# Accountability for performance in English and Scottish fire and rescue services from 2010 to 2016.

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**Abstract**

Using evidence from English and Scottish fire and rescue services from 2010-2016, this paper aims to show how divergent performance management regimes can affect public accountability. Performance management regimes enable agencies and the public to hold public sector organisations accountable by facilitating evaluation of their accomplishments. However, our findings show that local as opposed to central control over performance management, can have quite differing implications for public accountability.

**Impact**

It is often difficult to evaluate the implications that performance management regimes may have for accountability in public sector organisations. By analysing divergent performance management regimes operating in UK fire and rescue services, this paper illustrates that levels of hierarchical control over performance management regimes, can influence organisations' ability to deliver public services with improved accountability.

**Introduction**

Despite dramatic reductions in public spending since 2010, UK fire and rescue services have been required to maintain their resilience and response to local emergencies. The Grenfell Tower fire exposed the importance of a fully resourced, well-performing but also *accountable* fire service.

By setting standards and facilitating the assessment of what public services have accomplished, performance management regimes enable public sector organisations to be held accountable (Behn, 2003). In this sense, such regimes are instrumental to the establishment of legitimate accountability mechanisms (Moynihan *et al*., 2011). This article aims to analyse how the performance management regimes of fire and rescue services in England and Scotland, have diverged since 2010, having had common antecedents over the previous 200 years (Ewen 2010, Murphy and Greenhalgh 2018). Recent reports (Audit Scotland, 2015; NAO, 2015) have highlighted significant differences in the governance, performance management and policy response to the current era of austerity in each country. In an era of austerity, such differences have formed part of wider public sector reforms in each country (Audit Scotland, 2015; NAO 2015). Austerity-localism (Lowndes and Pratchett 2012) has featured heavily in England, as opposed to more centralised control over delivery and governance in Scotland.

Importantly, we aim to show how these divergent performance management regimes can have differing implications for how the public and other agencies can be assured that public services (including fire and rescue) remain accountable to the communities they serve. Our main argument in this paper is that public sector reforms in the UK fire services have had a fundamental impact on their performance management regimes and thus, how the services account for their performance. As such, our work contributes to ongoing debates about what constitutes effective public sector accountability and the important role of performance management regimes in assuring that accountability (e.g. see Dubnick, 2005, Eckersley *et al*., 2014).

Our paper contributes a comparative perspective to limited prior literature in the area of fire and rescue, a relatively under-researched area of the public sector (Carvalho *et al*. 2006, 2008, Murphy and Greenhalgh, 2013, Pileman *et al.* 2014, Kloot, 2009, Launder and Perry, 2014, Taylor *et al*. 2017). This approach has enabled us to highlight how differing levels of bureaucratic control (i.e. local versus central) over the management of performance

management regimes, can affect public accountability. In a similar sense, the findings may be of practical relevance to other jurisdictions seeking to understand what such control over their own performance management regimes may imply for their ability to deliver public services with improved accountability. It will also be of general relevance to organisations seeking to implement strategies, as it highlights the benefits of a 'golden thread' or "consistent cascading process" (Micheli & Neely, 2010) to enable the alignment of organisational subdivisions with the corporate centre (Kaplan and Norton 2006).

## Literature Review

*Accountability and performance management regimes*

The accountability literature is diverse cutting across the disciplines of accounting, public management & administration, public policy, politics and economics. The concept defies concrete definition and is widely regarded as multifaceted, beset with complexity and chameleon-like (Mulgan, 2000; Sinclair, 1995). Accountability is broadly about conduct and the giving and demanding of reasons (or accounts) for conduct (Roberts and Scapens, 1985; Messner, 2009). Its key purpose in democratic societies is to ensure citizens can maintain democratic control, control the exercise of power, and so that agents held to account know that they are expected to reach and maintain certain standards (Bovens, 2005; Aucoin and Heintzman, 2000). In this paper we use Bovens' (2005; 2007, p.450) conceptualisation of public accountability as *"a relationship between actor and a forum, in which an actor has an obligation to explain and justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgement and the actor may face consequences"*.

