

**Criminal Justice Committee**  
**Wednesday 4 September 2024**  
**27th Meeting, 2024 (Session 6)**

## **Scottish Fire and Rescue Service – current challenges and proposed reforms**

### **Note by the clerk**

#### **Background**

1. The Committee is taking evidence on the current challenges and proposed reforms to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS).
2. The SFRS was established in 2013 under provisions of the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012. This involved the merger of eight regional fire and rescue services.
3. The work of the SFRS includes:
  - dealing with fires and promoting fire safety
  - responding to road traffic collisions and other serious transport incidents
  - providing a rescue service on inland water and at height
  - responding to serious flooding
  - dealing with chemical and biological leaks.
4. In last year's [budget scrutiny](#), the Committee outlined evidence it had received on the then financial challenges faced by the SFRS, including the steps that were being taken to achieve savings (see paras 32 to 43).
5. The Committee also highlighted various issues relating to the SFRS, including:
  - cost pressures affecting investment in decontamination facilities in fire stations
  - the situation outside the central belt and the northeast where the retained system (on-call) used by the SFRS is under severe pressure, with difficulties in the recruitment and retention of firefighters
  - a need to move more quickly in exploring the provision of newer co-located premises with other services.
6. In December 2021, the SFRS published a document setting out its [long-term vision](#) for the next ten years. This included various priorities covering issues such as:
  - the importance of prevention, the use of technology and partnership working in carrying out its role
  - supporting its staff through training and work/life balance
  - understanding the needs of communities
  - being a more environmentally sustainable organisation.

7. In April 2024, the SFRS published a [three-year delivery plan](#) covering the period 2024-25 to 2026-27. In relation to areas of change, examples included a new command and control communications system.
8. In October 2023, the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) published a report entitled [Firestorm](#) looking into the future of the SFRS.
9. The report commented on the proposed reforms to the SFRS and the planned reduction of firefighter numbers since the establishment of the SFRS and low morale amongst staff. It included an extensive list of recommendations under nine headings, which are summarised on pages 8 to 11 of the report. The following provides just some examples found under those headings:
  - budget – having a long-term budget strategy and significant year-on-year injections of capital investment
  - pay – action to address the erosion of firefighter pay since 2010
  - workforce – measures to address a shortage of retained firefighters
  - health, safety, and wellbeing – action to address outstanding recommendations following previous incidents
  - equipment and technology – provision of modern and appropriate equipment, technology and resources
  - governance and accountability – reform of governance arrangements for the SFRS
  - culture – action address issues of a negative culture and mistrust and allow staff more input into their role
  - training – action to address the deficiencies in essential and safety critical training
  - climate emergency – provision of appropriate equipment and training to tackle wildfires.
10. This evidence session provides an opportunity for Members to find out the latest position on the challenges facing the SFRS and the status of the proposed reforms. It will also give the Committee the chance to hear from the trade unions and staff bodies.
11. This session will feed into any future scrutiny of the Scottish Government’s planned budget for the SFRS for 2025/26 when this is proposed at the end of this calendar year.

## **Today’s evidence on the Bill**

12. At today’s meeting, the Committee will take evidence from the following:
  - Panel 1 – **Colin Brown**, Executive Council Member for Scotland, Fire Brigades Union, and **Dave Crawford**, Scottish Official, and **Tim Kirk**, Inverness & North Regional Representative, Fire & Rescue Services Association
  - Panel 2 - **Ross Haggart**, Chief Officer, **Stuart Stevens**, Deputy Chief Officer and **Sarah O’Donnell**, Director of Finance and Contractual Services, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

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13. Written submissions from the above organisations are set out in the Annex to this paper.

**Clerks to the Committee  
September 2024**

## Annex

### FBU

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) is the democratic, professional voice of firefighters and other workers within fire and rescue services across Scotland and the UK. The union represents the vast majority of wholetime (full-time), retained (part-time / on-call), volunteer operational firefighters and operational control firefighters in the UK.

The FBU made previous submissions to the SFRS *Draft Strategic Plan 2019-22* and *Draft Strategic Plan 2022-25*; *SFRS - Fire and Rescue Framework: Consultation* in November 2021; the *SFRS: Consultation on Options for Responding to Automatic Fire Alarms* in October 2021; the *Scottish Finance and Public Administration Committee: Pre-Budget Scrutiny Consultation* in August 2022 and to the *Scottish Criminal Justice Committee: Pre-Budget Scrutiny Consultation* in September 2023.

