

Appendix D

'A Fire Brigades Union first impressions overview of the proposed closure of Bletchley and Great Holm Fire Stations to support the creation of a single 'blue-light hub' facility in West Ashland'

Overview:

On the 14th September Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service (BFRS) published a consultation document outlining its proposal to close both Bletchley fire station and Great Holm fire station and create one 'blue light hub' facility located in West Ashland. The consultation closes on the 9th November.

Over a series of meetings Fire Brigades Union (FBU) representatives conducted a preliminary consultation exercise with its members in order to collate initial views, concerns and suggestions regarding the proposed merger. The following paragraphs contain an overview of the feedback received by firefighters.

It is also very important to note that many of these firefighters, along with their family and friends, live in Milton Keynes and are residents in those areas that will be most affected by this proposed merger.

Over the course of the next two weeks, after further consultation with firefighters, the FBU will submit a more detailed submission. However, given the potential impact on both public and firefighter safety and the many serious concerns raised by BFRS firefighters it was decided to publish a brief and early summary of those views in order to try and influence the decision making process at the earliest possible stage.

Introduction:

A fire and rescue service must above all else make decisions which prioritise the safety of the public it serves.

On first viewing, this proposal does not appear to comply with this fundamental principle nor does it uphold the stated 'vision' of Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes fire authority to ensure:

'Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes are the safest places in England in which to live, work and travel.'

The Fire Brigades Union has very serious concerns about the detrimental impact on public safety this proposal will invariably have for a large number of citizens living, working and travelling in Milton Keynes.

In particular, the proposed re-location of Great Holm Fire Station from its current site in Great Holm to the proposed new site in West Ashland will without question significantly increase the time it takes for a fire fighters to respond to emergencies in areas of Western and Northern Milton Keynes.

In the following paragraphs the FBU will briefly outline some initial views and concerns regarding this proposal.

1. Increased risk to public safety:

Any change, or proposal to change, by a fire and rescue service must ensure that it provides communities the best possible fire service provision with the available resources.

The focus of service provision is the front line. It is the fire stations, fire engines, the professional and highly trained firefighters and their many pieces of life saving equipment that are called upon to provide a prompt response to any given emergency in order to carry out a potentially lifesaving intervention.

Any proposal, such as this one, that jeopardises or compromises the effectiveness and efficiency of the front line emergency response the public demand, fund, and rightfully expect, must be robustly challenged.

If enacted this proposal will result in many citizens living, working and travelling in Milton Keynes having to wait significantly longer for a fire fighters to arrive at an emergency.

It is factually incorrect and misleading for the fire service to state, as they do, within the consultation document that there will be no adverse impact on public safety and fire service provision.

It may seem to some as a bit of a cliché to say that ‘every second counts’ but in the context of an emergency, the time it takes for firefighters to get to an emergency and carry out a rescue is critical. An emergency can and does include a wide variety of incidents such as a fire, vehicle accidents, water rescue, and many more.

Speed and weight of a front line response matter so much that in the most extreme circumstances it can be the difference between life and death. It could also mean confining a fire to a single room of origin such as a kitchen or losing the entire property. For a business it could be the difference between a couple weeks with closed doors or a few months with closed doors.

Fire stations are situated in locations best placed to minimise as much as possible risk by ensuring an effective and necessary speed and weight (amount of resources required) of response.

The current location of Great Holm supports the existing risk profile of Milton Keynes. It is also well situated given the plans for the Western Expansion of Milton Keynes with approximately 6,500 dwellings being built on land close to Great Holm along the V2 (Watling street). The proposed Western Expansion will be comparable in size to Buckingham.

FBU members strongly believe that this particular aspect of the proposal, the re-location of Great Holm fire station, is unnecessary, misguided and should immediately be removed.

2. Firefighter safety:

Firefighter safety and public safety are inextricably linked.

As previously mentioned, any delay in getting to an emergency such as a house fire is likely to have serious consequences for any persons that may be trapped in the property. Conversely, a delay in the time it takes for a fire engine to respond to the same incident will result in firefighters having to deal with an incident which is much more protracted, and with more extreme and developed fires posing a greater risk to their safety.

The workplace of firefighters will become more dangerous if this proposal is implemented in full particularly in northern and western areas of Milton Keynes.

