



# HIGHLAND AND ISLANDS FIRE BOARD

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## DRAFT

Councillor Pat Watters CBE  
President  
COSLA  
Rosebery House  
9 Haymarket Terrace  
Edinburgh

Our Ref: HR17B  
Your Ref:  
Date: 15 September 2008

Dear Councillor Watters

I refer to your letter of 28 August 2008 to all Police and Fire Joint Board / Authority Conveners. I have shared this letter with the other members of this Board at its meeting on 11 September and my views as set out below have the full support of my colleagues.

Highland and Islands Fire Board recognises that we are operating within a changing political and financial landscape. We acknowledge that COSLA has a significant role to play in these developments. It is evident that not only does COSLA, as you make clear, see merit in greater integration of lobbying and policy development on issues relating to police and fire services, but also that the Scottish Government sees COSLA as instrumental in taking forward its proposals, not only for a new approach to local government funding generally, but also in relation to establishing a new allocation methodology for capital funding for Fire and Rescue Authorities. (In the latter regard, I have also shared with my colleagues the recent Scottish Resilience paper on its review of funding arrangements for fire capital grant.)

This Board wishes to be constructive in how we move forward. However, I am sure you will appreciate that we have serious and genuine concerns as to how best to protect the interests and safety of our diverse and dispersed communities in the Highlands and Islands. You will be aware of the historical funding deficit this area has suffered and the resulting struggle we face in fully establishing, let alone maintaining, a strategic network of station and vehicle facilities that fits not only our communities' legitimate expectations, but also the agreed level of necessary provision set by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Fire Services and the requirements of the Health and Safety Executive.

I am sure that every Fire and Rescue Service regards itself as unique, with its own local difficulties. I venture to suggest, however, that none is more so than the Highlands and Islands Fire and Rescue Service, given the sheer size of its geographical area, its mix of urban centres and remote rural and island settlements, its scattered and in places very sparse population and, so significant in terms of our

historical funding, the preponderance of retained as opposed to wholetime firefighters within its staffing structure.

We have the second largest property and vehicle portfolio of any fire board/authority in Scotland and approximately 1500 employees, yet our only wholetime station is in Inverness. We have one of the largest fire and rescue services in Scotland, but not in terms of budget.

Emerging from previous reviews by HMCIFS, it was identified in 2002 that we require a strategic network of 95 fire stations, in which those other than Inverness would be retained stations, requiring the appropriate building and vehicle facilities, levels of equipment, skills and training. At the time this necessary basic structure was identified, we had in fact only 34 retained stations and 92 volunteer units. We have made remarkable progress since then, both in terms of upgrading to retained status and also in establishing 31 community response units in communities whose former volunteer unit did not become part of the strategic retained network. However, there are still many buildings and associated equipment within our network in need of significant improvement, with up to 40 new fire stations required.

We have in particular been hampered by the consequences of the historical approach taken to revenue funding of the fire service, under which a retained firefighter attracted significantly less funding support than a wholetime officer. The net result has been that, as the FRS nationally moves forward into new relationships, we find that we do not start from a level playing field. This fact was brought home forcefully to a number of Board members who recently had an opportunity to visit some rural retained stations operated by Strathclyde Fire and Rescue. It was a highly informative exercise. It was apparent to our members that, the previous funding mechanism based upon a ratio of wholetime to retained firefighters that is balanced much more in favour of the former meant other Services have been able to address their requirements for retained facilities in a much more comprehensive manner and to a standard higher than has proved possible in the North.

In short, this Board is still on “catch up” and we cannot afford to slide back now. Much of our population may be dispersed into smaller pockets, but they have as much entitlement to expect the provision of fire cover to meet their needs as has the rest of the population of Scotland.

Given our special circumstances, and the degree to which our needs contrast to those of other parts of the country, you will understand that we would be concerned were we not to be full participants in any forums/structures/joint arrangements that may be established to address lobbying or funding issues such as allocation methodology. With no disrespect to the skills and abilities of colleagues elsewhere, we do not consider that our very particular interests can be properly represented by Conveners from other authorities. Accordingly, I would ask that, whatever arrangements may eventually emerge within COSLA, or between COSLA and the Scottish government, this Board has a full voice within them, and is in particular fully involved in the formulation of future funding methodologies.

**Yours sincerely**

**Richard Durham**  
**Convener**