

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Fire and Rescue Service, HC 505

Wednesday 20 March 2024

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Members present: Dame Diana Johnson (Chair); Lee Anderson; Simon Fell; Carolyn Harris; Kim Johnson; Tim Loughton; Alison Thewliss.

Questions 141 - 248

Witnesses

I: Kathryn Billing, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Lead, National Fire Chiefs Council, and Chief Fire Officer, Cornwall Fire and Rescue Service; Justin Johnston QFSM, Chief Fire Officer, Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service, and Vice Chair, National Fire Chiefs Council; Cllr Rebecca Knox, Chair, Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Authority; Rob MacDougall, Chief Fire Officer, Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service, and People Programme Executive, National Fire Chiefs Council.

II: Sarah Gawley, Director of Fire and Major Events, Home Office; Rt Hon Chris Philp MP, Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire, Home Office.

Written evidence from witnesses:

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Kathryn Billing, Justin Johnston, Rebecca Knox and Rob MacDougall.

Q141 **Chair:** Good morning and welcome to the Home Affairs Select Committee. This is the second session of our inquiry into the culture of the fire and rescue service. The aims for the session this morning are to find out how senior leaders have responded to the specific reports about cultural change; to understand how senior leaders are held to account; to see how effective recruitment and retention is for people from underrepresented groups; and to look at the effectiveness of the Home Office's work about the fire and rescue service.

Can I welcome our first panel this morning? I will ask each of you to introduce yourselves in turn. Perhaps we could start with you, Mr MacDougall.

Rob MacDougall: Good morning. My name is Rob MacDougall. I am the director of community safety and the chief fire officer at Oxfordshire County Council. I am also the committee chair for the National Fire Chiefs Council's people, culture and leadership work.

Justin Johnston: Good morning. I am Justin Johnston. I am the chief fire officer for Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service, and I am also one of the vice-chairs of the National Fire Chiefs Council.

Kathryn Billing: Good morning. My name is Kathryn Billing. I am the chief fire officer of Cornwall Fire and Rescue Service and the National Fire Chiefs Council's lead for equality, diversity and inclusion.

Rebecca Knox: Good morning. I am Cllr Rebecca Knox. I am chair of the Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Authority and vice-chair of the Fire Services Management Committee.

Q142 **Chair:** Thank you very much. This is our second session, as I said at the beginning. In our first session, the Committee was really quite concerned by some of the evidence that we heard. I just wanted to ask each of you to reflect on what Nazir Afzal said to us in that session. He said, "I do not shy away from using the terms 'institutional racism', 'institutional misogyny' and 'institutional homophobia'. It is not individuals; it is a systemic failure".

I wondered whether each of you in turn might want to address that. Do you agree with what Nazir Afzal said to the Committee about the culture in the fire and rescue service? I do not know who would like to start us off.

Rebecca Knox: I absolutely agree with Nazir on this point. The Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service had an independent report commissioned by its chief fire officer. That report made 37 recommendations and did find that that statement applied. I say it with a sadness because 99% of our workforce are brilliantly amazing people. I am sad for them because they really want to address the issue that we



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are facing here today, which is misbehaviour and bad behaviour. It is by a small minority, but we must address it. We must not be complacent.

Q143 **Chair:** Nazir Afzal was saying that it was institutional. It is not just a small minority; it is the institution that has a problem.

Rebecca Knox: The individuals, Madam Chair, are those who make up the institution. A lot of those individuals really want to do a good job.

Q144 **Chair:** I am not disputing that firefighters overall are doing a very good job in firefighting. The problem is with the culture that exists within these fire and rescue services. You were the chair of the authority. You had governance over the fire and rescue service.

Rebecca Knox: Yes, absolutely. Yes, I did.

Q145 **Chair:** Did you know what was going on there?

Rebecca Knox: Yes.

Q146 **Chair:** You knew. You knew what was going on.

Rebecca Knox: There were cases within the fire service. We knew what was going on.

Q147 **Chair:** What did you do about it?

Rebecca Knox: We addressed the cases that came forward.

Q148 **Chair:** Did you?

Rebecca Knox: Yes.

Q149 **Chair:** You stood by what the chief fire officer of Dorset and Wiltshire, Ben Ansell, said. He told ITV that the service did not have a problem with women and that he was shocked and appalled about what we had found. You said you agreed with him on that, did you not?

Rebecca Knox: May I take just a moment to explain the context of what the chief fire officer said? He said that we absolutely do not have a problem with employing women. Indeed, in his service, 50% of the top team are women. We positively encourage the employment of women.

There are issues that women in the service face, which was why we conducted the internal inquiry, on the chief's instruction, after the Fire Brigade Union's report. We did a gap analysis against that. We investigated and did focus groups with our staff to find out what the service could be doing more positively to keep individuals safe and have safe conversations about the issues that were facing them in workplaces.

Q150 **Chair:** Did you speak to any of the women who had been subject to harassment, bullying or abuse?

Rebecca Knox: I personally would not because I am the elected councillor. I would be removed from being able to identify—



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Q151 **Chair:** Sorry, you are the chair of the fire and rescue authority.

Rebecca Knox: Yes.

Q152 **Chair:** You have not spoken to any of the firefighters who had this appalling experience in the organisation for which you are providing governance.

Rebecca Knox: Those individuals would have had the protection that they asked for, if they requested it. No, I have not spoken directly to them.

Q153 **Chair:** Do you think you should have?

Rebecca Knox: It would not be appropriate, if they did not feel they could. I am there. I am visible. Anyone can come and speak to me within the service. It would not have been appropriate for me to go and seek out individuals, if they did not feel comfortable. There was a safe space for them to have the conversation with the relevant officers and the trusted guardians that we now have in place in order to—

Chair: I find that—

Carolyn Harris: It is incredible.

Q154 **Chair:** Yes, I find it incredible that you have a role of governance over an organisation and you did not think that you should speak to women who had been abused by the organisation.

Rebecca Knox: My role is to have accountability for the chief fire officer.

Q155 **Chair:** You have stood by him. He is saying that there is no problem with women.

Rebecca Knox: We do not have a problem with employing women, but women—

Q156 **Chair:** That is not what he said. He said “a problem with women”. He said that the service did not have a problem with women, and then the investigation found that it certainly did have a problem with women.

Rebecca Knox: I have weekly meetings with the chief. I know him extremely well on a professional basis. He would have informed me of incidents that I needed to know about, but I would not have been able to have a conversation with anyone, whether they were male or female, about an incident without—

Q157 **Chair:** We probably do need to move on, and I am sure other members will have questions, but I find that attitude, as someone in a position of responsibility, incredible. You do not think you have the role of asking questions and talking to firefighters. I find that incredible.

I am going to move on to our next witness, though, to give perhaps an overview generally about what was said about misogyny, racism and homophobia. Kathryn Billing, would you like to come in?



Kathryn Billing: If you do not mind, I will give my service's perspective. We are probably slightly different. On the topic about racism, we have been doing work with Black Voices Cornwall. I have called out our service as being institutionally racist. As I am sure you can understand, that will spark up debate. It is right that we have that debate.

For me, when I look at my organisation, I have a really good gender representation on my top team—two-thirds are women, which is brilliant—but I cannot see any diversity in relation to ethnicity. I recognise that Cornwall does not have a huge ethnic demographic, but that is not an excuse. We are predominantly an on-call service. We had somebody who required a prayer room. When we looked at our fire stations, the group manager said, "Do you know what? We do not have these facilities in place".

When you look at policies, procedures and training, we are institutionally racist. If we look at some of our policies, until recently we had restrictions on colour of hair or tattoos. Those types of things can make a person, show their values and have meaning. Again, our policies and our procedures are barriers to people being themselves in our organisations.

Q158 **Chair:** You are saying institutionally racist, but you are not saying that it is institutionally misogynist.

Kathryn Billing: I am, definitely. If you look at some of our facilities, we have recently had cause for concern around gender-inclusive facilities across our stations. I am sure that is the case in other areas. Our facilities are not inclusive for everyone.

