

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

Staffordshire Commissioner Ben Adams' third Fire Public Performance Meeting took place on 9 November 2022 – the first since His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) published their latest inspection report into SFRS's Effectiveness, Efficiency and People. It was an opportunity to discuss the report's recommendations and share with the public the progress made since the last public meeting against the priorities in the Commissioner's Fire & Rescue Plan and the Chief Fire Officer's Safety Plan.

Chief Fire Officer Rob Barber gave a summary of the three external reports received since the last meeting. The first was the HMICFRS findings, which gave gradings of Good for Effectiveness, and Requires Improvement for Efficiency and People. The report gives a very balanced view of SFRS at the time of the inspection in Autumn 2021 and, along with several areas of good practice, details 20 areas for improvement, all tracked through internal governance routes and through the Commissioner's Strategic Governance Board. There were some positive areas of the HMICFRS and the Commissioner acknowledged the progress already made.

A positive Ofsted report was received this year for the Operational Firefighter Apprenticeship Scheme looking at quality of education (graded Good), Behaviours and Attitudes (Outstanding), Personal Development (Outstanding) and Leadership and Management (Good), with the whole apprenticeship scheme graded as Good. The Chief is rightly proud of the effort that has gone into developing this programme to ensure SFRS has the best fire fighters entering the service to keep the public of Staffordshire safe.

The final external audit report received since the last meeting was the RSM audit for governance of the Integrated Risk Management plan known as Staffordshire's Safety Plan. RSM have given substantial assurance for SFRS's consultation activity, management and governance of the plan and the reporting arrangements for the plan. There is now a timetable in place for delivery of the next Safety Plan from 2024.

The Chief noted the activity around hot weather during the Summer, using the learning from 2018 and the action taken by SFRS in support of the multi-agency approach to Operation London Bridge following the sad passing of Her Majesty the Queen. Finally, the Chief noted the real threat of Industrial Action in the near future. There is currently a consultative ballot through the Fire Brigades Union around the 5% pay offer, which the FBU has advised members to reject. A lot of business continuity planning is underway to ensure statutory responsibilities are met.

The Manchester Arena volume II report was published last week with 149 recommendations to be reviewed against our policies, procedures and plans in collaboration with Staffordshire Police to reflect the multi-agency detail. The Commissioner noted he has requested that the Chief Constable and Chief Fire Officer demonstrate and test the recommendations of the Manchester Arena report and report back.

### **1. Current Areas of Priority**

#### **8. Finance update**

Chief Finance Officer David Greensmith set the context by outlining the financial challenges facing the Fire Sector, including the impact of pay on cost inflation running well ahead of SFRS's budget and MTFs assumptions. The UK Fire Sector pay pressure next year is estimated at £145M which for SFRS budgeting a 3% pay increase with c.£900K pay increase becomes £1.5M at 5%. Therefore, there is at least a £665K pay pressure on the budget.

The current year forecast is being managed robustly and budget is currently balanced for 2022-2023, mitigated through some one-off savings realized through the transformation programme but this is not sustainable. The MTFs plan demonstrates that the funding gap previously identified of £2M is now sitting at £3.2M and increases the financial challenge. The Commissioner accepted that this gap is driven by external factors but is keen to ensure all options are considered. We will need to act quickly over the next few months as the assumptions we use for the budget next year and for the medium term become clearer during the settlement process. The Fire Service budgets for 2023-2024 need to be set by 13 February, with the settlement just before Christmas with referendum limits for council tax limits which is currently held at 2% for many fire and rescue services. There are challenges to make savings through transformation and we may have to consider SFRS's reserves position to balance the budget in the short term. Difficult decisions will be needed to maintain a balanced position into the medium term.

The Commissioner took comfort from the prudent budget decisions made last year, noting that very few services budgeted for even a 3% increase. The State of Fire and HMICFRS reports made it clear that services can still make efficiencies and further adapt. SFRS needs to continue its transformation programme and continuous improvement to meet the financial pressures. The safety of the public and firefighters is paramount so the focus must be risk, public safety, improving the service and then how these decisions can improve the budget position.

