

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [State of the fire and rescue services, HC 1168](#)

Wednesday 2 March 2022

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 2 March 2022.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Dame Diana Johnson (Chair); Ms Diane Abbott; Paula Barker; Tim Loughton.

Questions 1 - 53

Witnesses

I: Sir Thomas Winsor, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services; Roy Wilsher OBE, Her Majesty's Inspector, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services; Mark Hardingham, Chair, National Fire Chiefs Council.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sir Thomas Winsor, Roy Wilsher and Mark Hardingham.

Q1 Chair: Good morning, everybody. This is the Home Affairs Select Committee inquiry today into the fire and rescue service. It is our first opportunity as a Committee to look at the fire and rescue service. We are really pleased to have three witnesses before us today. We have Sir Thomas Winsor, who is Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services; Roy Wilsher, who is Her Majesty's Inspector of Fire and Rescue Services; and Mark Hardingham, who is chair of the National Fire Chiefs Council. You are very welcome today.

The way I intend to run the session is that we will first of all concentrate on the fire and rescue services—there are a number of questions that we will want to ask you today—and then, at about 11.15, we would like particularly to hear from Sir Tom about his experiences as the Chief Inspector. Sir Tom, I know you are standing down at the end of this month, so we are very keen to hear from you in particular around your views on policing in light of some of the recent events that we have seen. If the other two witnesses want to sit in the public gallery or remain where they are, that is absolutely fine. That is how I intend to deal with this morning's proceedings.

Sir Tom, first of all, can you set out your concerns about the fire and rescue service currently, particularly in light of the challenges that the fire and rescue service is now facing? Could you reflect a little on what has happened in most recent times in terms of Covid and new or ongoing threats such as flooding? How is that being handled by fire and rescue?

Sir Thomas Winsor: I am naturally happy to deal with the policing things at the end, although HMI Wilsher is also Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary with special responsibility for domestic abuse.

The principal concerns are in relation to culture and preparedness to cope with the things that are thrown at the fire and rescue service. You may want to ask the question, "Could another Grenfell happen?" There is an importance attached to protection and prevention, which we can go into, but the influence and conduct of the Fire Brigades Union is a drag on reform, particularly in matters concerning the true role of the firefighter. There have been quite severe disagreements in some parts of the country in relation to the ability or the willingness of firefighters to deal with a marauding terrorist attack, which we may come to as well.

Q2 Chair: Perhaps you could just explain that a little more.

Sir Thomas Winsor: When a marauding terrorist attack takes place, if it ever does, the police will of course go in first and do everything they can to neutralise the terrorists, but there is also a need for the other two emergency services, firefighters and ambulance, to enter that zone. This is not the hot zone, where live rounds are being fired and there is the



greatest threat to life, but there is still a threat to life as they go into that zone to recover casualties and put out fires, if any have been started.

In two parts of the country, Merseyside and London, there have been disagreements with the firefighters in question as to whether that is a proper role for firefighters and whether they should be paid extra in order to undertake those duties. I, the Government and the NFCC take the view that firefighters are already being paid for this and therefore a 2% pay rise on top of the 1.5% that has already been agreed nationally is unjustified; it is paying twice for the same thing. I wrote to the commissioner of the London Fire Brigade and the chief fire officer in Merseyside and said that there is no justification for proceeding in this way, but—

Roy Wilsher: It is Manchester, not Merseyside.

Sir Thomas Winsor: I am sorry. I said Merseyside but I meant Manchester.

Chair: Manchester and London are the two areas.

Sir Thomas Winsor: Yes. I am so sorry. I do not know why I said Merseyside. I wrote to them to say that this is unjustified and should not proceed. We can go into that a little more, as you want.

The overall picture, though, which I should have emphasised at the beginning, is that the vast majority of firefighters continue to work very hard to help their communities. They deserve our thanks, particularly for the risks they take, of course, and for the way in which they handled the pandemic. Again, the Fire Brigades Union¹ attempted to prevent, in some parts of the country, the firefighters from helping with the vaccination programme, because they said it was not part of their function. That caused conflict with firefighters, because they wanted to help. Indeed, in many cases they did help.

Q3 **Chair:** Was that localised as well? Was that in particular areas?

Roy Wilsher: There was a general notice from the Fire Brigades Union for firefighters not to help with the vaccination programme. It was across the country.

Sir Thomas Winsor: Overall, we are finding that the performance of fire and rescue services is improving. When the Government announced their intention to create an inspectorate—they gave it to us, so it is not a separate inspectorate—for fire and rescue services, the fire and rescue service at least in some parts of the country thought that this would be a jolly good idea. They still think that, but what they were perhaps not

¹ The Committee received correspondence from the General Secretary of the Fire Brigades Union putting their point of view on this matter. This letter has been published on our website: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/9230/documents/159884/default/>



HOUSE OF COMMONS

anticipating was that we would find things that were not as good as they should be, and we have done that.

We have been doing the police since 1856, so we apply the same techniques. We expose weaknesses but also highlight strengths. We allow fire and rescue services in one part of the country to see very clearly how well other fire and rescue services are doing particular things and, therefore, to move everyone up towards the standard of the best. That is of considerable importance.

The other thing I would mention, which I expect we will get onto, is the operational independence of chief fire officers. Chief fire officers, unlike chief constables, are squeezed from two angles. They are subject to political oversight, which can intrude into undue political pressure to do things or not to do things. That can happen in policing as well, and we may get on to that. We may not have time, but we may get onto that in the case of policing. Chief fire officers, unlike chief constables, also face pressure from the other end of the spectrum, from a very powerful trade union, the Fire Brigades Union, which has the right to withdraw their labour and from time to time does threaten to do so. The chief fire officer is squeezed or can be squeezed, and therefore his or her freedom to make operational decisions is constrained. We can go into some of the specifics like that.

The Government have been working on a fire reform White Paper for quite a while. We are expecting it pretty soon. I said in my last *State of Fire* report, which we sent to the Committee and which was published not that long ago, that I was concerned that the windspeed of reform had reduced to a flutter. The windspeed is about to pick up again, though, which is very much to be welcomed. Those are my general reflections.

Q4 Chair: Mr Wilsher, do you want to add anything to that?

Roy Wilsher: I would just re-emphasise a few things. As Sir Tom said towards the end, the fire and rescue service does a very good job. It has highly trained, motivated individuals working across the country. Sometimes they are prevented from helping as much as they could. The flexibility to use their fantastic resource, in many areas from the pandemic to flooding and many other issues, is sometimes constrained, not only by the union but by the flexibility of employment contracts.

Reform is required. We need some cultural reforms, certainly in terms of equality, diversity and inclusion. There is a major turnover of leadership, as there is in a lot of the public sector, which can cause problems with experience. Overall, it is a great service. Sir Tom has covered most of the things that we will probably go into in more depth. Yes, reform is needed.

Q5 Chair: We will certainly have questions on a number of points that have been raised. Mr Hardingham, would you like to comment on the current state of the fire and rescue service?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mark Hardingham: Picking up from where Sir Tom and Roy started, from the perspective of the National Fire Chiefs Council, we have welcomed and embraced the role of the new inspectorate as an investment in the fire and rescue service and a part of the catalyst for change. We think we are now on the cusp of further reform through the White Paper in the fire and rescue service as well. We have worked closely with the inspectorate throughout its tenure of inspecting fire and rescue services collectively to shape and inform its work and to pick up its findings and recommendations in terms of our role in supporting fire and rescue services in England and equally across the UK, because the NFCC is a UK-wide body.

If I were to pick out just three or four of the issues in terms of the current picture for fire and rescue services, the fire service is a service that continues to be held in extremely high regard by the public and by the partners with whom we work on a day-to-day basis. We have seen evidence of that through the course of the pandemic, in the last couple of years, but also in the ongoing business-as-usual work, up to and including the fire service's response, with partners through local resilience forums, in terms of the storms that played out across the country over the course of the last two or three weeks.

Of course, alongside that, we are self-aware and we know the fire and rescue service is not perfect, by any stretch. There are areas where we want to see reform and improvement. Certainly, colleagues have talked about the industrial relations climate that sits across the fire and rescue service, which is not new. It has been like that for a long time. The trade unions—there are more than one; although the focus does tend to be on the Fire Brigades Union, there are several trade unions across the fire and rescue service—have an important role to play in the future of the fire and rescue service, but we need to reform that industrial relations climate and the machinery that sits around that.

In terms of the role of the fire and rescue service, it feels like we are on the cusp of an opportunity here. Fire services have the traditional role that the public expect them to do around preventative and protecting work in terms of building safety and our operational response role both locally and nationally. There are opportunities to broaden the role of firefighters and the fire and rescue service more generally. We have seen good examples of that through the pandemic. I hope the White Paper and the reform enable us to do that.

