

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD
Wednesday, 10th July, 2019

Present:- Councillor Steele (in the Chair); Councillors Cowles, Keenan and Walsh.

Apologies were received from Councillors Cusworth, Jarvis, Mallinder, Napper, Tweed and Wyatt.

The webcast of the Council Meeting can be viewed at:-

<https://rotherham.public-i.tv/core/portal/home>

255. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Robert Taylor declared a personal and pecuniary interest in item 258 (Consultation – South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service – Integrated Risk Management Plan) on the basis that he was the Chair of the South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Authority for the 2019-20 municipal year.

256. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

A member of the public referred to the proposals in the Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) which was subject to consultation by the South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service (SYFRS) and suggested that the consultation offered a binary choice of a reduction of 84 firefighters or reducing the wholetime cover to daytime staffing and night time on call staffing. In his opinion, the only realistic way forward would be to staff fire engines in a different way meaning that the number of full time fire engines would fall according to the scale of savings required. He asked whether agreement to the draft consultation document would mean several fire stations could suffer a reduction in cover without the service having to go to full public consultation. The Chair thanked Mr Carbutt for his question and indicated that he would pass it on to the South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service for response.

A further question was put by a member of the public who referred to the Fire and Rescue Authority's budget reserves of £24m and enquired whether the level of reserves held was a barrier to obtaining more funding and whether those reserves might be used differently to fund 84 frontline firefighters. The Chair thanked Mr. Nicholls for his question and indicated that he would pass it on to the South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service for response.

257. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

The Chair reported that there were no items of business on the agenda that would require the exclusion of the press and public from the meeting.

**258. CONSULTATION - SOUTH YORKSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE
- INTEGRATED RISK MANAGEMENT PLAN**

It was reported that South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Authority had commenced a consultation on a new Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP). On 21 March 2018, the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board recommended that in the event of the South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service consulting on future Integrated Risk Management Plan, it should be considered by the scrutiny committees of each of the constituent authorities to receive considered feedback (minute 124 refers). Chief Fire Officer, Mr. James Courtney, the Chair of the Fire and Rescue Authority, Councillor Robert Taylor, and the Director of Support Services at the South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service, Mr. Stuart Booth, attended the meeting to present the consultation proposals and seek feedback from Members.

Introducing the proposals, Mr Courtney explained that the public sector was in the ninth year of austerity, with local authorities and fire and rescue authorities having suffered cuts to funding in each of years prior to this. In the case of South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service, it was noted that the budget had reduced by almost 30% during that period. Mr. Courtney reiterated the changes that have had to been made as a consequence of those cuts to budgets. Whilst there had been some optimism that the financial situation was beginning to improve, but legal judgement against the Fire and Rescue Service in respect of crewing arrangements meant that SYFRS could not use a close proximity system. Compared to other metropolitan counties and service areas, South Yorkshire was well less provided for and Mr. Courtney remained concerned about cuts to the sector in the future.

In view of the foregoing, Mr. Courtney explained that it was beholden on SYFRS to develop proposals within the available budget and that was what the proposed plan sought to do. He confirmed that SYFRS would continue to seek savings from elsewhere and lobby government in respect of the ongoing financial situation. The proposal in the consultation document was to reduce ridership to four person crews. He reminded Members that SYFRS had consistently tried to protect the ability to provide an immediate response to incidents that occur within South Yorkshire. All 17 fire stations in South Yorkshire that provided response prior to the start of austerity were still providing immediate response. However, ongoing reductions to budget meant that SYFRS would be unable to maintain an immediate response if savings could not be found from elsewhere.

Mr. Courtney explained that he had contacted every Chief Fire Officer in the country to ascertain how many services were riding four person crews. He had received 17 responses in the affirmative. Up to eight other services had indicated that whilst they aspire to have five person crews, the Chief Fire Officer in those services had accepted that crews would regularly ride with four person crews. In a specific example, Mr. Courtney had consulted with Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service, which started to introduce four person crews in 2011. This was extended and the authority committed to continually evaluate the data from incidents as to whether there was any evidence that less safe with four person. Tyne and Wear had confirmed that there was no evidence to suggest that was the case. Mr. Courtney explained that the alternative to four person crews is to have significant number of whole time resource to move to daytime fully, with night time shifts following a cover model. The effect of this would be that response times at night would be significantly delayed because of the time that it would take for the personnel to mobilise, with an anticipated delay of five minutes across South Yorkshire.

