

Justice 2 Committee Official Report 21 September 2004

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Scottish Parliament

Justice 2 Committee

Tuesday 21 September 2004

Fire (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Convener: I welcome to the committee meeting Mr Jim Robson, who is the principal of the Scottish Fire Services College and whom I thank for coming along this afternoon. We are glad to have the opportunity to speak to you. As you are aware, we will proceed on the basis of an interrogation. We will ask questions and ask you to respond in so far as you can, but we are dispensing with preliminary statements. I hope that that does not in any way distress you.

Jim Robson (Scottish Fire Services College): Not at all.

The Convener: I will start the questions by looking at the parts of the bill that deal with the functions of fire authorities. Section 79 defines the principal functions of fire authorities and section 10 allows some additional functions to be added on. What are the training implications of conferring additional functions on fire authorities? How do you assess those implications?

Jim Robson: Each role within the fire and rescue service has a national occupational standard. The additional requirement to attend different types of incidents is embedded within those national occupational standards, so any training or development issues come out of those standards. The development of programmes to meet those needs is usually done centrally. A lot of the training can be delivered as part of the normal day-to-day development that goes on within the fire and rescue services.

The Convener: Is there any risk of the additional functions diluting expertise?

Jim Robson: Mr Ord alluded to the fact that what has happened over the past few years is the development of the integrated personal development system, which does away with the—I hope you will pardon the expression—day-to-day sheep-dip approach to training. The approach is now more about developing people so that they deal with the risks that they face in their work.

The Convener: That is a new one for the committee. Perhaps we could have a little more explanation of the sheep-dip approach.

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Jim Robson: The term has been used quite a lot about the old system of developing people. Irrespective of someone's experience and how long they had been in the service, a training course was a course of three, six, nine or 14 weeks' duration. Courses were sequential events and once someone had done one course, they went and did the next one, irrespective of their experience.

The Convener: The bill allows for the provision of local training to be contemplated; can smaller brigades adequately deliver training across a widening range of functions?

Jim Robson: Until very recently, there were occasions when training was delivered to a different standard and to a different programme in one place than it was somewhere else. What is happening within the integrated personal development system, especially in Scotland, is that the development programmes for the roles are being applied consistently wherever they are delivered.

In Scotland a working group that is made up of representatives of all the brigades and the Scottish Fire Services College is about to deliver a firefighter development programme covering all areas of the role. The development packages, which will be available on the internet and in hard copy at all levels, will ensure that, wherever they are done, the delivery of the programmes that are needed for the roles will be consistent. However, there is a role for a central establishment, such as the Scottish Fire Services College, to quality assure the delivery of that material. Each authority that has a training centre of its own is an opportunity for fire service or brigade-specific development to be done for that area.

Karen Whitefield: I will continue on the theme of training. What is the Scottish Fire Services College doing with regard to training for the new dimension of firefighting, which is preparing to deal with incidents of terrorism and the like, which I hope will never occur?

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Jim Robson: Some instructional staff at the Scottish Fire Services College have been developed to deliver training in mass decontamination, urban search and rescue techniques and tool skills. That development has been done in partnership with the Fire Service College in England and a training provider in Texas that has a great deal of experience and knowledge in the area. In other words, the trainers have been trained.

We have a programme of courses in Gullane in which we deliver urban search and rescue training, tool skills training and mass

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decontamination training. As I said, that training is being developed consistently across the brigades but, obviously, areas that have the response vehicles are prioritised for development. We are also going to introduce it into the basic training course at a much lower level so that when people go out into the stations, they will have some knowledge and experience of using the equipment.

Karen Whitefield: Last week, the committee heard evidence from the Fire Brigades Union Scotland, which raised concerns about the conferral of new powers to agencies and the difficulties that they face. Limited training might be given, but in an emergency, people might not be fully trained to deal with situations that arise. Is enough priority given in the bill, and in the fire service as a whole, to ensuring that firefighters are properly trained to deal with emergencies when they arise?

Jim Robson: Earlier, I referred to national occupational standards, which are very detailed and are being used, and there are the vocational qualifications that are awarded in Scotland. A person cannot get a vocational qualification unless they can demonstrate in the workplace that they can apply the skills, knowledge and understanding that they have derived from the programme of learning.

In addition, there are four key areas in which people work towards being competent in the integrated personal development system: understanding the task, task management, contingency planning and environmental skills. Contingency planning is particularly important. If a person has achieved a competence within their role and applies those four areas, theoretically—I stress the word "theoretically"—they should be able to deal with any incident that they come across, given the knowledge, skills and equipment that they possess. Therefore, the short answer is that I do not have any particular concerns about the term "properly trained" being an issue.

Jackie Baillie: You have sort of answered my question but, for the sake of clarity, I will pose it in a slightly different way. My question is about the balance between local and national training centres. Section 14 will allow individual fire authorities to designate local training centres and section 44 will allow ministers to establish both central and local training centres. Do you see any inconsistency in the sections, or do you think that a balance must be struck and that the proposals can work effectively?

Jim Robson: There is a balance to be struck and I think that it is being struck effectively because training delivery will be at national, local and regional level, as it is now. What should be delivered nationally, regionally and locally should

be focused on. We are achieving that aim with our IPDS and development programmes.

