

Home Secretary speech on fire reform

From: [Home Office](#) and [The Rt Hon Theresa May MP](#)

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Home Secretary Theresa May addresses audience at Reform event in London.



Introduction

Thank you very much, Andrew and Graham. It is a great pleasure to be here today to talk to one of Britain's leading think tanks on public service reform. In my time as Home Secretary, [Reform](#) has consistently challenged government to be more radical and more urgent in its pursuit of accountability, value for money and transparency in public services. And it is a challenge I have taken to heart in my time at the Home Office, and I think our work to cut crime, control immigration, safeguard the vulnerable and protect against terrorism and extremism is more effective as a result.

So today I would like to talk about reform of another public service essential to keeping people of this country out of harm's way. One with a fine tradition and a proud record. And one made up of individuals who command profound affection from the communities they serve - the fire and rescue service - which I now have the privilege of overseeing in the Home Office. But before I talk about that, I want to go back to 2010, to when I was first appointed Home Secretary and when I first began my programme of reform in policing.

The lessons of police reform

Back then, the problems in policing were painfully apparent. Police forces beset by an opaque system of governance and diffuse accountability. Productivity held back by targets and the systems which officers relied upon were inefficient and ineffective. And a closed culture which insulated failure and rewarded the wrong things. There was no question of the need for reform, or the urgency with which it was needed.

Yet when I first launched my programme of reform in policing, the response from Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and the Police Federation was to deny the need for change. For many in policing in 2010, the word 'reform' could mean only one of 2 things,

top-down reorganisation of the 43-force model or the establishment of a royal commission - and the fact I intended to do neither was heresy. When I set out the government's plans to reduce police budgets by over a fifth over the course of a Parliament, they were united: the frontline would be ruined and crime would go shooting up. The Police Federation predicted "Christmas for criminals".

Today, those claims lie in tatters and no-one in policing can be in any doubt of the purpose of police reform. In the last 6 years, we have set about systematically reforming the institutions of policing - bringing real accountability for local people; modernising pay and conditions; transforming the approach to procurement and collaboration; and abolishing the system of targets and bureaucracy which undermined productivity and drove centralisation.

And these reforms are bearing fruit. We now have a framework of institutions and processes that works properly to ensure accountability and operational integrity. Policing is more diverse, more professional, and better qualified than ever before. Public confidence has been maintained and the proportion of officers on the frontline is up. And crime is down by well over a quarter, according to the independent [Crime Survey for England and Wales](#), even as police budgets have fallen.

The experience of police reform shows what is possible. And over the course of this Parliament, I want to bring that same relentless focus to reform of the fire and rescue service - to improve the whole range of services provided to the public and to preserve the sustained falls in fire incidents and deaths we have seen in recent decades.

The achievements of fire and rescue

It is 15 years since the Home Office last oversaw fire and rescue services, and in that time the risk of fire has fallen considerably. Since 2001, the number of fires in England has been reduced by nearly two-thirds. Fire deaths have fallen by almost half and we have seen similar reductions in the number of non-fatal casualties. There are approaching 200,000 fewer false alarms each year, of which malicious incidents have fallen by nearly 90%. Buildings are safer, families and communities are more secure, and firefighters' time is being wasted far less, freeing them up to focus on more effective activity locally.

But what is striking about those achievements is that they were achieved not by change imposed from above, but by reform driven from below.

Just as in policing before 2010, local services were weighed down by bureaucratic control, targets drove confusion and perverse outcomes, and taxpayers' money was wasted. But unlike in policing, fire and rescue services seized the need for change at a local level and reformed themselves from the ground up. What began with the [Bain Review in 2002](#) led to wholesale change in the culture and priorities of fire and rescue services, marshaled not by Whitehall but by chiefs and authorities themselves.

Most importantly, as Andrew referred to, fire services embraced prevention over response. Today, prevention work in communities is second nature to every firefighter and core business in every local fire and rescue service. Over 600,000 homes were visited by fire personnel in England in 2014 and 2015 and nearly 59,000 businesses were checked for compliance with fire safety laws and given tailored advice on prevention and fire safety.