In this paper we show that performance management regimes have a key role to play in how the public sector achieves accountability (Lee, 2008). The information they provide forms the basis of questioning, debate and judgement by forums and the need for reward or sanction provides a form of control, which distinguishes accountability from other relationships such as answerability or transparency (Smyth, 2012). Yet, control can only be exercised if good performance can be distinguished from bad (Meyer and Gupta, 1994). This may be difficult to achieve without a system of national standards, and independent assessment to monitor how an organisation meets them. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, as part of Public Sector Agreement system, there was an attempt to ensure overall coherence between government set targets at the national and local levels, a 'golden thread' (Micheli and Neeley, 2010). This aimed to create delivery alignment with objectives, targets and indicators from central

government through to local delivery. At the same time, 'target and indicators are designed to control local delivery, improve accountability, compare organisations' performance, and influence behaviour and action to improve public services' (Micheli and Neely, 2010, p. 598).

The 'golden thread' ensures that there is a link between performance management at national and local levels. In addition, levels of hierarchical control evident in performance management regimes may indicate the extent to which the performance of accountees, can be scrutinised and judged by those with sufficient power to deliver rewards or sanctions based on that performance. The concepts of centralism and localism go some way to explaining the extent of hierarchical control, which itself is central to an understanding of public-sector reforms by successive UK governments (Carter, 1989, Boyne, 1998, Brooks, 2000, Bowerman *et al*., 2001, Sullivan, 2003, Peckham *et al*., 2005, Grubnic and Woods, 2009, Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012, Ferry and Eckersley, 2015, Ferry *et al*., 2015).

Whilst accountability is needed to prevent the abuse of power, it is generally accepted that too much control i.e. an excessive and overly bureaucratic focus on accountability, hinders entrepreneurship and, in turn, performance (Behn, 2001; Christensen and Laegreid 2015; Halachmi, 2002; Bovens, 2005; Dubnick, 2005). Boyne (1998) discusses the problems of centralist structures in the public sector. Perceived problems include; the monopolistic structure of public services in which a lack of competition provides no incentive for managers to innovate to survive; a lack of unambiguous performance indicators; and the large size of bureaucracies, which can become inflexible and slow to respond. The response of successive governments to these perceived problems has often involved the delegation of autonomy, whilst retaining centralist elements of control. For instance, UK localism has meant devolving accountability for operational performance, whilst maintaining central control over financial performance (Ferry and Eckersley, 2015; Ferry *et al*., 2015; Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012). In 2011, the 'Localism Act' (HM Government 2011) was introduced with the ethos, 'to try to do everything at the most local level' (HOC, 2011, p12).

Localism therefore aims to devolve power and resources away from central control, towards front-line managers, local democratic structures and local communities (Stoker, 2004). However, accountability deficits can arise when governance systems do not sufficiently provide those in the public sector with requirements to account for their conduct and performance publicly, to accountability forums with the power to sanction them (Bovens *et al*.,

2008). Aucoin and Heintzman (2000) argue that accountability deficits can be avoided by focusing on constraints that serve to secure and maintain the key purposes of accountability in a democracy. They argue that decentralised control, i.e. 'letting the managers manage' has never been a credible alternative to centralised command and controls. Systems of localised authority and responsibility work well only when accompanied by other mechanisms of constraint.

The mechanisms of constraint which allow accountability for performance to be achieved, include a commitment to transparency and information sharing, a comprehensive system of performance assessment, and effective and honest communication between those who evaluate and assess performance and those being held to account (Aucoin and Heintzman, 2000). External auditors and independent inspectorates also play a prominent role in promoting accountability (Bovens, 2005, Ellwood and Garcia-Lacalle, 2015, Ellwood, 2014). Such agencies may collectively act as independent forums, and their relations with public sector agencies are based on the obligation of those agencies to explain and justify. In addition, the public can be provided with an independent assessment, which they can use to judge how the agency is performing. As Eckersley *et al.* (2014) note, performance management regimes without the presence of independent monitoring can result in a widening accountability gap.

