

Scottish Fire and Rescue Service submission of 23 November 2023

PE2040/B: Increase funding to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to prevent serious cuts to the service provided to the public

Thank you for your letter dated 26 October 2023 and for providing me with the opportunity to respond to the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee regarding the above. The petition references several points which I will attempt to address in this response.

In addressing these points, please be assured that the safety of our communities and our firefighters is always the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's (SFRS) priority.

Operational Changes 2023/24

The petition references some of the operational changes implemented across SFRS in September 2023.

These include the temporary withdrawal of ten wholetime (fulltime) fire appliances, which will help us to meet financial savings during this and into the next financial year. This decision-making was based on data and modelling that helped to identify which appliances would have the least impact on our emergency response.

By way of context, SFRS has received an additional £14.4 million from the Scottish Government during 2023/24, to support the enhanced and backdated firefighter pay offer, however we are still required to make £11m savings this year.

We also reduced our provision of High Reach Appliances (HRAs) across Scotland from 26 to 16 and amended crewing arrangements for one of our water rescue resources based in Glasgow.

All of these above changes were implemented concurrently to minimise the impact upon our staff.

Ahead of implementation, we published an [information pack](#) on our website; this was also sent to all elected members via email. This document sets out the impact of the changes and the data that

underpinned our decision making.

We appreciate that there has been a lot of focus and opposition to our operational changes. Over the past few months, we have met with elected members across Scotland, including some individual members of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, to discuss the changes and address any concerns.

Following implementation of these changes, we will undertake a review in due course to ensure our resources continue to be in the right place to meet risk and demand across Scotland.

Crewe Toll Community Fire Station, Edinburgh

The petition specifically references the relocation of the HRA, which was previously based at Crewe Toll Community Fire Station in Edinburgh.

We operate as a national Service and our HRAs are national assets, strategically placed to protect our communities across Scotland. In support of our ten-year Operational Strategy (2022 - 2032) we have recently undertaken a review of these resources to ensure they are best placed to protect communities across Scotland. This review has enabled us to remove older vehicles, and in particular aging combined Aerial Rescue Pumps from our fleet, which incur significant expense to maintain, replacing them with dedicated height or pumping appliances.

Under our review, the HRA at Crewe Toll has been redeployed to Dunfermline Community Fire Station. Simultaneously, the ageing HRA stationed at Kirkcaldy Community Fire Station has been removed from service.

As noted above, the change in our provision of HRAs had already been planned to ensure a more even distribution of our assets and remove older vehicles from our fleet, which were unreliable and expensive to maintain. This was implemented at the same time as our temporary appliance withdrawals to minimise impact upon our staff, albeit in support of our Operational Strategy referenced above.

The East of Scotland will now be served by four dedicated HRAs. Crewe Toll Fire Station is in close proximity to fire stations at Tollcross and McDonald Road in Edinburgh, where there are modern, dedicated HRAs

at each station. There are also dedicated HRAs at Dunfermline and Falkirk.

These changes under our Operational Strategy are based on robust, evidence-led data from our Incident Recording System (IRS), which tells us the number of times an appliance is mobilised to an incident and what it is used for.

Over the last five years all three HRAs across Edinburgh have been mobilised to a total of 1,160 incidents. Please note this is where attendance has been for more than 20 minutes duration which is the minimum time it takes to set up the appliance. Of this total, the HRA at Crewe Toll was mobilised the least. The breakdown of mobilisations (incidents over 20 minutes in duration) being: Crewe Toll (15.52%), McDonald Road (27.84%) and Tollcross (56.64%).

We always send the nearest available appliances, with an appropriate weight of response, based on the incident type. Due to the way our Operations Control staff manage and flex our resources, SFRS will maintain height appliance cover across Scotland.

Financial challenges

Overall, SFRS faces significant budgetary pressures in both our resource and capital budgets. As a Service we have a legal obligation to deliver a balanced budget and we must live within our means.

This is based on the Scottish Government's *Resource Spending Review* published in May 2022, which sets out an indicative flat cash budget position for the Service until 2026/27 which, with the impact of pay rises for staff and inflation, will represent a cut in real terms in our budget over that period.

While our actual confirmed annual budget is not known until December prior to the new financial year beginning in April, current projections based on the flat-cash assumption show that next year (2024/25) we would need to find between £14 million and £26 million of savings.

Over the four-year RSR period, cumulative savings of between £37million and £48.4million would be required, but this will vary in line with pay awards and inflationary pressures.

During my attendance at the Scottish Parliament's Criminal Justice Committee's (CJC) pre-budget scrutiny meeting on 13 September 2023, and supported by SFRS's written submission, I was very clear that the predicted flat-cash settlement for the following three years, and continued increase in operating costs, mean that we cannot generate the levels of savings required without negatively impacting upon the service we provide.

The challenges we face are significant and this will ultimately require difficult decisions to be made to ensure we deliver a modern fire and rescue service while maintaining financial sustainability.

SFRS is already an extremely lean organisation that has undergone significant reform to achieve savings over the past decade. For example, as part of the reform programme that created SFRS, the Service was asked to make £328 million in cumulative savings by 2027/28. By the end of 2022/23 we have delivered £486 million in savings. This has been achieved through the reduction in staff numbers, removal of duplicated posts, disposal and consolidation of assets, and standardisation of duty patterns and crewing arrangements.

The large majority of our running costs as a Service relate to our staff; 80% of our budget is spent on staff, and of that figure, 80% is spent on operational staff costs. Ultimately, this leaves us with extremely limited scope for further efficiencies without reducing workforce numbers, including wholetime firefighters.

To put this into context, to achieve the conservative projection of £14 million savings for next year, we would need to reduce our wholetime firefighter numbers by 339. This would leave us unable to maintain our firefighter target operating model, resulting in SFRS no longer being able to crew the equivalent of an additional 18 wholetime appliances from next year.

We would therefore need to review our stations and resources, which may lead to the permanent removal of, or changes to crewing arrangements of, some fire appliances and closure of some fire stations. Any such changes would be undertaken on a risk-based approach to minimise impact upon community safety and would follow full stakeholder engagement and consultation.

As outlined in evidence provided to the CJC, while SFRS would always seek to minimise impacts upon community safety, we believe the levels

of cuts to frontline services outlined above would ultimately compromise the current levels of safety of Scotland's communities.

However, this is the stark reality of what we may face as a service based on current financial planning.

While the above has focused on SFRS's resource budget, it is also well documented that the Service has an insurmountable capital backlog and needs critical investment to ensure that we have the right community fire stations, facilities, vehicles and equipment fit for the 21st century.

I hope that this response helps to address the points raised in the petition.

Yours sincerely

Chief Officer
Scottish Fire and Rescue Service