Q159 **Chair:** What do you mean by "gender inclusive"? Are you talking about sex? Are you talking about male or female? Is that what you are saying?

Kathryn Billing: Male, female or transgender. They are not inclusive of everybody. There are not facilities that are inclusive for all genders. That is male, female and, as we like to say, non-binary or more inclusive for everybody.

Q160 **Chair:** We might want to come back to that. Perhaps we could move on. I know we are a bit short of time. Do you accept what has been said in terms of misogyny, racism and homophobia?

Justin Johnston: Yes, I do. Different services are in different positions in terms of how far they are down that road. It is going to be a fairly long journey for some and a shorter journey for others.

Q161 **Chair:** Why is that?

Justin Johnston: There is a historical piece to it. There is the effect of localism in terms of the way that some fire and rescue services are funded and their ability to resource some things. I do not mean things like changing your policy. Changing your policy is straightforward. The ability to update facilities is going to be different for different fire and rescue services.



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In terms of the journey of making sure that everybody feels included and can bring their whole selves to work, some people's policies are far in advance. As part of the NFCC, we are trying to get to a position where we are creating things once, sharing them widely and taking advantage of that, so we can bring on those services that are a little bit or, in some cases, significantly further behind.

Rob MacDougall: As a service that has just completed a culture review, we have not found any significant evidence of institutional misogyny, homophobia or racism within our service. However, I am very alive to the fact that that does not mean we do not have issues.

From a systemic point of view, we are looking for external verification to make sure we get external support. We are linking into the RACE Equality Code, the charity White Ribbon and Stonewall to get support to understand how we can ensure that—

Q162 **Chair:** Did you say Stonewall?

Rob MacDougall: I did, yes. This is to understand how our policies and procedures can support what we are trying to achieve in becoming a more inclusive fire and rescue service.

Q163 **Tim Loughton:** I am slightly alarmed by what I have heard so far. In terms of the extent of the problem, Ms Billing, you have defined some of the problems that you have as a lack of inclusivity for people with tattoos and an absence of prayer rooms.

Mr Johnston, you have just said that the reason why there are differential ways in which various fire services seem to be responding to this problem is due to localism and funding, which I do not quite understand.

Mr MacDougall, you have said there is no evidence of institutional misogyny, racism or homophobia, yet all the reports that have been published, by Nazir Afzal into the Met and other reports into individual fire services, reveal a serious cultural problem certainly of misogyny and degrees of racism, which appears to be completely at odds with your assessment of the problem or the lack of a problem that you have.

There appears to be, by all the studies that have been carried out externally and internally, a culture problem within the fire service akin to what has been exposed within the Metropolitan Police. Providing a few more prayer rooms and allowing a few more people with tattoos to join the service is only the tip of the iceberg of problems. Ms Billing, are you underestimating the problem that you are supposed to be tackling? You are the lead on diversity and inclusion for the fire brigade across the country.

Kathryn Billing: Thank you for your summary of what we said. There are two different points from me. One was the question raised by the Chair, which Nazir raised, around institutional racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism and all of the different characteristics. That is down



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to policies, procedures, facilities and the way in which we go about our business.

What you are referencing there is culture. My answer is yes—we absolutely recognise that we do have a cultural problem. What are we doing about it? As Justin was saying, as the National Fire Chiefs Council we are identifying the good practices that we are trying to put in place so we can ensure that we move forward as a sector.

We have been working on elements of good practice through the National Fire Chiefs Council, like the direct entry scheme, the culture dashboard and the challenging behaviour toolkit. We now run supervisory development leadership programmes, middle leadership programmes and executive leadership programmes. The list goes on. A lot of work has been and is being done to progress the culture change and the institutional part, which is much more directly related to policies, procedures and facility improvements.

Justin is right. If I look at my service, I am very lucky. I am a council-run organisation. The council has been able to direct some capital investment so I can make those improvements, but we are all in different positions.

Q164 Tim Loughton: What has changed over the last year or two since all these reports started to emerge? It is probably difficult in Cornwall. It is slightly ironic because, geographically, Cornwall is one of the least diverse parts of the United Kingdom. That is just a statement of fact. What have you done differently there? In Cornwall, you perhaps have a bigger challenge to become more diverse than the metropolitan boroughs.

Kathryn Billing: We have our problems. I terminated the employment of five of our firefighters before some of these reports came out for all the things that we are talking about. There was absolutely abhorrent behaviour, absolutely disgusting discrimination and harassment. We were taking those steps prior to these reports.

However, what these reports have done, what the brave people who have stepped forward have done, what the likes of Paul, who is here today, have done and what this Committee has done, in raising the profile of these issues, has allowed us to elevate them to the level they should be at.

We need to be treating cultural competence and our cultural policies and procedures in the same way that we treat our operational competence and our operational policies and procedures. Thank you to everyone who has raised that profile. Please keep that profile going because cultural competence is just as important as operational competence.

Q165 Tim Loughton: In Cornwall, how many people have been dismissed in the last couple of years for any of the things we have been talking about so far? How long have you been in post in Cornwall?



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Kathryn Billing: I have been in post since May 2021.

Q166 **Tim Loughton:** Over that time, how many fire officers have been dismissed?

Kathryn Billing: It is not just fire officers who have been dismissed. We are talking about the whole of our organisation. I can get back to you, but we have definitely dismissed seven people.

Q167 **Tim Loughton:** How many people do you employ?

Kathryn Billing: 577.

Q168 **Tim Loughton:** Do you anticipate that there could be a lot more dismissals?

Kathryn Billing: It is fair to say we will deal with those cases as they come up. I will make it really clear. If people are demonstrating those behaviours, we will absolutely take the appropriate action, as I have already done.

Q169 **Tim Loughton:** Of those seven, were any dismissed for criminal activity?

Kathryn Billing: No.

Q170 **Tim Loughton:** These are purely behavioural disciplinary matters within their job in the service.

Kathryn Billing: I am happy to come back to the Committee, if you do not mind. I will double-check that.

Q171 **Tim Loughton:** People need to be dismissed if there has been criminal activity that is not compatible with them carrying on being in the fire service. I understand that. The problem is those people who have this cultural problem, whether it is misogyny, racism or whatever.

First, how do you identify them? Who is responsible for that? Secondly, what procedures are in place to deal with them rigorously, whether that is saying, "You now have to go on a training course on certain behaviour" or, "No, that is an instant dismissal case"? Who is overseeing the whistleblowers, effectively? Who is encouraging the whistleblowers? Where are the disciplinary procedures? How does it work?

Say you get wind that a station down at the tip of Cornwall has lost several female firefighters over the last few years for reasons other than just having to move on. Say you have no black firefighters in a fire station because it has a reputation or whatever. How are you scrutinising that much more closely than perhaps was happening before your time or before all this became an issue?

Kathryn Billing: The first thing I would say is that I hope it would not be the case that we lost people over a few years and then identified that trend. We have put in place exit interviews. I am hoping that we would identify that a lot sooner. We have in place trends so we can start to see patterns of behaviour.



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We are very different in that we are quite a small service. There tend to be a lot more face-to-face conversations. That is from senior managers down to crew managers. As you said—you used the term—we are likely to get wind of things. There are also independent reporting lines that we have brought in since this. We recognise that, especially in close-knit communities, with team working and watch base working, people might not feel comfortable. We have collectively introduced independent reporting lines. As well as our whistleblowing and ongoing disciplinary processes, we have independent reporting lines.

Q172 **Tim Loughton:** How many whistleblower complaints have you had in the last three years?

Kathryn Billing: I would have to get back to you on that.

Q173 **Tim Loughton:** Rough ballpark, what do you think? Has it gone up? Has it gone down?

Kathryn Billing: It has gone up since I came into post and, like I said, took that action.

Q174 **Tim Loughton:** Are we talking still single figures?

Kathryn Billing: No. It is just in double figures, yes. I will have to get back to you on the exact—

Q175 **Tim Loughton:** When we challenge anyone—it is not just the fire service—over whistleblowing, quite often the response is, “Yes, we have a whistleblowing policy and we have had very few reports”, which suggests to me that the whistleblowing policy is not working very well.

