

NORTHUMBERLAND

Northumberland County Council

Press Release

21 March 2016

Council agrees changes to fire and rescue service

Northumberland County Council today (Monday 21 March) agreed to implement proposed changes to the fire and rescue service following a 12 week consultation.

The Service has to cut £500,000 from its budget in 2016/17, on top of the £1.5m already cut over the last two years, as a result of reductions in the Council's budget by central Government. Further cuts are expected, with the Council facing an 82.4% cut in its core funding over the next four years.

The proposed changes, which will now be implemented, were agreed at the Council's Cabinet meeting. They are to:

- Instigate flexible staffing policies to improve cover
- Remove the retained fire appliance from West Hartford Community Fire Station (it will continue to have two wholetime fire appliances)
- Change the second fire appliance at Alnwick and fire appliances at Ponteland, Seahouses and Wooler to smaller fire appliances
- Close Haydon Bridge Fire Station (cover to be provided by Hexham, Haltwhistle and Allendale)
- Increase collaboration with partner fire and rescue services/agencies
- Use a range of considerations to deliver the £500,000 of cuts required to minimise the impact on front-line services

There would be:

- No change to wholetime firefighter posts
- No change to Pegswood (wholetime and retained services), West Hartford (wholetime service)
- No change to Hexham, Berwick (day staffing/retained services)
- No change to the retained service at Allendale, Alnwick (first fire appliance), Amble, Belford, Bellingham, Haltwhistle, Prudhoe, Rothbury and Holy Island Garage
- No change to special appliances
- A fleet of 21 emergency response appliances remains
- No change to the support fleet (i.e. 4x4s)

- Minimised impact on retained staffing reductions by using Council redeployment/vacancies/voluntary redundancy, retained to wholetime process
- Continued current £7 million plus capital investment in new fire stations in Alnwick and Hexham
- Increased prevention/community safety work in affected areas i.e. fitting smoke alarms/home fire safety checks

Dave Ledger, chair of Northumberland Fire and Rescue Authority and deputy leader of Northumberland County Council, said: "This consultation has been one of the most difficult we have carried out. No one wants to make cuts to such an important, much loved, respected service with professional hard working staff who risk their lives on a daily basis. This has been strongly expressed during the consultation process.

"However no viable alternatives have emerged or been suggested during this time.

"Cutting the budget for the fire and rescue service is not something we want to do – especially on top of the cuts already experienced by this vital service. That's why the Council is already subsidising the cost of the service - however the Council's core budget is being cut by 82.4% over the next four years.

"To say I am concerned about the future is an understatement. We simply have no choice. The Government, which incidentally said fire and rescue authorities were coping well with budget reductions, keeps saying we have choices – well I'd like them to tell us what the choices are. We are already protecting this vital service from more severe cuts by funding extra from the wider Council budget, but that is being significantly cut.

"I would like to know what our Conservative councillors are doing with their Government to try to get better funding for our fire service."

Alex Bennett, chief fire officer for Northumberland Fire and Rescue, said: "The safety of the public and our firefighters is our number one priority.

"Like Councillor Ledger, having to make these cuts is not something I or any firefighter wants to do. We have already reduced the number of wholetime full time firefighter posts, our management and back office function.

"In developing these proposals we carried out detailed analysis and used our professional expertise as firefighters to ensure that the required cuts are made in a way which has the least impact on our communities. We have looked in detail at incidents our firefighters have attended and the risks; such as flooding and the east coast rail line, as well as the cover provided by our fire stations.

"We have also analysed the location of incidents and which firefighters and stations have attended them - this is to ensure there is effective cover across the whole of the county.

"Incidents have also reduced significantly over the last ten years and thankfully people are safer than ever before from fire.

"Following the implementation of these proposals we will continue to have 21 emergency response vehicles across the county and, through the introduction of

smaller fire appliances, in some areas we will be able to increase the cover we provide."

The Council will work with those retained firefighters directly affected, some of whom are already full time firefighters, to minimise redundancies, looking at a range of HR procedures such as re-deployment and the retained firefighter to wholetime firefighter process. No wholetime firefighters posts are affected.

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