There are challenges in the service around equality, diversity and inclusion. We are predominantly a white male organisation and have been for some time. That is right through the organisation. When we look forward, my senior colleagues and I collectively recognise that increased diversity in the fire and rescue service in many forms is part of the secret to a more successful and better fire and rescue service in the future. There is more we need to do in terms of recruiting a more diverse workforce, retaining a more diverse workforce and supporting a more



diverse workforce to work their way through the fire and rescue service to achieve fully whatever their individual potential might be.

The final piece that I would pick up would be around the funding of the fire and rescue service. Like all other parts of the public sector and society more generally, there have been challenges over the course of the last 10 to 12 years through the period of austerity. That was not only a challenge—of course, that creates opportunities as well around productivity, efficiency and innovation—but in general terms the funding of the fire and rescue service through a period of reform in the future does need to be looked at, in my view. We need to look at the funding formula, how that works and the disparity that exists across fire and rescue service as a consequence of a formula that is probably 15 years old now.

Q6 Paula Barker: Mr Hardingham, I want to come back to you on the industrial relations element. The report has described the culture in some of the fire and rescue services as toxic. When we talk about culture, would you agree that those at the top have to bear the biggest responsibility? In respect of the toxic culture that apparently exists, would you say that it is the result of the adversarial nature of industrial relations across the service? Certainly, many firefighters who I speak to feel aggrieved by what they describe as an aggressive culture that exists within the service.

Mark Hardingham: When I think about the culture in the fire and rescue service, I see lots of different cultures in the service. I see many cultures that are extremely positive. I will not go through those, because that is not the thrust of your question, but there are some really positive cultures in the service collectively within teams and individually in the service as well.

You are right: there are areas—the inspectorate has highlighted some of those—where the culture of the fire and rescue service is not right. As you say, there is absolutely a senior leadership responsibility around the culture of the fire and rescue service and, indeed, any organisation. Every person in a leadership role in the fire and rescue service has a responsibility around what impact they can have on the culture of the organisation as well.

The industrial relations climate plays into that. The nature of industrial relations in the fire and rescue service right throughout my career in the service, in many different roles, has often been quite adversarial. There is a responsibility on both parties in terms of the creation of a better industrial relations climate. I know my senior colleagues across the country work hard to create a positive industrial relations climate, whether that is at a local level, a regional level or a national level with the respective trade unions they are working with.

Q7 Paula Barker: Can you give some examples of those positive steps that are being taken?



Mark Hardingham: There are many examples where fire and rescue services across the country have been able to bring in changes to how they operate their fire and rescue service. They have done that in consultation and negotiation with local, regional and national officials.

Q8 **Paula Barker:** Surely that is just your normal industrial relations collective bargaining. You are saying that the leadership are taking positive steps to stop a toxic culture and a toxic relationship. Aside from the normal collective bargaining machinery, what positive steps are management taking?

Mark Hardingham: If I start at a national level, the fire and rescue service collectively, through the establishment of an independent chaired Fire Standards Board, is creating standards for the fire and rescue service. One of those standards is a core code of ethics for the fire service, which sets out how the fire and rescue service operates in an ethical way at a senior leadership level and right through the organisation.

That standard has been in place for probably about nine months now and it is being implemented across fire and rescue services. If you build on that, as part of establishing the core code of ethics, every fire and rescue service in the country will be setting up a set of values and behaviours that are appropriate for their fire and rescue service. They will be demonstrating those values and behaviours in terms of how they lead as senior leaders in their organisation. They will be embedding those values and behaviours into their organisation in a very visible way right through to frontline staff.

Equality and creating an inclusive environment are both parts of establishing that positive culture, and then fire and rescue services across the country will be looking in to weave into the fabric of their organisation a much more inclusive element to their organisation built on that code of ethics and on those values, behaviours and standards. They will promote that. If people do not apply those values or operate in leadership or other roles in accordance with those values, I would expect the services to deal with that in an appropriate way from an education perspective or to go further than that, if it is necessary and appropriate on that occasion.

Sir Thomas Winsor: Very briefly, I will just say what we found from our inspections. The fire and rescue service had not ever been inspected in the way we inspect them. The last inspection regime, such as it was, was over 10 years ago. They had a long period where they have not really been inspected. When we did our round one inspections—of course, we are further on from that now—we found in some parts a really quite toxic culture. There were disgraceful examples of bullying, harassment and discrimination. We found people being called inappropriate names, poor behaviour towards female firefighters and staff, poor treatment at the hands of operational staff compared to non-operational staff and so on. We also found management in some parts doing little to address these problems.



We graded three fire and rescue services as inadequate for values and culture, and that is the bottom grade. Those were Avon, Essex and Gloucestershire. At the time, 24% of the respondents to the staff survey that we did had felt bullied or harassed at work in the previous 12 months. Things have got a lot better since then. Now, 84% of the respondents to the staff survey report that they are treated with dignity, courtesy and respect, which is good. We graded nine services as good. Three of those services, Cambridge, Cornwall and Merseyside, maintained their grade from round one. The other six all improved. Avon jumped two grades in this round, from inadequate right up to good. It is very rare for an inspected body to jump two grades. Overall, the picture is improving. It is not perfect, but it is improving. I wish to give you those figures.

Q9 Paula Barker: That is really helpful. As we have already heard from Mr Hardingham, everyone has a part to play in terms of improving culture in an organisation. I was reading the letter from the general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union, which was sent to you in June 2021. I have also read the response to your report that was published in December 2021. It would appear that they are not pleased with some of the key tenets of the report. I have to say that I agree with them.

The language in aspects of the report is inflammatory. Some of what you implemented will seek to make industrial relations worse rather than better, I believe. Surely that hardly serves the public interest. I would be interested to hear from you, Sir Tom, about what you believe the benefits are to firefighters and the public if the morale of the workforce were to drop any further. You have already said here today that people have the right to withdraw their labour and the right to use that as a leverage tactic to improve their pay and collective bargaining machinery. I would be interested to hear your thoughts on that, please.

Sir Thomas Winsor: I do not accept that morale is dropping and dropping fast. That is rhetoric that has a tangential relationship to reality. I do not believe that anything I have published or said is inflammatory. It may be disagreeable, but it is not inflammatory. The principal objections of the Fire Brigades Union to the positions that I have taken are in relation to the right to strike and the reform of the pay negotiating machinery. Police officers do not have the right to strike. If they ever had it, it was taken away from them after the police strikes in 1919, 100 years ago. The Police Federation was set up as a result, and the Police Federation, especially most recently, has done a good job at representing their members' interests. Clearly, that is an industrial lever that you do not want to give up, if you have it.

The position that I have taken is that, if the right to strike is to be withdrawn, as I believe it should be, it should be paid out. There is an X factor in police pay that deals with the fact that police officers do not have the right to strike, and there should be an X factor in firefighter pay. Many firefighters do not really want to strike, because they do not want to see people in desperate circumstances left without assistance. I do not accept what the Fire Brigades Union say about inflammatory language.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Clearly, they are inflamed with anger at the prospect that the Government may take my advice and remove the right to strike. That would, of course, require primary legislation, and Parliament makes the final decision on that.

As far as the pay negotiating machinery is concerned, the current pay negotiating machinery has considerable capacity for paralysis. Again, if the fire and rescue service were to go the way of the police service, there would be great improvements. Again, the FBU does not like that idea.

When I did the review of police pay and conditions, and many other things, 10 or 12 years ago, I recommended that the Police Negotiating Board, which did pay, should be abolished and replaced by the Police Remuneration Review Body, which is the pay review body for the police. The Government accepted that and asked Parliament to establish the new body, and Parliament did. That body has now taken the heat as well as the difficulties largely out of pay reform for the police, albeit not completely. Police superintendents and the Police Federation are still very dissatisfied with the position of Government, because, at the end of the day, the Government make the decision on the pay bill because the Government, on behalf of taxpayers, pays that bill.

Those are the two things that the FBU most objects to, but I do not accept that the way in which I have expressed these views can be characterised as inflammatory.

Q10 Paula Barker: Finally, we have talked about police pay progression. Police receive progression pay each year, whereas firefighters only move between two levels, for most roles, from trainee to competent. Would you agree that there is a gulf between the lower rung of the workforce and management? I note that in the report you say that to get higher pay they need promotion to command or management responsibilities. Would you agree that this system fails to provide a fair reflection of their levels of experience, for example?

Sir Thomas Winsor: Yes, to an extent that is true. Clearly, the longer you do the job, the more experienced and competent you will be. If Parliament accepts that there ought to be a fire service pay review body as there is in policing, that is exactly the kind of thing that expert body could and should look at. Police progression used to be automatic. As a constable, you used to click up one grade every year; then there was an 11th grade, which was abolished.