At the same time, fire and rescue services worked to shift the balance of responsibility for fire protection onto industry and society more broadly. It is down to years of home safety visits, the successful [Fire Kills awareness campaign](#) and the continued pressure for building, furniture and fire safety regulations that fires are at an all time low and nearly 90% of all homes have a working smoke alarm, compared to only 8% a quarter of a century ago.

By working in partnership with other local services and using data more systematically, fire and rescue services have developed a deep understanding of the needs and the risks of the communities they serve. The elderly residents at risk of falls. The families whose chaotic lifestyles make them a cause for concern. The buildings with construction shortcuts and poor management standards. By understanding these risks, fire and rescue services have been able to better manage them – saving countless lives as a result.

And recent events remind us of the increasingly varied job that our fire and rescue services do. The crash at the Shoreham Air Show in August last year that left 11 dead and 16 injured. Widespread flooding in large parts of Cumbria and the Lake District in December. The collapse of part of Didcot Power station in March. Today firefighters do not just fight fire, they protect their communities from a range of dangerous situations.

The continuing need for reform

But as impressive as these achievements are, there remains much more to do. Families, businesses and property in this country remain at risk of fire. Last year there were more than 150,000 fire incidents in England. A total of 263 people lost their lives to fire and 7,500 more were injured. The insurance industry tell us that fire costs industry hundreds of millions a year, and we know that many businesses never recover from the ashes. These are not statistics we can or should ignore.

Nor should we forget that, whilst fire does not discriminate, those most at risk are not those living in modern houses with expensive appliances and insurance to protect them when things go wrong. The victims of fire, too often, are the vulnerable within our society – older people, those living alone, and those whose behaviours, lifestyles or housing puts them at greater risk.

And when I look at the fire and rescue service, I see a service that has succeeded in spite of the framework it operates in, not because of it. A fire and rescue landscape still beset by poor governance and structures. A workforce lacking diversity and still bound by many of the old ways of working. A service that requires further reform to improve accountability, bring independent scrutiny and drive transparency. And efficiencies and savings which could be made to improve the working lives of fire service employees and to reduce the burden on the taxpayer.

So, over the course of this Parliament, I intend to work with fire and rescue services to deliver a programme of reform that is as radical and ambitious as I have delivered in policing since 2010. The job of police reform is not yet finished and I am not going to pretend that reform in fire and rescue will be easy or straightforward. Meaningful and lasting reform never is. But with fire and rescue in the Home Office and with – I sense – a real appetite for change, I believe now is the time to deliver the change that is needed.

Efficiency and collaboration

In the last 6 years, fire and rescue authorities have shouldered their fair share in delivering savings to bring the public finances back onto a sustainable footing. And over the next 4 years, further savings will need to be made, including a 1.6% cash reduction in spending power for single purpose fire authorities this financial year, as we continue to bring the public finances onto a sustainable footing.

But we should be in no doubt that such efficiencies are possible. And nowhere is the scope for savings more apparent than in closer working between emergency services.

The development of much closer collaboration between emergency services was one of the great unsung successes of the last Parliament. This takes many forms, from basic practical steps, like sharing headquarters or back office services, to radical reform, such as the integration of command and control or response teams, but those areas that have worked together have realised savings and operational benefits. The [Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Programme](#) has developed a common approach to how the 3 bluelight services are trained for, and respond to, major or complex incidents, such as flooding or terrorist attacks.

And new ways of working between services have cut duplication and enhanced the response to incidents. Initiatives like the introduction of rural intervention vehicles, jointly crewed by police and fire officers, to serve hard to reach locations in Northamptonshire. Or the establishment of a joint station in Norfolk that houses not just police and fire, but ambulance crews and the coastguard too. Or the development of [Community Risk Intervention Teams in Greater Manchester](#), which deliver prevention services on behalf of all bluelight services and respond to high volume, low priority calls. Since 2013, the government has invested over £88 million in fire transformation schemes such as these, with expected savings estimated in the hundreds of millions of pounds over the next 10 years.

