



RESCUE SUFFOLK FIRE

MP & Public Briefing

Introduction

Since 2010 central government funding to the UK Fire & Rescue service has been reduced by 40 %. This has meant:

- **1 in 5** firefighters lost
- **Dozens** of fire stations closed
- Fire engines scrapped
- Emergency rescue equipment slashed
- First fire engines arrive at scene on average **2 minutes** slower
- Firefighters have lost around **12%** in real wages

The public expect firefighters to respond rapidly and in high numbers, to effectively save life, property and render humanitarian aid at a wide range of emergency incidents. But are the Suffolk public aware that there are fewer firefighters and fire engines behind those big red doors? Are they aware that some of the fire engines behind those doors do not have dedicated crews to operate them?

Slower response times, as a result of cuts, could be the difference between life and death. Despite improvements to fire safety, the number of incidents firefighters attend is still rising. In 2016/17, the UK fire and rescue service attended:

- **Over 700,000** incidents in total
- **Over 150,000** fire incidents
- **Over 200,000** non-fire incidents (including at least 15,000 floods)
- **Over 40,000 rescue incidents** (equating to 100 rescues per day)

As smaller budgets are handed down from Central Government to local Fire Authorities, Police & Crime Commissioners & County Councils – It is left to local governance models, advised by senior fire service managers, to distribute the funds and decide how to deliver the statutory duties of the fire service locally. In the absence of national standards, abolished in 2004, this has seen the quality of emergency fire & rescue response received by our communities become a post code lottery. **Suffolk County are losing that post code lottery.** As local fire & rescue services are having to find ways of balancing reduced budgets, Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service (SFRS) are choosing to strip the front line emergency service, lessen safe systems of work and firefighter welfare and conditions disproportionately to non-essential services and compared to neighbouring fire brigades. This briefing aims the outline how.

Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service

In attempts to find savings, SFRS have looked to the emergency frontline service and firefighter terms and conditions, in a way we aren't seeing in other fire services in the region. Fire service managers have delivered & imposed cuts in such a way that Suffolk Firefighters & Control Staff struggle to provide the same fire cover that we see in neighbouring Cambridgeshire, Essex & Norfolk. **A life in Suffolk isn't worth less than elsewhere. Why do Suffolk residents receive a lower level of fire & rescue response than their eastern region neighbours?**

Unsafe Fire Crew Levels

SFRS have imposed dangerous reduced crewing levels of only 3 firefighters on many fire stations. SFRS's own safe working practices & Fire Brigades Union policy advise crews of 5 as a safe minimum, with dropping to 4 being tolerated in extreme & unforeseeable circumstances. This is supported by national guidance requiring that sufficient personnel are mobilised to emergency incidents. SFRS managers are ignoring all health & safety and professional advice, including their own staff, by way of the reduced crewing policy.

Neighbouring Cambridgeshire, Essex & Norfolk Fire & Rescue Services maintain crews of 4 & 5. **A crew of 3 firefighters is not enough to take offensive lifesaving action at a house fire or road traffic collision.** It merely provides for artificial stopping of the clock on response time statistics.

When considering the professional guidance, moral pressure and societal expectation placed on firefighters to act once in attendance, Suffolk Firefighters' health, safety and welfare is being seriously compromised.

More information can be found in the attached appendix 1: all members circular, 11th Feb 2019

Suffolk Emergency Fire Response Times

In **2009/10** response times in Suffolk were on average **10mins 19 secs**. In **2017/18** these figures increased by **41 seconds** to an average of **11mins**. This means that Suffolk residents are waiting on average **7% longer** for a fire engine to arrive in an emergency situation. In an emergency situation seconds cost lives. This is the **worst** response time in the East of England and one of the **worst** in the UK.

Risk Critical Training

Firefighting is an incredibly high risk occupation. These risks can be mitigated by the funding and provision of appropriate training. Firefighter numbers in Suffolk have been consistently cut since 2010, severely reducing resilience levels. It is true to say that this is consistent with dropping establishment levels nationally, yet we are seeing the vital training of Firefighters adversely effected in Suffolk in a manner that we aren't across the rest of the Eastern region.

