

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

Staffordshire Commissioner Ben Adams' second Fire Public Performance Meeting took place on 18th May 2022, the same day that the 2022 Government Fire White Paper was published for consultation. This meeting was an opportunity to discuss the White Paper and to share with the public the progress made since the last public meeting against the Commissioner's priorities within the Fire & Rescue Plan and the Chief Fire Officer's Safety Plan.

Chief Fire Officer Rob Barber gave his first thoughts on the white paper highlighting the three areas of focus within the white paper of People, Professionalism and Governance.

The People pillar considers flexible modern employment practices to support operational or societal demand, such as the assistance Staffordshire FRS has already undertaken locally assisting health partners with vaccinations and supporting vulnerable people during the pandemic. There is importance placed on data and making decisions based on real time accurate data and commissioning significant pieces of research to forecast changes to the sector in the future. There is also a section on ethics linking the two Tom Windsor State of Fire reports detailing considerations to develop the culture within the fire sector.

The Professionalism pillar includes consideration of moving from a Fire Standards Board to the creation of a College of Fire & Rescue, a mandatory 21st century leadership programme for progression to senior roles, clearer entry requirements for recruitment, a statutory code of ethics and a fire and rescue service oath.

The final pillar of Governance discusses the model of Police Fire & Crime Commissioner (PFCC) governance which Staffordshire and three other Fire Services have already transitioned through. The specific statutory change which could affect Staffordshire FRS in the future is the passing of the Corporation Sole from the Commissioner to the Chief Fire Officer. Ben Adams is fully supportive of this model, which has already been adopted in Staffordshire, and welcomes the consultation with the aim that in future a single elected official can hold their operationally independent Chief Fire Officer to account. Ultimately the single point of governance has benefits for the public sector as a whole and the police and fire service, saving money and allowing investment in frontline officers and firefighters.

The Commissioner thanked the Chief Fire Officer for a comprehensive review given the short notice of the publication and for the Chief's personal efforts in developing the statutory code of ethics.

1. Current Areas of Priority

1.1. Covid-19 (Coronavirus) Activity Update

SFRS continue to carry out a significant amount of work supporting partners and the local community during this next phase of the Covid pandemic, including delivery of vaccines and supporting the vulnerable. A further development in the reopening of Staffordshire Fire Service Community rooms which were open to everyone within the community pre-pandemic but the policy has developed in order to maintain flexibility. Health partners and trusted partners, who are able to deliver true benefits to the community, have the first opportunity to book rooms only three months in advance to ensure flexibility of offering and ready to respond to ever changing circumstances. Ben thanked the Service for the ongoing community work that the Service is delivering.

1.2. Service Transformation

The Service 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. Michell 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 community's post Grenfell. This structure will be the foundation for delivery of future service transformation and recruitment is underway for the Area Manager positions.

2. A flexible and responsive service

2.1. Total number of Incidents Attended

The Chief and the Commissioner discussed the volume of incidents attended over the last period with specific reference to Special Service Calls and Primary Fires. 607 incidents of Primary Fires over 181 days when considered in context is only 21 incidents per day. The Service have agreements in place to assist partners in special service calls for example Searching for vulnerable people when they go missing or gaining access to buildings. During a recent visit to the West Midlands control centre the Commissioner viewed the 999eye facility to assist in controlling deployment of appropriate resources whereby the staff can take control of a mobile phone camera in order to assess the size of a fire and determine the mobilisation required. The Commissioner was pleased to see examples of advances in technology assisting incident management.

2.2. Response Standards

The Commissioner would like to see more visibility on average response times for first attendance times with a trend over time for the public. Visibility on trends and 85% within target is very reassuring although when response times are not met these need to be highlighted and understood in order to be clear where population increases and roadworks might affect that response time. The Chief Fire Officer is keen to modernise the SFRS website to show all this information in a pictorial manner for the public of Staffordshire to drill down into their own area. **This will be revisited for progress at the next meeting.**

2.3. Availability of Assets

This section is an opportunity for review of availability of assets using on call and whole time staff. There is a wide range of availability across all stations due to the different crewing requirements at each location. The on call system used here in Staffordshire is an outdated, fragile system relying on goodwill of on call firefighters disrupting their personal lives and Staffordshire are working with National Fire Chiefs Council NFCC to see if there are innovative solutions for the on call conundrum for all fire services across the country. Retention of on call firefighters is also an issue which is being looked at. The transformation project includes different crewing options and supports different approaches to solving the availability issue and will continue to be monitored by the Commissioner through the regular Strategic Governance Board and here at the Public Performance Meeting.

2.4. Accidental Dwelling Fires

Chief Fire Officer Rob Barber discussed the context of the volume of accidental dwelling fires. This equates to one accidental dwelling per day and is always seen as a failure by the Service's prevention and protection teams. Lifestyle and technology changes will also contribute to risks in dwellings such as lithium ion batteries and risks are increasing in different areas. The move to home working has also increased risk and outdoor home offices should have smoke alarms fitted in order to give an early warning. Chief Fire Officer Rob Barber took the opportunity to share the advice for free home safety visits by contacting the fire service on freephone 0800 0241 999.

