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Title: Professionalism in the English Fire and Rescue Services

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Abstract:

There has been a rapidly growing interest among academics, practitioners and more recently the UK government about the need or desirability of greater professionalism within the Fire and Rescue Services. This increasing interest also manifests in the other two 'blue light' emergency services, namely the police and ambulance services, with whom firefighters closely collaborate in their mutual quest to keep the public safe (Wankhade and Murphy (2023)). The two most recent fire service reform policy papers issued by the UK government both centred around three main themes, one of which is increasing professionalism or "helping fire professionals to best serve their communities (Home Office 2021, 2022) and the title of the government's response to the latter consultation was entitled "A profession we can all be proud of – reforming our Fire & Rescue Service" (Home Office 2023).

This paper looks at the current state of professionalism in Fire and Rescue Services, how it has changed since the Policing and Crime Act 2017 and the 2018 National Framework (Home Office 2018), and critically looks at the proposed nature and form of professionalism that the previous government envisaged for the service in the future. It draws on recent research that investigated the role that professionalism plays in the accountability and governance of the Fire and Rescue Services and how it is viewed by both senior management and front-line firefighters (Lakoma 2023, 2024). It concludes with some recommendations on policy and practice for the new government and the sector if they want to develop and embed the most appropriate form of greater professionalism within the service.

Key Words: Professionalism, Public Service Reform, Fire and Rescue Services, England.

1. Introduction

There has been a rapidly growing interest among academics, practitioners, regulators and more recently the UK government about the need or desirability of greater professionalism within the emergency services generally, and the Fire and Rescue Services in particular. This reflects both growing interest internationally, in continental Europe, Australia and North America, as well as domestically in the UK (Wankhade and Murphy 2023). The most recent policy papers relating to Fire Service reform

centred around three main themes one of which was “increasing professionalism” or “helping fire professionals to best serve their communities” (Home Office 2021, 2022, 2023).

Fire and rescue services are generally an under-researched emergency service compared to the other two blue light services. Sociological research on fire and rescue services is somewhat limited and tends to be focussed on leadership and governance, industrial relations, risks emotions and masculinity (Tracey and Scott 2006, Eyre 2018, Murphy and Greenhalgh 2018). To date, professionalism of fire services has not attracted much academic attention (Wankhade and Murphy 2023).

This paper will address this gap and critically examine the conceptualisation and the proposed nature of professionalism within the (previous) governments reform agenda for English Fire and Rescue Services. It will look at some further suggestions from the former Home Affairs Select Committee of the House of Commons. The authors will then suggest some recommendations for policy and practice for both the new government and the sector, to consider if they want to embed the most appropriate form of professionalism within the service.

2. Literature Review

While professional organisations, their membership and relationships date back to the late 17th century (Burrage & Torstedahl 1990), modern professional associations such as architects, engineers, lawyers, and medics date from the middle to late 19th century with a steady stream following throughout the 20th century (Perkin 1989). Modern free-standing professions, whether from the 19th century, like those above, or 20th century professions such as Town Planners, Social Workers or Air Traffic Controllers occupy ‘privileged’ positions (Parkin 1995), with considerable control over education, training and the licensing of individuals and organisations to operate (Ackroyd 1996, Wankhade & Murphy 2023).

In the fire sector, the Institute of Fire Engineers was established in 1918 as a global membership body that aims to promote and improve the science, practice, and professionalism of fire engineering. Professional work is however constantly changing with technology, innovation and interprofessional collaboration all generating the need for new professional standards.

The most common approach to determining whether an occupation should be recognised as a profession is known as the traits approach i.e., that it possesses certain traits that are assessed against a continuum of professionalism (Goode 1960, Yam 2004). These include:

- (i) an extensive theoretical knowledge base,
- (ii) a legitimate expertise in a specialized field,
- (iii) an altruistic commitment to service,
- (iv) an unusual degree of autonomy in work,
- (v) a code of ethics and conduct overseen by a body of representatives from within the field itself, and
- (vi) a personal identity that stems from the professional’s occupation.

Although this approach has attracted criticism (Forsyth 1994) as serving self-interest and being a professional ideology without a theoretical framework (Saks 1983, Wilensky 1964), it is generally accepted that formal knowledge remains the keystone of professionalism (Freidson 1986). This approach also provides a useful checklist for investigating the development of professionalism within the increasing interprofessional collaboration between the three emergency ‘blue light’ services generally, and more pertinently to this paper the English Fire and Rescue Services.