Under my proposals, which have been largely accepted, police officers progress up the progression ladder only so far and can only get further up the ladder provided that they pass appropriate tests in relation to skills and competencies. The pay ladder is seven points instead of 10 or 11, which means that people can go up faster. It seems to me that there is a perfectly good case for a future pay review body or some other body to assess firefighter pay according to the same principles. I cannot see why those principles should be different.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

- Q11 **Tim Loughton:** Sir Tom, can I just come back to this comment about vaccinations and the advice from the FBU, which I was not aware of? What was the rationale behind the FBU advising their members not to have anything to do with vaccinations during the pandemic?

Sir Thomas Winsor: It was because they were not being paid for it. It was not part of the core role of the firefighter. I will defer to my two colleagues on either side. It was one heck of a sticking point.

Mark Hardingham: When the pandemic started, when Roy was in the role that I am in now, there was a body set up with the Fire Brigades Union and the National Fire Chiefs Council and the employers to look at how the fire and rescue service could support communities and partners through the pandemic as well as their own staff. They sought to develop what was called a tripartite agreement.

The intention was that the tripartite agreement would be a set of principles within which the fire service would reach in to support the pandemic, and then those principles would be supported by safe systems of work training and PPE, etc, which would enable firefighters and other people working in the fire service to do that safely. Instead of becoming an enabling tool for the fire and rescue service, the tripartite agreement became largely a disabling tool for the fire and rescue service, because it ended up largely as a list of things that the fire and rescue service would do or could do, if it were asked to do so through local resilience forums and with partners.

Once that national agreement was enacted in services, chief fire officers were being asked to do things through the local resilience forum and were engaging, as you would expect, with the Fire Brigades Union and other representative bodies in terms of how to reach out to do that role safely with their workforces. If it was not on the list on the tripartite agreement, the pushback was that it could not and should not be done. As a consequence of that, the Fire Brigades Union effectively discouraged their members from taking part in those additional activities.

One of those activities was providing either logistical support or firefighters administering vaccines into members of the public, which actually did happen anyway. The fire service has vaccinated more than 550,000 people across the country during the course of the pandemic but have done it in spite of the work that was done around the tripartite agreement, not because of it.

- Q12 **Tim Loughton:** All credit to those fire officers who did step up, because an awful lot of people had to do things that were not in the job spec for which they were technically getting paid; in fact, many people did lots of things without being paid at all. During the pandemic, have fire officers been more busy or less busy than usual?

Mark Hardingham: At the start of the pandemic, when the country was in lockdown, the fire and rescue service was less busy operationally as a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

consequence of people being at home, being away from the workplace, not travelling on the roads and the like. They were less busy then.

There is also other activity that the fire and rescue service and firefighters carry out on a day-to-day basis, such as working in the homes of vulnerable people or carrying out inspections of high-risk businesses in terms of fire safety in those buildings. A lot of that work was paused. Clearly, it was paused on the back of Government advice around the spread of the pandemic not just into communities but also in terms of protecting the integrity of our own workforce and maintaining our operational response cover. Initially it was less busy, but then it returned to what I would consider to be more normal levels.

Q13 Tim Loughton: The FBU were not making that advice on the basis that fire officers were far too busy, but quite the reverse. It was entirely because it did not come on the list and they were not getting paid for it, which seems slightly stubborn, to say the least.

In terms of general working, between 2011 and 2019 the workforce in services has reduced by about 21% and the number of incidents attended has fallen by 17%. Presumably that is because we have fewer fires these days, because people take precautions and because electrical equipment is safer. Attending fires is very much a minority activity of a fire officer these days. Have those cuts in workforce been proportionate to your ability to deal with the level of demand? Are they being increasingly stretched?

Mark Hardingham: The fire service is resourced and provided on the basis of risk. Demand is an element of the consideration, but it is equally about the risk that exists in local communities. There is a process that services will go through to carry out their risk management plans and resource their service accordingly.

The reduction in the workforce to an extent has been reflective of the change in the number of incidents that we respond to, but, as you rightly say, it is a small proportion of what firefighters do in a modern fire and rescue service. They are out working in local communities; they are looking at the fire safety of high-risk buildings. We are a training organisation, so there is a lot of training to prepare for the sorts of incidents that we attend. A firefighter is still busy doing all of that stuff.

In terms of your other point about whether it has stretched too far, as I said in my opening remarks, the reduction has certainly led to some innovation and some creativity around how the fire and rescue service is provided. Every chief fire officer in the country would recognise that the changes that have taken place over the last 10 years have made the fire service less resilient.

We have seen some investment in the fire and rescue service. I will use protection officers as a good example, those who carry out the inspections. In the first round of inspections, Sir Tom and his team



identified that protection activity had dropped off significantly in fire and rescue services and that this was an area that needed improvement. We have seen investment from Government and from services to improve those arrangements in protection. The more recent round of inspections saw an improvement in performance. Where additional resilience is required, investment and resource has come into those areas and we have seen an improvement as a consequence of that.

Roy Wilsher: I just want to go back to the pandemic before we move on. It was a real cameo of the problems with industrial relations and the national machinery. It started off as a flexible framework and it became more and more restrictive and slower and slower. When local services wanted to do things, it got stuck with the national Fire Brigades Union leadership. It eventually collapsed, which allowed the flexibility for fire and rescue services to go into vaccination. As Mark quite rightly said, over 500,000 vaccinations were administered by firefighters and fire staff, which is fantastic.

Although there has been a reduction—Mark is quite right about risk—one of the things we have seen is around the balance in the role of firefighters between responding to fires, preventing fires and doing fire protection or fire safety in buildings. There needs to be much more balance around that. In certain areas, there are issues around the productivity of firefighters. We were surprised that in some services we do not see firefighters doing that on-the-ground prevention work and community safety work, going to people's houses. Of course, some of that was restricted by the pandemic. Either side of that, there is room for firefighters to do more of that community safety work. Following their training and following emergency response, prevention and protection is just as important. Services need to get that balance.

Q14 **Tim Loughton:** Sir Tom, can I ask you to be more expansive, as I am sure you would like to be in your valedictory remarks, and more reflective on your experiences and where we might go in this area? Let me pose a question to you. There are big divergences between the performances of different fire services. That is also true in constabularies, although probably the jobs that fire officers do are more similar to each other. A road traffic accident in Sussex is no different to a road traffic accident in Cornwall. There may be urban and rural differentials, but I would have said that it is a more similar job, though I may be wrong.

What makes for a better fire service that is rated higher under your criteria compared to one that is not? What are the factors that make that difference? Is it down to money? Is it down to leadership? Is it down to structures?

Sir Thomas Winsor: I would mention at least three factors: leadership and supervision, culture and money. On leadership and supervision, there are parts of the country where the leadership and supervision is of a high quality and there are other parts of the country where, frankly, it is not as good as it needs to be. That is as true a criticism as can be made of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

many organisations and essential public services, and it is no different in fire. As far as the culture is concerned, we have discussed morale a little bit. There is a strong protective culture in the fire service; people are eager and indeed they join the fire service in order to protect their communities and vulnerable people in their communities. We have also discussed the toxicity within individual fire and rescue services or indeed in fire stations.

Let me make a broad generalisation about the fire and rescue service, and my colleagues will come in and refine it, if necessary. There are many differences, but one of the principal differences between firefighters and police officers is that, when firefighters turn up at your house, you are quite glad to see them. When the police turn up, sometimes you are not, yet you are in a circumstance of crisis. They would not be there if there were not a crisis. The relationship with the public as far as firefighters is concerned should generally be much better, because firefighters are seen as people who just help protect and do not in any way disturb.

As far as money is concerned, public services have been strained, as Mark has said, over the last number of years. Those who pay the money, the public, through their elected representatives, want to be sure that money is being spent wisely and well on the right things at the right times.

Harking back to a conversation you and I had when I was here on 27 October when we talked about FMSs, force management statements, for the police, it is my expectation that my successor and my continuing colleagues as HMIs will in due time—quite soon, I would expect—establish force management statements for fire and rescue services. If I may just take just a moment on this, the principle is that every well managed enterprise, whatever it is doing, needs to understand three things: the demand it expects to face in the foreseeable future; the state of the assets it has in order to meet that demand and how they are going to be improved; and of course the money they are going to have coming in in order to use those assets to meet that demand.

