Management and NPG (Morphet, 2008; Murphy, 2014; Liddle, 2018; Lindgreen *et al.*, 2019).

The 2010 UK general election resulted in a new Conservative-led coalition government and a radical change in public policy for locally delivered public services based on austerity localism (Lowndes & Pratchett, 2011) and sector-led improvement (LGA, 2011), which included the Fire and Rescue sector (LGA, 2014; Murphy & Ferry, 2018). By this time responsibility for local government and for Fire and Rescue Services had been devolved to Scotland and Wales, where radical changes in governance of the service have moved away from the English model. The devolved administrations have been prepared to consider alternative approaches based on ideas more characteristic of NPG, and somewhat ironically the policy and delivery direction of the previous Westminster government (see for example Murphy *et al.*, 2019a). The Welsh government continued to have a much more inclusive, collaborative, and co-productive approach with the 44 Welsh public bodies, including its three Fire and Rescue Services (Taylor-Collins & Downe, 2022). This was collectively built on the strategic long-term approach enshrined in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (Welsh Government, 2022). In Scotland, the new government established the Christie Commission (2011) to focus on public service outcomes and embraced the notion of public value. It quickly passed the 2012 Police and Fire Reform Act (Scotland), which amalgamated all 8 fire services into a national Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, produced a national policy framework (Scottish Government, 2013a), and a new governance and accountability framework for Scottish Fire and Rescue Services (Scottish Government, 2013b; Murphy *et al.*, 2019b).

In 2012, the UK government produced a new national framework based on NPM principles for Fire and Rescue Services that now applied only to England (DCLG, 2012). Competition, commercialisation, and marketisation were prominently encouraged, as was the control of costs, while service configuration and delivery were to be in response to demand rather than in the traditional response to risk. Operational performance management had become the legal responsibility of local fire authorities. Fire and Rescue Authorities were to be treated as commissioners of the service, although the existing Fire and Rescue Service remained as the main provider of the service. Fire and Rescue Services had to determine their local standards, response times, and other performance indicators under the policy of austerity localism as the principal responsibility for accountability moved from central government to fire and rescue authorities, by giving fire authorities more flexibility and freedom in how they delivered services.

By 2015, Ferry and Murphy (2015) in a report for the National Audit Office (NAO) found that accountability, transparency, and service delivery were notably poorer in 2015 than in 2010. The NAO (2015) and subsequently the Public Accounts Select Committee (2016) were heavily critical of the oversight of the sector by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and the Secretary of State Eric Pickles. As a result, responsibility for Fire and Rescue Services was transferred to the Home Office and proposals for reforming the fire and rescue sector were added to the

parliamentary bill that was to become the Policing and Crime Act 2017. In 2016, Theresa May, the Home Secretary (immediately prior to becoming Prime Minister) summed up her view of the issues:

“It is currently almost impossible to scrutinise your local fire and rescue service. There’s no independent inspectorate; no regular audit of performance; and only limited available data on performance over time or between areas.”

(May 2016, p. 8)

The Policing and Crime Act 2017 devoted its first four chapters to Fire and Rescue Services and sought to enhance the democratic accountability of Fire and Rescue Services through the introduction of Police, Fire and Crime Commissioners (PFCCs). The legislation encouraged and enabled, but did not mandate, Police and Crime Commissioners, directly elected politicians overseeing local police services, to take on responsibilities for the governance of their local fire authorities. 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 and localism agendas (Lakoma, 2024). The re-establishment of an external inspection regime, His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Police & Fire Services (HMICFRS), and improvement in the efficiency and effectiveness of emergency services through closer collaboration was intended to improve performance management in the fire sector as well as bring more accountability to key fire stakeholders (Murphy *et al.*, 2020a). The introduction of the 2017 legislation was quickly followed by a new national framework for the fire sector (Home Office, 2018).

At the time of writing, only 4 PFCC-governed fire services have been established and two of these (Northamptonshire and Cumbria) coincided with local government re-organisations. HMICFRS was established in 2018 and has completed two rounds of service inspections (another is underway), a themed inspection into the response to the Covid pandemic and produced four national State of Fire reports (HMICFRS, 2020, 2021a, 2021b, 2023). The reports have confirmed *inter alia* how the local evidence base is inadequate, just as the NAO report found a deteriorating national evidence base in 2015 NAO (2015)). They have also confirmed the inadequacy of current Integrate Risk Management Plans, upon which service configuration is based and report the worst service response time in decades. The 2018 National Framework and the inclusion of two additional objectives (improved collaboration and proposals for workforce development) made it more comprehensive than its immediate predecessors, but this did not make it as comprehensive as the 2004, 2006 and 2008 frameworks. The re-creation of an external inspectorate was almost bound to be a step forward. Its claims to independence are however contested (Murphy, 2017) and the inspections specifically do not include an assessment of corporate governance, leadership, organisational culture, or accountability arrangements (HMICFRS, 2018. p 5.). Nevertheless, in the annual reviews of the State of Fire, HMICFRS has consistently and repeatedly called for further reforms of Fire and Rescue Services at both national and local levels.

