



House of Commons

Committee of Public Accounts

Financial sustainability of fire and rescue services

Twenty-third Report of Session 2015–16



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*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

*Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed 10 February 2016*

The Committee of Public Accounts

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Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Stephen McGinness (Clerk), Dr Mark Ewbank (Second Clerk), George James (Senior Committee Assistant), Sue Alexander and Ruby Radley (Committee Assistants) and Tim Bowden (Media Officer).

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Summary

While fire and rescue authorities have done well to absorb funding reductions since 2010, risks to their financial and service sustainability could increase given the Government's decision to implement further funding reductions from 2016–17. The Department for Communities and Local Government has not had a strong understanding of the capacity of individual fire authorities to absorb further reductions through efficiency savings, or of the impact of reducing fire prevention work. By not providing more active support and guidance, the Department exacerbated the risk that fire authorities would miss opportunities to improve value for money—for instance, through greater collaboration or mergers—and that the projects they do implement may not represent best practice. There are weaknesses in the local scrutiny by fire authorities which raise concerns about their operational performance and safeguarding value for money; this is more serious because of the lack of an external inspectorate, unlike in other emergency services. Weaknesses in the local system of oversight also led to gaps in the Department's statutory assurance to Parliament that all authorities are maintaining both required performance standards and value for money. From January 2016 responsibility for fire and rescue has been transferred to the Home Office.

Introduction

There are 46 fire and rescue authorities in England, carrying out a range of duties including (but not limited to) responding to fires, road traffic accidents, and other emergencies. In January 2016 the Government announced that responsibility for fire and rescue was transferring to the Home Office. At the time of our evidence session on 26 November 2015, it was the Department for Communities and Local Government (the Department) which provided fire authorities with financial resources, enabled them to raise their own income, and mandated duties which they must carry out. Between 2010–11 and 2015–16 the Department reduced funding for the sector, with its funding for the majority of authorities going down by an average of 28% in real terms. During this period, fire safety continued to improve, with fatalities declining by 22% between 2010–11 and 2014–15. Some fire and rescue authorities have expressed concern, however, as to the potential implications of a further period of funding reductions on their capacity to respond to major incidents.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. **Central government does not have a strong understanding of the potential impacts of future funding reductions on fire and rescue services.** The Government has announced further funding reductions for the period 2016–17 to 2019–20, forecasting that as a whole local government spending, including funding for fire and rescue, will decline by 7% in real terms. It is important the Government understands the potential impacts of these funding reductions, as it has a responsibility for ensuring the public is adequately protected from fires. While the Department for Communities and Local Government commissioned research on ways in which fire authorities could save money, it lacked a detailed understanding of their capacity to absorb further reductions through continued efficiencies. Although it took comfort from the fact that fire incidents are on a long-term downward trend, it lacked a sophisticated understanding of how reductions in fire authorities' prevention and protection activities might affect this trend.

Recommendation: *By summer 2016, the Home Office should write to us, setting out how it is improving central government's understanding of the impacts of ongoing funding reductions on fire and rescue authorities. This should take into account, in particular, both fire authorities' capacity to make further efficiency savings, and the impact of prevention and protection activities on reducing fire risk.*

2. **Reductions in funding are forcing local consideration of mergers but there is no clear plan centrally about whether these will be cost effective, deliver better outcomes, or be possible because of legal and financial hurdles.** The Department told us that collaboration and mergers between authorities were important ways of increasing efficiency, and that some authorities might need to merge sooner rather than later. While in 2015–16 it provided a £75 million Fire Transformation Fund partly to support such projects, overall the Department regarded mergers and collaboration as primarily a matter for individual fire authorities to take forward. This kind of approach could create risks, however, during a period in which fire authorities—and other 'blue-light' services—may be forced to make rapid decisions to restructure under financial pressure, potentially missing out on opportunities to take a planned approach to optimising their joint use of resources. If financial pressures mean mergers between fire authorities are being discussed locally then central government has a responsibility to address the barriers to merger, such as rules on equalising council tax precepts. However, the Department offered no substantive answers to these issues, and was contradictory in its responses as to whether and how it would support possible mergers, generally adopting a laissez-faire attitude. It remains to be seen if this approach will be adopted by the Home Office in its new role. .

