

## **Q and A from St Helens Consultation October 1, 2015**

### **Questions answered by the Chief Fire Officer following a presentation**

**Q:**

One of my concerns is there are only two entrances into the station.

**A:**

We will get access in from the Linkway. We will come out on to Canal Street. It will give us a green wave, which gives us the green light so that lets us out.

**Q:**

So you can affect those lights?

**A:**

Yes.

**Q:**

You said there could be closures. Does that mean we could be left with no new build and we could be left with two stations closed?

**A:**

No if Eccleston was closed without a new build at Canal St the station at Parr Stocks Rd would have to be substantially redeveloped or rebuilt.

**Q:**

You're building the brand new station, is that cost effective when you've already got one or the other there?

**A:**

We can't afford both of the stations. We can only afford one fire appliance's worth of people. The buildings can also get very costly.

If we were left with Parr Stocks it's expensive to repair. It is well beyond the assumed life of one of our fire stations. It would cost around £4.5m to £5m to build a new station.

**Q:**

Do you have the funding to build that?

**A:**

Yes because we have the grant.

**Q:**

Won't response be different because there will be fewer fire appliances? The resident said there were issues with waste disposal sites in the area.

**A:**

Chief said we have a protocol around waste disposal sites.

**Q:**

The user groups at Parr Street would they have more?

**A:**

We would factor that into the new design.

**Q:**

So the groups at Parr Street will be offered that if they went?

**A:**

Yes they would.

## **Q and A from St Helens Consultation October 6, 2015**

### **Questions answered by the Chief Fire Officer following a presentation**

**Q:**

How many fatalities have there been in St Helens this year?

**Chief:**

There have been two.

**Q:**

Surely it would make more sense to close Newton-le-Willows and bring their appliance to Parr, as the Authority pays £2m a year on the PFI. Why does Newton need to keep its pump?

**A:**

Newton is a PFI building and the PFI deal was initiated over ten years ago. At that point in time the MFRA could never have predicted what would happen in 2010 and beyond in terms of austerity.

**Q:**

MF&RS have built the stations and they are more like social services. In places like Whitefield in Manchester they still have old fire stations.

**A:**

Newton is a PFI so nothing can be done about that and nothing can be done about the other PFI buildings because the costs are fixed. MFRA could never have foreseen the extent of the cuts over this last Parliament. The crewing system in Newton is still the most efficient way of delivering 24 hour response. The Authority is not going to use Low Level of Activity and Risk (LLAR) crewing more broadly however, which the Fire Brigades Union supports. The mergers are the options that deliver the least impactful outcome.

**Q:**

MF&RS has given up with the lobbying, they should try to contact the Government and try to get out of the PFIs.

**A:**

Lobbying has not stopped and it will continue. This a majority Government and whether we like it or not they have a mandate for austerity.

PFI stations are different to hospitals as the usage is much less as are the overheads. A number of the PFI stations are in key locations. There is nothing the FRA can do about the PFI situation but will continue to drive efficiency out of the PFI

contract. Any new station will not result in borrowing. The payments on the PFI stations are not excessive. It is a very good deal.

**Q:**

Why is Merseyside the most expensive Authority in the country by grant and fifth most expensive by population.

**A:**

It's a legacy. In the 1930s Liverpool's population was 850,000, when it had significant operational docks etc that were "A Risk" (industrial). Since then and most acutely in the late 1970s and early 80's there was then what has been referred to by Lord Howe as the 'managed decline of Liverpool'. The population of Liverpool fell by 100,000 and the St Helens population fell by 20,000. The infrastructure in Liverpool supports a population of one million people but the actual population is half of that.

**Q:**

We therefore get a better service at the moment than the rest of the country?

**A:**

Yes we do. The run times in Cheshire (for example) are slower because of the distances between stations and the size of the station areas. Merseyside is still very fast.

**Q:**

There is no doubt Canal Street will provide a better service than the alternative, but will Skelmersdale still serve as a back-up to Rainford?

**A:**

Skelmersdale will make the second attendance to Rainford junction as they do now.

**Q:**

I had a big fire and appliances couldn't get there because they were too big and Skelmersdale used small appliances.