In higher risk areas such as Wolverton, Stony Stratford and surrounding communities where there have been numerous significant fires in the last few years, the attendance times will be doubled which will increase risk to public and firefighter safety.

3. A financial necessity?

As previously discussed, any change to fire service front line provision must make sure that it does not have a detrimental impact to front line lifesaving provisions unless there is absolutely no alternative, a last resort, due to matters outside of a fire service's control such as budgetary pressures which are unable to be resolved by any other means.

BFRS has over the past 5 years saved on average over two million pounds each year. That is two million pounds every year that is being directed away from fire stations and front line resources.

These considerable savings have in the best part been achieved through reductions in the number of front line firefighters. BFRS have already implemented the biggest cuts in the history of the Service with a reduction of over 100 full time firefighter posts in the last 5 years.

There is no evidence to suggest that this merger is a necessary because of an absolute financial imperative, and there being no other alternative options available.

In fact, it will cost the fire service millions of pounds to enact. Any long term cost savings from the proposed merger would be achieved by a further reduction in the number of front line firefighters.

4. Insufficient information to support a meaningful consultation:

There is a considerable lack of statistical data, evidence and analysis for members of the public to fully understand what impact this change will have for them particularly in relation to safety and risk levels.

There are no accompanying risk and impact assessments to best quantify the impact this proposed merger will have on public safety and fire service provision.

The maps in the document support the argument that this proposal will invariably have a detrimental impact on public safety due to an increase in response times. But there is little in the way of real data and evidence for the public to importantly understand, and be able to measure, exactly how this increase in response times will directly affect their safety.

BFRS must as a matter of urgency provide this fundamental information.

There is insufficient information to support a meaningful consultation process, and one which actively encourages widespread participation with informed and constructive feedback.

5. Unclear as to what the actual benefits of the merger are for MK communities:

The consultation document is vague and does not clearly identify the absolute need to merge these two Milton Keynes stations and consequently increase risk to public safety.

It fails to provide clear and detailed information as to what the benefits actually are for closing two stations and relocating them to one site. Especially as this decision will result in many Milton Keynes residents receiving a worse fire service provision.

It is not obvious, as the document is incredibly vague, but it would seem that the main benefit resulting from this proposal is that a new blue light hub facility would provide facilities for community groups such as meeting rooms and also make it easier for firefighters to train with other blue light services.

I'm sure the public would rather the focus of the fire service be on ensuring the best possible front line response to minimise risk and promote safety.

A community resource facility and greater collaboration with other blue light services is a positive approach but it should not be prioritised over public and firefighter safety.

Furthermore, both of these aspirations can be achieved without closing and merging the existing stations.

There is space at both Bletchley and Great Holm fire stations to support greater community engagement. Also, In order to train and work closely with other emergency services does not necessarily require that you share a premises with them.

6. Have important decisions already been taken regarding this merger that will limit the ability of the public, stakeholders and other groups to influence the decision making process?

The fact that BFRS have already been successful in their bid for government grant money (£2.8 million) specifically to build this site does bring into question the 'genuineness' of this consultation exercise and whether decisions that have already been made will undermine the ability of the public to truly influence the outcome of this process.

It is very important that in the interest of transparency and fairness that BFRS release all documents relating to the awarding by the government of grant money to build this facility. The consultation document refers to BFRS being awarded the money to build this new site based on a 'speculative' bid. Was the speculative nature of this bid made clear to the government?

7. Reduction in incident numbers = reduction in risk?

It is true to state that over the past 10 years there has been a considerable reduction in the number of incidents/emergencies that BFRS respond to.

However, although there are fewer incidents overall there has in recent years been little or no reduction in the numbers of emergencies where there is a higher risk to person and property such as accidental dwelling fires and road traffic collisions.

The last five years has seen an upward trend in numbers of people being rescued from fire, road traffic collisions, and flooding.

In fact, last year BFRS reported the highest number of fatal casualties for over 10 years. The numbers of non-fatal casualties for the last two years were also the highest they have been for over 10 years.

The majority of the reduction in incidents is due to having fewer types of incidents which pose much less risk to life and property such as car fires, hoax calls, secondary fires and false alarms.

