

Speech: Fire Minister's speech to Reform

Thank you Andrew. It's a great pleasure to be here today speaking at one of Britain's most influential think tanks on public sector reform. Thank you to your team and thank you to you, Tim, for your support.

And it's particularly good to have the chairs of fire and rescue authorities, chief fire officers and others from across the fire industry all in the audience.

Before I come on to the core of what I want to say today, I want to start today by offering my condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of Tom Naples from Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service and fire officer Alan Grant from Surrey Fire and Rescue Service, both who sadly passed away recently. My thoughts are with both their families and their colleagues at this incredibly difficult time.

Last year, the Prime Minister – when she was Home Secretary – addressed Reform outlining her vision for the fire and rescue service. She set out a programme of reform that was as radical and ambitious as the one she had laid out for policing in 2010 and she explained her aspiration for a more accountable, more efficient and professional fire and rescue service.

It is a fitting time to address you today less than a week after the [Policing and Crime Act 2017](#) received Royal Assent, which in itself enables the transformation of local fire governance and seeks to drive greater collaboration.

In July I was very pleased to be appointed as the new Minister for Policing and the Fire Service. I continue to be hugely impressed by the work our firefighters do and the challenge they face every time they go on duty. The bravery they show whether responding to a fire, a flood or the collapse of a building. Our fire and rescue services do stellar, impressive work.

I've seen how the service is changing. Services are transforming and seizing opportunities for collaboration.

We've also seen a significant reduction in the number of fires and fire fatalities over the past decade especially. There's been over a 50% reduction in the number of fires and more than a 20% drop in the number of fire fatalities.

And in April we will see the creation of the National Fire Chiefs' Council, which in itself will be a positive step forward, transforming the operational voice of the service. I also want to congratulate you, Roy, on your appointment and I look forward to seeing your delivery plan which I hope is big, bold and ambitious for the future of the fire service.

But I have also seen the problems. Outdated working practices, a lack of

diversity, no independent scrutiny of services. When I spoke to chiefs in September last year there was a realisation that I was reiterating the same messages about what needed to change as when I addressed you back in September 2012.

I have been encouraged to see that reform is happening across the service. But I want reform to go further and faster. So today, I want to outline what my expectations are for the coming year and what I think needs to be done to make our fire and rescue service the best it can be and continue to be renowned as the best in the world.

I want 2017 to be a big year for fire and rescue. If we get it right, we have the potential to transform the sector for the better, to create a fire service that is ready for the challenges of the future. I want this to be the year when real change happens.

So today, I thought today would be a good opportunity to talk to you about the areas where I want to see transformation.

Accountability and transparency

When the Prime Minister spoke about the need for reform, one of the problems she highlighted was the lack of a suitable inspection regime. She commented that the system in place which involved chief fire officers handpicking their own reviewer, setting their own terms of reference and then deciding whether or not to publish the results, was like setting your own exam paper and then resolving that you have passed.

This isn't acceptable and it's why we are creating a new inspectorate for the fire service. This will be modelled on HMIC, including (as with policing) a focus on efficiency and effectiveness. It is essential that regardless of provider, inspection teams include suitable skills and expertise from the fire sector.

This new inspectorate will be empowered to determine how effective each service is to prevent and respond to incidents; whether the service provides value for money; whether the service understands its current demands and where the future risks lie; and its leadership, training, diversity, values and culture.

My ambition is for the first inspection to take place this year and I will make a further announcement shortly

We will also be able to commission thematic inspections on individual issues if needed. I can announce today that the first issues I want the inspectorate to focus on are diversity, collaboration and flexible deployment.

The Local Government Association's peer review must also change to complement the work of the forthcoming inspectorate. So, I look forward to hearing their proposals about how this will be transformed into a genuine sector-led improvement process.

