



Fire Brigades Union

South Eastern Region

Kent Surrey East Sussex West Sussex

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Leader of Surrey County Council

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Dear Dr Povey,

Ref. Public Value Review of Surrey Fire and Rescue Service

Having now received the final PVR document, the FBU in Surrey are extremely concerned at some of its findings, recommendations and the way in which the review has been conducted to arrive at its conclusions.

FBU Surrey does not feel that they have been consulted properly throughout the process. Documents such as; "It's about time" and "How much are Surrey lives worth?" are not even mentioned in the final review document and do not appear to have been taken into account in any way.

The only consultation meeting held by the council at which 2 FBU officials attended, resulted in us having very little chance for input and the decision taken at the meeting by the chair to progress the draft PVR for further work was by no means unanimous; in fact it appeared to be a majority against further progression of the review but the decision was made without a vote being taken.

So, given the dubious democratic way in which this review has been progressed and the way in which this review has been conducted, it is hardly surprising that we have many concerns with its findings.

The remainder of this letter will respond directly to the final review document.

FBU Surrey, Response to Surrey County Council's Public Value Review of Surrey Fire and Rescue Service

Background

- SF&RS has made over £4m in efficiency savings in the previous 4 years.
- SF&RS has suffered a reduction in whole-time frontline crewing posts of over 16%. This is over 3 times the national average reduction.
- SF&RS has less than half the retained duty system emergency cover necessary to deliver 24/7 cover on its retained fire engines.
- Of all the fire authorities in England, only Merseyside has cut a higher percentage of frontline posts than Surrey.

So, it can be no surprise to hear that for the last few years;

- SCC spends less per head of population on its fire service than any other fire authority in the South East and amongst the lowest nationally.

Yet, despite all these savings and cuts that have already happened, the PVR is recommending more cuts in the frontline service.

The FBU Surrey document "How much are Surrey lives worth" you have already received highlighted how these previous cuts are impacting on the performance of SF&RS in relation to its statutory obligations stated with the Fire Service's Act 2004.

Cutting SF&RS frontline service any further carries a very real and large risk of catastrophe.

A thorough review of the cuts that have already been forced through as a result of the IRMP's should be taken into account;

- Variable Crewing introduced in 2004 which cut the whole-time night and weekend cover at Walton and Haslemere. The targets set for availability of the fire engines at these locations in the 2004 IRMP have not been met.
- Reduction of 1 pump at Chertsey in 2004 which would facilitate the Aerial Ladder Platform having permanent and immediate crewing has been cut through a subsequent IRMP.
- The introduction of Limited Borough Autonomy in 2005 had minimum crewing targets set to maintain and measure its performance. These minimum crewing targets have been not been met by many stations for the last 3 years running due to the establishment post remaining vacant or being converted to management posts.
- The introduction of the Surrey Emergency Response Standard introduced in 2006 was a worsening of the existing standard for the vast majority of Surrey but even this new standard has not been met due to the lack of whole-time and retained duty fire fighters required to meet it.

SF&RS sets targets on staffing of;

- Whole-time crewing of the fire engines (currently 10% under established)
- Retained Duty System crewing (currently 30% under established*)
- Flexi Officers required for incident command, support and liaison (currently 20% under established)

It is also important to understand that the targets set for the first 2 points are among the lowest in England and they are still not being complied with.

* As highlighted in "How much are Surrey lives worth?"; the number of Retained fire fighters should have increased by 40% in 2004 when the NJC National Scheme of Conditions of Service Sixth edition 2004 was agreed which brought retained fire fighters in line with the Working Time Directive. The increase required on the establishment to meet the rules was not done in Surrey. Surrey should have an FTE establishment of over 200 retained fire fighters but Surrey County Council only fund 120 (although SF&RS quote an FTE of 156) of which we currently only have 103 posts filled. So the real loss is over 50% .

These targets are not being complied with due to lack of funds.

The PVR states that the whole-time uniformed establishment in Surrey is 635.2 FTE staff but it does not compare the number of these posts held by senior managers with other fire authorities. The current number of emergency crewing posts in Surrey is the lowest in England for the number of fire engines it aspires to make available to respond to emergency crews. Again this was fully explained in the "How much are Surrey lives worth?" document under "Ridership Factor" which was supplied to all councillors several weeks ago.

