

The Rt Hon Angela Rayner MP
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Dear Deputy Prime Minister

Thank you for your continued support; support which is essential in protecting the work of the fire and rescue service now and into the future.

This letter, sent with concern, is written based on the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) submission in response to the Fair Funding Review which your team will already have received. I attach our submission again for your reference ([Appendix 1](#)).

I think it is evident from the response that in representing the views of Chief Fire Officers the NFCC has serious concerns that the proposed cuts in funding of the fire and rescue service, combined with the changes detailed within the Fair Funding Review 2.0 consultation, will result in poorer fire and rescue services overall, and a growing inequity between some services – placing lives, particularly in some of our most deprived communities, at risk.

In representing these views, I felt it important to raise these risks directly with you as Fire Minister in order to highlight the real and legitimate concerns that we have concerning public safety, and the safety of our firefighters who risk their lives every day to keep our communities safe.

You will also understand that the proposals, if left unchanged, will directly undermine our collective ambitions to reform the fire and rescue service.

Background

There have been two decades of under-investment in the FRS.

Indeed, there has been a significant and unequivocal reduction in the number of firefighters (11,000) in the last decade.

At the same time, the number of incidents the fire and rescue service has responded to has increased by 20%.

Since 2001, the England population has grown by 8.6million. The population at greater risk of fire, those aged 65+, increased from 9.2m (2011) to over 11m (2021); and the population with disabilities increased from 9.4m (2011) to 9.8m (2021).

Based on the disinvestment in recent years, response times have been steadily increasing for the last decade.

Even the most recent finance settlement, has not kept pace with inflation leaving the FRS with unenviable choice between cost of living pay increases in line with inflation or making reductions in service.

There are also a multitude of other legitimate spending pressures that will be exacerbated should the funding be cut and/or distributed without a full risk assessment. Notably, the increase in demand due to climate change, the increase in regulatory pressures following the Grenfell Tower Phase I and II inquiries, the expanding role in support of our blue light colleagues, challenges in recruitment and retention in the On Call duty system, the lack of capital investment which has impacted significantly on the inclusive ambitions of the sector and the mitigation of the risk of cancer due to contaminant risk.

This also undermines our ability to reform – putting direct pressure on industrial relations, particularly frustrating as there has been some real progress on pay progression linked to reform in the last few months.

I fully recognise the Government have the unenviable task of balancing public finances and that they face tough choices when it comes to funding local services.

I also recognise that over the next few weeks ministers will be making some challenging decisions over funding, within a complex local government finance framework.

To make a meaningful contribution to the Fair Funding Review consultation and to support ministers in their decision making overall, we commissioned work to understand the potential impact on the FRS of the combined impact of the Fair Funding Review and the Local Government Finance settlement.

Inevitably that modelling has to be based on a range of assumptions within a model that has many moving parts that interrelate in a complex way.

Our modelling has raised serious concerns both on the quantum and the distribution of funding for fire and rescue services.

Based on exemplifications of the spending review and modelling of the impacts of the fair funding review, it is clear that there is the potential for real and significant cuts in central government funding for the fire and rescue service.

Our modelling shows a potential cut of £102m in real terms of direct government funding for standalone fire and rescue services – equivalent to circa 1,500 firefighter posts. This estimate does not include any impact on London or County Services. With these included, the cuts might be as large as 2,300 firefighters.

The potential impact of these cuts is amplified at a local level in many services due to the impact of the fair funding review which seems anything but fair for fire and rescue services.

Our initial calculations show that the proposals will impact significantly on some of the most deprived communities in England – communities that rely heavily on their public services. This seems contrary to the intent of government and draws NFCC to question the legitimacy of the proposed approach in that context.

To offset the cuts in central government funding, our understanding is that government believe that individual FRAs will increase council tax locally. This however is not a given as any decision on local tax increases is entirely down to local political governance. This approach also appears to abdicate central government responsibility and misses a real opportunity to drive reform. Neither does address legitimate inflationary pressures or cost of living pay rises.

Based on our forecasts, even with £5 council tax increases for all standalone FRAs, over the next few years:

- At an individual service level, a number of services would see their overall funding frozen for three years and larger number of services would see cuts in real terms – they would inevitably face reductions in firefighter numbers and largescale service cuts.
- Nationally funding for the FRS would not keep pace with the cost of living when around 80% of our costs are staff related.
- There would be no capacity to modernise, improve or address very real issues associated with its capital infrastructure (inclusive workplaces / contamination risk).

We also have significant concerns about the resilience of FRSs within county council arrangements which face their own pressures and competing demands.

We do not believe that this is the intention of government, but on the basis of the funding arrangements and review proposals, cuts in frontline fire and rescue services are inevitable. These cuts will inevitably land heaviest in our most deprived communities.

Whilst recognising the current very challenging economic climate, NFCC urges the Government to reconsider overall fire funding and, in this context, elements of the Fair Funding Review which appear to have significant negative consequences for FRSs. In particular:

1. Modelling suggests that the review will result in government grant funding for standalone FRAs reducing by more than 4% over the next three years. If this were to occur the real terms cut in government grant funding is estimated to be £102m over the multi-year settlement period – equal to the loss of over 1,500 wholetime equivalent firefighter roles (this estimate does not include any impact on London or County Services. If we scale up to include those services, the cuts might be as large as 2,300 firefighters).

NFCC position – government should not implement these cuts and should protect government funding for the FRS in real terms.

2. Our understanding is that the impact on core spending power (CSP) of those cuts is expected to be offset by assumed increases in local council tax. Our model is based on a referendum limit of all FRAs increasing council tax by £5 a year for the next three years. This shows that, even then, funding for the FRS does not keep pace with the cost of living.

NFCC position – we require consistency in how FRS are treated in respect of precept flexibilities and request that all services are given choice over council tax levels to make sensible community-based decisions reflecting local risks and increasing demands, in policy terms aligning to the flexibilities afforded to mayoral authorities.

3. Our modelling suggests that the changes to the funding formula significantly redistributes funding between FRAs. Some services see increases in CSP of over 14% over three years whilst at the same time other FRAs will face freezes in their core spending power even after factoring in potential £5 increases in council tax for each of the next three years. A large number of local FRS will face cuts in firefighter numbers and reductions in service.

NFCC position – NFCC cannot support the Fair Funding Review principles in their current state. Fire funding should be excluded from the review, and government should instead consider remaining with the current allocation methodology in the absence of a better solution. At a time of scarce local government funding, it seems illogical to choose now as the right time to redistribute limited FRA resources.

4. No cognisance has been given to the fact that NFCC, along with Government, the Local Government Association and English employers are seeking to strengthen the capabilities of the fire and rescue service through progressive reform and modernisation, reflecting the changing risks faced by communities and the demands on the wider public sector – the impact of the funding arrangements and review undermine this ambition.

NFCC position – the FRS requires investment to reverse the previous cuts in service. The Review and the wider SR proposals appear to undermine our ambition to modernise and better protect our communities, placing deprived communities at greater risk.

Our communities depend on a funding settlement that matches the reality on the ground, and ensures we have the people, equipment and capability to keep our communities safe.

I look forward to discussing these concerns with you should you feel that acceptable, but I have felt compelled to raise them now and in writing as I know that key funding decisions are currently being made and that these decisions may have a long, unseen and irreversible impact on the fire and rescue service – hindering our ability to respond effectively.

I hope you feel able to support the sector in addressing these concerns.

Yours sincerely



Phil Garrigan OBE KFSM
Chair
National Fire Chiefs Council

Appendix 1



250815 NFCC Response to Fair Funding Review 2.0 Consultation .pdf