

Cheshire Police and Crime Panel

Response to Home Office Consultation

Reforming our Fire and Rescue Service

Question 29

Strongly disagree.

Question 30

The Cheshire Police and Crime Panel is of the view that at the present time there is no evidence, at least in Cheshire, that there is a need for change to the governance arrangements of the Fire and Rescue Service.

The Fire and Rescue Service in Cheshire provides an excellent service to the public and is supported by a very effective and experienced Fire Authority. Making a change at present, or in the near future, would be the wrong time and in all likelihood would focus attention away from many of the challenges facing the Fire and Rescue Service at a time when public finances are stretched. This position is unlikely to change for some time to come.

If responsibility for the Fire and Rescue Service were transferred to the Police and Crime Commissioner, there is a concern that the Commissioner would not be able to devote as much attention as would be necessary to the Criminal Justice system and to delivering the aspirations of the Cheshire community for such things as lower crime rates, reduced reoffending and safer communities.

The Cheshire Panel do support closer working between the Police and the Fire and Rescue Service and note that in the county the two services share back-office support and accommodation. Initiatives such as “safe

and well” visits, something pioneered in Cheshire, can benefit both Services and the wider community. Irrespective to any changes to the governance arrangements for Fire and Rescue Services, the Panel would wish to see an increase in collaboration, but does feel that this is possible without radical change to governance arrangements.

The Panel have concerns that should change be made, and in the context of Cheshire, responsibility for the Fire and Rescue Service transferred to the Police and Crime Commissioner, there would be a need for greater scrutiny of the Commissioner than could be delivered by the Panel and its lead local authority under the current arrangements.

The Cheshire Panel has only 13 members (10 Councillors and 3 independent co-opted members) and the Home Office grant to the lead authority has not increased for many years. If changes are to be made, very serious consideration needs to be given to the effectiveness of the scrutiny arrangements that are put in place. Police and Crime Panels, when operating effectively, should act as a “critical friend” to the Commissioner. This should not be lost by very significantly widening the remit of Commissioners, without at the same time bolstering the role of, and resources available to, Police and Crime Panels.

Question 31

Disagree.

Question 32

Strongly disagree.

Question 33

No.

Question 40

Strongly agree.

Question 41

The Cheshire Police and Crime Panel is of the view that should responsibility for the Fire and Rescue Service transfer away from the current Fire Authority to the Police and Crime Commissioner (which it would not want to see), it is important that the Chief Fire Officer is given a degree of operational independence, in the same way that the Chief Constable has been. It is recognised that this would be a change to the current arrangement, where the Fire Authority can make some decisions in relation to such things as the allocation of resources. However, the Fire Authority is made up of Councillors representing (in the case of Cheshire) the four Borough Councils (all unitary authorities), and between them they have a considerable amount of “collective wisdom” in relation to the needs of the Cheshire community. Such knowledge could not rest with one individual, no matter how well advised and supported they were.

Question 43

Please see response to question 41.

Question 45

Neither agree or disagree.

Question 46

Strongly agree.

Question 47

Strongly disagree.

Question 48

The Cheshire Police and Crime Panel is of the view that a Fire Authority, identical or similar in structure to the current arrangement are best placed to determine the strategic way forward for the Fire and Rescue Service in Cheshire. Such an Authority should always be advised by senior Fire and

Rescue Service officers, but it should be recognised that in the context of the Fire and Rescue Service there can be a grey area between the strategic and operational.

25th July 2022