Recommendation: *If fire and rescue authorities are considering merging the Home Office should work with them to assess options and support them in a planned way, rather than waiting for 'forced' mergers as an emergency measures to avoid financial failure due to the financial pressures they face. It is not clear that mergers are necessarily the best option.*

3. **On the possibility of collaboration between fire authorities and police forces, the DCLG was clear that collaboration between ‘blue-light’ services did not mean fully merged services but only ‘aligning overall oversight’.** As the Home Office is now taking over responsibility, the Home Office should make clear if this is also its position and what this means in practice.
4. **While the expansion of fire fighter activities beyond their statutory roles has potential to benefit vulnerable groups, it is not yet clear to what extent such projects represent value for money.** Fire authorities are increasingly expanding their services into other areas: for example, co-responding with paramedics to medical emergencies; reducing the risks of trips, slips, and falls when checking the properties of elderly residents; and working with disadvantaged young people to help prevent youth offending. These activities offer potentially significant benefits, but the Department accepted that questions should be raised as to whether it necessarily makes financial sense for fire fighters to carry them out. In particular, we noted a tension between the Department’s expectation that fire authorities will transform their services in ways that will reduce their own long-term costs, and fire authorities’ own vision, which often focuses primarily on adding value to other sectors by using their existing capacity more flexibly.

Recommendation: *By summer 2016 the Home Office should publish a robust evaluation of the sector’s wider community service projects (which assist other areas of the public sector), setting out best practice and criteria for determining which are effective and an efficient use of public money, and if there is any impact on the financial challenges faced by the fire and rescue sector.*

5. **The strength of local governance and accountability is variable, posing risks for the local maintenance of value for money and service standards.** The Department devolved accountability for fire authorities’ use of public money, and compliance with mandated duties, to authorities themselves, subject to a framework of legal controls. It was aware, however, of criticisms of the standards of local scrutiny in some cases: the National Audit Office, for example, has highlighted difficulties in comparing the performance of authorities, as well as the lack of independent technical advice to authority members. The Department suggested that one way to improve local governance was to have fire authorities taken over by police and crime commissioners, where this was supported locally. Whether or not this is a good solution, we welcome the Department’s acknowledgement there was room for improvement in local accountability. We were particularly concerned about weak local scrutiny over the remuneration of senior officers, and while the Government is taking some action on public sector exit payments, we remain unconvinced that the Department was addressing the quality of local governance.

Recommendation: *By summer 2016, the Home Office should have begun to strengthen local governance and accountability by consulting the sector on additional guidance, to underpin the duty in the National Fire Framework on authority members to hold their chief fire officer to account.*

6. **The lack of an independent inspectorate creates the risk that scrutiny of fire authorities will be inconsistent, and that oversight exercised by the Department will be incomplete.** Unlike other emergency services, there is no external inspection of fire and rescue services in England. While external challenge continues to be provided in the form of peer reviews organised by the sector itself, these are not designed to provide independent assurance to the Government, either on value for money or operational standards. The Department said it would consider ways both of strengthening peer reviews, and of drawing on the services of inspectorates such as HM Inspectorate of Constabulary, and was going to write to us on these options within six months. However the Home Office decides to develop this policy, we would be concerned if there were to be a disjointed approach to external scrutiny, in which authorities were subject to differing standards of scrutiny from different types of body. Whatever new approaches the Home Office considers, it should improve on the previous approach to assurance, which remained too dependent on the readiness of chief officers and chairs to volunteer concerns about their own service.

