



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON
JOHN MAPLES M.P.

Member of Parliament for Stratford on Avon

Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service
Improvement Plan Consultation
Service Headquarters
Warwick Street
Leamington Spa
CV32 5LH

2nd December 2009

Dear Sirs,

I am grateful for the opportunity to comment on the Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Improvement Plan. I have received several representations from constituents questioning the logic behind the proposed closure of Fenny Compton, Bidford and Studley fire stations. I strongly object to the closures and ask that you look again at the improvement plan to ensure that these fire stations are kept open.

The annual cost of retaining Fenny Compton, Bidford and Studley fire stations would be £260,000 in firefighters' salaries and £45,000 in firestation running costs. Relative to the overall expenditure of the proposed plans, this is a small price to pay for ensuring the most efficient way of delivering a fire service that is 'fit for purpose'. While I applaud plans to increase fire safety measures through the Home Fire Safety Checks (HFSCs) and smoke detector delivery, I am concerned that this will be at the expense of frontline services. The proposed closure of Fenny Compton and its close proximity to the ammunition depot at Kineton is a particular cause for concern.

The consultation documents outline the retention of these fire stations for community use by the county council and other partners. I understand that they will still be used for the Young Firefighters and Anti-Social Fire Intervention Teams. I am deeply concerned that the proposals are merely the first stage in reducing the service to a minimal presence in these communities. The Det Norske Veritas (DNV) report outlines this by stating that the service could 'increase savings through complete closure of selected stations (which) could be investigated in future work.' Public safety should not be compromised in this way.

Much has already been said about the nature of the consultation and delays in disclosing the DNV report. In his July report to the County Council Cabinet, the Chief Fire Officer referred to the fact that 'The Service...is currently in the process of defining a revised suite of corporate priorities to facilitate the achievement of long-term, sustainable improvement. An enabler of this will be gaining the support of all key stakeholders and decision makers.' While I do not wish to go over old ground, I would like to highlight the fact that certain aspects of the consultation process have damaged public confidence. The consultation document also places great emphasis on the benefits of the proposals but is less forthcoming in detailing the drawbacks of possible changes.

The DNV study was described by the Chief Fire Officer as 'the most robust and quantifiable review' of the current state of Warwickshire's Fire and Rescue Service (WFRS) ever undertaken. Yet it is notable that the study begins by stating that 'this quantification has relied on previous analyses and simplifying assumptions. The results are therefore approximate.' The set of data employed has only been subject to preliminary validation by WFRS, which calls into question the accuracy of any conclusions and the comprehensiveness of the report.

Certain aspects of the proposed modernisation, such as increased hot fire training, Road Traffic Collision units and the Small Fires Unit, appear to be positive steps forward. However I am strongly opposed to the proposed closures of Fenny Compton, Bidford and Studley fire stations. These closures will have severe implications on the capacity of WFRS to provide an efficient service and will put communities at risk. Response times in many parts of the area are bound to be longer.

While there will be an increase in the proportion of full-time firefighters, the overall number will be reduced by 54 (16% of the total number). This is coupled with the overall decrease in stations from 19 to 12. I accept that it is vital to ensure that WFRS meets the challenges of the future, however I am at a loss to see how a decrease of this magnitude in both stations and personnel can benefit local communities.

I believe that the consultation overlooks the possibility of further development in Studley, Bidford and Fenny Compton. A village like Fenny Compton has doubled in size over 10 years and it is therefore logical to assume that demand on the local fire service will increase not decrease over the coming years. This will require an effective fire service for a growing Stratford District.

The consultation literature continually refers to stations maintained by retained firefighters as 'off the run', as well as questioning their capacity to deliver on response times. The availability for Fenny Compton, Studley and Bidford is over 90% and it seems completely wrong to suggest that reform and closure are needed to remedy issues of availability; for 2008/9 average availability at Studley was 99.45%, at Fenny

Compton 91.21% and at Bidford 98.10%. The loss of these fire-fighters, with their wealth of local knowledge, would be a devastating blow to the communities they serve and would ultimately compromise the county's service provision. The DNV document confirms that the provision of fewer front-line services, which would result from the closure of these stations, may reduce overall availability and response times.

My primary concern has always been possible increases in response times. The case has been repeatedly made that response times would still comply with the emergency response standards of 10 minutes for urban areas and 20 minutes for rural areas. However the DNV report quantifies this by saying that average response times would increase from 8 minutes 15 seconds to 8 minutes 33 seconds; this must include many areas where the extra time would be far greater. The current stations serve their communities more effectively through rapid response times rather than statutory minimums. The residents of Bidford, Fenny Compton and Studley are right to ask questions about whether their service is being compromised.