**Research methods**

The analysis and findings reported in this paper are based on a mixture of documentary analysis of publicly available sources and elite interviews with key stakeholders involved in the performance management and accountability of UK fire and rescue services (Yin, 2008). Policy documents were used to explain the changing nature of performance management regimes and accountability arrangements in England and Scotland. This analysis was supplemented by semi-structured interviews with senior stakeholders of both services. Interviewees included senior officers of both FRSs, along with senior members of bodies responsible for external oversight and scrutiny of the services. In Scotland we interviewed members of Audit Scotland, the Scottish Improvement Service and HM Inspectorate. In England we interviewed members of the National Audit Office, the Local Government Association, DCLG and the Centre for Public Scrutiny.

The interviews complemented other evidence in identifying an actor-level perspective of both how the changing performance management regimes were working and in determining their implications with respect to accountability. The perceptions of these actors are considered important given their role in implementing, designing and participating in their respective systems of performance management and accountability. Prior to interviews, the interviewees were provided with themes that would be covered during the interviews.

**Organisational and historical Context: UK Fire and Rescue Service**

A National Fire Service (NFS) was in existence in the UK from 1941 until the Fire Services Act of 1947 when the fire-fighting functions of the NFS were transferred to local fire brigades, maintained by the councils of counties and county boroughs. The 1947 Act placed a duty on fire authorities to 'to make provision for fire-fighting purposes and to make arrangements for rendering mutual assistance to other authorities for dealing with fires' (ODPM 2003, p.14). Authorities were required to provide advice (upon request) in relation to buildings and other property and fire authorities could use the brigades and equipment to respond to other incidents.

Statutory requirements have changed over time as the fire service has needed to respond to changing patterns of risk. The 2004 Fire and Rescue Services Act, together with the 2004 Civil Contingencies Act replaced the policies, practices, institutions and arrangements that had been established by the 1947 Fire Services Act, the 1920 Emergency Powers, and 1948 Civil Defence Acts (Murphy and Greenhalgh, 2018). The fire service became 'The Fire and Rescue Service' (FRS) and its role changed from merely responding to incidents and protecting property, to the reduction of risk to communities and individuals. The 2004 Act acknowledged and embraced the wider functions undertaken by the service since its inception. The range of duties presently performed by FRS across the UK include:
- responding to fires, road-traffic accidents and other emergencies;
- carrying out safety inspections of business premises;
- undertaking preventative activities to reduce the risks of fire
- contributing to national resilience, and collectively being able to respond to up to 4 simultaneous national-level emergencies. (NAO, 2015)

In England there are currently 46 Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) and in Scotland (up until 2013), there were 8 fire and rescue services which merged into one national FRS. The service

in both countries is staffed by firefighters employed on both a full-time, retained (on-call/part-time) and volunteer basis. The service also has control room operatives and is supported by the usual back office functions.

Despite reforms in public services in each country, both English and Scottish FRSs have embraced the move from a reactive service to a greater emphasis on prevention and protection. Since 2005, there has been a move away from prescriptive standards of fire cover determined centrally, towards Integrated Risk Management Planning (IRMP), at the level of individual fire services. IRMP requires each service to prioritise its resources based on a systematic assessment of the risks to life and property in its area. Its aim is to recognise the relationship between risks and resources, and to use this information as a planning tool to ensure consistent service delivery. It recognises the critical role of prevention, i.e. to develop local resilience against risks that can be foreseen. IRMP, the retained firefighters' system and community safety initiatives have been retained in English FRSs, despite recent reforms. To this extent these characteristics of the service have been common to both England and Scotland post-2005.

Despite the local focus of IRMP, in Scotland a review in 2010 recommended the development of a complementary national/regional IRMP to enable economies of scale, collaboration and sharing of services such as human resources, IT and fire investigation (Scottish Fire and Rescue Advisory Unit, 2010). The Scottish reforms together with parallel reforms in England and, in particular, their implications for performance management, service delivery and accountability are discussed below.