Recommendation: *The Home Office should publish a delivery plan by summer 2016 that ensures there is a coherent approach to external scrutiny across the sector, capable of providing independent assurance to the Government, and ensures that every fire authority is covered by a consistent, objective, and rigorous form of review.*

7. **The Department did not provide Parliament with sufficiently rigorous assurance on the standards and sustainability of fire and rescue authorities.** The Secretary of State has a statutory duty to assure Parliament, at least every two years, on the extent to which fire authorities are in compliance with their mandated duties. Despite its awareness of criticisms of the system of local governance, at the time of our evidence session the Department was relying for this assurance almost entirely on the self-certification provided by fire authorities themselves. Although it gathered significant amounts of data on the sector, and maintained extensive personal contact with senior officers, it did not appear to analyse this information systematically to detect the emergence of key themes.

Recommendation: *The Home Office should take a rigorous approach to gathering information on the quality and sustainability of fire and rescue services, doing this in time to provide substantive support for the next statutory assurance report to Parliament, in summer 2016.*

1 The capacity of fire and rescue authorities to absorb funding reductions

1. On the basis of a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, we took evidence from the Department for Communities and Local Government (the Department).¹ We also took evidence from Paul Hancock, President of the Chief Fire Officers Association and Chief Fire Officer for Cheshire; Sir Ken Knight, former Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser; and Councillor Jeremy Hilton, Chair of the Local Government Association Fire Services Management Committee.

Introduction

2. There are 46 fire and rescue authorities in England, carrying out a range of activities including:²

- responding to fires, road traffic accidents, and other emergencies;
- contributing to national resilience: collectively being able to respond to up to four simultaneous national-scale emergencies;
- carrying out preventative activities to reduce the risks of fire, such as home fire safety checks; and
- carrying out protection activities, such as making safety inspections of business premises.

3. It is the Government which has overall responsibility to ensure the public is adequately protected from fires and other emergencies. At the time of our evidence session, on 26 November 2015, it was the Department which discharged this duty. It did so by providing fire and rescue authorities with financial resources, giving them the power to raise additional local funding, and maintaining a statutory framework within which they must operate.³

4. In addition to statutory duties concerning the services they provide, fire and rescue authorities are subject to a similar set of financial controls as local authorities, meaning they are legally prevented from running a deficit. While this makes it less likely that an authority would experience financial failure, it suggests that if they experience funding pressures they may have to change the services they provide.⁴ The Department has also specified a range of duties which fire and rescue authorities “must” carry out in the Fire and rescue national framework for England (the National Framework).⁵

1 [C&AG’s Report, Financial sustainability of fire and rescue services, Session 2015–16, HC 491, 23 November 2015.](#)

2 [C&AG’s Report, paras 2, 3](#)

3 [C&AG’s Report, para 1.](#)

4 [C&AG’s Report, paras 1, 18.](#)

5 [Department for Communities and Local Government, Fire and rescue national framework for England, July 2012, p 7.](#)

5. Between 2010–11 and 2015–16 the Department reduced funding for the sector, with government funding for the majority of fire and rescue authorities going down by an average of 28% in real terms. Fire and rescue authorities are also able to raise money locally, notably from council tax. Fire authorities managed these reductions primarily by reducing staff costs: the number of whole-time fire fighters going down by 14% between 2010–11 and 2014–15. Despite this, fire safety continued a long-running trend of improvement, with the number of fire fatalities declining by 22% between 2010–11 and 2014–15. The National Audit Office (NAO) found that some fire and rescue authorities have expressed concern, however, as to the potential implications of a further period of funding reductions on their capacity to respond to major incidents.⁶

6. On 5 January 2016 the Government announced that ministerial responsibility for fire and rescue policy was transferring to the Home Office with immediate effect, in order to “support a radical transformation of how the police and fire and rescue services work together”.⁷ The Department’s Accounting Officer will remain Accounting Officer for fire budgets until 1 April 2016, when this role will transfer to the Accounting Officer for the Home Office.⁸