Additionally, in October 2023 the FBU published our *Firestorm* report. A critical review of the first decade of the single Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) that gives effective voice to Scotland's firefighters. The report is an essential contribution to the debate over what is needed for the SFRS to deliver a fit for the future, leading, emergency service that the people of Scotland expect and deserve.

This submission will revisit our response to the Scottish Criminal Justice Committee (SCJC) from September 2023 and consider potential positive and negative outcomes from the ongoing SFRS Strategic Service Review Programme. Our response to the SFRS *Shaping Our Future Service, Your Say* stakeholder consultation is appended and should be read in conjunction with this submission.

The headline figures from the 2024/25 Scottish Government budget, delivered an increase to SFRS resource budget of £13.5 million and capital budget increase of £10.3 million, taking SFRS budgets to £317.3 million and £43 million respectively. The stated £13.5 million uplift to the resource budget obscures that £4.4 million had already been allocated to SFRS as in year funding in 2023 to support SFRS in meeting their obligations under the National Joint Council pay settlement covering 2022/23. SFRS resource budget received a real term £9.1 million increase in the 2024/25 budget, the inclusion of the already allocated £4.4 million in year funding was to allow this money to be recorded against SFRS overall budget.

The 2024 resource and capital budget increases are welcomed, however, the FBU repeat our legitimate and long-standing concerns regarding the chronic underfunding of SFRS. The capital backlog now exceeds £800 million and in September 2023 SFRS decided to cut a further 166 wholetime equivalent posts and remove 10 wholetime fire appliances from across communities in Scotland to deliver a balanced budget. These appliance removals were labelled as temporary however no clear roadmap for returning the 166 firefighter posts or the 10 appliances to their previous locations has been published.

Additionally, SFRS began implementation of the planned removal of 10 of the 26 high reach vehicles across Scotland. The FBU oppose this reduction in specialist resources and has concerns that cuts to high reach firefighting and rescue capability increase the risks faced by firefighters and communities. These risks were evidenced shortly after the

initial reductions were implemented at fires in Kirkcaldy at the former Kitty's nightclub, the large fire in the derelict Station Hotel in Ayr and the fire in Breadalbane Street in Edinburgh where further concerns have been raised regarding flammable cladding remaining on the facade of the building.

Following more than a decade of pay restraint and erosion of firefighters' terms and conditions SFRS continue to experience significant recruitment and retention issues across the Retained Duty System (RDS) and, increasingly within their three operational control rooms. Improved pay, terms and conditions is an absolute requirement if SFRS are to be an employer of choice and begin to address the growing recruitment and retention issues they face.

Pay awards and improved terms and conditions must be supported by additional funding and not paid for by making deeper cuts to an already lean emergency service. Scotland's firefighters should not have to choose between providing a professional well trained and equipped emergency service to the people of Scotland or having fair pay and conditions.

### ***2022/23 and 2024 pay settlements and NJC working groups***

Collectively agreed improvements to the pay, terms and conditions of all UK firefighters are negotiated by the FBU within the UK National Joint Council for Fire and Rescue Services (NJC). This negotiating body comprises 14 representatives from the FBU and 14 representatives from UK fire and rescue employers, with the Chair of the SFRS board and the Scottish FBU Executive Council member being permanent lead members.

Firefighters have suffered more than a decade of pay restraint that has seen their pay reduced by around 12% when measured against inflation over the same period. As highlighted in the FBU September 2023 consultation response to the Criminal Justice Committee, firefighters agreed to settle their 2022 pay dispute with a two-year settlement that provided a 7% uplift for 2022 followed by a 5% uplift for 2023 alongside agreeing a number of working groups to review other contractual conditions.

In May 2024, firefighters agreed a pay settlement of 4% for 2024. Measured against inflation rates at the time, this is the first in year real terms pay increase firefighters have received since before the creation of the single Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. Alongside this pay uplift, implementation of a number of recommendations from the joint working groups, and a commitment to continue the constructive dialogue of these groups, established following the FBU 2022 pay claim, was also agreed. Both sides of the NJC recognise that much work is still required to address long term erosion of pay and conditions experienced over the last two decades.

