

Commissioner's response to Staffordshire Fire & Rescue Service (SFRS) Public Performance Report

Staffordshire Commissioner Ben Adams' fifth Fire Public Performance Meeting took place on 14th November 2023. It was an opportunity to discuss publicly the current pressures facing the service, and progress made since the last public meeting against the priorities in the Commissioner's Fire & Rescue Plan and the Chief Fire Officer (CFO)'s Safety Plan.

CFO Rob Barber gave an overview of activity since the last meeting and the Commissioner changed the agenda around to cover item 8 – Finance first due to the importance of being open and transparent to the public before council tax consultations in December. For the purposes of this response, the commentary remains in the order of the agenda.

1. Current areas of priority

1.1. His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary & Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS)

The Home Secretary has commissioned HMICFRS to carry out a thematic inspection of the way misconduct is dealt with in Fire and Rescue services in England. Staffordshire has been chosen as one of 10 Fire and Rescue services to be inspected and the mixture of remote and on-site inspection activity has started this week. Staffordshire will receive an informal debrief at the end of the three-week inspection and a full report will follow next year.

The next item to update the Commissioner on was the refresh of the Staffordshire Fire & Rescue Safety plan. The current plan ran from 2021-2024 and will be extended for one year to align with a new PFCC Fire & Rescue plan which is due after elections in May 2024. Both plans need to take due regard of each other in their production and Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) is currently consulting on the extension to the Safety Plan, which can be accessed via their website.

2. A flexible and responsive service

2.1. Incidents Attended

There was a significant reduction of 34.01% in attended Secondary Fires between April and September 2023, in comparison to the same period in the previous year. This reduction is likely to be down to the increase in weather-related incidents in the previous period 2022-2023, where outdoor Secondary Fires were due to a prolonged dry spell in 2022.

Between April and September 2023, there were slight increases in attendances at Primary Fires (9.60%), Special Service Calls (3.96%) and Road Traffic Collisions (3.75%) compared to the same period in 2022, but overall the number of attended incidents has decreased by 8.42% in comparison to the previous year.

Following the significant increase in false alarm malicious calls noted at the last public meeting, the number of malicious calls has reduced in the last six months compared to the previous six-monthly period (49 from 105).

2.2. Service Availability

Between April and September 2023, the total average Service Availability was recorded as 62.84%. In the same period in the previous year, this was recorded as 60.89% and between April to September 2021, this was recorded as 62.27%.

Between April 2023 and September 2023, the total Whole-Time Service Availability was recorded as 98.54%. In the same period in the previous year this was recorded as 98.55%, and between April and September 2021 this was recorded as 98.91%.

The most recent HMICFRS report states that Staffordshire FRS must improve availability. Availability is good for whole-time crews but on-call availability for the last six months was 51.7%. The pilot of appliances crewed with 3 on-call crew members is responsible for an increase of approximately 12% across the board. It is important to note that recruitment for on-call firefighters is not an issue, but retention is. On-call firefighters are joining and then not being

active and doing what they signed up to do, as a result of fewer incidents and the current policy requiring 4 on-call firefighters to crew an appliance.

Staffordshire's position currently requires appliances to be crewed by 5 whole-time firefighters, or 4 on-call firefighters. The pilot is exploring opportunities to deliver an immediate response with fewer firefighters, whilst keeping our communities and firefighters safe. In order to be flexible in approach, the service is not crewing down to 3; rather this is seen as mobilising available resources appropriately. A team of 3 cannot complete full firefighting activities but they can respond safely with a range of interventions, such as passing critical information/status updates to full crews, and stopping the public putting themselves at risk. With the right policy and right training, a crew of 3 can attend as the second or third appliance on the basis that every extra firefighter in full kit can be useful on the scene. In addition, a first attendance for a crew of 3 on-call firefighters can save lives when a full crew may not be able to attend for some time. The CFO has firefighter safety at the heart of the trial but the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) does not support crewing of 3 because they wouldn't be able to complete the full range of interventions. There are certain incidents where a crew of 3 would not be mobilised where the crew would need to provide the full range of interventions, such as building fires with persons trapped. This pilot started in June 2023 and is now approaching evaluation so the final report will be brought to the next public meeting.

