

Public Consultation on the 'Proposed Change to the NIFRS Crewing Arrangements'.

[Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Services]

Consultation Response from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council.

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (Council) welcomes the opportunity to respond to Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) on the public consultation regarding the 'Proposed Changes to the NIFRS Crewing Arrangements'.

Brief Background for Fermanagh and Omagh District Council

The District Council area is home to 114,992 people (as of 30 June 2014). The District Council area is Northern Ireland's largest region in terms of land mass - approximately 3,000km², or 20% of NI - and the smallest in terms of population. As a result, the population density of approximately 41 people per km² is the sparsest in NI. This is a feature of the region which also provides challenges to service delivery.

Consultation Feedback

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (Council) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the 'Proposed Changes to the NIFRS crewing Arrangements', and in particular the crewing arrangements within the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area.

Within the Council District there are a number of Fire Stations which provide the essential response to issues and/or call outs. These stations include:

- Omagh
- Enniskillen
- Fintona
- Dromore
- Irvinestown
- Lisnaskea
- Beleek

The Council acknowledges the vital role that is fulfilled by Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, within the Council District and indeed Northern Ireland as a whole. NIFRS is committed to the protection of the public and respond to various emergency calls such as fires, road traffic collisions and other specialist rescue incidents. On top of this NIFRS Officers and Staff provide a range of very valuable contributions to the community through education initiatives, advisory roles and participation on various bodies such as Policing and Community Safety Partnerships.

In response to the 'Proposed Changes to NIFRS Crewing Arrangements' the Council has a number of queries which it would like NIFRS to pay attention to. The Council is aware that there is a need to constantly ensure that services are accessible, timely and effective. Therefore, sometimes there is the need for change and to constantly be on the lookout for ways to improve services. Particularly for public services, in the current financial climate there is a need to ensure that services are delivered within budget by maximising, and making best use, of the skilled staff and available resources to improve services for the community.

Firstly, the Council welcomes the introduction of Wholetime firefighters to Enniskillen Fire Station. The certainty that the Station in Enniskillen will be staffed full-time between the hours of 8.00am and 6.00pm (Mondays to Fridays) is very reassuring to the local community that an fast response to any urgent request is imminent.

The Council would also like to acknowledge the huge role played by the 'Retained Firefighters' who are employed across the Council District. They play a huge role in securing safety and saving lives across the District. This role should never be undermined as the 'Retained Firefighters' play an integral role in Northern Ireland.

'Retained Firefighters' are fully trained Firefighters and will be called to attend the full range of incidents which include fires, floods, road traffic collisions, chemical spills and so forth. The Council understands that often 'Retained Firefighters' will work alongside the Wholetime Firefighters, having being called in to help out their wholetime colleagues.

One slight concern that the Council has is that the majority of the general public are not aware of the term 'Retained Firefighter'. When some of the general public hear of the term they automatically think that these firefighters are not as important/vital to their safety. This is a small issue that NIFRS should look to rectify, perhaps in local media, social media and such.

With regards to the introduction of Wholetime Firefighters to the Enniskillen Fire Station, the Council would wish to know why this is only happening now. It is understood that Enniskillen has been trialling the new system now for a number of months, but specifically why would a station in Enniskillen which is central to a large area on be benefiting from Wholetime Firefighters now.

Through various research, both in Northern Ireland and across the water, Wholetime Firefighters or Crews are traditionally placed in larger towns where risk and demand has been deemed high enough to warrant permanently crewed Firefighters.

Has there been a change in the risk and/demand within the Enniskillen area to warrant permanently crewed Firefighters? Or is this change based upon a different statistical assessment of the current situation.

Within Omagh Fire Station, there will be a reduction in the number of Wholetime Firefighter hours, particularly at weekends i.e. Saturdays and Sundays will now be

serviced by 'Retained Firefighters' rather than the permanently crewed staff that were present previously between 7.30am and 7.30pm on both days.

Has there been a reduction in the need, risk and demand within the Omagh area to warrant the reduction?

Local Events

Previous to any reform in the Crewing Arrangements, the Council has enjoyed a very good working relationship with NIFRS, both through the Councils own activities, the activities of the Policing and Community Safety Partnership (PCSP) and so forth.

Local NIFRS staff would have:

- Attended Council organised community events to give out information or advice.
- Assisted in the delivery of programmes (educational purposes).
- Liaised with PCSP in the rollout of programme delivery to ensure no overlapping.
- Worked with many local Community Groups to provide talks, information evenings, a presence at events and so forth.

With the introduction of the new Wholetime Firefighters in Enniskillen, the Council would be concerned that this community element to their roles would be lost. The Council feels that the community would lose a huge asset if this was the case as events such as education talks/events, fire safety checks along with advice and guidance, is a huge benefit to the community as a whole.

The Council would urge NIFRS to build in community engagement to the roles of Wholetime Firefighters, or to offer such engagement events to the 'Retained Firefighters'.

Other events which the Council would be keen for NIFRS to continue to provide would be events such as the Bee Safes and the LIFE Schemes. These are of huge benefit to the young people they are offered to, and often change attitudes and behaviours.

The Council is pleased to read in the Consultation Documents that redeployment will give NIFRS the opportunity to:

'...drive down risk across four extra locations through:

- Targeted provision and protection activities.
- Increasing awareness of local risks across both Wholetime and Retained Duty Systems to ensure higher levels of Firefighter safety.'

The council believes that this would be very positive and would urge NIFRS to share with the public what these activities would entail.

The Role of Retained Firefighters and Possible Knowledge Gaps

One slightly worrying aspect regards the 'Retained Firefighters'. With the introduction of Wholetime Firefighters to the Enniskillen Fire Station, if 'Retained Firefighters' are not utilised as often there could be a reduction in the knowledge of the crews attending call outs. This not only would be felt when on route to the location, but also in how to deal with a particular issue.

With Wholetime Firefighters now being stationed in Enniskillen, and the fact that 'Retained Firefighters' are not eligible to apply for those positions, NIFRS Management must ensure that there is no loss of important information.

Promotion

One of the major problems with the issue of the 'Change to NIFRS Crewing Arrangements', within the Fermanagh and Omagh District has been the negative publicity or press. This has given the process a very unfairly achieved negative image to the public, particularly within this area.

Some members of the public may just see this as a simple 'cost cutting' exercise and not one which has wider benefits. This may be particularly potent in areas which are seen to be 'losing' permanently crewed Firefighters at weekends.

Therefore it is imperative that NIFRS takes parts in substantial media campaign to outline the benefits of any new Crewing Arrangements. It would be worthwhile to meet with community groups in the affected areas, as well as meet with Elected Representatives who will be able to inform local residents of the changes and the reasoning behind such changes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council welcome the opportunity to respond to the public consultation on the 'Proposed Changes to NIFRS Crewing Arrangements'. The Council would recommend that NIFRS take on board the comments held within this Consultation Response Document.

NIFRS should pay particular attention to the public opinion on the proposed changes. Ultimately, it is the public whom NIFRS are serving, therefore it is important that at all stages of the change process the public are consulted with, engaged with and listened to.