**Findings and discussion**
*Changing performance and accountability arrangements in English FRS 2010-2016*
The broader context of austerity (see Bracci *et al*., 2015) provides the backdrop to key reforms that have fundamentally affected how English FRSs have been structured and governed since 2010. The 'Open Public Services' white paper (Cabinet Office, 2011), the Localism Act (HM Government, 2011) and Local Audit and Accountability Act (DCLG, 2014) set out the policy agenda of the Coalition government with respect to public sector reform. These reforms aimed to create a more diverse market in public services, and a greater role for private sector companies in service delivery (Eckersley *et al*., 2014). There was significant decentralisation of control (or localism, see Stoker, 2004) to challenge bureaucracy; *"Decades of top-down prescription and centralisation have put bureaucratic imperatives above the needs of service*

*users"* (Cabinet Office, 2011, p.7). FRSs, though not mentioned specifically in the white paper, became commissioned services; with the Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) as the commissioners and the FRSs as service providers (Murphy and Ferry, 2017). Localism aimed to decentralise power and decision making to the lowest possible level (Stoker, 2004). A *Fire Futures* report on localism and accountability (De Savage, 2010) discusses the priorities of FRSs and the need to eliminate central targets, central control mechanisms and empower local communities. The role of central government was to be limited to the elimination of anything which constrains local freedom, including reporting requirements and inspection.

Responsibilities to report to central government were reduced to financial reporting requirements under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014, which had facilitated the closure of the Audit Commission. It became the role of the National Audit Office (NAO) to provide central government with value-for-money reports, limited to the financial sustainability of the service (see NAO, 2015) and to oversee arrangements for the audit of local public bodies, such as FRSs. As noted by Ferry and Eckersley (2015), local government services including FRSs would be assessed on financial *con*formance alone, with limited central provision for monitoring outputs or operational *per*formance. As such, there was also limited scope for performance information to assure public accountability (see also Kloot, 2009).

Performance management regimes underpin accountability by providing a mechanism that enables service providers to be held accountable by forums (Behn, 2003). Prior to 2010, performance management regimes within FRSs involved comprehensive national frameworks, performance indicators and assessments (see Murphy and Greenhalgh, 2013 for a review) ensuring consistency between national policy and local delivery and enabling the establishment of a 'golden thread' (Micheli and Neely, 2010). These 'whole organisation assessments' (WOA) (Martin *et al*., 2016) covered operational performance and emergency preparedness alongside financial management. Key performance indicators and standards were a prominent feature of assessments to evaluate the performance of locally delivered services. They also provided benchmarks for other FRSs and provided a motivational tool to facilitate continuous improvement and learning (Bovens, 2005, Aucoin and Heintzman, 2000). However, since the introduction of localism in 2010, there has been a move away from the use of nationally imposed indicators and standards to assess local operational performance. As one interviewee noted;

*"(...) so whereas previously we used to have national standards of fire cover, with the introduction of local risk planning, services were released from the requirement to conform to national standards."* [Senior manager in an English FRA]

As such, a new National Framework (DCLG, 2012) focused on high-level responsibilities of both the government and FRS, but it did not 'prescribe operational matters';

*The National Framework will continue to provide an overall strategic direction to fire and rescue authorities but will not seek to tell them how to serve their communities. They are free to operate in a way that enables the most efficient delivery of their services. (...). Ultimately, it is to the local communities, not Government, that fire and rescue authorities are accountable.* [DCLG, 2012, p.6]

Thus, whilst the National Framework provided some strategic direction, it did not provide any nationally imposed key performance indicators to enable the assurance of accountability for performance at the *local* level. Effectively, the ability to create a 'golden thread' between national policy and local delivery was severed, as one interviewee noted;

*I don't think it's as good as it used to be because all of the national PIs have been side-lined. When you've got a team in DCLG or in Government bringing together all the information and statistics to share back out to the forty-six services, that was a better arrangement, but again it's not part of the Government's policy. It's down to you decide what you've got which puts more onus back on the individual services. How do you know you are performing well?* [Deputy Chief Fire Officer of an English FRS]

The model for assessing operational performance at the local level (to fit the vision of localism) was 'sector-led improvement'. It was proposed that the sector-led framework (designed by the Local Government Association and Chief Fire Officers Association), would underpin local accountability by giving forums (e.g. citizens) the tools and information to hold local fire services to account in terms of both delivery of outcomes and value for money (De Savage, 2010, LGA, 2014). The tools for sector-led improvement were an Operational Assessment (OpA) and a fire peer challenge (FPC). The FPC process complemented the FRSs' own

performance assessment (using OpA) by providing assessment and feedback (from peers within the sector) on how the service could improve. However, our interviewees questioned the effectiveness of performance assessment led by the sector;

