

Strathclyde Fire & Rescue has expressed surprise at an Accounts Commission briefing to the Scottish Parliament's Public Audit Committee earlier this week.

A Strathclyde Fire & Rescue spokesperson said: "We have been inundated with calls from our staff who felt that the media reports portrayed the service in a very negative light. An analysis of the national statistics shows a completely different picture to that presented in Parliament by the Accounts Commission on Wednesday. The fact is that in Scotland we have shown a comparatively bigger improvement than in England, both in terms of fire deaths - and particularly fire casualties - which we reduced by a third.

"The briefing delivered to Parliament highlighted that the level of house fires in Scotland remains almost double the rate of that in England and Wales. All of the relevant evidence and statistics point to the fact that this is simply not true. Indeed, the last report on this subject approved by the Scottish Parliament was published in 2009 and was titled 'Scotland Together'. The report provided evidence of a continuing and downward trend over many years in Scotland and provided strong and consistent evidence that the difference between the number of house fires in Scotland is 30% to 40% when compared to England alone or against the UK average. The most recent Scottish Government statistical bulletin acknowledged that accidental dwelling house fires in Scotland were at a "ten year low". Staff were amazed that the Accounts Commission had got their figures so wrong."

The Accounts Commission report also reflects that the reason for Scotland's high level of fire deaths is "complex and they never got to the bottom of it". The Strathclyde Fire & Rescue spokesperson responded: "The reasons behind Scotland's high fire death ratio are indeed complex but this does not mean that the Service has no understanding of them. In fact the Scotland Together report made clear recommendations to target underlying factors. As a result we have developed detailed knowledge of risk profiles and this has allowed officers to design carefully targeted engagement strategies that reach people identified as being 'at risk'. Evidence from our evaluations proves that our prevention activities are having a massive impact on the safety of Scottish communities."

The Accounts Commission briefing made some rather strange observations about the shape of cities such as Dundee, which it described as "a very long city requiring a number of fire stations at regular intervals". It then went on to compare this with the city of Edinburgh, which is "more circular in shape and where stations in the centre can feed out". It pointed to Tollcross in Edinburgh as a very cost effective station which offered economies of scale while rural stations were more expensive. Strathclyde Fire & Rescue remains unclear about the merits of this geography lesson - we cannot change Scotland's geography.

Strathclyde Fire & Rescue Chief Officer Brian P Sweeney commented: "I find this to be a very odd briefing which is clearly not supported by the facts. It also contains some very strange observations. I am really at a loss to find an appropriate form of words to describe it - I think "bizarre" may be the best term."

The Strathclyde Fire & Rescue Service spokesperson went on to reflect on the fact that the Accounts Commission's observations refer only to fire activity and do not reflect the extensive range of rescue activity undertaken by

Brigades throughout Scotland, for example road traffic collisions, water rescues and rescues from collapsed buildings.

“The briefing appears very narrow and seems to point solely at cost as a measure of how effective Scottish Fire and Rescue Services are. We believe we should be measured against the job that we do and the improvements we have made rather than solely upon costs.”

Strathclyde Fire & Rescue Board Convener, Councillor Joe Lowe said: “This report demonstrates just how out of touch the Accounts Commission is. Only yesterday we published our statistics for the last year and for the busy festive period – these clearly show that the number of deaths, injuries and fires are all at a record low. Perhaps Mr Baillie and his colleagues at the Accounts Commission should check their facts. As for the observations they make in relation to Scotland’s geography, I can only say that the good people of Dundee cannot be held responsible for the shape of their city.”

Roddy Robertson, the Scottish Executive Council Member of the Fire Brigades Union, added: “The Accounts Commission report takes little or no account of the movement of resources across Scotland, which has taken place in the last 10 years. It also takes little account of Scotland Together. The briefing is one dimensional in relation to cost and lacks both balance and common sense. We agree with Chief Officer Sweeney that it is a very clumsy review and we would not wish to be associated with its findings.”