This has been a high-profile issue, primarily with the police but also with the fire service, where it probably has gone more under the radar. There has not been a big hike in whistleblowing complaints, though clearly there are lots of things to blow the whistle about. That suggests to me that the whistleblowing system—your force may be no different to others—is not very effective and people do not have the confidence to use it.

Kathryn Billing: No. What you will probably hear coming out in the HMI thematic review is the fear of reprisal. People do not like to speak up. We are finding—we have evidence of this in our own service—that people do not want the stigma of being a grass. That is the term they use. If we go back to your original question, which was around culture, we have a lot of work to do to say, “You are not being a grass at all”.

If you saw a firefighter not doing a check properly on their breathing apparatus set, you would call it out. How can we get to a position where it is the right thing to say, “You should not be saying that” or, “You should not be doing that”? It is about education. It is about calling it out and supporting people so that we do not have these really horrible cases of people who have been really hurt and who have suffered significant



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impacts. We need to get to a point where we are educating people to understand this and to call it out. That is brave; that is not being a grass.

Q176 **Tim Loughton:** I agree. I have one final question. I am sorry I have concentrated on you, but you are the lead on all of this. How many women are employed across your own fire service?

Kathryn Billing: We have 41, which is just over 7%.

Q177 **Tim Loughton:** What proportion of new recruits in the last year have been women?

Kathryn Billing: In the last 12 months, we have had a higher proportion than we have ever had before. In one course that we ran, which usually has 12 people, we had more women than men.

Q178 **Tim Loughton:** What does that work out as, as a percentage? The problem is that, as we know, even if you take on all women for the next few years, that 7% figure is going to take some time to come because the turnover within the fire service is quite low, certainly much lower than the police.

In my fire service in West Sussex, where we have a fantastic chief fire officer, Sabrina Cohen-Hatton, we have 8% women. Last year 20% of recruits were women, but it is still going to take time. Are you at a similar sort of level, then?

Kathryn Billing: Yes, we are over 20%. We have a wholetime recruitment this year. I am quite looking forward to that. We are predominantly on call, which is the same as West Sussex.

Q179 **Lee Anderson:** I have a couple of quick questions for Cllr Rebecca Knox, please. You were in agreement that your force was institutionally racist. Is that correct?

Rebecca Knox: I agreed with the independent report. The chief fire officer also accepted the findings of that report.

Q180 **Lee Anderson:** Could you please tell me what unfair advantages white people have in your force?

Rebecca Knox: I would hope none—not advantages. Did I hear you correctly?

Q181 **Lee Anderson:** Yes, do they have any advantages?

Rebecca Knox: No.

Q182 **Lee Anderson:** How can you be institutionally racist, then?

Rebecca Knox: Sorry, I might have to get back to you on—

Q183 **Lee Anderson:** No, you don't. You said your force was institutionally racist—

Rebecca Knox: Misogynist—



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Lee Anderson: —yet white people have no advantage at all. How can it be racist?

Rebecca Knox: Maybe I was interpreting Nazir's phrase as a whole. That was how he summed it up. I would absolutely stand by the view that the force was not racist, but going back to the way it was described—

Q184 **Lee Anderson:** I am sorry. You said you agreed that your force was institutionally racist. I am asking you how it is racist. What advantages do white people in your force have?

Rebecca Knox: I am saying that there are no advantages for white people.

Lee Anderson: Then it cannot be racist.

Q185 **Chair:** Can I just interrupt at this point? The inquiry that was held into Dorset and Wiltshire was around misogyny and sexism. What I was referring to, Lee, was the quote that we were given in the last session, which was more generally about institutional racism and homophobia. Councillor, you might want to reflect on the inquiry that you were concerned with and be clear on that.

Rebecca Knox: Yes, of course. It was focused on culture, but I do see the issues of racism that affect the culture as important. We have some extremely good officers in our service who are really good role models for the service. In particular, Sam Allison, who received the King's Fire Service Medal this year, is the second black football referee in the Premier League. He is an excellent role model for us.

Q186 **Lee Anderson:** I just have one more question, Chair. I will just try to nail this down. What group of people in your force have an unfair advantage in their employment?

Rebecca Knox: The independent report and our previous report identified that we needed more safe spaces for females and others to be able to call out where they were experiencing unfortunate bad behaviour within the workplace. We have put in some processes to allow for that.

We have a "safe to" campaign, which means that individuals can find exactly the type of assistance and practical help that they need in order to address concerns about misconduct within the workplace.

Q187 **Lee Anderson:** I get that, but I did not ask that. I asked about which group of people have an unfair advantage within your force.

Rebecca Knox: I am sorry. I was just trying to say to you that perhaps the females and others who have not felt they could call out and speak out in a safe space were disadvantaged. We are addressing that. We are not complacent about the fact that that was a need identified in the independent report that was commissioned.

Q188 **Carolyn Harris:** Cllr Knox, let me go back to some of the things that you have just said. Tell me a little bit about how the procedures work. If



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someone has a complaint, you have already said that you would not speak to them. Why?

Rebecca Knox: I am an elected member of the fire authority. Therefore, I have the governance role over the service and hold the chief fire officer to account. The responsibility for the procedures to address misconduct at those levels would be with the operational staff.

Q189 **Carolyn Harris:** Do you have a team of people who work for you?

Rebecca Knox: They work for the chief fire officer. Yes, there are teams of people.

Q190 **Carolyn Harris:** Did they try to contact the people?

Rebecca Knox: Yes, absolutely.

Carolyn Harris: Did they feed back to you what—

Rebecca Knox: Yes, absolutely.

Q191 **Carolyn Harris:** You still did not feel the need to go and speak to the victims after you were fed back on just exactly how dreadful they were feeling about everything.

Rebecca Knox: The victims would not be identified, as Kathryn was saying earlier. With some of the issues that are facing the fire and rescue services, the victims sometimes do not want to be identified because of the culture in some places, which is quite negative.

I and my authority would get fed back the number of cases. I have asked—the chief fire officer is absolutely in favour of this—to know more about the type of case. I am not able, and nor is my authority, to know who is involved because that might identify the victim. That would not be a good thing for the individuals who did not want to be identified. The type of matter that might be under scrutiny is fed back.

Q192 **Carolyn Harris:** The chief fire officer told you that he had concerns and that things were going on, but you still did not feel the need to intervene in any way.

Rebecca Knox: The chief fire officer did tell me. We have a regular meeting. The chief fire officer and I use that space to have frank and very honest discussions. He does not have to tell me, but he does. We discuss the ways and means by which the matter might be solved within the service. That is my role.

Q193 **Carolyn Harris:** Respectfully, were you rather naïve to believe that you did not need to do more? Given the kind of culture, and the historical culture, that there was in other frontline services, such as the Met Police, it was highly likely to be going on within the fire service, which you had some level of responsibility for. Yet you did not think to have a review into the culture.



Rebecca Knox: We did have a review into the culture. Since HMICFRS started its inspections in 2018, every single report that has come out from the other 43 fire and rescue services has been looked at by the team within Dorset and Wiltshire in order to learn from the good and the bad, and ensure that we put improvements in place and share good practice to help others improve.

The day after the independent report on the London Fire Brigade came out, a gap analysis against our service was conducted. That took in staff feedback, representative bodies' feedback and feedback from networks of underrepresented groups. A thorough review was underway. That was cross-referenced within the report that Alex Johnson and her team did, which started in February 2023 and reported back in October.

In that time, the members of the fire authority—there are 18 elected members—were receiving that feedback in a space that was confidential in order for us to hold the chief fire officer to account to ensure that the report was being conducted in an independent way and as thoroughly as it possibly could be. We really wanted the independent team to pick up the phone rather than wait for the telephone to go. This was about reaching out and really going into the—

Q194 **Chair:** Cllr Knox, can I gently say to you that the only reason you had that independent review was because of the exposure of what was going on in your fire service by the media? That is the only reason you did that. Can we be clear on that? That was not you thinking, "We will do this because there might be a problem". You were forced to do it because of the exposé in the media. Let us be clear, please.