> *"I suppose the problem with peer assessment and the sort of friendly in-house touch is, is it challenging enough and is it pushing things as far as it might? It's not quite the same level of external scrutiny and it's a much friendlier sort of process (…) does that mean it's too cosy and a bit too easy? Should there be a bit more challenge and scrutiny?"* [Senior manager in an English FRA]

> *"(…) we can't be trusted as a fire sector to quality assure ourselves and provide assurance back to the Government. We've proved that because we haven't been brutal enough with ourselves, I don't think (…) I think it needs to be, there needs to be some form of assurance and a real decent assessment with teeth that makes services improve, if not, sanctions will be put in place."* [Senior manager of an English FRS]

Research by Downe *et al.* (2017) found that although the service engages positively with sector-led improvement, its effectiveness is too heavily reliant on the integrity of the sector to undertake accurate and robust assessments. This means that the quality of the information upon which accountability forums (e.g. citizens, local government) are able to make judgements and evaluations is questionable. Performance assessed by the sector may be less objective than the scrutiny of an external inspectorate. As one interviewee noted; *"Trust is good, ruthless supervision is better, and at the moment, peer review doesn't provide ruthless supervision"*. If integrity of performance assessment is open to challenge, the ability of forums to impose sanctions for poor performance is limited, as it may be more difficult to identify. In addition to the problem of quality, the data has not even been available for scrutiny, as although the OpA and FPC have been undertaken by all 46 FRS, the reports were removed from the Local Government Association (LGA) website in 2015 and were not available on all local authority websites (Murphy and Ferry, 2017).

One interviewee explained that the process of sector-led improvement has, to some extent, *"been its own worst enemy"*.

*"(…) certainly, the analysis of how services are performed, release of reports, availability of data and opportunities for improvement, identification of where service practice could be improved (…). I don't think that's been particularly strong (…) The perception is, and I think it's probably fair, that it's almost seen as the sector marking its own homework, I think some of that's perception, and I think because the outcomes and the outputs from the review process are not clearly defined and they're not well shared."* [*Home Office Manager*]

Performance management regimes based on localism do not necessarily need to result in accountability deficits (Bovens *et al*., 2008) if there are adequate constraints in place to prevent it (Aucoin and Heintzman, 2000). National monitoring and inspectorate powers can provide such constraint, as they are (when properly established and conducted) impartial performance assessments carried out by those with expertise. Moreover, as such performance assessments are carried out by objective agents (unlike the sector-led assessments identified above), the accuracy of the data and information can be relied upon by citizens who may not be sufficiently qualified (or motivated) to carry out 'armchair audits' (Ferry and Eckersley, 2015).

In the English FRSs, national monitoring and inspection disappeared in 2007 when Her Majesty's Independent Fire Inspectorate was decommissioned, making England the only country in Europe without a dedicated inspectorate (Murphy and Ferry, 2017). Whilst the independent inspectorate was retained in Scotland, it was replaced by the Chief Fire Service Adviser (CFSA) in England. The CFSA is a civil service role accountable to the relevant ministerial department (DCLG 2010-2015 and Home Office from 2016) and obliged to provide strategic advice and guidance to the government on the structure, organisation and performance of FRAs and FRSs (Murphy and Ferry, 2017). However, this role was not independent and there were no reporting requirements to Parliament or to the public. As a Deputy Chief Executive of an English FRA notes; "*It's not particularly a beefed-up role. It's quite light-touch.*" It is questionable whether the presence of the CFSA has provided sufficient assurance to enable accountability for performance, as it did not result in independent assessments that could be accessed and scrutinised by the public. Indeed, NAO senior managers admitted that "*the major driver of service improvement and/or efficiency (…) has been austerity. People will not be inefficient as they have not got the cash (…) this principle has replaced any sort of centralised inspection*" this has left "*an assurance hole in relation to Fire.*" Aucoin and

Heintzman (2000) note, independent oversight should not be viewed as 'bureaucratic overload' but as a necessary long-term investment in good governance to prevent accountability deficits. The NAO conclusion on value for money in England in 2015 was:

