

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

Staffordshire Commissioner Ben Adams' fourth Fire Public Performance Meeting took place on 10 May 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.

Considerable work was undertaken by SFRS to put in place business continuity plans to mitigate the impact of potential strike actions. The FBU rejected a pay offer in November 2022, with a ballot for strike action concluding in January 2023. The result was a large majority mandate for strike action, although further negotiations with national employers averted this. In March 2023, a 2-year pay deal was reached which will have financial impacts moving forward. The Commissioner commended the CFO on the substantial work undertaken throughout the process, and for keeping the Commissioner informed.

The Commissioner believes we will see a different economic position in the next couple of years, with inflation pressures ensuring that this sector and others will be able to settle into a more traditional way of negotiating pay with the independent panels and the National Joint Council. The Commissioner will keep applying pressure through the Minister and others to ensure improvements are made in how the Joint Council negotiates pay and that decisions are made earlier.

### 1. Current areas of priority

#### 1.1. Values and Culture

On the day of the last public meeting, the London Fire Brigade culture report was published and subsequently HMICFRS published a national review of [Values and culture in fire and rescue services](#). Since the publication of these reports, SFRS has worked hard to ensure the right conversations are taking place to develop the right cultures in Staffordshire. The service is working hard on all inspectorate areas for improvement and monitoring progress through the Service Delivery Board, using a tracker for all action updates. The service is also preparing for the next inspection in Autumn 2023 to demonstrate progress in all of the areas previously identified for improvement.

The Commissioner drew attention to Police & Fire Minister Chris Philp's assurance and determination to see progress in a new White Paper for the type of governance seen in Staffordshire rather than a Fire Authority, and operational independence for the CFO, aligned with Police operational independence. The CFO awaits the outcome of the White Paper with interest and mentioned his role in national standards and the core code of ethics which now forms the basis of the SFRS core code of ethics. In relation to SFRS culture, the Commissioner asked if a conclusion had been reached with a member of staff who appeared on Radio 4 to discuss their experiences. The CFO confirmed this was concluded in the previous week and although the incident goes back some years, there have been key learning points around the way incidents are raised and independent reporting lines. SFRS introduced an independent reporting line in 2021 but this particular incident occurred before this. In addition, the CFO has written to every member of staff to give them an opportunity to raise issues directly with himself or to use the independent reporting line. Whenever there is a serious incident that could be considered gross misconduct, an external resource will be brought in to conduct investigations for due diligence and independence. All issues are now flagged to the Commissioner as corporation sole and he is satisfied with the due diligence applied and how allegations are dealt with. This will continue to be reviewed at future meetings.

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

### **2.1. Incidents Attended**

CFO Rob Barber reported on the significant increase in false alarm malicious calls which appeared following the implementation of a new command and control system in conjunction with West Midlands Fire Service. There are potentially some legacy test calls included in this data set or incorrect filtering of specific call types. Although this is a 95% increase, it is a relatively small number of calls, 105 from 54. This is being investigated and an update will be given at the next meeting. The Commissioner also confirmed that SFRS is currently reaffirming the governance of the shared command and control provision with West Midlands FRS.

The increase in special service calls over the last 6 months relates to 10 days of extreme cold weather, with calls about frozen pipes impacting electricians. SFRS made properties safe, putting vulnerable members of the community in touch with support mechanisms and carrying out safe and well visits at the same time. General demand is returning to normal levels and SFRS is in a very good position to continue to concentrate on prevention and protection.

### **2.2. Service Availability**

The on-call system of firefighters is fundamentally difficult to fulfil in modern society, with people not wanting to put their lives on hold to be within 5 minutes of an on-call station. Figures show that on-call stations are only available 49% of the time with a full 4-person crew. A 6-month trial for mobilisation of vehicles with 3 on-call firefighters will begin in the next few months, allowing them to mobilise and support incidents as a first responder even if they cannot deal with the whole incident. The aim is to keep existing on-call firefighters engaged and committed, and part of the SFRS team. The CFO asked anyone interested in joining the service as an on-call firefighter to get in touch.

### **2.3. Service Response Times**

Between October 2022 and March 2023, the average SFRS response time to incidents is recorded as 9 minutes 38 seconds, a slight improvement on the same period last year.

### **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 October 2022 and March 2023, the average pass rate was recorded at 84.01%. In the same period in the previous year, it was recorded as 84.70%.

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

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

Fire Safety Audits are an examination of a premises and relevant documents to ascertain how fire safety is being managed to ensure compliance with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. Audits are generally targeted to premises where the occupants could be deemed at most risk should a fire occur. Legislation is continually changing and SFRS supports business owners to meet their statutory requirements. Under the Licensing Act 2003 and Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, the licensing authority is required to consult and give SFRS the opportunity to make representation with regards to public safety (fire safety), before issuing the licence. These have increased with the reopening of premises after Covid, which is good news for the local economy. As licensing consultations increase, fire safety audits have decreased as a result of finite capacity, although SFRS has now employed 8 new protection staff to increase the number of safety audits carried out. SFRS is also keen to develop career pathways to ensure people don't leave for the private sector once the fire service has trained them.

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

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.