Demand in policing is quite hard, but not impossible, to measure, but no measurement is going to be absolutely precise. In fire and rescue, it is a simpler, though not simple, assessment as to where the high-risk premises are, where the incidents of fire are and what the historical pattern is of the things that the fire service is required to do, because of course it is more than putting out fires. As far as the assets are concerned, the principles are exactly the same. The chief fire officer needs to understand and have a really good appreciation of the condition, capacity, capability, serviceability, performance and security of supply of those assets and the highest practical level of efficiency with which those assets can be deployed. The third thing they then need to understand is how much money they know or reasonably expect they will have coming in.



The fire and rescue service, like the police, until recently have had year-to-year settlements. That is no basis for planning. What it will and does expose in policing is, with that money, using these assets at their maximum practical level of efficiency, we cannot meet all future demand. The public, through its elected representatives, has to work out whether it wants to put in more money or accept less demand being met, or to a lower standard, or, as it usually does, find a balance.

- Q15 **Tim Loughton:** I take your three categories around what makes the difference. The area you did not mention in that is structure and governance. What makes police different to fire services? Police are standalone. They are now subject to democratic accountability through a police commissioner. Fire services are part of the local authority. Chief fire officers are employees of the local authority and they supposedly have to battle for their budgets with the local authority. I would say that chief fire officers are relatively anonymous, with the exception of my own in West Sussex, Dr Sabrina Cohen-Hatton, who is something of a star within the fire service, not least because she is a woman and because she is exceedingly successful at the job she has been doing, thank goodness, in our county.

Is it a weakness or a strength that the fire service is effectively just another department of the local county council? They have to battle for budget with libraries, roads and adult social care or whatever, whereas the police are funded directly with a budget from the Home Office.

Sir Thomas Winsor: Of course, the police also get money from the local precept, which is a locally raised tax as well. They get it from two sources, broadly. Yes, the governance pattern, the map of governance of fire and rescue authorities in England, is a bit of a patchwork quilt. There are services that are not part of local councils, and they receive their funding directly from local government settlements or from increased rates of council tax. Then there are fire services that are part of a wider authority, such as a county council unitary authority or a mayoral service, which get their funding from the authority they sit under.

Of the 44 fire and rescue services in England, 24 are in combined council or metropolitan authorities, 13 are in county council authorities, four are under police, fire and crime commissioners, two are under mayors, and of course London is special. It is a very different picture in different parts of the country. While not all policing is local, all fires are local, of course. Therefore, it is up to local communities to decide what the governance and funding arrangements ought to be and how much risk they are prepared to take. There is considerable financial disparity between services. Some services appear to be really quite well funded and others are struggling to afford the number of staff they think they need to meet local risk.

- Q16 **Tim Loughton:** On that basis, are you saying that, because all fires are local—it is a very good point—there is a case for extending the role of the PCCs to have the oversight for the fire service universally?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir Thomas Winsor: That case undoubtedly exists. That is a wider discussion about—

Q17 **Tim Loughton:** I know it exists. What is your comment on it?

Sir Thomas Winsor: The idea of having PFCCs with their own powers and a separate line on your council tax bill has some significant strengths and advantages to it.

Q18 **Tim Loughton:** You are not being as divisive as I thought you might be on this. It sounds as though you are not a fan of PCCs.

Sir Thomas Winsor: I am a great fan of some PCCs.

Q19 **Tim Loughton:** Are you a fan of the principle of PCCs?

Sir Thomas Winsor: It has many strengths on paper.

Q20 **Tim Loughton:** You are giving us very political answers here, Sir Tom. It is very disappointing. We thought you might be slightly more valedictory and reckless in your comments today.

Sir Thomas Winsor: Next week I am publishing my last *State of Policing* report. You will be able to read a bit more about that in that one. Democratic accountability of the police did not begin in 2012; it goes back as long as there have been police and even further, in fact. The idea that PCCs have a monopoly on wisdom in relation to the affairs of the police is nonsense, of course. There have been instances where some PCCs have done the most extraordinarily stupid things; happily most of them not re-elected.

The model has yet to settle down. The question for Government and Parliament is, “Do we want to give PCCs more functions when they are still in their infancy?” That is a really big question.

Roy Wilsher: Could I just add to the governance discussion as well? As Sir Tom said, it is a complex and complicated picture with the different types of governance. So far from our inspections we cannot say that one type of governance is a better form of governance than any other.

One of the things that we have found following our inspections—West Sussex is a classic case—is that there is more investment in the fire and rescue services when our inspections say that there is a need for improvement. I know Sabrina in West Sussex has got quite a lot of money that way. The telling point is the relationship between the chief fire officer and the governance structure. As you quite rightly say, they are employees rather than having operational independence. At times, there can be interference into operational matters from the governance structure.

One of the things that would be of benefit is operational independence for chief fire officers and a bit more of an executive approach to governance, so it is about holding people to account, scrutiny and all those things that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

you would expect from really good governance. That would enable the chief fire officer, within the constraints of the resources available, to get on with running the service.

Sir Thomas Winsor: If I may add to my earlier answer, as Roy says, operational independence is a hot issue. When a PCC takes office, in relation to policing, he or she has to swear an oath of office. The last line of that is, "I will not interfere with the operational independence of the chief constable". That undoubtedly ought to be applied equally when they take on fire. They should do the same in relation to that, because operational independence is of enormous importance. That could be a very great advantage of the PFCC taking over fire.

The other thing that I wanted to clarify, just to add to what I said earlier, is that I am not against the PCC model. It has very significant strengths and very significant advantages over the police authority model. I would also like to emphasise that some PCCs have done an absolutely exemplary job. A new crop of PCCs has come in. We saw almost 50% turnover in PCCs at the last elections. I do not wish to be taken in any way that I do not intend—we do not inspect PCCs—but there has been a very significant improvement in the professionalism and the approach of the new intake of PCCs, building on and intensifying the quality of the PCCs who are still there.

Q21 **Ms Abbott:** I wanted to ask quite a simple question. I was born in the 1950s into a working-class West Indian family. Everyone in those days had paraffin heaters. There was no such thing as central heating in working-class houses in the 1950s. Paraffin heaters being knocked over caused an awful lot of fires. People do not have paraffin heaters nowadays. This may be one for Mr Hardingham. What is the main cause of domestic fires nowadays?

Mark Hardingham: Overall, the number of domestic fires has come down significantly over the last 10 years. Most fires start in the kitchen or come from some sort of electrical cause. Those are the causes, but it is also about the vulnerability of the person. When we see people who are sadly killed or seriously injured in fires, particularly fires in the home, more often than not there is a degree of vulnerability about the person as well. That might be linked to the age of the person; the illness or multiple illnesses that person has; the fact that the person is isolated and lives at home; issues associated with drink and drugs; or issues associated with mental health and issues like that. There are a lot of issues around the vulnerability of the person that are attributable to the cause.

The link to that is often around electricity causes or fires in the kitchen. You are right. If we all compared our own homes today with our homes a number of years ago, the number of electrical items in our homes and the places where we source some of those electrical items from is significantly different to what it was 10 years ago. In my own home, there is probably hardly a plug socket that does not have a plug in it charging something. In my previous role in the county council, when I



was chief fire officer in a county council service, I also had responsibility for trading standards. In that role, we often looked at the quality of the equipment that was being provided into homes, which was often linked to the causes of fires, if people were buying things off the internet and elsewhere that were not appropriate or safe to be used.

Q22 Ms Abbott: That was, to coin a phrase, very illuminating. I just wanted to get back to Mr Winsor. I was really struck by the poor relationship you seem to have with trade unions. It is unusually bad, really, in terms of people in your role coming before Select Committees. Is there a particular reason for that, or is the FBU particularly difficult?

Sir Thomas Winsor: Do I have a poor relationship with trade unions? I am a member of a trade union. I do not have a poor relationship with trade unions. I was a member of the Labour Party for 30 years. I quit in 2006. Trade unions have achieved a vast amount of improvements in relation to the terms and conditions of their members. I am a great fan of trade unions. It is about how they behave. If they try to prevent their members doing the things that their members want to do, for example marauding terrorist attacks or vaccinations, then I am against what they are doing. I am not against trade unions—far from it.

Q23 Ms Abbott: My Hardingham, you touched on the lack of gender and race diversity in the fire service. What exactly are you doing to address that?

Mark Hardingham: We are doing lots of things. I will reflect on what we are doing as the National Fire Chiefs Council at the moment. One of the things the National Fire Chiefs Council does is it has a number of programmes of work in place where we produce products, guidance and support to fire and rescue services across the country. One of those programmes of work, led by my chief fire officer colleague Ann Millington in Kent Fire and Rescue Service, is called the People Programme. There are a number of projects attached to the People Programme. One element of that is a work stream led by Kathryn Billing in the future and Alex Johnson, who are chiefs in the South Yorkshire and Cornwall fire services, that is focused around equality, diversity and inclusion.