> "*To ensure the continued financial and service sustainability of the sector in the context of ongoing funding reductions, we would expect the Department to have a fuller understanding of the appropriate funding level necessary to support services. Equally it should oversee an accountability system capable of providing robust assurance that authorities are maintaining service standards and delivering value for money locally. The Department needs to improve on both criteria to ensure that it is well-placed to deliver value for money in the future. In particular, it has weak assurance over the effectiveness of the local accountability system for fire and rescue, and this needs to be strengthened*". (NAO 2015 p.10)

*Changing performance and accountability arrangements in Scottish FRS 2010-2016*

Following devolution, the transfer of responsibility for fire and rescue gradually moved from Westminster to the Scottish Executive (Taylor *et al*., 2017). Although Scotland is still regulated by UK-wide legislation such as the Civil Contingencies Act (2004), the country now enacts its own legislation on the delivery of most public services, including its FRS (Mackie, 2013). Despite also being subject to 'austerity' (Blyth, 2015; O'Hara, 2015; Schui, 2014), Scotland has taken a very different approach to its public service design and delivery than that adopted by England. By 2015, the new governance structure in Scotland was very different to England and despite a significant transition, clear demonstrable improvement was being achieved in terms of both operational performance and efficiency savings (Audit Scotland, 2015, 2018).

Like the rest of the Scottish public sector, fire and rescue has undergone significant institutional reform (Christie Commission, 2011, Scottish Government, 2011, Mackie, 2013). The structure of eight separate FRAs had resulted in considerable duplication and significant unwarranted variation in the provision of services. In 2013, the eight services were reorganised into a single national body, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS). A centrally imposed framework of national performance targets based on outcome objectives, measures and indicators was developed (Scottish Government, 2016). Unlike England, these performance targets were designed to assess local operational performance.

The new SFRS brought with it a new 'landscape' for structures of governance (Scottish Government, 2013). New governance and accountability arrangements were set out in the 'Governance and Accountability Framework Document' (Scottish Government, 2013a). Public sector governance arrangements generally involve accountability mechanisms relative to the stated goals of the sector, e.g. effective service outcomes as in the case of the SFRS. It also usually includes the structures that clarify the responsibilities of the various stakeholders to the organisation, and the tools that could be used to assure accountability both internally and externally (Annisette, *et al.,* 2013). The new accountability framework included the roles and responsibilities of Ministers, Scottish Government, the SFRS chair, board and Chief Officer. It demands good conduct from those in authority to meet the stated objectives of the SFRS. For instance, the Chief Fire Officer must ensure "…*robust performance and risk management arrangements…to support the achievement of the SFRS's aims and objectives and that facilitate comprehensive reporting to the board, the Scottish Government and the wider public"* (Scottish Government, 2013a, p.6).

The Fire and Rescue framework sets out 'Minister's expectations and strategic priorities for the SFRS' and the SFRS develops its strategic plan to show how it proposes to deliver against these Ministerial priorities (2013, p.14).   A manager in Audit Scotland asserted that *"the Fire Framework sets the exam question and the strategic plan is then the answer to the question"*. The potential to create a 'golden thread' between national policy and local delivery was therefore, (unlike in England) maintained and strengthened.

Comprehensive reporting refers to transparency which is a key mechanism for ensuring effective accountability by providing the openness needed to, amongst other things, prevent the abuse of power (Bovens, 2005). The SFRS has a statutory duty to provide the public as well as national and local government with access to its proceedings, papers and reports. However, as in England, transparency is not adequate by itself to provide accountability (Bovens, 2005).

