

Observations and questions for Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service Safer Together Consultation from Somerset County Council

1.0 The Consultation Document and Methodology

- 1.1 The consultation questionnaire appears to lead the reader's thinking, has limited detail and does not allow for innovative thinking to enable a comprehensive high level response.
- 1.2 The way the options are set out to the reader, gives the impression of an accumulative set of choices with options 1,2 and 3 stating that alone, they would not achieve the desired cost savings. This presents the respondent with limited choice in the knowledge that only certain groups of options would meet outcomes required. This is leading the reader to respond in certain ways.
- 1.3 The options state that where stations are closed, resources will be redeployed, but gives no further information or clarity.

2.0 Prevention Activity and Opportunities

- 2.1 The emphasis on prevention is a welcome one, fitting nicely with the Council's own strategic planning and it is recognised that social progress has reduced incidence of fire. However, more could be done to make communities aware of the various types so fire prevention activity can and will take place and its impact.
- 2.2 The Council would welcome greater engagement on reducing smoking in the population as part of prevention activity to match the partnership activity that is seen in neighbouring regions such as Cornwall.
- 2.3 When stating 'Protection and Prevention' in the consultation document and options, only home/business safety checks and briefly, education is mentioned. However, there is an abundance of prevention activity that is undertaken and planned with partner agencies that is omitted. A good example is the Safer Homes initiative and child accident prevention projects. This is a missed opportunity to demonstrate the breadth of work the fire service undertakes and leaves readers unclear with what the future service offer for prevention will look like.
- 2.4 The data within the consultation document shows that there was an increase in false alarms of 16% between 14/15 and 18/19 with a total of 35% of calls being false alarms during 18/19. Further, in the same period secondary fires increased by 40% 14/15 to 18/19. Has the service considered how they would

prevent these occurrences in the future and would this have an impact on resource and demand planning?

3.0 Risk Factors

- 3.1 Socioeconomic factors are the best known predictors of fire incidents, including age, health and lifestyle, income, status and education. However, it appears that lifestyle is the only factor that is briefly considered within the consultation document in relation to smoking and reduced use of chip pans. Around 38,000 Somerset residents now live in a neighbourhood (LSOA) identified as one of the 20% most deprived in England. Poverty alone, is a very important factor to consider in fire risk due to links between poverty and overcrowding, lack of home safety awareness, increased uptake of smoking and other risk taking behaviours and likelihood of accidents amongst children in the home.
- 3.2 Another risk factor essential to this debate is age. The number of people aged 75 or more is projected to double in the next two decades in Somerset. In parts of West Somerset and Burnham-on-Sea, more than half of the population is projected to be aged 65 or older by 2033. The projected risk of fire and use of existing and future resource does not appear to fully appreciate the impact of Somerset aging population, particularly, when proposing to remove resource in West Somerset, an area identified as most impacted by this.
- 3.3 The proportion of older housing stock is more prevalent in rural areas with the 2011 census stating that West Somerset comprised of 5% of Somerset's housing stock without central heating. This locality also includes a large proportion of the County's homes with thatched roofs and unlike new builds, more likely to fall victim to open fire.
- 3.4 Somerset attracts 11.4million day visitors per year and 1.8 million overnight visitors (ONS 2015). Looking specifically at West Somerset, this equates to roughly 5,000 to 8,000 extra visitors in Minehead Butlins per week during the summer months, plus all the other Hotels and self-catering apartments spread across the Moors and beyond. Although it is noted that the impact of the summer holidays is referenced in the rationale for option 6 – roving resource, it is not clear whether the full impact of tourism been factored in the risk modelling.
- 3.5 Somerset is a largely rural area with a high portion of agricultural activity and farm land. Has the Devon and Somerset Fire and included in their risk methodology, activities which carry with them additional risk and demand for fire resource e.g. Swaling and storage of potentially hazardous chemicals?

4.0 Deployment Activity

- 4.1 What would be the impact of the closure of fire stations on the co-responder functions? This could have a determinantal impact on the more isolated stations such as Porlock.
- 4.2 The proposal to deploy engines based on demand predictions makes sense but it is important to make sure that crews can remain active whilst awaiting deployment. Is there an opportunity for staff to engage in prevention or other positive work in this situation? If so, what would this be?
- 4.3 Given the proximity to Hinkley Point, the proposal to reduce the number of engines at Bridgwater is surprising. It is also concerning that Hinkley Point is not referenced in the consultation document and given the scale of the developments both at the site and in the supporting infrastructure.
- 4.4 Option 6 - 'roving' fire engines. If actual fires are as low in number as stated, would it not be better to have more agile, less resource intensive vehicles? It is unclear how the model of 'roving' fire engines would work practically for example, would they be linked to a station of fully mobile during the day?
- 4.5 Chart 1 on page 14 appears to show the average number of engines available but does not appear to consider travel distance.
- 4.6 In option 1 it states that there are nearby fire stations within a 15 minute radius able to respond. We would query this comment with reference to Porlock. The nearest fire resource to Porlock is Minehead, which in perfect travel conditions is under the 15 minute threshold, however, this route is served by a single access road which is frequently hindered by delays due to tourism, sheer traffic volumes and severe weather.
- 4.7 It is noted that that the DSFRS statutory duties are: to make provision to response to fires and road traffic collisions and promote fire safety. This does not include dealing with hazardous materials or responding to flooding, which is one of the highest risks for Somerset.

5.0 Partnership Working

- 5.1 It is not clear from the consultation document what impact the options would have on DSFRS capacity for multi-agency working for example on emergency planning and preparation and on promoting community resilience. Currently DSFRS is an active and valued partner in such groups as the Avon and Somerset Local Resilience Forum and the Somerset Prepared Partnership.

- 5.2 It is not clear from the consultation documents what impact there would be on the DSFRS specialist capabilities including urban search and rescue and response to flooding and wildfire.
- 5.3 The consultation is based upon savings made by the DSFRS in isolation and does not factor in opportunities for working with partners in a place-based/systems approach.
- 5.4 Public Health with CCG and other partners have been working on strategies for Improving Lives in Somerset including the development of the Neighbourhoods Model and ongoing partnership activities to create stronger communities. We would have welcomed involvement from DSFRS and consider that the DSFRS would have gained useful local intelligence to inform their analysis and planning.
- 5.5 Has DSFRS explored possibilities for joint working with the Somerset Road Safety partnership and Devon Road Safety Partnership in the planning for these changes?
- 5.6 It is suggested that DSFRS consider retaining a small fire safety vehicle at Porlock and suggest that this can be housed in a different way, not necessarily in a DSFRS owned facility. Again, this is an example of opportunities that can come with broader discussions with partners.