Rebecca Knox: May I reply?

Chair: That is correct, is it not?

Rebecca Knox: No, I do not agree that it is.

Q195 **Chair:** You were going to do that anyway.

Rebecca Knox: The independent review was commissioned by the chief fire officer.

Chair: Yes, after the media.

Carolyn Harris: It came after the media attention.

Rebecca Knox: There were known cases. They were not identified by the media, but—

Q196 **Carolyn Harris:** Cllr Knox, that was the point that I was trying to make. If there were known cases, why did it take a television exposure on the practices of the fire authority, for which you were the chairperson, in order for you to have this independent inquiry? Is it not the case that you are not sorry for what happened, but you are sorry that you got caught?



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Rebecca Knox: No, absolutely not. It was commissioned because some issues were raised by the media. Some were known about and some were being acted on.

Q197 **Carolyn Harris:** If they were known about, why had you not acted on them earlier?

Rebecca Knox: They had been acted on.

Carolyn Harris: When?

Rebecca Knox: If I may, I will give you an example of something that was reported on in the media. There was an allegation of photographs of victims being taken at road traffic collisions. This was a surprise. The day we were informed by the media that that had come forward, we sent it to Dorset Police and Wiltshire Police. They conducted a thorough inquiry and found there was no evidence.

Q198 **Carolyn Harris:** Can we just concern ourselves with your responsibility for your fire service? Those reports were a surprise. I am delighted to hear that, but, on your own admission, you knew there were things happening and yet you did nothing about it.

Rebecca Knox: That is incorrect. We knew of incidents and cases. They were acted on through the process. I would not have individually got involved. That would not have been appropriate as the chairman, but our team—

Q199 **Carolyn Harris:** You cannot have the role that you have and not be involved. That is the whole point of your role. You have to oversee this fire authority. You cannot pick and choose the bits that are going to be good. You have to look at it all and take responsibility for it all. The buck stops with you. That was your job. You were the wall. The buck stopped with you. You had a responsibility to the people in that fire service. Their welfare, their concerns, the way they were treated, their working conditions and everything else fell on you.

Rebecca Knox: Operationally, the chief fire officer is the one who has the delegation to ensure that those processes are in place.

Q200 **Carolyn Harris:** You should have held them to account.

Rebecca Knox: I hold the chief fire officer to account through a very thorough governance process, which is laid out.

Q201 **Carolyn Harris:** Let me rephrase it. Retrospectively, how do you personally feel about what we now know occurred in that fire service? Do you have any remorse? Have you attempted to contact any of the victims? Do you feel you were remiss in the way that you have dealt with this?

Rebecca Knox: I feel a great sadness that the fire service has this culture.



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Q202 **Carolyn Harris:** No, I am asking how you feel about the role that you played.

Rebecca Knox: I personally feel responsible because I really care about the fire and rescue service. Otherwise, I would not have been in the position that I am in for this length of time and with the passion that I have. I care about the service. I really want to do the right thing and so does the chief fire officer.

Q203 **Carolyn Harris:** Will you do the right thing and meet the people who are making the complaints?

Rebecca Knox: Again, I am not in a position to contact victims.

Q204 **Carolyn Harris:** What if they contacted you?

Rebecca Knox: If they contacted me, absolutely, I would like to understand and hear them and listen to what they have to say.

Q205 **Carolyn Harris:** You can make that public statement now. Any victim who wants to come and talk to you and express their concerns, you were willing to listen to them.

Rebecca Knox: Yes, absolutely.

Carolyn Harris: Thank you. That is all I wanted to know.

Q206 **Chair:** Have you expressed publicly any concern about the victims, any remorse or any apology? Have you said, "I am sorry"? Has that ever happened?

Rebecca Knox: I have spoken up at fire authority meetings about—

Q207 **Chair:** I mean publicly. The only quote I have from you is supporting the chief.

Rebecca Knox: From memory, on the occasion when we were reporting to the fire authority, there was that determination. I hope you can—

Q208 **Chair:** I am just asking you whether you have ever said to the victims, "I am sorry".

Rebecca Knox: I hope I have.

Q209 **Chair:** You are not sure whether you have.

Rebecca Knox: I am reflecting on the number of times I have spoken in public because I do speak—

Q210 **Chair:** I need to move on, but you responded with a statement that said, "We have every confidence that the chief fire officer will take action. In my role as chair of the fire and rescue authority, and elected members through the finance and audit committee, will hold the chief to account and scrutinise the delivery of the resulting action plan".

That statement came after the independent review, which found an



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underlying culture of misogyny and sexism. There was nothing about victims and nothing about the culture. You are just saying that you have full confidence in the chief.

Rebecca Knox: Madam Chair, that was at the time of the publication of the report.

Chair: Yes.

Rebecca Knox: It was earlier on when we made the public statement that the chief was going to commission the independent report.

Q211 **Chair:** You said then, "I am worried about the victims".

Rebecca Knox: I did not say I was worried. I apologised for the situation that we found ourselves in. I am sorry. I cannot remember the exact wording.

Q212 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, panel. I have a couple of questions for the fire chiefs. At our last session, it was stated that the buck stops with the fire chiefs in the services. Mr MacDougall, in your role as an executive of the people programme, what does that entail? What have you done to change the culture within your particular fire service?

Rob MacDougall: There are two points there. I will speak about the National Fire Chiefs Council work and how that supports chief fire officers, and then I will speak about what I have done within my service, if that is okay.

We have shared with the panel the culture action plan. Again, following the first report that come through from the London Fire Brigade, the National Fire Chiefs Council looked very closely at all the work it was doing. We have been doing a lot of work over quite a long period of time to support services in how they deal with cultural change within their organisations.

Again, within that report that we have provided to you, you will see all the work that we are doing to support that. Chief Fire Officer Billing has talked to some of that work already. Again, we are making sure that we support chief fire officers to bring about culture change in their services.

We have another cultural event in July and we are currently releasing those products. We have talked about some of those things. This is about how we support challenging behaviour and make sure everyone in the service can speak out when they see behaviour that is not appropriate.

Some of that work is around what success looks like, so looking at how we produce the right measures for services to recognise where they are on that cultural improvement journey. Again, that is about making sure we can learn and support each other as we drive cultural change within the service.



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As the chief fire officer in Oxfordshire, we have recently undertaken a culture review, which has landed in the last couple of weeks. From that, we have pulled out lots of actions. There is an action plan that we are going to deliver, over the next 12 months and going into a second year, to make sure we can improve culture across our service.

As I have said, we are looking for external verification on some of our policies and procedures through accreditation by various organisations to make sure we are driving cultural change to improve our culture.

Q213 Kim Johnson: In terms of your role at the National Fire Chiefs Council, how confident are you that all 44 services are taking this on board and constructively looking at making significant changes to culture within the organisation? We were told at the last session that there is an inconsistent approach in terms of the different fire services.

Rob MacDougall: I am confident that all 50 fire and rescue services see cultural change as a priority within their organisations. We are working to try to drive consistency in that approach.

As the National Fire Chiefs Council, it is about supporting services to drive consistency and to make sure we understand what is best practice. As services introduce initiatives into their services, how can we understand how they are working and whether they are delivering improvements?

Again, from a National Fire Chiefs Council point of view, we are supporting fire services in doing that. As an example of that, there will be a conversation through the National Fire Chiefs Council at the end of March, where we will be discussing the positive practice that services have been implementing.

The inspectorate is also holding an event at the end of May that will look at the positive practice that has come out of the inspectorate's cultural thematic review. Again, we are making sure that we identify that positive practice, understand how it is improving culture and share that among fire and rescue services.

Justin Johnston: I will speak from Lancashire's perspective. In Lancashire, we have been on this cultural journey for about 10 years. It is a constant journey. We still have issues that we have been working through.