Impacts of further funding reductions

7. In the 2015 Spending Review, HM Treasury announced there would be a further period of grant reductions for local government (which includes fire and rescue services), up to 2019–20.⁹ The Department told us that, taking local funding (such as council tax) into account, the total income available to local government was forecast to go down by just under 7% in real terms by 2019–20. It was not yet able, however, to break this figure down for fire and rescue authorities specifically.¹⁰

8. The Department has accepted the importance of fire and rescue authorities having the right resources to do their job effectively.¹¹ Representatives from the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA) and Local Government Association (LGA), however, cautioned that a continuation of the funding reductions begun in the last Parliament would start to have an impact on the services provided by fire and rescue authorities, including their capacity to contribute to national resilience. CFOA said that some fire authorities were affected more by funding reductions than others, and that those authorities would be forced to change the way they delivered services before others.¹² The NAO found that, since 2010–11, the Department had reduced funding most to fire authorities with the highest levels of need, and that the distribution of funding might diverge increasingly from need in the future.¹³ The Department said it had been responsible for ensuring it had sufficient understanding of the use of resources by fire authorities such that it could implement resource allocation in the right way. It also said it was important to keep the relationship between funding and

6 [C&AG’s Report, paras 8, 10, 13.](#)

7 [“Fire and rescue policy to move to the Home Office”, Home Office and Department for Communities and Local Government news story, 5 January 2016.](#)

8 [Department for Communities and Local Government, “Machinery of Government Change – Fire and Rescue Policy transfer to Home Office”, Fire and Rescue Immediate Bulletin 23, 5 January 2016.](#)

9 [HM Treasury, Spending Review and Autumn Statement 2015, Cm 9016, November 2015, p 100.](#)

10 [Q 82.](#)

11 [C&AG’s Report, para 3.9.](#)

12 [Qq 1, 5, 23.](#)

13 [C&AG’s Report, para 16.](#)

need in view. Despite this, however, at the time of our evidence session it was not planning to update its needs assessment regularly.¹⁴ It remains to be seen what approach the Home Office may take to distribution of funding in future years.

9. The NAO found that, while the Department had commissioned research (the Knight Review) on the scope within the sector for increased efficiency, its understanding of the underlying costs of providing fire and rescue services was still limited.¹⁵ The Department conceded it was fair comment that, in presiding over another prolonged period of funding reductions, it needed to have better information on the capacity of individual fire authorities to absorb these reductions. It said it had carried out further research since the Knight Review to gain a more granular understanding of the scope for further efficiency savings across the sector, and that it had used this to assess the potential impacts of funding reductions as part of the 2015 Spending Review. The Department acknowledged, however, that a main component of this additional research, a survey of fire authorities, in large part comprised narrative rather than quantitative data, and that it had not completed its analysis of these returns before the Spending Review was completed.¹⁶

10. In considering the question of whether it had sufficient assurance that fire and rescue authorities were maintaining the services they needed to deliver, the Department referred to the long-running trend in improvements in outcomes (such as reductions in fatalities). It said this reflected improvements in the way fire authorities were operating. The Department recognised that understanding the reasons for the improvement in outcomes was complicated, involving a range of factors including fire safety regulations, but was clear that fire authorities themselves had played a significant role.¹⁷ We were concerned, therefore, to learn that fire authorities' prevention and protection activities had gone down since 2010–11.¹⁸ The Department said that fire authorities had a statutory duty to prevent fires, and that it had assisted them to target their preventative activities better, so that fire safety checks of households with disabled residents and vulnerable older people had increased in recent years.¹⁹ Nevertheless, without a sophisticated understanding of the impact of prevention and protection activities on reducing fire risks, we believed there was a danger the Department would be over-reliant on outcomes data for its understanding of the impacts of funding reductions, even though such data are necessarily backwards-looking. The risk in this case would be that the Government would only become aware of service failings once they had occurred.²⁰

