

Justice Committee

Scottish Government's Draft Budget 2016-17

Written submission from the Fire Brigades Union Scotland

SFRS Budget reductions and increased cost pressures

We believe the key motivation behind the creation of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) was to *'protect and improve local services, despite financial cuts, by stopping duplication of support services – like control rooms – and not cutting front-line services'*ⁱ

The ongoing pressures since the formation of the SFRS to seek further 'savings', with year on year continuous and substantial reductions in costs, have unsurprisingly resulted in an intensely challenging and testing period for our members. This has driven continuous change and reductions in posts with the overriding priority being to drive cost out of the system.

Economies of scale and the removal of duplication from the merger of the eight former services have mitigated some of the effects of the funding reductions. However, these have now been exhausted.

We are now very concerned that the 2016/17 budget may not take account of the significant increased cost pressures and we are therefore very concerned that the unrelenting pressure to deliver savings is now having a number of counterproductive effects and impacting on the delivery of the front line service to communities.

Reductions in front line firefighters

A Resource Based Crewing (RBC) model was jointly developed by the SFRS and the FBU in 2014 to ensure that a safe system of work can be implemented on the incident ground for all incident types as soon as practicably possible, by adopting a standard response model throughout Scotland. The primary drivers for change were the inconsistent legacy service crewing arrangements and the ongoing reductions in the service budget.

There has been a continual year on year reduction in the numbers of front line Firefighters since the decision to introduce a single SFRS was taken in 2011 due to sustained periods of recruitment freezes. There are now **over 400 fewer full time firefighters** than there were in 2010 and almost 300 fewer than there were in 2013. These reductions inevitably affect the staffing levels and the ability to adequately crew all of the frontline fire appliances all of the time.

Since the inception of a safe crewing model, ie RBC, SFRS have relied heavily on voluntary overtime to maintain the availability of appliances to respond to the everyday emergencies across the communities of Scotland.

This has led to the allocated overtime budget being overspent. In response to this, the unilateral decision was taken by SFRS to remove up to **4 front line appliances** each day in part of the West Service Delivery Area (former Strathclyde FRS) in an attempt to bring this back into balance. The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) were given very short notification of this action.

This is an unacceptable and unnecessary risk. The overtime overspend was entirely predictable given the retirement profile and recruitment freeze. The obvious conclusion is that SFRS do not have the resources available to sufficiently recruit in order to maintain sufficient firefighter numbers. We have formally responded, outlining our opposition and concerns at the decision to reduce fire cover as a result.

Unintended consequences of insufficient recruitment has been an ageing workforce in a very physically demanding occupation, little opportunity of jobs for the next generation as well as stifling attempts to improve the very limited diversity profile of the SFRS workforce. We believe the priorities of the SFRS to reduce costs and avoid spending commitments to adequately address recruitment is short sighted and misplaced and shall ultimately result in costs being stored over the longer term.

Evolution and development of the SFRS to further protect our communities

Firefighters protect our communities and critical national infrastructure responding to: Industrial disasters, Terrorist Attacks, Flood Response, Rescues from Water and Height, Chemical spills and other Civil contingencies, as well as our traditional role in responding to Fires and Road Traffic collisions.

Recent research by the Labour Research Department found that firefighters rescued a staggering 3000 people across Scotland last year. Firefighters also undertake vital education and prevention work within the community, including over 230,000 Home Fire Safety Visits since 2013, targeted to protect the most vulnerable. Firefighters also play a key role within local Community Planning Partnerships, collaborating closely with other partner agencies and the Third Sector in support of the Fire and Rescue Framework for Scotland priorities and, in particular, our 16 National Outcomes.

Discussions are also well advanced over expanding the role of the Firefighter. These are captured within specific work streams and taking place between the FBU and fire service employers in order that we can continue to meet the changing needs of our communities and businesses.