**A:**

Merseyside appliances are rescue pumps with the highest level of equipment provision. All standard pumping appliances are of a similar size.

**Q:**

What debt has the Authority got? Also is there anything in place for new road layouts?

**A:**

The debt is about £44m and that was inherited from measures taken in the past to avoid firefighter redundancies, not for PFI. The Authority has £24m in reserves so

you could argue the debt is £20m. Some of that amount is earmarked to pay for new stations, which would be match funded by DCLG.

With regards to the Canal Street site we will seek a green wave system where all of the lights will turn green on receipt of a mobilisation. The area around Linkway is no busier than anywhere else in Merseyside.

**Q:**

There is only one set of lights on Canal Street.

**A:**

The green wave will get us on to the Linkway. At this point in time I can't comment on planning issues. It may be that the Local Authority put lights in at other points in the vicinity of the station, but that's a planning issue.

Cllr Linda Maloney (Vice Chair of the Fire and Rescue Authority and a St Helens councillor) said she wants to assure people that the Authority has not stopped lobbying and will never stop lobbying. MFRA is one of the most expensive fire and rescue service because we have wholtime, fully trained firefighters, we don't have retained firefighters.

She said she wasn't on the Authority when the PFI stations were brought in but that they are brilliant. They have gyms. They bring the community together.

A member of the public said yes but they should just be fire stations.

The Chief said they are there for the community and that firefighters need the gyms to maintain fitness, so the community should also get the benefit.

**Q:**

When you say incidents have reduced are you talking about the same like-for-like figures as ten years ago?

**A:**

Yes. We carried out a lot of Home Fire Safety Checks and fitted smoke alarms which has had a significant impact on reducing incidents. However it doesn't matter how many incidents there, we still need to get there quickly. The Government might use that argument but I don't because there is still life risk.

**Q:**

I live in Eccleston and it has been built up and built up. The fire station is opposite. Am I at more risk if Eccleston closes?

**A:**

The risk is also about you as an individual. The risk to you personally is not higher.

If you live in Millfields an appliance will take longer to get there in the future. If you live nearer Canal St and the merger proposal is pursued by the Authority, it won't.

**Q:**

Eccleston is being put at risk.

**A:**

Overall Eccleston's station area has quicker predicted run times with the merger proposal.

**Q:**

What happens if you live in a big farm?

**A:**

Appliances will respond from the nearest stations.

**Q:**

How many appliances are there at the moment?

**A:**

We have three appliances in St Helens.

**Q:**

How many will you have?

**A:**

We will have two wholetime and one wholetime retained appliances which is a resilience appliance (on a 30 minute recall).

**Q:**

But with the overall time of response we're still going to be one of the best responders in the country?

**A:**

Yes we will.

Cllr Robbie Ayres (or the Fire and Rescue Authority and St Helens council) said that firefighters don't attend as many automatic fire alarms anymore. The Authority has lost a third of the service. The cuts are there, if the Authority doesn't make the changes, someone from London will come up and do it for them. Someone who doesn't care.

**Q:**

If you've got one fire appliance and the other comes half an hour later how are you going to guarantee the safety of your teams? That first pump will be on its own for half an hour.

**A:**

The pumps won't be on their own for half an hour. The second retained appliance won't be used for immediate mobilisation.

The attendance of the second fire engine is going to take longer, but it will continue to come from surrounding stations (where cuts are also having to be made). There is nothing you can do about that. The alternative is we close stations in Liverpool now and we come back to St Helens but then we would have to consider outright closures because we won't have the Government capital to build the new station.

**Q:**

The logical thing is to shut Newton.

**A:**

It isn't and we can't do that, because the Authority will have to continue paying for it, regardless of whether it is open or closed.

**Q:**

You're putting your crews at risk.

**A:**

The cuts are inevitable. Our base prediction is we might end up with 14 stations. I'm the one who ultimately held to account for service delivery. The Firefighters responding to incidents are my colleagues. This is the least worst thing to do.

**Q:**

What if the death toll goes up in Rainford?

**A:**

Across Merseyside deaths are going up. Our fire deaths across Merseyside this year will be in to double figures. However the excess winter deaths in Liverpool alone will be around 300. The figures for accidental fire deaths are very small in comparison.

