

**Councillor Stuart Knight – South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue
Spokesperson**

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Please Ask For Cllr Stuart Knight

2nd August 2024

Councillor Simon Ball
Elected Member

Via email: simon.ball@rotherham.gov.uk

Dear Cllr Ball

Question at Council – Wednesday 17th July 2024

Thank you for the supplementary questions asked at the Council meeting on 17th July 2024, which I agreed to provide written responses to having consulted with the Fire Authority. The responses offered by me and the Fire Authority are outlined below:

SYFR's forecast was wildly out, and the Advertiser had picked up that £1.5m was being put back into reserves. With Rotherham residents being told there was no money to provide a night-time cover and two appliances in Rotherham whilst year on year, SYFR bank more millions, why was Rotherham left with a diminished cover, despite having the money to facilitate a night shift?

The final outturn variance to budget (subject to audit) in 23/24 (reported in [June](#) adjusted in [July](#)) was £1.8m (equivalent to 2.8% of funding for the year). The largest variances were due to:

- 1) £1.206m higher Section 31 grant funding for business rates relief and inflation and more from the collection fund than budgeted,
- 2) a £1.471m reduced whole-time pay forecast and
- 3) a reduced capital financing forecast £0.471m.

Our budgets are set in February based on agreed assumptions, known funding and agreed capital plans. We are continuously improving our budgeting and forecasting processes to increase the accuracy and delivery against target, however, additional income, or changes to recruitment or retirements, or delays in capital projects will always generate some variances which we explain in our reporting.

Rotherham was getting short-changed whilst the reserves increase. If the CRMP data showed that Rotherham needed that cover, would Councillor Knight support it and could he explain to Members what the CRMP was as that it was the information was from?

SYFR Reserves as of 31 March 2024 (subject to audit) are higher than predicted at £20.1m, forecast to reduce to £15.8m by 31 March 2027. This includes nearly £3m statutory MRP reserve and £5m general reserve (a minimum recommended by the Section 151 officers and approved by FRA) and several earmarked reserves which include grants restricted for certain purposes. Within reserves we have more discretion over the £8.5m Emerging Risk Reserve (ERR), forecast to reduce to £5.4m by 31 March 2027. The ERR has been generated from previous reserves set aside which are no longer required (e.g. for pension remedy costs and rates reviews) as well as small surpluses made. In the November 2023 and February 2024 papers we proposed to retain an emerging risk reserve until we can generate a breakeven forecast position for the medium term and to mitigate financial risks and uncertainties. This approach was approved by FRA.

Reserves are not banked cash. At 31 March 2024 we had £6.3m of banked cash, we also had £26.5m of capital loans. Our Treasury Management team manage these balance daily to optimise returns and ensure we can pay our bills.

We will prepare the next medium term financial plan over the summer for FRA approval in November 2024. We anticipate revising our reserves strategy to propose using the ERR to fund capital, this will be subject to reducing financial risks over the medium term.

Why were Sheffield, Barnsley and Doncaster fully crewed and yet Rotherham was left with seemingly slower response times to its most critical of callouts?

The response standards for fire engine cover across South Yorkshire is captured within our Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP). We aim to arrive at incidents within specific times and our performance against these attendance times is constantly monitored and reported into the Fire and Rescue Authority at its Performance and Scrutiny Board.

“Within the CRMP, the service sets itself a target to attend all incidents within the specific times set out within the CRMP on 80% of occasions. Taking last year’s (2023/24) performance figures, considering all emergency incidents, SYFR arrived within the set time on 87.1% of occasions (87.7% days shift / 86.5% night shifts). Looking specifically at the performance for Rotherham, this figure was 90.2% of all incidents attended within the times set within the CRMP (92.8% day shift / 87.8% night shift). It is also worth noting that over the past five years, 82.3% of all emergency call outs the service attended within Rotherham only required one fire engine to deal with the incident. Where additional fire engines are required, these are dispatched to the emergency from other areas of the county as has always been the case.

There are occasions when one of the fire engines at Rotherham is deployed by the service to provide cover elsewhere within the county. This is either to cover safety critical training or to provide resilience. At all times, operational response is our top priority, and as such, any deployment of fire engines away from their home station is done to ensure that we respond effectively to the risks identified within our CRMP and remain as effective as possible against established response standards.

Recruitment and retention to all our on call stations continues throughout the year. Nationally, the UK fire and rescue service faces challenges in relation to on call appliance availability. SYFR has invested significant resources and financial support to ensure we achieve high levels of appliance availability. Regular recruitment campaigns have taken place at all our on call stations and the service is now seeing the benefit of this.

It can take a number of months following recruitment for this to be reflected in appliance availability due to training and development programmes. This can already be seen in the figures we have so far for 2024 which show a three month average of 62% availability in the period between January and March 2024.

Improvements to all our on call appliance availability remains a service priority and it is anticipated improvements will be delivered throughout 2024 as more firefighters complete their training and development.

Regarding overtime, South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue uses overtime to cover staffing shortages due to annual leave, absence and to cover safety critical training as required.

The service has embarked on a significant recruitment drive over the last six years to ensure that the use of overtime remains as low as possible.

During high levels of operational activity, SYFR will also use overtime to ensure appliance availability is maintained. For example, during the day of extreme heat in July 2022 which placed exceptional demand on our service and fire services across the country.”

I hope that you find this information helpful.

Yours sincerely



Cllr Stuart Knight
Wickersley North Ward
South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Spokesperson