

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

Staffordshire Police, Fire & rescue and Crime Commissioner Ben Adams' sixth Fire Public Performance Meeting took place on 7th November 2024 and is the first public meeting since his re-election in May 2024. 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.

Commissioner has concluded consultation on the new fire and rescue plan which is a continuation of previous plans which includes continuation of work to provide rapid response and prevention and endorsement of working in partnership with the NHS and ambulance service. The next Public Performance Meeting agenda will be structured slightly differently to match the changes to the fire and rescue priorities for 2024-2028.

1. Current areas of priority

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

HMICFRS Thematic Inspection: This inspection on handling misconduct has resulted in 15 national recommendations, all of which are accepted by SFRS and are monitored for progress through internal governance arrangements. Staffordshire were one of ten services inspected in November 2023 during this thematic inspection. CFO Rob Barber discussed the Code of Ethics and local policies, implemented in fair and consistent manner to develop a culture we are proud to be part of and where individuals can be themselves at work. The Commissioner welcomed the recommendation to strengthen HMICFRS' ability to inspect governance of PFCCs. The other recommendation of specific interest to the Commissioner is the independent scrutiny of misconduct, complaints and appeals and how that might work in SFRS. CFO Rob Barber indicated that this was in progress to explore different options including regional fire collaborations, Staffordshire Police and fire collaboration or an independent third party contracted service.

HMICFRS Service Inspection: The report published on 11th September has yielded positive outcomes with 4 adequate, 6 good, and 1 outstanding grading for responding to incidents with two areas of good practice identified. These are specifically responding to incidents alongside the Local Resilience Forum and working with the NHS and Falls Response and Home from Hospital Team. The CFO is really pleased with this outcome and testament to the hard work of everyone in the service has put in over the last three years. The Commissioner echoed CFO comments and said thank you on behalf of the public for the service you give our communities.

The Commissioner mentioned the adequate finding for Equality and Diversity within the inspection in order to make sure the organisation is as inclusive as possible and reflects our community as a whole. There are so many varied roles across the service not just firefighters and the service needs to continue encourage diverse entrants into the service. CFO Rob Barber made the point that operational diversity is only one part of the diversity picture and there are many non-operational areas and he is keen to make progress using the shared Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (ED&I) service with Staffordshire Police.

Staffordshire Police have benefitted from the recent Operation Uplift large recruitment drives to improve diversity very quickly whereas SFRS hasn't had the same opportunity. A recent SFRS recruitment drive had 790 applicants for 16 vacancies and over the next 3 years a third of operational firefighters will retire so there are opportunities for bringing in new recruits. However, there will be a new issue of an experience gap and fewer on the job training opportunities due to improved safety and fewer fires, meaning less on the job training. The Commissioner is keen to hear how the service intends to manage this potential experience gap into the future and will pick this up at the next public performance meeting.

Other activity during the previous period includes the publication of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase Two Report. SFRS have adopted 18 recommendations and progress is monitored via an online tracker. There has been investment in training in new breathing apparatus, Enhanced Rescue Pumps (ERPs) and Aerial Ladder Platforms (ALPs) so firefighters have the best equipment available.

Collaborative work is ongoing with health and further partnerships being explored to service our vulnerable community members. Two days ago the Community Risk Management plan consultation was completed which has had the best response ever from the public of Staffordshire. In addition, the SFRS 50th Anniversary Celebrations have seen a variety of events held, including a retired Firefighters event and fundraising activities raising over £31,000. The aim is to reach £50,000 by April 2025 to support lifetime beneficiaries of the charity.

2. A flexible and responsive service

2.1. Incidents Attended

4,435 incidents between April and September 2024, a slight reduction from the previous year.

2.2. Service Availability

Total average availability is at 65.62%, with Whole Time at 98.91% and On-Call at 55.20%. On-call availability improvements have been implemented. One example is the training of new on-call recruits. The application and training process was over 120 days long and that has now been streamlined to reduce time before new on-call firefighters can be a useful member of crew. Recruitment has been streamlined and much more local training has been implemented. Fragility is still identified in on-call cohort and still fragile if one on-call firefighter chooses to retire.

2.3. Service Response Times

The Service looks to achieve a target that 80% of the time a response is completed within either 8 minutes for areas of high risk, 10 minutes for areas of medium risk, and 18 minutes for areas of low risk. The current average response time is 9 minutes 34 seconds, within the target of 10 minutes with an overall pass rate of 79.33%.

2.4. Service Response Standards

SFRS looks to achieve a target of 80% of all calls passing the target threshold for Response time within the county, based upon the arrival time determined by the understanding of risk. Between April and September 2024, the overall pass rate has been **79.33%**. In the same period in 2023 this was recorded as **82.50%** and between April - September 2022 this was recorded as **78.83%**.



3. Protect people and places

3.1. Protection Activity:

The number of Fire Safety Audits completed has increased significantly through the period of April to September 2024. Increases have been seen in Fire Safety Audits and Building Regulation Consultations and a decrease in Licensing Consultations (which are limited by the number of applications) and Post Fire Inspections. The increases can be attributed to a new risk-based inspection programme giving greater insight and overview of premises to be audited, as well as much improved performance statistics being available to Protection Teams. A new structure was also implemented in the period which allows Delivery Group Protection Teams a greater focus on the completion of Fire Safety Audits.