The Secretary of State for Communities will compare those figures. I have been down to Westminster and given evidence to the Commons Select Committee. Our argument is not strong compared to other areas of the public sector.

**Q:**

At the end of the day, you're responsible for people like me.

**A:**

But there won't be another government change until 2020. What I can say is that it stops here in St Helens. The base case in St Helens will be two stations.

**Q:**

Would you do day crewing?

**A:**

It would extend response times. We already do a faster response version of day crewing at Newton. With true day crewing I don't have an appliance there during the night.

I want five people crewing in order to achieve safe systems of work for Firefighters but that means fewer fire engines.

**Q:**

The smoke alarms [installed in early Home Fire Safety Checks], it must be getting close to the ten year battery life.

**A:**

We moved to a risk based approach which means not everyone gets free smoke alarms. Anyone over 65 gets them and anyone other than that we provide alarms on a cost recovery basis.

**Q:**

Physically you were having two crews to put them up. There are not enough crews to do the work now. The smoke alarms have done more harm than good.

**A:**

We use Fire Support Network who provide the service using volunteers.

We only target the high or medium risk because we know we have the resources to visit them.

**Q:**

When are you going to have Canal Street up and running?

**A:**

The consultation process will conclude, then a report is taken to MFRA with the views that people have expressed and I will make a professional case that takes that into account. Assuming the Authority approve my recommendations, there will be a pre-planning application that would go to St Helens Council. Assuming it was granted we would engage with NWAS and the police as to whether they want to come in. I think it would be about 18 months.

Any valuation we have had has not gone into the public domain as it might compromise the ability of the Authority to get the best price for disposal of the existing stations.

A member of the public said isn't it time that the individual looks after themselves? Why does it have to be the Authority that has to do it?



**Q:**

Is Parr Stocks road going to be demolished?

**A:**

We will work with St Helens Council over disposal of the existing stations.

**Q:**

I do think the Fire Authority should lobby Government to make it compulsory that all new properties have smoke alarms.

**A:**

They do. New properties should have hard wired smoke alarms.

**Q:**

This consultation from what I gather, it's cut and dry but will anything you've heard shed any light on how you view St Helens?

**A:**

I don't disagree with anything you've said but this is the most pragmatic approach because I know what's coming in terms of further cuts. The proposal delivers the least worst outcome for St Helens for the remainder of this parliament.

**Comment:**

We just get fed up of hearing about these cuts. I'm sick of hearing about it. It's as though it's becoming the norm for not doing anything

**Q:**

Over the 24 hour period is there a profile for fire incidents?

**A:**

We used to have peaks for small fires. The life risk profile now is broadly the same across the day. That is why it is important to maintain fast response times at all times.

**Around 12 people attended the public meeting on September 29, 2015, at Cowley International College. This included a St Helens Star journalist.**

**Questions answered by the Chief Fire Officer following a presentation**

**Q:**

I do not understand the “retained bit” during the Chief’s presentation. Is it like in America where they lifeboat services are called to come out and help?

**A:**

“Retained” in this context refers to retained contracts held by full-time firefighters based in St Helens, who are paid additional money (a retaining fee) to be on call on the middle two days of their (four day) off duty period to operate the retained fire engine on a 30 minute recall (i.e. the appliance would not provide an immediate response to an incident).

**Q:**

Have you still got the two fire engines [under this arrangement]?

**A:**

There would be two fire engines (the second being crewed as detailed above).

**Q:**

Can you explain more about the second fire engine response time? [after the Chief mentioned the second fire appliance at a life risk incident would take longer under the proposals].

**A:**

The second fire appliance could take longer to get to an incident, compared to now, due to the reduction in the number of stations throughout Merseyside. A second fire appliance that would currently come from Eccleston, could come from Newton-le-Willows, the new Prescott station, Kirkby or further afield.

**Q:**

Would the response by a fire engine would be quicker into the Eccleston Park area with the proposed new station on Canal Street and due to the new station being built in Prescott?

**A:**

The first and second fire engines would respond quicker into Eccleston Park due to the new station in Prescot, once that station has been built. The response, due to the location of the new Prescot station, would be quicker into Eccleston Park and there would be a quicker response to anything on the west side of Eccleston due to the location of the new Prescot station.