When we first started, we introduced a set of values. The organisation worked on those and implemented them. Within about two years—I will be honest—they went stale. They sat on a shelf and they were forgotten. We realised that we had not integrated them into absolutely everything we do. We had not integrated them into recruitment and selection. We had not integrated them into promotion processes. We had not put them into appraisal processes so that people understood them and could be taken through disciplinary channels for not behaving to the set of standards that we had all agreed.



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Over time, we have been able to supplement those values. We have introduced leadership training about how to have difficult conversations with people, how to have authentic conversations and how to call things out if they are inappropriate.

That does not mean we still do not have issues. We had 26 investigations this year. In the year prior to that, we had about 18. You can take from that that some people are more confident to come forward now, which is what we want. We want people to know what is right and wrong and be happy to identify it.

From our reviews, I know that 90% of our staff feel confident enough to speak out. A bit like Kathryn said earlier, some of them are confident to speak out but they still worry about being ostracised or reprisals, which makes them less likely to speak up. Particularly if we get something like a bullying and harassment case, there often may not be physical evidence in terms of WhatsApp conversations. That seems to be a significant modern thing. You often have to go and talk to people. Unfortunately, we still do find some circumstances where people who would have seen or heard something turn out, by the time they are interviewed, not to have seen or heard anything.

I am hoping that some of the things that will be drawn out of the misconduct review by HMICFRS and published in June will give us some of the evidence base to start driving that forward more thoroughly across the whole of the NFCC. People need to be comfortable to stand up and be an ally.

In my own fire and rescue service, we are—let me put my glasses back on—10.4% female. My last recruitment process of 35 people generated 40% female candidates and 60% male candidates; it generated 17% BAME candidates. It is an improvement journey for all of us. It is a really difficult one, but we are committed to taking it on.

Q214 Kim Johnson: You are recruiting, but how well are you retaining and promoting those officers? Could you maybe say a little bit about your statement earlier on when you agreed there was institutional racism and misogyny. Have any staff members lost their jobs as a result of that?

Justin Johnston: In terms of retaining, we have a very low number of leavers. Statistically, it is very difficult for us to draw conclusions at that level. Again, through the HMI misconduct review, we are hoping to get to a standardised and anonymised national dataset, which will tell us more information. We do exit interviews with all our people.

After the initial review into London, we reviewed those again and checked whether people left for the reason they gave us or whether there was anything more to it, so we could assure ourselves. Our numbers are very small in terms of leavers. It is difficult to ascertain anything from that.



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In terms of people being dismissed—I am pulling figures from my mind—probably about one or two people a year will be dismissed in relation to those behaviours. I am happy to write to the Committee to confirm those.

Q215 Kim Johnson: Kathryn, I want to ask about the inspection process. At our last session we heard that a lot of services achieved a “good” inspection. Dorset got a “good” inspection. However, there is all this misogyny going on. How confident are you that the inspection regime is effective enough in highlighting and dealing with this culture that is endemic within services?

Kathryn Billing: HMI calling for the thematic was a recognition of the fact that in the three areas of efficiency, effectiveness and people we probably had not done that deep dive sufficiently. That thematic inspection around misconduct was specifically targeted at that. I was one of the services that went through that inspection. That does give me assurance. I certainly welcome and look forward to seeing the outcome of that report.

As a Committee, you have spoken to a lot of groups of people individually. We ask ourselves, “Why have we not been able to crack this before?” One thing that I have reflected on is that what you see now that you probably have not seen before is a joint approach to this. You have the National Fire Chiefs Council. As I have said to you before, I have been bullied; I have been discriminated against. You now have leaders in these positions who want to make a difference because we have been receivers of those types of behaviours.

You now have committed chiefs. You are holding us to account with that scrutiny. We have the Fire Brigades Union. We have the HMI. We have AFSA. We have Women in the Fire Service. We have the UK FirePride network. We have the Inclusive Fire Service Group. I nearly forgot that group.

There are a lot of people who are going, “This is really important”. It is important right here, right now, but it needs to be important forever. As I have said before, we see operational competence as an absolute priority that never ever wavers. Our cultural competence and improvement needs to be there as well. Long may that partnership and us working together continue because we will not get there on our own.

Q216 Kim Johnson: Councillor, do you know how many staff members have taken constructive dismissal against Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service because of the failure of the service to support them while they were there?

Rebecca Knox: I do not, I am afraid. I can get back to you with those details. I am sorry not to be able to reply today.

Q217 Simon Fell: I just have a couple of questions for the fire chiefs. Do you track staff sentiment? Are you measuring the impact of having



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whistleblowing lines in place? Do you measure whether your teams have trust in the transparency of those procedures and that they will be listened to?

Justin Johnston: Yes, absolutely. Every two years, we also do a full survey, independently run. We ask specific questions around things like that so we can understand the impact that we are having and the confidence that people have. I will not say that is universal, but, through the culture dashboard work that we are doing through the NFCC, it will be a product that everybody will be able to draw down upon.

Q218 **Simon Fell:** Are you seeing an increase in confidence?

Justin Johnston: Yes. The figures from my recent one show that there is a marked increase in confidence.

Kathryn Billing: It is slightly different in Cornwall. We know that the independent reporting lines and our reporting lines work because they are being used. Until we implement the culture dashboard, we will not have that trust and confidence rating, if that makes sense.

Rob MacDougall: We are currently going through an annual staff survey, which again tracks all those feelings of confidence. As part of our independent culture review, there is a recognition that we are seeing improving behaviours over the last 12 months. We will be using things like pulse surveys to track the elements of that improvement.

The work that we have done nationally on the culture dashboard has been really interesting work to understand the best way to track cultural improvement in any organisation. We have looked far and wide to other sectors and other services, including internationally, to see how others are doing it and to try to develop best practice in order to support services in setting up the right information to be able to show that cultural improvement journey.

There is quantitative data that we can go into, which you would expect us to do, around workforce data, but we recognise that doing that survey and having a qualitative understanding of the employee experience and how people feel is really important in understanding how we are improving across our services.

Q219 **Simon Fell:** This is a slightly lazy analogy, but I will make it anyway. When we have been looking at the police, one thing we have seen in the standards there is that it certainly helps to have those hotlines and the ability for people to blow the whistle and point out when there are challenges in the environment in which they are working.

They also need to have confidence that, where people are in employment already, there is retrospective checking going on. That has been a really tricky piece of work for certainly the Met to lean into and for some of the other forces that we have looked at as well. There is this standards and vetting piece, where they might have missed red flags or where warning



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signs were not picked up.

Are you doing that retrospective work as well to provide reassurance to the people within your teams that no stone is going unturned, that you are not just waiting for someone to come forward and that there a bit of proactivity here?

Kathryn Billing: Just on that point about vetting and DBS checking, that piece of work was driven by the National Fire Chiefs Council. The law passed in July last year. I know Justin wanted to come in on that.

Justin Johnston: That is pretty much what I was going to say. We are working through staff groups retrospectively. Potentially 35,000 people are going through that. It is going to take a little bit of time.

I am about halfway through on my fire and rescue service staff. We are looking at that with pretty much a standardised approach. Through NFCC safeguarding, we have agreed how we will approach what will turn out to be disclosures to us around safeguarding and whether those disclosures should have already been made to us on recruitment. We are working our way through that now.

Q220 **Simon Fell:** Are you all on a similar journey there?

Kathryn Billing: Yes.

Rob MacDougall: The only difference in my own service is that, because we are part of a county council fire and rescue service, we have had safeguarding and vetting in place for a much longer time. It was raised by adult social care colleagues that it was a requirement for us to have. In some cases, we are having to look at whether it is appropriate to do enhanced checks. We are vetting our staff.

There is also a lot of work going on to look at disclosures from police services and, when things are getting raised to our police colleagues, whether it is appropriate for them to raise those with us directly so we get an early indication that action is being taken against someone from a policing point of view.

Q221 **Simon Fell:** Justin, you said you were halfway through, but I will ask this of all of you. Do you have an estimate for when that retrospective vetting will be completed?

Justin Johnston: Only in so much as we have been running it for about four months now, so it will potentially be another four months.

Rob MacDougall: From my perspective, I am confident all my staff have been appropriately vetted.