And to support greater transparency and to encourage greater accountability I will also be creating a new website, operational this year, to mirror what we see on www.police.uk. This website will hold a range of information, all in one place, about the fire and rescue service. This will include data which helps the public to assess the performance of their local service as well as information about chief officer pay, expenditure, accounts, efficiency plans and workforce composition.

Police.uk has proven to be incredibly popular tool and I hope this site will be just as valued by the public. It has the ability to unleash armchair auditors to scrutinise and do their work on how their service is operating.

In the spring I will also publish the first tranche of incident-level data from the [Incident Recording System](#), which is something that you have asked for.

I will also increase accountability by bringing the same direct democratic mandate to oversight of fire and rescue as we already have in policing.

The Policing and Crime Act, given Royal Assent last week, will enable police and crime commissioners (PCCs) to take on responsibility for the governance of local fire and rescue services where a local case is made. And to ensure fire's distinct identity remains, they will be called police, fire and crime commissioners.

By overseeing both police and fire services, I am clear that PCCs can drive the pace of reform, maximize the benefits of collaboration and ensure best practice is shared.

But I also want to be clear about a couple of things:

- I am not proposing a blanket police takeover of fire and rescue services
- I am not proposing the merging of the roles of firefighter and police officer
- and I am not forcing fire services to do this

This is instead an ideal opportunity for fire and rescue services to develop closer and stronger partnerships with policing.

Now of course, it is only right that PCCs consult local people on their proposals and listen to local views; and they are required to do so by the act. But if there is a PCC who has a clear case and a fire and rescue authority saying they do not want to see change just because they are comfortable with the status quo – I need to be equally clear this won't be good enough.

I expect fire and rescue authorities to work with PCCs by providing the information they need to develop their proposals. The Policing and Crime Act places a legal duty on fire and rescue authorities to cooperate and to provide the information that a PCC reasonably requires to build their business case and I do not want to hear of further cases where information is unreasonably withheld or there are attempts to delay business case development.

If a fire authority is being obstructive then you must stop. I urge you all to work constructively with your PCC to get the best outcome for your local communities, which is at the heart of what all of us want.

Efficiency and collaboration

I want now to turn to procurement.

Fire helmets are worn up and down the country by firefighters. Except that while one service pays £85 for one of these, another pays £252.

Last year, we revealed for the first time through the basket of goods exercise, how much fire and rescue authorities spend on 25 common pieces of kit like uniforms, fire engines and frontline equipment. We revealed that some were paying 5 times more than others for similar or the same equipment. Prices paid for breathing kit ranged from £328 to £1,504, while a handheld thermal imaging camera varied by over £4,500. There was a massive £28,000 difference on the price paid for staff vehicles. [This information is in the public domain on GOV.UK](#) where the public can consider how much their service pays for kit.

I'm pleased from what I have seen over the past few months that the sector has started to respond to these findings and to make changes to procurement practices as a result – through the Chief Fire Officers' Association's new commercial strategy.

But I want every service to be involved in this. It is in everybody's interest for the sector to be getting the best deal they can. I want every service to be taking a long hard look at their procurement practices and questioning whether they could be much more strategic. And I challenge the sector to give me a quantifiable ambition as to what savings are possible.

I want to see services working together and getting a better deal from suppliers in order to save themselves time and the taxpayer money. It makes no sense at all for fire and rescue authorities to be buying separately when there are so many benefits to be gained from buying together.

I will be asking fire chiefs to lay out what they spend when I ask them to repeat the same basket of goods exercise this autumn where I hope to see that the gap between what different services have paid for items has narrowed – preferably considerably.

I can announce today that I will undertake a separate and more extensive basket of goods exercise in the spring. This will cover wider services like the costs of facilities management and training procurement. Results will be published on the future website.

But procurement is just one area where efficiency savings could be made. I am also keen for services to keep their eyes open for collaboration opportunities.

The Policing and Crime Act introduces a new statutory duty on the emergency

services to keep collaboration opportunities under review and to enter into collaboration where it would be in the interests of their efficiency or effectiveness to do so. This new duty will come into force in April 2017 and going forward, I expect the pace and ambition of collaboration to increase and for it to become the norm.

