HOUSE OF COMMONS

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: State of the fire and rescue services, HC 755

Wednesday 9 November 2022

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 9 November 2022.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Dame Diana Johnson (Chair); Simon Fell; Tim Loughton; Gary Sambrook.

Questions 54-101

Witnesses

I: Mark Hardingham, Chair of the National Fire Chiefs Council, Roy Wilsher, HM Inspector of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, and Matt Wrack, General Secretary, Fire Brigades Union.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Mark Hardingham, Roy Wilsher, and Matt Wrack.

Q54 **Chair:** Good morning. Apologies for keeping you waiting a few minutes, but we are very keen to hear from you this morning. Can I just get our witnesses to introduce themselves? This is the second time that we have had the opportunity to look at the fire and rescue services, and obviously over the last few months, they have been in the news more than ever, with the Grenfell inquiry and just recently the Manchester Arena inquiry, and over the summer with the wildfires and climate change being such a big issue. We are very pleased that you are here with us today. Perhaps, Mark, you would like to introduce yourself to the Committee.

Mark Hardingham: Good morning, everybody. My name is Mark Hardingham, and I am the chair of the National Fire Chiefs Council.

Roy Wilsher: Morning. I am Roy Wilsher, and I am one of His Majesty's inspectors of constabulary and fire and rescue services.

Matt Wrack: Good morning. I am Matt Wrack, and I am the general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union.

Q55 **Chair:** We are very pleased that you are here with us today, Mr Wrack, because we want to get your perspective on what we heard earlier in the year—I think it was March—when we last had a session on the fire and rescue service.

I am going to start off by asking generally about the situation we face today. I was looking at the statistics from last year, and fires accounted for 26% of incidents that were being dealt with; false fire alarms were 40%; and non-fire incidents, such as traffic collisions and flooding, were 34% of the workload. Looking forward in relation to the White Paper, what does the future look like for the fire and rescue service? How is it going to change, and what should we be looking at in the future? Mark, would you like to start?

Mark Hardingham: I am happy to; thank you, Chair. I think we are on the cusp of a bit of an opportunity, to be frank, and a number of things have been the catalyst for that: to an extent, the inspectorate; the learning that has come from the Grenfell Tower inquiry and incident, and the learning very recently around the Manchester Arena inquiry as well; and of course, we have a White Paper that was published in the summer. I think there is still an opportunity to look at the role of the fire and rescue service in the future. I do not think we should ever take our eyes off the core role of the fire service as it is now: the prevention role, the protection and building safety role and our 999 operational response, but also our role around national resilience collectively across the UK.

However, there are two further areas that we can look to build our work in. One is our support into the health sector—I think there are opportunities to build on our support around emergency medical response for people who are suffering significant life-risk issues, such as heart attacks. I think we can lean in and provide some support to the health service around the prevention agenda in health, particularly basic, low-level stuff—slips, trips and falls and that sort of thing—where we can branch the success of the fire service's prevention work into the health world. Then, I think there is a particular role for the fire service to support ambulance colleagues, who are sometimes at a point of crisis because of the significant demand that they face almost 24/7.

The second area where I think there is an opportunity for the service is around civil contingencies and support into local communities. That opportunity comes in two forms: one is the role that the fire service can have as a uniformed emergency service alongside police colleagues, in particular, in the command and control arrangements around local resilience forums and strategic co-ordinating groups in the event of major incidents. The fire service equally has the ability, 24/7, to put—for want of a better word—feet on the ground in local communities, to carry out some basic but often life-saving support to communities when they are suffering some sort of crisis. We can do that while the rest of the sector, whether that is the public sector, private sector or voluntary sector, steps in and provides some support as well, which enables the fire service to step back slightly—but not necessarily entirely—from that role in local communities.

Matt Wrack: The fire service has always changed and developed throughout its modern history. We should be thinking ahead. We have been arguing for more than a decade—for the past 15 years or so—that we need to be thinking about where the fire service should be in the next 20 or 30 years. Indeed, we have raised that with our employers, with colleagues among chief officers and with Government Ministers. The National Joint Council, which was much maligned at your last session, agreed several years ago to embark on discussions around what we called workstreams. That is about identifying areas of new activity—for example, related climate change, terrorism, inter-service working, preventive activities and so on—to map out the sort of work that the fire service could be doing.

One of the obstacles we have run into—and it was touched on to some degree by the inspectorate's comments on the White Paper—is that central Government have not been clear. Mark mentioned responding to heart attacks. I was in post when our union was subject to criticism, under the then Labour Government, for our stance on the question of responding to heart attacks. We have changed our position. We have approached Ministers of all parties to say, "Can you be clear about your expectation of the fire service?" If you want us to do new work, that will require training, investment, resources and so on. That answer has not been forthcoming from any of the Ministers we have attempted to discuss it with.

Q56 **Chair:** You just said that you changed your position on dealing with heart

attacks. Can you explain?

Matt Wrack: The discussions that we have had with our employers for the past seven or eight years initially identified five workstreams, which touch on some of the points that Mark mentioned. Those are areas where either the work of the fire service is developing or we think it should or could develop in that direction. Some were raised by us; some were raised by employers. We agreed that either side could bring whatever they wanted to the table.

When asking central Government for clarity—for example, whether they expect the fire and rescue service to respond to heart attacks—we have never had an answer from them or from any of the Fire Ministers. I have dealt with many Fire Ministers over the years. None of them has ever given us a clear answer, because presumably they think that fire and rescue authorities would then say, "Fine. Give us some money to do it."

Q57 **Chair:** As a service, you and your members would be interested in adopting an approach to heart attacks, and the issues around the NHS and ambulances. You are willing to look at and consider that.

Matt Wrack: We are willing to look at that. Indeed, the biggest ever trial of that was conducted under an agreement of the much-maligned National Joint Council. We agreed a trial in several fire and rescue services where that activity was undertaken. It is the biggest experience in the British fire service of people undertaking that sort of work. There were some positive lessons and some negative lessons that we could draw from that, but one of the obstacles we face is a lack of clarity about what is expected of the fire and rescue service.

Let me just make one point in response to something that Mark said on the question of feet on the ground. The old CFOA, the predecessor of the NFCC, made the point that the fire and rescue service can respond quickly to major incidents and get boots on the ground. At one point, we were discussing the possibility of responding to three simultaneous incidents. That is a lot more difficult when you have lost 11,000 jobs. We have lost 11,000 jobs in our service over the past 12 years: an unprecedented level of cuts to our service. Frankly, that makes the fire service less resilient than it should be, and less resilient than it was previously.

Q58 **Chair:** That is very helpful. Thank you. Roy, would you like to comment?

Roy Wilsher: Certainly. Obviously, our role as an inspectorate is to inspect what is happening now, rather than looking to the future, although I will pick up on one thing. I agree with both Matt and Mark about clarity on the role of the fire and rescue service. That is one of our national recommendations, and it has been for a while now. We are promised, and look forward to, some clarity in the White Paper on that. We would call for that.

First, we would like to praise the firefighters across the country, who are a very skilled and capable workforce that can add even more to their communities. We have seen through our inspections that there are some

good areas, but there are also areas for improvement. Responding to fires, multi-agency response, increasing fire protection and building safety are all good areas, but there are areas to improve still. What firefighters do in some services, which is very productive, is fire prevention and protections. Other services do not do that so much, and I think that standard could be brought up. There is also a standard about how resources are allocated to risk that could be improved in some areas. Overall, they are improving and doing a good job, but that clarity would help everyone.

Q59 **Chair:** That is helpful, thank you. I am going to come to Simon Fell, but before I do, I want to come back to the hearing we had in March. We had quite a lot of conversation about covid and the approach that the FBU took to being asked to take up different duties during the pandemic. I think Sir Tom Winsor was quite critical of the FBU. I wondered if you wanted to respond to that, as another example of what is expected of your members.

Matt Wrack: I very much would like to respond, and I appreciate the invitation to address the Committee on that. I think there were some misleading comments made in that evidence session. We have a very high union density in the fire and rescue service; most firefighters are members of our union, and they expect to have a union bargain and negotiate on their behalf. Just to be clear about where I think some of the confusion from Tom Winsor arises—I think he draws a false analogy with policing. Firefighters are not police officers; their employment status is entirely different. They are civilian employees with the same rights as any other civilian employee. To compare them, incorrectly, with police officers is misleading.

We have systems in place to negotiate. Very rapidly, as soon as covid hit, our union took a decision very clearly—although there were some different points of view—that we would be keen to support wider efforts to engage in the covid response in whatever form that took. That took place very quickly. Roy, with a different hat on at the time, attended those tripartite talks between our employers—primarily local government employers or their representatives—the National Fire Chiefs Council and the Fire Brigades Union. We reached a whole series of agreements.

I will pick up on some of the comments that were made. In *Fire* magazine, both in May 2020 and September 2020—you can find those articles—Roy praises and comments on how groundbreaking those agreements were. So we found the comments that were made at the evidence session to this Committee to be somewhat alarming and misleading. We did not obstruct the vaccination. In fact, we have the evidence of a National Joint Council circular that said very clearly that the Fire Brigades Union was willing to engage in vaccination work. We reached that agreement in an understanding in meetings where Roy was in attendance. We were very clear that if those requests came in, we would support that measure.