3.2. Community Sprinkler Project

The Service updated on the project, 19 out of 42 identified blocks of flats fitted with sprinkler systems. Modernising stock in Stoke-on-Trent City has identified 6 high rise blocks for demolition. The CFO commented that as a result of the success of the 10-year sprinkler project started in 2016, sprinkler systems are being considered at planning stages of new stock rather than having to retrofit. Fire safety doors, access, egress and sprinklers are now being considered in all buildings low, medium and high-rise flats. 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. This project is under review as part of phase 2 of the transformation project.

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. Over 6,000 hydrants have been tested in the last 12 months. 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

This type of prevention activity has been running for twenty years here in Staffordshire. Methodology applies risk assessment to households within Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent and prioritise home visits. This is based on socio-economic factors and areas of heightened emotion such as including local homes on streets that have experienced a house fire. 7,685 visits were completed between April and September 2024.

4.2. Fire and Health Partnership Team:

CFO Rob Barber reminded the meeting that this is not being carried out by a stand-alone team with full training rather than operational firefighters. The Falls Response and Home from Hospital services continue to provide valuable support. The Falls Response has seen 1674 mobilisations to date, which averages 2.52 call per day, however more recent months have been running at over 3 calls per day. These visits also allow SFRS to carry out safe and well visits on the properties they visit as appropriate, ensuring that vulnerable members of our communities are kept safe.

The Home from Hospital service went live on 4th December 2023 and has provided live service every day since, excluding Christmas day, as the Integrated Discharge Hub is closed. The team are based at Newcastle Fire Station and ensure 2 personnel are on duty every day from 0800 – 1900 to respond to calls from the 'Integrated Discharge Hub' (IDH) at the Royal Stoke Hospital. Primarily the team are utilised to take patients home and settle them in once discharged from hospital, but since July the team have also been undertaking other tasks, such as fitting key safes, property inspections and furniture moves.

CFO Rob Barber mentioned future collaborations such as the ongoing West Midlands first responder discussion, which is gaining national focus and direction to take account of extensive training that firefighters have already had.

4.3. Education Update

The Safe+Sound programme and various educational events continue to be delivered to schools alongside further interventions to support our communities during the longer lifespan of Staffordshire citizens.

5. A Fire and Rescue service for tomorrow

5.1. Transformation Update:

CFO Rob Barber shared progress on three-person crew trial, Prevention, Protection and Partnerships review, and Shared Estates. The service understands the Fire Brigade Union position for crewing which is a minimum of five fire fighters on every appliance and a five minute attendance time across the county. CFO is also required to balance the budget and ensure that services are delivered in the most efficient way.

The three-person crewing trial was put in place to provide a faster response to incidents where there are insufficient on-call firefighters available to crew an appliance. This is not a change in policy and it is still the goal to have five firefighters on all appliances. It is to give an opportunity to attend when they have three people. There have been 636 attendances by three crewed appliances as of yesterday. This could be adding to an existing crew on site, laying ground work for incoming appliances and as first attendance whilst additional resources are being sent. This enables additional investment in development of on-call firefighters with an associated increase in practical experience and on-the-job training hours. The trial is being carefully evaluated and a local decision will be made next month on whether to implement into business as usual.

5.2. Enhanced Rescue Pumps (ERPs)

The new vehicles are expected to be operational by January 2025.

5.3. Aerial Ladder Platforms (ALPs):

Two new ALPs have been delivered and are in use, enhancing functionality and firefighter safety.

5.4. Collaborative Shared Estates

There are several ongoing projects to improve facilities and reduce carbon footprint.

6. Emerging Issues

6.1. Lithium Ion Batteries

Increased risks and challenges, with updated public advice and trial of an electric vehicle containment unit. These risks are not going to go away and the Commissioner is committed to keeping this topic on the public performance agenda for more detail at the next meeting.

6.2. Hidden 'Hidden' Batteries in Domestic Waste:

There are significant fire risks from incorrect disposal of batteries and there are some significant awareness opportunities to improve local community knowledge around how to dispose safely of electrical items.

6.3. Non-approved and Counterfeit Products:

The service have an ongoing 'Buy Safe. Charge Safe' campaign to raise awareness and improve safety especially during the festive period.

7. HR Performance Update

7.1. Recruitment & Diversity Recruitment Activity:

The most recent activity includes 26 support roles and 16 operational roles filled, with ongoing recruitment for on-call firefighters.

7.2. Workforce Diversity

Workforce Diversity: The CFO clarified the positive action initiatives utilised in recruitment drives and the continued collaboration with Staffordshire Police ED&I shared service as discussed as part of the HMICFRS gradings in Section 1.

7.3. Workforce Sickness

Overall reduction in sickness absence, with mental health being a leading cause. The Commissioner was keen to develop the format of the sickness figures as the percentages could be misleading because the sample sizes are small. The service took an action to review this section for the next meeting.

8. Finance update

The revenue budget is on track with a total spend of £24.9m as of 30 September 2024. The capital programme has £2.6m committed, with a revised forecast of £4.8m for the year. Useable earmarked reserves are at £7m with general reserve at £1.9m, and long-term loans at £16.7m. The Commissioner summarised that the public would be reassured to hear the care that is taken with public money.

The Commissioner reminded the meeting that these meetings are transparent and contain data that is reviewed regularly at internal governance meetings. The discussion was particularly welcome about being prepared for the future and developing what the service can do help the NHS and making the job of an on-call fire fighter as rewarding as it needs to be. The Commissioner thanked the CFO for keeping us all up to date with emerging issues.