

Briefing Note for Plymouth City Council (Scrutiny Committee).

Details of planned major changes to service delivery where the changes have the potential to impact on partners and communities e.g. through reduction in spend, significant changes to targets and level of service delivery or location of delivery.

The DSFRS finance settlement for 2013/14 and 2014/15 was only announced yesterday (19th December 2012). Due to timing issues, the proposals for 2013/14 and 2014/15 are not yet agreed or in the public domain. Members of the Fire Authority will be considering options for change at their meeting on the 18th January 2013. This will then lead in a full public consultation before any decisions are made. However, it is clear from the reduction in grant outlined above that changes will need to be made in order to meet the revised budget. These will be prepared with a view to minimise the impact on the public and any changes will be evidence based and subject to public consultation and engagement with staff.

Context setting – national requirements and policy drivers

The Service draws funding from two main sources - Government grant and local Council Tax precept, in broadly equal proportions. Two years ago it was announced that the grant element for FRs was to be reduced by 25% over four years. This has been applied to date by means of a formula, rather than being equally shared, with 13% of the reduction to be applied over the next two years.

The Government announced in December 2012 that the Government Grant for Devon & Somerset Fire and Rescue Service will be reduced by 10.3% in 2013 and a further 7.3% in 2014. We are acutely aware that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has also extended the period of austerity until 2018 so the financial outlook for us as a service is challenging. Whilst we do not know what savings will be applied in 2015-2018, we know that we will have to operate with a reduced budget.

In response, we have three main options to solve the gap in funding announced: (1) We meet the shortfall by just putting up council tax (this could equate to as much as a 24% increase) which we are not recommending (2) We close fire stations and make staff redundant or (3) We look to do what many other organisations are doing and reform what we do and in the process aim to minimise the negative impact on the public and our staff whilst meeting the savings target at the same time. Our planning considerations focus on option (3).

We have already shown how we can improve public safety and reduce costs through the recent introduction of a Light Rescue Pump into Greenbank fire station, Plymouth which will mean we get these fire engines to you more quickly whilst at the same time saving £70k per vehicle over a more traditional fire engine. These have been well received by staff in rural and urban communities alike.

We do not plan on making redundancies at this stage as we will use our reserves to fund the salaries of staff until such times as people retire. We have worked hard over the last few years to hold vacancies and if our options are agreed in July following the consultation period, we will simply not fill these and will wait until staff naturally leave the organisation. So unlike many other private and public organisations, we are able to not force any existing member of staff on a permanent contract with us to leave.

We will however need to change the way we do business and we will engage staff and trade unions in the process. This will mean greater use of 'on call' staff, many of which are whole time fire-fighters who take out a secondary contract to respond to calls on an 'as and when' needed basis.

It is important to stress that there has been a significant decrease in fire deaths in Devon & Somerset in the last 10 years as a direct result of more prevention activity/legislation, not faster fire engines or more fire-fighters. We will always need highly trained, competent, professional and committed fire-fighters to respond to fires and emergencies when prevention activities fail but the number of fires has also fallen significantly whilst the number of fire-fighters and fire stations has remained essentially the same. However, we are simply unable to continue the same level of resourcing in some areas within a shrinking budget.

In addition, we will be able to use fire-fighters and junior officers to provide even greater support towards our emphasis on targeting those most vulnerable in society - those most at risk of dying in a fire have high risk factors such as drug/alcohol dependencies and mobility/ill health problems. Many of these people are known to other agencies and by us working more closely with police, social services and health agencies, we will be able to focus time, effort and money into protecting those most at risk.

We plan to hold a series of road shows across Devon & Somerset to better outline our thinking, to listen to your concerns and alternative suggestions and to inform a subsequent decision by the Fire Authority in the Summer.

The options being considered support a reshaped service that we believe can still provide a long term resilient and sustainable emergency service. It will mean changes for local communities and also for staff. In moving forward, we are proposing changes to the way we match our resources to community risk. At the same time our ambition remains to avoid compulsory redundancies.

Headline budget messages – key areas of budget reduction and likely impact on partners and service users, performance against high level delivery of efficiency plans.

All public services need to make considerable savings and Devon & Somerset is no exception. We have worked hard over the last few years to avoid having to make compulsory redundancies and have held vacancies, only filling necessary posts with staff on fixed term contracts – some of which we will now cease. We have managed down budgets and have been able to put considerable sums of money into our reserves which will now act as a buffer to again assist us not making compulsory redundancies.

We are also progressing our income generation approach which is making money and this will be used to support our rebuilding/repair our fire stations in the future.

Risks and issues to delivering the city priorities including plans to tackle any underperformance and highlight areas of challenge where dependent on partners to resolve issues.

Our current resource distribution and provision is based upon national standards of fire cover devised between the two world wars. This means that the service has the same number of fire engines and fire stations largely in the same places as they have been for over 60 years. Over the following years successive governments have introduced legislation and regulations that have had a positive impact on community safety by greatly reducing the number of fire deaths e.g. the introduction of: fire safety law; foam furniture regulations; building regulations that provide a safe period of time for escape; and more recently, the need for smoke alarms.

In the last ten years alone there has been a 48% reduction in the number of fires nationally, and fire deaths have been reduced to a new low nationally of 304 in 2011/12. This improved level of community safety is to be celebrated as a success story. It also highlights that it is time to reconsider the distribution of resources committed to providing our service when incidents are reducing, especially when costs have risen over the same period and we don't always have the right resources in the right place. For illustration, in 2011/12, 71% of our stations had two or less incidents per week. One of our whole time stations attended 120 incidents on its station ground in that year. Our new 'on call' staff availability management system (Gartan) identified in a 12 month period that several fire stations did not have sufficient crew to respond during the day on a regular basis and that the total amount of time when on call stations were not available for emergency response was 51,525 hours, which equates to 6 fire engines permanently unavailable.

By making some changes, we aim to improve public safety (as we will have more staff doing prevention work and our experience has shown that increases in prevention activity is the best way to save lives) and ensure that we don't make staff redundant. We will also be able to provide guaranteed cover on some fire stations that are often not available and in doing so will improve our operational performance standards.

Our operational and prevention based analysis has been recognised nationally and staff involved received prestigious national awards earlier this year which further validates our underpinning data and approach. We have also used a Government provided computer modelling tool which has been used for many years by the vast majority of fire services.

Critical risks to delivering services provided in partnership; including areas of support required from partners to improve delivery and identification of blockages.

DSFRS has seconded an officer to the Plymouth and Devon Race Equality Council in order to assist us focus our time, effort and advice in those areas where people are most at risk, including migrant workers and those who do not have English as their first language.

We intend to further enhance our cross cutting work with each of our constituent authorities to ensure that those who are most at risk are protected as best we can by working better together. We do not plan on reducing our prevention services.

We will be able to use fire-fighters and junior officers to provide even greater support towards our emphasis on targeting those most vulnerable in society - those most at risk of dying in a fire have high risk factors such as drug/alcohol dependencies and mobility/ill health problems. Many of these people are known to other agencies and by us working more closely with police, social services and health agencies, we will be able to focus time, effort and money into protecting those most at risk.

To effectively and efficiently promote community safety, the Authority works to engage with communities, understand their values and the services they need. We work in partnership with agencies and organisations who represent vulnerable groups in the community most at risk from an emergency. The range of community safety prevention activities includes: schools fire safety education; home safety visits; arson reduction programmes; youth inclusion programmes; investigation of fires to identify cause and impact, including hate crime; reduction of unwanted fire signals and road traffic incident reduction.