The Commissioner probed how many deployments and what type of incidents have been attended in order to help the public understand the advantages of the pilot. There have been 409 mobilisations to date, of which 152 were as a standby to provide cover elsewhere, which leaves 257 live emergency incidents since June 2023. In some instances, the crew of 3 arrived first and dealt with the incident in its entirety, such as making vehicles safe following Road Traffic Accidents (RTA), automatic alarms or small fires in the outdoors. The top 6 incident types attended were: 70 building fires (not persons trapped), 49 RTAs, 40 automatic alarms, 32 outdoor fires in rural locations, 15 vehicle fires and 13 incidents involving animals. In summary, crews of 3 can attend 90% of incidents and make a range of interventions safely. A number of focus groups are starting to speak directly with on-call firefighters to hear their experiences of the pilot and gain qualitative feedback for the final evaluation. There was an example recently of an on-call crew of 3 attending a rural tractor fire in Gnosull which was at risk of spreading to a farm building containing 30 cattle. The crew of 3 extinguished the tractor fire, preventing it spreading to the building, with no harm to the cattle or farm staff. With a 20-minute delay waiting for a full crew, the situation could have deteriorated quickly. The critical 'tipping point' of fire growth for most fires is at 9 minutes, after which the fire will start to double in size and energy every minute, meaning firefighting becomes much more complicated and dangerous. As the trial progresses, the service is sure that mobilising a crew of 3 will demonstrate the benefits of early intervention, saving lives and providing a better service to the public. Testing of workforce views and consulting with representative bodies is ongoing and the Commissioner's Ethics, Transparency and Audit Panel have been invited to be part of the evaluation to independently review the pilot. The detail will then be taken to the internal governance board on 5th December to decide whether to discontinue the pilot, extend it to other areas or adopt it as a working practice. The Commissioner has complete confidence in the expertise of the Staffordshire team in its ambition of meeting quicker response times and assessing risk competently.

2.3. Service Response Times

Overall attendance times fluctuate between 8 mins 30 secs and 10 mins 30 secs, and are dependent on whether appliances are busy at an incident or unavailable due to crewing, meaning the next nearest appliance will attend.

2.4. Service Response Standards

Staffordshire FRS aims for 80% of all calls to pass the target threshold for Response time within the county, based upon the arrival time determined by the understanding of risk. September saw a positive 94% achievement rate.

3. Protect people and places

3.1. Fire Safety Audits & Building Regulation Consultation Activity

The service has seen some challenges retaining certified risk assessors, with the private sector seen as an attractive alternative marketplace. Restructure is ongoing and under consultation in support of the retention of qualified staff. There have been many changes required for building safety legislation and the fire service is reviewing resources to

ensure they can continue to support business owners to meet their statutory requirements, monitor compliance and keep Staffordshire safe. Staffordshire FRS has seconded a member of staff into the regional Building Safety Regulator's office within the Health & Safety Executive and is in a very good position when compared against national Fire and Rescue services with reporting of responsible owners as required.

3.2. Community Sprinkler Project

The service updated the meeting on the project, which has now seen 19 out of 42 high-rise buildings fitted with sprinkler systems. Tribute was paid to Stoke-on-Trent and Tamworth community safety partnerships and other housing providers who are working together to retro-fit sprinkler systems. Following a review of existing housing stock, a demolition programme for 7 high-rise buildings has been implemented, which will reduce the outstanding number of high-rise buildings requiring retrofitted sprinklers to 16. Other options for fire suppression are also being explored for some of the more vulnerable members of our society so there may be exciting future developments in this area.

The Commissioner commended the CFO on the success of the 10-year sprinkler project started in 2016. He hoped housing providers will consider retrofitting sprinklers and continue the progress already made, with local authorities and responsible people thinking about the safety of the people of Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent.

3.3. Fire Hydrants

Fire hydrant testing continues in a bid to assess Staffordshire's 39,000 hydrants, with whole-time crews now engaged in assisting with their testing. Two technicians cover the county and have the streetworks qualification to inspect hydrants in the roadway (operational firefighters can only inspect those on paths and verges). The CFO said that 8,706 hydrants have now been tested and inspected, which is 3,000 more than at the last Public Performance Meeting in May. The 10 whole-time station crews have now been trained to complete hydrant testing and escalate issues to the technicians as appropriate. Hydrant testing is risk assessed and those prioritised for testing are those designated as high risk: close to residential areas, farms and industrial estates.

4. Help people most at risk stay safe

4.1. Safe and Well Visits

The Commissioner mentioned the targeting of Safe and Well visits to the most at-risk households as the number of visits continues to rise. The Commissioner is prepared to see fewer visits, provided the risk is managed appropriately and the highest-risk households are being targeted. 6,939 Safe and Well visits were completed between 1 April and 30 September 2023, although it should be noted there was a period during Quarter 1 whereby a proportion of prevent activity recording was completed elsewhere to pilot a new system so the true number is higher. Fifteen years of data shows the risk factors in fire fatalities are consistently smoking, alcohol, mobility and age but there are now new risks in the home: lithium batteries, ebikes, scooters, toys and, cheap goods, compromising safety. It is important to educate communities to keep their family members safe, particularly coming into the Christmas period. The advice should include guidance on not overcharging electrical items, and buying reputable electrical goods.