### **3.3. Fire Hydrants**

The Commissioner mentioned that during a recent visit to the National Farmers' Union, they were keen to understand where hydrants are and where they can take their own equipment to support SFRS. Rob Barber was keen to engage local farmers and the NFU network and will attend the next engagement event. 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 5,667 hydrants have now been tested and inspected. The 10 whole-time station crews have now been trained to complete hydrant testing and escalate issues to the technicians as appropriate.

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

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

7,034 Safe and Well visits were completed between 1 October 2022 and 31 March 2023, a notable increase from 1,080 in the previous 6-month period (April 2022-September 2022). Numbers of safe and well visits were down in Staffordshire post-pandemic, but remain above the national average. SFRS strives to be more targeted in its approach to providing safety visits to the most vulnerable people. SFRS is working with the National Fire Chiefs Council (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 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 and there is no cost to SFRS as they are funded to support young people.

### **4.3. Education Update**

Detail on the online education packages is contained within the Public Performance Report – these developed during Covid and will continue to be delivered remotely. Between October 2022 and March 2023, 184,081 devices tuned in, including 71,041 from Staffordshire. The highest week saw 8,915 devices watching nationally. 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**

CFO Rob Barber discussed how learnings from Staffordshire's 2018 wildfires have been put into action, with lightweight PPE and hoses much easier to move over undulating terrain, and the purchase of 4x4 vehicles with a misting system on the back to support extreme weather conditions.

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

The ERP is a normal fire engine with additional heavy rescue equipment. One is already based in Longton, with Stafford also set to receive one. The capital investment is similar to standard appliances at c.£700K for both. The HS2 construction phase has been highlighted as a potential risk for working at height, confined spaces and heavy goods vehicle movements, and SFRS has plans in place 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 the transfer of contaminants from fires, for instance through 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, Hanley and Chase Terrace shared estates have been successful, with sharing information about vulnerability a peripheral benefit of sharing premises. There has been a significant opportunity for investment in the facility in Stafford's Hydrant Way site, and work will continue to identify how else the site can be used. Stafford whole-time station will not be moved to Eastgate. The CFO is keen for the collaborative approach and shared estate to be progressed over the next few months at Uttoxeter, Kidsgrove, Stone, Kinver and Penkridge.

## 6. Emerging Issues

### 6.1. Climate change and extreme weather conditions (discussed at section 2.1 and 5.1)

This brings a significant challenge to SFRS in resourcing additional demand throughout periods of extreme cold and hot weather.

## 7. HR Performance Update

### 7.1. Recruitment & Diversity

SFRS is not understaffed in any area except on-call firefighters. The Commissioner requested an update on the direct entry scheme for firefighters. Traditionally, the only route into the fire service was as a firefighter, then working up through the hierarchy. The NFCC set up a national programme within the review and update of transformation within the sector. Rob Barber joined the direct entry project 3 years ago and is now the project executive, along with East Sussex CFO Dawn Whittaker. It launched this year for applications, with the robust training programme learning from similar schemes within the Ministry of Defence and College of Policing experience. There is a clear 3-4 year programme to develop a station manager into an operational commander. The first cohort is for 7 posts across the country with one posted in SFRS. The Commissioner looks forward to welcoming the new recruit.

Attracting, developing and retaining a diverse workforce is a significant focus for SFRS, 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, with proactive recruitment and education taking place.

### 7.2. Workforce Sickness

Between October 2022 and March 2023, Sickness Absence continued to reduce across the board from the previous 6-month period. Sickness figures during Covid show it is still a substantial reason for absence at 18% of lost days/shifts. SFRS is focusing on developing welfare support for all staff in the workplace including Mental Health First Aiders to provide initial mental health support in a similar way to trained First Aiders for physical ailments.

## 8. Finance update

The Commissioner was pleased to report that the final budget position taken to Panel 2 months ago was almost identical to the forecast at the start of 2022-2023. There was a request for an increase from our communities in the precept, but this was lower than other FRSs in the country.

The Commissioner asked the CFO about progress against HMIC's recommendations for improving productivity in terms of efficiency. Progress has been made in decisions about crews riding in 3s on call and riding on 4s for whole-time firefighters, which has a direct impact on overtime costs. An additional piece of work with the local Integrated Care Board saw the launch of a falls project pilot on 7 December, making efficiency savings with the NHS. The pilot has gone from strength to strength and has been extended and funded by ICB for a further 6 months to 12 months, with formal evaluation being carried out by Chester University. The service has been rolled out to low-level incidents involving elderly or vulnerable patients, preventing further injury and hospital stays. The Commissioner commented that rescuing people in this way is exactly the purpose of the fire service and gives the opportunity to offer home safety visits at the same time for the most vulnerable people. It is a fantastic expansion of SFRS' professional capability in line with their priorities to protect people and look after residents. It is an excellent example of partnership working and other services will be watching, with encouragement from the Minister to develop a more productive and enjoyable future for everyone in the service. The Commissioner thanked the team carrying out the pilot and WMAS for their increasing confidence in the service.

## 9. Next Meeting

The next public performance meeting is 14 November 2023 13:00-15:00 at the Oak Room, County Buildings, Stafford.