

Community Resilience

Nationalisation, regionalisation and contracting out: the implications

David Warner-Howard discusses the implications of regionalisation, nationalisation and contracting out within the Fire and Rescue Service

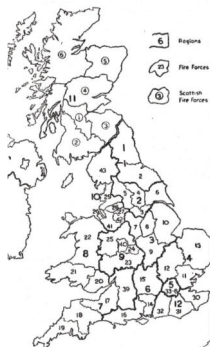
HAVING WORKED WITH THE UK FIRE

and rescue services for more than 50 years, I frequently ponder whether or not we are going round in circles. Problems and their solutions that arose in the 1950s-60s, having subsequently been superseded or abandoned, reappear again and everyone tries to reinvent the solution.

This manifests itself in all aspects of FRA activities, but for the moment I will consider the cases for Nationalisation, Regionalisation and Contracting Out.

Nationalisation

Those familiar with the Fire Service prior to WW2 will recall that there existed some 1,600 separate fire authorities. In 1941, following the London Blitz, and within the space of three months, Parliament approved a Bill to change all this, and The National Fire Service (General) Regulations 1941 received the Royal assent.



The 12 regions following the change to a National Fire Service in 1941

Effectively the UK was divided into 12 regions. These regions are listed alongside their FRA equivalents of today:

- Northumberland, Durham and Darlington, Tyne and Wear, Cleveland
- North Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire, Humberside (part)
- Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire, Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, Humberside (part)
- Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire, Essex, Bedfordshire and Luton
- London

“Problems and their solutions that arose in the 1950s-60s, having subsequently been superseded or abandoned, reappear again and everyone tries to reinvent the solution”

- Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Royal Berkshire, Dorset, Hampshire, Isle of Wight
- Cornwall and Isles of Scilly, Devon and Somerset, Wiltshire, Avon, Gloucestershire
- South Wales, Mid Wales, North Wales
- Staffordshire, Shropshire, West Midlands, Hereford and Worcestershire, Warwickshire
- Cumbria, Lancashire, Greater Manchester, Merseyside, Cheshire
- Scotland
- Surrey, Kent, East Sussex, West Sussex.

Following the cessation of hostilities, the NFS was disbanded and control was vested in the hands of the county and county borough authorities. Since 1948 subsequent changes made over the years have produced the 45 FRAs in England, three in Wales, and seven in Scotland.

Prior to nationalisation there was little standardisation anywhere. Appliances, equipment, uniform, and conditions varied dependant on the needs (or whims) of the local authority concerned.

Nationalisation brought a degree of standardisation to the Fire Service and, from 1948 we had the Fire Service Inspectorate to inspect and report to the government on the efficiency of the various FRAs. The FSI also undertook research into a wide range of potential improvements for the Service and helped produce fire safety advice and new legislation. Now this organisation has been disbanded. Not given a review and overhaul, but discarded. So how do we now retain uniformity?

We see a growing diversity in many

aspects of FRA work across the UK. Gone are some of the recognised standards such as uniform, and this change will continue until someone says ‘stop’. Once that happens, do we re-nationalise the Service? Is there a political will to carry out a re-nationalisation programme? From the various statements made by political party spokespersons it would not seem to be on their agenda at the moment.

It would only be beneficial if it restored uniformity, pooled resources in research and development.

Would it be cost effective? Probably, but of course the cost would then fall on central government rather than local authorities, and in the future it would put pressure on the pound or the country’s national debt require the Fire and Rescue Service budget to be cut still further.

So, if Nationalisation is likely to be a non-starter at the moment, what about Regionalisation?

Regionalisation

Cash for the Fire Service is made up from central government grants and local authority resources. With the old Pension Scheme (unfunded as it was) still drawing a large percentage of the annual FRA budget, and with local authorities constantly juggling resources against various departmental needs, not to mention political priorities, chief fire officers are constantly being instructed to make economies.

Whilst there is always the need to be ever watchful over ‘unnecessary expenditure’, when one reads that a FRA is seriously considering the closure of its Retained Stations, relying then solely on its whole-time stations to cover the county, something must be wrong. Is this the only way to balance the books, or might the scale of their operation be too small? Would amalgamation with one or more adjacent FRAs be a better solution? There would be a loss of local identity, but should the retention of local identities be an overriding factor in today’s world?

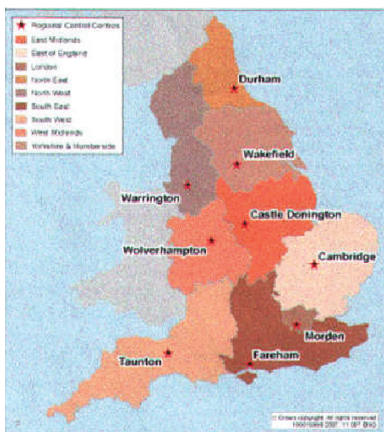
In 1964 the London, Middlesex and London Borough Fire Brigades amalgamated.

by David Warner-Howard

In 1974 the present County and Metropolitan Districts were formed, and they have benefited from the subsequent mergers.