This includes:

1. Considering the Fire Service role in Emergency medical response.
In Scotland we are conducting Trials to support the Scottish Governments strategy of improving survivability rates from out of hospital cardiac arrest (OHCA) and are due to be evaluated in March 2016.
2. Optimising the Multi agency emergency response to terrorism.
Particularly significant at present due to the heightened terrorist threat alerts
3. Training with new equipment to meet the Environmental challenges of climate change.
4. Building on the success of Junior Firefighter schemes that cut youth re-offending and developing other social engagement work.
5. Reviewing and improving on the vital Fire Inspections and enforcement work the SFRS currently do.

The SFRS and Fire Brigades Union are currently therefore at the forefront of Prevention, Protection, Partnership and Response

The ultimate aim of discussions taking place on the National work streams is to enhance and develop the service that firefighters provide to the public. This is a key aim of both the SFRS and the FBU. The geographical footprint of the SFRS's 356 fire stations, 620 appliances and 895 additional vehicles leaves SFRS uniquely placed to deliver these improvements in community safety and resilience. It should be noted however that the continuing budget reductions will severely hamper the ability of the SFRS to achieve this additional and critical added value while also maintaining our core statutory duties to respond and protect our communities.

The FBU believe we need to assess the risks at a national level, in an ever changing landscape to ensure the SFRS continues to be suitably resourced with enough Firefighters who have the skills, equipment, and infrastructure to deal with them. We are gravely concerned that the cuts will continue to impact on the SFRS budget and have a detrimental effect on 999 response times and the vital lifesaving service Firefighters provide. A number of recent reports have highlighted the worrying trend of increasing incident response times and every firefighter knows that every second counts to somebody trapped by fire.

We therefore believe there should be National Response Standards set for the fire service to protect against this. The risks in our community are always changing and the job of firefighter changes with them. The Scottish Government must recognise this and ensure firefighters continue to have the resources and tools to do the job. This means the SFRS recognising that an establishment level and sufficient recruitment to maintain the agreed RBC model to maintain the availability of life saving resources 24/7 has to

be implemented. A fully and robustly established SFRS and RBC model would also reduce the reliance of costly overtime payments to maintain appliance availability.

Any further budget reductions will severely hamper the ability of SFRS to provide this additional and critical added value while maintaining our core statutory duties to respond and protect our communities. A fair funding settlement, that is in effect invest to save (both in the reduced costs of the effects of fire and other emergencies and in protecting our communities) would represent best value, is crucial to providing any enhanced service and maintaining the availability of the front line service.

The fire and rescue service costs every man, woman and child in Scotland approximately £50 every year which we believe is remarkably good value.

A recent YouGov survey found that 82% of respondents thought that the fire and rescue service was value for money. Only 4% said they thought there should be fewer firefighters, with 43% arguing for more.

Scottish Government National Outcomes state that:

*'Our public services should be high quality, continually improving, efficient and responsive to local people's needs';*ⁱⁱ

These aims are incompatible with continual reductions to budgets, financial pressures on SFRS and the reduction in front line staff.

Reductions in control rooms

One control room has already closed. Four more are also facing closure. Two of which are due to close by the end of the 1st quarter of 2015 and the remaining two by the end of 2016. They shall be replaced by three larger Service Delivery Command and Control rooms servicing the North, West and East of Scotland. This was partly to reduce costs and also to provide modernised control rooms with enhanced resilience. The closures and staffing reductions have impacted most profoundly on our women members, a number of whom have been offered and accepted early retiral/voluntary severance or been redeployed to suitable other posts with some currently displaced.

These closures shall mean less staff dealing with more Calls over larger geographical areas. This coupled with the loss of local knowledge has the clear potential to result in calls taking longer to process and errors more likely to be made. This may also result in increased response times, and inevitably Firefighters having to deal with more developed fires and incidents when they are ultimately dispatched and arrive on scene. While call handling may have been on a downward trend, evidence suggests this will quickly reverse should the SFRS expand OHCA Trials or take on an enhanced Emergency Medical Response role in future.