But progress is patchy and collaboration remains the exception, not the rule. In this Parliament, I want to see much deeper collaboration between fire and rescue and other local services, to improve the service to the public and deliver savings. And that is why we are legislating in the [Policing and Crime Bill](#) to put a statutory duty on the police, the emergency ambulance and fire and rescues services in England to collaborate whenever it is in the interests of their efficiency or their effectiveness to do so.

And it is why I am committed to ending the narcissism of small differences between local fire and rescue services, which make no sense in principle and which frustrate joint working in practice.

Two weeks ago, progress was made when the [Chief Fire Officers' Association](#), the [Fire Service College](#), the [Fire Industry Authority](#) and others agreed to unify research and development so that equipment is only tested once, rather than by each local service. And I welcome the Chief Fire Officers' Association's proposals to develop a coherent and comprehensive set of professional standards, building on the work of the [National Operational Guidance Programme](#). There are many legitimate reasons why collaboration can fail - competing aims, conflicts of leadership, differing financial positions - but a lack of consistent professional standards is not one of them.

And to help services work together to buy equipment and services, I will publish comparable procurement data from every fire and rescue authority in England, to show how much each is

paying for common items like uniform, operational kit, and vehicles. As we have seen in policing, local services can deliver significant savings just by pooling their purchasing power and buying the same equipment collectively - and there's no good reason not to do so.

Reform of the fire and rescue workforce

These changes will lead to better use of resources and more thoughtful deployment of assets. But there is one resource, which comprises the majority of fire and rescue budgets, where there is still work to do: the fire and rescue workforce.

In the last 10 years, the overall size of the fire workforce has not changed significantly despite the number of incidents attended falling by 42%. The challenge facing senior fire officers is therefore how to reform the workforce to meet a completely different risk and demand model, and how to build in the flexibility to deploy resources in different ways as demand changes again in the future. But, let me be clear, this does not and should not mean a reduction in the quality of frontline firefighting. Just as we have seen in policing, it is possible to protect the frontline and increase the proportion of officers deployed in frontline roles even as savings are made.

These matters are rightly operational decisions for fire professionals, not for politicians. But already the characteristics of a future workforce are visible from changes the best chief fire officers have introduced. New and flexible shift patterns so that firefighters are available at times when risk or demand is greatest. The recruitment of dedicated fire prevention staff to conduct prevention work in communities and businesses and free up firefighters for specialist tasks. And increased use of on-call firefighters to increase flexibility and generate savings, not just in rural areas but in major metropolitan areas too, as Sir Ken Knight and the retained firefighters' union have powerfully argued.

Now I know there are those in the audience who will say that the National Joint Council (NJC) acts as a barrier to some of these changes and to a flexible workforce more broadly. The fact that, after 15 years of discussion and steadfast opposition from the [Fire Brigades' Union \(FBU\)](#), the NJC has only recently reached agreement to pilot co-responding suggests to me that at least some of those complaints are well-founded. But the NJC is owned by fire and rescue, not by government, and fire authorities form one half of its membership. It is in your hands to change it, and my challenge to you is to deliver that change or have the courage of your convictions and withdraw.

And reform must extend to chief fire officers too. There is widening disparity between the pay of chief fire officers in different parts of the country, with little relationship to their skills, performance or the size of the role. And it can never be justified for chief and principal fire officers to retire one day only to be rehired in the same job just a few days later with financial benefits that rank and file firefighters could never expect. It looks wrong; it erodes public confidence; it undermines the respect of firefighters and staff in their leadership; and it must stop.

Just as the culture of bullying and harassment we have seen in some fire and rescue authorities can no longer be allowed to persist. There is no excusing this type of culture - which was described as "toxic" and "corrosive" by last year's review of Essex Fire and Rescue Service. I know that there has been progress in Essex to put that right and I will be monitoring developments, but we must let it serve as a wider lesson too. In doing so, we must

transform the diversity of a firefighter workforce that is 96% white and 95% male. Because it is not just professionalism and integrity that underpin the relationship with the public, it is also how representative fire and rescue services are of their communities and the communities they serve. I know this is something the FBU has championed in the past, and I hope we can work together to increase diversity in fire and rescue.