I will just quickly go through some of those projects. We are creating leadership programmes across the fire and rescue service for supervisory and middle, and there is a senior leadership programme in place for the fire and rescue service, and equality and inclusion is woven into the fabric of those leadership programmes. We have developed a number of what we call equal access statements, which are about providing the statements to fire and rescue services to support the way in which they engage with communities across their counties. To give you an example, there are statements for engaging with people from neurodiverse communities, people from LGBT communities and from black communities as well. There are about seven other statements as well.

We are developing a recruitment website, and that recruitment website will have a strong focus around equality and inclusion. There are a



number of aids to fire and rescue services to enable them to support their own recruitment programmes within that. As we touched on earlier, we also developed the standards around the core code of ethics in the fire and rescue service, which sets out the basis upon which you can develop the culture in your fire and rescue service. We produce lots of guidance and organise training and CPD events that fire services across the country can engage with to support how they provide this in their own fire and rescue service.

There is a range of things that we are doing. What I would say is that, at the moment, from the perspective of diversity and the number of firefighters who are female or come from minority ethnic communities, we are not seeing the outcomes that we want to see. As I said earlier, a more diverse workforce will create a better fire and rescue service. That is a more diverse workforce right throughout the fire and rescue service, not just at firefighter level but up to and including chief fire officer level. We have put some work in place, and our job now is to maintain the momentum around that and continue that for years to come. I am not sure we will ever reach a position where we are entirely satisfied with where we are.

Q24 Ms Abbott: I listened very carefully to what you said. In my experience, when it comes to diversity, it is very easy to get the diversity jargon off pat and it is very easy to set up committees, programmes and all the rest of it, but getting concrete outcome year on year is much harder. First of all, can you remind me—you may have said—of what proportion of the fire service is ethnic minority or female? Secondly, have you set yourselves targets to increase recruitment year on year?

Mark Hardingham: The proportion of firefighters from an ethnic minority is 4.7% at the moment. If you go back 10 years ago, it was at 3.5%. There has been some improvement but not enough. If you look at the number of female firefighters, the current figure is 7.5%. If you go back 10 years ago, it was 4.1%. Again we have seen some improvement, but not enough.

Have targets been set for the fire and rescue service or within the fire and rescue service? We have not set targets. Having said that, there is a strong ambition. Only yesterday, I was leading an induction event with new members of the National Fire Chiefs Council, 50 of my senior colleagues across the country. We were talking with Wayne Brown, the deputy chief fire officer of the West Midlands, about how to create a more inclusive environment in the fire and rescue service. I met with my senior chief fire officer colleagues from across the UK last week at the London Fire Brigade headquarters and Ann Millington led a discussion around equality, diversity and inclusion.

Rest assured that this is a significant area of attention for the fire and rescue service. We are determined to see better outcomes than we have seen so far, both in terms of recruitment but also, as I said earlier, in terms of having the right inclusive environment in the fire and rescue



HOUSE OF COMMONS

service once we recruit people in, so that we retain people and all of those people are able to realise their full potential, whatever they want that to be, in the fire and rescue service in the role they carry out, up to and including being future chief fire officers.

- Q25 **Ms Abbott:** I could ask how many black people were in those meetings, but I will not. I want to move on to the report against your 2020 equality, diversity and inclusion strategy and your strategic improvement plan. In the improvement plan, you promised an equality, diversity and inclusion annual report. Have you produced one?

Mark Hardingham: I do not have it to hand with me. I would have to go away to have a look and see when the last annual report was and provide it to the Committee where there has been one.

- Q26 **Ms Abbott:** Are you saying you are not sure whether there has been an annual report?

Mark Hardingham: I am not sure if there is an annual report, no. We have a strategy and a number of workstreams that sit on the back of it. I am not aware and in my tenure as the NFCC chair we have not produced an annual report around equality and inclusion from an NFCC perspective.

- Q27 **Ms Abbott:** You did not meet the promise in the improvement plan.

Mark Hardingham: If there is not an annual report, no, we have not.

- Q28 **Ms Abbott:** Just moving on, as a colleague said earlier, the culture in the Fire and Rescue Services has been described as "toxic". You spoke about the code of ethics that you have introduced but, when you are trying to change the culture of an organisation, if you have the self-same management in position that presided over the old culture, it is often difficult to change the culture. Apart from codes, meetings and so on, do you have any other ideas about changing the culture in the Fire and Rescue Service?

Mark Hardingham: I will draw from my experiences of having been a chief fire officer in Suffolk for eight years before I came into this role. My experience is, if you want to change the culture of the organisation, as the most senior leader in the organisation then you personally need to lead it.

Yes, you do need to have a strategy. You do need to have a plan. You do need to have objectives that you have set. You do need to take on board National Fire Chiefs Council products and things like that, but it is a very personal thing. It involves you as a senior leader committing the time and the energy to live by the values and cultures that you want in the organisation and then to spend time out in the workforce talking about that, at length and in detail, with colleagues right across the fire and rescue service.

That is what I did when I was in Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service and was inspected against that by colleagues. That is what I know a lot of my



HOUSE OF COMMONS

colleagues across the country are doing to improve the culture in their organisations, accepting that there are services where the inspectorate and also senior leadership teams are dealing with cultures that they are not happy with in their organisation as well. When I say their organisation, they would be the first to say that they are as senior leaders, of course, a critical part of that organisation. It is not something they are talking about that is separate from them. They are the senior leaders. It is their organisation, of which they are part.

Q29 Ms Abbott: Sir Thomas, do you have anything further to say on the culture and diversity issues?

Sir Thomas Winsor: Of course there is a long way to go, but the hardest thing to do in leadership and management is to change the culture of an organisation. There is nothing harder than that. Culture is how we behave when no one else is looking. It is a hard job to do, but these public services, both the police and the fire and rescue service, in their leadership take that very seriously indeed.

Roy Wilsher: Could I just add some of the solid examples and things that we see? As Mark quite rightly says, there are intentions there. The strategic plans are there. It is when you get further into the workforce, such as equality training not being optional. It should be compulsory. We have been to services where it is optional.

There should be performance management and individual performance plans, so people performance-managed properly, and proper community engagement. I know there is lots of work, but it is very important to take your existing workforce with you as well. If you are doing engagement and trying to recruit particular communities to the service, the workforce needs to understand that that would improve the service and bring greater talent. There are a number of things that could be practical in terms of performance management, training, outreach work and recruitment that all services could learn from.

Q30 Chair: Could I just ask a question from the inspectorate? Do you think there should be targets around gender and ethnicity for the fire and rescue service? I am a little taken aback that there are not targets. We all accept that this is not acceptable and we want things to be better, but are targets what the inspectorate think we should have?

Sir Thomas Winsor: There is always a case for targets but, of course, the old thought is you set a target and you miss the point. In other words, something else gets neglected. We have seen a target culture in policing produce very significantly adverse consequences because the target gets aimed at and other things get neglected. However, the case for targets or appropriate measures in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion is much stronger.

Q31 Chair: As an inspectorate, you would call for that.



Sir Thomas Winsor: We will have to give that some thought. It is really a matter for the Government and the local authorities in question as to whether or not they wish to set their own targets. Of course, the inspectorate would then have to assess whether or not the targets are the right targets and whether they are creating perverse results. It would not be for the inspectorate to set targets.

Q32 **Chair:** There is a White Paper that has been referred to a number of times. Is your expectation that there will be something in the White Paper around inclusivity and diversity? Were you thinking that is the case?

Mark Hardingham: Yes, it will come across very clearly in the White Paper.

Q33 **Tim Loughton:** Why do you think there is such a problem with attracting BAME candidates? Sir Tom, you said that when a fire officer turns up at your home, they are welcomed. Without trying to discriminate, of all the emergency services, fire officers are seen as the heroes. Why would people from a BAME background not want to be seen as somebody who is actually feted amongst society? What is going wrong?

Roy Wilsher: I have spent 40 years in the fire service and it is something we have been thinking about for a long time. There are a number of things in there. The phrase, "You cannot be what you cannot see", comes to mind, reflecting the community you work in. They might still be welcomed across the door, still be welcomed into the homes, talked to, but people do not think they can be that so you cannot be what you cannot see. It is a really well-kept secret just how diverse the work is in the fire and rescue service. People will think you have to be big and strong and break doors down all the time. That is a bit of a myth we need to get through.

Q34 **Tim Loughton:** There are BAME people who are big and strong and can break doors down just as much as anybody else.

Roy Wilsher: Yes, absolutely. It is about reflection. Wayne Brown, who is of Afro-Caribbean descent and whom Mark talked about earlier, uses that phrase quite a lot: "You cannot be what you cannot see". It is one of those vicious circles: you need more people to join so that people can see more people, and we need to work with them.

