

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

10 JULY 2023

PRESENT

Councillor D. Acton (in the Chair).

Councillors J. Holden (Vice-Chair), J.M. Axford, G. Coggins, W. Frass, W. Jones, L. Walsh, B.G. Winstanley and D. Butt (ex-Officio)

In attendance

Dave Russell	Chief Fire Officer, GMFRS
Carlos Meakin	Assistant Chief Fire Officer, GMFRS
Simon Wood	GMFRS
Dave Pike	Fire Brigade Union Representative
Stephen James	Head of Strategic Growth
Alexander Murray	Governance Officer

Also Present

Councillors Ennis, Gilbert, Hartley, and Newgrosh.

APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors G. Carter, D. Jarman, M.J. Taylor, and D. Western.

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations were made.

2. QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

No questions were received.

3. GMFRS FIRE COVER REVIEW

The Chair introduced the meeting and the structure of the meeting with the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service (GMFRS) providing a presentation then questions and answers then FBU questions and answers and the Committee to discuss how they would then respond to the consultation.

The Chief Fire Officer delivered the presentation with the Assistant Chief Fire Officer and the Committee were informed that the fire cover review was done every four years to ensure resources were used in most efficient ways. The review included all fire stations covered by GMFRS. The Committee were asked to note the review was not to deliver a reduction or increase but rather a re-allocation of existing funding. Explained that looked at the service and how the changes would impact response times across the areas. GMFRS could have decided to propose a no change review, but The Chief Fire Officer was of the opinion that the changes proposed offered a better service to the people of Greater Manchester as a whole.

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As the funding would increase prevention services, introduce two new enhanced rescue stations, and increase the fleet by two fire vehicles.

Members were shown the expected changes in the average response times across Trafford and Sale and The Chief Fire Officer noted that the times were averages and recognised the issues faced by residents in Partington.

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer then gave a detailed look into the recommendations that would directly impact Trafford. Explained how the day shift pattern would work with the service being the same from 08:00 – 18:00 and a night on call service from 18:00 – 08:00. The Committee were informed of how the rota system worked and The Assistant Chief Fire Officer assured Members that it was a service pattern which had worked well in other areas of the region. The Assistant Chief Fire Officer informed the committee that the new system greatly reduced the number of staff required from 28 to 13. The Assistant Chief Fire Officer explained why Sale station was chosen which included the low number of night-time incidents (3rd Lowest in GM), the low number of Night-Time Life Risk incidents (3rd Lowest in GM), and the low number of Serious life risk incidents (4th Lowest I GM). The Committee were informed that in addition to low level of risk also Sale Fire Station also had a strong level of support from other fire stations within a 10-minute response area.

The Assistant Chief Fire Officer then went through the benefits of the proposals for staff which included being family friendly, improved life/work balance, and an attractive remuneration package. The Committee were then asked to look at the wider benefits of the proposed changes to make the service more robust across the conurbation which included two additional fire trucks in Manchester Central and Moss Side. The resources the proposals would add to the service were not fixed but worked as mobile elements of the rescue system and two new vehicles would add a lot of additional robustness to the service. The additional vehicles would be of particular use given the increase in high rise towers within the Manchester city centre where fires required a minimum of 5 trucks compared to 3 trucks for a standard residential property.

Following the presentations opened to questions from the Committee Members and Ward Councillors in attendance.

Councillor Hartley and the Chair asked questions whether the 4-minute time for the night crew to get to the Station were acceptable, what the outlier response times were, and how the 4 minutes had been measured. The Chief Fire Officer detailed how the night crew got to the station and state that the 4-minute response time was a requirement of the model and, if the proposals were approved, GMFRS would report the times back to Scrutiny or the Council to assure them the targets were being met. The Assistant Chief Fire Officer provided more detail on how the times had been calculated informing the Committee that the figures were based upon 10 million data points from vehicles to assess average road speeds. The Chief Fire Officer added that if GMFRS could not find 13 firefighters who lived within the 4-minute radius then they would not go ahead with the model.