Wankhade and Murphy (2023) contend that from 2010, after a change in government, there was a gradual increasing interest in greater professionalism and wider professional standards across the three emergency services in the UK. This mirrored similar interest and new initiatives in Australia, New Zealand, the USA, and Canada. It was also indirectly encouraged by changes in the governance, performance management, and financial support arrangements across the public services in England as previous more centralised top-down arrangements were replaced by much weaker accountability and transparency arrangements under 'austerity-localism' (Lowndes and Pratchett 2012) and the Sector-Led Performance Management Improvement regime (Murphy and Ferry 2018, Downe *et al.* 2018). These arrangements reduced the legal, and bureaucratic accountability of locally delivered public services and shifted the spotlight onto professional accountability and local political accountability (Lakoma *et al.* in press).

Unfortunately, the quality and the consistency of the application of both professional and performance standards deteriorated over the period from 2010 to 2016, exacerbated by the sale of the National Fire Service College to the public outsourcing company Capita in 2013, and this deterioration was evidenced in practice at the public inquiry reports into the Grenfell Tower Fire (Moore-Blick 2019, 2024) and the Manchester Arena Terrorist Attack (Kerslake 2018, Saunders 2022).

Within Fire and Rescue Services standards and practice have "predominantly been developed by policy makers in close collaboration with practitioners" (Murphy *et al.* 2020) and during this period both the government, and the wider practitioner community gradually came to the view the sector as needing an Independent Standards Board. This was duly established in 2018 to produce "high quality, professional standards focused on achieving positive outcomes" (National Fire Chiefs Council 2018). This perceived inadequacy was acknowledged and addressed in parallel with other inadequacies in the 2012 National Framework for Fire and Rescue Services some of which were addressed in the 2017 Policing and Crime Act 2017. That Act focused on governance, external inspection and assurance and the adequacy of data and intelligence available for policy makers and service deliverers at both national and local levels (Murphy *et al.* 2019, 2020). The National Framework that followed in 2018 (Home Office 2018) acknowledged the work commenced by the Standards Board and promised:

"a coherent and comprehensive set of professional standards across all areas of fire and rescue services' work will be developed, drawing on existing standards where appropriate. The development of new standards will be on an ongoing basis."

However, the act did not address corporate or financial assessment, strategic leadership or organisational culture, and the individual service inspections that HMICFRS subsequently introduced focussed specifically on service matters and operational leadership. It was however not long before the new inspectorate noticed something amiss within the service. "There is a toxic culture in too many services" with "24 percent of staff feeling bullied or harassed at work in the previous 12 months" reported the Chief inspector in his first annual report (HMICFRS 2020 p 20). Since HMICFRS commenced inspections and produced the annual 'State of Fire Reports' (HMICFRS 2020, 2021a, 2021b, 2023, 2024) the calls for national professional standards and greater professionalism within the service have significantly increased both from the Inspectorate and from within the sector. The Fire Reform White papers (Home Office 2022, 2023) sought to drive change and improvement in three key areas: "People, Professionalism and Governance" and in the (former) government's response to the consultation results, it states:

"Our reform proposals seek to modernise the fire and rescue service, to enable greater professionalism and to ensure that we are recruiting and training our fire and rescue services to be the best that they can be. We want to increase professionalism by moving from a Fire

Standards Board (which sets clear expectations for the sector) to the creation of a College of Fire and Rescue”.

(Home Office 2022. P. 2).

After repeated references in the annual State of Fire reports and the publication of highly critical independent reviews of individual services such as London (Afzal 2022) and South Wales (Morris 2023), the Home Office commissioned HMICFRS to undertake a thematic review drawing on all their service inspection from 2018, into the “values and culture” of the Fire and Rescue services (HMICFRS 2023a). While only partially related to professionalism this reported that in more than half the services “bullying, harassment, and discrimination; lack of fairness and diversity; and reporting and handling of concerns, including allegations of misconduct” were issues which led them to review the competence of leaders from station level to chief fire officers in all services.

When the Home Office published its reaction to the outcomes of the white paper consultation it was entitled “A profession we can all be proud of – reforming our Fire & Rescue Service” (Home Office 2023) and earlier this year the Home Affairs Select Committee of the House of Commons commenced an inquiry into the “cultural failings” of the fire and rescue services using the findings of the values and culture report as part of it justification. Although this inquiry was cut short by the general election, the chair of the committee wrote a letter to the (then) Home Secretary outlining some emerging findings and anticipated recommendations. It was however clear that both government and opposition both agreed about the need for greater professionalism in principle, if not the details.