Q35 **Tim Loughton:** You have had 40 years, you say, to deal with that vicious circle. With the police, there is a problem because of perceived—I make no response—issues to do with more stop and search for people who tend to come from black backgrounds or whatever. There is no such perception amongst the fire service. They do not choose to turn up to a road traffic accident because it has been driven by a person who happens to be black rather than white. There are not those potential perception barriers for people coming forward and saying, "Yes, I would love to be a fire officer". What is it? I just do not understand.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mark Hardingham: It is a fascinating debate and a debate that has been had many times. It is difficult to grasp exactly what it is. It is a number of things. We touched earlier around the reputation that the fire service has in local communities. There is a risk of some complacency in there, because in general terms the fire service has a very good reputation in communities. It would be different in different communities, because in predominantly white communities the fire service has a very good reputation because what the white community see is a fire and rescue service that represents them. In other communities, they do not always see a fire and rescue service that represents, looks like or sounds like them. There is some challenge there in terms of how you then attract people to come and join an organisation.

Tim Loughton: I do not buy that. You do not not ring up and report a fire because you might not get a black fire officer arriving because they do not take it seriously. I just do not buy that.

Chair: You are hearing from the Committee that we are particularly concerned about this and, as Tim Loughton has just said, this has been an issue for decades and has not been properly addressed.

Q36 **Paula Barker:** I just have a comment before I move on to my question. Mr Wilsher, you made the comment that you have been in the fire service for 40 years and you have been thinking about it for a long time. Perhaps that is what one of the issues is. Rather than just thinking about it, perhaps you just need to get on and do it. Perhaps there should be active campaigns about recruitment. I am literally astounded, and the White Paper, when it comes, must include equality and diversity.

It is about recruitment and retention that I would just like to touch on as well, because I would be interested to understand your reflections and thoughts. In 2021, there were just over 35,000 firefighters nationally, of which 35% were on-call firefighters. That is a significant amount, but in urban centres like Merseyside and Greater Manchester, for example, they have rejected the on-call model. Nearby Cheshire, for example, relies heavily on on-call firefighters in the more rural locations. My first question is about whether the model is fit for purpose. Secondly, I am hearing that problems exist in those services that are more reliant on on-call firefighters in respect of recruitment and retention. I would be interested to hear your thoughts on that, please.

Mark Hardingham: Recruitment and retention of on-call firefighters was an issue I dealt with for 10 years in Suffolk. Suffolk has 35 fire stations. 29 of those are on-call-only fire stations. The other six fire stations have at least one on-call fire engine on those stations. It was the heart of the organisation that I led for 11 years. On-call firefighters do a fantastic job in their local communities and more broadly across the county in which they serve, but there are challenges to the system.

In terms of a duty system that is resilient, at night, when the majority of those on-call firefighters are at home, so within five minutes of their on-call fire station, it is a really resilient and effective duty system. At the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

weekend, when a good proportion of them are close to their fire station, doing whatever they do at the weekend and when they are not at work, then it is a good duty system.

During the week, people are at work and people who are on-call firefighters have other jobs as well. That job is often not in the local community anymore, in rural communities. They have to travel further afield. If they are not within five, six or seven minutes of the fire station, they are not available as a firefighter, because it takes too long to get to the fire station. During the week, during the daytime, it is a more difficult duty system.

Also, the expectations of an on-call firefighter are significant. The terms and conditions for an on-call firefighter are that they will be available for up to 120 hours a week. That is five 24-hour periods every week they will be available. Available means within five, six or seven minutes of their local fire station. For that, they take a financial benefit of something like £6,000 a year, on which, alongside their primary employment, they pay tax and national insurance, so they are not getting much financial reward. Most of them do not do it for the money. They do it for their commitment to their local community.

If they work for a primary employer, particularly if they are going to be available whilst they are at work for their primary employer, it requires a fire service to have excellent relationships with the primary employer, to be able to release that person, when their pager goes off, to just run out of their primary employment to get to the fire station to respond to the incident. It is a significant role, but it is a really important role for rural fire and rescue services.

In terms of what we could do, there is an awful lot that fire services are doing. In terms of recruitment, we have touched on recruiting from a broader range, so from a gender perspective and also from a different communities perspective as well. There is a lot of work that goes on around positive action, to encourage people to come into on-call roles from those communities. There is a lot that services do around making sure the fire and rescue service is as good a place as it can be so that, when you do come in, you want to stay; you feel like you are well looked after as an on-call firefighter and you do a job where you feel you add value into the local community.

There is more we need to do, because it is a system that has been around for 50 or 60 years. It needs more resilience, more investment and improving in the future. We have had conversations with Government several times around tax incentives for individuals, tax incentives for primary employers and other ways in which we can create a more attractive environment for people to release people to be on-call firefighters or come in and stay in on-call firefighter roles.

Q37 Chair: That is another issue that needs to be addressed in the White Paper.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mark Hardingham: I would expect it probably will be picked up in the White Paper, because certainly colleagues in the inspectorate have raised it as an area as well.

Ms Abbott: You tried to make out that part of the problem as to why you do not have more black firefighters is the way they regard the fire service. What I would say is this: the black community's relationship with the police force is—how can I put this?—mixed. I would say that for the black community, or the Asian community for that matter, the respect and admiration with which they hold the fire service is as great as any other parts of the community. You have to look at yourselves rather than say, "We do not identify", or "We do not like". I just wanted to say that.

Q38 **Chair:** I just want to ask a couple of questions about Grenfell, about the changes that have been introduced post Grenfell and whether, as the chair of the National Fire Chiefs Council, you believe now those changes that have been introduced go far enough and mean that we will not face the situation we had at Grenfell ever again. I would then like to ask Sir Tom a question about the number of fire inspectors that we have.

Mark Hardingham: I will pick a couple of areas, because there are so many considerations around the learning that has come from the tragedy at Grenfell. I will pick two. One I would touch on is the built environment and then, secondly, the way that the fire and rescue service deals with fires in tall buildings.

In terms of the built environment, there is a significant amount of work—I have sat previously in Select Committees talking about this—in terms of the role of the National Fire Chiefs Council and the role of the fire and rescue service, with Government and the wider industries around fire safety and the built environment, to talk about the sorts of improvements that are required, whether it is external wall systems on high-rise residential building or all of the other issues associated with fire safety in the built environment that have been exposed through the public inquiry, through Dame Judith Hackitt's report and through the work of colleagues in Government around the building safety programme, Building Safety Bill, Fire Safety Act and the like.

There is a lot that the fire and rescue service has done, because we have looked at ourselves in terms of our role as regulators in that built environment. We have revisited our competency-based framework for our inspecting officers. We have created a system of third-party accreditation for our inspecting officers, of which we have about 1,000. We now work closely with the local authority building control around a system of CPDs. There are some changes that we have made internally within the fire and rescue service in terms of what we do.

We are also strongly of the view that the system that creates the built environment, as Dame Judith Hackitt described, was the worst example of systemic failure she had ever seen. That is true, from what I have seen. There is still some way to go before that system is in a position



HOUSE OF COMMONS

where we can have confidence about the quality of the existing built environment and how it is maintained, but also some assurance about new buildings as they are built in accordance with regulations, with the right competency and culture of those who work in the system.

The second piece, in terms of our operational response to fires in tall buildings, is that there are all of the recommendations that have come out of the Grenfell inquiry so far. The National Fire Chiefs Council has a role in terms of supporting every fire and rescue service across the country in how they are implementing the recommendations that are relevant for the fire and rescue service. I attend, along with a colleague in the inspectorate and Andy Roe from the London Fire Brigade, the ministerial board around the Grenfell recommendations, to provide some assurance about the progress that is being made. The outcome of the reports that we do with fire services are published by the Home Office on the Fire England site in terms of progress that is made.

How we deal with fires in tall buildings is different now to what it was five years ago, in terms of how 999 fire control operators handle the calls, deal with fire survival guidance, as well as the process that firefighters will go through in terms of training and development and how they apply that to deal with fires in buildings.

It would be remiss of me not to comment in terms of providing assurance that this will never happen again. That would be a big step, because, like any tragedy that takes place, it is never one thing that causes the tragedy. There are a number of events that come together in a terrible way that lead to the tragedy. I do not think that I could provide assurance that an incident of that nature would never happen again, but I can provide assurance that we will not rest as the National Fire Chiefs Council.

Q39 Chair: There is work in progress, there is more to do, and the fire and rescue services around the country are currently implementing the recommendations so far, but that is not complete yet.

Mark Hardingham: That is not complete yet, no.

