

22 March 2016

Receipt of Petitions in Connection with the Suffolk Fire and Rescue Authority's Integrated Risk Management Plan 2015-18

Three separate petitions have been received by the Council's Democratic Services, which contain a total of 11,439 valid signatures. These have been combined, by Democratic Services, into two separate petitions (numbers 0002 and 0003), due to their similarity.

The petitions relate to the Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service's Integrated Risk Management Plan 2015-18, which was published for consultation between 9am on 16 November 2015 and 5pm on 22 February 2016. Cabinet will note that the formal consultation has now closed, however, the consultation feedback has not yet been fully assessed, considered, nor any decisions made regarding this.

Petition 0002 has been considered separately by the Council at its meeting on 17 March in line with the wishes of the petitioners.

The purpose of this report is to advise Cabinet of the meeting that I attended in connection with petition 0003, which was organised by Mr Mark Green and Mr Lyndon Milne on behalf of Bury St Edmunds fire station's on-call Firefighters.

Introduction

As part of the Council's procedures the organisers of the petitions were contacted and meetings with them took place on 4 March.

For petition 0003, 6,184 signatures, on paper petition forms, were counted by Democratic Services.

The petition says:

"We the undersigned strongly object to the proposed cuts to the Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service. These proposed cuts will see the loss of 6 fire engines, 1 fire station closed and the potential loss of 55 firefighters throughout Suffolk.

These cuts include the loss of 1 fire engine and potentially 10 firefighters from Bury St Edmunds fire station.

We believe that these proposed cuts are unacceptable and should not happen".

The petitioners have identified they wanted the petition to be discussed at the 22 March Cabinet meeting.

Summary of Meeting

The meeting in connection with the petition was attended by me, in my role as Cabinet Member for Environment and Public Protection. Councillor Martin, Councillor Wood and Councillor Mountford also attended along with Deputy Chief Fire Officer Mark Sanderson, Monitoring Officer Tim Ryder and Democratic Services Officer Linda Pattle. The petition was presented at the meeting by Mr Matt Hassey and Mr Mark Green on behalf of the firefighters serving at Bury St Edmunds fire station.

The petitioners were afforded the opportunity to discuss and clarify their concerns with those present. These largely focused on the view that the proposal for the removal of the third on-call fire engine at Bury, contained within the Integrated Risk Management Plan, had not had full regard for future activity such as medical co-responding with the Ambulance Service, which could increase demand on the station; that the removal of the fire engine could take away a valuable and cost effective resource which is able to back-up the full-time firefighters at Bury and that the availability levels of neighbouring on-call fire stations could impede the response to emergencies in Bury, should the 3rd on-call fire engine be removed.

The Group Leaders present made statements in support of the petition and I made a brief statement in response. The Monitoring Officer provided those present with information regarding the process to be followed for the receipt of petitions and the arrangements that had been made for the petition to be considered at the 22 March Cabinet meeting, the course of action selected by the petitioners.

Response

I would like to start by thanking the petitioners, Mr Hassey and Mr Green, for their active engagement with the Integrated Risk Management Plan consultation and also, publicly, recognise and pay tribute to the really important role both on-call and full-time firefighters play in Bury and across Suffolk, every day, in helping keep our communities safe. I have the highest regard for our firefighters and know that colleagues and the general public will share my sense of pride in them.

These are very challenging times for public services, including fire and rescue services across the country. The amount of grant funding available for the fire and rescue service, nationally, is likely to reduce by over 20% over the next four years. For Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service, this could mean a reduction in grant of around £1.9m by 2018 and a further £600,000 between 2018 and 2020.

Over previous years this administration has helped to protect our fire and rescue service from the full effect of national funding reductions and we will strive to do so in the future. However, any significant reductions in funding, like those expected, need to be carefully considered when making plans for the future.

For several months work has been taking place to prepare for the likely funding reductions ahead. The proposals contained within the Integrated Risk Management

Plan have been carefully developed by the Chief Fire Officer and his team of operational officers who have taken into account risks in Bury St Edmunds and across Suffolk as a whole. They have reviewed all 35 fire stations and each of Suffolk's 47 fire engines, examined at least 5 years of emergency incidents and taken into account, amongst other important factors, current and future demographic information and plans for housing growth and infrastructure development in Bury and across Suffolk.

The proposals have also taken into account the change in demand on the Service over the years and significant reduction in emergencies. In no small part this is due to the excellent work of our firefighters in advising and helping people to be safer in their homes, whilst at work and when driving on our roads and also by responding to emergencies when these do occur. Regard for on-call availability at Bury fire station, on neighbouring stations and across Suffolk has also been had in developing the proposals. Work has also been taking place to improve on-call availability and this will continue in future. The proposals in the Integrated Risk Management Plan also sit alongside plans for further changes, each with a financial saving, to the managerial and support function arrangements that support the day to day operation of the Service.

The Integrated Risk Management Plan sets out the way in which Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service proposes to structure and deploy its resources to best manage the risks in Bury and in other areas of Suffolk and be able to continue to respond to foreseeable emergencies. Taking into account the availability of financial resources is a key factor, amongst several others, when planning future resources and risk management arrangements.

The Service has an excellent reputation locally, regionally and nationally for being an efficient, effective and well-performing Service. Care has been taken in developing the current proposals to ensure that the Service can continue to respond effectively and provide the important emergency services which the people of Bury St Edmunds and Suffolk have come to expect from their fire station and fire and rescue service.

A thorough, comprehensive, 14-week public and staff consultation exercise has been conducted and extensive feedback on the Integrated Risk Management Plan proposals has been received. No decisions have yet been taken regarding Bury fire station or on the future shape of Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service and, in fact, the consultation feedback is still being collated, assessed and analysed. This will be fully considered over the next few weeks and the feedback received will help to shape the report and the associated recommendations which will be presented to Cabinet in May.

On the subject of co-responding, Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service has well established arrangements in place with other blue light services in Suffolk, sharing ten stations with Police and/or Ambulance colleagues and Bury is one example.

Plans exist to extend these arrangements and pilot medical co-responding with the East of England Ambulance Service so as to provide a joint response to people suffering serious, specific life-threatening events. Despite there being no evidence of high-demand in other counties where similar pilots have taken place, officers will be carefully examining the arrangements within the future pilot to ensure that it does not have an unacceptable impact on the ability of crews to undertake their core responsibilities or place them under undue pressure.

Again, I would like to thank the petitioners for their engagement with the consultation process and also recognise the very important role they and their colleagues play in helping keep Suffolk's communities safe.

In summary, I acknowledge the petition and can confirm that this will form part of the body of formal consultation responses and evidence which will be fully considered by Cabinet when it meets on 17 May to discuss the Integrated Risk Management Plan 2015-18.

Councillor Matthew Hicks

Cabinet Member for Environment and Public Protection

March 2016