

The fire and rescue service of the future.

This report is the result of a study conducted by NTNU Social Research and SINTEF NBL as (Norwegian Fire Research Laboratory) on behalf of KS, The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities.

The study was intended to inspire reflection on possible models for future organization of the fire and rescue services. This was to be done by developing scenarios focusing on organization, dimensioning, financing and task portfolio of the fire departments. An essential starting point is to understand the changing framework conditions and the changing expectations for the fire and rescue services. In particular this pertains to the expanded role of the fire and rescue services as an actor in emergency preparedness for maintaining societal safety more generally. They are the municipalities' primary operative resource in emergencies and are expected to mobilize on a wider specter of incidents than before. Changes in public sector policy have reduced the operative resources in other public entities available in emergencies. The Defense, Civil Defense, Home Guard, Port Authorities, electric and telecommunications utility organizations etc. are all organizations that have been become leaner, sometimes split up and privatized. Generally all of these have operative personnel available in crises. In addition, new organizational forms have also led to similar changes in private sector, thus reducing the capacities of industrial fire departments. For the fire and rescue services this development means that they are expected to respond to a broader range of events, have fewer external resources to draw on, and that they will have to undertake complex coordinating work in major events.

To reflect on organizational models of the future it is important to have a good understanding of the situation today, both what kinds of models that exist and also how they work in practice. To ensure this, the project started with a literature and document study and a series of interviews with a selection of fire chiefs and other relevant personnel. These interviews, which are presented in more detail in the main report, give an overview and understanding of the variation both in organizational forms, size, competence and the challenges between the different fire and rescue departments. Though a majority of our informants thought that change is necessary in the organization of the fire and rescue services, we also documented a variety of solutions and models that work at the moment. This means that even though the organization is not optimal, there might be a risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, if one implements changes that are not sufficiently grounded in practice and who do not build on an understanding of the variety of practices in different municipalities today, for example how they cooperate with industrial fire departments and private companies with machinery that may be important in emergencies etc. A table-top model may do more harm than good, amongst other things because local solutions may be ruined.

The interviews give a varied picture of the condition of the fire and rescue services in Norway. The differences are large between big and small municipalities, between districts and urban areas, and in terms of industry structure and risks. The diversity of models is also large. A common feature is that the fire and rescue departments are relatively "isolated" organizationally. This gives some advantages in the sense that they are relatively free to adapt to local circumstances, but in general it is seen as a problem. Many of the interviewees would like to have more professional support, and would like the Directorate for Civil Protection (DSB) to be more involved in the operational work, and support standardization of

equipment and work processes. Most interviewees also see larger, more homogenous fire and rescue departments as the way forward.

Based on the literature study and the interviews the research group outlined three organizational scenarios as starting points for further discussion. These were presented for a group of fire chiefs and municipal emergency managers who discussed them in groups and in plenary sessions.

The proposed scenarios were:

1. Retain the current model, and only make minor adjustments to known problems. The motivation behind this scenario is that our preliminary studies showed that there is a diversity of functional local solutions that can easily be destroyed by major restructuring .
2. Regional model. This model is meant to join fire and rescue services into larger units based on systematic risk and feasibility considerations. This model is intended to improve resource utilization and also to make it easier to work systematically with competence development.
3. A model with a stronger professional (disciplinary) connection up to the national level. This model was intended to address the issue with the individual fire departments being loosely coupled organizationally to a professional network and other fire and rescue services.

As mentioned, most of our interviewees preferred a model with larger units. This was also a clear consensus in the workshop where a variant of Scenario 2 was the clear recommendation of the joint group. They saw clear professional benefits in larger departments. A strengthening of the professional line, as presented in Scenario 3, was considered to be useful, but they regarded it easier to implement with larger units. Competence development and technical robustness are the main arguments for to larger regional fire and rescue services. For example, a core of permanent employees may contribute to the training of part-time personnel larger departments may also have in-house specialist capacities. Several other factors were also discussed and documented, such as the ability to work more systematic and risk-based in dimensioning and planning.

The main challenges with major incidents, stressed the fire chiefs, are management challenges. With larger departments, leaders will be exposed to a number of events and develop more experience and expertise in leadership in such events. A challenge with larger units may be to maintain the networks that existing fire departments have now in their local communities, to machine entrepreneurs, NGOs and municipal service functions. These often informal networks must then be replaced by something else, such as more emphasis on formal agreements and contracts that govern relationships and networks. The research group sees potential of utilizing, exercises, education and training strategically for networking both within the fire and rescue service and with external partners. Larger units will probably be in a better position to allocate resources to such activities.

DSB's role as a national fire authority is not sufficiently established and anchored among the fire and rescue departments. From the research group's standpoint, it appears that the DSB should work to build up trust among practitioners, seek out the individual fire departments, engage in dialogue on their challenges and try to contribute with concrete advice. Such a foundation would also be very helpful if DSB is going to be a driving force in future change processes. DSB should also contribute to establishing

practices or a system for learning from experiences. Such a system could document and disseminate experiences from events, and it should be centered on that and not be used for general reporting purposes.

In interviews and discussions the opinions of what role the alarm telephone centers should have differ. Some people think they can specialize in answering calls and dispatching resources, while others believe they could play a coordinating role in the operations also after the first dispatches.

The fire and rescue services are facing challenges that will require organizational changes. Consensus in our study, and also the research group's assessment, is that a development towards larger regional units would contribute to responding to these challenges. It is important, though, to be aware that such changes are not easily implemented. A feasible strategy might be to work with targeted incentives for mergers, and establish cooperative solutions in which the necessary trust can be built before changes to the organizational structures are made. Change processes must be based on a good understanding of how things work today in the different municipalities and regions. There is not likely to be a quick fix that can be rolled out. There are several pitfalls associated with such processes and, especially given the large heterogeneity that exists today, it is important to anchor the change processes. To the extent possible, new ways of working should be initiated from the practice field, and not come as sweeping top-down reforms. Our recommendation is that the desired goal of larger units should be clearly stated, and that the central government should provide incentives and support for change processes towards this end.