I have two points to make: first, firefighters, as key workers, unlike millions of other people, were required to carry on attending their workplace with all the risks that brought. We have had members who died

of covid, and some of those cases we believe are linked to their attendance in the workplace. Additionally, we had members who volunteered to do a whole range of activities. They were delivering PPE to care homes and other venues. They were delivering other items to vulnerable people in the community. They were driving ambulances and training ambulance drivers. They were training people in the use of PPE. I think the thing that brings home in a stark way what our members volunteered to do, under agreement with their union, was the fact that we had specialist teams in at least two services moving the bodies of the deceased. That included FBU officials, so I have to say that we took great exception to some of the comments that were made in your last evidence session suggesting that our union attempted to obstruct that. That is absolutely and utterly untrue, and it has caused a great deal of offence, particularly to those union members who undertook those activities on the basis that their union had agreed it. With all due respect to Mr Hardingham, sometimes our members don't have the greatest confidence that their chief officer is looking after their safety as well as their union is looking after their safety. They expect their union to step in and address those matters, and that is what that agreement allowed us to do.

Q60 **Chair:** Right. You have had your opportunity to put that on the record. If I recall, the concern was that at the national level it hadn't been possible to get to the point where the agreement had been reached, but locally—

Matt Wrack: That is not the case. There was a whole series of agreements issued in National Joint Council circulars. Numerous agreements were reached. We invited all parties so that we, the NFCC and the employers could bring proposals for agreement. Discussions are sometimes difficult, but they were agreed as quickly as possible to facilitate that work at a local level.

Chair: We all want to say a huge thank you to you for the work that your members and fire officers carried out during the pandemic. From what you just described, we recognise that it must have been incredibly harrowing work at times, so we all want to say thank you.

Q61 **Simon Fell:** Welcome, everyone, and thank you for coming. I just want to take you back to the White Paper. You all mentioned the need for clarity from the Government, and you have a view on the future of the service. I am interested to hear from you all what you think might be missing from the White Paper.

Mark Hardingham: I don't think there is any one thing that stands out as entirely missing from the White Paper. The challenge that sits before us now is how we turn the set of principles and proposals in the White Paper into the reality that delivers something different for the fire and rescue service and, ultimately, for the public in the future. It covers a broad range of areas from operational independence, a college of fire and some of the national institutions, entry standards, pay, the role and the National Joint Council, and even governance of the fire and rescue service.

We are clear in our response to the consultation on the White Paper that reform of the fire and rescue service is going to require investment in the fire service. At the moment, we are entering a particularly difficult fiscal period across the whole of Government—not just in the fire and rescue service. The challenge is, how do we find the investment to enable us to deliver on some of the recommendations in the White Paper and, at the heart of it, create the 21st-century fire and rescue service that I and others spoke about in response to the Chair's question earlier? That is the fire service that the public expect and need over the course of the next five or 10 years.

Q62 **Simon Fell:** Thank you. Roy?

Roy Wilsher: Again, I agree with Mark. I don't think there is much missing. Momentum needs to be maintained so that it can be taken forward. One of the things I would agree with is that we have seen an improvement in fire protection and building safety because of investment and grants from the Government—to give the Home Office their due. That needs to be sustainable, and any improvement needs to be sustainable.

Q63 **Simon Fell:** Thank you. Matt?

Matt Wrack: The single most important thing that is missing is assessing how fire and rescue policy is developed to advise Government. Since the primary legislation changed in 2004, a whole series of structures that existed previously have been abolished. The fire service that I joined in the 1980s was one of the leading, if not the leading, fire services in the advanced economies. I am not convinced that that is the case today. One example is the work that is being done on contaminants and the risk of cancers to firefighters. The World Health Organisation has just designated firefighting to be an occupation at risk of cancers. The only people doing work systematically on that is our union. It has been ignored by chief fire officers, it is being ignored by employers and it is being ignored by central Government. I think that in previous decades we would have had centrally funded research on that issue; we are funding research by a lottery, which I don't think is really appropriate, to be honest.

The structures that were abolished in 2004 had been in place. The Government now take their advice on fire and rescue policy from the National Fire Chiefs Council, and pretty much only from the National Fire Chiefs Council. I ask the Committee to consider this point. If you have listened to the evidence presented at the Grenfell Tower inquiry, I do not see how anyone argues that that system is fit for purpose, because there were warnings that should have been seen. There were fires in the UK that included fires worsened by cladding and there were certainly similar fires elsewhere in the world.

People should have been horizon scanning, so this is not remotely to blame anyone on the ground on the night of the Grenfell Tower fire—they did an absolutely outstanding job in the circumstances—but we do not have in this country adequate systems to develop policy, to identify emerging risks and to identify changing risks to our communities. There has been a terrible level of complacency, whereby I have sat and heard civil servants and, frankly, Ministers

and sometimes chief officers say that fire is a declining risk, and therefore we can take our eye off the ball and we can concentrate on things other than fire. I think Grenfell gives the lie to that claim, which has been—unfortunately—a mantra from Whitehall for a considerable period of time.

In our view we need new systems that actually address those issues and allow the voices of the people who are really on the frontline—the people who are sent in to risk their lives in fires—to have their say on what fire policy should be and what fire and rescue policy should be in this country.

Q64 **Simon Fell:** I am not going to get into Grenfell, because we will cover that later in the session, but regarding those structures, you mentioned research, horizon scanning and policy development. Is there anything else that you feel is missing?

Matt Wrack: Yes, everything from how we recruit people to how we train people to how we develop people. If you went and looked before 2004, you would have found national systems in place that provided very clear guidance and indeed regulation about how people were recruited, trained and developed in the fire and rescue service. None of that exists now.

Particularly in England, we have an extremely fragmented fire and rescue service where everyone does their own thing. It affects everything from how we recruit onwards. You touched on the question of diversity in your last session. It touches on all of those issues that there is, frankly, no serious national strategy to improve diversity in the fire and rescue service. In our view, that is because of the terrible level of fragmentation that we have in our service and in our profession.

Q65 **Simon Fell:** You have led me very neatly on to my next question, which is about diversity and inclusion, and whether the White Paper did enough to set the direction for this. I suspect that I know your view already, Matt; I just wonder, Mark and Roy, what your opinion is on this issue.

Mark Hardingham: The expectation around the increasing diversity of the fire and rescue service is absolutely clear and the statistics bear that out. The fire service is not as diverse an organisation as it needs to be if we want to be the best fire and rescue service that we can be.

The direction of travel, whether it is from a female or from a member of an ethnic minority or from a lesbian, gay or bisexual member of the fire and rescue service, is in the right direction, but the pace of moving in that direction is extremely slow and has been for quite some time.

There is work going on in every fire and rescue service in the country to increase diversity. There is substantial work inside the NFCC to do that as well. I think that the reform potential within the White Paper provides the opportunity to put a shoulder in behind that to achieve even more.

What I would say around an inclusive workforce and around equality, diversity and inclusion is that it is not just a fire and rescue service issue as to why the fire and rescue service is where it is. We absolutely carry responsibility around that, particularly as senior leaders in the fire service,

but I think this is a societal challenge as well, about what the perception is of a firefighter and of their role.

The headline of an article in a broadsheet newspaper only four or five weeks ago read, "Fire service entry standards lowered to recruit more women". What does that say to women in the fire and rescue service? What does it say to women who want to join? I don't think it presents a positive picture. When you got into the detail of the article, it was somewhat different; actually, it was about a fire and rescue service that had done some national horizon scanning into other fire services, looked at the sort of equipment they carry and adjusted their entry standard to make it more appropriate to the role of a firefighter in that particular service. It was a very different reason than was presented in the headline. I think that narrative to the public is extremely unhelpful when we are trying to create a much more diverse workforce.

My final point is that it is not just about recruitment. It is about what the organisation is like when people of diversity come into it. There is substantial work being done, but much more still needs to be done to make fire and rescue services more inclusive workplaces. We need to grasp that opportunity even more through the White Paper.

Q66 **Simon Fell:** You are probably preaching to the choir about misleading headlines when speaking to a Committee of politicians. I take your point. Roy, do you have anything to add?

Roy Wilsher: Perhaps I can go back to your first question about the national policy and direction. Matt is quite right that in the mid-2000s a lot of institutions, including the then inspectorate, were done away with. We are back now as an inspectorate. I think the NFCC has filled quite a hole, but there is a proposal for a college of fire in the White Paper, which talks about professionalisation and the proof of professional practice. You have the College of Policing, the College of Paramedics and the Royal College of Nursing. A profession deserves a college of that kind, but it will need resource to do that. I do not entirely agree with Matt on the complete fragmentation of services. We found that there are variances but not a complete fragmentation. There has been work done together, but a college of fire, working with the NFCC and others, could certainly fill that gap.

On diversity, I echo everything that Mark said. If you want a professional service, you have to employ the people with the talent to make it one. To get talent, you need to employ and attract people from all sections of society. There are examples of good practice across the service now. Along with the NFCC, we are setting up a portal that shows good practice across the range of things fire services do, including recruiting. We are tracking people through from application to employment, and seeing where there are gaps and how we can take positive action and attract people. As I said in a previous session, the fire service is a well-kept secret in terms of the experiences and the job it gives you. We need the whole of society and all our communities to recognise that and join.

