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WAR CABINET.FIRE FIGHTING SERVICE IN RELATION TO PRESENT EMERGENCY REQUIREMENTS.*Memorandum by the Home Secretary and Minister of Home Security.*

I FIND it necessary to bring before the War Cabinet the state of the Fire Services in relation to present emergency requirements, because I am satisfied that those requirements cannot be met without radical change in the present organisation.

2. The stage now reached in the development of the emergency fire brigade organisation may be summarised as follows :--

- (a) The emergency organisation is based on the peace-time fire brigades, which are administered by the London County Council in London, and, elsewhere in England and Wales, by the Councils of Boroughs, Urban Districts and Rural Districts. In Scotland, unlike England, County Councils have fire brigade powers, and 11 of the 33 Counties have County fire brigades. Elsewhere, I understand, the organisation in Scotland is similar to that in England and Wales. There are thus about 1,440 separate fire brigade authorities in England and Wales, and nearly as many fire brigades. The brigades vary greatly in size, from the London Fire Brigade, with about 3,000 professional firemen and more than 150 major appliances, to brigades with only a few part-time firemen and no appliances save a few lengths of hose and other hand equipment. The total strength of the peace-time brigades in England and Wales is about 25,000, but only about 6,000 are whole-time firemen.
- (b) For emergency purposes, the regular fire brigade organisation has been greatly expanded, the scale of the expansion being of the order of 15 to 20 times for the more important towns, or even higher in a few cases. The total whole-time strength of the Auxiliary Fire Service is about 80,000 (including telephonists and messengers), and the part-time strength about 150,000, with about 25,000 power appliances, *i.e.*, not counting hand equipment.
- (c) Each borough and urban district, and in a good many cases the rural district, has its Auxiliary Fire Service contingent, auxiliary fire stations, a supply of emergency equipment produced and issued by the Home Office, an emergency communications system, supplemented by messengers and often by special observation posts, and its emergency scheme of operations for the borough or district. In addition to this local organisation there is the regional reinforcement scheme, under which a proportion of the major appliances available in any district may at any time be despatched as reinforcements to other districts, under the directions of the Regional Commissioner; and under this scheme large numbers of appliances and men have been sent to heavily raided areas on many occasions since the heavy raids began. At Headquarters, since the Fire Brigades Division was constituted in 1936, the staff has been expanded to deal with the production of the emergency equipment (in collaboration with the

Ministry of Works and Buildings) and to supervise the general development of the emergency measures as a whole; and the Department is assisted by regional technical staffs, who act in the dual capacity of Inspectors and staff officers to the Regional Commissioners.

3. A very large emergency organisation has therefore been built up, but it will be seen, from what has been said above, that in many cases the local emergency measures rest on relatively slender administrative foundations. Even in the case of the larger towns, where the technical and administrative staffs of the fire brigades are strongest, the effectiveness of the expanded emergency services naturally varies from place to place, depending largely on the attitude of the local authorities in matters of expenditure and the enterprise and capacity of their officers.

4. Where there are still defects and shortcomings in the local emergency organisation, they generally arise from shortage of man-power, a good many of the key centres being still considerably under establishment (in spite of all the efforts made to obtain recruits), from shortage of towing vehicles for trailer pumps or from inadequacy of the measures for procuring emergency supplies of water when the normal supplies are interrupted in a raid. In addition, and perhaps most important of all, there is a general shortage of officers with large-scale fire fighting and administrative experience, in comparison with the numbers which are required in a large-scale air attack and for planning and carrying out the many measures which are necessary to provide against that contingency. These shortages, so far as they relate to man-power, are now about to be made good under the new National Service Act procedure, so far as general man-power limitations will permit; the local authorities are being assisted to obtain additional towing vehicles, and I have initiated the policy of obtaining by central instead of local purchase the lorries which are needed for regional reinforcement purposes. The measures for augmenting the supplementary supplies of water are particularly important and are being pressed forward, as labour and other conditions will permit, with all possible help and support from Regional Headquarters and the Home Office. In particular, I have introduced the use of lines of surface steel piping, as emergency mains, to supplement the ordinary pressure mains in high risk areas or to take their place, to the extent that that is possible, when the normal supplies of water are interrupted. For the shortage of experienced officers there is no solution except as more men gain the necessary experience under emergency conditions. All that can be done is to give such assistance as is possible by staff training and to make the best use of such men as are available.

