

Tom Blenkinsop MP's response to Cleveland Fire Authority's Community Integrated Risk Management Plan 2014-18 consultation

Background

1. I recognise the financial pressure Cleveland Fire Authority faces due to reductions in funding from the Conservative-led Department for Communities and Local Government.
2. The £4 million cut in funding from central government has already posed significant challenges to Cleveland Fire Authority. The £5,946,000 cumulative shortfall up to 2017/18, therefore, places fire services in Cleveland under unprecedented strain.
3. The Cleveland Fire Authority area is particularly deprived. 34 of the 82 wards in the area fall within the 10% most deprived wards outside of Metropolitan areas.
4. Cleveland also has high levels of arson.
5. Furthermore, Cleveland has a very high risk profile, due in part to major industrial sites, the presence of two power stations and a major port. Some 12% of COMAH sites nationally are situated within Cleveland.
6. Many fire authorities in the South of England have received significant increases in funding when Cleveland's has been cut. Essex has had nearly a 4% increase in its Government funding since 2010/11, Cleveland has received a cut. This is unacceptable, and the Fire Minister has not satisfactorily accounted for risk and deprivation in Cleveland and metropolitan areas.

Strategies for Reducing Risk

7. The Authority's commitment to proactively adopt strategies to reduce risks is to be commended; prevention will likely be more efficient than responding to incidents. Furthermore, prevention reduces the risk of loss of life, loss of property and injury.
8. **It is not clear what "de-centralisation of services into communities" involves. This should be clarified.**
9. The continuation of offering free home fire safety visits to everyone in the Authority Area is a welcome step. Targeting it to those at particularly high risk is also a sensible step. To assist in identifying those most vulnerable, the Authority should further work with its partners in law enforcement, local government, and social care.
10. The Fire Authority is to be praised for its steps in attempting to reduce the acute problem that is "deliberate fire setting".
 - a. The CIRMP does not explicitly discuss the essential role of Cleveland Police and other law enforcement partners in tackling this. This should be recognised, and there should be a commitment to share intelligence at both a Brigade/Force level and at more local levels.
 - b. Diversionary activities, such as 'Fire Cadets' and volunteering schemes, are also to be praised. Such diversionary activities should target intervention so as to most efficiently reduce risk.

Protection

11. The Fire Authority should, if possible, share outcomes of investigations with community safety teams in local councils on Teesside.

Risk

12. The Authority should also further integrate flood risk into its strategies, due to the expectation on the Brigade to respond to such incidences.
13. Legal and political risks surrounding the Community Interest Company and the proposed Public Service Mutual are notably lacking from the CIRMP 'horizon scanning' exercise. These should be considered.
14. Although not within the CIRMP, the Corporate Risk Register argues that the "lack of staff engagement and knowledge of Public Sector Mutuals prevents the Authority from achieving its aim of exploring the movement to a Public Sector Mutual and thus affecting the ability to deliver savings requirements without significant effect on services" poses a risk to the Brigade.
 - a. **The Authority has not yet publicly outlined how a Public Service Mutual (PSM) would deliver savings without significant effect on services.**
 - b. The efficiency of engaging consultants "to conduct focus groups and staff survey" at a time of austerity is questionable.
 - c. The Authority should not spend its limited funds to "conduct staff road-shows to explain Public Sector Mutuals" until details of the proposed PSM have been released to the public.
 - d. There is a risk that spending on consultants for a PSM will be wasted should the Authority decide a PSM is unsuitable or should employees continue to oppose it. Furthermore, it would be wasted if the Fire Minister does not legislate to allow PSMs to provide fire services, a commitment he has so far refused to give to Parliament.
15. The effects of proposed reductions in the number of stations and employees have not been discussed in "future changes to risk". This is problematic; the closure—for example—of Marine station may significantly increase the risk profiles of surrounding wards, particularly Middlehaven.

Organisational development

16. A Fire Authority Review (OD2) is welcomed. It should also review allowances paid.
17. An Executive Leadership Review (OD3) is welcome.
 - a. The Brigade currently has seven Chief Officers, of whom five work directly for the Authority. This is excessive, and could be significantly reduced.
 - b. Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service and County Durham and Darlington have far fewer Director-level staff than Cleveland. Below the Chief Fire Officer, in Tyne & Wear, there are three Assistant Chief Fire Officers. In Durham, below the Chief Fire Officer, there is a Deputy Chief Executive Officer and a Deputy Chief Fire Officer.
 - c. The Authority should commit not to further increase the remuneration of Chief Officers.
 - d. The fixed sum telephone allowance to Chief Officers should be scrapped.
 - e. Fully expensed cars should not be provided to Directors. Consideration should be given to the use of pooled vehicles instead.