The 2024 settlement has resulted in some improvements to pay and maternity provision for all firefighters, and the banding and remuneration for retained firefighters. All of which will support the SFRS in being a genuine fair work employer. These negotiated improvements are set out in more detail below.

### ***RDS/On Call issues and NJC working group***

Last year our written response to the SCJC highlighted the significant gaps within the RDS which provides the primary cover for around 80% of Scotland's land mass. The FBU *Firestorm* report detailed that SFRS face significant recruitment and retention issues within the RDS duty system with a vacancy rate of 30% and an annual turnover of

10% of RDS firefighters. This is a significant financial drain upon SFRS with a long-standing cycle of investment and loss as SFRS trains and equip new recruits only to see them leave the Service within their first few years. These well publicised recruitment and retention issues, coupled with availability issues due to RDS firefighters' external primary employment and personal and family responsibilities, result in Scotland regularly seeing up to 150, and at times as many as 200 of the 345 retained appliances unavailable for emergency response at any one time.

In response to Parliamentary and media scrutiny regarding firefighter numbers, SFRS and the Scottish Government have previously stated that a higher number of firefighters are being maintained in Scotland than in other parts of the UK. This response fails to take account of the geography or population density of Scotland and does not state whether this assertion is based on the nominal 'on paper figure' or physical head count, or whether this is based on full time equivalent roles, or a combination of wholetime and RDS firefighters who provide varied hours of availability with a contractual maximum of 120hrs per week. Or indeed if this assertion includes a double count of firefighters who hold a dual contract with SFRS where they are employed as wholetime firefighters in their primary employment and RDS firefighters in their local community on a secondary contract. Ultimately, the response is a flawed analysis of the situation on the ground and fails to recognise many specific geographical, socioeconomic and infrastructure challenges faced across many parts of Scotland.

It is important to stress that there is no criticism of any of the dedicated RDS firefighters who give up significant amounts of time and sacrifice many important family and social events to ensure that their communities are protected with fire and emergency rescue cover. In large part they are working a duty system that no longer fits the society we live in, and the issues faced by SFRS in relation to recruitment and retention within the RDS are mirrored across much of the UK fire and rescue service. The FBU reserves any criticism to fire and rescue services and politicians for historically failing to recognise societal shifts and respond accordingly.

One of the joint working groups established as part of the 2022 pay settlement committed to review the remuneration package for RDS firefighters. The outcomes from this work were encompassed in the 2024 NJC pay settlement and will introduce new bandwidths for hours of availability given and increased retaining fees across these bandwidths.

It is anticipated that this NJC agreement will facilitate SFRS and the FBU to finally be able to reach agreement to standardise RDS employee terms and conditions. The standardisation of terms and conditions and the improvements to retaining fees will likely have a positive impact on recruitment and retention. However, they are unlikely to fully resolve the recruitment and retention crisis within the RDS and will undoubtedly increase financial pressure on SFRS, as increased numbers of employees on RDS contracts will increase the SFRS wage budget but also increase less obvious costs such as training, PPE, national insurance and pension payments.

***Improved maternity provision***

The FBU *Fight for 52* campaign calls on fire and rescue employers to provide 12 months full pay maternity leave in the fire and rescue service. In response, the NJC has agreed an increase to maternity provision for all Grey Book employees to provide 26 weeks full pay for new mothers. This is an improvement for members in Scotland but remains short of what the FBU demands given the significant concerns for new mothers to pass carcinogenic contaminants onto their children following their exposure at operational incidents.

Improved maternity rights are not just the responsible thing to do, they are essential in addressing the gender balance and cultural issues faced by SFRS.

This increase to maternity provision will have a minimal but corresponding impact on SFRS budgets but will assist SFRS in their work to address the significant gender imbalance within operational roles. SFRS workforce data from October 2023 shows that women employees make up just 14.3% of the entire workforce, this is an increase of just 0.9% in the 10 years from 2013-4. Whilst some staff groups show improvement in gender balance, wholtime operational has increased women employees by 2.5% over the 10-year recording period. It should be noted that these increased percentages are against an overall reduction in SFRS headcount within all staff groups so may not represent an actual increase in women joining SFRS. Even discounting this observation, the improvements are minimal and demonstrate that for women, SFRS is not seen as an attractive or viable employer.

