

P-06-1363 Save our Fire and Rescue Service, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 03.10.23

Clwyd West MS Darren Millar has objected to all of three of the options North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority put forward in their consultation on the future provision of emergency fire and rescue service cover in North Wales.

Darren is concerned that all three options would lead to a reduction in cover at Rhyl Fire Station and in his response to the consultation has told the Authority that as such he is unable to support any of the options.

He also urged the Authority to consider the alternative option being proposed by firefighters.

His response states:

“While I applaud the Fire and Rescue Authority’s ambition to increase the ability to respond to incidents at more households within 20 minutes, I regret that I must strongly object to all of three of the options in the consultation document on the basis that they would all lead to a reduction in cover at Rhyl Fire Station.

“As you will be aware, crews in Rhyl provide cover for many of my constituents in the Towyn and Kinnel Bay area. This area has the largest number of households in Wales at risk of flooding and the population rises from around 10,000 to 70,000 in the summer months due to the large number of holiday caravans in the area.

“The catastrophic Towyn floods on 1990 are still etched into local memory and, should there ever be a repeat of such a major incident then it is critical that fire and rescue response crews are on hand immediately to assist, particularly if a flood took place at night during the visitor season.

“Holiday caravan fires can also be devastating and the density of these on some local holiday parks, along with the huge increase in the population during the visitor season does not appear to have been considered by the Authority in developing its proposals.

“Having discussed your proposals with local firefighters it would appear that, in their professional opinion, there is an alternative to the options in the consultation paper which is yet to be explored by the Fire and Rescue Authority which would enable the retention of 24/7 cover in Rhyl and increase the number of households able to receive a 20 minute response beyond those in your options while still creating three new hub stations to serve rural North Wales. I understand that the cost of the alternative is likely to add around £20 per annum to the annual precept which is literally less than the cost of a packet of peanuts each week for a year.

“Given the above, I would urge the Fire and Rescue Authority to consider the alternative option as a matter of urgency.”

I have also attached some further reading below which will give some background.

The reason the Fire Service is requesting £1000,000 from each Authority is because they have forecasted a budget deficit of £6,000,000 for the year 24/25. This is purely a forecast and is based on a number of factors.

Inflationary Pressures – These have been felt across all sectors and households and it is difficult to gauge exactly how much this has increased costs for the Service;

Energy Costs – Similar to inflationary increases but how much extra has it added to the bills?

The Firefighter pay award – The Service budgeted for 4% but it ended at 7%. This meant they had to find an extra

The new £48 million training facility – Fire Service management want to build a new training centre. They have forecasted £48 million and £1.1 million of the £6 million deficit is needed to pay JUST THE INTEREST ALONE on an initial £25 million loan. The £25 million capital will not reduce and the Service intend to take out an additional £20 million and £3 million in the coming years. This initial £25 million burden has been approved by our Fire Authority Members, hence why it is added to the budget deficit. ***It is worth noting that Cheshire Fire and Rescue built a new state of the art training centre, way and above what we need in North Wales, and it cost them £11.9 million.

Wastage and a culture of Spending – An over reliance on overtime (increased rates), buying “the best of the best kit”, constant renewal and upgrade of fire engines (the ones we have are fine), leasing buildings when we have ones we own, an abundance of white fleet vehicles, fruitless initiatives (the current consultation is expecting to cost £120,000+), a 3-fold increase in non-operational staff, creation of new departments (Finance), legal fees have increased and just recently, a massively costly project called The Direct Entry Scheme (£160k for 1 person).

Under the administration of the previous Chief Fire Officer Simon Smith, there was never an overrun-on budget and in some occasion, an underspend was achieved. It has only been in the last 2 years where we have seen this loosening of the purse strings.

Less than 2 years ago, the Chief Fire Officer requested £2.4 million extra from the Fire Authority to undertake a re-organisation of the Service management structure. The net result of this “re-organisation” was that every single manager from Station Manager through the Chief Fire Officer all received an above inflationary pay rise. This hadn’t been requested by any manager nor had it formed part of an annual pay award. This was an overnight uplift in all of their wages. Operational Firefighters received a selection of chocolates.

On Tuesday, Gwynedd Cabinet wrote to the Chief Fire Officer asking her to undertake a review of senior manager positions. They have identified that we as a medium-small fire service, serving a population 700,000 population, have the same, or in some cases, more managers than large metropolitan brigades. We are top-heavy in managers.

North Wales has the following:

1 x Chief Fire Officer
1 x Deputy Chief Fire Officer
4 x Assistant Chief Fire Officers (2 post currently vacant)

The combined cost for these 6 posts is in the region of £1 million. The Service has been operating with the 2 vacant positions for a number of months but intend filling them after the consultation. This is a cost of around £300,000. Frontline operational response is under threat and underfunded and yet principal posts are seemingly essential.

I will finish with the current costs of the Options that have been put out for consultation. Each one involves a decline or downgrading of operational response, in an attempt to prop up other failing areas. Each Option comes at a cost to the Tax Payer.

Option 3 - £1 increase per household per annum (70+ job losses, 5 station closures, downgrading 24hrs stations and loss of an appliance at Wrexham)

Option 2 - £1.43 increase per household per annum (downgrading 24hr stations, loss of an appliance, slower response to incidents in Clwyd area)

Option 1 - £1.68 increase per household per annum (downgrading Rhyl/ Deeside)

Option Growth - £2 increase per household per annum (maintain all standards of current cover but also open 3 stations in rural areas and create 20+ new jobs, investing in communities and massively improving response times across the region).

At the public consultation last week in Conwy, when the attending public were offered a Growth option (it can be re-branded if growth in a time of constraint is not palatable) voted unanimously for it. 100% agreement and appetite to pay for an improved service.

It is less than a pint of milk a month over Option 1.

Regards

Gavin Roberts