

Reform of the Police and Fire and Rescue Services

Presiding Officer, I want to set out for Parliament the Government's ambitions for improving the performance, local accountability and financial sustainability of Scotland's police and fire and rescue services.

Can I once again pay tribute to the outstanding contribution made by our police and fire services on a daily basis to our communities.

We have delivered one thousand additional police officers in our communities and that has helped result in a 32 year low in recorded crime. We have also seen fire deaths in Scotland continue to fall over the long term. These are real successes of which we should all be proud.

However, in order to maintain those successes in the face of unprecedented budget cuts from Westminster, the status quo is no longer tenable.

Moreover, the current configuration dates back to the 1970s. Structures need to be able to cope with the challenges of the 21st Century.

Accordingly, we need to look at how we effectively structure our police and fire and rescue services to protect the frontline delivery that is essential to our communities.

It is not simply about financial challenges, it is also about providing appropriate accountability and enhancement of service. All three criteria require to be met and addressed.

Change is demanding. It is not without cost nor without its challenges. We do require to take time to get it right. But change we must.

Police and fire are not alone. These challenges go across the public sector. It is for that reason that the Christie Commission has been established, and the results of the consultations I am setting out today will be submitted to the Commission to inform their wider work.

Let me recap what has been done to date. Last year, the Government formed two representative sub-groups of the Scottish Policing Board and Ministerial Advisory Group on fire and rescue.

Drawing directly on input from senior police and fire and rescue officers, this early work confirmed that the status quo, in both police and fire, is not tenable and provided some options for change.

Policing and fire services in Scotland have historically and correctly been by consent. That is how we want it to remain and why we are consulting.

There has been some limited public comment but it is appropriate that we should widen the debate. We wish to try and see if we can reach a consensus as a country on the structures for our fire and police services for the 21st Century.

I am, therefore, announcing plans for a consultation on the future options for both the police and fire and rescue services. The consultations will commence early next month.

The consultations will be separate for each service but run in conjunction with each other.

In both there will be three options: eight services but with enhanced collaboration; a regional structure with fewer boards; and a single service.

Firstly, let me deal with fire and rescue.

As a Government we believe that there are compelling arguments for one service.

Let me explain why. The options of an enhancement to eight boards or a regional service with fewer boards would appear not to meet the criteria of appropriate financial savings, improved accountability or enhanced service.

Collaboration to date has proved challenging and has not delivered the scale of efficiencies required. In reality the current structure of eight fire boards simply does not lend itself to the most effective collaboration across boundaries.

While a model with fewer regional boards will deliver some returns, it is unlikely to achieve all the desired outcomes. Unnecessary duplication will still exist and local accountability will be further diminished.

In our view, a single Fire and Rescue service, with a national framework and standards, will be best at reducing unnecessary duplication and cost and making sure maximum funding is channelled to the front line. One service provides the opportunity for greater accountability locally and improved service in our communities.

We need to reduce headquarters bureaucracy and provide more autonomy to the front-line. There are fears about centralisation. But one service provides an opportunity for more power to be given to local stations and for local authorities rather than joint boards where one can cover up to 12 local authorities.

All our communities, irrespective of their postcode, would have access to the full range of Scotland's fire and rescue capability.

All our firefighters, wherever they are based, would have appropriate access to the training and equipment they require.

In the 21st Century we face a variety of complex and difficult challenges, not just financial. All areas must be resourced to meet them.

Some have argued for a 'blue light service' incorporating fire, police and ambulance. The case for this, in my view, has not been made, and there is significant opposition from within those services to such a scheme. We will be seeking greater cooperation where that is appropriate, but we are not persuaded of the case for a single service.

However, we wish to reach as wide a consensus as possible. This consultation provides an opportunity for those otherwise minded to try and persuade us.

But, let me be quite clear, any alternative option would require to make those financial savings, meet the need for accountability and provide for enhanced and improved service.

Let me now deal with policing, where the debate is different and distinct.

Again we will consult on three options. Many of the arguments made in respect of fire apply to the police.

However, it is quite clear to us as a Government that the option of the current eight forces with enhanced collaboration will not provide the savings necessary nor the enhanced service required to meet the challenges of the 21st Century.

That leaves the options of a single force or a regional model.

Significant arguments have been made for a single force but questions remain over accountability in the absence of local boards and centralisation of services.

Some argue for a regional model but many questions remain unanswered, in particular whether there would be significant savings or service enhancement and how accountability would be improved with fewer and more remote boards. That is why we wish to consult.

Which model meets the needs of financial savings; improved accountability; and enhanced service?

In a single force model, the savings can be significant and that is necessary in these financial times. It can also provide a better service locally - devolving more decision-making control to local commanders who know and account to their local communities.

However, there are understandable concerns about accountability and centralisation. These have to be answered.

Suggestions have already have been made, for example, by the Deputy Chief Constable of Lothian and Borders. He has suggested a model whereby local authorities attain more accountability than exists through joint boards. It is also argued that one service in fact provides more autonomy for local areas. These arguments though have to be made and won.

Alternatively, a regional model with three or four forces has some legitimacy. However, those who favour that model will need to demonstrate that the required savings can be made with the retention of so many back offices, that the accountability can be provided by even more remote joint boards, and improved service provided across all forces.

The consultation provides the opportunity for those who support a particular option to make their case and address their doubters. They have to demonstrate it will make the savings; provide the accountability; and enhance the service.

Presiding Officer, the status quo is no longer tenable in both fire and police. The Government believes there is a compelling case for a single fire service but we will strive to reach a consensus.

On police, a strong case has been made for a single service but concerns need to be allayed regarding accountability. There is an argument for a regional model but significant challenges have to be overcome regarding efficiency. In a country where we pride ourselves in policing by consent we hope this consultation provides an opportunity to reach a consensus.

Presiding Officer, let us decide as a country on the structures of our police and fire and rescue services to meet the challenges of the 21st Century.

Word Count: 1369