

Introduction

1. This is the response of the Leeds City Council's Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny Board in relation to the West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Authority's consultation on proposals to changes to emergency cover in West Yorkshire.

Background information

2. The Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny Board is made up of 12 Elected Members of Leeds City Council. Within the Safer and Stronger Communities portfolio, the Scrutiny Board is required to review or scrutinise decisions made or other action taken in connection with any council or executive function of any matter which affects the authority's area or the inhabitants of that area, including matters pertaining to outside bodies and partnerships to which the authority has made appointments. In accordance with the Leeds City Council Constitution and the West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Authority Constitution, eight Elected Members of the Council are appointed onto the West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Authority.
3. The Scrutiny Board welcomed the attendance of the District Commander, Chief Finance Officer and Deputy Chief Fire Officer of West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service to its meeting on 22nd October 2012.
4. In consideration of the proposals set out within the consultation document, the Scrutiny Board wishes to make the following comments.

Acknowledging the significant financial challenges

5. We are very proud to acknowledge that the West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service is one of the best performing fire and rescue services in the country and at £38.82 per head of population per year, the Authority provides the lowest cost service of all the metropolitan fire and rescue authorities.
6. The West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Authority is responsible for ensuring that the best possible service is delivered with the resources available. However, when the fire service nationally is expecting a 25% budget reduction over the current spending review period, we appreciate that the Fire Authority is facing significant financial challenges.
7. In response to increased financial pressure, we are aware that a number of innovative ways of working have already been identified and changes to support functions implemented to make them more efficient. We note that in the last five years alone, the Authority has made efficiency savings of £8.8m of which £7.3m were achieved in the last two years. Yet despite its efforts to make such efficiencies, we learn that the fire service budget reductions have impacted more heavily towards Metropolitan Authorities, with West Yorkshire losing over 10% of its grant funding (£5.9m) in the first two years. This is deeply disappointing and we share the frustrations of the Fire Authority in this regard.

8. We note that further fire service budget reductions of 18.5% nationally are still to come. We understand that the latest indications are that this will be a further cash cut in grant of 9.0% in 2013/2014 and 5.4% in 2014/2015 if they are shared evenly. We note that the best case, if the reductions are shared evenly, is that the Authority will lose £4.6m in 2013/2014 and a further £2.5m in 2014/2015. However, despite the Authority's own attempts to lobby government on this issue, we note that it is anticipated that the reductions to the Authority will again be greater than the national average.

At what point will the service become unsustainable?

9. We acknowledge that very few Fire and Rescue Authorities have set their own performance standard and West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Authority is one of those. We understand that the Authority's Risk Based Planning Assumptions are based on a very sophisticated process of analysis using powerful software tools. We were also assured that new and proposed housing developments were being taken into consideration as part of the planning analysis. However, it is vital that the Authority is assured that its risk assessment methodology is robust, objective and analytical as the results will influence decisions to determine where to allocate and deploy fire engines in a way that accounts for the different types of incidents and the varying levels of risk within West Yorkshire. It is also vital that this benchmark standard to which the Fire and Rescue Service is expected to work and be judged against does complement the Authority's commitment to deliver a highly professional service.
10. Within this current economic climate, we acknowledge that the biggest cost to the service is staff. The cost of building new fire stations is small in comparison to the actual savings to be made in terms of the running costs and the salaries of staff that work there.
11. However, the Authority has already approved plans in January 2012 to replace 10 current fire stations with 5 new fire stations; has undertaken a fundamental review of support staff establishment to remove around 85 posts and deliver savings of £2.5m; and continues to lose firefighter posts as a result of a recruitment freeze since 2009, which has already generated savings of £4.6m in relation to wholetime firefighters and £0.5m on retained firefighters.
12. These new proposals clearly represent a further significant reduction in resource. With the service now employing around 1350 wholetime firefighters in total, we understand these new proposals will see this figure drop below 1,000 and possibly by 2020, if there is no additional funding, as low as 850. In Leeds alone, the proposals will see the number of fire stations reduce to 11 by 2015 and then to 8 by 2020, along with a further 25% reduction in firefighter posts.
13. We accept that the significant reduction in risk and demand does present an opportunity to look again at service provision and to be more innovative and efficient in the way services are delivered. However, as resources continue to diminish, the key challenge will be to remain highly professional.
14. Whilst we appreciate that these proposals are based on a reasonable worst case planning assumption in view of anticipated spending reviews up to 2020, as a Scrutiny Board we questioned at what point the Chief Fire Officer will be advising the Fire Authority that the service can no longer sustain further reductions, with the obvious measure being the ability to meet the Risk Based Planning Assumptions relative to the

risks. We therefore sought assurances from the Deputy Chief Fire Officer that the Authority would be advised appropriately if ever this situation was to arise.

Providing an equitable emergency fire service.

15. With limited resources, we acknowledge that whilst the service could try to spread resources thinly to deliver better coverage, this would inevitably result in a lower quality of service. We agree that the Authority needs to remain committed to delivering a highly professional service, where the safety of its firefighters is also paramount. We are pleased that the Authority continues to ensure that the fire engines and firefighter kits are the best it can buy and not just afford, with the Authority having recently approved £2m of investment in new equipment and personal protective clothing. As such, we therefore appreciate the need to focus on ensuring that fire engines are placed in the best locations where fires are most likely to occur. Attendance to all types of emergencies is considered but the focus is upon getting fire engines to where people may be at risk.
16. It was the opinion of the Deputy Chief Fire Officer during our meeting that if fire station locations were not to change, some areas would get a very good service and some areas would get a lot poorer service. We therefore agree that there is a need to redistribute the resources to ensure that the cover is equitable across the county based on risk. Within the resources available, and based on the standards that the Authority has set, it was the opinion of the Deputy Chief Fire Officer that these proposals represent the best range of options for the community of West Yorkshire.

