

Alex Cunningham MP

Stockton North



Councillor Robbie Payne
Chair, Cleveland Fire Authority
Endeavour House
Stockton Road
Hartlepool
TS25 5TB

Monday, 10 February 2014

Dear Robbie,

Cleveland Fire Authority's Community Integrated Risk Management

Thank you for your letter of 06 January 2014 and your invitation to comment on the Cleveland Fire Authority's Community Integrated Risk Management Plan (CIRMP).

As you are aware, the four Labour MPs across the Authority's area work extremely closely and we have discussed the Plan in considerable detail. We share the same views on the future of many services across the area and on your Draft Plan. I understand that Tom Blenkinsop has prepared his own response, so I submit this letter on behalf of Iain Wright, Andy McDonald and myself.

For our part, we have sought a meeting with the Minister responsible for the Fire Service though at the time of writing he has not acceded to our request. We will write to you again with details of the outcome of that meeting, assuming it is granted.

We are well aware of the tremendous pressure being put on the Fire Authority with unprecedented cuts imposed by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Government which also refuses to recognise the very specific challenges of our area.

It is our opinion that these cuts, to be implemented in the way that the Chief Fire Officer proposes, could have a devastating effect on our communities and the ability of Cleveland Fire and Rescue Service to fulfil their duties in what is one of the highest fire risk areas in Europe. But we recognise this isn't just about a fire service – but also rescue as well, as the recent floods illustrated. Whilst the work goes on to have such services deemed a statutory duty, the Fire Authority needs the resource to respond to these people intensive incidents, even if flood defences of the future may help ease that responsibility.

Fire Fighters and Stations

To sack 120 full time fire fighters, rely on part time, on-call or retained ones, reduce the number of appliances and close the marine fire station which serves one of the continent's biggest port and petro-chemical complexes and downgrade several others, must impact on the Fire Service's ability to maintain the excellent and cost effective service of past years. It will also damage the Fire and Rescue Service's ability to maintain the high levels of education and other preventative work which has resulted in the reduction in fires and could reverse that downward trend.

Continued...

Whilst we may recognise new ways of working could lead to the need for fewer fire fighters, we see limited scope for losing more front line professionals. The proposals from the Fire Authority around pushing services closer to communities have not been explained very well and seem to be at odds with closing fire stations.

We do not support the wide-scale replacement of full time professional fire fighters with on-call people and further fire station closures.

We know the Fire Authority will not have come up with the proposals in the Community Integrated Risk Management Plan lightly and not without many weeks of discussion and calculations but the document does not convince us that average response times will not be longer and that there is not a considerably increased risk to the safety of the public and property across the area.

Similarly, we believe there are other areas to examine in detail where savings could be made in business costs and the need for other reductions, particularly in appliances and fire fighters, reduced. Some are alluded to in the Draft Plan but there is limited financial information about how much could be saved if they were to be implemented.

Mutual Organisation

The reference to the Chief Fire Officer's ambition to create a mutual organisation is extremely brief and has no detail about how such a change could impact on the cuts faced by the Fire Authority. Whilst other parts of the proposals in the document are costed, there is no detail on which we can base a judgement about how a mutual could contribute to either cost reduction or service improvement – nor how its creation would help avoid cuts. We also note that the promised Business Plan for the mutual model is now long overdue from the time we were told to expect it.

We would hope that the absence of both the business plan and details in the Draft CIRMP Plan reflects the fact that the staff and fire fighters in particular are opposed to the idea and recognition that it would lead to the privatisation of the Service within a few short years. We would echo our earlier calls for this idea to be scrapped and for no more restricted resources to be used to develop it further.

Service Standards

The CIRMP is a comprehensive document and the explanations of activities around risk assessment and management are helpful as are the statistics and information around both statutory and non statutory activities. The service standards are generally a credit to the Fire Service. We note that the only failure, albeit a small one, was getting to property fires in high risk areas on time – with more than one in four being outside standard. This small failure was however when the Service was equipped at current fire station, appliance and fire fighter strength and we are concerned that the huge cuts in these areas will not just lead to more failures in this standard but impact negatively on others too.

We recognise that risk factors may be changing in some areas but are concerned that, with the Cleveland area still an area of high and increasing unemployment, and much higher than average deprivation factors, this is given much greater weight in assessing the risk. Those deprivation factors and the very specific industrial challenges we face in the Cleveland Fire Authority area mean we have a very special situation quite different from other areas.

Shared Services and Buildings

At the centre of all thinking about the way to reduce costs must be full collaboration with local authorities and other public services like the police including shared headquarters, shared back office services and shared training facilities. None of our local authorities or other public service providers can afford not to collaborate in a substantial way but this will be picked up in more detail later in this submission.

Continued...

We now offer some comments on some of the specific proposed areas for savings and ideas which we believe either need to be pursued or if they have already been, re-examined and costed to give a better view of alternative cuts to those currently proposed.

Governance

We welcome the review of governance arrangements to reduce the costs. Smaller bodies can be more cost effective and also make quicker decisions though the Authority would have to remain representative of the area it serves pending any future governance changes proposed by Government including the possibility of a regional service or one that could come under the auspices of a Commissioner.