Kathryn Billing: I cannot give you a timescale, but I am happy to report back.

Q222 **Simon Fell:** Yes, I would be interested in that, if possible. Just in terms



of outputs from that, have you seen people dismissed as a result?

Justin Johnston: It is difficult to know from the data. I have the exact data. It is difficult to know from that because it says that some people left prior to finishing the vetting process. Most things tend to be fairly low level and historical. Like I said, there is a process to work through whether that person presents a risk from a safeguarding perspective.

Q223 **Chair:** We have the Minister waiting so we are going to have to move on. There were just a couple of things that I wondered whether you could write to me about. First of all, I wanted to ask each of the fire chiefs whether you use non-disclosure agreements in your service. Could you write to me and let me know if you do use NDAs? Could you also write to me and let me know whether you use 360-degree reviews? That would be very helpful.

Finally, when we questioned the Fire Brigades Union about the representation that it provided to firefighters, it said it could not give us any information about how many people it represented. It suggested that we ask the fire chiefs and the Minister about that.

Do you have any data about representation from the FBU in particular in any disciplinary or misconduct proceedings? Would you be able to write to me about that as well if you have that information?

Justin Johnston: Yes.

Chair: I have to say that I am rather surprised that the FBU is not able to provide that, but it has said that it does not have that information.

Kathryn Billing: You want to know how many cases it—

Chair: How many people has the FBU represented? One of our questions to it was about representing firefighters and fire officers where there were allegations of bullying and intimidation. It told us that it has a specific policy that it will not always represent those people. We wanted to get some data about that and understand how that policy works. Just generally, we want to have information about the number of times that the FBU represents people in disciplinary and misconduct proceedings, just to understand the level of that.

Thank you very much for your attendance today and the evidence you have given. We will be producing a report, hopefully before a general election. Thank you very much. We will now move to our second panel.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sarah Gawley and Chris Philp.

Q224 **Chair:** Minister, it is very good to see you and I do apologise. We have had quite a packed morning. We had a briefing with some of your officials in private to start off with and then we have had a panel of four giving



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evidence, for whom there were lots of questions, so I do apologise for keeping you waiting. We know you, Minister, very well. You have been in front of us several times before, but I wondered if we could perhaps hear from your colleague who is here. Would you just like to introduce yourself and explain your role?

Sarah Gawley: Good morning. I am the director for fire and major events in the Home Office, with responsibility for fire safety, fire reform, fire resilience and the Crown Premises Fire Safety Inspectorate.

Q225 **Chair:** Thank you very much for attending today. This is the second session we have had in looking at the culture of the fire and rescue service and the Committee is very concerned about what we have heard from a number of people. In our first session, we heard about some of the independent inquiries that have taken place. Minister, in that session, there were a lot of compliments paid to you as a Minister who is engaged, who is interested, who is looking at the fire and rescue service.

What we are very concerned about, though, is a culture that does not seem to be one that you would expect to see in any public service in 2024. It harks back more to "Life on Mars" and the 1970s at times, in the way people were spoken to or treated. What are your reflections on what you have come across so far as the Minister responsible?

Chris Philp: Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity of appearing before the Committee again today. There are cultural problems that need to be addressed and I have discussed this repeatedly with a number of people in the fire system, from Mark Hardingham, who is the chair of the National Fire Chiefs Council, to Matt Wrack, the general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union, and many chief officers. I have repeated this message in a number of public forums that I have spoken at.

It is very important, not just at the top, because, in a sense, the culture at the top is relatively easy to fix once chief fire officers understand change is needed. I hope you have seen in your evidence that most, if not all, chief fire officers do now accept that. They may not have done as recently as two or three years ago, but they do now. The challenge with changing culture is to move beyond just that cadre of chief fire officers and cascade that change of culture to treat colleagues with respect and so on right the way through to the front line.

The real test of whether a culture has changed or not is at 2 am, when there is a watch working together on a fire station and there is no senior supervisor around. It is just the watch commander and the frontline firefighters, no one else. If something happens, if someone is made the subject of unacceptable abuse of some kind, does that get called out? Does it get called out by the watch commander? Even more importantly, does it get called out by the other frontline firefighters? Only when we can say with certainty and confidence that the answer to that question is almost always, "Yes, it will get called out at 2 am in that frontline fire



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station when no one else is watching or looking”, has the culture truly changed.

Q226 **Chair:** You do not have that confidence at the moment.

Chris Philp: That is a journey that they are on. They have not yet reached the destination. A lot of progress has been made in the last two or three years. It is certainly accepted at the very senior levels of the fire service, but more work needs to be done to meet the test that I just set out, and that is ultimately the test of whether a culture has changed. Cascading that down through the whole organisation is the challenge that the leadership have to deliver on.

Q227 **Chair:** Can I just refer to what Andy Cooke has said to the Committee? He says, “While there has been some good progress within services, overall, I am concerned that they are often too slow to make changes following our reports”. He says that, “We commenced our third full round of inspections in February 2023”. They have published 15 reports.

“We have still found too many instances of unacceptable behaviours and have issued the following to those 15 services in relation to values and culture”—the 15 that they have inspected—“requires improvement’ or ‘inadequate’ grades to five services and causes of concern to two services”. It is not exactly a glowing recommendation that things are moving at the pace that we all want them to, is it?

Chris Philp: I have discussed this with Andy Cooke repeatedly. I meet Andy Cooke on fire and police matters on an almost weekly basis. He is probably sick of the sight of me, I would imagine. I would broadly agree with his analysis. There has been progress. The London Fire Brigade is a good example of that, where the Commissioner, Andy Roe, has made enormous progress following the Nazir Afzal report. He has really gripped it and brought about positive change and they have come recently—just last month, in fact—out of the “engage” process. There has been good work done in Manchester as well, which received a “good” rating just recently.

There has definitely been progress, but I would agree with Andy Cooke that there is more to do and he has given you the figures around that.

Q228 **Chair:** He also says to us, “A worrying trend has arisen during our third round of inspections; we are seeing increasing instances of services attempting to unduly influence the inspection process. This includes services selecting specific members of staff ahead of our reality testing and briefing them on answers in advance”. What do you say about that?

Chris Philp: I read that on page 2 of his letter to the Committee, dated 12 March, and I was very concerned to see that. That is completely unacceptable, to try to game the system in that way. They should not be trying to do it in the first place, but I was slightly reassured by his next sentence, which said, “To date, because of our vigilance and robust



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processes, these attempts have not been successful". He has spotted it and stopped it, but they should not be trying it in the first place.

He has also made some changes following the Dorset and Wiltshire inspection, where he is now requiring chief fire officers of FRSs being inspected to notify the inspectorate where there are significant misconduct processes ongoing. One of the problems with the Dorset and Wiltshire inspection was that they were not fully aware of some of the investigations that were going on at the time. That is a further change that should make it harder for FRSs to try to pull the wool over the inspector's eyes.

Q229 **Chair:** Do you find that very surprising, though, that that information was not given to the inspectorate when it was in Dorset and Wiltshire? It rated that service as good, did it not?

Chris Philp: It did.

Q230 **Chair:** It did not know about that underlying culture of misogyny and sexism, which was then found in the independent report.

Chris Philp: That is right. Yes, I am very surprised that that information was not provided. It definitely should have been provided by the Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service to the inspector. The inspector who conducted that, as Andy Cooke's letter says, was Wendy Williams, who this Committee will know very well. She is a very well-respected figure.

They conducted interviews with 135 members of staff—about 10% of the workforce—but the issues were not found. You are quite right. That is why the changes I just mentioned have been made because, clearly, just a short time later, the independent report did find the issues. I am pleased that the inspectorate is going back in very soon to reinspect Dorset and Wiltshire. It is going in on 8 April, so in just two or three weeks' time it will be back in there to check up on them again.

Q231 **Chair:** That is good. I do not know if you were able to hear any of the evidence that we have just taken. We heard from the chair of the fire and rescue authority in Dorset and Wiltshire as to the governance arrangement for that fire and rescue service. A number of us on the Committee were concerned about the lack of questioning or inquisitiveness, really, about what was going on in a service that the governance structure was supposed to oversee.