- f. Further consideration of shared services should be explored. In particular, the case for sharing Directors and/or the Chief Fire Officer with neighbouring Fire Authorities should be explored. The Authority could also consider sharing Directors with the Police, NHS, or Teesside local authorities.
18. A full organisational review (OD6) is welcome, in part.
- a. Management structures need to be reviewed. The number of directorates within the Brigade should be reduced. The Authority should look at structures employed in other brigades in the region.
 - b. It is vital that prevention and protection remain central to the Brigade's work.
 - c. Consideration should be given to sharing certain technical and corporate support staff with other brigades, the Police and/or local authorities.
 - d. The Brigade should hold discussions with Cleveland Police, neighbouring brigades and the North East Ambulance Service about the merits of sharing control room resources beyond the current tri-partite arrangements outlined in ER2.
 - e. Shared services are preferable to outsourcing to private sector providers.
 - f. Trade unionists have a statutory right to time off for certain trades union activities. Reducing facilities time may lead to more inefficient outcomes, and could also hamper industrial relations.
19. The case for a Public Service Mutual (OD 4) is far from established, and may not be legally possible. The Authority should reassess whether they can justify the resources they are using to investigate potential reorganisation.
- 20. The Authority is correct to commit to “explore opportunities for sharing accommodation with other Agencies” (OD11). This is significantly preferable to capital expenditure on new buildings solely for the use of the Fire Authority.**
- 21. It is completely inappropriate to “build a new complex on Queens Meadow Business Park consisting of Administrative Headquarters, Fire Control, Learning and Development Centre and Asset Resource Centre” (OD12) when cutting fire brigade numbers and closing stations.** This should be removed from the Authority's plan.
- a. If maintenance issues necessitate a new Headquarters, consideration should be given to using existing commercial space in Cleveland.
 - b. Alternatively, consideration should be given to sharing a Headquarters, control facilities, and 'Learning and Development' facilities with the Police or a Cleveland local authority.
 - c. The Authority could also consider sharing Headquarters, and/or 'Learning and Development' facilities, with other fire brigades in the North East and North Yorkshire.

Risk management

22. The Brigade should commit to attempting to maintain existing operational response times, rather than just to life risk incidents (RM 2).
23. Potential risk should remain a consideration in the deployment of emergency response resources (RM 1). Focussing on potential risk, as opposed to actual service demand, could prevent incidents becoming even more significant.

Emergency response

Assets

24. **It is inappropriate to open four new fire stations (ER 3) whilst closing others in high-risk areas and cutting staff numbers.** Having sufficient deployable front-line resources is more important than having new buildings.
25. Capital and revenue budgets are interdependent and should not be considered distinctly. Capital expenditure impacts revenue budgets, as debts must be serviced and loans repaid. If capital expenditure occurs from reserves, this still equates to foregone income. The construction of new buildings is therefore not necessarily justifiable on the basis of the “increasing pressures on current revenue budgets” caused by old buildings, as new buildings would also cause pressure on budgets.
26. The Brigade should not be planning to spend £22million on new buildings whilst cutting jobs and closing services.
27. The Brigade should instead focus on maintaining and repairing the current accommodation, unless absolutely necessary to replace it. This could be funded through reserves.

Station configuration

28. The removal of approximately 130 whole-time posts (approximately 25% of firefighter numbers) reduces the Brigade’s ability to respond to major incidents.
29. The introduction further ‘on-call’ posts, instead of whole-time ones, is similarly unsatisfactory. On-call firefighters may have longer response times.
30. An increased move from full-time to on-call firefighters is wholly inappropriate given the massive industrial risks this area faces. Quick responses are necessary.
31. Furthermore, ‘on-call’ firefighters may struggle to receive a satisfactory overall income, as the CIC aims to take away business from private, industrial fire brigades where many retained firefighters traditionally worked.
32. Coulby Newham, Hemlington, and Stainton and Thornton have relatively high community risk profiles. Given this, where possible, the proposed reduction in staff rider-ship (ER 5) should be reconsidered.
33. Grangetown serves a very high-risk area. Whilst the introduction of a small fire unit is a welcome step, reducing crewing (ER 9) increases risks faced by firefighters and the community in this unique area. Furthermore, the proposal to remove the Trade Union representative post from the establishment will not necessarily save money, as employees working elsewhere in the Brigade may then have to take additional time off to fulfil trade union duties. Furthermore, the removal of this post reduces the ability of the Authority to actively engage with their employees and their representatives. This will damage industrial relations.
34. The dramatic reduction from 44 whole-time firefighters to 28 whole-time firefighters at Redcar and Thornaby (ER 9) is of concern. These stations service a large area with high populations, including high-risk sites such as Wilton. Given the presence of the many medium risk wards surrounding this station, and the likely pockets of high risk areas within those wards, it is difficult to agree with the view that 44 whole-time firefighters is “overprovision”

35. Closing Marine fire station (ER7), and removing its 20 fire-fighters significantly increases fire risk in wards like Middlehaven. This is inappropriate given the highest fire risk in the area.
36. It is welcomed that there is no change in deployment of resources in stations in East Cleveland, given the large geographies the stations in East Cleveland serves.

Summary

- With a few exceptions, such as changes in senior management, the Authority is proposing cuts—not efficiencies—over its staffing. Despite the fact these are cuts, the word “cuts” only appears once in the Community Integrated Risk Management Plan. The Authority should be honest with the people of Cleveland, and recognise that they are proposing cuts due to funding reductions from the Tory-led Government.
- The Authority should prioritise the retention of stations and whole-time staffing over capital expenditure in new buildings. In particular, spending on non-operational buildings—such as a new Headquarters—is wholly unsatisfactory.
- The Authority must further explore sharing buildings, management staff and non-frontline staff with Cleveland Police, local authorities in Cleveland or neighbouring Fire Authorities.
- It is counterproductive to separate ‘capital’ and ‘revenue’ spending. If the Authority were to significantly reduce the amount it plans to spend on buildings during austerity, it could reduce the number of whole-time firefighter posts it plans to cut.
- The Authority should seek to minimise the move from full-time to on-call firefighters. It is not satisfactory to replace whole-time firefighters with on-call staff, as on-call staff may take longer to respond to emergencies.
- The Authority should abandon its costly, unnecessary, unwanted and risky proposals to spin-off the Brigade as a public service mutual.