The Financial Management Regime

The Audit Commission originally established the nature and scope of the modern financial audit and reporting system in English local government. From 1983, the Audit Commission appointed all external auditors to local authorities, from 1990 health service bodies, and from 2004 all Fire and Rescue Services (Campbell-Smith, 2009). Thus, the annual audit and financial reports, value for money reports and the inspection and performance reports (national and local), were all made publicly available on an internet based interactive repository, together with the tools, techniques, and guides to analyse this data for individual authorities and/or sectors.

When the Audit Commission began co-ordinating the government's modernisation and improvement agenda and reporting its outcome to the public, in CPA an annual 'Use of Resources' Assessment (Financial Reporting, Financial management, Financial Standing, Internal control, Value for money) was developed for assessing how authorities managed their financial, human, physical and other assets to facilitate achieving best value and the continuous improvement of their services and activities as measured by their economy, efficiency, and effectiveness.

Before 2010, central government acted as the primary source of funding for Fire and Rescue Services. The austerity localism policy introduced by the 2010 Spending Review and the Localism Act 2011 meant that central government financial support started to decline (Lowndes & Pratchett, 2011), while at the same time the proportion of Fire and Rescue Services' funding that was generated from local council taxes and business rates started to increase. Although the amount of central government support had fallen, income continued to come from central government grants (called "revenue support grants" and "top-up" funds), which meant that Fire and Rescue Services were largely dependent on central government. The department in charge of Fire and Rescue Services at the time, DCLG, was responsible for distributing central government funding on behalf of HM Treasury via an annual 'local government finance settlement' which included all fire and rescue authorities.

Financial compliance in Fire and Rescue Services, previously overseen by the Audit Commission, and delivered through the District Audit Service and External Auditors on behalf of central government, was dismantled between 2010 and 2015, when the Audit Commission was abolished. In its place, the UK government introduced a system of sector-led improvement for financial management and transferred local audit to private audit firms (Murphy & Ferry 2018, Murphy et al. 2023). External audit and financial reporting were then reformed by the Coalition Government under the Local Accountability and Audit Act 2014 to improve accountability and transparency. The 2014 Act replaced the Use of Resources financial management regime with a short-term financial reporting regime and transformed local audit through the NPM mechanisms of outsourcing, fragmentation and reduced levels of public oversight and knowledge of risks (Ferry & Eckersley, 2022; Murphy *et al.*, 2023). It moved away from reporting to central government and towards establishing new arrangements under the policy of austerity-localism (Lowndes & Pratchett, 2011). The act also enabled the NAO to provide central government with reports into value for money and financial sustainability in Fire and Rescue Services (NAO, 2015). Local public audits were consequently overseen by the NAO, but focused solely on financial management, and did not include performance assessment (Ellwood, 2014). However, the fragmentation of local audit weakened both accountability and transparency, as local audits were increasingly delayed, were less comprehensive, were undertaken by private companies using lower graded and/or less experienced staff and showed signs of increasing financial vulnerability (Ferry & Murphy, 2018; Watson, 2019; Bradley *et al.*, 2022; Murphy *et al.*, 2023).

Following multiple critical reviews (Ferry, 2019; ICEAW, 2018; 2021; RAND Europe, 2018), the government commissioned an Independent Review of Local Authority Financial Reporting and External Audit (Redmond, 2019, 2020), which concluded that local public audit arrangements established by the 2014 Act were no longer "fit for purpose" and produced 43 recommendations for change. The government eventually accepted all the recommendations, and the NAO issued a new Code of Audit Practice (NAO, 2020). Although it is anticipated that the new regime will incorporate the emerging concepts of financial resilience, financial sustainability, and financial vulnerability, the government has yet to bring forward the required legislation four years after publication.