Q67 **Simon Fell:** The proposed college of fire would be a step in the right

direction. I am interested to hear from all of you what you think the impact of the fragmentation of the 44 services is and if you have the mechanisms at the moment to learn from policing. I recognise that it is a different service and it is structured differently, but is there anything you can learn from what they have gone through and their learnings from the College of Policing? What about from international fire services? What are they getting right, and where can you pick up good practice from them? Are those mechanisms already there, or are you relying on the college being progressed and set up to really get into that and deliver?

Mark Hardingham: There are five functions that are proposed for a college of fire, including standards, ethics, leadership, research and data. To a greater or lesser extent, all five of those are currently being serviced through the National Fire Chiefs Council. I wouldn't want anybody to go away with the view that on all five of those areas, nothing is happening in the fire service, because there is a substantial amount of work happening already.

If I just pick out the independent Fire Standards Board, which was set up about three years ago, I sit as a member of the board alongside employers and the Home Office. It is independently chaired. It is producing national standards for fire and rescue services. There are about 11 standards out there at the moment, and there are additional standards that will come out during the course of this year. I think the functions are already there. On leadership, there is an executive leadership programme for the fire and rescue service. That is broadly similar to what is there for policing, with the strategic command course. There are other leadership programmes that we are running at the supervisory and middle management level, both now and in the future.

I think there will be a significant amount of learning drawn from the College of Policing. I meet colleagues in the National Police Chiefs' Council and the College of Policing to talk about that sort of stuff. I think they would be the first to say that the way in which different organisations work together is not perfect. One thing that the fire service has at the moment is a degree of simplicity; there aren't too many competing organisations at a national level where there is a fear of overlap and bumping into each other and a lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities. There is absolutely some learning that can be drawn from the policing model, accepting that the fire service is quite different in what we do. I suspect that the level of available funding will be somewhat different as well.

In terms of international colleagues, as chair of the NFCC, I have good international reach into the Metro Fire Chiefs in the US, the FEU in Europe, and an organisation called AFAC in Australia and New Zealand. I think the UK fire and rescue service stands up well in comparison to international colleagues, but that doesn't mean there aren't things we can learn from international colleagues. If you look at the States, for example, there is a strong system—and there has been for some time—for writing guidance and standards for fire and rescue services. I would overlay that with the fact that there are 35,000 fire and rescue services in the US, so it is an

extremely complex operating environment, and not one I would necessarily want to replicate here.

Simon Fell: Thank you very much. Matt, I'll come to you now.

Matt Wrack: I would agree with some of what Mark has said. However, I have two points. First, I don't think it is particularly joined up, and secondly, what is absent from everything Mark has said is the voice of the workforce. Our members are professional firefighters who obviously do what everyone thinks: they ride fire engines and so on; but they are also out inspecting buildings and they have a knowledge of fire safety legislation.

On the question of standards, we have negotiated role maps with our employers. They clearly set out what is required contractually of firefighters, between their union collectively and their employer. If a third party—the standards board—says it has now set up a new standard, what is missing is how that links in with what has already been agreed between the employee and the employer. That is almost totally off the radar of what the NFCC seems to be doing. What we won't accept—and this is a big problem—is people unilaterally changing people's contracts, because any employee has the right to understand what is in their contract, and what can be asked of them and what cannot be asked of them. I am sure you have got some very able staff around here—what you don't do is suddenly tell them, overnight, that they have got to go and sweep the yard in their lunchtime. Unfortunately, that sort of thing is happening in the fire and rescue service, and we are not prepared to accept it. The link between discussions strategically, and the workforce and its rights, is missing.

On the US, one thing that is noticeably different is there is actually less of an anti-union agenda in the United States fire service than there is here. We have strong links with the International Association of Fire Fighters, which sits on all the bodies that Mark referred to. It is very much involved in standard setting for things such as PPE, response to incidents and so on. That is not the case here, because there is, sadly, a very clear anti-union agenda from a number of people in the fire and rescue service. I think that is what lies behind much of the criticism of the National Joint Council.

On the inspectorate, the only fire service organisation that supported an independent inspectorate during the time at which it was abolished was the Fire Brigades Union. It was not supported by the Chief Fire Officers Association, which preferred peer-review systems where chief officers marked each other's work. We were the only organisation on a UK-wide basis that said, "That is not adequate, and we need independent inspection." We have attempted to have that dialogue with the inspectorate—I have got to say, under the new chief inspector, we have had a meeting and we welcome that—but we were very disappointed that the previous chief inspector chose, despite requests, not to meet with us and not to have a dialogue with us. He has made all sorts of criticisms of the NJC without ever discussing it with either us or the employers' side of the NJC.

Simon Fell: Given that you'll be feeling very supported, Roy, over to you.

Roy Wilsher: I think your original question was: was there learning between policing and fire? Of course, the inspectorate inspects both. I inspect forces as well as fire services. There are things that policing can learn from the fire service as well—it is not a one-way street. I very much agree on the fragmentation. There was a policy vacuum in the 2000s, but I think things are coming back together.

There are two things for the inspectorate, if you look at our strategies. The first part of that strategy is adding public value, so helping policing and fire to improve. The second is a systems approach. Under the new chief inspector, we are certainly looking at how we can maintain our independence, which is absolutely vital, but also how we can work with other organisations, whether that is a college or the NFCC. We have met with the FBU and we will continue to do so. It is about working with others through a systems approach for improvement. That is the reason we exist, really. It is not just to tell people where they are not doing things correctly, but to help them improve. We are very much up for working with other people. We want to maintain independence, but also help that improvement and learning across the different sectors.

Q68 **Chair:** Could I just ask about the NFCC equality, diversity and inclusion strategy and plan? We discussed it in March and asked whether you had produced an annual report, which was one of the things in that plan. That had not happened then. Has that happened since we last asked you in March?

Mark Hardingham: It is being produced this year. An annual equality, diversity and inclusion plan from the NFCC for the period 2022-23 is happening this year, and that will be—

Chair: This year—so, in the next few weeks? We are getting to the end of the year.

Mark Hardingham: This financial year.

Chair: This financial year—so by next April?

Mark Hardingham: Yes.

Q69 **Chair:** That will be the first annual report. Are you are planning to produce that annually?

Mark Hardingham: We are planning to produce it annually unless we take a conscious decision to do something different from that. It would be wrong of me to sit here now and say, "We will produce it annually for the next 10 years," when we might choose to do something different. But, certainly for this year, our intention is to produce and publish an annual plan.

Q70 **Chair:** I understood it was a commitment to capture progress through an annual report.

Mark Hardingham: It is, yes.

Q71 **Chair:** Okay. You haven't done so so far, but you are going to produce one by April next year. Then, you are going to think about whether you are going to carry on producing an annual report.

Mark Hardingham: No. We will carry on producing an annual report unless we decide that we want to do it in a different way in the future. I think the answer is yes.

Q72 **Chair:** All right. Roy, as part of your inspections going forward, will you be looking at this issue of inclusion and diversity? Will that now be part of—

Roy Wilsher: We do already. Under what we term our people pillar, we look at recruitment, diversity, talent management, leadership—all sorts of people issues—as well as health and safety and welfare. They come under the third section of our reports.

Q73 **Chair:** It is a bit disappointing that we haven't got this annual report to actually look at what's happening from the NFCC—

Roy Wilsher: What we don't do is inspect the National Fire Chiefs Council. We inspect each individual fire and rescue service.

Q74 **Chair:** Yes, but this report would be a helpful tool in seeing what progress is being made, wouldn't it?

Roy Wilsher: I think any progress in any report would be helpful for everyone, yes.

Chair: Thank you.

Q75 **Tim Loughton:** Can I come back to the roles of fire officers? These days, you don't really put out many fires. We have heard about a big decrease in the number of personnel, but also, fortunately, a decrease in the number of house fires. However, there are big increases in your being called to what might be termed climate change events. At the moment, there is flooding; over the summer, we saw an awful lot of fires involving crops and open spaces. Do you think that is a continuing trend? That partly depends on what the world does about climate change, I suppose. How geared up are you to deal with those changing duties and responsibilities? What do you think needs to change so that you can react as flexibly and effectively to rescuing people and property from floods as you do when rescuing people and property when it is burning down?

Mark Hardingham: You are right: the number of fires that fire services attend has gone down. It has gone down over the course of the last 10 years—the figure now is about 577,000—but we are seeing an uptick. In the last two to three years, we have seen a slight increase in the number of fires we are attending, and we still attend a number of significant fires; obviously Grenfell is the most high-profile and tragic example recently, but there have been many other very significant fires across the UK, and that will continue to be the case.

An awful lot of great work has been done around prevention and providing targeted support to the most vulnerable people in communities, to try to maintain that low level of fires we want to attend, but there is a risk of complacency around the number of fires we attend. When we look at the built environment, modern methods of construction and the way that buildings are being built now and in the future, and, as you just highlighted, when we look at the consequences of climate change—of which flooding is one, but wildfires over the winter are another—we need to be really careful about not becoming increasingly complacent about what has been a good direction of travel over the course of the last 10 years.