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The Chair noted that it still added 4 minutes to the response time which was a significant change. The Chief Fire Officer noted that the changes did have a risk associated with them, but he felt that the risks were outweighed out by the benefits to the whole system.

Councillor Gilbert asked how often the 13 members of staff were needed to be available and whether the 17.5% uplift was to account for that availability. The Assistant Chief Fire Officer responded explained what the 17.5% uplift was for and how the shift patterns would work.

Councillors Gilbert and Jones both expressed their concerns about safety and thought the 4-minute response time was unattainable.

Councillor Winstanley asked about the challenge of the additional times for areas such as Partington. The Chief Fire Officer responded that when looking at the overall impact on response time it did not seem worth doing but he assured the Committee that the advantages of having two additional fire engines more than made up for the additional risks in the areas affected.

Councillor Walsh asked what positive responses had been received from the consultation. The Chief Fire Officer responded that the majority of responses received were negative.

Councillor Ennis asked if GMFRS had tried to meaningfully engage with those not digitally available. The Chief Fire Officer responded that GMFRS had reached out to leaders in communities to contact as many people as possible.

Councillor Frass noted that day crews also had reduced times at weekends with people being at home from 13:00 and the impact Manchester united home games would have on the response times. Councillor Frass then asked for a case study from an area with a similar population density. The Assistant Chief Fire Officer responded that the response times would be based on the best data available and if it turned out that they could not be met then they would not proceed with the proposals. The Chief Fire Officer added that they did not have any examples in GM but mentioned two examples in Lancashire which had similar population density and had had the model in place since 1991.

Councillor Axford noted that it was unlikely there would be enough firefighters living within the 4-minute radius given the cost of property near the sale station and asked if GMFRS had considered future risks such as increased flooding and wildfires. The Assistant Chief Fire Officer responded that GMFRS were looking to upskill staff, purchasing additional powered vehicles, and introduce a controlled burn team to meet those risks going forward. The Committee were asked to note that even though the population density had doubled in GM the number of incidents had not increased due to changes in lifestyle and peoples fire safety awareness.

Councillor Newgrosh noted that used three years' worth of data and at least of one of those years was not a normal year. Councillor Newgrosh also noted that Blue light data was used when the firefighters would not be using blue lights to get to the station. Councillor Newgrosh then asked whether if firefighter could not get there in time would four rather than five firefighters go would the engine go. The

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Chief Fire Officer answered can go with four but dependent on who was late as the driver had to be there.

Councillor Coggins asked whether the changes are beneficial or just making tough decisions due to lack of government funding. The Chief Fire Officer responded not about funding genuinely felt that the changes considered had a low risk due to the rewards the service and areas would gain.

Councillor Coggins asked whether the average was mean or median. The Assistant Chief Fire Officer responded that it was a median. The Chief Fire Officer expressed that GMFRS had been asked questions about response times from Andrew Western MP and were working on the data which would also be shared with the Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Coggins asked how many people lived within the 4-minute boundary The Assistant Chief Fire Officer responded that GMFRS had 22 and some of them had already expressed interest in working at Sale after the changes.

Councillor Holden noted that there were fire stations from Altrincham and Stretford and asked when if it happened at a night would those stations respond before the sale station was activated. The Assistant Chief Fire Officer responded that it would depend on which could respond quickest and how many were needed to work on the fire.

Councillor Hartley noted that only three pumps were available across the three stations in Trafford and that taking one down meant there were not enough to deal with residential fires. The Assistant Chief Fire Officer responded that the system was fluid with pumps constantly changing placement as they responded to call outs, community work, etc.

The Chair thanked the representatives of GMFRS for their presentation and answers to Members questions. The Chair informed the GMFRS representatives that following the meeting the Committee would submit their response to the proposals as part of the consultation.

[Note - The Assistant Chief Fire Officer, The Chief Fire Officer, Simon Wood left the room]

[Dave Pike - Fire Brigade Union entered the room.]

The Fire Brigade Union (FBU) representative informed the Committee that he had been a firefighter for 26 years and told the Committee that he did not want to see staffing reduced at any station. The FBU felt there was a way for GMFRS to achieve the service improvements by making use of the current staffing structures through the management of how training was undertaken.

