

Speech: Fire service reform must go further and faster: article by Brandon Lewis

Last month I visited the firefighters working in gold commands in Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk responding to the flooding threats on the east coast. As always, they showed the utmost professionalism in their roles and again highlighted how dedicated our firefighters are to protecting and serving communities in their wide-ranging roles. The Prime Minister delivered radical and ambitious reforms in policing while she was Home Secretary. Last May she set out an equally ambitious reform programme for the fire service.

The aim was clear: to make the fire service more accountable, efficient and professional than ever before – so we can better protect the public. I am pleased that these reforms were met with genuine optimism from a sector which knows it must modernise to meet the changing demands upon it.

While we have been laying the groundwork for this in the last 6 months, 2017 will be the year when we see real change. Today I will update the fire service on the next stage of fire reform.

Progress has been made, but I want to us to go further and faster.

That is why I'm going to introduce independent inspection, which, for the first time, will consider the operational effectiveness of each service. This independent scrutiny will ensure fire services are held to the highest possible standards. It will bring an end to the current peer review process through which, in practice, chief fire officers handpick their own reviewer, set their own terms of reference, and decide whether or not to publish the results.

[The Prime Minister described the practice in her speech last May](#) as 'not so much marking your own homework as setting your own exam paper and resolving that you've passed'. It has to change.

I also want to further professionalise the service and to make sure that all fire personnel are offered opportunities to enhance their skills so they are equipped with the knowledge they need to provide the best possible services to their communities.

Our workforce must better represent the communities it serves. I expect services to find solutions to the current lack of diversity so clearly highlighted in the statistics we published last year, with just 4% of the workforce from an ethnic minority background and just 5% female. We can, and must, do better.

I also want to see services collaborate further in more innovative ways. Better joint working can strengthen our emergency services, deliver

significant savings to the taxpayer and – most importantly – enable them to better protect the public. Last week, the [Policing and Crime Act](#) received Royal Assent, giving the fire service the legislative platform it needs to seize collaboration opportunities.

A new duty requiring the emergency services to keep collaboration opportunities under review and to take on collaboration opportunities where it would be in the interests of efficiency and effectiveness to do so, will come into force in April. Police and crime commissioners will be able to make a local case to take on responsibility for governance of fire and rescue services, to maximise the benefits of joint working.

To ensure the public have trust in how the service is performing, services must also be more transparent. Last year, [data published for the first time by this government](#) highlighted stark differences between what different fire and rescue services were paying for similar items of uniform and kit. For example, prices that authorities pay for breathing kit were shown to range from £328 to £1,504.

That is why in 2017 we will collect and publish even more information to allow the public to compare whether their service is getting the best value for money. Services must work together much more closely to improve how they buy their kit and on what they pay for things like training and buildings, to drive down costs and maximise savings. This will demonstrate how local government can deliver sensible savings, whilst protecting frontline services and keeping council tax down.

Delivering this ambitious reform agenda does not simply rest with me, or with the government. Ultimately, the fire service itself must shape and deliver these changes. It is for their benefit and the benefit of the communities they serve, and I look forward to seeing the results.