In terms of monetary reserves, Mr. Courtney confirmed that these had been maintained consistently throughout the period of austerity since 2010 and SYFRS had developed a response structure that complemented the available funding. It was noted that reserves had grown as a result of the retirement profile of uniformed personnel. During the period of austerity, SYFRS' maintenance programme had been on an essential repairs only basis as a result of the uncertainty arising from the financial position. Two years ago, the Fire Authority recognised that there was an opportunity to make good investment in infrastructure that had not been undertaken for a number of years.

Concluding the presentation, Mr. Courtney explained that SYFRS had no choice but to come up with a model to fit within a reduced operating budget. Faced with the binary choice of reducing firefighters or reducing appliances, Mr. Courtney considered the introduction of four person crews on appliances to be a lesser risk so that appliances are available for use across the daytime and night time models of working.

Members requested clarification in respect of the way in which consultation would be conducted with the public. In response, it was confirmed that there would be a 12 week period of consultation which had been advertised through a variety of social media. SYFRS had engaged with local authorities, consulted local MPs and had created a dedicated webpage. Focus groups were also being arranged and conversations were taking place with other agencies with whom SYFRS did business. Mr. Courtney advised that, to date, the response had been greater than any in the past.

Reference was made to the absence of an equality impact assessment accompanying the consultation proposals. Concerns were expressed that hard to reach groups would not be able to respond to the consultation, especially groups of people that did not have English as their first language. In response, Mr. Courtney indicated that SYFRS had engaged with the local media and it was estimated that the coverage on the consultation had reached in excess of 900,000 people. In addition, Mr. Courtney committed to making the document available in any language to support individuals wanting to respond to the consultation. However, Mr. Courtney was unable to provide information on the number of people who had responded to the consultation to date, but the period of consultation would close on 3 August 2019 and responses were being monitored by the Communications Team at SYFRS.

Members referred to the consultation document and sought clarification as to whether South Yorkshire had a high density population, what high density meant in simple terms and by saying that the area was not so highly populated, what were Members meant to understand from that. In response, Mr. Courtney explained that the analysis had included all county council services in predominantly rural areas. South Yorkshire was one of seven metropolitan fire and rescue services. However, it was funded on the basis of a rural county council, despite having a population approximately twice the size of the average rural county council area. With regard to other metropolitan areas, South Yorkshire was less well provided for in a financial sense. Population density was therefore critical in Mr. Courtney's opinion as it did not serve South Yorkshire well.

Reference was made to home safety checks undertaken by SYFRS and Members sought to understand how many properties had been checked and whether progress was being made across the borough. In response, Mr. Courtney explained that he did not have the specific information to hand, but the number of inspections was increasing steadily across South Yorkshire. Whilst not as many were being undertaken on a day to day basis due to fewer people and reduced funding, partner agencies were signposting to those residents who were considered to be more vulnerable. Mr. Courtney provided reassurance that SYFRS was still committed to home safety checks programme.

Members highlighted data within the consultation document which indicated that the number of incidents requiring attendance from SYFRS were increasing, yet at the same time the number of firefighters were reducing. As the safety of the public was the paramount concern, Members sought to understand the logic behind that approach. In response, Mr. Courtney acknowledged that the total number of incidents had increased year-on-year for the past three years. He further broke down the type of incidents responded to by stations across South Yorkshire, with the busiest stations spending less time dealing with operational incidents. The key concern for Mr. Courtney was maintaining sufficient appliances to respond to issues as they arise, and the number of incidents was not a significant concern at the present time.

Reference was made to performance in respect of responding to incidents in a timely manner and it was noted that there was no target or agreed measure by which SYFRS could be held to account. In response to this observation, Mr. Courtney indicated that SYFRS was conscious of performance and six years earlier undertook consultation and sought to understand what the public thought about response times. As a result, SYFRS had proposed a risk assessed approach which would have provided a quicker response time. The public responded to indicate that they did not consider a performance measure to be a priority. Mr. Courtney indicated that every person on duty in a fire station in South Yorkshire made every effort to get to an incident as quickly as possible.

Members referred to Mr. Courtney's earlier observation in respect of the use of monetary reserves and the advice of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy. It was suggested that, as the Council had been forced to use considerable levels of reserves during austerity, SYFRS should use those reserves to maintain service provision in places like Rotherham. In response, Mr. Courtney explained that the Fire and Rescue Authority had made a decision to increase the precept each year but one since the commencement of austerity. Any decision to go beyond that level would necessitate a referendum on whether the people of South Yorkshire would be willing to pay more. It was noted that the Fire and Rescue Authority did not have the same freedoms as the Police, as fire authorities had been restricted to increases of 2.98% per annum. With regard to the assumption that additional funds could fund additional crewing in Rotherham, Mr. Courtney reminded Members that such a move was not a temporary fix. The employment of firefighters was effectively a career commitment on the part of SYFRS. Since the start of austerity, SYFRS had put affordable structures in place. It was reported that SYFRS' Medium Term Financial Plan had suggested a funding deficit of £5.2m, with an ongoing reduction in respect of financial reserves with up to £8m being allocated for use on fire stations, other appliances and operational equipment. The general reserve position of SYFRS was £5m, which was 10% of the net budget. It was reiterated that the use of reserves was not credible around the current funding position and SYFRS had received no assurances from government in respect of the ongoing funding position.