Q40 Chair: I just wanted to ask Sir Tom about the comment that he made that it will be some time before the numbers of fire safety inspectors reach the numbers required in England. I just wondered what risk that is posing to the public, if we do not have those numbers.

Sir Thomas Winsor: It is an increased risk, but I defer to Roy Wilsher.

Roy Wilsher: One of the things I talked about earlier was the balance between response, protection and prevention. That balance over a number of years got a little bit out of kilter with concentration on response, to the detriment of fire protection and the number of fire safety officers. It is one of the things we have pointed out in our earlier reports. I am pleased to say that, with some Government investment and more investment and balance through fire and rescue services, the numbers



HOUSE OF COMMONS

are increasing. We are seeing more fire safety inspectors. The difficulty with that is it takes some time to train a fire safety inspector. There are not a ready number of inspectors there. They need to be brought into the service or from the service and trained.

The other difficulty fire and rescue services face is that there is a lot of call for that expertise to go into private industry, which can often pay more. It is almost a never-ending circle of recruiting, training, getting competent fire safety inspectors who then can go and earn money elsewhere. It is an improving picture: there is more balance; there are more fire safety inspectors; risk-based inspection programmes are increasing. That needs to be sustainable and that is our fear: that it will not be sustained over the long term.

Q41 **Chair:** When will we have enough inspectors? What date is the aim? Is there a target?

Roy Wilsher: There is not a target, but there is an increase and, as I say, with the training we are probably two or three years away from having the number we would expect.

Q42 **Paula Barker:** How long does it takes to train an inspector?

Roy Wilsher: A lot of it depends on what level. We go from the apprentice inspector right to a fire engineer. To be a fire engineer is probably five to seven years. To be a competent inspecting officer is probably around two years.

Q43 **Chair:** Thank you very much for your answers to our questions about the fire and rescue service. We now just want to turn in the last part of the session to discuss the police in light of recent events and also the fact that Sir Tom is coming to the end of his tenure as the Chief Inspector at the Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services. Sir Tom, Tim Loughton has already said about your valedictory remarks to this Committee. I just wondered whether you would like to comment on the current state of policing and your feelings about whether policing is in a better state at the end of your tenure as the Chief Inspector than when you began.

Sir Thomas Winsor: The answer to the latter question is undoubtedly yes, but I will explain why. The most important thing to say is that there has been more police reform in the last 10 years than there had been in the last 100 years, since the Desborough report in 1920 and the Police Act in 1919, after the strikes. Next week, on 10 March, I will be publishing my ninth and last *State of Policing* report. It will come to all members of the Committee. Of course, I will come back and talk to you about it if you really want me to; I would love to. I say quite a lot about it because it is a nine-year or 10-year look back, as well as, of course, a look forward.

Although the police service has undergone a great deal of reform, there is one thing that is in no need of reform, and that is the bravery of police



HOUSE OF COMMONS

officers who do not know what they are going to face every single day. The culture and the qualities that are required to be a good police officer are very clear. They are courage, self-restraint, the ability to talk to people, empathy, professionalism, intelligence, the commitment to help people and of course the commitment to keep people safe by preventing crime and disrupting criminal networks and criminal behaviour.

The culture in policing is strong, but recent events—Sarah Everard's murder, the photographs of the two dead ladies, what was revealed in Charing Cross Police Station, which is not confined to Charing Cross—are very serious incidents, which have shaken public confidence in the police. They have not destroyed public confidence in the police. They are the subject of a number of inquiries and investigations. We, the inspectorate, have been commissioned to look into the vetting and other aspects of policing as a result of these things. We were commissioned to inspect the conduct by the Metropolitan Police at the vigil on Clapham Common after Sarah Everard's murder.

Those are important considerations, but there is no reform to their courage and their bravery. The vast majority of police officers are absolutely furious at what has been recently revealed. There are of course controversies over the loss of the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, which you may want me to talk about. You may want me to reflect on the other aspects, in terms of where policing has got better.

Broadly, in terms of the competence of police forces in understanding future demand and understanding what it takes to ensure that they are well prepared for the future, as crime and disorder changes in both its techniques and its nature, forces have taken very considerable steps in the right direction in that respect. Their sensitivity to the needs of their police officers, both in terms of mental health and physical wellbeing, are important and extremely valuable.

However, the march of technology is, with some exceptions, leaving the police behind. The gap between what the police can do and what those who will do us harm can do and are doing may very well be widening. The failure of the police to invest, which is a function of public policy as well as anything else, is making people more at risk of fraud and other means of offences being committed. Children are more at risk in their bedrooms than they are out on street corners, for example.

I have made some remarks about the local accountability model, which has real strengths but is in need of reform. I would say that the 43-force model in England and Wales is now broken. It does not work as it should. It was provided for in 1962, implemented in 1974. That is a long time ago and not all policing is local. I would say that the failures of public services to do their part is imposing significant additional and unnecessary demand on the police services, which will never say no. Failures in education, housing, social policy, social services and of course



HOUSE OF COMMONS

mental health, particularly child and adolescent mental health, are putting undue demands on the police, and that needs to be dealt with.

The state of the child and adolescent mental health services is a national disgrace. It is necessary for public policymakers to fix that. To quote Frederick Douglass, it is easier to build strong children than to fix broken men. That is what happens. T

he other observation I would make is that the criminal justice system is on its knees.

- Q44 **Chair:** Thank you for that assessment. Can I just take you back to a comment you made there about the 43 police forces model being broken, and wrap that up with your earlier comment about the Metropolitan Police and the departure of the Commissioner? Could you just say something about what your thoughts are about what model should be employed and whether the Metropolitan Police is just too big and has too much to do?

Sir Thomas Winsor: The local accountability model, as we have already discussed and will not repeat, has significant strengths but is in need of reform. The local accountability model in London is unique, because the Commissioner of the Met is looking in two directions. She or he is held to account under the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011 by the Mayor and by the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime, but the Commissioner is also not only appointed by and may be removed by the Home Secretary, but also has national responsibilities, as well as capital city responsibilities, which are of a special importance to the Home Secretary. When the Mayor and the Home Secretary see life differently, as they do at the moment, that puts the Commissioner in an awkward position. That is a matter of local accountability, which is in need of some examination.

- Q45 **Chair:** Could you say something about the 43-force model? What is your view about how that should be changed? I remember years ago there was a debate about whether we should have fewer police forces covering bigger areas. Of course, in Scotland, we have just one national police force. Do you have a view?

Sir Thomas Winsor: I do. I will be saying more about it on 10 March. I said quite a lot about it in my previous *State of Policing* reports. There are not 43 best ways of doing the same thing. Because criminality and vulnerability cross police force borders, police forces need to be much better at co-operating with one another.

There is not a case for a national police force. In terms of the collaboration between police forces, especially in the acquisition and use of information and communication technologies and the flow of information and intelligence across police force boundaries, that is in need of significant reform. I made a number of remarks in that respect in relation to the creation of a network code for the police, which mirrors the network codes in the other essential safety-critical monopoly public



HOUSE OF COMMONS

services. I have drafted one and I hope to get it out before the end of the month.

Q46 Tim Loughton: Can I just come back to mindset, which you quite rightly said is the biggest challenge for any leader to change? The three examples you just mentioned were Sarah Everard's murder, the extraordinary way police officers publicised photographs of the two young women who were murdered and then Charing Cross? The first was clearly down to an evil person, however you want to define that. There are question marks as to how his behaviour might have been overlooked by colleagues, but it is primarily down to that individual. You could say the same applied to the second, although the fact that they seemed to think it was a good thing to publicise among their social network is obviously worrying.

The third one was absolutely a mindset of colleagues thinking it was absolutely acceptable and amusing to brag about how misogynistic they were or racist they were or whatever, among a not small circle of colleagues and potentially a wider circle of colleagues if they thought there was the traction for it. That is deeply worrying, is it not? Out of all of those things, although it obviously did not involve a murder, in terms of the mindset of professional police officers who we look to to protect us against misogynistic and racist abuse, as well as criminal activity at large, for officers in a mainstream London police station to think it is normal practice to brag and banter about those sorts of things is deeply worrying as to the sort of people we are allowing into the police force, is it not?

Paula Barker: I agree.

Sir Thomas Winsor: I am sorry. Nobody would defend, and indeed they will not defend, what they wrote on their social media messages, etc. It is remarkable that anybody would think it safe, let alone acceptable, to write down those things, because when you commit it to writing, you are creating a permanent record of the communication. You wonder about their basic intelligence and common sense. I do not know the ages of the officers in question and when they were recruited, but clearly the communications in question were just disgraceful and appalling.