A key part of this paper is the arrangements that determine the performance assessment of FRSs in Scotland and England. Such arrangements provide the tools needed to assure the public accountability of the SFRS. Unlike England, accountability for performance has been reinforced by the re-establishment of an independent fire and rescue service inspectorate. The

SFRS is subject to scrutiny and oversight at the national level, of both its financial *and* operational performance. This is achieved by several external bodies, namely the Scottish Improvement Service, Audit Scotland and HM Fire Inspectorate in Scotland, and encompasses the wider performance perspective needed for public audit (Elwood, 2014). Audit Scotland has the powers to examine value for money and financial performance. In addition, Her Majesty's Chief Fire Service Inspector in Scotland (HMCFSIS) oversees operational inspection of the SFRS, including community safety engagement, staff learning and development, and policies and practices. This amount of direct scrutiny was in stark contrast to their previous experiences;

> *"(...) pretty much from day one all of a sudden the Senior Management of the new Fire Service found themselves exposed to a level of challenge they'd never had in their career before... it's absolutely massively ratcheted up and to a certain extent in the early days for the first year they gave non-executive Board members, of whom there are twelve, additional days because they thought, 'Get it started, it's going to need to be a lot of input'."* [Manager, Audit Scotland]

The amount of scrutiny is not only due to the number of bodies overseeing the service but also due to the differing and overlapping natures of the scrutiny. Whilst the SFRS is directly accountable to the Scottish Government, under the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act (2012, section 115) the SFRS is required, 'to make arrangements for local fire and rescue services'. This includes 'establishing a formal statutory relationship with each local authority' and providing adequate arrangements, 'for the involvement of the local authority in determining priorities and objectives for SFRS locally'. This enables the service to work with local authorities to tackle local, risk-based priorities. There are thirty-two local authorities within Scotland. This means that the SFRS has thirty-two Local Delivery Plans and thirty-two scrutiny committees. Despite this apparent bureaucracy and complexity, interviewees agreed that the new arrangements had strengthened local engagement;

> *"(...) there's more of a focus now than we had in the past because under the Joint Board arrangements they used to have in [some] areas, the Joint Board were very distant from the councils and scrutiny took place at the Board level and there was very-very little local engagement with the service. I think the current arrangements have actually strengthened local engagement, because you now have a local plan*

*for each of the thirty-two areas of Scotland and each area has a Local Senior Officer from the service."* [Manager, Scottish Improvement Service]

This shows that whilst the single service (accountable to the Scottish Parliament through the Fire and Rescue Framework) is centralised, the day-to-day approach taken exhibits characteristics of localism (see Stoker, 2004). One interviewee explained the approach taken in Scotland as opposed to England;

*"(...) whereas in England it is localism and Scotland appears to be centralisation, it's actually not centralisation. It's centralisation in direction and administration but creating greater local connection. It's empowering people to be able to think for themselves and that's a cultural shift, whereas everything before was deferred up, people are now starting to get a wee bit more comfortable in supporting local needs."* [Senior officer, SFRS]

The interpretation of localism in Scotland seems to mean that the SFRS engages with the needs of its local communities whilst still being subject to national targets and scrutiny. Unlike in England, the Scottish experience of localism does not mean that the SFRS is no longer accountable to government for the performance of its locally delivered services. The framework for SFRS (Scottish Government, 2013) sets out strategic priorities and objectives. These cover three key areas; improving service outcomes; equal access to specialist services and stronger engagement with communities. As in England, it mirrors the shift in emphasis from property to people and from response to prevention. However, unlike England, the framework is used by the Scottish Government to hold the SFRS to account for performance against operational as well as financial targets. As detailed within the Fire and Rescue Framework and the SFRS's Planning and Performance Management Framework (SFRS, 2014), targets include, reducing fire fatalities and causalities, reducing special service fatalities and casualties, reducing accidental dwelling fires, reducing the number of non-domestic fires and reducing firefighter injuries.

In contrast to England, there is no need for 'armchair auditors' as mechanisms to assure public accountability have not been replaced by raw data. The existence of nationally imposed targets and inspection powers provides performance information and assessment that is an adequate basis for the evaluation and judgement of the SFRS by forums (including citizens and local

government). The objective assessment of performance by independent and external bodies including HMCFSIS ensures that performance standards are met, providing those using such information with trust in its accuracy and completeness. The first key message from Audit Scotland's' review of the new service in 2015 stated;

*The Scottish Government and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service managed the 2013 merger of the eight fire and rescue services effectively. The Scottish Government clearly defined roles, expectations and initial targets for the chair and chief officer, and the merger followed good practice. There was no impact on the public during the merger and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's performance is improving. (Audit Scotland 2015 p5.)*