The need for this paper to consider both positions was made plain in July 2024 when following a change of administration, the former Chair of the Select Committee, Dame Diana Johnson, became the Minister of State for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention in the Home Office.

Later in this paper we will discuss the nature of the professionalism and the proposed steps to professionalisation that the former government and the former select committee proposed and whether in our opinion they would be the most appropriate steps on the path to professionalisation within the service. To this end we adopted the following research questions were

1. What is the nature of the reforms intended to professionalise Fire and Rescue services in England, and
2. How do Fire and Rescue services understand professional accountability in the fire sector?

The next section will however briefly describe our research methods and approach before outlining the alternative proposals for reform.

3. Methods and Methodology

This paper adopts an exploratory approach based primarily upon publicly available archival data including UK legislation, parliamentary inquiries, consultations, guidance and ministerial speeches as well as formal and official reports from national and local inspections of Fire and Rescue services. It examines the background, and the development of the concepts of professionalism within the emergency services and specifically most recently within the fire and rescue services, since responsibility was transferred back to the Home Office in 2016.

A literature review revealed the dominance of a characteristics or ‘traits’ approach to the study of the development of professional bodies and professionalism (Goode 1960, Yam 2004), and these traits are later used as a guide to assess the development of professionalism in the service to-date as well as recent proposals for improving professionalism from the (now former) government (Home Office 2023) and to a lesser extent, the proposals emerging from the (now former) Home Affairs Select Committee’s truncated Inquiry into the values and culture within Fire and Rescue Services in England (Home Affairs, 2024).

The documentary evidence was supplemented by empirical evidence from a study of six out of 44 Fire and Rescue Services in England (Lakoma 2024) which investigated the understandings of accountability amongst senior officers (Chief Fire Officers, deputy CFOs, Assistant CFOs, Directors of Assurance, Directors of Finance, Directors of Prevention and Protection) through 35 semi-structured interviews together with 5 focus groups and 3 interviews with front line firefighters. The interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed and then analysed and thematically coded using the NVivo qualitative data analysis computer software package.

This paper contributes to the growing governance and management literature on the emergency services and to the currently high-profile policy debate on professionalism within fire and rescue services (Wankhade and Murphy 2023). As such, it contributes to the limited academic literature on fire and rescue services and the very limited literature on professionalism within the service. It potentially may also contribute to the development of future local and national policy on public service reform and to the future development of professionalism in practice within the service.

4. Findings and discussions

a) Recent empirical evidence

In her recent study of changes in perceptions of bureaucratic, legal, political and professional accountabilities in fire and rescue services, Lakoma (2024) *inter alia* demonstrated how the understanding of professional accountability relationships changed significantly as a result of the introduction of the Policing and Crime Act 2017 and parallel changes to governance and accountabilities arrangements, most notably the establishment of the Independent Standards Board, brought in around the same time.

She also confirmed the view that some professional characteristics referred to in the ‘traits approach are already embedded in fire services such as theoretical knowledge and legitimate expertise in their specialized field. They have an altruistic commitment to service and a degree of autonomy in their work. She found that firefighters act and were respected as skilled and expert employees who fight and prevent fires and protect their communities by utilising their professional knowledge of fire engineering and experience of preventing or fighting fires. They are diligent in applying the Nolan Principles of Public Life (Committee on Standards in Public Life 1995) and they earn respect from colleagues, the public and other stakeholders, who call them to account based on how contemporary professional standards are operationalised in practice. As professionals, in responding to emergency incidents they are able to deviate from standard protocols, if necessary, depending upon the nature of the emergency they were responding to. When operating in extremely hazardous environments they are acutely aware of the need for professional discipline to protect themselves, their colleagues from the three blue light services and the public.

“You know if I make a decision operationally, I’ve made a decision based on what I can see, information I receive ... what I know in my gut, prior experience.”

Professionalism does not only apply to front-line firefighters, but also to other professionals who work in management and in the ‘back office’ services such as legal advice, finance, human resource management and the estates functions who all have their own professional bodies.

However, contemplating the work of the Independent Standards Board, early indications from the new Inspectorate and the extent of collaboration with the other two blue light emergency services, Lakoma (2024) when undertaking field work in 2020-2021 found that there was by that time a recognition of the need to improve professionalism with a legitimate role for appropriate standards, inspection and greater collaboration in improving their professionalism.

“There are no consistent standards in terms of training and performance. HMICFRS bringing that in and feeding back via the state of the fire report is a real welcome [initiative] one for me. So, if we can professionalise the service, transform it and bring it into what it needs for the future, all the better.”

