



## 'A fork in the road'

May I start by offering an apology, I pride myself in writing my own blogs so communication is direct. The downside to this is that if I find myself in a busy period the blogs slip a little, hence an absence since the end of March, I will try to do better in future.

So much continues to happen and often at such a fast pace it takes some effort to keep up with the momentum and changes. I titled this blog 'A Fork in the Road' as I mused on current issues and what they might mean for the future of Fire and Rescue in the UK. It feels to me that the UK FRS stands at a point where there may be a myriad of futures in front of us but there are two distinct and overriding directions possible. One is a confident and respected service that continues to add value to the communities we serve in not only our traditional areas of Protection, Prevention and Response but also in the wider areas of public safety and vulnerability. The alternative is we suffer from further financial constraint, fall back from a wider more flexible role and retrench to a response organisation that does Protection and some Prevention.

You might wonder why I have developed such a view after all the UK Fire and Rescue Service has had a fantastic reputation for many years, we pride ourselves on opening doors where others can't go and making people safer wherever or whoever they may be. National Fire Chiefs Council has had a great start and in partnership with various governance structures and Fire and Rescue Services we have developed and implemented the first full suite of operational guidance. We have worked closely with and helped to shape the Inspection regime and future of standards in England we are moving forward with procurement and have a strategy and plan to be proud of which demonstrates the clear ambition of the NFCC. Our response across all FRS post Grenfell to keeping people safe in residential buildings following the discovery of widespread non-compliant cladding and influence on the Hackitt review has been immense. But, and there is a but.

Following the Kerslake review and the full opening of the Grenfell public inquiry I am not sure I have ever heard so much open and sustained criticism of the Fire and Rescue Service. Yes, there are reasons why things happened the way they did and we will continue to have our say, but the criticism forms a back drop for future opinion and leaves an impression. Much of our work both internally and in delivery involves people. I opened a Diversity Congress just two weeks ago and opened by saying I wish I wasn't there.

After all these years we still need meetings to discuss how we make the FRS an open, welcoming and diverse place to work, despite some recent successes. Then I hear on a fairly regular basis how people are treated if their opinion does not conform with the majority or if they come from a different background, not to mention the reaction if someone dares to consider an operational role having not been a firefighter. It can be shameful. Yes, everyone needs to be competent for the role they are performing but that applies equally to those of us who started as firefighters.

This leads me into workforce reform. In general, many colleagues are struggling to maintain on-call/retained cover Monday to Friday during office hours and with the Matzak ruling on restriction of movement we may face even greater challenges in this vital part of our delivery model.

There are a number of other rulings and discussions that will also help shape the future size, scope and service delivery model for Fire and Rescue in the UK. The West Midlands strike ballot; the ruling on Close Proximity Crewing in South Yorkshire; pension transition; and the national pay discussions will

affect the future. Whether these all help shape the future of an expanded, well supported service delivery model that helps even more vulnerable people in society within an affordable budget or not remains to be seen.

Which leads me to my next area of musing and leads me to my conclusion we are at a fork in the road, finance. We all know, and it is well documented that Fire and Rescue has not been protected through austerity and a 21% reduction in wholetime firefighters shows this. With the announcement by the Home Secretary that Policing will be a priority in England and Wales and the fairly open secret that the NHS will receive more funding I wonder where that leaves Fire. Scottish colleagues have the prospect of more investment following the savings of amalgamation but my understanding is that this may rely on the outcome of UK negotiations.

NFCC is working hard with Home Office colleagues to prepare for CSR 2019 but the Treasury will want an evidence base for including risk as well as demand in future funding settlements. A retraction to core business with less flexibility may mean a greater link to demand for our services, demand that may well fall again and leave the FRS with even smaller budgets and ultimately workforces.

There are other link initiatives. Not least the Hackitt review and us helping to shape the recommendations to ensure the FRS continues to play its part in keeping people safe. But my last point for this blog is the changes in governance, already four Police and Crime Commissioners have been given the go ahead to become Fire Authorities, although there is still some challenge in the system.

With at least two more PCCs, a Mayor and possible others wanting to be Fire Authorities things are changing at a governance level. The legislation that enables PCCs to be fire authorities also enables a single chief to be in charge of Policing and Fire. This governance change may mean little for operational and technical leadership but it adds, in my view, to that fork in the road. With HMICFRS judgements to come, the prospect of more financial constraint and less workforce flexibility, it is a time of challenge as well as a time of change.

So, what should be the NFCC response? We have proved ourselves to be excellent operational and technical leaders with the ability to provide advice, which most organisations welcome. The current changes, challenges and opportunities require a collective effort, by working together I am sure we can take the right road alongside partners and continue to provide an excellent and expanded service to our communities. The choice is ours.

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