There appears to be some ambiguity over the time taken to travel from Bidford to Alcester. A timed run of 5 minutes 57 seconds was carried out and a time of 7 minutes was recorded by the Chief Fire Officer and Cllr. Richard Hobbs. I would argue that this is a conservative estimate and locals have suggested to me that this is closer to 8 or 10 minutes. I am also concerned by figures from the Fire Brigades Union which suggest that some areas in Warwickshire will have to wait 20% longer for fire attendance.

The proposal to decrease the number of pumps in Warwickshire is particularly worrying and indicative of further incremental decline in service provision. In my constituency, there are currently 9 retained pumps and 1 WT pump, however this would be cut to 5 retained pumps with 2 WT pumps; the number of major appliances for Warwickshire would be cut from 26 major appliances to 19. Chief Fire Officer Fuller originally said 'we have to maximise the day-to-day availability of our emergency fire appliances.' However this relies on appliances running at a high level of reliability and concerns have already been expressed over the availability and reliability of certain engines.

There will be a Road Traffic Collision unit for Warwickshire and this will be mobilised 'in support of traditional appliances.' I understand that this will not be in addition to the overall number of engines available. While I am in favour of this service in principle, I question whether it is viable in light of the depleted number of appliances. There are many tasks, e.g roof removal, which require a full crew. I am also supportive of the rationale behind the Small Fires Unit, however it is doubtful whether it can provide a truly comprehensive service for South Warwickshire if it is based in Nuneaton and Leamington.

The closure of fire-stations in Warwickshire would increase pressure on existing services. Currently the number of incidents per station-year based on 2006/7 figures and excluding false alarms, is 235 but this would increase to 372 incidents as a result

of the closures, well above the level of many other county fire services. How does the Warwickshire Fire Service intend to manage this substantial increase? Warwickshire already has the highest fire appliance utilisation and the cuts proposed would increase the strain on existing appliances from 186 incidents to 235 incidents per appliance-year.

The consultation documents place great emphasis on Section 16 agreements and the provision of inter-county assistance in areas where closures are proposed. The DNV report states that 'at present, there is a successful knock-for-knock arrangement based on goodwill, but continuance of this is not entirely within the control of WFRS.' This ad-hoc agreement can offer little comfort to the residents of Studley, Bidford and Fenny Compton. According to local residents, some villages near Fenny Compton may not receive any cover from Warwickshire, instead having to rely entirely on services from Oxfordshire.

The numbers presented in the consultation are per station area, which means that incidents attended outside the operational area have been overlooked. I have been provided with a breakdown of Bidford call-outs in 2008. This shows that in 2008 Bidford attended 145 incidents in Stratford, while Stratford supported Bidford 19 times; the consultation documents imply that this is the other way round. These fire stations are clearly providing a service beyond their immediate environs and I am not sure that this has been taken into consideration.

The proposals imply that Fenny Compton would be served by Stratford, which has a poor availability rate, or Banbury, which is located in Oxfordshire. Studley would be covered by Alcester and Henley. Bidford would also be served by Alcester. While Alcester is receiving a complement of 25 full-time fire-fighters, I am concerned that the five-watch system and restrictions on appliances will in reality mean that only 5 full-time fire-fighters are on duty at the station at any one time.

Flood protection has also been identified as a key objective for the fire service. I believe that Chief Officer Fuller stated at a staff meeting in June that money was available from central government for the second boat unit for the south of Warwickshire. If this is accurate, then the rationalisation of services and closure of these three fire stations to fund these improvements is unnecessary.

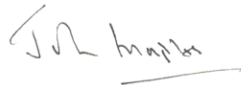
The statistics show that in Warwickshire in 2008/9 over 40% of all incidents were false alarms. I accept that this is placing an undue strain on WFRS and is the primary reason behind the proposed false alarm attendance policy. I am however concerned that, in the absence of human confirmation, real fire alerts will not receive a response leading to damage to property and potentially putting lives at risk. I am not yet convinced that concerns have been addressed on this point.

The improvement plan places great emphasis on reinvestment and, with this in mind, I would like to draw your attention to the presentation made by Bidford residents on 10th November 2009 to Glen Ranger, Deputy Chief Fire Officer. This appears to offer

an alternative and cost-effective way forward, allowing for the retention of Fenny Compton, Studley and Bidford fire stations and increasing the level of availability by converting Stratford into a full-time station; the plan would also allow sufficient funds for further investment in training. I believe that this should be seriously considered.

The Fire Service is there to serve the community and I do not believe that certain aspects of the plan are the best way to accomplish this objective. I am opposed to the closures in Fenny Compton, Studley and Bidford. I ask you to end this uncertainty and keep these stations open. While I accept that the Service has to adapt to the challenges of the 21st century, these closures would be a retrograde step.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. R. Hapton", with a horizontal line underneath it.