“I think with the fire standards coming in, that will be the measure...like the police, there needs to be that national direction and standards for us to be measured against.”

“We are highly trained, and we carry a lot of first line first aid equipment, and we go to car crashes and significant incidents and give first aid, trauma management, we can respond to cardiac arrests, strokes... and bring people back to life, [we have] lots of capacity that we could use to support the ambulance service”.

b) The Conservative governments’ proposals

Theresa May was Home Secretary when, in 2013, she introduced Police and Crime Commissioners to replace the former Police Authorities and considered herself to have successfully transformed the police services which she considered was one of her biggest successes in office (Home Office 2016). When she became prime minister in 2016 and received two highly critical reports on Fire and Rescue Services (NAO 2015, PAC 2016) she leant heavily on the police model and policing policies in the government’s response (by which time she had become Prime Minister). The first four chapters of the Policing and Crime Act 2017, that relate to fire and rescue services, are focused upon improving collaboration and governance, reintroducing an external inspectorate and improving the collection and use of data and evidence. Professionalism did not appear in the Act and professional standards warranted only two short paragraphs with professionalism mentioned only three times in the National Framework that followed (Home Office 2018). However, the more recent policy proposals from the Home Office, the national reports from the inspectorate, the Home Affairs Select Committee and the Culture Action Plan from NFCC’s (NFCC 2023) are all *inter alia* seeking to accelerate the development of professionalism within the sector.

In its fire reform white paper consultation (Home Office 2022), the government proposed a number of initiatives relating to professionalisation, most of which reconfirmed a commitment to the consultation (Home Office 2023). These proposals continued to reflect similar initiatives within the policing service and the police model. It had five priority areas for professionalising Fire and Rescue Services, and these related to leadership, data, research, ethics and ensuring the service had clear expectations.

The most significant confirmation was a commitment to establish an Independent College of Fire and Rescue (based on the College of Policing), which would be responsible for a number of the other

professionalisation initiatives. It would for example create a 21st century leadership programme, although it did not take forward the government's original idea that this should be mandatory for all senior officers. The college would also take forward the white paper's four priority areas for improving research (collaborating, commissioning, conducting and collating) and its five priority areas for improving the use and quality of data (analytical capacity and training, consistent data, data structuring, data governance, and data sharing). The NFCC's developing 'Core Code of Ethics', which sits alongside the Code of Ethics Fire Standard developed by the Fire Standards Board, would be placed on a statutory basis with the new college as its custodian and Chief Fire Officers charged with enforcing it within their services. The government dropped the idea of an oath for the service and was silent about whether adherence to ethical code should be an "employment matter".

c) The Home Affairs Select Committee proposals.

As mentioned above, the Home Affairs Select Committee of the House of Commons commenced a "short" inquiry into the "cultural failings" of the fire and rescue services using the findings of the HMICFRS values and culture report and the Afzal report into the London Fire Brigade and other independent culture reports as the starting point. Although it only managed 3 oral sessions and an anonymised round table discussion with limited written evidence before the announcement of the general election brought its inquiry to a close, the emerging findings and recommendations from the committee unsurprisingly had some strong resonances with the Home Office proposals relating to greater professionalism.

It found that leadership "at all levels are the key to changing the toxic culture" (Home Affairs 2024, p.1) and that "a process to deal with poor leadership with an enforceable set standard", needed to be introduced. It called for "a statutory Core Code of Ethics to be put in place" (Home Affairs 2024, p.2). They also wanted "fire and rescue authorities in England to improve their scrutiny of senior leaders especially when it comes to holding them to account on the culture within their fire and rescue service. (Home Affairs 2024 p.3). It recommended that the government should update the 2018 Fire and Rescue National Framework with specific sections on cultural change (Home Affairs 2024, p.3).

Its other (more controversial) proposal was that the government should give "HMICFRS enforcement powers so that cultural change can happen at speed" (Home Affairs 2024, p.2). In proposing this the committee was, apparently unaware or unsatisfied with the fact that enforcement powers are currently available within the national framework (See section 7 and Annex D) and elsewhere (e.g., under section 15 of the Local Government Act 1999) to the government itself. Under the existing provisions HMICFRS play a leading role in identifying any fire and rescue authority that is failing or is likely to fail. This reflects the established relationships between government, national inspectorates and locally elected public service delivery organisations, such as Local Authorities or Education establishments, since the turn of the century.