In terms of wildfires and climate change, last year was an exceptional year, and it might be that next year is not quite as busy from a wildfire perspective, but I think overall the trend will always go in one direction: up. All the reporting around the climate summit at the moment does not give me any cause for optimism around that. In the year until September this year, we attended nearly 1,000 wildfires across the UK. The year before, it was about 250. There were 60 homes lost on that hottest day of the year in July. As Matt touched on, there is undoubtedly a consequence for the fire service's resilience and how it steps forward in that period of peak demand, which was not just those two days when it was over 40°C—it extended for about six or eight weeks, right throughout the summer.

There is no doubt about it: fire and rescue services were stretched on those two particular hot days. Fifteen services across the country then declared major incidents. Many services were unable to provide fire engines and firefighters across the border into neighbouring services, as they would normally do, because of the impact of the major incident and the wildfires in their area. It was right across the whole country; there was not a fire service that escaped from that.

Looking forward, this is the world that we now live in. We are going to see more wildfires. We are going to see wildfires for a more extended period of time. We are going to see more widescale flooding and the other consequences of climate change. We in the NFCC have a national wildfire lead, Paul Hedley, who is the chief fire officer up in Northumberland, and he does a lot of work internationally with colleagues, but of course there is always more that we can do. What could we learn from colleagues in southern Europe, California and Australia about how they deal with this sort of stuff? What is the new training and equipment that we can provide? What are the new vehicles that we can provide? How do we make the service increasingly resilient in terms of our firefighting capability?

My final point is that this is not entirely within the gift of the fire service to solve. We are the sticking plaster at the end of the day when things have gone terribly wrong from a climate perspective. There is a wider role for the fire service in how we influence public policy to better protect local communities, so that they do not end up in the situations we found this summer.

Q76 **Tim Loughton:** Thank you. Mr Wrack, how stretched were your members

during the summer with those fires, and earlier in the year when there was serious flooding in parts of the country, which we are seeing again at the moment? How unresilient is the force now to deal with those sorts of emergency?

Matt Wrack: Extremely stretched. The Commissioner of the London Fire Brigade described one of those days in London as the busiest time for the London Fire Brigade since the blitz; that gives you an idea. What was shocking about that is that we are used to seeing moorland fires in country areas; we are not used to seeing that touching on the capital city. That should be a wake-up call for us all.

I want to make a couple of points on domestic fires and so on. Absolutely, fires have declined. That is a trend in most of the advanced economies of the world, because people are smoking less, how they heat their homes has changed and so on. But in our view, that should not mean that people are told—I am not saying you are suggesting this—that they can expect a lower standard of response. They still need the same response. Even though fires have dropped by 50%, people in that community are entitled to the same level of response, speed and weight of attack.

In terms of climate change, this is an international debate in the fire and rescue profession worldwide. Mark mentioned Australia. We have links with firefighters in Australia and New Zealand and all across Europe, and in North America. Clearly some of those have had much worse experiences than we have so far experienced in terms of wildfires, but we need to build in thinking about wildfires, floods, storms and other extreme weather events.

One point that it is important to make about all those incidents is that they are often very large scale and protracted. A house fire can be dealt within an hour or a couple of hours, sometimes. A major flood may last for days and weeks. If you think about the resource implications of that, I don't think that is adequately addressed.

I am here to represent the workforce. It does not happen in many areas of public service that people are told without notice that there is a flood 200 miles away and are asked to drive 200 miles in a fire engine, not knowing when they are going to get home. Think about the impact on families and commitments and so on. That is quite a regular occurrence in relation to flood incidents in particular, but also for some of the big moorland fires we have experienced.

It is worth drawing attention to the fact that there was a moorland fire in Scotland where, over the days that it burned, it produced the same carbon emissions as the entire rest of the Scottish economy during the same period. That shows the scale of what we need to think about.

My last point comes back to resilience and resources. I try to attend incidents where I can, with the help of the local service and the chief officer and so on, to see what people are doing on the ground. In 2018, I attended in Greater Manchester, Lancashire, Derbyshire, on Winter Hill

and elsewhere—you might recall those fires. In the aftermath, at the local government fire conference, a comment was made by a principal manager, who said, "Perhaps the community needs to be told not to expect us to be able to tackle fires on this scale." I challenged the person immediately. I found it quite shocking. I said, "Well, actually, if your fire service hadn't been cut in half over the past 15 years, perhaps you wouldn't be making that point at this conference."

I think communities have the right to expect that their fire service can put out fires. Okay, there is always a debate around resources, but we need to build in the resilience to make sure that we can deal with what can only be a growing threat.

Q77 **Tim Loughton:** That is sort of my question. I am absolutely not suggesting that because there are fewer fires, you have less to do and should not be prepared. The public absolutely expect, and are entitled to expect, that service. When their house catches on fire, it is not an excuse to say, "Oh well, it is quite rare these days, so we are going to take longer to get there." Of course you have got to get there straight away with all the right equipment, resource and fire officers to put it out.

My point is more about resilience, which you touched on there, and whether we are resilient enough at the moment, or what it is going to take to make us resilient, given that we are seeing climate-change related emergencies happen on a more frequent scale. Fires are slightly more mainstream for you to deal with, but you are right; when they affected property in cities, that was a new phenomenon. Certainly, with flooding, which we are seeing a lot of, it is always the fire engines that are there helping in a huge situation that can last for days. It is not just a question of unblocking a drain and you are back to the station.

What has got to change in your service that you can adapt with sufficient resilience, so that we can expect you to turn up and do your very best in an overwhelming situation such as a town flooding and a river bursting its banks?

Matt Wrack: One problem—this is my point about fragmentation—is that fire authorities now plan their resources on the basis of an integrated risk management plan. They call them different things. They are supposed to assess the risk within their community and identify how they will tackle or mitigate those risks. Those risks might be floods, wildfires and so on, depending on the community that they are reflecting. What they do not necessarily do is think about what happens if I send three fire engines from London to Greater Manchester for two weeks. That is not built into the London plan. When those major incidents are happening, they are increasingly reliant on crews from elsewhere across the country. In the Greater Manchester incident that I attended, there were crews from all over the UK in attendance—as I say, some for days at a time and they were put up in hotel accommodation and so on. I think there needs to be much more planning. On the boots on the ground point that was made earlier, how many boots can we put on the ground and how can we sustain that?

Also, for us, there are conditions of service issues. What do you say to someone if you might be away from home for a week without any notice?

Q78 **Tim Loughton:** Can I ask you a completely different question before I go to Mr Wilsher to comment on climate change? I was at a local fire station recently talking to new recruits. It is still a popular job, so we are able to recruit people, but they are not paid enough, are they? I know you will say yes. I was quite surprised that the standby time and the demands on fire officers to be available at antisocial hours and at short notice does not receive, it appears to me, due compensation. It is considerable, but, because it is a popular job, the service does not have to ratchet up terms and conditions to attract more people. What is the answer to that to make sure we get the very best people coming in and we look after them and bring them on?

Matt Wrack: There are various systems of organising fire cover in the UK. Most firefighters are whole-time firefighters, so they work a 42-hour week on some form of shift system during that time. Geographically, most of the UK is covered by retained firefighters, which is who I think you were referring to, in smaller towns, villages and rural communities.

The biggest single problem we have in terms of recruitment and retention is with retained firefighters, because it is very demanding in terms of having to be available on a pager or an alerter system for considerable periods of time. I think Mark covered some of this in the last evidence session. Every single service that I am aware of—most of them have retained to some degree—have difficulties in recruitment and retention. Whole-time firefighters tend to stay. I will come to pay in a minute, but it is a career and people will serve their career and then retire. Among retained firefighters, the length of service is far shorter. In the last figures I saw, people might be working eight years, whereas whole-time firefighters might work 30-plus years.

The other problem that we have increasingly is availability. The system was designed in the 1910s, 1920s for a very different society. If you have people who commute from a village to work in a town somewhere, they might not be available at certain hours of the day. Again, if you visit fire controls, you will find at certain periods of the day and during the week there will be lights alerting the control staff that the fire engine is not available because the crews are not available, so there is a very major problem with recruitment and retention of retained firefighters.

I will, if I may, make a point about whole-time firefighters. The question of pay is an urgent one. Pay has fallen in real terms for the past 12 years. A competent firefighter on the national rate of pay is at least some £4,000 a year worse off than if their pay had kept pace with CPI inflation. That is alarming. We are currently consulting about an offer from our employers. I am sure they are very proud people, but we have firefighters using food banks. We have firefighters being referred by union officials to food banks. We have at least one chief officer—I think of Avon—who publicly wrote in an article recently that he is aware of firefighters using food banks.

There is a growing crisis about the cost of living crisis, as there is for millions of other people, but very much in the fire and rescue service, and it has been allowed to drift for more than a decade. As I say, we have attempted to discuss with Government Ministers the question of investment in the service and what they expect of the service, linked to conditions of service, pay and all those things; and frankly, we have run into a brick wall on that issue.

Q79 **Tim Loughton:** Finally, can I come back to Mr Wilsher on climate change? How much is that becoming a factor in your inspections? I am talking about resilience to deal with climate change events rather than the traditional activities around fires and responding to emergencies.

