

## ST HELENS MERGERS CONSULTATION

### CORRESPONDENCE FROM THE PUBLIC

#### Letter from FF to Chair

May I firstly thank you for giving me the time to voice my concerns and concerns of many others regarding the imminent closure of Eccleston Fire Station.

I have attached a couple of documents which you may or may not have seen which I will refer to during the course of my email.

I am a resident of Rainhill and I have been a Firefighter for Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service for nearly 20 years so you can appreciate the impact the changes concerned will have on me, both as a resident and an employee.

As you may be aware MFRS are anticipating further cuts to its forthcoming budget and these cuts are outlined in the attached documents.

One of the tough decisions MFRS has had to make is the closure of fire stations. Already to date, the fire stations at Allerton and Whiston have been closed and the station I am concerned about, Eccleston, has been earmarked for closure after a public consultation, which began on 3rd August 2015 and will end 25th October 2015.

The two issues up for consultation in the attached document are

1. Outright closure of Eccleston Fire Station
2. The closure of Eccleston Fire Station and the *merger* with St Helens Fire Station to build a new station at a new site on Canal St near to the town centre

I have put the word merger in italics to emphasise that this could be misleading. A merger in some peoples eyes could suggest that the two stations will merge at one location and each keeping its own fire engine, but what is actually happening is that Eccleston Fire Station is closing and the fire engine from Eccleston will not be based at the new fire station but will disappear. Currently the Fire station in St Helens at Parr has one wholtime appliance and also one whole time retained appliance which can be used, apparently within 30 minutes of recall, when the service is stretched. So, as you can see, the word merger is in some ways misleading.

The consultation is due to end on 25th October, after that it is expected that MFRA will take the decision to close Eccleston Fire Station. This will then leave the whole of St Helens, Rainford, Eccleston, Billinge and surrounding area's fire cover provided by one whole time appliance at Parr. The next nearest fire engine would be Newton Le Willows which operates on the LLAR system (after 10pm available by pager only). The next nearest fire engine after that would be supplied by Whiston, which although has been closed is still staffed periodically.

As a Chair of the Fire Authority you may appreciate the vast area that this one fire engine would have to cover when/if Eccleston station closes.

In the consultation document it is stated that response times to a 'life risk' incident will be lower when the new station at Canal St is built. This may be true but as yet the 'new' station build has not even commenced.

It seems grossly unfair that when Eccleston Fire Station closes, this vast area will be left vulnerable and as a resident I object to this level of service which could potentially put my loved ones at risk.

As an employee of MFRS at Eccleston Fire Station I understand that cuts have to be made but it seems premature to close this station as other districts in Merseyside with much smaller areas have adequate fire cover.

Also in the Memorandum of Understanding document which has been agreed between the FBU and MFRS it states on page 6 that " as a consequence of the in-year cuts, Eccleston , West Kirby and Whiston fire stations will no longer be routinely crewed under these arrangements. Where sufficient staff are available without recourse to Voluntary Additional Hours then these appliances will be crewed"

This essentially means that after the proposed closure of Eccleston Fire Station then MFRS may, if staffing numbers permit, crew the fire engines at Whiston and Eccleston. It makes no sense to close a station only to then detach firefighters out at a cost to the Authority of detached duty allowance in order to crew the fire engine there. It would be more sensible to keep the station open as long as possible leaving the existing experienced crews there and if staffing falls then detach crews out from that station to cover shortfalls elsewhere.

I hope you can see and understand the issues that I have raised and I look forward to your reply on this matter.

#### **REPLY FROM CHAIR**

*I am aware of both documents having discussed them extensively with the CFO. Unfortunately the MOU with the FBU and the consultation document have to reflect the reality of the Authority staffing model for 2015/16 which, as a result of the in years cuts to the Authority budget, can only sustain 24 WT appliances at 22 stations and assumes the mergers already having been delivered. These in year cuts, as you know, are on top of the significant cuts to the Authority budget over the last Parliament and the further cuts faced by the Authority over the next 4 years from a Tory Government that is intent on decimating the FRS (or whatever words you think suitable).*

*The CFO recognises the operational challenges these cuts present to St Helens and Knowsley which is why the Eccleston and Whiston pumps are never off the run on the same shift. The reality is however that as more Firefighters retire and cannot be replaced in order to meet the required savings and to avoid the need for compulsory redundancies, this position becomes much harder to sustain. If Eccleston were to remain routinely crewed it would be at the expense of another station elsewhere on Merseyside not subject to a merger proposal (which I or the CFO have never suggested is anything other than a closure of two stations and the loss of one WT appliance).*

*As the CFO has delegated responsibility for all operational matters you may wish to raise your concerns directly with him as he has the unenviable task of trying to reconcile what is becoming an ever more impossible situation. As I stated previously he is well aware of your concerns and is working with the FBU and FOA to ensure the impact on our communities is minimised as much as possible by maintaining as many WT appliances as the budget will allow without increasing the very real prospect of compulsory redundancies.*

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LETTER FROM MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC

Sir,

With reference to your information sheet for the proposed plans for a Fire Station to be built in Canal Street, St Helens.

I use Canal Street on a daily basis, for both work and leisure purposes, and due the shift pattern, I travel at various times both day and night.

The Linkway runs past Ravenhead Retail Park via Burtonhead Road, then into Canal Street, which ends at a very busy junction, a dual carriageway, with double sets of traffic lights.

I understand the necessity for a Fire Station in St Helens, and the value of an empty piece of land in this area, however the sheer volume of traffic at this road junction, could cause a serious accident, with traffic coming to a halt in all four directions.

I will certainly attend any meeting you may hold in this area, as the outcome of your decision, will certainly have an effect on traffic in my area.

**Response**

Thank you for your recent letter regarding the proposed plans to build a fire station at Canal Street. Your comments have been included in a summary report, following the closure of the consultation period, which is to go before the Fire Authority in December.

.....  
Response to verbal questions from a partner who uses St Helens community facilities (28<sup>th</sup> October)

Dear Sir,

Station Manager ..... has contacted me with your questions you raised with regards to the St Helens Parr Station consultation. As I understand it you have raised two questions of concern as follows:

- 1) would we have the same facilities as now?
- 2) If this is not possible what would the time scale be for us to find a new place to practise?

I will include your concerns as part of our full consultation report which details the responses we have had and the concerns raised by the public, residents, stakeholders (includes Parr Band) and Fire Station Staff. Once the report has been written it will go to the Fire Authority Committee for consideration as to whether the station should close and merge with Eccleston at Canal Street and if so what facilities will be available. This report will go to Authority on 17<sup>th</sup> December so we will hopefully have some more information in the New Year and a likely indication of the timescales for planning consent and build and closure of the station

Please let me know if this information is helpful and please do feel free to contact the Station Manager or me again to receive an update following the Authority meeting.

Many thanks for your participation in the consultation