***Pay Progression and CPD***

Work continues via the NJC to consider improved mechanisms for pay progression. Both sides recognise that the current flat pay structure and continuing professional development system are problematic and have committed to continue work to improve both elements. Unlike other industries such as the NHS where there are multiple pay points within salary bands, fire and rescue services operate a flat pay structure meaning a competent firefighter has no option for salary progression other than to seek promotion. Counterintuitively, the current CPD model acts as a disincentive, to some, from seeking promotion. It is likely that improvements to salary structure and CPD will impact FRS budgets and SFRS will not be immune to this.

***Developing the role of firefighters***

Perhaps most significantly in relation to this year's SCJC pre-budget scrutiny is the question of developing work on new roles for firefighters. Both sides of the NJC maintain a commitment to develop this work and to do so by agreement, not imposition. As stated in last year's submission, the employer's side of the NJC has recognised that any new roles will require investment and appropriate employee reward.

In response to the shared belief between the SFRS and the FBU, and the direct asks contained within the Scottish Government 2022 Fire and Rescue Framework, a business case between the FBU and SFRS to develop the role of Scottish firefighters, was delivered to the Scottish Government in October 2022, this was predicated on funding from the Scottish Government. However, despite the clear socioeconomic benefits this work could deliver for communities across Scotland no funding has been delivered to support its implementation. This is a significant area of concern and the lack of political

direction and leadership on this issue creates substantial risk as SFRS undertake their Strategic Service Review Programme (SSRP).

Failure to adopt and fund reform in this year's budget will mark three years of missed opportunity and would signal to Scotland's firefighters a clear lack of intent in doing so in the future.

Part of the scope for SSRP may identify a number of stations for closure and result in further fire appliances removed due to an assessment of perceived low activity levels, long term unavailability of fire crews, and changes to risk within communities. This assessment will be based on the current roles and current activity levels of firefighters. The FBU argue that agreement and funding for a developed role for Scottish firefighters should be implemented first to allow an accurate assessment of the impact of new and developed roles prior to considerations on closing stations or removing fire appliances.

As set out in our 2023 submission, it remains the case that historical assurances that the creation of a single Scottish Fire and Rescue Service would protect frontline services have not been met. Since 2012/13 and the creation of Scotland's single fire and rescue service, there has now been a combined reduction to SFRS uniformed operational headcount of more than 1,200 firefighter posts across all duty systems. These cuts have been accompanied by reductions to station establishment levels, control room closures and diminishing crewing levels.

While headcount has reduced by 1,200 in the last decade, at the same time data released by SFRS in their September 2023 Operational Changes information pack detailed that SFRS were relying on overtime from remaining staff, costing an average of £12,000 per day.

Across Scotland, the situation continues that fire appliances are routinely unavailable, routinely crewed below agreed safe crewing levels, and control rooms continue to regularly operate with unsafe critical staffing levels.

Corresponding with the managed reduction of operation firefighters' response times to emergency incidents have steadily increased. Data shows that between 2015/16 and 2020/21 response times increased by a full minute.

The temporary removal of 10 wholetime appliances and corresponding reduction to SFRS head count implemented on 4 September 2023, were assessed by SFRS as the least bad option to balance their budget. In each scenario SFRS own data demonstrated further increases to response times, and by default increased risk to the public and firefighters.

Data obtained from the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) in 2023 confirmed that SFRS has seen funding levels cut by around £57 million in real terms since 2013.



## ***Underfunding remains the key issue for SFRS***

As was highlighted in our 2023 submission to the Criminal Justice Committee, long term underfunding of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service remains the key issue preventing SFRS from progressing work on firefighters' exposure to fire contaminants, providing dignified facilities and developing the role of Scottish firefighters. The increase to both resource and capital budgets for SFRS in the 2024/5 Scottish Government budget allowed SFRS to avoid making further cuts this year but was inadequate to allow SFRS to implement the required programme of large-scale and long overdue replacement and upgrading of Scotland's fire stations. Firefighters continue to attend workplaces that the SFRS and the FBU agree are unfit for purpose, do not allow dignified facilities for all staff and continue to exacerbate the proven risks from toxic contaminants firefighters are exposed to through the course of their work.