Roy Wilsher: To answer the question, climate change is here to stay. Even if COP manages to get to the 1.5° point, we still have climate change to stay at the moment, so it will impact the services. We look at a number of things: business continuity, ability to respond to major incidents, and the local integrated risk management plans, which should cover the national response as well. I would also like to make a point about the fires—agreeing with both colleagues here. The number of fires reducing does not necessarily mean you need to reduce the number of firefighters. There are many other things, to do with training, fire prevention, fire protection and responding to climate change.

We are going into round 3 of our inspections next year, and although there will not be a dedicated question on climate change, it will feature more in the things we are looking for—how services are preparing, how they are responding and what resourcing they have to do that. So it will be part of our inspections over the next couple of years.

Q80 **Chair:** Mark, did you want to come back in on one of the questions?

Mark Hardingham: Just briefly. You asked a question about climate change and how we improve the resilience. There are three things I would pick out; there are not only three. One is about flexibility. One of the things with climate change is that you can see it coming, sometimes, in terms of flooding or the extent of wildfires, because of decent weather reporting. So I think there is a degree of flexibility to meet that demand—within appropriate terms, conditions, pay and everything around that.

Secondly, the fire service in the UK has very strong national resilience arrangements that enable us to support neighbouring services and services right across the country. That is not unique to us. I speak to colleagues in Australia and the US, where you will have firefighters drive for 15 hours in a fire engine to get to a wildfire or flooding event. But I agree with the point Matt made: services need to build the expectation of that into their planning, in terms of receiving it in but also giving it out to other services. The third bit—it is going to come down to this—is the financial resilience of fire and rescue services as we go forward. The resilience of the organisation is going to be directly proportional to the level of funding that services have available to them.

To come back to the final point about the whole-time and the on-call service, I think fire services generally do not struggle to recruit whole-time firefighters, but it is getting more challenging. There are fewer applying than normal, for a whole range of reasons, and the level of pay is certainly part of that. In terms of on-call, I will not repeat a lot of what I said earlier, but I was the chief fire officer in an on-call fire and rescue service for probably 10 or 11 years, and in perfect conditions we would have had 450, or thereabouts, on-call firefighters, but I don't think we ever reached that in 10 years.

Recruiting and retaining on-call firefighters is a significant challenge. Pay is part of that, but it is not the only reason; there is other stuff, around flexibility and other commitments in terms of primary employment. It is a significant issue and it is an issue that is growing in the service, because of the changing demographics of society.

Matt Wrack: Chair, could I make a point on flooding that I missed? You asked how it has changed. Certainly Roy will remember and I remember going to floods where we did not have any appropriate equipment to attend floods. We had incidents where we were borrowing boats and so on. We did a lot of campaigning and we were provided—I think, under the last Labour Government—with an increasing number of boats. And there are now specialist resources in fire and rescue services.

One issue that has been the subject of debate with central Government—it comes back to clarity about the role of the service—is the question of a statutory duty. There is no duty on the fire and rescue service to respond to major incidents of flooding. It is not a requirement anywhere. And we have made the case clearly that it should be. We have been attending floods since at least the 1950s, and we are very happy to do so, but it would be helpful if Government clarified that. That change has been made in Scotland, in Wales and in Northern Ireland: the Act has been amended in each of those parts of the UK to make it clear that that response is expected of the fire service. That is not the case in England. I know that previously CFOA opposed that and then changed their mind; I don't know what the current position is. But certainly our position is that the legislation should be clear and should set out an expectation on services that they should plan and respond accordingly.

Q81 **Chair:** Are you agreeing with that, Mark? You were nodding then.

Mark Hardingham: Yes. Dawn Whittaker, chief fire officer of East Sussex, is the national lead around this. Our response to the White Paper included statutory responsibility for that—not just the response aspect, but also a lot of the prevention work that fire services do around water safety, because of the number of people who lose their life going into the water every year.

Chair: On the point you just made, Matt, about having to borrow boats to deal with the flooding, can I just say, as an MP who lived through the extensive flooding in Hull in 2007, that the change was made as a result of the inquiry that followed from those floods? However, your point about

statutory responsibilities is very well made, and hopefully the Government might see sense on that one.

Q82 **Gary Sambrook:** One of the White Paper suggestions is around governance. I just wanted you to explore the idea of directly elected politicians having responsibility for fire services. How will that impact on the service? Is the idea good or bad?

Mark Hardingham: The National Fire Chiefs Council has long held the position that chief fire officers and fire and rescue services will work with whatever governance arrangement is put in front of them. Our focus has always tended to be less on the type of governance, and much more on the quality of the governance in place. There should be clarity about the political role of those governing the organisation, and the operational role of the chief fire officer and the senior leadership team—and a clear distinction between those roles. That is reflected in the White Paper under "operational independence of chief fire officers". It is similar for colleagues in policing; there is legislative clarity around the operational independence of chief constables.

I have worked in a fire and rescue service that was a combined fire authority, and I have worked in a fire and rescue service that was a county council fire service, where I reported directly to a cabinet member, and then up to the leader of the council. I engage with colleagues from all sorts of different governance arrangements, and to be honest, we see some really great examples of governance, and some less good examples of governance. In my experience, the issue does not necessarily tend to be the type of governance; it is more about the clarity on the political and operational roles of those in governance and the chief fire officers, and about really good-quality terms of reference, schemes of delegation, and everything that underpins good governance—Solace guidance and things like that.

Roy Wilsher: We do not inspect governance, but of course, we inspect all services under their different governance arrangements, whether they are police, fire and crime commissioners, Mayors, combined fire authorities or county councils, so the impacts are the same. On governance, I agree on the principles of the White Paper—good scrutiny, executive leadership and those sorts of things. The governance required is good governance, whatever shape it comes in. Again, the operational independence of chief fire officers and governance—those sorts of issues—would meet some of our national recommendations.

Matt Wrack: It may not be a popular view, but we have some concerns about the single-person model, whether the person is a Mayor or a PCC. We are concerned about the amount of power being placed in one person's hands, so we have expressed concerns about that. That said, we work with whatever is in place, and we have good and bad dialogue with all the various governance structures that exist in the English services.

We are keen to defend the right of local communities to have their say on their fire and rescue service. They are the people who pay for it, so we

think they have a right to ask, "What is it we're paying for, and what's the shape of that?" That is where we take issue with this "operational independence" term, which is a bit of a slippery term, because if you ask people to define it, you get different answers. Operational independence sounds as though it is about managing fire incidents, but that is not remotely what it is about; clearly, operational managers manage operational incidents already.

In our view, the concern is that this is about reducing political scrutiny and community scrutiny of plans for local fire and rescue services—questions about how many fire stations there are, how many fire engines there are, and which firefighters crew those fire stations and fire engines. If you are paying your council tax, you want to know what you are getting for your money. You have the right to know that. Our concern is that behind some of the pressure from the NFCC is the ability of chief officers to determine that unilaterally, with less scrutiny, including political scrutiny, and to then determine what firefighters can to do, bypassing established mechanisms for determining contractual and employment matters—that is, negotiations. We have concerns about what operational independence actually means, and the risks that it poses to local democracy.

Q83 **Gary Sambrook:** You talk about people having a direct say in the service; surely directly electing an individual in an election is the best way of having your say in a service.

Matt Wrack: It may be. An old-fashioned council structure might also be a mechanism for doing that. You elect a ward councillor, whether it is through a combined authority or a county council authority, who has a say in that area of policy.

Q84 **Gary Sambrook:** But that is only if you are lucky enough to have your local councillor sitting on that body and if you have a directly elected person. I do not think we have any system in the UK where only one person has all the power. There are checks and balances. Even if you are a council leader, you must report to the council. If you are a Mayor, you must report to the regional mayoral authority. In the west midlands, we have every council leader in a scrutiny committee, and there are about three or four different layers of scrutiny of the directly elected Mayor. Surely having your say and voting to directly elect someone who will be responsible, then having an additional vote to elect people to scrutinise them, is the purest way of doing it.

Matt Wrack: It depends on the powers of the scrutiny panel. Does the panel have the power to make decisions? Is it something that a Mayor or the PCC have to take account of and then make the decision themselves? There are questions.

I have a further point on the independence of the fire and rescue service. It is about our concern with the other model, the PCC or PFCC model. We are clear that the fire and rescue service is, and should be, a separate public service and profession. You touched on some of those issues in your last evidence session, and on the fact that fire and rescue is not policing.

It is widely acknowledged in the service, and by senior police officers, that firefighters can get into and talk to communities that police forces may have more difficulty with. We want to keep that neutrality and independence. We have a long history; anyone who studies the history of the fire service will know that we used to have police fire brigades before the second world war. That model did not work, so they were got rid of at the end of the war and we created the modern fire service. Our concern is that those boundaries are being blurred, which will not benefit the firefighting profession or communities.

Q85 **Gary Sambrook:** The current system has reasonably opaque committees made up of local councillors, and it is difficult to get through. How does that help the independence of the service?

Matt Wrack: It helps on one level, in that the fire service is a separate service. For example, the drive toward—

Q86 **Gary Sambrook:** But it is not if councillors are involved, because it is not separate.

Matt Wrack: I am making two different points. The first is about PCCs. I have expressed some concern—although it is lesser than our concerns about PCCs—about mayoral systems and so on; we have some broad, political policy positions on mayoral systems, but that is secondary. We have a clearer position on PCC takeovers, of which there have been about four so far. We are opposed to them, because we are opposed to the blurring of the lines between policing and the provision of a fire and rescue service.