To keep thrusting financial cut upon financial cut without stopping to review their negative impacts they cause is reckless. The results of all of this under funding can be seen in SF&RS's end target of "Dwelling Fires confined to room of origin" which are not being met month after month.

Even the Audit Commission in 2009 said;

"While the service has the vision and capability to further improve, its budget limitations will reduce its capacity to deliver".

I wonder what the Audit Commission would have said if they had had the chance to read the PVR first?

The Audit Commission also showed in 2009 that SF&RS has one of the slowest average emergency response times in England; yet the PVR seeks to change the standard to an even slower one than the one that cannot be currently complied with. But even this proposed new very low standard will not be complied with due to the cuts that are still being forced upon SF&RS. I urge the council to take into account the ENTEC data which clearly proves that slower response times result in more deaths. The council is very much going it alone by stepping away from this government supplied data which they used to set the objectives of an IRMP.

Detailed Response to the Public Value Review

Section 13

Although the PVR correctly quotes the number of fire stations in Surrey it does not say that many of the fire engines are unable to respond to emergency calls on a daily basis due to lack of crew.

Section 14

The whole-time establishment figure quoted is correct although it is not maintained. Currently the crewing ridership is 48 people short.

The Retained Duty System establishment quoted is incorrect. The real figure is 156 (as previously explained it should be over 200) not 130 although the actual number employed at present is 103.

Hence this is the reason why so many fire engines are unavailable to respond to emergency calls on a daily basis.

Section 20 to 21

Smoke alarms do not save lives. Smoke alarms only provide early warning; the actions that follow this warning may or may not save lives.

In Annexe 3 of the PVR;

47% of dwelling fires attended had a smoke alarm which actuated.

13% of dwelling fires attended had a smoke alarms which did not actuate.

In the SF&RS Fatal Fire Report 2006-2009, 66% of the dwelling fire deaths occurred in dwellings with smoke alarms.

The PVR makes the assumption that providing smoke alarms in every dwelling is more effective than emergency response in saving lives. The figures locally and nationally show the opposite is true yet the PVR seeks to cut emergency responses even further whilst investing more in community safety initiatives.

This highlights how little the review team understood about the fire service and this grave error has given rise to recommendations that would be ridiculed under scrutiny as well as costing the public in both human and financial terms.

Section 23 to 26

Surrey Response Standard

As already stated, SF&RS's response times are amongst the slowest in England. To relax the standard even further to meet the attendance times being achieved is wrong. The standard should be set to deliver a good service and SF&RS should be funded adequately to meet that standard. The current situation is the opposite; the funding is setting the level of service. This funding/performance strategy may work for Libraries but it doesn't work for a life saving emergency service and the public of Surrey should be made aware of this fact.

The FBU previously supplied 2 in depth documents containing a great deal of research on emergency response times to yourself and all the councillors; "It's about time" and "How much are Surrey lives worth?". Both of these documents contained the data compiled by ENTEC (commissioned by government) on emergency response times which shows the direct correlation between response times and likelihood of deaths occurring in dwelling fires. Neither of these documents appear to have been considered in the PVR.

Sections 27 to 29

Examining governance and its implications.

This is a huge opportunity to challenge the micro-management of the fire service by the county council. We have seen decisions made by the service that have then been rescinded by county officials. The County's procurement stifled any opportunity of time scaled purchases and subsequently has no direct control over major equipment or appliances. The massive problems in IT systems are caused solely by the council's governance which constrains SF&RS from achieving better systems tailored to its specialist requirements. Maintenance is costly, often sub-standard and usually wasteful. To give a current example;

Although many of SF&RS's buildings are suffering serious maintenance issues and on recent occasions these have been so serious they have led to serious injury and prolonged sickness; currently Farnham's drill tower and Staines fire station are being re-pointed at a colossal cost. How can this possibly be the most effective use of an insufficient budget for maintenance?

SF&RS suffers dramatically in many ways through being governed by the council. SF&RS could be more effective and efficient if it were a standalone fire authority.

We need to have our own “governance” to manage the fire service directly; this could lead to SF&RS offering services to others ultimately leading to a joint or combined services.