**Q:**

According to information on the Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service website, there e appears to be 9 stations in Liverpool for a population of 470,000; so a station per 52,000 people – but the changes for the St Helens area would mean one station for 88,000 people. Where's the equity in that?

**A:**

The facts are correct. The number of current Liverpool stations is historic; due to the area having a population of 850,000 in the 1930s. Liverpool stations could be closed before St Helens and Eccleston, but to take advantage of the Transformation and Efficiency funding available from the Government it made financial sense to merge St Helens and Eccleston at Canal St whilst the funding was available as it may not be available in the future. Additional stations will need to close in Liverpool in the future to deal with the further cuts expected.

**Q:**

The transformation funding money looks like a “bribe”. Why haven't the public spoken up more about the cuts and reductions in funding. Why are we letting it happen?

**A:**

I have given evidence to a House of Commons Select Committee on the dangers that would result from funding reductions; making people less safe. There was a campaign run by the Liverpool Echo in the 2013/2014 financial year, along with a petition, but the petition only attracted around 2,000 signatures.

Comment: Fire and Rescue Authority Vice Chair and St Helens Councillor Linda Maloney told the meeting that the Chief Fire Officer had invited ministers to Merseyside to see what the Service does and to explain how funding reductions could affect the Service. The Councillor said Authority members were working hard to protect the Service, but the proposals were the least worst options and that no-one wanted to make the savings but there was no choice.

**Q:**

Could Eccleston be kept and St Helens (Parr Stocks Road) could be closed. Rainford could have emergency response cover from Skelmersdale and Billinge could have emergency response cover from Wigan.

**A:**

You are right in some ways as fire and rescue services do assist one another near their county borders. But you would not close St Helens and just stay at Eccleston because, due to the central location of the current St Helens Fire Station in the county, St Helens is in a better geographical location in terms of a fire engine getting to locations quicker (and within the MF&RS response standard).

**Q:**

Why was Eccleston Fire Station built? The building of Eccleston was a lever for closing the fire station at Rainford.

**A:**

Rainford fire station was a “community retained” station, which meant that the appliance was always delayed in responding by at least 5 minutes to give enough time for retained firefighters to get to the station from their homes or places of work. A fire engine staffed by full-time firefighters could get to an incident quicker than the retained crew which was probably one of the reasons it was shut. The other reason was that it would have proven difficult to recruit sufficient retained firefighters from the local population to provide a good service. As to why Eccleston was built, that happened before I joined the fire and rescue service, but I think it was might have been due to the National Standards of Fire Cover that existed at that time. They dictated how quickly a certain number of fire engines had to get to industrial sites, some of which were in the St Helens area.

**Q:**

Parr Stocks fire station covers the majority of the Pilkington’s site but Eccleston only covered a small industrial area on a road.

**A:**

Three appliances were sent to incidents in ‘A’ risk areas when the old national standards of fire cover were in operation and the station at Eccleston was probably required to ensure they attended within the times allowed in the standard.

**Q:**

Is there likely to be a change of Government soon and how long is this funding reduction situation going to carry on?

**A:**

It is unlikely that there will be a General Election before 2020. The Government has set out in their manifesto what they intended to do in regards to public finance, reducing the deficit and funding for public services and I believe that the Government will follow what they have set out.

**Q:**

Is the Council committed to the Canal Street plan and has that commitment been provided in writing as I do not want to see the land for the new station withdrawn at the last moment after stations had been closed?

**A:**

Pilkington's is the owner and is working very constructively with Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service. I am not aware of any planning reason that would prevent the building of a new fire station on the land on Canal Street.

**A:**

Councillor Maloney explained that she is a St Helens councillor but also a member of the Authority and there was commitment [in the Council] for the plans to help the Authority address the financial challenges it faced.

**Q:**

There was a "works" fire station in the past.

**A:**

I believe that there was.

Comment: Another Councillor in the audience said that for clarification they needed to make it clear the Canal Street land would be a "private sale" between Pilkington's and Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service.