Again, lessons of the past are not being learned. I have lived through times when we dealt with civil disturbances. My union organised firefighters in Northern Ireland throughout the troubles; we had to engage with different communities in the most difficult of circumstances, and independence from the police was absolutely vital. That is almost not on the radar in the discussion today, and we are missing a trick from the history of our service.

Q87 **Gary Sambrook:** Before 2012 and the invention of police and crime commissioners, was it not the same system for both? You didn't have that separation before 2012. The same committees would do it.

Matt Wrack: Yes, but—

Q88 **Gary Sambrook:** That was certainly the case in Birmingham; the same committee was doing it. You didn't have the independence before 2012. You've now got police and crime commissioners.

Matt Wrack: No, it depends where you were.

Q89 **Gary Sambrook:** Which leads neatly to the next question, about the 44 different services and how much of a barrier you think having a fragmented system is to modernisation. Do you want to go first, Matt?

Matt Wrack: Yes. Look, you can go back to two reports from the 1970s that raised questions about how many fire services there were in England

and recommended mergers and so on. There has been a small number of mergers in the intervening 40 or 50 years. A lot of it depends on the dynamics of the local politicians sitting on either county councils or fire authorities, who often resist the idea of merging. Equally, under the last Labour Government, the idea of just regionalising everything didn't go down well at all, so there has to be a dialogue on the optimum size that reflects the ability to deliver an effective fire and rescue service, but also is able to engage with and relate to the needs of the local community, however that is determined.

Roy Wilsher: To cover a few of the issues you have raised, I don't think you can take operational independence alone. It becomes part of the system—the scrutiny, ourselves as an inspectorate, and a fire college if there is one, so the standards are set. In policing, there is a lot of public scrutiny, whether by independent advisory groups or others. There is a lot of accountability there, so you shouldn't take it in isolation.

In terms of the bleed-across, I personally inspect three areas that have PFCCs—Northamptonshire, Essex and North Yorkshire—and I have not seen that bleed. So far, I have seen appropriate collaboration, whether in fleet management or use of buildings—those sorts of thing—but not expecting firefighters to do policing roles, because warranted officers are totally different. I agree with Matt: the police don't cross over in that way, and they play a different role.

On the number of fire and rescue services, we have not yet made a comment, but that is a debate that should be had. What is a sustainable fire and rescue service? What size should it be, especially if we are to have more financial issues coming towards us? That is a debate that should be out in the open.

Mark Hardingham: To finish off on operational independence first, the NFCC's support for operationally independent chief fire officers is absolutely not about chief fire officers riding roughshod over their organisations or avoiding appropriate political scrutiny from their fire authorities. On what an operationally independent role is and how we capture what it means, the devil will be in the detail. That can be set out either in legislation or in the national framework document when it is rewritten for the fire service. There are safeguards, so fire authorities will hold chief fire officers to account for their operational independence. Chief fire officers have to produce a statement of assurance every year, which goes to the fire authority. There are national standards now, which the services will need to adopt. An inspectorate sits over that, which will take a view about the operationally independent decisions of a chief fire officer. An operationally independent role reflects other operationally independent roles in public sector organisations, whether directors of public health, chief constables or whoever.

On the question arising over fire services, I suspect that if you got 43 people in the room, you would probably get 43 different answers; ours would be somewhere between No. 1 and No. 43. The reality is that, in the absence of national direction on the number of fire and rescue services,

we will stay broadly where we are. There might be, as Matt has described, the occasional merger of two fire and rescue services because of a political appetite to do that, or an event, financial or otherwise, that creates the catalyst for doing it, but it will be occasional.

The direction of travel at the moment—this came up in an earlier question about governance—tends to be more around police, fire and crime commissioners and elected Mayors than mergers or reducing the size of services. I also think, echoing Roy's point, that this is a national debate that needs to be had. Going back quite a while, the Welsh services combined to three. Much more recently, the Scottish fire services, alongside policing, combined in a single service. There is experience that can be drawn on, in terms of how that has been managed, and the benefits and challenges along the way.

Q90 **Gary Sambrook:** I have a last, quick question. To go back briefly to inclusion and diversity, most of the answers featured firefighters and people in recruitment, but there also seems to be a diversity and inclusion problem in the leadership of all three organisations. If you look at the websites to see the people in positions of influence, it is all very samey. How are you directly trying to influence the leadership of all your respective organisations, so that it reflects society? I am talking about not just the conventional areas of diversity, but region. I noticed from the bios that nearly all of you are from London or the south-east. As a Brummie, I find that hugely objectionable. How are you going beyond the usual London and home counties look?

Mark Hardingham: The senior leadership of the fire and rescue service broadly reflects the demographic of the fire and rescue services. Most chief fire officers are white men. That is not entirely the case; there are some female chief fire officers.

Tim Loughton: West Sussex.

Mark Hardingham: Absolutely; Sabrina. There are some chief fire officers who have come into the organisation not directly through the route of being a firefighter.

The National Fire Chiefs Council is doing work about opening up the opportunity for direct entry to the fire service, but in a much more considered, co-ordinated and consistent way than has been done in the past, so that we support people when they come in. That will never replace progression through the organisation; it will just be another tool in the box, in terms of how people can progress and increase the diversity of teams.

I think we will see a slow drift of women and people from different ethnic backgrounds into middle management and then senior roles, as the number of people recruited into the fire and rescue service from a diverse perspective increases. While we do that, it is incumbent on the National Fire Chiefs Council to ensure that equality and inclusion are writ large in the leadership programmes that we provide for everybody in supervisory,

middle and senior leadership roles. That way, we create inclusive leaders, and the leadership programmes are attractive to anybody in the fire and rescue service. People can realise their potential, and do not feel that is only the purview of white men who join the fire and rescue service.

You are right: we tend to focus on the uniformed, operational firefighter roles in the fire service. Fire service staff perform many different support functions in every fire and rescue service where the diversity is much broader. Among fire control staff, there is much broader diversity; I do not have the figures in front of me, but the numbers are weighted more towards a female workforce than a male one. There are different aspects of diversity in different parts of the service.

Roy Wilsher: First of all, you will be pleased to know that the chief inspector is from Liverpool, and we have moved our headquarters to Birmingham, as part of levelling-up.

Gary Sambrook: Excellent; I should visit at some point.

Roy Wilsher: So we are moving that way. On a more serious note, what has been said is absolutely right. When it comes to people, we will inspect the leadership of the organisation, how people are developed, the talent management and retention policies. It is one thing to recruit people, whether through direct entry or at a lower level; it is another to retain and promote them. This goes back to my earlier comment about using all the talent at your disposal. Constantly looking like white men is not the best way to do it, because you do not get that diversity of thought. I praise the NFCC on the director entry, and am also really pleased that is a standard approach now, because in the past the fire service let down direct entrants; everyone was left to their own devices. There needs to be a national standard that is well met.

Matt Wrack: This debate has been around ever since I joined the fire service, and the fire and rescue service has not made sufficient progress at all. Part of that is a lack of joined-up thinking and fragmentation. Why do some services that reflect diverse communities in big cities have very different results in recruiting and retaining ethnic minority firefighters? We should examine why one fire service is more effective than another at recruitment, retention and promotion. I do not think that is particularly happening.

On our own structures, we are a small union and we have an executive council elected by members. There are 13 regions in the Fire Brigades Union. We have women who are elected as executive council members by a predominantly white male membership, and we have black and ethnic minority executive council members who are elected by a predominantly white male membership. On that score, our executive council is not ideal, but it is not that bad.

We took this debate on in the 1980s, when the first debates around diversity started—what was then called equal opportunities and so on. We have sections in our union for women, for black and ethnic minority

members and for LGBT members. We have national structures for those groups of members to engage in, with education facilities and structures within the union for them to raise issues. In the past, they have played quite a role in discussions with employers about how to break through—if they want to get some advice about how to recruit black firefighters, it might be worth speaking to some black firefighters about it; or if they want to recruit LGBT firefighters, it might be worth speaking to them.

We have those structures in place. Again, by and large, for the past 10 or 15 years, they have not been taken advantage of. Through the National Joint Council, however, we created the inclusive fire service group, which involved our sections sitting with employers to look at some of the issues. A lot is still to be done.

I will finish with the point I started with on that. None of the fire and rescue services is anywhere near where they should be, but that difference between some whose communities are probably comparable should be examined in more detail.

Q91 **Chair:** I want to ask some questions about Grenfell. Five years on, a number of recommendations have been made and implemented. I would like to hear from each of you about whether you are now feeling confident that we will never again be in the position that we were in with Grenfell. Mark, will you start us off?

Mark Hardingham: More than five years on, the fire service absolutely still exists in the shadow of Grenfell and, I suspect, will do for many years—rightly so. I think it significantly shapes what the NFCC does and what fire and rescue services do, alongside the Manchester Arena inquiry report, which came out just this week.