As a stand alone fire authority we could provide a better service more efficiently than will ever be possible whilst we remain shackled to the county council.

Section 32

Mobilising Control.

Any proposed changes to shift arrangements needs to be thoroughly risk assessed, subject to an Equalities Impact Assessment and subject to full consultation. We find it impossible to imagine how further savings can be made immobilising control without detrimentally affecting the service provided or the work life balance of our members.

Section 39

Several County initiatives, such as BDR, has lead to total confusion and disarray with staff complaining of lost financial documentation and delays in responses.

With 4 Chief Executives being employed by SCC members, each bring in their own management teams which has resulted in mass change and disruption to services.

We need to ensure that Support staff are employed by SF&RS to meet the requirements of the service without the doubling of work through the micro-management of the over monitoring of what SF&RS are doing.

Expectations are that the fire service could make saving of £152k this current year and £329K for the next 3 years HOW?

Sections 40 to 41

Fleet & maintenance Contracts, White fleet insurance premiums, Work experience/ Community Safety are all “Blue sky” theories and would be opposed until factual details can be verified and guaranteed.

Section 46

Please see response to **Section 20 to 21**.

The PVR has not provided any evidence that HFRC’s contribute to fulfilling the fire service’s statutory obligations under the Fire Service’s Act 2004. No data is available to show that HFRC’s save lives or reduce the losses caused by fires.

The increase in funding stated will result in even further degradation in emergency response.

Currently, SR&RS provide many Youth Engagement Schemes under this banner of Community Safety. Each one of these week long courses results in 25 shifts being lost from crewing fire engines which leads to insufficient crew numbers and fire engines being unavailable to respond to any calls.

All CFS initiatives should be FULLY funded separately to emergency response.

Section 56

IRS is a good recording system nationally, but there is a total lack of local information available to Borough Managers which is needed to target ops/prevention. The assumption made in the document is wrong. This information is just not being made available. The FBU have requested that Surrey use Microsoft Share Point to allow all staff to utilise the data as is the case in Kent and other fire service’s.

Section 58

The FBU does not share the PVR’s confidence that the Post Incident Review procedure is either robust, leads to lessons being learnt or to positive change.

Section 72

The PVR has strewn into more “Blue Sky Thinking” on this point.

The HFRC data base is not updated centrally by anyone. The paper copy returns from HFRC’s are filled in but the data is not collated, monitored or reviewed by anyone within the service; they are simply filed in a drawer. Therefore trends and areas of improvement are not being highlighted. In short it’s a pointless exercise filling out the HFRC returns.

Summary

The FBU raised its objections to the way in which the PVR was planned to be conducted. Our objections to the process are totally justified having seen the final PVR document. The review makes no mention of the detailed documents supplied by the FBU.

We are also disappointed to see that the review has not followed the general principles within the generally considered best practice document "Rethinking public service Reform" published by the TUC.

The FBU and SF&RS staff consultation in the review was a very small percentage of the workforce and the final document reflects the severe lack of understanding the review team and council has in the fire service and its statutory duties and responsibilities which the council is directly and solely responsible for delivering.

The council has seen the fire service as an easy target to cut funds as it is held in high public esteem. Funding has been cut from SF&RS to prop up failing services within the county (Children's and Adult services). If the fire service cuts continue, the council will soon have to cut another service to prop up a failing fire service. The cuts faced until now are significantly impacting on the quality of service delivered and any further cuts will be disastrous for both the public and fire fighters in Surrey.

The PVR also calls for SF&RS to charge the public for some call types. This will not save the average council tax payer any money it will only move the burden of payment to the insurance companies where it may well cost far more in premiums than it does in supply the service through council tax.

Surrey County Council must focus on the statutory obligations placed upon the fire service and fund SF&RS adequately to achieve them. The public expect that when they call 999 and request an emergency response that the fire and rescue service will respond rapidly with the correct equipment and correct number trained fire fighters to save life and mitigate losses; the government expect the same but sadly this is not happening and further cuts will only worsen the service's ability to meet these expectations and legal obligations.

Yours sincerely

Richard Jones

Email copies to;

David McNulty
Surrey Councillors
CFO Pearson
Yvonne Rees