### **1.1. Service Transformation**

One of the first areas for transformation worked on in 2022 was a corporate restructure. SFRS has had one of the leanest management structures in the country. Following the retirement of a Director, the Chief has decided not to replace the second role of Assistance Chief Fire Officer. The structure is now one Chief Fire Officer, one Deputy Chief Fire Officer and one Assistant Chief Fire Officer and three Area Manager Roles for the three directorates of Response, Prevent & Protect and Strategy & Intelligence. Michelle Hickmott has recently been appointed Assistant Chief Fire Officer following a period of time as the London Fire Brigade Borough Commander in Kensington and Chelsea, building relationships with diverse communities post-Grenfell. This structure will be the foundation for the delivery of future service transformation and recruitment has been completed for the Area Manager positions.

Another major change this year is amending the minimum operational crewing models so the accepted minimum on fire appliances is four firefighters. Although five is the optimum, it was accepted this means that overtime reliance has been reduced. The Commissioner confirmed that this change has not affected the safety of the public.

Another project showing green shoots is employing more retained support officers to improve on-call availability to improve fire cover for Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent. This has been funded from redirecting a community safety budget so there is no financial cost but their impact is significant. These retained support officers have been able to refine the recruitment process offering dedicated support to home locations, managerial support and plug physical gaps and making up crews where there are shortfalls in staff.

SFRS has also agreed to make efficiency changes to the whole-time crewing model relating to annual leave and day-to-day crewing arrangements. Negotiated with FBU, this will make six figure savings over an annual period.

A further project to amend crewing at two stations has also been implemented. The first at Longton introduces an enhanced rescue pump (ERP) – a new appliance to SFRS which can attend a range of traditional fire and rescue incidents as well as carry enhanced capability for heavy rescues. There will be a second enhanced rescue appliance at Stafford and fewer people at Longton, as Longton's existing heavy rescue tender will be retired.

SFRS anticipates that transformation will contribute c£1M to the budgets, however as already heard this will not be sufficient to meet the potential deficits expected. Future work will include a stringent review of targeted prevention activity and successful review of shared estates with Staffordshire Police. Several further sites have been identified to consider for colocation. There is a project to remodel the Stafford site to increase efficiencies and there could be some tougher adjustments to make the service smaller. This could be amendments to duty systems or exploring the viability of some of our on-call stations with the lowest availability.

The Commissioner was pleased with the £1M savings as a considerable achievement and expressed thanks to the staff involved and Fire Brigade Unions being involved to co-design outputs. There will be opportunities to make savings that we would hope not have to consider but the public would expect us to explore all opportunities.

### **1.2. HMICFRS Fire and Rescue Service Inspection**

The People strand of HMICFRS' action plan is led by the new Assistance Chief Officer Michelle Hickmott. The promotion process is being reviewed and all actions are recorded and tracked within local governance systems. The main focus regarding culture is the eradication of small pockets of inappropriate behaviour which will not be accepted and will be dealt with robustly, and SFRS has implemented an anonymous reporting capability.

## **2. A flexible and responsive service**

### **2.1. Incidents Attended & Road Traffic Collisions**

Concern was raised around the work required to ensure regular accurate data provision due to the West Midlands' Police Vision 4 update and assurance was sought that the process would be resolved by next quarter's reporting deadline. There has been a 64% increase on the same period pre-Covid and a 46% increase in secondary fires (generally small outdoor fires, not involving people or property) recorded in the last 6 months. The Chief noted that the increase since 2019 is likely due to climate change and hotter drier summers and we are likely to see widespread flooding in winter. Crews can be committed for months and communities are affected for long periods so SFRS is committed to ensuring we have the right resources for the future.

### **3. Protect people and places**

#### **3.1. Fire Safety Audits & Building Regulation Consultation Activity**

Protection activity has returned to business as usual following the pandemic. All audits now take place 'in person' and numbers are increasing to pre-pandemic levels. A slight reduction in audits can be explained by a reduction in staff due to retirements and leavers, however 6 new members of protection staff have now been recruited into SFRS to ensure capacity with regards to the completion of fire safety audits can now be achieved.

#### **3.2. Community Sprinkler Project**

The Commissioner commended the Chief on the success of the 10-year sprinkler project started in 2016 and hoped that housing providers will consider retrofitting sprinklers and continue the progress already made. Retirement villages in Hednesford and Lichfield are the current projects being retrofitted.

#### **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 and operational firefighters can only inspect those on paths and verges.