The FBU Representative informed the Committee that responses were already up 13% on the previous year. The FBU agreed with what the Fire Chief was trying to achieve but they felt there was a better way it could be achieved. The FBU Representative Informed the Committee that Sale had double the number of responses of the other day crew in GMFRS and the Committee were asked to

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note that were not a range of choices from the review with only one option provided for people to comment upon. The FBU Representative spoke about the increases in the built-up neighbourhood and told the Committee that the main responses were road traffic accidents. The Committee were asked to note that there was the potential for conversations with the GM Mayor as to whether more engines could be provided without losing firefighters.

The Chair asked the FBU Representative to provide the Committee with an overview of the alternative options. The FBU representative then outlined the FBUs proposals which related to training of firefighters which often require firefighters to go off site and require others to cover them to ensure all stations were fully crewed, so it did not impact engine availability. The FBU thought that there was a better way to organise and deliver the training which would save as much as the GMFRS proposals without losing any firefighters or capacity.

Councillor Coggins was surprised that GM only area buying more engines going against the grain and asked whether doing so at the loss of staff was the right thing to do. The FBU Representative felt that GMFRS proposals were innovative and welcomed that they were looking to increase the fleet. If GMFRS proceeded with the alternative method of delivery suggested by FBU then those proposals would benefit the region greatly.

Councillor Coggins asked whether an engine going out with 4 rather than 5 firefighters had a large impact on their effectiveness. The FBU Representative informed the Committee that he had been in a situation where an engine had a crew of 4 rather than 5 and would not recommend 4 but would not delay a response for waiting for the fifth crew member and definitely not head out with less than 4.

Councillor Coggins asked whether FBU had a view on likelihood of getting the 13 staff within the 4-minute response time radius. The FBU Representative felt that it would be unachievable.

Councillor Ennis asked whether there were lessons to be learnt from how GMFRS had conducted the consultation process. The FBU Representative felt that the consultation had been rushed and the identification of alternate ways of achieving the same outcomes could have been done a lot earlier. The FBU Representative spoke about the importance of involving the unions from the beginning of the process, which had not been done this time. Councillor Ennis asked whether the alternative option proposed by the Union would be offered. The FBU Representative hoped that GMFRS would take the time to review the validity of the Union's proposals.

The Chair asked about the response time to Partington and whether the additional 4 minutes put Partington residents in danger. The FBU Representative agreed that the additional four minutes did put residents lives in danger and spoke of his personal experience of taking 10minutes to respond to a call, which would be the time Partington would have, and knowing it was too long.

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Councillor Axford asked whether the FBU proposal kept the level of training but changed how it was delivered. The FBU Representative stated that it would maintain the level of training but would do so by using onsite resources rather than having people going off site to train.

Councillor Gilbert asked whether there was a prescribed amount of training. The FBU Representative answered that there was but there were different types of training available and the FBU felt that there should be more practical training and less pc-based training, which was the training that took people off site.

The Chair asked whether recommendation of a pause on the consultation would be backed by the FBU. The FBU Representative responded that he felt it would be a good recommendation.

Councillor Winstanley welcomed the alternative proposal and wanted to have it captured within the Committee's response to the consultation.

The Chair noted that the four minutes for firefighters to get to the station was an issue and the concerns needed to be reflected in the Committee's response.

Councillor Frass proposed that the Committee reject the proposals of the fire service and ask that alternative proposals be produced.

Councillor Axford felt that additional information was required and agreed that should reject the proposals on the current position.

The Chair then moved the recommendation to reject the proposals and it was agreed. The Chair informed the committee that the Leader was also putting a response together and so wanted the Committees response ASAP.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the presentation by GMFRS be noted.
- 2) That the update from the FBU representative and alternative proposal be noted.
- 3) That the Committee reject the proposals of GMFRS.
- 4) That the Committee submit a response to the GMFRS Consultation.

The meeting commenced at 6.30 p.m. and finished at 9.07 p.m.