Commented [HB1]: What number was recorded elsewhere?

4.2. Falls Prevention Team

The service's Falls Service pilot has reached its one-year anniversary and has now been rolled out across the county. Victims of falls are likely to be a low priority for ambulances, yet a lengthy period on the floor can lead to further complications and a hospital stay is an additional burden on the NHS. The Staffordshire FRS team of seven was implemented last year, with level 3 training to assess injury and take the appropriate action to prevent further deterioration of the patient's condition. Most have no further issues and simply require attendance. Calls go through the Ambulance service and are then passed to the FRS for assistance. Through the pilot, 620 people have been assisted over the past 12 months. Over 85% of calls required no further medical intervention, with an average of 39 minutes to attend followed by a resolution time of 31 minutes, compared to waits of 10-15 hours for an ambulance.

Future plans include assistance in discharge from hospital. The FRS is in discussion with health colleagues to develop an additional service to ensure patients are fit to return home, taking into account handrails, trip hazards, return journey and combining a Home Safety Visit as part of the discharge process. This is about working in partnership and

keeping communities safe, encouraging all Fire and Rescue services to support other organisations and community first responders, with trained firefighters and defibrillators in remote locations.

4.3. Prince's Trust Activity

Staffordshire FRS is contributing to developing future community members, and engagement with families and young people is vital to building these relationships. The CFO is passionate about engaging with isolated and vulnerable young community members through the Prince's Trust and there is no cost to the service as they are funded to support young people. 93 young people have been supported by Staffordshire FRS through the Prince's Trust's 'Team', 'Get Started' and 'Explore' programmes in the last six-month period.

4.4. Education Update

Detail on the online education packages delivered remotely is contained within the Public Performance Report. Between April and September 2023, 165,817 devices in total viewed the programmes. The highest week was 12th July with 12,425 devices, of which 4,496 (36.1%) were based in Staffordshire. Safety messages now reach many more people, across a wider geographical area, than previous face-to-face education offerings.

5. A Fire and Rescue service for tomorrow

5.1. Climate Change; Environmental Protection Strategy

Flooding and extreme weather remain a challenge. FRS receive no funding for responding to flooding and although there is no statutory responsibility to respond, Staffordshire FRS chooses to support local communities in this way. Through the Local Resilience Forum (LRF), the service assists in planning for events such as more complex wind events with fire, sea-level increases and flooding. The LRF is a well-managed multi-agency process with good relationships developed in advance of the need for any emergency response. By using the LRF channels, advice around not driving through floods is being spread through all agencies in a co-ordinated way.

The service is utilising learning from police investment in drones for the purpose of situational awareness of wild fires and flooding, with thermal imaging capability allowing the most effective deployment of resources. Drones can also be used to support action at waste fires and identify sub-surface fires, identifying the seat of the fire and dealing with risks appropriately. The Commissioner is keen to see these developments progress in the future.

The UK Government has set a limit on internal combustion engine (ICE) sales by 2035 and Staffordshire FRS are planning for this change by moving towards fleet electrification. In September 2023, a paper was agreed at strategic level to lease three electric vans for a two-year trial period. The service is also set to purchase four electric vehicle charging points which will be located at HQ, JETS and Sandyford Fire Station. The EV trial will work closely with the performance and assurance team to monitor progress and benefits of this initiative. There are organisations that have produced electric fire appliances, however appliances need to be able to complete a task over many hours. This isn't currently compatible with battery life, so technology will need to develop before heavy vehicles can be brought into Staffordshire's fleet. Alternative fuel vehicles are also being explored, but all will come with their own set of risks which will need to be fully assessed.

5.2. Enhanced Rescue Pumps (ERPs)

The Enhanced Rescue Pump project has made good progress over the past 12 months. The chassis have now arrived and the body build will last 20 weeks. Delivery to Staffordshire is still anticipated around April 2024. The appliances will be the latest version of the Advanced Technology (AT) and will include features which surpass any frontline appliance currently in the service. Cabs and lockers will incorporate features helping the move towards a 'Clean Cab concept' in Staffordshire. These include:

- The removal of Breathing Apparatus (BA) sets and other equipment, which could bring contaminants from the fire ground, from the crew cab area. These will be stored within an easily accessible locker.
- Easily cleanable and contaminant reducing surfaces and materials in the crew cab design.
- Filtered air-conditioning within all areas of the vehicle cab.