Maintaining a strong commitment to the prevention agenda

17. The main priority is to prevent a fire or other incident occurring in the first place. The significant effort and resources already put into fire safety education, fire prevention and fire protection has clearly been a contributable factor in reducing the numbers of serious fires, deaths and injuries within West Yorkshire, which are at their lowest ever levels.
18. We particularly welcomed the free Home Fire Safety Check service, which commenced in 1996 and was expanded in 2005 when the new Community Safety Strategy was launched. However, we understand that this approach is now being revised, targeting the most vulnerable and high-risk people in communities.
19. We also note that the service has reduced its number of community safety staff, both on the fire safety enforcement and community safety dedicated staff. In doing so, we understand that there will be capacity for such preventative work to be undertaken by operational firefighters, albeit a more targeted approach.
20. We do acknowledge that over the last 10 years the service has successfully helped to change the attitudes of many people so that they better understand the risks and are therefore able to take more responsibility for themselves in terms of fire safety. However, it is vital that the Authority maintains its commitment to the preventative agenda and works closely with other partners to continue to deliver proactive community safety activity.

Lobbying for sprinkler systems within domestic buildings

21. We noted that another reason why the service has seen significant reductions in fire deaths and injuries relates to the fact that new homes are much safer than older homes, with hard wired smoke detection and better fire protection generally. It was highlighted that the public sector stock in particular has dramatically improved over the last 30 years. However, we note that the Chief Fire Officers Association has been pressing for many years for sprinkler systems to be introduced in all new building developments and particularly domestic dwellings as such systems provide the best protection for people. Whilst we appreciate that the cost implications of introducing such systems will be a significant factor, we do support this move. We will therefore work with other relevant Scrutiny Boards to consider the feasibility of introducing such systems within the social housing stock and also promoting this approach with other partners and developers.

Maximising available revenue streams where appropriate

22. We understand that the Authority plans to borrow money, perhaps through the Public Works Loans Board, in order to fund the whole of the costs associated with building the new proposed fire stations and therefore is not reliant on the sale of those stations proposed for closure. However, in the medium term, we note that the intention is to sell those stations, either to fund new schemes or reduce the borrowing. In view of this, we discussed the potential for local communities to express an interest in bidding to purchase such properties. Whilst we acknowledge that the Fire Authority is not obliged under legislation to consider such approaches from the community, we would encourage the Authority to be receptive to this. However, we appreciate that the Authority would need to consider the capital asset value of a particular site and for the local community to forward a bid that was appropriate.
23. Following a recent change in legislation, we understand that the Authority is also reviewing its policy in relation to attending fire alarms, as it is now able to charge for this service. We understand that 97.9% of all alarms turn out to be false, which is a huge number. Whilst recognising that the main desire is to try and reduce demand in order to leave more resources to respond to more serious incidents, we believe that this option to charge should be pursued by the Authority.
24. Whilst we understand that the Authority does have the option to raise its precept by any amount, we also acknowledge the requirement to hold a referendum on such a decision within each of the five districts. We were informed that the estimated costs of this would be around £2 million. In view of this, we acknowledge that this would be a huge gamble and therefore is not an option for the Authority to pursue at this stage.

Working in partnership to maximise resources

25. In acknowledging that all the blue light services are facing financial pressures, we are pleased to learn that emergency service partners continue to identify opportunities for collaboration. A good example is West Yorkshire Police sharing the Pontefract fire station and will soon occupy parts of Castleford Fire Station too. This generates income for the Fire and Rescue Authority and reduces costs for West Yorkshire Police. Whilst acknowledging that the WYFRS has also been working closely with the Yorkshire Ambulance Service to identify similar opportunities to share premises, we are disappointed to learn that such opportunities have now been put on hold following the decision of the Yorkshire Ambulance Service to undertake a wider strategic review

of its assets. Particular reference was made to proposals for developing a shared site to replace the Ambulance station in Menston. Whilst a site would still need to be identified in line with this proposal, we acknowledge the difficulties in identifying appropriate sites in line with the size and type of land required for such stations to be built.

26. All fire appliances carry initial flood rescue equipment and Stanningley fire station in particular contains some specialist equipment for the removal of large amounts of water (High Volume Pump). We therefore sought assurances that the service will still be able to deal with flooding incidents effectively across the county. The District Commander reported that the service does have a comprehensive amount of resources and we are pleased to note that there is also an understanding with other partners, such as the Environment Agency, to get equipment to incidents too.
27. In terms of other partnership working, we are pleased to learn that the WYFRS is assisting in the development of the Leeds City Council Concordat and that particular focus will be given to working more closely with private sector landlords in addressing fire safety risks within that sector and particularly within Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs).
28. We also welcome the WYFRS youth engagement programmes, which include the Young Firefighters Scheme. With the ongoing support of partners, we believe this excellent initiative will continue to deliver an extremely important local service.
29. In acknowledging the District and Local Area Risk Reduction Plans, we particularly value the role of the local area reduction teams in delivering prevention and protection activities within communities. We also welcome the pilot schemes with the Rotary Club and Neighbourhood Network Schemes in the North West Area that assist in delivering prevention services on behalf of the WYFRS. We therefore believe that more effort is needed to publicise and promote the achievements of such partnership working in the future.