Collaboration and merger

11. The Department told us that collaboration—sharing facilities, for instance, both within the sector and with police forces and ambulance services—was an important way for fire authorities to increase efficiency and manage funding reductions.²¹ In 2015–16 it distributed £75 million to fire authorities in the form of a Fire Transformation Fund, which in a number of cases was supporting the creation or conversion of fire stations to

14 [Qq 50, 69.](#)

15 [C&AG's Report, para 14.](#)

16 [Qq 48-49, 82.](#)

17 [Qq 37-38.](#)

18 [C&AG's Report, paras 1.30-1.33.](#)

19 [Q 70.](#)

20 [C&AG's Report, para 15.](#)

21 [Qq 57-58, 60, 62.](#)

be jointly used with other ‘blue light’ services.²² In September 2015 the Department also issued, in conjunction with the Department of Health and the Home Office, a consultation on closer working between the emergency services.²³ The Department, in particular, highlighted the contribution that blue light collaboration could make in more rural areas. For example, bringing together the roles of part-time fire fighter, first responder to medical emergencies, and community support police officer could help to maintain the viability of blue light services in less densely populated areas.²⁴

12. The Department clearly approved of such projects, and expected more authorities to undertake them as funding reductions continued.²⁵ Despite this, its approach appeared to be in large part that of a passive observer (for example, “Authorities that are exploring it are finding it a benefit”),²⁶ rather than seeking actively to co-ordinate such collaboration. Such an approach might in some cases create the risk that, for example, individual emergency services make decisions with regard to their estates without collectively considering what would be their optimum configuration of joint resources. We heard that basing both fire and police services in the same building could increase the chances of retaining the presence of both within a local community: the implication being that, if decisions on local infrastructure were considered solely by individual services, it was more likely they would each decide to close their facilities.²⁷

13. The Department was clear that one option for increased collaboration between fire authorities and police forces was to align their oversight under police and crime commissioners, but was equally clear this proposal did not mean they would be fully merged services.²⁸ Where the Department did see a role for mergers was between different fire authorities: not only did it view this as a good way for the fire sector to increase efficiency, it positively expected more authorities to consider this option after pursuing other forms of saving.²⁹ The Department was clear in this case, however, that it was a policy decision, taken by its ministers, not to take a proactive approach: while supporting proposals for merger that emerged from the bottom up, it would not mandate or push fire authorities into merger. It said this was a lesson it had learned from the failure of FiReControl, a government programme which had attempted to merge regional fire control rooms from the top down.³⁰ At the same time, the Department believed there was a general consensus there were too many fire and rescue authorities, and wanted to understand how it could encourage mergers more actively without actually mandating it.³¹

14. Our impression was that the Department’s thinking on mergers was underdeveloped. While the Department agreed it would not be desirable for mergers to take place as an emergency measure to rescue failing authorities, it said that some fire authorities would indeed need to merge sooner than others (implying this would be needed to maintain their financial sustainability).³² It acknowledged there was a perception within the sector

22 [C&AG’s Report, para 2.17.](#)

23 [Q 65; HM Government, Consultation: Enabling closer working between the emergency services, September 2015.](#)

24 [Qq 61-62.](#)

25 [Qq 57-58.](#)

26 [Q 62.](#)

27 [Q 2.](#)

28 [Q 65.](#)

29 [Qq 60, 75.](#)

30 [Qq 74-76; Committee of Public Accounts, FiReControl: Update Report, Sixteenth Report of Session 2013–14, HC 110, July 2013.](#)

31 [Q 78.](#)

32 [Qq 79, 81.](#)

of barriers to merger, and said it would be happy to discuss this with individual authorities, but was not able to provide details on how it would approach such situations.³³ While it was aware that lessons could be learned from the experience of the Scottish Government—which in 2012 had overseen the successful merger of regional fire services into the national Scottish Fire and Rescue Service—it thought these were primarily for individual fire and rescue authorities in England, rather than itself.³⁴