Recently Devon and Somerset FRAs amalgamated. No doubt both these counties had established local identities.

The government's Communities and Local Government department has invested vast sums of money on 'New Dimension Equipment' strategically located across the country for local and national use.



The nine regions as they stand today

Another CLG controversial change has been the creation of nine regional control centres in England. These regional areas are listed alongside the present day fire authority areas. It may be of interest to observe the similarity between these and the old NFS regions:

- North East – Northumberland, Durham and Darlington, Tyne and Wear, Cleveland
- Yorkshire and Humberside – North Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire, and Humberside
- North West – Cumbria, Lancashire, Greater Manchester, Merseyside, and Cheshire
- East Midlands – Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire, Leicestershire, and Northamptonshire
- West Midlands – Staffordshire, Shropshire, West Midlands, Hereford and Worcestershire, and Warwickshire
- East of England – Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire, Essex, and Bedfordshire and Luton
- London
- South East – Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Royal Berkshire, Surrey, Kent, East Sussex, West Sussex, Hampshire, and Isle of Wight
- South West – Cornwall, Devon and Somerset, Dorset, Wiltshire, Avon, and Gloucestershire.

The question of 'loss of local knowledge' by centralising control centres has been voiced for years. When I joined the Fire

Service emergency calls, for both fire and ambulance services were received at whole-time stations. They made the necessary mobilising moves before passing the details to the county headquarters.

In some respects there was a degree of local knowledge, but the subsequent move to a single county control did not pose a worse situation. Today, with the aid of automatic call location, the 'local knowledge' factor should not create any greater problems than before. Therefore do these government initiatives invite a case for Regionalisation of the FRAs?

Currently the largest FRA in England is London with 112 stations and some 5,800 operational staff. If we look at the FRA areas that will be linked to the new control and mobilising centres, would their amalgamation into similar regions make sense?

By combining their current resources we find that of the nine regional authorities, the largest would manage some 268 fire and rescue stations and 8,300 operational staff, and the smallest would manage 67 stations and 3,100 operational staff. Are these figures unmanageable? In the NFS days their figures were considerably greater, as was the need, but would anyone say that they were unmanageable?

Regionalisation would bring cost savings by virtue of scale and avoidance of current duplication. So perhaps there is a good case for initiating such a move.

But could contracting out also offer some cost effective solutions?

Contracting Out

To the diehards, such a subject is tantamount to heresy. But should it be? Fire cover being provided by private companies is not a new idea. It was included in courses held at the Fire Service College. Today there are private fire brigades, such as the Peterborough Volunteer Fire Brigade, that provide local fire and rescue cover in the UK. Their training and equipment is equal to that provided by the local FRA.

In Denmark the Falck organisation provides about 50 per cent of the nation's fire cover from 194 different centres, 68 out of the 98 municipalities having contracted to Falck. This organisation also provides ambulance and patient transport services, vehicle breakdown and recovery, as well as other public services.

In the UK AssetCo provides operations and infrastructure support, technical rescue and operational training, specialist equipment supply, vehicle build management, technology and information systems, and fire reserve. This latter item can provide trained firefighters for civil emergencies or in the absence of local authority fire crews.

“The military option has all but evaporated, so perhaps now it is time to look elsewhere, and contracting out to private enterprise appears to be an attractive choice”

AssetCo already has contracts with various FRAs to provide them with many of its varied products. Could the private sector help in providing fire and rescue services within the UK?

Privatisation is an emotive word and would indicate a transfer of responsibility. However should the local authority wish to keep control then contracting out some or all of their fire cover responsibilities may offer a very cost effective alternative. We should not close our minds to this idea on the basis that the status quo is the only way. Many central and local government activities have been successfully contracted out. The Fire and Rescue Service might benefit from an injection of private enterprise.

No doubt there would be strong opposition to this from many quarters. But in the event of firefighters becoming unavailable, where would the UK look to provide fire and rescue cover. The military option has all but evaporated, so perhaps now it is time to look elsewhere, and contracting out to private enterprise appears to be an attractive choice.

Conclusion

I have tried to outline some ideas where the UK FRAs might look in the immediate and long-term future. Staying as we are does not bode well, as we can see from measures to minimise costs by closing stations.

If the wheel were to turn a full circle then a re-nationalisation programme would be the final move. Regionalisation does appear to offer a genuine solution to the fiscal problems facing local authorities. I have only looked at the effect of Regionalisation based on the new control centres, but there do appear to be greater advantages than disadvantages to such a move.

Finally, there is scope for contracting out fire cover to the private sector organisations. Certainly in areas where there is local difficulty in recruitment, but perhaps in other areas where reduced costs may prove attractive without affecting the quality of service provided.