And I can confirm that I intend to publish the Thomas review of the fire and rescue workforce as soon as is possible. This is an important piece of work, which I know has been a long time coming, but fire and rescue services should not wait for its conclusions to start reforming their workforce - you are the employers, not me or Adrian Thomas, and it's up to you to drive the process of reform.

A more accountable and transparent fire and rescue service

And as you do, I will put in place the right framework of institutions and processes to ensure operational integrity and to restore the link between fire and rescue services and the communities they serve.

Because governance in fire and rescue bears all the hallmarks of the flawed police authorities I abolished in 2012. Bureaucratic committees of appointed councillors without the direct democratic mandate to drive real change or the public profile to engage local people. In policing, I replaced police authorities with single, visible individuals held to account in the strongest possible way - at the ballot box. And 3 weeks ago, more than 9 million people did just that when they voted for a police and crime commissioner to oversee their local force on their behalf.

So we will bring the same direct democratic mandate to oversight of fire and rescue services – by giving police and crime commissioners the ability to take on responsibility for fire and rescue services where a local case is made. This provision, which is already in the Policing and Crime Bill currently making its way through Parliament, will bring greater accountability to the work of local fire and rescue services where it is taken up and provide stronger leadership in keeping the public safe. And I encourage Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) to carefully consider the potential benefits and I hope fire and rescue authorities will work constructively with PCCs to realise them.

But let me be clear, these proposals are not a police takeover of fire and rescue services, or a top-down merger of the roles of police officers and firefighters. The important distinction between operational policing and firefighting will be maintained – fire officers will not be given the power to arrest and the law will continue to prevent full-time police officers from training as firefighters. Funding streams for police and fire will not be merged and PCCs will raise a separate fire precept, so local people can hold them to account for how their money is spent.

But there's one problem – it is currently almost impossible to scrutinise your local fire and rescue service. There's no independent inspectorate; no regular audit of performance; and only limited available data on performance over time or between areas. Instead, local fire and rescue services are examined by a system of peer challenge – which provides no assurance whatsoever to the public. It may serve a purpose as a tool for self-improvement, but in practice it means that chief fire officers handpick their own reviewer, set their own terms of reference, and decide whether or not to publish the results. It is not so much marking your

own homework as setting your own exam paper and resolving that you've passed - and it has to change.

To help fire and rescue authorities and PCCs hold their service to account and to drive closer scrutiny by taxpayers and communities, I intend to bring forward proposals to establish a rigorous and independent inspection regime for fire and rescue in England. I will shortly table amendments to the Policing and Crime Bill to strengthen the inspection powers in the [Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004](#) to put beyond doubt the powers of fire inspectors to enter premises and access information, and to ensure the government has the power to commission inspections of particular issues or fire and rescue services. Because it is only by understanding problems and holding services accountable that we can begin to fix them.

To support greater accountability, I will publish transparent fire and rescue information so that ordinary members of the public can compare fire and rescue services on performance, value for money and diversity, monitor that performance over time, and access useful fire safety information and advice. And if anyone doubts the public appetite for this information, just look at the success of [Police.uk](#), which now receives 450,000 unique visits each month from interested members of the public.

Conclusion

I am sure there are those who question some of these reforms; who simply don't accept the need for change; who, rightly, say that fire and rescue today does not share all the problems of policing in 2010. After years of falling risk of fire and even fewer incidents, it would have been easy for me to adopt the same mentality and let fire and rescue services stand still.

But if we do that, if we choose to ignore the 263 people who lost their lives to fire last year and the thousands of business owners whose livelihoods went up in flames, we implicitly suggest that the institutions and structures of fire and rescue are good enough, not the unaccountable and inefficient framework we know them to be. And we brush aside, under the carpet, difficult questions about culture, leadership and diversity - which matter to those that work in fire and rescue just as much as the public they serve.

The reforms I have set out today will make fire and rescue more accountable, more effective and more professional than ever before. They will build on the great strides in prevention and collaboration that fire and rescue services have already made. And if we get them right, they will benefit not just the public or the taxpayer, but firefighters too and I hope you will all work with me to deliver them.

Thank you