



'2018 – a look back and a look forward to 2019'

This time last year I wrote in my blog that 2018 promises to be another busy year, I wasn't wrong. Although many of the main strategic issues remain familiar, the work and change agenda they herald continue to gather pace. 2018 has been a year of achievement for the UK Fire and Rescue Services, but also a year of further change, some uncertainty, some frustration and some criticism.

The Kerslake report brought some criticism of Fire and Rescue, but also a recognition of excellent foundations such as the Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles, which the Fire Service has played an integral role in developing. Then through the moorland and heath fires of the hot summer we saw Fire and Rescue services at their best with national support and interoperability given at a moment's request.

But foremost in all our minds has been the ongoing Grenfell Towers Inquiry, I cannot imagine there is fire and rescue service colleague who doesn't think about the events of that night on a regular basis. I know I am a member of the Expert Panel and I am heavily involved in progressing the Hackitt recommendations, but there is not a day that goes by where I do not think about what I might have done if I had been called to that horrendous and tragic incident.

I do not have enough hours in a day to listen to all the evidence but I do catch up with the excellent BBC Grenfell Inquiry podcast. All the podcasts are thought provoking, but the most harrowing has been the recent Bereaved, Survivors and Residents written statements.

Our thoughts remain with them and I have no doubt whatsoever that London Fire Brigade colleagues did everything they could on that fateful night, but with hindsight I ask myself could we as a fire and rescue sector have done something different in the run up to that night.

Yes, there were emerging issues with non-compliant cladding, perhaps we had too much faith in what we thought were robust building regulations, building material testing criteria and the associated control systems. Although no material testing criteria can be that robust if the system is not tested.

Yes, there had been similar fires in other countries, although none that I have seen that spread fire around as well as up the building. Many of these fires have come to my attention post Grenfell, so perhaps on reflection the dismantling of most of our national institutions in the years of localism, so mitigating any collective intelligence gathering, was not the best policy.

NFCC's National Operational Learning process, the fact we now have a dedicated International lead and we now try to work much closer with other organisations in the Fire Sector will no doubt assist in gathering learning across the fire and rescue service sector.

We then come to perhaps the biggest issue of all, Stay Put. Stay Put relies on the building being compliant with Building Regulations and the Fire Safety Order. It is a strategy for the building, not a Fire and Rescue Service policy. One of the Inquiry's Expert Witnesses, Doctor Barbara Lane says that once Grenfell was clad in the non-compliant ACM the Stay Put policy was compromised, the building should not have been handed over for occupation and the London Fire Brigade should have been informed of the situation, they were not.

Then on the night, had a decision for full evacuation happened earlier, I ask myself, with no communal fire alarm or communications system, with limited fire and rescue personnel in the earlier stages, no

guarantee that people could or would answer their front door. With possible mobility problems and a single 1100mm staircase, a smoke extraction system that appears to have operated incorrectly, with firefighting and breathing apparatus operations in place, how could a smooth evacuation happen?

Undoubtedly the questions will continue to be asked, both within and without the Public Inquiry, but in the meantime colleagues will come under some immense pressure.

The aftermath of the Grenfell Tragedy saw, and continues to see work through the Expert Panel, including remediation of those buildings that have the ACM cladding systems. Incredibly, there are still a few who will argue that the ACM3 cladding systems complied with building regulations and need to be persuaded with less than satisfactory legal powers in the Housing Act or Fire Safety Order that they have to remove the cladding.

The new cladding ban, banning already non-compliant products, is welcomed for its clarity, but we as NFCC think it should go further and cover all buildings where vulnerable people may reside and evacuation may be difficult, hospitals, care homes, specialised housing and similar. In 2019 NFCC will be working very closely with MHCLG, LGA and Local Authority Building Control to help implement the Hackitt recommendations through the development of the Joint Competent Authority and the Joint Regulators Group.

We have now secured Government funding to establish our own Building Safety Team that will help the work of Hackitt implementation. We are hoping for a MHCLG release on the implementation plan in the New Year, but as with all national politically linked issues at the moment, it is hard to have certainty on when things will happen. Our work on a number of policy areas with the Fire Service Management Committee will be particularly important as we strive to support Fire and Rescue into the future.

Talking of which I was hoping to write extensively in this blog about HMICFRS' first national report on tranche one of their inspections of English Fire and Rescue Services, they are already well into tranche two. But the initial report has been delayed twice, once by the planned local funding settlement announcement, which itself was delayed, then a second time for the actual settlement announcement.

My understanding is that the national report will say that broadly in effectiveness terms Fire and Rescue Services are doing well, but with Prevention and particularly Protection showing signs of the impact of austerity. Fire and Rescue Service efficiency ratings are a bit of a mixed picture but, unfortunately, the People strand shows Fire and Rescue still requires more work on values and diversity.

I am sure the outcomes of inspection will be a subject for debate in 2019 and the NFCC Central Programme Office is collating areas for improvement and learning from the inspections and are doing similar for the learning emerging from the Grenfell Inquiry. Both of which will feed into NFCC work and the new English Fire Standards Board which will be up and running in 2019.

Another piece of this particular jigsaw is the Engagement Forum, where we can engage stakeholders from across the fire sector. I can report that the Forum had its inaugural meeting and it was so pleasing to see so many sectors represented. One of the things I have recently put in place is access to an equalities adviser for each of the NFCC committees and to ensure no NFCC papers will be taken to council in future without an Equalities Impact Assessment.

The funding settlement appears to be what was expected of the last year of a four-year settlement, but there is disappointment that Fire Authorities did not get the precept flexibility afforded to Police, especially as employers' contribution to pension costs also affect Fire and Rescue Services.

My last look back on 2018 is with significant pride, having laid a wreath on behalf of all civilian services on the 11th November on the 100th anniversary of Armistice Day. A day I will never forget.

Looking forward to 2019, with the Grenfell Inquiry and Hackett, a proposed Comprehensive Spending Review, Inspection and Standards, plus the Fire Brigades Union pay claim to be considered alongside the long running debate on the role of a firefighter, there is plenty for us to do and consider. On the later matter, the NFCC through the Prevention committee has been doing some great work concerning Fire supporting the NHS prevention strategy.

I believe this, along with further Protection work from the Hackitt review and some more workforce flexibility could find us a way through. Firefighters constantly show their excellence in responding to incidents and I have no doubt will continue to add value in other community safety activities.

There will be further changes in 2019, in England we will have the Fire Policy units brought under a single new Director, Luke Edwards. In Scotland, after many years of sterling leadership Alasdair Hay will be retiring, I wish his successor, Martin Blunden every success.

In Wales the Welsh Government have already issued a consultation White Paper on Fire Authority governance and funding changes, which we will await and see the outcome. I hope we can celebrate more success in 2019, in all areas, including awards like the Fire Magazine Excellence in Fire Awards and through national recognition of colleagues through the honours system.

I am sure we would all like to make sure we get the FireTones to number one in the charts. I wish you, your families and loved ones a very Merry Christmas and a very happy and successful 2019.

Roy Wilsher