

HUW MERRIMAN MP
(Bexhill and Battle)



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Deputy Chief Fire Officer Mark O'Brien
East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service
HQ Church Lane
Lewes
East Sussex
BN7 2DZ

Our Ref: HM16210
26 June 2020

Dear Deputy Chief Fire Officer O'Brien,

Re: Planning for a Safer Future - Consultation on Fire Authority's Future Plans

Thank you for providing the opportunity to respond to the above consultation. I apologise for my late reply; it has taken some time to collate concerns from constituents, local firefighters, a local FBU representative amongst my other work priorities.

I very much welcomed the meeting we had at the start of the consultation process in which you set out the background to the consultation and explained the recommendations the IRMP contains.

My first concern about this consultation is with regards to its timing. Whilst I note your reasons for not wishing to delay the consultation i.e. the pressing need for an up to date IRMP for ESRFS, I do think that the pandemic situation should have led to a pause in process for two key reasons:

1. The ability for the public and stakeholders to fully consider and respond to the proposals within your timescales
2. The role of the ESRFS has been expanded during COVID-19 to cope with the national emergency

With regards to point 1 above, I know that my workload and that of my small team has quadrupled during COVID-19. It has therefore been challenging for me to study the proposals and seek further information about the impact of them from interested parties. It is especially important that I was able to do so as 3 of the fire stations and staff impacted by the review are within my constituency of Bexhill and Battle – Bexhill, Battle and Heathfield. I am sure that many other stakeholders would have had faced

similar challenges so I am not confident that the consultation will result in the number or quality of responses it would have received under normal circumstances.

With regards to point 2 above, I know that ESFA has regularly examined ESFRS to ensure that it efficiently and effectively meets its responsibilities in responding to incidents and it has continued to expand its work on education and prevention. More recently ESFRS has played an active and critical role in the response to COVID-19. This has presented the service with a unique opportunity to examine whether any of its recent COVID-related work is likely to lead to new responsibilities or work which the service would like to continue and will therefore need resourcing. My view is that it would be that sensible to pause and reflect on the changes this may bring and incorporate the outcome in the IRMP. On this point, the new proposals which will lead to the cut of 30 wholtime firefighters. If we experience another national crisis like COVID-19 would ESFRS have the staffing capacity to support the Local Resilience Forum as it has done so this year under the new proposals? What resilience against unanticipated events have you built in to the new IRMP?

The safety of my constituents is paramount to me, as I know it is to ESFA. I am therefore concerned about the proposal to reduce the number of fire engines at Bexhill Fire Station from two to one and to change the crewing model from 'day crewed' from 08.30 to 18.30 7 days per week to 5 days per week leaving the weekends and evenings 'on-call' I understand that ESFRS data does not demonstrate that there are less incidents on weekends, in fact, Saturdays are the busiest days according to ESFRS data. The consultation document states that on evenings and weekends "it may take slightly longer to get to you." Could you please quantify "slightly longer" in minutes so we are clear what the delay in response time would be for my constituents?

My concern is based on the demographic profile of Bexhill which has a high proportion of vulnerable residents unable to self-rescue: 9% of the population is aged 80-89 and 3% aged over 90. There are more retired people in Bexhill, 24% of the population compared to the average of 15% in the rest of the ESFRS area and the general health is poorer (likely to be related to age).

Local firefighters inform me that whilst Bexhill station attended 519 incidents in 2017/18, this figure does not include the incidents the station has attended in neighbouring towns and villages or the number of standby moves to support another fire station. Bexhill Fire Station's own records show that they were actually mobilised 949 times in 2019. Whilst I fully agree with the IRMP's proposal to increase the number of fire engines at Hastings Bohemia Road in order to better manage the higher risks identified in the town, I am not currently convinced that removing an engine from Bexhill is the best option.

This brings me to a further concern regarding the proposed resourcing of Hastings Bohemia Road Fire Station. I understand that the crewing model for Hastings Bohemia Road, allows for one fire engine and one Aerial Ladder Platform (ALP) to attend a local incident. Additional fire engine support for a major incident is currently provided by neighbouring stations, often Bexhill. However, the IRMP proposal to locate two fire engines at Hastings fire station retains the current crewing numbers. I believe this will mean that if two fire engines are required to attend an incident, the ALP could not also be crewed. The next nearest ALP would have to be sent from Brighton. The reason



this is a concern is because East Sussex ranks 6th in the country for high rise residential buildings over 18 metres, with 358 buildings. Following Grenfell, other fire and rescue services in England with a high proportion of high-rise properties are primary crewing Aerial Ladder platforms rather than share crewing them as the IRMP proposes. I know ESFRS has received additional government funding totalling £510,235.71. This was announced on 29 April by a letter to MPs from Lord Greenhalgh, Minister for State for Building Safety, Fire and Communities at Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government and Home Office. This was formed of two grants aimed at ensuring fire safety in high rise buildings over 18m. I would be grateful for your comments on how these grants will be utilised to protect my residents, many of who are elderly, who live in high-rise buildings and who could not self-rescue.

I understand that the IRMP proposals will require a renegotiation of contract for on-call (RDS) fire fighters at Heathfield, Seaford, Hailsham and Rye fire stations as their terms and conditions will need to change in order to meet the proposed crewing models. Currently Heathfield is considered to be a two-engine station as they have a maxi-cab fire engine which can take additional crew members. I note from our meeting that you want to re-classify the maxi-cab vehicles as one fire engine. This would mean that in the future Heathfield fire station will be considered to have one fire engine and therefore a reduction in cover. In order to balance this your proposals for a new shared crewing model will increase the fire engines available from 15 -18. Could you please provide further detail on how this will benefit the residents of Heathfield and the surrounding villages. Also, as this proposal relies on new contract for on-call fire fighters, could you please advise whether you anticipate any difficulties in the negotiation process and whether there have been any formal or informal discussions with RDS staff or the FBU on this matter? I am aware from my visits to the fire stations in my constituency that recruiting retained fire-fighters is challenging. Therefore, do you anticipate that the new contracts will attract more people to this role? If not, is there a risk that you will not have enough staff to fill the posts and provide the cover that is needed?

I would welcome your comments on the issues I have raised. I have also enclosed a petition from some of my constituents who are concerned about the proposals which was delivered to my office.

Yours sincerely,

Huw Merriman
Member of Parliament for Bexhill and Battle