Do you think the governance structure that we have for fire and rescue services is actually fit for purpose? You have councillors who are elected and all of that, but just seem to take what a chief fire officer tells them without questioning.

Chris Philp: We, collectively, the public—as well as Parliament—rely on the fire and rescue authority as the oversight body to be inquisitive and to be appropriately sceptical, rather like a local version of a Select Committee in many ways. We need them to discharge that function



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seriously and not just treat it as a minor matter alongside their county council duties.

That is one of the reasons why moving towards having a police, fire and crime commissioner model, or having a combined mayor taking responsibility, is a better model, because you have a single, individual elected person—not a Committee, but one person—who is obviously accountable and has a stronger incentive, therefore, to make sure it is sorted out.

We have five or six PFCCs now. To take an example, in Essex, there is a PFCC—police fire and crime commissioner—Roger Hirst. There are others as well. I know that those PFCCs take a very strong interest, as do the mayors of combined authorities, whether it is in Manchester, London or elsewhere. That is a better model. We are not, as you know—and as discussed in our previous session—mandating transfers or changes from an FRA to a PFCC or combined mayor model, but we are encouraging it and one of the reasons why is the point that you are making.

Q232 Chair: It seems to me there needs to be some training. If you are not moving everyone on to that model, for the authorities that exist there seems to be some training required, to ensure that there is proper oversight.

Chris Philp: They need to take the responsibility seriously. This is not a minor function that is an adjunct to county council duties. It is, as you have identified, a really important function. If there is a problem, as there was in Dorset and Wiltshire, clearly, we are relying on the fire and rescue authority to act as the first line of defence against that. It is a really important role that they need to take very seriously.

Q233 Simon Fell: Welcome, Minister. I am aware you are sat across two services, which are experiencing real cultural challenges at the moment. I would just be really interested in your reflections on that and what you are taking from the challenges that police have, what you are learning from that, and what you are bringing into your approach to how we change the culture within the fire service as well.

Chris Philp: The first point is the one I made earlier. For cultural change to happen, you need everyone in the organisation, but particularly the frontline, to really embrace it, understand it and have the confidence to call out problems where they see them. That is the same in any organisation, including private sector organisations.

I have said this in speeches to all of the chief fire officers and the fire and rescue authorities, and I say the same thing to the National Police Chiefs Council and PCCs as well. The first message I always give is that, for both services, their mission as leaders is to make sure—as I said to the Chair—at 2 am, in a police station or a fire station, we know that the people on the frontline are going to do the right thing with confidence. That is the acid test of culture change.



Secondly—again, common to both—we need to create the systems that back that up. That means that, when people blow the whistle or report something, it gets taken seriously. It is investigated independently. People have the confidence in the reporting system. It means we have proper inspections. It is the same inspector for both. You have met Andy Cooke.

That is why we, for example, commissioned, first, a spotlight inspection and then, secondly, a thematic inspection—that is underway now—into culture in the fire service. We have had similar inspections in policing. This is to make sure someone independent is checking up on what is going on, that they know that that is happening and that the regulations are there.

In policing, we have much more nationally imposed regulations, partly because police officers are officers under the Crown, whereas firefighters are employees. They are different things. In policing, we have much more prescriptive, national regulations on, for example, misconduct, what counts as misconduct, how a police officer gets dismissed. It is quite prescribed in national regulations and guidance, which we are in the process, by the way, of updating.

In fire, it is much more devolved. It is up to each local FRA as an employer to set those rules. We do have a core code of ethics that was introduced in 2021 and it is our intention to put that on a statutory footing, but that is one of the main differences between the two. The officeholders under the Crown have a lot of national regulation in police, versus the much more devolved, localised management for firefighters, because they are employees. That is the main difference between the two.

Q234 Simon Fell: Thank you for that. One of the first things you said there was about being able to call out problems and act on them. Andy Cooke has made a recommendation that the chief inspector should be able not just to inspect, but to enforce. Do you support that recommendation?

Chris Philp: First of all, to answer the first bit of the question on people being confident to report, one of the recommendations that Andy Cooke made in the past was that, by 1 October last year, there should be a confidential and independent way for staff to raise concerns and that there is a whistleblowing process. I can confirm that all 44 fire and rescue services now have that independent mechanism in place, which they did not previously. That was an HMICFRS recommendation. It has been implemented. That is really important, to give people that confidence in reporting.

On your second question, Andy Cooke has made this sort of request in relation to both fire and policing. The way our system is constructed, they are an inspector, not a regulator. That means they make recommendations. They do not have hard-edged powers to direct either a police force or a fire and rescue service to do X, Y or Z. We take their



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recommendations seriously. We expect the police forces and fire services to as well.

There are last-resort Home Secretary powers to step in, with either the police or fire, if there is a really serious problem and things are getting out of hand. In fire, I do not think that has ever been used, but it is there as a last resort. We do not propose at present—I say “at present”—to give the inspector powers to direct, but we expect fire and rescue services and police forces to follow those recommendations. We watch that very carefully indeed and I am sure chief constables and chief fire officers are mindful of the Home Secretary’s last-resort power to be used if necessary.

Q235 Simon Fell: You say you do not accept that at the moment. What is the process for reviewing that?

Chris Philp: Andy Cooke wrote his “State of Policing” report last year and made various requests along those lines, which we considered. We discussed it with the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners. We discussed it with the National Police Chiefs Council. We have had similar consideration in relation to fire. Having considered it and discussed it quite widely, we made some clarifications but decided, for the moment, not to take it forward. I would never say “never”. It is the kind of thing you keep under constant review and you keep an eye on it the whole time.

Q236 Simon Fell: In the previous panel, I asked the fire chiefs about the process they are going through, where they are vetting existing staff and going back through. One of the things that came up there was that a number of people have left as a result of that process starting, either through retirement or for other reasons. Of course, that does not come to a conclusion then, at that point.

I just wonder what thought you have given to those processes and whether there is some mechanism to hold individuals like that to account. Perhaps they should have been picked up in the past, either through bad behaviour or something that was missed through vetting. Do you think there is something more we should be doing in that space?

Chris Philp: We have to be hyper-vigilant about this and that is why we introduced legislation in July 2023 to expand the eligibility for background checks, including criminal record and police background checks, on fire and rescue authority employees, to make it so that you can do more of those background checks. That is really important. The continuous vetting and re-vetting is important, in both fire and police, for the reason that you have set out.

Q237 Kim Johnson: Minister, how confident are you that culture change will take place with regards to all of the actions that you have spoken about today? We have heard from previous sessions that nothing has changed in the last 30 to 40 years, because it is so endemic. How confident are you?



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Chris Philp: Change is in progress. I would certainly not say that it is completed, by any stretch of the imagination, but change is in progress. In maybe the last two years, in particular, that process of change has started. It may well not have happened for the 28 years before that, but in the last two years changes have started.

I have already mentioned the example of the London Fire Brigade, which has changed very significantly in the last year or two under Commissioner Andy Roe's leadership, to the point that it has come out of "engage". It has made some really meaningful changes on the culture, behaviour and integrity point. Manchester has made a lot of progress as well, but I would say it is a work in progress. It is not finished yet, for sure.

We in Government are trying to push everything we can. I have mentioned, for example, the code of ethics already. We have commissioned HMICFRS, the inspectorate, to do the thematic inspection that I mentioned is currently in progress. We have given the National Fire Chiefs Council funding to create the tools and guidance necessary. Every time I talk to chief fire officers, I press this point. We are pulling a number of levers but, just to be honest, it is a work in progress. The job is not done yet.

Q238 **Kim Johnson:** You mentioned earlier that, for change to take place, it is very incumbent on the frontline to be responsible for that. Given that you have mentioned that the responsibilities are devolved and there is a massive inconsistency in terms of how services are run, again, how confident are you that there will be that consistent culture change right across all of the services?