As previously discussed, the consultation document as it currently stands contains no statistical information or analysis to support the argument that this proposal is safe or will not adversely impact on service provision.

7. Impact on the retained duty system (on-call firefighters):

'On-call' firefighters are very important constituent part of any fire and rescue service.

These firefighters are available to respond to an emergency from their homes or places of work. They are notified of an emergency via a pager and promptly respond to their designated fire station.

Because of the importance of a quick response to any emergency these firefighters are required to live and work within a five minute radius of their designated fire station.

Both Bletchley and Great Holm fire stations currently benefit from two retained fire engines and a compliment of professional 'on-call' firefighters living and working in the communities close to the current fire stations.

The consultation document makes no mention of the impact the proposed merger will have on the retained duty system. The new site in West Ashland is a considerable distance away from Great Holm and also to an extent Bletchley.

This will greatly increase the time it takes for these firefighters to respond to the new site and provide essential cover and response when necessary.

It is surprising that the significant and detrimental impact this proposal will have on the retained duty system receives no mention at all in the consultation document.

BFRS must provide the necessary information to explain and evaluate what impact this merger will have on the retained duty system.

8. Longer consultation period

An 8 week consultation is not long enough to support a full and meaningful consultation on such a significant proposal which has significant a far reaching impact on many citizens living, working and travelling in Milton Keynes.

A 12 – 16 week period would ensure a more thorough and involved consultation process.

Conclusion: based on the initial views at this early stage of the consultation

- If introducing change, for whatever reason, a fire and rescue service is obligated to prioritise public safety and make sure that any change maintains the best possible front line fire service provision. Any unnecessary increase in risk is a failing in the duty of a fire service, is not acceptable and must be challenged.
- The re-location of Great Holm fire station will increase risk levels for members of the public living, working and travelling in Milton Keynes.
- Firefighter's safety will also be jeopardised under this proposal. The increase in response times will mean that firefighters will be attending fires which have had an extra 5-10 mins to develop and increase in intensity.
- There is no evidence to support that this change is necessary because of financial constraints. On the contrary, the large scale cuts BFRS has made of the past 5 years has produced savings in excess of 11 million pounds. By reducing the front line (mainly firefighter numbers) the fire service has saved far more than the amount by which the overall budget has been reduced.
- The consultation document is seriously lacking in fundamental information to support a meaningful consultation process. The public must have a better understanding of the direct impact this proposal will have on their service provision and safety.
- The document does not explain in any detail what the substantive benefits of this proposal are and why it can only be achieved by closing two fire stations to the detriment of public safety.
- It is true to say that overall incident numbers are declining. However, those incidents which pose the greatest risk to life are not reducing in number and in some instances, such as fire deaths and fire related injuries, are in fact increasing.
- The FBU in principle supports increased collaboration and co-location between emergency services but not when it compromises fire service provision and consequently public safety.

- There is no mention of the impact this proposal will have on the retained duty system and what BFRS are proposing to do to address this very important point.
- 8 weeks is not a sufficient period of time to support a meaningful consultation exercise on such a significant proposal which impacts on front line service provision for many MK residents.

Initial recommendations:

- Remove the proposal to re-locate Great Holm in the interests of public and firefighter safety.
- Continue to examine the feasibility of re-location of Bletchley fire station. However, it is vital that this aspect of the proposal is properly substantiated with information (data, statistics, risk and impact assessments) to support a meaningful and informed consultation exercise.
- Ensure that the public are able to put forward an informed contribution by providing comprehensive statistical analysis about the potential impact this proposal will have on public safety. Including, risk assessments, impact assessments, incident data and all other relevant statistical data and evidence.
- Provide information to accurately evaluate the impact for the retained duty system.
- Extend the consultation time frame to 12 – 16 weeks.
- To support a wider consultation exercise a number of open meetings should be arranged within those communities most affected by this proposal including, but not exclusive, to Stony Stratford and Wolverton.
- To support the principles of openness and transparency, publish all documentation relating to the 'speculative' application for, and the subsequent awarding of, government funding for this blue-light hub facility.

If you have any questions regarding the above consultation submission, or wish to meet and discuss any of the content please contact either of the FBU officials below.

Greg O'Neill

FBU Brigade Secretary

James Wolfenden

FBU Regional Secretary