### **4. Help people most at risk stay safe**

#### **4.1. Safe and Well Visits**

Numbers of safe and well visits are down in Staffordshire post-pandemic but remain above the national average. SFRS strives to be more targeted in their approach to providing safety visits to the most vulnerable people. SFRS are working with NFCC to allow residents to access the Safe Links online resource to request a visit or simply get advice.

#### **4.2. Prince's Trust Activity**

SFRS is contributing to developing future community members, and the engagement with families and young people is vital to building these relationships. The Chief is passionate about engaging with isolated and vulnerable young community members and it doesn't cost SFRS as they are funded to support young people.

#### **4.3. Education Update**

Detail around the online education packages available is contained within the Public Performance Report. Between 1 April and 13 July (end of summer term) 91,312 devices tuned in, of which 35,862 were from Staffordshire. The highest week recorded 6,014 devices watching nationally. Safety messages are getting to many more people than previous face-to-face education offerings including wider than Staffordshire. This is an opportunity that has developed following the pandemic and will continue to be delivered remotely.

### **5. A Fire and Rescue service for tomorrow**

#### **5.1. Environmental Protection Strategy**

The Commissioner is pleased that the Chief is leading nationally on waste crime, lithium battery, air quality, and green space generation. The Commissioner expressed nervousness about joint emergency transport teams changing over to electric vehicles, as large appliances cannot yet utilise this technology. The Chief confirmed there was no desire to move fire appliances to hybrid or electric as yet, and this is targeted towards the fleet of small cars and vans. SFRS can move to hybrid or electric and ensure the infrastructure and estate is future-proofed for new

technology in preparation for 2030 and meeting requirements for reducing carbon impact on environment and assist in improving local air quality.

## **5.2. Enhanced Rescue Pumps (ERPs)**

The ERP project is due in April 2024 but may be brought forward with the first one perhaps in April 2023 in Longton. The capital investment is similar to a standard appliance and will be c.£700K for both appliances. The construction phase of the HS2 project has been highlighted as a potential risk for working at height, confined spaces and heavy goods vehicle movements, and SFRS has planned to be available to respond effectively to these types of risks.

The Commissioner commended the approach to the clean cab concept in Staffordshire. An emerging risk for the service is reducing contaminants from fires, for instance cleaning routines and breathing apparatus to protect firefighters, and the clean cab concept will be developed for the future.

## **5.3. Collaborative Shared Estates**

Tamworth and Hanley shared estates have been successful. There have been delays with the awaited changes to the Local Policing Model and transformation, but we are in a good place to revisit the opportunities for sharing buildings, data and efficiency. Sharing information about vulnerability is a peripheral benefit of sharing premises.

## **6. Emerging Issues**

### **6.1. Climate change and extreme weather conditions** (discussed at section 2.1)

The Commissioner was keen to ensure that learning from the Police implementation of drone technology was taken into consideration in the future, with potential uses for SFRS during wild fires and flooding before the deployment of personnel and equipment. The Commissioner will share this good practice wider in this national area of work.

## **7. HR Performance Update**

### **7.1. Recruitment & Diversity**

The attraction, development and retention of a diverse workforce, as a characteristic of our staff profile and contract type, is a significant area of development for SFRS including investment in a Positive Attraction Coordinator and an Insights and Engagement Manager. The Chief assured the Commissioner that Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI) is a key priority and SFRS is keen to learn from Police colleagues who have had real success in recent recruitment of officers. As a longer-term action, SFRS is keen to collaborate in a shared service for EDI.

### **7.2. Workforce Sickness**

Sickness figures during the pandemic show that Covid is still a substantial reason for absence. SFRS is focussing on developing welfare support for all staff. The Chief indicated that SFRS is likely to see mental health sickness increase over the next period, as staff suffer the consequences of cost of living worries. Each department on every watch will have a key point of contact with training on mental health, physical fitness and wellbeing support in order to monitor and support staff at the earliest opportunity.

## **8. Finance Performance Update** (covered at section 1)

The Commissioner closed the meeting with thanks to SFRS for their hard work over the last period, and for a comprehensive update.

## **9. Next Meeting**

The next public performance meeting is 10 May 2023 13:00-15:00 at the Oak Room, County Buildings, Stafford.