Jackie Baillie: That moves me neatly on to my next question, which is about the IPDS. I understand that the successful introduction of the IPDS might have implications, some of which are cost related. We have heard that people are not sure what the costs will be and whether you expect or will receive additional resources to implement the proposals. Training the trainers at a local level is resource intensive—I have done that in a different context. Do you have any concerns in that regard?

Jim Robson: I think that costs were talked through at the Scottish Central Fire Brigades Advisory Committee stages some years ago and it was agreed by chief officers and firemasters that the costs of the IPDS would be borne within the current budget.

That brings me to the next point. Training and development programmes are very expensive. If there is a transition from one to the other, as there should be, there would not necessarily be an increase in costs at the local level.

Jackie Baillie: I do not know whether this is true, but I have heard that Strathclyde, for example, is saying that it will need an additional 250 officers to implement the proposals successfully.

Jim Robson: Can you give me a breakdown of that figure?

Jackie Baillie: I have no idea how it was arrived at. It is simply a figure that was quoted to me. Training is resource intensive.

Jim Robson: In Scotland, it has been agreed that the award of vocational qualifications will be the outcome, rather than the driver, of the new development system, so there is certainly a need for qualified workplace assessors. Providing those will be cost neutral to local authorities, because we do it centrally from the Scottish Fire Services College. We have peripatetic trainers who go out to develop people in the role of workplace assessors.

The cost of registration of candidates on the system is borne centrally. Again, it is an issue of realigning budgets, roles and responsibilities to meet the requirements of the IPDS, once we have moved from the training phase to the development phase.

Maureen Macmillan: How do retained and volunteer firefighters fit into this system? I know that in rural areas concerns have been expressed about the training of retained and volunteer firefighters, not least by the men themselves. In

particular, there are concerns about the need to be trained to use certain kinds of equipment. If

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firefighters are unable to get that training, they may, in effect, be stood down. Is training for retained and volunteer firefighters delivered locally or nationally? Will there be changes in how it is delivered?

Jim Robson: There is no consistent approach across Scotland. Some brigades send their volunteer and part-time firefighters to the Scottish Fire Services College for training, whereas some provide it in-house. However, all brigades train people to the same standard.

We are reviewing what is known as the phase 1 course—the trainee course—which we deliver at the Scottish Fire Services College, to modularise it further. There is a view that we can deliver the right tool skills and safety skills and the minimum level of safety requirements within that programme. For example, in weeks 4 or 5 of the trainee course we could invite candidates from the part-time and volunteer service to come to Gullane to get exactly the same training that full-time fire service candidates receive, so that they have the same skills, knowledge and understanding. With a bit of vertical planning, we can do both things at the same time.

When I first took up my role, I was taken to Cromarty fire station, where I was shown a 6ft-by-8ft shed containing some equipment and challenged to apply the IPDS to it. That can be done, because the IPDS is about role maps. It is about what people must know and understand in order to carry out their role effectively and safely. We need to consider what people must do and know to discharge their function safely under the integrated risk management plan. If we apply that principle, we can provide the right training to the right people with the right equipment for their role.

Maureen Macmillan: I am pleased to hear you say that.

Colin Fox: I draw your attention to part 3 of the bill, on fire safety. What new skills will be required to deliver the enforcement duties in that part of the bill?

Jim Robson: Fire safety is not my area of expertise, so I will talk about development of fire safety people in general.

Historically, fire safety training in Scotland has been delivered in Gullane on an outreach basis by the English Fire Service College. This year we have not done that. Instead, we have asked the CFOA fire safety committee to allow us to reinvest the money that would have been spent on training fire safety officers—the sheep-dip approach that I described earlier—in producing a Scottish fire safety development programme. On Thursday, I will interview an individual who

will be invited to design, develop and, probably, deliver fire safety training for fire safety officers in Scotland.

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It is a case not of providing new training, but of providing on-going training. As I said earlier, there are national occupational standards for all roles, including fire safety officers. Those standards include a requirement on officers to understand, know and practice what they need to do to fulfil their role. Officers will receive not extra new training, but more of the training that they already receive.

Colin Fox: Do you share the concerns of the chief inspectors about the uniformity of training in the new skills and whether it will be of the same high standard throughout Scotland?

Jim Robson: There is a national occupational standard, which means that people have to apply what they know and understand consistently in the workplace and be assessed against it. The standard includes a quality assurance element that is applied by the Scottish Qualifications Authority, so that if there are inconsistencies, those can be recognised and dealt with at local level.

Colin Fox: What role do you envisage the fire service playing in training employers? The bill contains provisions that relate to employers' responsibilities in their premises.

Jim Robson: By employers, do you mean fire service uniformed personnel or the likes of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities?

Colin Fox: No. I was thinking about the new responsibilities that employers will have for maintaining safety in their premises.

Jim Robson: That is not my area of expertise, so I cannot comment on it.

The Convener: Would you like to make any concluding observations?

Jim Robson: No, thank you.

The Convener: On behalf of the committee, I thank you for joining us. The session has provided us with a helpful illustration of another dimension of the bill's implications. We are grateful to you for your evidence.

I declare a comfort break and suspend the meeting for five minutes.

15:25

Meeting suspended.