Chris Philp: That is a good question and that is really what the thematic inspection is designed to get to the bottom of. When there were questions asked about this on the Floor of the House roughly nine months ago, I immediately commissioned this thematic inspection to give some assurance about that and I am sure it will get repeated again afterwards. That is the best mechanism for us in Parliament and for me as a Minister to check up on that consistency of the inspectorate. The code of ethics also sets out national standards and, as I say, we intend to set that on a statutory footing, again to underpin the consistency that we want to see.

Sarah Gawley: I was just reflecting on what Justin Johnston said about having put in place some values, which then had sat on the shelf and nothing happened, so they needed to go through a whole new process. There is a sense that it needs a relentless, sustained focus and again, from the Government's perspective, we will need to make sure that we also keep that focus and that we hold services and the NFCC to account for making progress in these areas. It is going to be a long run.

Q239 **Chair:** It is surprising just how far behind some of the services are. I just wanted to ask you, Minister, about when the College of Fire and Rescue will be established.



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Chris Philp: That was announced in the Government's response to the White Paper we published in December. I would describe that as a process that is going to unfold over the coming years. To start with, we are going to be bolstering and bulking up the work that is already being co-ordinated by the National Fire Chiefs Council in this area.

Ultimately, to do this properly—I am not saying we are not doing this properly; let me choose my words more carefully—or to do this on a more expansive basis, to expand it and make it even better, will require additional funding. That will be tied into the next spending review process that will happen in the course of the autumn. In the short term, we are doing more work with the National Fire Chiefs Council. Into the medium term, it will be a consequence of the next spending review.

Q240 **Chair:** That is within the next three to four years, if the spending review goes ahead and it is agreed.

Chris Philp: Yes. That is right.

Q241 **Chair:** There are no consequences currently for those who are going through the disciplinary process and who leave the service or retire. I am directly referring to a case in Dorset and Wiltshire. What consideration has been given by the Home Office to looking at whether that should change? I think you did change that with the police. Has there been any thought given to that?

Chris Philp: In relation to the police, if someone leaves the police—retires or resigns—they can still be subject to misconduct proceedings and, if they are found guilty of misconduct or gross misconduct, then, since they have left already, they can be barred, so they cannot rejoin any police force. I will ask Sarah to expand on the position in relation to that for fire in a second. In relation to any employee, they can get fired but, if they have left and what they have done meets the criminal threshold, clearly they can be criminally investigated by the police.

Is it the case, in terms of fire, that a retired or resigned firefighter can be investigated for misconduct and then barred, as is the case with police?

Sarah Gawley: It is not at the moment. I would just go back to the role of the FRA as the employer. It would need to follow its employee-employer arrangements for that. We have, though, asked HMICFRS, as you know, to do a thematic inspection into misconduct. Part of that is to see if there are any gaps and anything that we should be doing differently. On receipt of that report, that will be an opportunity to reflect on whether more needs to be done in this space.

Chris Philp: That could include, potentially—I am just thinking out loud—creating a barring concept. Given that firefighters are employees, not officers of the Crown, there would be legal questions, but that could be one further reform, to introduce a barring concept if a firefighter is found guilty of misconduct after having left. That would be a possible reform.



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Q242 **Chair:** The Committee is quite concerned that, in the Dorset and Wiltshire case, there was a very senior officer in that fire service who, as I understand it, over a number of years was behaving in a dreadful way. When, finally, there was some disciplinary action taken against him, he basically ducked out of it and I assume he has retired on full pension, with all the rights that that brings, and yet he has never been held to account for what he inflicted on women firefighters in that service. That is disgraceful, is it not, Minister?

Chris Philp: That lack of accountability is concerning. We can consider the barring concept that I just mentioned. I do not want to firmly commit to it. There may be legal issues, because they are employees rather than officers of the Crown, but that is something that we can certainly take away and consider. Clearly, if the conduct met the criminal threshold, then police investigation would be the right thing.

In relation to pension forfeiture, again, we do have that with the police, but that normally follows criminal conviction. The threshold is criminal conviction of a nature that constituted, typically, abuse of their power as an officer. It is a relatively high threshold, but it certainly generally follows criminal convictions.

Q243 **Chair:** Just finally, can I ask you about your relationship with the FBU? You said that you had met with Matt Wrack, the general secretary. Can you say how the union is involved in getting the cultural change that we all want to see?

Chris Philp: It is basically pretty good, actually. I have met Matt Wrack on a number of occasions and meetings have always been very constructive, very civil, mutually respectful and often quite productive. We most recently met about a month ago, I would say, actually talking about these issues. I met with Matt Wrack and Mark Hardingham, the chair of the NFCC, to talk about exactly these culture issues in the fire service, but also in the FBU.

Q244 **Chair:** Sorry, let me just get that straight. That is three white men meeting together to talk about the cultural issues in the fire and rescue service.

Chris Philp: Yes, it was.

Sarah Gawley: Plus my female members of staff, supporting the Minister.

Chris Philp: That is right. The meeting was not exclusively of that background. We do have a good relationship and we do discuss these issues, including as recently as just a few weeks ago.

Sarah Gawley: If I might also just make a comment, Matt Wrack recognises that the FBU has a key role to play. There is also the fact that it sometimes can be representing the perpetrators, as well as representing the victims. Given the unionised workforce, both sides could



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be members of the union, and so there is a role that the FBU needs to play there. Again, Matt Wrack has talked about what it is doing to strengthen the representation, so that it is appropriate in both cases. Sometimes, if it needs to, it will withdraw representation.

Q245 **Chair:** Can I just ask you about that? We have had some written evidence from the Fire Brigades Union after its appearance a few weeks ago. It talks about that policy of “all different, all equal”, which is about representing perpetrators. In its information to us, it says it does not have any data about who it has represented and that we should ask the fire chiefs and Ministers about that. Do you have any information or data about the FBU, who it represents and how many cases?

Chris Philp: I am not sure it is entirely up to Ministers to hold data on what the FBU gets up to. Sarah, do you know?

Sarah Gawley: No, we do not have that data.

Chair: Nobody seems to have any data.

Chris Philp: The people within the FBU should have the data on who they are representing.

Q246 **Chair:** I am surprised. The Committee asked for the number of people the FBU had represented at disciplinary hearings. This is Matt Wrack: “I explained to the committee that this question is best put to ministers, fire employers and chief fire officers, who are in charge of fire and rescue service discipline and for statistics on these matters”, but do you not have that either? I just want to be clear. Nobody has any statistics.

Chris Philp: No, not on FBU representation.

Sarah Gawley: No, not on FBU representation.

Chris Philp: That is something I would expect the FBU to hold. They are the people doing the representation, after all.

Q247 **Chair:** The Committee is of that view as well, but I just wanted to check with you, in case we had misunderstood and there was information. Can I thank you very much indeed for attending today? Is there is anything else you would like to say, Minister?

Chris Philp: Chair, I did want to say one last thing. We talked about the cultural issues that need to be sorted out and they are very serious, but we should also put on record our thanks to the over 30,000 firefighters up and down the country who put themselves in personal danger every day to keep the rest of us safe. We should just note that the majority of firefighters are public service-orientated, doing the right thing, putting themselves at risk, and we should not lose sight of that as we rightly consider all of these other issues as well.

Q248 **Chair:** I am very glad you have said that, Minister, and the Committee would absolutely endorse those comments. The Committee would also



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like to pay tribute to all those brave firefighters who have come forward to explain where things have gone wrong in the fire service, where they have not been treated properly and appropriately, and have spoken out, because that also takes a lot of bravery to do. I certainly have spoken to firefighters who are going through the process at the moment of calling out bad behaviour and I know how stressful and difficult that is. The Committee would like to put that on the record as well.

Chris Philp: I would certainly endorse that. Just to add to it, we strongly encourage any firefighter who has concerns to report their concerns via the channels. We have the independent line that we talked about. There is obviously the union or, indeed, it can be reported through their local MP or other channels available. Secondly, to any firefighter who may be listening, if you do see behaviour on your watch that is wrong, please have the confidence to call it out, because that is the way, ultimately, we are going to bring about the change that we need.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. That concludes our session.