

Community Safety Options 2015 Consultation – Response by Jeremy Lefroy MP
(Stafford)

1. Please tell us what you think about our Community Safety Options overall - Do you think there is anything we have not considered?

I appreciate the funding gap which Staffordshire Fire and Rescue (SF&R) are currently facing. However, I consider that we need to look closely at other ways of meeting this. I believe that neither of the options proposed are acceptable in terms of community safety.

Option one removes the whole-time night-time cover from Stafford while option two is based on substantially reducing the number of fire stations throughout Staffordshire and stopping the use of retained firefighters. Full-time night-time cover for Stafford is essential for reasons which I will set out below. Retained fire-fighters play a vital role in community safety across the county and it would be a retrograde step to stop using them, particularly – but not only – in more rural areas.

Other options which should be looked at are:

- i) A reasonable increase in the SF&R portion of Council Tax, put – if necessary – to a referendum;
- ii) Much greater partnership working to cut duplicated costs;
- iii) Introducing or increasing charges for some non-statutory services provided by SF&R to (for instance) private organisations.

2. Please give us any comments you have about any of the Community Safety Options associated with a particular fire station or area (Burslem, Burton-upon-Trent, Cannock, Kidsgrove, Lichfield, Rugeley, Stafford, Stone, Tamworth) or the New Delivery Model

Both options give rise to serious concerns for the Stafford constituency for similar reasons. I will therefore make my comments in respect of both options.

The new station was constructed at Rising Brook precisely because of Stafford's infrastructure problems which mean that it can take a long time to cross town from Stafford/Beaconside at certain times of the day. It also took into account the planned growth of the town to the West and the North.

By removing some (Option 1) or all (Option 2) services from Stafford/Beaconside, there will be a very serious gap in provision in Central and North Stafford and in the rural areas surrounding Stafford as far as Stone. Option 2 which would also remove Stone station would – as far as I can see – mean that there was no full-time provision between Rising Brook (South Stafford) and the Stoke-on-Trent/Newcastle-under Lyme conurbation, a distance of more than 20 miles. At the same time, there would be two full-time stations (Rising Brook and Penkridge) which are relatively close to each other.

The plans do not appear to take into full consideration the fact that the Stafford/Beaconside, Rising Brook and Penkridge stations also have an important regional and national role to play in attending incidents on the M6 (one of the busiest motorways in Europe) and well as the major trunk roads A449, A51 and A34. Both branches of the West Coast Mainline (again one of the busiest transport routes in Europe) pass through Stafford constituency and any F&R incident would be attended by these three stations.

Stafford constituency is also a major destination for investment with two new factories planned by Alstom as well as strong growth in local manufacturing SME's. A robust F&R response service is vital in giving investors' confidence.

With the growth of Stafford to the North and West, retaining full-time cover at Stafford/Beaconside supported by retained cover at Rising Brook is essential.

3. Please give us any reasons you may have why we should NOT proceed with any of the options

Please see my answer to question 2.

4. Please give us any additional or alternative options or proposals that you may have and any other comments that you wish to make

Other options which should be looked at are:

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- ii) Much greater partnership working to cut duplicated costs;
- iii) Introducing or increasing charges for some non-statutory services provided by SF&R to (for instance) private organisations.

I would like the opportunity to discuss in depth with SF&R all these and other options.

I am also concerned that a number of state of the art community fire stations have been built under PFI arrangements, meaning an ongoing cost to the tax payer. To propose, before some of them have been finished, to reduce or even stop their use and F&R stations, is extraordinary. I welcome the plans to use the stations for more community engagement activity, especially centred around fire prevention and protection. But the core purpose of the stations is response as well as prevention.

iv) One of our ideas is to expand the range of prevention, protection and community engagement activity carried out by our volunteer service. This might include volunteers offering support to the victims of fire, providing a meet and greet service at community fire stations etc. Overall how do you feel about that idea?

I welcome this. However, we need to be realistic about the time which volunteers can give. Stafford already has one of the highest rates of volunteering in the country. Volunteers are very important for improving the F&R service in the way you describe. However they cannot replace professional staff.

v) We would like to work to reduce people's long term vulnerability to fire by working more closely with our partners on more health and lifestyle initiatives. For example this might include offering basic eye tests or working on no smoking and healthy eating initiatives. Overall, how do you feel about that?

Agreed. This is very important work. We need more work like this with funding pooled from several sources, rather than relying on the budget of SF&R.

vi) Another idea is for us to contract out delivery of some specialist emergency response activity such as rope rescue or water rescue to other expert organisations. How would you feel about that?

It would depend entirely on the expert organisations involved. I would be very cautious. Contracting out can look good on paper but in practice can result in either an inferior or more expensive service (or both). Contracting out would also cut the opportunities for SF&R professional staff to increase their skills.

vii) We believe that preventing fires and accidents is a more effective solution than responding after the incident has happened. In the future we might look to put more resources into prevention and protection activities with local communities and reducing the amount spent on emergency response where this is the best solution. How do you feel about that?

S&FR has already been very successful at fire prevention and deserves praise for that. Prevention is always better than cure. But there will always be emergencies and there needs to be a strong emergency response capability at all times. I refer again to the demands on SF&R in my constituency, including the national vital role which it plays in covering our road and rail infrastructure.

viii) We already undertake a wide range of fire prevention activity including free home fire risk checks, with the strategy of targeting fire prevention resources at the most vulnerable as a priority. How do you feel about that?

This is an excellent service and has undoubtedly saved lives. It needs to continue.

ix) New technology means that we might be able to use new types of fire appliance to fight different types of fire using different techniques. These vehicles would have effective firefighting equipment but potentially carry fewer crew members. How would you feel about that?

It is vital to embrace new technology. However it is vital to have sufficient firefighters at an incident. They are not just involved in fighting the fire but also in reassuring the public and – potentially – crowd control. This cannot be done by technology but needs human beings. The recent tragic fire at Tilcon Avenue, Stafford, shows just how important it is to have sufficient firefighters to deal with these matters when they first arrive at an incident.

x) We could potentially try to find some different solutions for funding our activities. A few possible ways of doing this are listed below, please tell us how you would feel about each one?

Increase Council Tax – Positive

Work with partners and commercial organisations to deliver some services – Positive

Charge for additional services e.g. training – Positive

Seek more grants to support project work – Positive

Reduce the number of services they provide – Very Negative

Charge for some call outs e.g. unwanted fire signals at business premises – Reasonably Positive

Use volunteers wherever practical and safe to do so – Reasonably Positive – see comments in Point 5.

xi) Finally, please give us any other comments you have about our proposals or any other aspect of Staffordshire Fire and Rescue service's work.

SF&R provides an excellent service to the people of Staffordshire and have recently engaged in an ambitious programme of redevelopment and development of community fire stations. The staff are well trained and a credit to the service. That is why I find this consultation concerning. I do not believe that it has fully taken into account Stafford's infrastructure and growth plans

I am ready at any time to work with SF&R to develop other options to meet the financial challenges while retaining a full emergency response capability for my constituents alongside its prevention work.

Jeremy Lefroy MP