Assurances were sought that there were no PFI funded projects for fire stations in South Yorkshire. In response, Mr. Booth confirmed that there were no PFI projects. Reserves were used to rebuild fire stations. He also referred to the present debt level of £16m. At the present time, there was no intention of accruing new debt to fund investments.

Members sought to understand the length of time that the IRMP would cover. In response, Mr. Courtney explained that SYFRS intended to move away from having a fixed period plan. The proposed structure would remain in place until such a time as a change would be required in the operating model. However, Mr. Courtney was clear that this would not mean that there would never be a need to come back with a new draft IRMP and undertake a new consultation process.

Reference was made to the trend in recent decades for the number of incidents attended to increase and Members sought to understand the causes of this and what potential remedies existed. In response, Mr. Courtney stated that a slight increase had been identified in the submission of annual statistics to government. A great deal of time and effort had been expended to work out what might be causing the increase. Alongside this, extensive campaigning had taken place in respect of fires arising from the cooking of food. It was noted that there had been an issue with car fires and anti-social behaviour. Mr. Courtney speculated that the upturn may also be attributable as a consequence of austerity, as SYFRS no longer had employees specifically targeting anti-social behaviour, however he was unable to comment with certainty as to whether this was a blip or the start of a new trend. Referring to Mr. Courtney's opening remarks, Members speculated that ageing equipment could be an austerity issue. Mr. Courtney indicated that he had approached the Fire and Rescue Authority for additional funding for the estate and assets held by SYFRS.

Members referred to the present arrangements and the proposed arrangements, which seemed to improve the offer for residents across South Yorkshire, and sought to understand the respective roles of the reduced four crew members on an appliance. In response, Mr. Courtney reiterated that he would much prefer to have five crew members on an appliance and the key consideration was ensuring the safety of the operatives. It was noted that the driver tended to multi task to enable four crew members to do more. Members noted that SYFRS were happy to consider any technology that might be available to expedite processes. At the present time, SYFRS rides with four person crews on 32% of occasions.

Members sought clarification from Mr. Courtney that the authority would go back to the public to consult if there was any additional need to introduce or remove services. Mr. Courtney was happy to commit to undertaking future consultation if need required.

Members sought the views of Councillor Robert Taylor, as Chair of the South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Authority. In response, Councillor Taylor explained that the Fire and Rescue Authority would consider all of the available options following the completion and analysis of the consultation responses. Responding to a question from the Chair of the Board, he indicated that he was as satisfied as he could be with the consultation process to date and it was noted that he had attended two focus groups which had been undertaken with a wide range of individuals.

Resolved:-

1. That should it be necessary to consider additional savings to address funding pressures which may involve changes to day/night time staffing of fire engines or stations, that the Fire and Rescue Service commits to undertake a full public consultation on a refreshed IRMP.
2. That prior to consultation on future iterations of the Integrated Risk Management Plans being undertaken, that detailed consideration is given to ensuring that the consultation adequately targets 'hard to reach' groups and groups with protected characteristics and this is reflected in its consultation plan.
3. That there be no deterioration in the number/level of home safety checks undertaken in Rotherham.
4. That the Fire and Rescue Service commits to providing further detailed statistical breakdown to the district authorities on emerging adverse trends or concerns relating to performance, home safety checks undertaken and response times.
5. That should adverse trends be identified, that the Fire and Rescue Service draws up credible plans to address these concerns and these are shared with the district authorities and other relevant groups e.g. households, health partners, businesses etc.
6. That the Fire and Rescue Service and South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Authority gives full consideration to the equality analysis prior to the approval of the IRMP and demonstrates what action has been taken to mitigate any potential adverse impact of its proposals on 'hard to reach' groups or groups with protected characteristics.

259. URGENT BUSINESS

The Chair reported that there were no items of business requiring the urgent consideration of the Board.

260. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING**Resolved:-**

That the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board be held on Wednesday 17 July 2019 commencing at 11.00 a.m. in Rotherham Town Hall.