Despite all the implicit or explicit acknowledgements of a need to revise the local government finance system (Sandford, 2021), the recent wave of section 114 notices from local authorities in financial distress, and the growing realisation of the importance of the new concepts of financial resilience, and

financial sustainability (Sandford, 2023), there are no current proposals for legislation. It is also notable (and likely to be temporary) but while the number of section 114 notices in England has risen there have been no notices, yet, from local authorities in Scotland or Wales, and none from Fire and Rescue Authorities. The CEO of CIPFA was quoted in the national press as calling local public audit as a “public administration disaster” commenting “before the abolition of the Audit Commission accounts were signed off on time and had been for four decades. It is hard to think of a public service reform that has done so much damage” (Goodier & Butler, 2023).

Discussion

It is self-evident that the public management and accountability theoretical as well as practical and empirical discourses have been complex and contested, particularly as it relates to the UK. Neither theoretical changes nor developments in policy and practise happen in a vacuum removed from other contemporary changes and influences, and a paradigm change is not usually clear or instant particularly in its emergent phase.

This section seeks to evaluate the changes in the Governance and Performance Management Regime and the Financial Management Regime of Fire and Rescue Services, (which together comprise the accountability regime), between 1997 and 2023. It shows that government initially attempted to adopt and impose NPM based reforms onto the service, but a gradual accumulation of evidence and circumstances dictated that the New Labour and more recently the Conservative government gradually adopted approaches, tools, and techniques more associated with NPG. However, they differed in that Labour administrations were relative enthusiastic adopters of NPG based reforms, while the Conservative administrations have been more reluctant, if not explicitly resistant to NPG initiatives.

The New Labour government came in at a time when NPM ideas were rapidly displacing traditional public administration, and before the pioneering work by Moore (1995) on public value had been developed and widely disseminated. Nevertheless, in the UK, the original ‘modernisation’ agenda soon transformed into the ‘improvement agenda’ with increasing accretions and refinements that incorporated new tools, techniques, policies, and structures more associated with NPG than NPM. Accountability and transparency were better understood (Hood, 2010), and continually enhanced, thereby, contributing to greater public assurance under the Labour administrations (Ferry & Murphy, 2018). Both the performance management regime and the financial management regime for Fire and Rescue Services (and for Local Authorities), became more comprehensive and broadened in scale, based on improved data and intelligence. Corporate and community objectives and assessments complemented the traditional service-based assessments, and the objectives shifted to outcomes rather than merely inputs and outputs. Short-term financial reporting developed into short, medium, and long-term resource planning and reporting as well as the evaluation of all corporate resources. By the end of this period, prospective audit and accounts were being evaluated alongside retrospective audit and accounts. Internal and external scrutiny of public expenditure and service performance demonstrated the economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of service delivery (Audit Commission, 2009a, 2009b; Murphy *et al.*, 2019). In addition, a robust evidence base, early warning system, and effective intervention arrangements had been developed for public authorities who were significantly underperforming (Coleman, 2009; Murphy & Jones, 2016).

When Fire and Rescue Services became a devolved service, the new administrations in Scotland and Wales continued the direction of travel established by the previous Labour administrations in Westminster, and continued to base their approach on ideas that are more characteristic of NPG. Wales passed the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 embedding the continuous

improvement the social, economic, environmental, and cultural well-being of Wales. It retained the local 'combined' authority governance model for its three fire authorities after devolution, and they were made responsible to the Communities and Regeneration Department of the Welsh Government. In Scotland, the Scottish Government amalgamated the 8 previous local authority-based Fire and Rescue Services together with the national training centre, into a single national service answerable to the Scottish Government through an appointed board (Murphy *et al.*, 2019).

In contrast in England, following the 2010 general election, the Conservative-led coalition government brought more complexity to the sector as it introduced a radical change in policy and service delivery arrangements, based on a return to NPM principles and the imposition of long-term austerity management. Local public audit was privatised (Murphy *et al.*, 2023), and financial reporting and external audit emasculated, quickly becoming no longer 'fit for purpose' (ICAEW, 2018; Redmond, 2019, 2020). Independent external inspections was abandoned, as England became the only advanced western fire and rescue service without independent inspection.