Suffolk Firefighters are now forced to attend risk critical training such as swift water rescue on their days off if they hope to maintain safe operational levels for themselves and the public they serve. Not only is this hit & miss approach to risk critical skills maintenance unsustainable and dangerous, it creates huge pressure on Firefighter work life balance as they are now demanded to sacrifice their days off for no financial recompense, often creating family and child care difficulties. SFRS managers argue that they can't afford the cover to train Firefighters in this activity whilst on duty.

Initial basic recruit training has now been reduced to just 6 weeks, this simply isn't enough when we consider 12-18 weeks is required in neighbouring brigades. We are also seeing the delivery of specialist appliances, such as aerial ladders used for rescues at height, severely compromised due to lack of training.

In addition to this, SFRS have now stated they wish to remove the requirement to complete risk critical breathing apparatus training from operational officers for similar financially driven rationale. This is not a practice we see in neighbouring brigades and is counter to national guidance.

Industrial Relations

Suffolk Fire Brigades Union are the professional voice of firefighters representing the vast majority of SFRS emergency front line staff. SFRS management refuse to abide by contractual obligations to discuss these changes, or how we can improve them, with Suffolk FBU representatives. Industrial relations between staff and management have ups and downs in other Eastern Fire Services, yet none are as fractured, unprofessional and ignored as in the county of Suffolk.

National collective agreements, such as consultation & negotiation protocols, are consistently ignored and SFRS management continue to force through recklessly imposed contractual changes and working practices without obtaining or listening to the views of their employee representatives.

Summary

At a time when the demand on our service is on the increase, SFRS management and governance are delivering ill thought through and dangerous cuts severely effecting the emergency front line service that Suffolk communities receive along with the professional women and men that deliver it. The dangerous and detrimental policies and working practices being imposed by SFRS managers are unlike any others we are seeing across the Eastern region.

Suffolk residents are now waiting longer for a fire engine to arrive, and when it eventually does, it's now possible it will only have a reduced crew of 3 Firefighters on it, too few to effect rescues, with those crews being likely to have reduced or difficulty accessing the appropriate training as mentioned above.

Either Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service is underfunded to provide a fit for purpose service, in which case it is the duty of the Chief Fire Officer to make the public and governance body clearly aware of the dangers. Or Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service has adequate funding but Senior Management, through negligence or incapability, is unable to provide the emergency service Suffolk residents should expect and deserve.

It isn't right that Suffolk residents receive a worse standard of fire cover and emergency response than the rest of the region.

It isn't right that Suffolk firefighters are being asked to work to less safe standards than the rest of their eastern colleagues.

It isn't right that the professional voice of Suffolk's Firefighters are being ignored

Next Steps

Members of Parliament & Councillors

We call on you to sign our statement of support, stating that enough is enough and Suffolk residents and its Firefighters deserve better – at the very least in line with other fire and Rescue Services in the Eastern region. <https://www.megaphone.org.uk/petitions/rescue-suffolk-fire>

We call on you to use your office to write to Suffolk County Council & SFRS managers to highlight your concerns and demand action be taken immediately to improve the situation in Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service. These demands should include:

- The immediate cessation of the dangerous & life threatening *Reduced Crew of 3* policy
- An immediate review into how we can improve emergency fire attendance times in Suffolk without detrimentally affecting the health & safety or terms & conditions of Suffolk Firefighters.
- An immediate review into the delivery of risk critical training in Suffolk to ensure it is delivered and that it is delivered appropriately without staff having to sacrifice their work life balance
- A review of how budgets are allocated to the emergency front line service in comparison with back room projects
- That SFRS adopt a professional approach and start to listen to staff and their elected representatives and abide by nationally agreed, collective, contractual agreements

Members of the Public

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Write to your local Cllrs & SFRS managers to highlight your concerns and demand action be taken immediately to improve the situation in Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service.

Suffolk firefighters have always been there to rescue people in their time of need, now we ask you to take action and help us **#RescueSuffolkFire**