5. Since the heavy raids began all local fire authorities and their officers have been reminded of the necessity for these and other measures, which experience has shown to be necessary by way of precaution against the consequences of such attacks; and the instructions which have been issued have been followed up at Conferences held for the purpose in all Regions and by the regional staffs, which have been strengthened for the purpose. Arrangements have been made to move into heavily raided areas experienced officers from other brigades, as temporary reinforcements, and the regional and Headquarters officers have also taken charge of the local fire fighting organisations, in temporary relief of the chief officer, on several occasions.

6. Taking the emergency fire fighting services as a whole, they have certainly proved their worth. On more than one occasion when the enemy has brought his heaviest attacks to bear the local brigades and Auxiliary Fire Services have dealt successfully with the attacks, virtually without reinforcement, and can be relied upon to do so as long as the attacks are fairly well dispersed and not concentrated in the main on any one area. Generally speaking, the local authorities deserve considerable credit for the energy and enterprise they have shown. In spite, however, of all that has been done, there are still serious difficulties for which no adequate solution has been found, more especially in connection with the measures for dealing with the more concentrated attacks and attacks which are repeated on successive nights. These attacks often result in more or less complete dislocation of water supplies and communications and serious blocking of roads as the result of H.E. bombing, and involve at the same time the handling of large fire brigade reinforcements. The extent to which fire brigades can operate under air raid conditions must obviously depend upon the extent to which the movement of appliances and measures such as the relaying of water from a distance are prevented by the blocking of roads, the dislocation of communications

and the destruction of appliances and their crews, and, with increasing weight and concentration of attack, a point may be reached, and has been reached on more than one occasion, when no fire brigade organisation could avail to prevent the spread of fires. At the best, these concentrated air attacks give rise to problems which, though provided for to some extent in the local schemes, call for further measures which local authorities are frequently unwilling to take—until they have suffered in turn and it is too late—and, generally, require the preparation of plans on much more than a merely local basis. In spite of all that has been done, and recognising that the best possible measures of civil defence may not suffice to prevent great destruction so long as the enemy can bring heavy and concentrated attacks to bear, I am satisfied that the most serious weaknesses in the measures for providing against such attacks are mainly attributable to the large number of units of administration and the relatively limited resources most of them command, individually; that little further progress can be made, and certainly no effective solution of the present difficulties can be expected, without a radical recasting of the whole administrative machine and that the necessary changes should be made as a matter of urgency.

7. In my judgment, the principal sources of weakness which are outstanding at the present time are the following:—

- (a) Under the present system, with so many small units of administration, quite simple plans or operations may involve 20 or 30 separate local authorities and Chief Officers of Fire Brigades, and it is virtually impossible to secure sufficient unity or breadth of plan for meeting any major contingencies, to dispose the various fire fighting resources according to requirements, viewed as a whole, or, when a crisis arises, to direct the movements of appliances and men with general, rather than local, requirements as the sole consideration in view.
- (b) For similar reasons, it is impossible to secure the best use of the available personnel, especially the relatively limited number of officers who have experience of large-scale fire fighting or have proved their value in one capacity or another in the emergency organisation, seeing that they are dispersed in numerous small brigades and are the servants of different authorities, many of whom tend to put their own local considerations first. It is also very difficult to eliminate local officers who are in positions of responsibility to which they are not equal.

8. I am quite satisfied that it is administratively impracticable, on the basis of the present units of administration, to expand the local services to any greater degree than has been done, and that there are no existing units of administration on which the burden of reorganising the fire services could reasonably be placed. The creation of special *ad hoc* authorities for this purpose would be a slow and cumbrous procedure; on such a plan, which would necessarily involve the creation of relatively large units of administration and the vesting of wide powers in the hands of executive officers in charge of the consolidated brigades, local control would be retained in semblance more than in reality; and, in my view, such a course is not to be considered as a solution of the problem as a whole.