The 2012 National Framework differentiated between Fire and Rescue Authorities and Fire and Rescue Services for the first time, adopting a commissioner/provider split with fire authorities having strategic and governance responsibilities, and fire services being responsible for most (but not all) operations. Outsourcing and externalisation were encouraged, and service configuration was to be in response to demand rather than risk. Performance management and improvement was to be based on the Sector-led improvement regime, as primary responsibility for delivery was firmly established as the local services responsibility rather than a joint responsibility with central government. As result of these NPM-based initiatives, accountability and transparency deteriorated, along with the weakened evidence base upon which policy was predicated and new reporting arrangements to the public established (DCLG, 2015; PAC, 2016; Murphy *et al.*, 2019). By 2015, accountability of Fire and Rescue Services were displaying many of the characteristics of a wicked policy issue (Head 2022).

The government's response was in the Policing and Crime Act 2017 and the adoption of governance, performance and accountability based on the model developed for the police. The new National Framework 2018 was desperately needed, but was soon explicitly (Murphy *et al.*, 2020) and implicitly acknowledged to be both partial and inadequate, thus demonstrating the difficulty and complexity of getting the balance between performance and financial accountability right. The Home Office in two white papers on "Fire Reform" (2020, 2022) subsequently announced further reforms to "professionalism, performance, and governance", inter alia, to improve governance and accountability in Fire and Rescue Services, which implicitly assumed the need for service configuration to be based upon assessment of risk rather than demand. In 2021, the HMICFRS strategy introduced a focus on public value as the first of its four strategic objective (HMICFRS 2021c).

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study set out to understand how the UK's policy agenda affected both the Governance and Performance Management Regime and the Financial Management Regime of English Fire and Rescue Services. We analysed the available evidence to differentiate between the NPM initiatives and the NPG initiatives to determine which tools adequately or inadequately addressed the accountability issues within English Fire and Rescue Services.

Our analysis revealed that the government's reliance on NPM-based reforms since 2010 has become an increasingly intractable problem in accountability of English fire services. This is due to the reliance on the fragmentation of the fire sector, sector-led improvement initiatives, lack of external inspection

regime, the imposition of long-term austerity management, short-term financial reporting, and privatisation of local audit. In practice, all these NPM-based initiatives introduced by the Coalition Government weakened accountability of the fire sector as they made it more difficult to determine who and how can actually be held to account for the performance of English Fire and Rescue Services.

However, our paper suggests that NPG reforms and approaches have been more successful in dealing with long-term accountability problems during the Labour administration and in the devolved administrations in Wales and Scotland. Reliance on outcomes rather than merely inputs and outputs, the importance of public value, short, medium, and long-term resource planning and reporting, as well as the evaluation of all corporate resources, together with retrospective and prospective audits of performance contributed to the robust accountability regime of the fire sector.

We argue that the UK government over the recent years have misdiagnosed the problem of accountability in English Fire and Rescue Services by reverting to NPM reforms and being reluctant to introduce new legislation to change the current state of the sector, which ultimately proved to be a wrong solution to the accountability problem, making it an unresolved 'wicked' problem. We suggest, based on our analysis and the reviewed literature, that accountability issues in Fire and Rescue Services, and other public services, require more NPG-type approaches, tools and techniques rather than the NPM equivalents. This is because NPG promotes 'common good' by including a wide range of actors, including the public, collaboratively involved in dealing with the complex issue, which is accountability, across multiple boundaries. It is therefore more applicable in the public sector setting as it cultivates a strong and unified sense of values and the 'public interest'.

In our responses to the reform white papers, we have repeatedly put forward proposals for improved data, information, and standards; better joined up working and inter-agency collaboration and operational Independence for the Chief Fire Officers all of which are part of the Home Offices agenda. However in addition we have suggested that the government needs to resolve funding and resourcing issues such as financial sustainability and local audit; to review organisational landscape responsibilities and inter-relationships between the Home Office, HMICFRS and parliament; and make improvements to internal and external scrutiny, including conducting corporate rather than service inspections, and stronger internal scrutiny, which are not on the current governments agenda but might be on any new government that might be in place by the time of the conference.

Examining how this policy agenda has played out (and might play out in the near future) reveals insights into the difficulties of improving accountability in practice. The Governance and Performance Management Regime and Financial Management Regime effectively enshrine the accountability regime for local public services in the UK. This paper has revealed the difficulty of getting the right balance within the two regimes, but this should not prove impossible when adopting the right tools and techniques. This study contributes to the accountability literature on public services by providing insights on what elements of each of the regimes are adequate when addressing the 'wicked' problem of accountability in the public sector setting. Our example, and others in the public sector, demonstrate that recent governments have not fully understood the nature and complexity of accountability relationships within public services and these need to be understood if we are to maintain an appropriate accountability framework for local public services.

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