Of the 46 recommendations that came out of the first phase report, a number were specific to the London Fire Brigade, although an awful lot of national and multi-agency recommendations were in there. As the NFCC, we have a function inside the NFCC that oversees some of the national work to deliver on those recommendations. We have a co-ordinating role with every fire and rescue service across the country on the progress that has been made against delivery of the recommendations. I am held to account as the NFCC chair, not just by the council and the board of trustees within the NFCC, but by the Grenfell recommendations ministerial board, which I sit on alongside Andy Roe, the London Fire Brigade commissioner. We feed back our regular surveys of the fire and rescue services, and report on the national work on progress against those of the 46 recommendations that are relevant to us.

Q92 **Chair:** That is with a Minister—sorry, did you say "ministerial"?

Mark Hardingham: That is with a Minister—Lord Greenhalgh used to chair those meetings. We have not sat since we have had several Fire Ministers over the course of recent months, but I expect that we will sit again in the course of the coming weeks. That is a ministerial decision.

Q93 **Chair:** When was the last one you had?

Mark Hardingham: The last one? Probably about four months ago, or something like that. One of the things that comes out of those is a national report that the Home Office pull together, based on some information we provide in the NFCC about progress against the recommendations. That sits on the Fire England website.

Where we are with the recommendations at the moment is that about 95% of the services expect to have their actions completed by April 2023. It is not entirely there yet, because there are some national pieces of work that are wrapped up in those recommendations and are not entirely within the gift of the fire and rescue service. The sorts of changes we have seen are around national operational guidance, the new Fire Safety Act, the new Building Safety Regulator, training and development, and a whole range of other activities that are linked to those recommendations.

Q94 **Chair:** Do you have enough money to do implement all those recommendations?

Mark Hardingham: There are two aspects to that. There is the money that comes into the National Fire Chiefs Council, which enables us to be the co-ordinating body and deliver some of those recommendations. Then there is the money that goes into services to enable them to properly embed those, and there is a link to the Manchester Arena inquiry around that.

The settlement coming up for fire and rescue services in the coming weeks will be critical in terms of the finances available for services to deliver their business-as-usual work, but also to deliver on the recommendations of the Grenfell and Manchester Arena inquiries, bearing in mind that there are 149 Manchester Arena inquiry recommendations that have recently come out. Not all of those are for fire services, but many are. Next year, we are expecting the next phase of the Grenfell inquiry to report, and again there will be many recommendations for the fire and rescue service that we will need to work on nationally, together with local fire and rescue services.

The key bit, which comes back to your point around funding, is that it is not just the development of a product, guidance or change of policy that satisfies that recommendation. It is about that recommendation being properly and fully embedded in that organisation—that fire and rescue service—to enable it to consistently, into the long term, deliver something different and better for the public.

Q95 **Chair:** Are you confident?

Mark Hardingham: I am confident at the moment that we have the processes to respond to the recommendations. It is not within my gift at the moment to be confident that we have all the funding we need over the next two or three years to enable us to deliver on those. We will know more about next year and future years when the settlement comes out later this year.

Q96 **Chair:** Okay. Roy, what is your view on the implementation of the Grenfell recommendations?

Roy Wilsher: It is something we have picked up on in our inspections with all fire and rescue services, and particularly with London Fire Brigade. We were commissioned to do a dedicated inspection on behalf of the Home Secretary to look at that. That was back in 2018-19, when, to be honest, London Fire Brigade had not made the progress we would have expected. Fortunately, we went back earlier this year, and 26 of the 29 recommendations directed at London Fire Brigade had been, or were very close to being, completed, and we were confident that the others would move forward.

We have also looked in every fire and rescue service at the building risk review, which looked at every high-rise residential building in the country. All had been completed, or were very close to being completed, in terms of plans. We were pleased with that. I mentioned very early on the extra funding that went into protection services. That was welcomed, and has seen improvement in fire protection. But it needs to be sustainable, as Mark says. If you cut off that funding, things may well go backwards in protection as well.

I am confident progress has been made. I think a point that will be made, and I am sure others will make, is that it is not just about the fire and rescue service. It is about the new Building Safety Regulator, about building control and about contractors. As the Grenfell inquiry says, a whole plethora of people and organisations is involved in building safety, and they need to step up to the plate as well.

Q97 **Chair:** Okay. Thank you. Matt, I am sure you will have lots to say on this. Can I also ask you to address the alternatives for personal emergency evacuation plans? A number of people who have disabilities or vulnerabilities are very concerned about the issue of people leaving high-rise blocks. Could you also deal with that in your comments?

Matt Wrack: Sure, thank you. Let me address that first. We were certainly taken aback by the response of Government on the question of PEEPs. Along with people who are bereaved, survivors, residents, the local community, and campaigners on housing and disability rights, we had expected something on that issue. Clearly, the question of people with disabilities was a major factor in the injuries and loss of life at Grenfell. We had all assumed that that would be taken account of, and we were extremely disappointed therefore that the Government backtracked on that point at the last minute.

I will take the opportunity, if I may, to say that we are a core participant in the Grenfell Tower inquiry. They may not thank me for saying this, but I have to say that I found the process far too long, and I do not think there is huge confidence in it within the local community. People expected more action before now.

In terms of the response—just to give a flavour of it—because of the density of our union in the London Fire Brigade, something like 97% of the uniformed people who attended Grenfell and responded are members of our union, so a whole host of our members are affected in one way or

another. I would like to take the opportunity to praise them. I have spoken to many of them, I have sat through much of the evidence and I have read much of the evidence, and I think anyone who has worked in the fire service has never heard the sort of stories and accounts that we have read on the scale that was experienced that evening. Equally, we have tried to work with the local community and the bereaved, survivors and residents, because their voice is absolutely essential to resolving this and their demand for justice is one that we support.

I used to work in the London Fire Brigade, and we have a relationship with them. We sometimes disagree with them and fall out, but in many ways the London Fire Brigade is no better or worse than other fire and rescue services, had they been faced with the same situation. In our view, there was a failing at a national level of this horizon-scanning and monitoring the changing risks. We have put that in our evidence—going back to well-known fires that we reported in Select Committees at the turn of the century—about the risks of the external spread up a building as the result of a cladding system. We gave evidence on that issue here in the House of Commons more than 20 years ago. Frankly, it was ignored for the intervening 17 years. Our concern is that policy is still driven by a desire to deregulate. For us, in terms of fire and housing policy, regulation is the difference between safety and non-safety, and, on this occasion, the difference between life and death. Sometimes there is too much lazy talk about the need to deregulate, and we have made that very clear throughout the inquiry.

I touched on the fragmentation several times. We did work at the time of the fire around the response of different fire services to a fire in a high-rise block of flats. If we have 43 or 44 fire services, we will have 44 different standards of how a fire service will respond to that. The best standard now in England is the London Fire Brigade standard for how they would respond immediately to a fire in a block of flats, but it varies hugely across the rest of the country.

In terms of your question about risk to communities, we are far from complacent or satisfied with the position we find ourselves in five years down the line. We have a debate around whether it is possible to evacuate a building on that scale in the middle of a fire. Some people acted as though there was an easy answer to that. I don’t know Roy or Mark’s views but, certainly in our view, there is no easy answer to that when buildings have been designed in a certain way. To alter policies that are in place because of the way buildings were designed in the 1970s is not an easy task to undertake.

We have supported all the recommendations, although we are critical of elements of the inquiry, particularly some of the criticism of firefighters and the London Fire Brigade. I will go back to a point that I made in my opening response: the system of developing fire and rescue policy in England is broken. I don’t think it is fit for purpose. The Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council, which was abolished in 2004, has never been

adequately replaced, and that is one of the factors in why we were not prepared for a Grenfell-type incident.

I will make one last point, if I may. On the question of money and so on, the Government has gone through phases of whether it keeps adequate figures on this, but the number of trained inspectors qualified to carry out fire safety audits has declined by something like 35% or 40% in the past 12 years or so. The idea that you can maintain the same level of a fire safety regime having lost something like 40% of your specialist teams is simply ludicrous and not sustainable. We need investment, training and the resources to do that work.

Chair: That is very helpful. We now have some questions about the Manchester Arena inquiry from Simon Fell.

Q98 **Simon Fell:** I will be brief. I know you touched on this, Mark, but the report makes interesting reading and throws up a few challenges. I would be keen to understand whether you think the report highlights what is an endemic problem that needs addressing in fire and rescue services or whether it was isolated to Greater Manchester. The chief fire officer on the night has admitted—I think his words were—gross failings for the way they responded. They could have been there in four minutes; it took them two hours and six minutes to get there. In your view, is this a problem purely in Greater Manchester or is it something that each fire and rescue service needs to address around the UK?

Mark Hardingham: Again, this is so fresh off the stocks, with the substantial report and the recommendations that came with that. It would be appropriate to say that my thoughts are with the 22 people who lost their lives, the families of everybody who was affected and the hundreds of people who were injured. I echo what Dave Russel as the current—but not at the time—chief fire officer of Greater Manchester said alongside his blue-light colleagues: the fire service's response was wholly inadequate and ineffective on that night. That will always be a matter of deep regret for the fire service not only in Manchester, but nationally, and I echo the apologies that were made on the day.

Turning to your question, it would be naive of me to say, "This is just an issue for Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service." Undoubtably, there are recommendations specifically for Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service. Sir John Saunders and his team spent many, many months going through detailed witness statements, including those from the Fire Brigades Union. Roy gave evidence and I gave evidence as well. They have produced a 1,000-page report and 149 recommendations, many of which are multi-agency and have a national focus.