5. Recommendations

Having set out our empirical finding and considered the government and select committee proposals we now set out our views and do so in relation to three groups of issues. We distinguish some wider strategic issues from more recent specific proposals relating to professionalism, before considering all the issues against the generic trait model of governance outlined in section 2.

We support the government's proposal for the creation of an 'Independent' College of Fire and Rescue. We agree that it should be responsible for the drive towards greater professionalism, however we are concerned that the initiative continues to be too heavily influenced or directly modelled on the police model and the College of Policing. In our view, it should complement National Fire Colleges, such as

the Scottish Fire and Rescue Services National Training Centre and liaise with and review best practice internationally and from all relevant domestic initiatives from the NFCC, the Office for Local Government, CIPFA, the LGA Knowledge Hub, and the Colleges of Policing and Paramedics and other key stakeholders.

We agree with the Select Committee that scrutiny arrangements (external and internal) need strengthening but the need for strengthening is not confined to either professionalism or organisational culture. Scrutiny arrangements in FRS both internal and external have long been acknowledged as some of the weakest arrangements in the public sector. Assessing scrutiny arrangements should form part of HMICFRS regular inspections. However, the next rounds of inspections need to be broadened into corporate or comprehensive inspections and should cover both political and managerial leadership (and the latter not confined to operational leadership) together with organisational culture and financial arrangements to replace the current service inspections. We do not agree with giving HMICFRS enforcement powers. The current powers have proven adequate to address both Local Authorities and Fire and Rescue Authorities since they were introduced in 1999 and 2004 respectively (Coleman, 2009, Murphy *et al* 2012, 2019). They have repeatedly proved fit for purpose and are currently being deployed in a number of Local Authorities who have recently issued section 114 notices indicating that they cannot balance their budgets and are therefore failing in their duty of Best Value (DCLG 2024). The Home Office, despite having the powers, have failed to use them since 2017, when Amber Rudd commissioned the statutory Inspection in Avon FRS (Baker 2017).

We agree with both government and select committee that the new college should develop, commission and/or accredit various leadership courses (although not as an exclusive provider of such courses) and for it to develop into the national centre for research, data collection and dissemination of good practice, part of which would be promotion of inclusivity and transparency in its operation and an obligation to develop a real-time remote-access institutional repository. We also agree that it should absorb the work of the Standards Board and be responsible for a statutory code of ethics and conduct which is overseen by a body of representatives from within the sector. Clearly it should develop links with other research groups both internationally and domestically (particularly the NFCC Academic Collaboration, Evaluation and Research Group).

In Table 1 below, we compare the state of professionalism in fire and rescue services against the classic characteristics/traits model or continuum outlined in section 2 (Goode1960/Yam 2004). Some of the characteristic 'traits' in the table have demonstrably been characteristics of the Fire and Rescue Sector and have been for some time. We therefore compare the situation before the 2017 Act and the 2018 National Framework; the state of professionalism as it is at present and the prospect of it developing into a modern comprehensive professionalism if the current proposals were to be appropriately implemented.

| Traits | Until 2017 | Now | With changes |
|---|------------|-----|--------------|
| an extensive theoretical knowledge base | No | No | Yes |
| a legitimate expertise in a specialized field | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| an altruistic commitment to service | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| an unusual degree of autonomy in work | Yes | No | Yes |
| a code of ethics and conduct overseen by a body of representatives from within the field itself | No | No | Yes |
| a personal identity that stems from the professional's occupation | Yes | Yes | Yes |

6 Conclusions

Some aspects of professionalism have been characteristics of Fire and Rescue Services for some time, yet the drive to introduce greater professionalism stalled in the early 21st century despite centralised top-down performance management arrangements being replaced by ‘austerity-localism’ and ‘sector-led’ performance management policies. These policy and management changes reduced legal and bureaucratic accountability and shifted the spotlight onto local political accountability and more significantly professional accountability. Although there were commitments and initiatives from both the government and the sector to improve professionalism, such as the establishment of an independent Standards Board, these were not by themselves adequate or sufficient to embed and develop professionalism within the Service. This has clearly been illuminated in individual service reviews and national inspections of the service. In reality, professional work has been constantly and increasingly changing with technology, innovation and interprofessional collaboration, all generating the need for new professional knowledge, relationships and standards across the sector. These have recently been acknowledged across the sector with some consensus emerging about what needs to be done at least in principle. This paper has tried to highlight both areas of emerging consensus and acknowledge where differences currently exist. It is intended to contribute to the current high-profile policy debate on professionalism within fire and rescue services and the very limited literature on the development of professionalism within the service.

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