Expanding the role of fire fighters

15. Fire and rescue authorities are increasingly expanding their activities so as to provide wider support to their communities and other public services.³⁵ This includes, for example, co-responding with paramedics to medical emergencies; reducing the risks of trips, slips, and falls when checking the properties of elderly residents; and working with disadvantaged young people to help improve their life chances.³⁶ The Department recognised that there may be benefits to carrying out such work, where for example it eased the burden on the ambulance service, and had supported a number of them through its Fire Transformation Fund.³⁷ The Department drew attention to cost-benefit analysis commissioned by the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Authority (which found a return of £1.60 for every £1 spent on activities which alleviated pressure on local police and health services), though it had not validated these figures itself. The Department recognised the difficulty of quantifying such wider impacts, but said at the time that it was seeking to do so within a planned evaluation of Fire Transformation Fund projects.³⁸

16. At the same time, the Department was clear there were questions to be raised about the value for money of such projects.³⁹ While the number of fires has been declining for years, fire authorities have not reduced operational resources at the same rate, not least because they have to provide resilience against major events, not just meet average demand. The expansion of fire fighters' activities into other areas has, in part, reflected an attempt by fire authorities to increase the productivity of the resources they need to maintain in order to respond to emergencies when they arise.⁴⁰ The NAO highlighted a tension between this approach, which aims to add value to other parts of the public sector, and the Department's overarching intention behind the Fire Transformation Fund, to support the sector to reduce its own costs.⁴¹

17. The Department was keen to make its view clear that fire authorities should not be using such projects as a justification for maintaining a higher level of resources than they themselves needed. It also suggested that even where fire fighters were very effective in delivering, for example, social care to elderly residents, it would not necessarily be economical to use them in this role. At the time of our evidence session, the Department

33 [Q 77.](#)

34 [Q 72.](#)

35 [C&AG's Report, paras 2.19-23.](#)

36 [Q 85; C&AG's Report, para 2.21; Ev xx, Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Authority, 23 November 2015.](#)

37 [Q70; C&AG's Report, para 2.23.](#)

38 [Qq 46, 86; Ev xx, Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Authority, 23 November 2015.](#)

39 [Q 67.](#)

40 [C&AG's Report, paras 2.19, 2.20.](#)

41 [C&AG's Report, para 17.](#)

said its evaluation of the Fire Transformation Fund would help it to assess which sorts of project represented value for money, and that it would then disseminate its view of best practice and the types of project it expected authorities to implement.⁴²

42 [Qq 67, 67.](#)

Formal Minutes

Wednesday 10 February 2016

Members present:

Meg Hillier, in the Chair

Deidre Brock

David Mowat

Kevin Foster

Stephen Phillips

Nigel Mills

Karin Smyth

Draft Report (*Financial sustainability of fire and rescue services*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 17 read and agreed to.

Introduction agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Twenty-Third Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Tuesday 23 February 2016 at 2.30pm]

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the Committee's [inquiry page](#).

Thursday 26 November 2016

Question number

Paul Hancock, President of the Chief Fire Officers Association and Chief Fire Officer for Cheshire, **Jeremy Hilton**, Chair of the Local Government Association Fire Committee, and **Sir Ken Knight**, former Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser to the United Kingdom Government

[Q1–23](#)

Melanie Dawes, Permanent Secretary, Department for Communities and Local Government, **Peter Holland CBE**, Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser, Department for Communities and Local Government and **Neil O'Connor**, Director of Fire Resilience and Emergencies, Department for Communities and Local Government

[Q24–97](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the Committee's [inquiry page](#). FIR numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Chief Fire Officers Association ([FIR0005](#))
- 2 Communities and Local Government ([FIR0003](#))
- 3 Fire Brigades Union ([FIR0001](#))
- 4 Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Authority ([FIR0002](#))
- 5 Sir Ken Knight ([FIR0004](#))

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

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