2.5. Accidental Dwelling Fire Deaths and Injuries

Three people have lost their lives in the last 12 months. Whenever there is a loss of life there is a fatal fire review with partners in order to identify where there may have been potential trends or opportunities for intervention in the future. This does highlight the importance of close working with health agencies and data sharing between partners to identify vulnerabilities and risk factors.

2.6. Accidental Business Property Fires

There have been 81 incidents in the last 6 months an increasing trend following a downturn during the pandemic.

2.7. Road Traffic Collisions

Traffic is back to pre-pandemic levels and RTC numbers are creeping up in this report and there have been a number of fatalities in recent weeks. Chief Fire Officer Rob Barber requested that we bear in mind that the figures in this report are not all Road Traffic Collisions that occur, this is simply the collisions that Staffordshire FRS attend for an extrication, to deal with fuel spills or to make vehicles safe. The fire service is tackling this issue from a prevention angle with educational programmes available for pedestrians, young people, cyclists, older drivers and new drivers. Deputy Commissioner Helen Fisher reminded everyone that road safety is everyone's responsibility and she looks forward to working with the service and other partners within the Staffordshire Safer Roads Partnership to make our roads safer.

3. Protect people and places

3.1. Fire Safety Audits & Building Regulation Consultation Activity

Particularly noticeable in this report is the enforcement activity that Staffordshire is undertaking which has increased since pre-pandemic levels. The approach the service is now taking is far more robust approach and notices will be served where action is not taken. Fire Safety Regulations 2022 come into place today which puts more responsibility on fire services post Grenfell and Staffordshire will need to increase the capacity of current fire regulation teams and upskill firefighters to deliver fire safety audits. The service intends to work with business owners to get premises to meet safety regulations but where prohibition notices and enforcement notices are not actioned then prosecution will be the next step.

3.2. Community Sprinkler Project

Commissioner Ben Adams commended Chief Fire Officer on the success of the 10year sprinkler project started in 2017 and hopes 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 an effort to get through the 39,000 hydrants within Staffordshire.

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. Staffordshire fire service strive to be more targeted in their approach to providing safety visits to the most vulnerable people in Staffordshire. FRS are working with NFCC to allow residents to access an online resource called safe links in order to request a visit or simply get advice without a visit.

4.2. Prince's Trust Activity

Deputy Commissioner Helen Fisher commented that during her visits to sites she has found fantastic leaders involved in the Prince's Trust activity teaching young people to be more confident and make plans for their future. The Fire Service are contributing to developing future community members of the future and the engagement with families and young people is vital to building relationships with our communities. Staffordshire FRS West Midlands Commonwealth Games preparation and working with partners to ensure safety within our county

4.3. Education Update

Detail around the education packages available is contained within the Public Performance Report.

5. A Fire and Rescue service for tomorrow

5.1. Climate Change Environmental Protection Strategy

5.2. Enhanced Rescue Pumps (ERP's)

5.3. Collaboration

6. Emerging Issues

6.1. Waste Site Management

6.2. Alternative Fuel Systems

6.3. HS2 Protestor Sites

7. Enabling Services

7.1. HR Recruitment and Diversity

Workforce diversity was discussed at the last public performance meeting and there is still room for improvement to attract women into the fire service. Sickness figures during the pandemic show that Covid is still a substantial reason for absence. The service are focussing on developing welfare support for all staff with the potential for an aging workforce. 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. This should impact on reducing sickness figures in the future.

7.2. Finance Update

2021/2022 closed slightly ahead of forecasted budget of £42M. The actual outturn was £41.2M. Overall 700K better than budget and financed 400K of capital costs. Two key areas of savings in the last 6months include 300K in budget reductions across the business and through the “Check, Challenge and Appeal” process with the Valuation Office around business rates savings for 450K delivered in year. In addition, the planned £2M transformation saving programme is on target. There is a robust system of budget challenge across the FRS and there is regular communication with budget holders and staff. A key part of the transformation savings will come from savings in reducing the overtime budget. At £750K it is expensive and not good for the wellbeing of the workforce.

Delivery of the Capital programme has been hampered due to a number of factors including Covid, Brexit, war in Ukraine and inflation which have impacted on product availability for heavy rescue tenders and aerial ladder platforms. The service must keep a close eye on productivity and service delivery and monitor the delays and manage the budgets. The Service started the year in a healthy position as the service have not used the earmarked reserves yet so the Finance Officer noted that the reserves will increase slightly due to delays in capital programme rather than savings through transformation.

The Commissioner thanked the Finance Officer David Greensmith for the team’s handle on finances during a very difficult period. Every service and employer needs to have an eye on the uniqueness of the issues we are currently facing, energy supply issues etc and be sensible around pay rise conversations and funds will need to be identified through further savings or from the precept from the public of Staffordshire who are also facing the inflation pressures.

The Commissioner closed the meeting with thanks to the Fire Service for looking after us and a mention that at the next Public Performance Meeting in November we will have had the latest Staffordshire HMICFRS inspection report published. There has been a more rigid approach with the outcomes of these inspections this time which has no doubt influenced the Fire White paper so the Staffordshire’s report will be discussed in detail at the next meeting.

9. Next Meeting

The next public performance meeting is Wednesday 9th November 2022 13:00 – 15:00 , 1pm at the Oak Room, County Buildings, Stafford.