

# Fire Magazine

## The importance of good governance.

Pete Murphy

UK Fire Services both individually and collectively, have recently been beset by significant challenges that will be only too familiar to regular readers of this magazine.

The inspectorate's disturbing thematic reports on Values, Culture and the handling of misconduct, together with independent reports into the London Fire Brigade and the South Wales Fire and Rescue Service led the current Crime, Policing and Fire to claim that a significant number of services are "institutionally misogynistic, racist, and homophobic" when she was Chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee (Johnson 2024). The political, corporate and leadership omnishambles in the West Midlands around England's second largest Fire and Rescue Service has recently led the Chief Inspector Andy Cooke to consult the Secretary of State about a Best Value Inspection (and I suspect a potential formal Intervention) into the effectiveness of the governance of the WMFRS, and the relationships between senior personnel (Cooke 2024) both within the service and with its key stakeholders.

What these issues have in common is the inadequacy and/or the failure of the leadership, governance and accountability arrangements that should be in place to ensure that the intended outcomes for the public and stakeholders are clearly defined, demonstrably achieved, and appropriately captured and reported on the public record.

All strategic leadership teams and the politicians responsible for overseeing public services need to be acutely aware of the differences and overlaps between leadership and management and the differences and overlaps between strategic and operational activities. They should also realise that any successful organisation and in particular any successful public service organisation must have robust and appropriate governance arrangements in place to manage these overlaps, oversee continuous improvement in both strategic and operational performance, and maintain support from government and the confidence of the public.

To do so it must have the organisational infrastructure, the systems and processes and the values and behaviours that together make for a positive organisational culture. I do not like, nor do I completely agree with Peter Drucker's famous quote that "culture eats strategy for breakfast" but I do think that an empowering, inclusive, and mutually supportive organisational culture is one of the most important things for the long-term success of public services, and that robust effective governance and scrutiny is essential to achieving it. Governance' leadership and scrutiny in the Fire and Rescue Service, as in some other locally delivered services, has been woefully de-prioritised and under-examined by both politicians and practitioners since the 2010 general election. The result is the multiple challenges currently being experienced by services.

### **What is 'Good Governance in the Public Sector' and how can we develop it in Fire and Rescue Services?**

The answer to the first question (which is a generic question) has been much debated by the International Federation of Accountants and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) who in 2014 developed and published an "International Framework: Good Governance in the Public Sector", (IFAC 2014) which was followed by the more bespoke advice

in “Delivering Good Governance in Local Government” (CIPFA 2016). The overall aim of this framework was to “achieve intended outcomes while acting in the public interest at all times”. It therefore suggested a set of principles that should underpin all public authorities:

- Planning, priorities, and objectives
- Decision making
- Policies & procedures
- Culture, values, and ways of working

The individual principles and their relationship to each other are shown on the diagram below.



Figure 1: Relationships and Principles for Good Governance in the Public Sector  
Source CIPFA 2016

These principles have subsequently been refined, prioritised, and articulated for individual services or sectors, although, to my knowledge this hasn't really happened in the Fire Sector and there is, for example, no specific governance 'workstream' on the NFCC website. Governance has however recently featured prominently in the HMICFRS consultation (2024) which outlined proposals for the next round of inspections between 2025 to 2027. It is mentioned no less than eleven times and the first question within the consultation is introduced with the information that the inspectorate proposes “to evaluate how each FRS is affected by its fire and rescue authority's governance, oversight, and scrutiny arrangements. We have been warned.

## References

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