5.3. Shared Estates

The Estates Team is working closely with the Staffordshire Commissioner's Office to build upon the current successful collaborative building projects recently undertaken to create a new police post at Chase Terrace. 2023/24

saw similar schemes agreed for Uttoxeter, Kidsgrove, Stone, Kinver and Penkridge stations. The Estates Team is committed to utilising the building portfolio to explore further collaborative opportunities between both Fire and Police as well as other public body organisations. The service has seen organic, tangible benefits from the sharing of estates and, over the next 12 months, should see at least two of these schemes completed. The Commissioner is proud that the two services have pioneered this collaborative approach and made it successful and looks forward to this process continuing beyond the existing projects.

6. Emerging Issues

6.1. Climate change and extreme weather conditions

Globally, the summer of 2023 has been one of record temperature highs, characterised by extreme heatwaves, flooding, hurricanes and wildfires. Staffordshire's cooler, wetter weather meant a large decrease in demand for secondary fires when compared to 2022. August 2022 had 446 secondary fires, whereas August 2023 had 180. It is hard to predict if there will be more extreme weather in the coming months but the Met Office reports that weather will be more chaotic and unpredictable as a result of climate change and that we should be prepared for it.

Most recently in 2023, Staffordshire has been affected by Storm Babet. Over 100 incidents of flooding, fallen trees and debris were reported across the county and parts of the region were submerged, with the Met Office issuing a yellow weather warning on 20th October. Over this recent period, there was increased demand for the service in assisting stricken motorists and recovering stuck vehicles.

7. HR Performance Update

7.1. Recruitment & Diversity

The CFO discussed the ongoing recruitment process for whole-time firefighters, which has seen over 850 applicants. The process has been overseen by the shared services recruitment team with learning from previous recruitment drives within both police and fire services. Through a robust selection process, this will eventually deliver the best sixteen new recruits to become firefighters of the future.

Attracting, developing and retaining a diverse workforce is a significant focus for Staffordshire FRS, including employing a Positive Attraction Coordinator and an Insights and Engagement Manager, working closely with police diversity colleagues. Gender diversity is improving, with 19.25% female employees, but there is more to do. The next firefighter intake is aiming at a 50/50 split between female and male and improving diversity of ethnicity, with proactive recruitment and education taking place. The Positive Action Co-ordinator also has a focus on disability, sexuality and the neuro-diverse population and ensuring appropriate support is available. It is important that everyone has equal opportunity to access the recruitment process.

7.2. Workforce Sickness

Between April and September 2023, Sickness Absence continued to reduce across the board from the previous six-month period.

8. Finance update

The Commissioner reminded the meeting that a key part of his job was to ask the public for investments through council tax, and that the public look to him to demonstrate real value for money and investments for the future to keep our communities safe. The CFO reminded the public that the service has had a number of years of budget cuts and the challenge of finding financial savings year-on-year since 2012. The service must be fit for the future, and the transformation and productivity savings over the last few years has been significant.

The CFO said the service needed to make sure it was fit for purpose for 5 years' time and make the right key investments to be the most efficient and effective service it can be.

The Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) update was delivered to the Panel the day before this meeting, and key points were that the service will be in line with budget by the end of the year and some of the reserves that were set out to be used by the end of the year may not have to be used. The gap for MTFS of £1.3m increased to £1.5m so the

service will need to carry on with transformation work and reflect on crewing models to ensure a flexible service for the future. The main pressures are the pay increases: the fire service had a 7% pay increase in 2022 and a further 5% increase in 2023. The assumption in the FRS budget assumes 5% again in 2024. The agreed pay settlements are not funded and not expected which Staffordshire FRS had to cover, but another one this year and future plans for next year indicate further pay increases above what has been budgeted, meaning further savings must be found. The transformation agenda continues.

The budget was set at £46.5m with an increase of £3.90 in Band D council tax, which was below the £5 referendum limit but was the biggest increase seen in the last 15 years. Spend is marginally favourable to budget but there has been an increase in the costs of business rates. Utility costs significantly spiked at the beginning of the budget cycle and there is a marginal improvement in the current position, but we are coming into the colder months now. Higher interest rates show investment returns better than forecast.

The Commissioner intends to complete an earlier consultation this year to be finished before Christmas, giving the service a clear indication of the investment residents are willing to support. The Commissioner will share his council tax decision following consultation with the public.

The Commissioner summarised that the public would be reassured to hear the care that is taken with public money. The discussion was particularly welcome about being prepared for the future, developing what the service can do to help the NHS and making the job of an on-call firefighter as rewarding as it needs to be. The Commissioner thanked the CFO for keeping us up-to-date with emerging issues.