As I said in last year's *State of Policing* report, when police officers are joining the police, it is incumbent upon the police when they are assessing these candidates—a lot more people want to join the police than get in, so they have a wide range of people to choose from—that they have good techniques to recognise characteristics and behaviours that are inconsistent with the office of constable: a fondness for violence, a fondness for the exercise of power over their fellow citizens, homophobia, misogyny, racial attitudes, et cetera.

When those things are recognised, the police should root them out and throw them out under regulation 13 of the Police (Conduct) Regulations. They should not allow them to stay in the police or get into the police. In too many respects, the attitude, "Well, he will make a good officer. We



HOUSE OF COMMONS

will knock these rough edges off him or her”, is a disastrous policy. It costs a lot of money to train a police officer and forces will be reluctant to abandon that investment by throwing out somebody like that but they must, because otherwise they are storing up what could be a 30-year problem, as we may have seen in the case of Charing Cross.

I do not want to pre-empt, because I cannot, what the Independent Office for Police Conduct and the other investigations into that will reveal. We have been given a commission by the Home Secretary in relation to the quality of vetting and professionalism in relation to the police, so I will not say more about that, because we do not talk about inspections once they are going on. We will be publishing relatively soon in relation to that. I share your view that these attitudes are entirely inconsistent with the office of constable, or indeed inconsistent with the attitudes of any decent human being.

Q47 Tim Loughton: All of the things you have said should not be happening must not happen. I am sure all of us entirely concur with that. You have said that over nine years the quality of the police is undoubtedly much better. That seems to undermine hugely the fact that the police are much better. The police may be much better in terms of detection rates, although I think they are not. They are certainly not in terms of reporting and ending up in prosecution of violence of women and girls, for example. In terms of detecting terrorism, probably they are much better. We will not know the full details of that for obvious reasons.

To be employing a not insignificant number of officers whose very targets seem to be the sort of inclusive targets that we are trying to get into the police force, let alone the fire service, whose record is even worse, as we have already heard, the fact that they are still there and the fact that they were recruited in the first place suggest something is going very wrong. You, Sir Tom, said that it is not limited to Charing Cross. Of course, it is not. How do you reconcile that things are certainly a lot better over nine years, or whatever the phrase was you used, and the fact that that has just happened.

Sir Thomas Winsor: Of course, I did not say everything is a lot better.

Q48 Tim Loughton: That is quite a fundamental thing. It is not just one or two rotten apples. It is a barrel.

Sir Thomas Winsor: Of course not. You have said it is a not insignificant number of officers. We do not know how many are guilty of this kind of behaviour. We have Elish Angiolini doing her report, Louise Casey is doing hers, we are doing ours and there are others. I am not pre-empting anything. I would be extraordinarily surprised if they came out saying everything is fine; of course they will not, and they will make recommendations for improvement. The recruitment of officers needs to be far more rigorous in the ways that I have described, so that when these attitudes are revealed, when they are apparent, then the police



HOUSE OF COMMONS

should stop these people going any further in the police and get them out.

- Q49 **Chair:** Can I just ask a question on that? What recently came to light was that some police forces were using online recruitment methods. There was a quote from an officer who joined the force to say the first time he met anybody in person from that police force was when he was being measured for his uniform. With what you have just been saying to Mr Loughton about the issues around misogyny, homophobia and propensity to look to violence and all of that, are you satisfied that online recruitment is going to be able to establish and pick up on those traits?

Sir Thomas Winsor: It is not universal online recruitment.

Chair: No, it is not universal. It is some forces.

Sir Thomas Winsor: Where it takes place it is plainly inadequate.

- Q50 **Chair:** Those police forces doing it should stop doing that now.

Sir Thomas Winsor: Online only is not enough. You need to get somebody in a room. You need to listen to them. You need to listen to them when their guard is down, when they are not pretending. You need to listen to them and see how they behave with their colleagues. Their supervisors and those who are making assessments of them need to get to know them and to talk to them in ordinary, informal surroundings as well as formal surroundings, to draw out those attitudes and behaviours. The police do employ psychologists and other professionals who can recognise these traits. When they see them, they need to take them very seriously. I am confident, particularly as a result of Charing Cross and the other things that we have mentioned, that will be taken very seriously indeed.

Clearly, there were significant failures in the past. There is no doubt about it. I do not think I said that the police are universally better in the last 10 years, but some things have got a great deal better. Some things really have not. Mr Loughton mentions detection rates and other things. I discuss those things in my report on 10 March, which I hope I will be able to come back and talk to you about.

- Q51 **Chair:** Does there need to be a royal commission on policing? That is being mooted at the moment: that things have changed so much in the last few decades in terms of policing that now is the time for a royal commission. Do you think that would be helpful?

Sir Thomas Winsor: Yes, it would. Unfortunately, Government Ministers do not much like royal commissions unless their objective is to kick things into the long grass. The last royal commission on the police was in 1960. I have read every word of it and all the evidence. It was a piece of remarkable quality. Sixty-two years later is not premature.

The Government did promise in its 2019 manifesto a royal commission on criminal justice. The pandemic has intervened, but I have no real



HOUSE OF COMMONS

expectation we are going to see that this side of whenever the next election is. That is regrettable. A royal commission on criminal justice is necessary. It has the advantage that it could, as long as its terms of reference are not drawn too narrowly, be able to cover the police but also the other three elements of the criminal justice system: prosecutions, prisons and probation.

Q52 Chair: I would just like to ask a specific question about the BBC, which recently reported a quarter of the firearms licences returned between 2019 and 2021 went to people who had faced allegations of domestic abuse. I just wondered what your view is, especially Mr Wilsher, because it was said that you are the lead on domestic abuse in the inspectorate. What is your view on that? Are the police failing victims of domestic abuse?

Sir Thomas Winsor: I will go first and then hand over to Roy. We did a thematic report on firearms in September 2015. We have not been back since then, because the Home Office ask us to do particular things and by definition ask us not to do certain things. We sounded warnings at that time about the return of licensed firearms to people who were suspected of domestic abuse and other intemperate behaviour.

Since then, the Home Office have made regulations. We recommended that the Home Office should make regulations in relation to the assessment of people who are applying for or getting renewals for their licences, and of course the return of firearms is pretty much the same sort of thing, so that there should be a proper assessment of the suitability of the person in question to get that firearm back or to have a firearms licence.

I am pleased to say that, six years later, the Government did make those regulations after a certain due process. The regulations are now tighter and the return of a firearms licence, the grant of a firearms licence or the renewal of a firearms licence will require a doctor's certificate, saying that the doctor has no reason to believe that the person in question is in some way mentally or in any other respect unsuitable. GPs are not very happy about this. It may very well lead to a degree of reticence on the part of GPs about taking responsibility for something that they do not think they should be doing. The number of firearms licences that are renewed and the number of firearms that are returned will go down.

Q53 Chair: A GP would not necessarily know there were allegations of domestic abuse.

Sir Thomas Winsor: No, and therefore the police need to be able to share that information with the GPs. This system has potential for significant complexity.

Roy Wilsher: I fully agree with Tom. Although there have been improvements, linking it to domestic abuse would be the police's responsibility.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I am pleased to say that there is greater concentration on that area. I was here in this House just two nights ago for the launch of the campaign against violence against women and girls. Domestic abuse goes beyond women and girls but is a major part of it. Our report last September that came out under my colleague, Zoë Billingham, on police engagement with women and girls made recommendations. All have been accepted, particularly violence against women and girls being part of the strategic policing requirement, which is a major step forward.

We also welcome, under the National Police Chiefs Council, the appointment of a temporary deputy chief constable Maggie Blyth, who is leading an action plan for every police force on how they deal with this issue. The concentration of police is much greater. Our own inspections look at the victims' journey; repeat offenders; how domestic abuse is investigated; the use of what is called Section 15 and 16, which is if there is no evidence to take a prosecution forward or if the victim does not want to take prosecution forward, how consistent that is; and the standards that police chief constables set for their engagement with domestic abuse.

There has been really good uptake and improvement over the last year or so. Again, we want to see that sustained and we will be going back to look at how the police force has sustained that improvement.

Chair: Can I thank you very much for your evidence today? We have talked about a number of cases. We have talked about Sarah Everard, but we have also talked about Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman. We should recognise how deeply the public and this Committee feel about those cases and how, as police forces going forward, issues and matters like that are dealt with, so that we never see those type of cases again within our police forces in this country.

Again, thank you very much for your evidence today. I am sure we will be following up, particularly on the issues of diversity and inclusion in the fire and rescue service. We look forward to your report, Sir Tom, and we wish you well in whatever you go on to do after 31 March. It may be we do see you again once you are free of the office. Perhaps you might want to come back and talk to use with some further reflections. Thank you very much for your time today.