**Q:**

The Watson Street site is a "ghost town" and it is a fantastic location to get to the M62, on the link way, but nowhere else. It is good if someone lives in Sutton to get to the town centre. How would fire engines would get onto the road system from the suggested Canal Street location?

**A:**

The Chief clarified, using the indicative design of how a station could look at the Canal Street site, that the fire appliances would leave their engine bays and travel along Canal Street and would have access to get on the Linkway and from there go in either direction.

**Q:**

Considering St Helens has less stations per population than Liverpool could the station closures not take place elsewhere?

**A:**

If there were going to be no further cuts in funding then that may have been a possibility (to close stations elsewhere in Merseyside), but I am certain there will be more cuts in funding and so more stations will need to close. Liverpool stations could be closed before St Helens and Eccleston, but to take advantage of the transformation and efficiency funding from government building the new station at Canal St made the most economic sense at this time. Had the Government funding not been obtained now then the situation could be that when it comes to considering closing St Helens and Eccleston in the near future, due to expected further cuts to funding, then there would not be enough money to pay for a new station.

**Q:**

Would the proposals mean it would take 10 minutes to get to call-outs in Rainford?

**A:**

There are already areas of Rainford that it would take fire engines from Merseyside 10 minutes to get to.

**Q:**

Would a new station would have community facilities similar to the Toxteth Fire Fit Hub.

**A:**

There would be community facilities at the new station. The extent of any community facilities would form part of the planning process.

**Q:**

How much money would the sale of "Millfields" (Eccleston Fire Station) raise as the cost for the new station project was £4.8 million?

**A:**

Colin Schofield from Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service said a precise figure could not be given for the two sites (St Helens and Eccleston) but the St Helens station site was unlikely to raise "a lot" of money but the Eccleston station site could be more attractive to buyers.

**A:**

The Chief said people needed to bear in mind that this was not London and that there was a fire station that had closed in Westminster, London, two years ago and the site had yet to be sold.

**Q:**

Both St Helens and Eccleston station sites are Brownfield sites.

**A:**

From a planning perspective I think they are Brownfield sites.

**Q:**

The Eccleston station site is a prime location with it overlooking a lake. Who owns it?

**A:**

Eccleston fire station site is owned by Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority so would be sold if the proposal for the new station in Canal Street was to go ahead.

**Q:**

Why is the Eccleston station area “split into two” on one of the maps provided as part of the consultation?

**A:**

The boundaries shown are those of the St Helens and Knowsley local authority areas.

**Five people attended the Business Stakeholder's Breakfast Meeting on October 9, 2015, at the Chalon Court Hotel in St Helens.**

**Q:** A member of the audience asked, when the Chief Fire Officer presented the PowerPoint slide which stated Allerton Fire Station had been closed, what the impact on response times had been as a result of the Allerton closure.

**A:** The Chief Fire Officer said this was a good point to raise and that he would come to explain the situation regarding response times in Merseyside during the presentation. The Chief later explained about the average attendance times for fire engines reaching incidents across Merseyside and the actual response times for the St Helens area and how just closing Eccleston would affect that and what the impact would also be with a new station at Canal Street (if Eccleston and St Helens were merged).

**Q:** A member of the audience asked if they could ask about the "prevention" work. The member of the audience said a lot of things were preventable, including fire deaths and injuries. The audience member asked what the impact on prevention work was, given that the capacity of the organisation had reduced so much due to funding cuts and with future expected funding cuts.

**A:** The Chief explained that there had been a move away from a district-based delivery model to a functional model, in terms of operational response. He said the district-based Prevention Manager role in St Helens would be maintained but the management of the prevention work was being co-ordinated centrally from MF&RS headquarters. He said that our staff who make proactive interventions, to help to make people safer from fire in communities, saved far more lives than just responding to incidents.

**Q:** A member of the audience asked what the public response has been so far to the proposals in St Helens.

**A:** The Chief said that, so far, the public response had been "generally supportive" of the least worst option; the merger proposal. He also said there had been "real pragmatism" in St Helens on the proposals. He said a new station would cost around £4.5m - 5.5 million and, like with other recent station build projects, it was an infrastructure project that would see, where possible, local companies involved in the build and that any new fire station build would have a "positive impact".