The proposal for a Public Service Mutual Model of Governance has been referred to above but we would reiterate, within this specific governance section that there is but scant reference to the idea in your document and no financial information at all.

We note the work undertaken by authority members on behalf of the Community Interest Company has not been mentioned. We would like to know what costs are being incurred by the Fire Authority in the servicing of members who serve on bodies associated with the CIC and understand how these are charged to the CIC.

Executive Leadership and Organisational Review

There is no doubt that for such a relatively small Fire and Rescue Service, Cleveland appears to have a proportionally large and expensive Executive Leadership and we welcome the review of these posts and those of senior managers. Such a review needs to reflect the need to cut costs considerably by moving to the shared services and buildings model which would require fewer executives and managers who currently look after Human Resources, Payroll, Support Services and Training amongst other things.

Specific ideas on how a much smaller Executive and management structure could be developed are included below. The provision of information provided through a Freedom of Information request has shown Executive pay grow by as much as 15% for one executive and an average of 7.6% excluding the Chief Fire Officer and 5.8% including him, in two years. In cash terms this has seen the cost of existing salary packages rise from £615,539 to £652,897, some £37,000.

Even with additional duties due to the axing of a post, we would have hoped senior executives would have shown pay restraint and absorbed the duties as others in the service are expected to do.

We believe that much closer joint working with the Police will enable a further reduction in executive posts by at least one, possibly two saving between £112,000 and £136,000 – enough to save several fire fighter posts.

Add to those savings the cost of some posts at middle management level, again through the development of shared services, and even more front line services could be protected.

We note from the FOI information that the Chief Fire Officer and four Executives receive a car as part of their contracts but make a contribution for personal use. We understand that the vehicles in question are of an executive grade and would hope this would be reviewed, contracts varied and pool vehicles introduced.

Continued...

Collaborative working

We know some of our submission will feature ideas that are under discussion but we need to get beyond discussions. We are pleased that there have been some limited discussions with Cleveland Police but recognise that strong, bold decisions need to be taken by both the Police and Crime Commissioner and the Fire Authority to agree a way of working together to share a new headquarters – or community safety hub – as well as other buildings across the area. Police officers based in the community in fire stations and Fire Authority staff working within a shared control room will contribute to major cost savings.

Both services must get beyond the fear of being taken over by the other and ensure that the interests of communities are put ahead of specific interests of one or the other. Likewise there is a need to have clear and positive discussions about how facilities are paid for to ensure they can be systems can modelled to get a shared outcome.

There are many examples of collaborative working between Police and Fire Services across the country. In Durham there is a joint police and fire training centre; North Yorkshire Police and Fire have shared services; in Surrey there is three way working across the emergency services to share buildings and support services; in West Yorkshire there are neighbourhood policing teams based in fire stations; Merseyside Police and Fire Services have signed an agree for a joint command and control centre; and Dorset has shared headquarters which includes among other things a custody suite in a fire station. All these ideas will drive service improvements and lower costs.

In the Cleveland area, there could be opportunities for other shared support services with the Police or local authorities. The partnership between Stockton on Tees Borough and Darlington Borough Councils which created Xentrall has driven substantial savings, innovation and service improvement across ICT, Design and Print and Human Resources including Payroll. The development of agreements across that range of services could derive substantial savings for the Fire Authority as fewer Executives and senior managers would be required. Those savings would not just be in salary and on-costs but also the provision of vehicles and other parts of executive packages.

Community Interest Company

If the CIC, which does not appear to be making any contribution to the costs of the Fire Authority, is to continue, there is a need for full transparency of its costs, recharges, income and contribution to the overall cost of the Service. This needs to include details of any subsidised costs afforded it by the Fire Authority be that the leasing of vehicles or access to cheaper fuel. We would welcome confirmation that the Fire Authority is charging full costs for all services and goods to the CIC.

It strikes us as bizarre that an organisation which was developed to contribute to the costs of running the fire and Rescue Service enjoys the use of vehicles and other services at preferential rates – the most obvious example being the use/leasing of Fire Authority vehicles below a market rate for such a hire.

As with the Mutual idea, there is nothing of note in the CIRMP that addresses the costs/profits from the CIC and the projected contribution or cost the organisation will be to the Fire and Rescue Service.

Consultation

We would offer a brief comment at this stage on the Consultation exercise. We have seen the failure of a similar exercise in Tyne and Wear, and only hope the exercise conducted by Cleveland will result in far greater numbers of people feeding back on the proposals demonstrating that organisations and more importantly, the public, have been aware of these massive cuts to their Fire and Rescue Service.

Continued...

Thank you again for ensuring we had early sight of the documentation and proposals. We look forward to learning of the progress of collaborative working with other organisations to minimise the huge cuts being made to fire fighters and fire stations which we believe will lead to a poorer service, increased damage to property and, more importantly, more deaths and injuries resulting from fires, accidents and natural disasters.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Alex Cunningham'.

Alex Cunningham MP

Stockton Office: Unit 121, Stockton Business Centre, 70 Brunswick Street, Stockton-on-Tees, TS18 1DW

London Office: Alex Cunningham MP, House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA

London Tel: 020 7219 7157

Constituency Tel: 01642 345 291

Email: alex.cunningham.mp@parliament.uk

Website: www.alex.cunninghammp.com

Twitter: @acunninghammp