## ***Proposed reform***

The FBU concerns regarding the continuation of single year budgets and long-term underfunding of SFRS by the Scottish Government were set out in detail in last year's submission to the committee. It is our view that the combined impact results in an inability for SFRS to make long term planning decisions in relation to capital budget projects whilst faced with the annual prospect of significant downward pressure on capital and resource budgets.

The October 2022 agreement in principle between SFRS and the FBU to develop the role of Scotland's firefighters has been reported to the SCJC previously. As outlined, a business case was provided to the Scottish Government setting out the proposals covered by this agreement at the time.

These areas include utilising and broadening the successful *Home Fire Safety Visit* model to assess a range of other risks and wellbeing considerations to provide advice and signposting to other agencies.

The proposal included an increased role for firefighters to respond to terrorist and mass casualty incidents. A number of terror related incidents, including the horrific attack at Manchester Arena in 2017 exposed a gap in operational understanding and responsibility for fire and rescue services in relation to such events. Unlike some other UK fire and rescue services, SFRS have been unable to progress implementing a Scotland wide programme of training and equipping firefighters to respond to such incidents. The current response model is reliant on a small cadre of ranked officers who are trained and equipped to operate in these environments when on duty being available to respond. This voluntary element has not been negotiated or collectively agreed upon with the FBU and we have significant concerns regarding safety and contractual elements that impact our members, and concerns regarding equity of service provision across Scotland.

As we have seen over recent weeks the risk of large-scale public disorder where fire has been repeatedly used to attack communities is significant. Thankfully, mass casualty incidents have, at the time of writing, been avoided.

The FBU continue to raise our concerns that Scotland's firefighters remain largely unprepared to respond and assist in such circumstances and SFRS are relying on

volunteers to respond to such events due to the failure of Scottish Government to fund the developed role.

The work to develop the role of Scotland's firefighters has stalled with the Scottish Government continuing to voice support for role development but not committing the required financial support to allow realisation. A continuation of this approach will create an intolerable risk to both the SFRS, its workforce and Scotland's communities.

### ***Strategic Service Review Programme***

Recognising the increasing risks resulting from the financial constraints SFRS face, ongoing recruitment and retention issues and issues with their ageing estate (all set out previously), SFRS have proposed further reform under their *Strategic Service Review Programme*.

The FBU have given a commitment to engage fully with this review and to do so in an open, honest and transparent manner. The FBU recognise that maintaining the status quo is not an option, through our *Firestorm* report we highlighted the crisis faced by our retained members and that many of the workplaces our members attend are no longer fit for purpose. We have also acknowledged that SFRS will be unable to spend its way out of the £800 million capital backlog it now faces and that many of the stations across Scotland were built to protect against risks that, due to deindustrialisation, have changed. The FBU have highlighted that departments including training are stretched too thinly resulting in the current levels of training across the service being inadequate and putting firefighters at risk.

The need for review is therefore fully supported by the FBU, we welcome the commitment from SFRS that this review is not a cuts agenda, but a means of using their thin financial resources to allow them to improve the workplaces our members work from, to improve emergency cover where gaps exist and to bolster training departments to allow stretched instructional staff to deliver increased and enhanced levels of training to our members, improving both firefighter and community safety. These potential positive outcomes from SSRP are accompanied by a number of significant risks if decisions are rushed, firefighter and community voices are ignored, or financial support is not provided.

SFRS, like all UK fire and rescue services, will have to take detailed consideration of the recommendations from the Grenfell Tower Inquiry, Phase 2 report, due to be published on 4 September 2024. The recommendations from this report will have to be factored into the SFRS SSRP and may require plans currently being developed to be amended. It should be noted that in response to recommendations contained in the phase 1 report, London Fire Brigade introduced new high reach capabilities for tackling fires and rescues at height, as previously outlined, SFRS have implemented plans to reduce high reach capabilities from 26 specialist vehicles across Scotland down to 16.

The FBU response to the SFRS *Shaping Our Future Service, Your Say* stakeholder consultation is included and should be read as an integral part of this submission to the SCJC.