The FBU have agreed a staffing structure with an inbuilt early review of staff numbers for each of the new control rooms that we believe can suitably address these concerns.

However we are concerned that the delivery of key training and evaluation may be compromised by a lack of suitable funds to ensure a safe and effective transition.

The costs of additional overtime to permit robust and rigorous training and assessment for staff transferring to larger control rooms and also to provide independent quality assurance to ensure key performance indicators are being appropriately measured etc. do not appear to be provided for in the 2015/16 budget and may not be available within the 2016/17 budget. Any additional costs of providing robust resilience arrangements until the single mobilising platform is available to ensure each of the three Controls can provide mutual resilience, also do not appear to be taken account of.

This is a high risk project and there is no further transitional funding available to assist with implementing this.

We therefore believe the necessary resources need to be clearly identified and provided to address our concerns and ensure the proclaimed benefits are achievable and being delivered.

RDS Projects

Due to concerns over the availability of Retained Duty System (RDS) firefighters and volunteer firefighters to attend incidents, particularly during working hours, the SFRS has embarked on two projects to consider how this can be improved in the short term and further enhanced in the medium to long term.

These projects are considering any barriers to recruitment and retention, sustainable crewing arrangements and the costs of any proposed changes. Many of the almost 3000 RDS firefighters no longer work in the communities they provide protection for and this results in an unacceptable number of RDS Stations being unavailable during working hours. Options to address this safety critical concern are being developed and shall almost certainly require further funding. It is now difficult to envisage how any additional funding shall be available in future budget allocations to implement the options recommended by these projects. The aim to provide enhanced and essential resilience to smaller towns, rural and remote communities and the benefits of equitable access to specialist services as well as the further community benefits of an evolving SFRS may be at risk.

Middle manager reductions

There has been a sustained reduction on the number of SFRS Middle Managers (Flexi Duty Officers) available to deal with a range of vital managerial activities; enhanced community partnership arrangements and engagement, manage front line fire stations, training delivery, fire safety enforcement, operational readiness and assurance as well as to respond to incidents in support of front line crews. This has had a significant impact on workloads and our members are finding maintaining a reasonable work/life balance very challenging. The concerns are that any further budget reductions may lead

to further reductions in personnel. Particularly when current demands would actually justify an increase in numbers.

Summary

For the reasons identified in this briefing note, no further reductions in front line posts can be sustained. Further cuts will threaten the Industrial relations that presently exist and which have enabled us to engage positively and productively within the working together arrangements. As a result of good industrial relations, we have already overcome many significant challenges and played our part in achieving substantial savings while mitigating the impacts of delivering the benefits of reform. The pain and pressures our members have experienced as a result should be recognised and rewarded by a fair and measured funding settlement:

1. SFRS has already suffered disproportionate cuts of around 20% (including the £10 million VAT bill not mentioned in the report.) in comparison to other public services and considering the reduction on the Scottish Govt. budget has been around 10.5% over the same time period
2. Front line firefighter numbers have reduced by around 10% over the last 5 years.
3. Any further reductions of firefighters beyond this shall have an unacceptable impact on public and firefighter safety and our ability to continue to deliver the key benefits of reform; Improved frontline outcomes, equitable access to specialist resources, improved engagement with local Authorities.
4. The ability of the FBU to continue to engage positively with the SFRS to develop and enhance the role of firefighters to further support communities, including initiatives like the out of hospital cardiac arrest strategy, is seriously threatened by any further budget reductions.

We thank the Scottish Parliament Justice Committee for the opportunity to provide this evidence and trust this has been helpful. Please do not hesitate to contact us for any additional clarification on any of the issues we have presented in this briefing report.

Fire Brigades Union
24 November 2015

ⁱ The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, report by the Auditor General, Audit Scotland May 2015

ⁱⁱ Fire and Rescue Framework for Scotland