As I've already said, there are now half the number of fires there were a decade ago. That is great news for all of us and a testament to work those involved in prevention have been doing. But it poses questions about the role of the service going forward, how you can deliver what is needed more efficiently and how the service should engage with other local services.

Better joint working can strengthen our emergency services, deliver significant savings to the taxpayer and – most importantly – enable them to better protect the public.

And I will champion best practice. When we have a genuinely innovative approach to joint working, I'll get behind it. On the flip side, where I see a lack of ambition and action I'll challenge it. Every one of us in this room has a duty to the sector to make sure we are challenging it.

I've seen some great examples of collaborative working. For example, the sharing of headquarters between fire and police in Hampshire and in London, collaboration between the Ambulance Service's First Responder Scheme and the London Fire Brigade. And in Durham and Cornwall, we have tri-service Community Safety Responders who work as PCSOs, retained fire-fighters and emergency medical responders, bringing great benefits to the community that they serve.

Examples like these show that the fire sector is already listening and moving forward with some great collaboration projects already happening. I have seen how local government, for example, has delivered sensible savings whilst protecting frontline services and keeping council tax down.

And I do know many services are delivering a range of wider community safety initiatives too, both independently and in collaboration with other local and national partners to tackle vulnerability and reduce pressure on health and social care services.

Where these projects support the key public sector principles of efficiency, economy and effectiveness and where they deliver genuine and measurable results, I am more than happy to support them.

We also need to be clear about the core functions of the fire service because I do not expect this work to be carried out at the expense of those functions. Nor, of course, would I expect it to be used as an excuse for not considering the scope for workforce efficiencies.

I am all too aware that although there has been a significant reduction in the number of fires and fire fatalities over the last decade, our most recent figures show there have been some worrying increases – a 15% increase in the number of people who died last year as a result of fires and a 5% increase in

the number of fires attended. These figures are a stark reminder that we cannot be complacent and we must continue to maintain a clear focus on keeping our communities safe from fire.

Workforce reform

And moving onto the workforce, there are problems which must be addressed.

Like everyone in this room, I want all fire personnel, whether full time, on-call or a mixture of both, to be the best trained and most professional in the world. And to help with this, I will be establishing a new professional standards body for everyone in fire and rescue which will build a comprehensive professional framework of standards for the service.

This will be a body that is for the sector, setting standards on a range of issues including leadership, workforce development, equality and diversity and codifying effective practice.

Having one central professional body will help fire staff to think of themselves as one profession with common goals and standards, rather than forty five separate services.

This new body will work with all the organisations that are currently devising standards to develop and test new ones and to consider the effectiveness of the ones which already exist.

I expect the new inspectorate will also inspect against the standards this body sets and in turn, for the standards body to carefully consider the inspectorate's findings when setting their standards.

A working group led by Chief Fire Officer Dave Curry has been established to develop costed proposals and to determine the scope and remit of this body. It will consider 2 options – a new fire standards body affiliated to the College of Policing or creating potentially a fully combined College of Policing and Fire. I expect that these considerations will conclude by September and that the new body will be operational later this year.

There is considerable scope to improve for recruitment, training, development and leadership at every level of the fire and rescue service and this new body will help do just that.

But it's not just a new professional body that the service needs; it needs a culture shift too.

I published the [Thomas Review](#) in November, which felt like déjà vu as I had commissioned it a few years before, and it made a number of recommendations, which (if implemented) will secure the future of the service for years to come by creating a diverse working environment free from bullying and harassment, with strong leadership and more flexible working conditions and for the teams who work in it. Things that I am sure everyone in this room thinks are important.

And I am encouraged that the Local Government Association, in partnership with the sector, recognises the need to take swift action in response to this report and deliver vital reforms to the workforce. And I expect the recommendations of the review to be followed, particularly in relation to reforming the National Joint Council and the grey book, and I will be closely monitoring progress.