9. I am driven, therefore, to the conclusion that there is no alternative to eliminating local control of the fire services, for all practical purposes, for the period of the war. I think it is also necessary to bear in mind that, while it would clearly be out of the question to return to the present basis of organisation when the war is over, the fire brigades will presumably then pass back to local authority administration on some basis, though with much closer central supervision than hitherto, and, for this as well as other reasons, it will be desirable to leave a portion of the cost of the regular fire services a charge on the local rates.

10. Accordingly, I propose:—

- (i) That the administration and control of all fire brigade services, regular and auxiliary, in England and Wales, be transferred, for the period of the emergency, from the local authorities to the Secretary of State. (It is not proposed that the ownership of land or buildings should be transferred, but only that they should be available for use as may be required for fire brigade purposes.)
- (ii) that, as part of the new organisation, fresh fire brigade units be created, on the basis of the Regions and sub-Regional areas (to be constituted for the purpose), each sub-Regional unit being, in effect, a separate fire fighting force, with unity of command over the whole resources of the sub-Region;

- (iii) that power be given to the officer in command of each unit, subject to the general supervision of Regional Headquarters and any directions of the Secretary of State, to dispose the available fire fighting resources as circumstances require, but so that due regard be paid to local requirements and transfers of regular firemen and members of local A.F.S. units now serving be limited to cases of real necessity;
- (iv) that, similarly, power be given to fill officer posts from regular and A.F.S. officers selected for their proved capacity, irrespective of the areas where they happen now to be serving, subject to transfer of officers from one area to another being limited to real requirements as above;
- (v) that the conditions of service of the various classes of regular fire brigade personnel, which vary from force to force, be brought into line on a co-ordinated plan, for the Service as a whole; the conditions of service of the Auxiliary Fire Service to remain broadly as at present;
- (vi) that regional reserve units be formed, with appropriate personnel and equipment, where required, in support of the localised fire fighting forces, these reserves to be under the direct control of the Regional Commissioners;
- (vii) that the Regional and sub-Regional administrative work be provided for by extension of the existing regional organisation;
- (viii) that provision be made for setting up co-ordinated training for officers and men, with regional as well as central training centres;
- (ix) that all salaries and other outgoings be defrayed in the first instance by the Exchequer, but that charges be made on the local rates representing 75 per cent. of the current cost of the regular fire services (which, hitherto, have been borne by the local authorities without Exchequer grant) or, in the case of such local authorities as have not made arrangements to set up a fire service on their own account, the like proportion of the produce of a 2d. rate, as representing the reasonable cost of providing a local fire service on a modest scale.

11. The Secretary of State for Scotland and I have taken an opportunity to consult the Regional Commissioners on these proposals, and found them in general agreement as to the necessity for further measures to meet concentrated enemy attacks and, with the possible exception of the Scotland Regional Commissioner, as to their taking the form which I have indicated. I have every reason to believe that, so far as the members of the Fire Services are concerned, such measures would, on the whole, be welcomed. The attitude of the local authorities will be important. It is only to be expected that local fire authorities will in many cases deprecate any measure which would have the effect of taking away their present fire brigade powers. As yet, we have had no opportunity to consult the local authorities' representatives, and it is not possible to say to what extent their objections may depend upon the form such measures might take or whether they could be met in any degree by the formation of consultative committees, collaborating, in an advisory capacity, with the Home Office and/or the Regional Commissioners, or what their views might be on the financial arrangements which are suggested. Arrangements are being made to consult the local authorities' representatives as soon as possible.

12. The adoption of these measures would necessarily involve some additional charge upon the Exchequer. The annual cost of the regular fire brigade service may be put at about £3,000,000. The cost of the emergency services is about £23,000,000, of which about £21,000,000 is already borne by the Exchequer, so that the burden to be transferred from the rates to the Exchequer would be relatively small. Some additional Exchequer charges are to be anticipated in respect of additional emergency fire services now in process of development or remaining to be developed on a local or a regional basis, but these would for the most part be borne in any case by the Exchequer; and such additional Exchequer charge as might arise from the particular reorganisation proposed in this Memorandum is, in my view, fully justified by the necessities of the situation.

H. M.

*Home Office,*  
 May 6, 1941.