**Conclusions**

This paper has explained how performance management regimes within UK fire and rescue services changed between 2010 and 2016. Our paper shows how such regimes can be used as a basis for evaluating the level of public accountability that exists in public services. It does so by contributing to limited empirical evidence of such arrangements within the FRS. In particular, illustrating the accountability implications of divergent approaches to performance management regimes in England and Scotland in recent years. We found that in England, the regime based on localism (for operational performance) and centralism (for financial performance) relied heavily on the integrity and professionalism of the sector. This is not necessarily problematic in terms of accountability, if there had been arrangements to assure accountability for *operational* performance. However, (in the study period) there was an absence of constraints to prevent accountability deficits. Due to the interpretation and execution of localism in England, there were no nationally imposed targets and indicators to which English FRS at the local level were held accountable for meeting. This resulted in severing the ability to create a 'golden thread' between national policy and local delivery. In addition, the ability to ensure consistent service delivery across FRSs was also lost.

Transparency in the form of raw data (e.g. peer review reports) was not considered to be an adequate substitute for accountability, especially given that such data was no longer accessible. There were accountability deficits as there was no independent external forum of oversight to pass judgement on the performance of the FRS and thus a limited basis on which individual FRS could face consequences for poor performance. This may change following the

establishment of the HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS). HMICFRS is an extension of the inspectorate for police forces. Its establishment partially reflects the findings of the 2015 NAO report on the financial sustainability of the service. As the report stated;

> *"The fire sector is different from other emergency services in not having an external inspectorate. The Department relies on local scrutiny (from peers within the sector, elected councillors, and the general public) to safeguard service standards, governance, and value for money of each authority. While this is in keeping with its policy of localism, the Department has not attempted to test the effectiveness of the local systems to which it has delegated accountability. There are shortcomings in some of these local arrangements; for example, some authorities think that peer challenges are not always rigorous and independent" (NAO 2015 p. 12).*

It remains to be seen whether or not the establishment of the HMICFRS will improve accountability for performance and reassure the public and other agencies that the fire and rescue services remain accountable to the communities they serve. Moreover, in 2018 the Home Office (which has been responsible for FRS since 2016) stated that *"The National Framework will continue to provide an overall strategic direction to fire and rescue authorities, but Whitehall will not run fire, and fire and rescue authorities and their services remain free to operate in a way that enables the most efficient and effective delivery of their services"* (Home Office, 2018, p.4). Whilst this suggests a continuation of previous policy as discussed in this paper, an in-depth evaluation is beyond the scope of this paper.

In Scotland the performance regime and thus accountability for performance arrangements have been quite different. Unlike in England, there are centrally imposed targets for performance. In addition, there is a proliferation of independent monitoring to assure accountability for both operational and financial performance. Based on current arrangements, there is ample opportunity for posing questions and passing judgement on the performance of the SFRS. As such our research indicates that, in contrast to England, the arrangements to assure public accountability are much stronger in Scotland as there are clear constraints to limit accountability deficits.

We believe that our findings illustrate that independent scrutiny and oversight of performance management regimes is essential in assuring accountability. In addition, they highlight the necessity for a coherent strategic direction at government, i.e. 'central' level. In England the interpretation and enactment of localism, with empowerment at the local level and lack of external scrutiny, has failed to provide adequate assurance of accountability. Ironically, Scotland's more centralised approach, which the English Coalition government shunned as being too bureaucratic (Cabinet Office, 2010), appears to have enabled local priorities to have been tackled. We therefore show that, whilst some research suggests that centralisation can be a bad thing (e.g. see Grubnic and Woods, 2009), it can also empower local communities when supported by mechanisms to ensure that services are listening to those communities.

As this research covers the period between 2010 and 2016, we acknowledge that an obvious limitation of the research is that public policy has moved on. However, we do not believe that this necessarily detracts from the broader implications and insights that differing levels of control over performance management regimes may have for public accountability in general. Nevertheless, future research may wish to assess whether or not the introduction of HMICFRS in England is likely to lead to improved public accountability. In Scotland, whilst levels of independent scrutiny provide superior public accountability, future research may, nevertheless, wish to consider whether there is too much scrutiny, which could, if it becomes burdensome, be detrimental to long-term performance.

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