My initial reading, and the discussions I have had with many colleagues since this happened, is that the principles of JESIP that guide multi-agency working at this type of event are about right. There will always be things that come through the recommendations that can be changed. The principles are about right, and the joint operating protocols sit beneath that. It is about how we ensure they are properly trained, tested and

exercised, and the issues coming up are addressed and learned from, bringing about embedded change in these organisations. It is then about ensuring that when we come across a dynamic, complex and difficult terrorist event in the early hours of the morning, or whenever it might be, the principles can be enacted in a way that puts the public at the forefront of the thinking of all emergency services. Equally, there must be that careful balance with the safety of those responding on behalf of the blue-light services as well.

I have already met a number of fire service colleagues about setting up an organisational response ourselves on this matter. Just this week, I had a meeting with the National Police Chiefs' Council, the College of Policing, the British Transport Police, CT policing and the Association of Ambulance Chief Executives to discuss how we can come together as a collective to ensure that we respond properly to the multi-agency recommendations.

Roy Wilsher: My thoughts are with everyone involved, as Mark said. Anyone who thinks this might not happen again somewhere with them is not thinking hard enough. As Mark said, the joint emergency services interoperability principles—JESIP—are there and are fairly sound. It is about how they are trained and implemented, especially on the day that matters. It needs to become part of the muscle memory, so you co-locate, communicate and co-ordinate, and that is the first thing you do, which did not happen.

Back in about 2015, there was a joint inspection between the then chief fire adviser, what was the Inspectorate of Constabulary and the CQC on the JESIP response. I think there is a place for that again—perhaps not immediately, but at some stage in the future—because independent scrutiny of local arrangements could assist. We do that with policing and with fire, and sometimes, if they are co-located, we will do that across, but there needs to be that tri-service inspectorate approach.

Matt Wrack: On Grenfell, the people who matter most are those who lost members of their family or those who were injured. I attended Manchester the day after the attack and I spoke to the then chief officer, but also, most importantly, to some of our members who were absolutely raging at the failures within their own organisation. They had been mobilised to rendezvous at a fire station and, in some cases, had friends in other services who were saying, "Where are you?" It caused absolute outrage among firefighters in Greater Manchester. I note that the report does not criticise individual firefighters at all. There are systemic issues that need to be addressed.

In our view, it is a long-running debate that has taken far too long. In 2010 or 2011, myself and our assistant general secretary had a meeting with the then English Fire Minister, Bob Neill, who raised the question of the aftermath of the Mumbai attacks. We have been very clear since then—I am sure Bob will vouch for this—that we, as a union, want to ensure that the fire service is prepared adequately. That means all sorts of things—training, adequate procedures, resources and so on—but we absolutely committed to that from day one.

The disagreement we have had throughout that period, sometimes with colleagues here today and sometimes with the Home Office, is that in terms of the risk of marauding terrorist attack, which was not the case in Manchester, our model is that we need to train all firefighters. We do not think the model that has been adopted, by and large, in most fire services to train specialist teams works. The attacks in London, for example, were responded to not by specialist teams but by firefighters on a normal fire engine turning out to a road traffic collision, so there have been failures of planning in that regard.

We have also had some criticism, again unfortunately from the HMI, over agreements that are now in place in the London Fire Brigade and in Greater Manchester that precisely improve training and provision on the preparation for that type of terror attack. In those two fire and rescue services—in Greater Manchester and in London—we think that is a positive outcome. Unfortunately, it has been criticised by the inspectorate. I will leave that there.

Q99 **Simon Fell:** Obviously, the JESIP principles are key to this, but it is also about embedding them and building that institutional knowledge so that you are working together as emergency services and other blue light services. Has the frequency of training and joint exercises increased since 2017? Are you seeing more of that in practice? Are you getting more of that practice embedded in the culture?

Mark Hardingham: To be honest, I do not have the data across the services to be able to respond accurately to your question. I would say with confidence that services have focused on the training and development that they provide to their staff. We will take all the training and development aspects that come out of the national recommendations and revisit the type of training that takes place and the frequency with which it takes place, and make sure that is embedded not just for fire but right across all the blue light services. I am not sure I can offer up any more than that because I do not have the information to hand.

Roy Wilsher: Certainly from our inspections, a question that we ask of incident commanders and people at fire stations is whether they understand the principles that are embedded and the things that go with it. In the vast majority of cases, they do. What we have not done so much, nor had the time to do so, is attend exercises and inspections and read across. That is where I think joint inspections would assist.

Simon Fell: Matt, do you have anything to add to that?

Matt Wrack: Our assessment is that levels of training vary between fire and rescue services, and the degree to which services identify that sort of incident as a priority probably varies—mistakenly, in our view, because those sorts of attacks could take place in any of the English fire and rescue services.

Q100 **Chair:** If there is any further information on that, the Committee would be quite interested to see the extent of that joined-up working and training together. If it is possible to provide any information, that would

be helpful.

Could I just pick up on one issue with you, Matt? We have talked a lot about how distinct firefighters are—they are not the police. However, for a lot of our constituents, I think that we just see the emergency services—the police, fire and ambulance services. In terms of the right to strike, you made clear early on that being a firefighter is a civilian role and a very separate profession. Obviously, the police are not allowed to strike. In the minds of most of the general public, there is a view that firefighters should perhaps be treated in the same way as the police and not have the right to strike because you are an emergency service. Do you accept that?

Matt Wrack: No, I don't. Perhaps you won't be surprised that I do not accept that. In terms of emergency services, I think that police are exceptional in that regard. Ambulance staff are civilian employees and have the right to strike. In fact, I believe that a number of them have recently voted to strike over the question of pay in the NHS. So, they have that right and we have that right.

Our view is—look, firefighters do not want to take strike action. I remember walking out on strike in 2002 and seeing people I had known for many years in tears over it, because that is how seriously they took it. Nobody takes this lightly. But, when your pay has fallen for 12 years and you are struggling to pay the bills, those are the things that people are going to think about. We would defend our right as civilian employees to, first of all, negotiate and bargain over our terms and conditions.

A lot was said about the National Joint Council at the last meeting. I have to express, again, my frustration that nobody bothered to come and speak to the National Joint Council before reaching their conclusions on it. A lot of the work that we do through the National Joint Council, primarily through my assistant general secretary, who is not here as he is on variations—his replacement, Ben Selby, is behind me and he is not from London but from Lincolnshire—is to resolve disputes. That is kept confidential. If we resolve a dispute in Nottinghamshire, we do not publicise that—it is simply resolved. I think there is a misunderstanding on the part of other people in the fire and rescue service about the effort the National Joint Council makes to resolve and avoid problems. That is part of our regular work.

First, we defend our right to collective bargaining, and secondly, we defend our right to take action. That is never something that we take lightly

Q101 **Chair:** If there is strike action from the FBU in the coming months, will people be endangered by it?

Matt Wrack: To address that point, an obligation is placed by central Government, in legislation, on each fire and rescue service. I know that they are making those plans now. They regularly assure Government and their local communities that they are putting those emergency provisions

in place. It becomes a responsibility for them at that point—I hope that we do not come to that—and I know that many of them are doing that.

Chair: Mark, do you want to come back on that?

Mark Hardingham: I suspected that was coming my way, Chair. In terms of those business continuity arrangements, Matt is right: the national framework document makes them the responsibility of fire authorities and chief fire officers. In reality, it is an extremely difficult thing to do when a very high percentage of your operational firefighter workforce are members of the Fire Brigades Union and will most likely take part in industrial action in which they entirely withdraw their labour. To put substantial business continuity arrangements in place is extremely difficult in terms both of the volume of that business continuity and its capability to deal with the complexity of the incidents that we regularly deal with.

Every chief fire officer in the country will be in a slightly different set of circumstances depending on the demographics of the local community, the extent to which they have an FBU or non-FBU workforce, and the extent to which that flows up into their middle manager and senior teams. There are services that have arrangements with third-party contractors to provide external resilience cover for their service during industrial action, but again, that is an extremely expensive use of public money, and that facility simply is not available right across the whole fire and rescue service. Some services are currently trying to recruit people to provide resilience cover not just for industrial action but for more broad resilience cover across their fire and rescue service, part of which might be for industrial action.

It is a complex picture. To come right back to your question about whether the public will be in danger, I can be really clear: during the period of industrial action, the public will not receive the same level of service that they currently get from the fire and rescue service, and will not be as safe as they are at the moment.

Chair: Roy, do you want to say anything?

Roy Wilsher: I think I should comment. The removal of the right to strike came from the inspectorate previously. Our current position on that is that we understand how difficult that would be. Police officers are different, as they are warranted officers and Crown employees. It could not come as a direct thing; there will be other things to come around that. Striking should absolutely be a last resort—I agree. We on the NJC have also made a recommendation for a fundamental review involving the Fire Brigades Union and others, and we stand by that. It may be that the outcome of that review is that this is the best process, but until it is reviewed, we will not know.

Chair: Okay. Thank you very much indeed for your evidence. We are keen to keep abreast of what is happening in fire and rescue services. We are aware that they have been the responsibility of the Home Office for some years, and we will keep watching, looking at and understanding what is

happening. This is the second time this year that we have considered this issue. Please rest assured that we will carry on with our scrutiny. Thanks for your time today.