I am also heartened by reform in some areas – for example last year I visited Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service recently who have introduced flexible crewing systems, negotiated locally. Firefighters themselves welcome this flexibility and the broader use of their skills; at the same time it delivers a better value service for local communities. But I want to see more innovation like this across the country.

And as the Thomas Review made clear, the service's culture must change to accept that women and ethnic minorities, together with all groups that make up the diversity of the working population, have a place in the fire and rescue service.

One of my biggest disappointments last year was publishing the latest workforce statistics and seeing that very little has changed in terms of diversity.

A workforce should represent the community that it serves. But in fire at the moment, this isn't the case. Firefighters are white and male – to be precise 96% white, 95% male.

And I've been to fire stations where it seems to me like there's more diversity in the range of fire hoses than firefighters. And from the reaction of everyone in the room I think many of you know that.

I recognise that some services are trying to work on this but the proportion of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and female fire fighters must increase and I welcome the challenge Commissioner Dany Cotton gave yesterday to increase the percentage of female operational staff in London Fire Brigade from 7% to 18%.

Before we get into the questions and answer session, I have heard the excuse many times that this woeful lack of diversity is due to a reduction in recruitment in recent years. Before anyone makes this point, let me say this. That isn't good enough. This is an issue decades in the making. Recruitment is only one aspect. A culture shift is needed. Action is needed on career progression, inclusive working practices and recruitment. Progression through the service has to improve.

Policing has shown that improvement is possible. While it still has a way to go, there have been significant improvements and forces now have a greater proportion of female and BME officers than ever before. In fact, there are 5 times the proportion of female police officers in policing than female firefighters. And the rate of police joiners from a BME background was over 12% last year. One in 4 new recruits to the Metropolitan Police are non-white.

These changes, these improvements are down to determined action across police forces, using targeted attraction strategies and redesigned recruitment practices, as well as the leadership of the College of Policing which itself has published advice on the use of lawful positive action and has provided case studies from forces showing what can be achieved. Doing something we don't do enough of – sharing good practice.

I want the Local Government Association and fire and rescue services to spring into action on this and follow the example of the police. Once up and running, I also expect the new inspectorate to identify barriers to diversity across services and for each service to respond to the issues that it faces.

Let's also be clear that almost a third of the workforce due to retire soon, there is a golden opportunity for services to look hard at how you recruit and who you recruit, and to make sure that your workforce reflects the communities that you serve.

And to those of you who are due to retire, I would like to thank you for your service. Firefighters give every single day and we must respect that.

But there is one retirement activity which I cannot condone. That is the practice of senior fire officers retiring from their posts and subsequently being re-employed in the same or very similar roles. The sector knows this is wrong and it needs to stop. I will shortly consult on revising the national framework to discourage this practice, in advance of a full review of the national framework later this year.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by saying that the year ahead is going to be a year of change for the fire service. We must be determined that this is the year that all the discussions we have had our put in to practice.

I want to see a service which is more transparent, more accountable, more efficient and more professional.

I want services to ask themselves difficult questions like:

- are we an inclusive enough?
- how do we attract the best people?
- are we providing the best and most cost efficient service to our local community?

And to find solutions. And look across the sector to see where we can learn from.

The changes I have outlined will all help with this: The National Fire Chief's Council to drive operational change; the inspectorate to provide assurance and the standards body to support workforce development. All of this will be underpinned by a refreshed national framework which will clarify expectations and responsibilities.

But ultimately, the reform agenda is not owned by Whitehall. The Local Government Association, CFOA and the new National Fire Chiefs' Council must be at the heart of this agenda. We as leaders owe it to the brave fire-fighters on the front line and all who work with them to build the right, strong institutions which support their hard work and dedication. And I want each and every service to bring about the changes which could benefit you. And I look forward to seeing the results.

Thank you.