Meaningful change and ongoing, genuine reform cannot be achieved if SFRS do not receive long term and significant multiyear investment from Scottish Government. Proposals brought forward through SSRP cannot be used to disguise deeper cuts to

SFRS and a developed role cannot be delivered from the already stretched SFRS budget. The potential for positive change coming from SSRP, which protects firefighter jobs and enhances their role, health and safety, and the service provided to the people of Scotland is significant. With it will come challenging discussions between the SFRS and the FBU and will require imaginative thinking if we are to protect SFRS from deeper cuts and deliver a genuine fit for the future fire and rescue service to the people of Scotland.

The FBU urge the Scottish Criminal Justice Committee to recognise the need for increased financial support and to make this case when they produce their pre-budget scrutiny report.

## **Appendix**

### **Introduction**

This is the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) submission to the **Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) 'Shaping Our Future Service: Your Say' consultation** launched on 30 April 2024.

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) is the democratic, professional voice of firefighters and other workers within Fire and Rescue Services across Scotland and the UK. The union represents the vast majority of wholetime (full-time), retained (part-time) and volunteer firefighters and fire control staff in the UK.

In October 2023, the FBU released '*Firestorm*' report in recognition of the longstanding and deepening issues faced by SFRS through inheriting an aging estate when the eight legacy Scottish fire and rescue services were amalgamated into one single service in 2013, and chronic under investment in both resource and capital budgets by successive UK and Scottish Governments.

Since 2010 SFRS uniformed operational headcount has reduced by more than 1,400 firefighters across all duty systems, amounting to almost one in five firefighter posts being cut. The FBU's report identified longstanding recruitment and retention issues with the retained that provides primary emergency fire and rescue cover for approximately 80% of Scotland's landmass, despite as of October 2023 a vacancy rate of around 30% and an annual attrition rate of 10%. These two factors alone combine to produce a significant financial drain on the SFRS and create a significantly increased risk over large areas of Scotland.

The consistent and recurring need to recruit and train retained firefighters creates a perpetual cycle of limited operational experience, negative impacts on appliance availability and lack of stability within retained and does not constitute a meaningful return on the investment made. The vacancy and attrition rates regularly result in large areas of Scotland not having adequate emergency fire and rescue cover, in turn resulting in available resources being spread thinly to attempt to meet SFRS statutory obligations.

The FBU has been clear that the current trajectory of cuts and erosion of the fire and rescue service cannot continue. The FBU welcomes the SFRS consultation and review of service, which in large part overlaps with many of the findings of the FBU *Firestorm* report. However, any proposals brought forward must be evidence based and seek to improve emergency fire and rescue cover across Scotland while protecting and improving the health, safety, wellbeing and working conditions of Scotland's firefighters. These outcomes

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cannot be achieved with further and deeper cuts to an already lean emergency service. The FBU believes the SFRS to achieve these outcomes needs significant investment if it is to be fit for the future.

## Consultation questions

**Question 1: About you**  
**How would you best describe yourself? (Tick the one that best applies)**

### Trade Union/Representative Body

The FBU is the democratic, professional voice of firefighters and other workers within fire and rescue services across Scotland and the UK. The union represents the vast majority of wholetime (full-time), retained (part-time) and volunteer operational firefighters and operational fire control staff in the UK.

**Question 2: Our People**  
**To ensure the highest possible levels of community and firefighter safety, SFRS needs to have firefighter duty systems with the right staffing levels available to attend incidents at the time of day when there is most risk. Do you:**

### Agree strongly

SFRS have undertaken significant modelling work to assess the various risks across Scotland through their Community Risk Index Model (CRIM). This modelling has assessed historic incidents against population density and other metrics in an effort to understand where historic risks existed.

The FBU agree that emergency cover should be provided in areas where there is clearly identified risk. However, the FBU would caution that societal changes that cannot be easily predicted can create significant changes to risk factors. Historically the impacts and change to risk from the deindustrialisation of Scotland were not fully predicted. Equally the recent societal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in temporarily reduced risks across the transport network, and fire risks in commercial settings, due to an increase in members of the public working from home, but also an increased risk of incidents in domestic and rural settings, was not foreseen.

Additionally, the increasing use of lithium-ion batteries has resulted in increased risks in domestic and commercial (including transport system) settings when damaged or overheated batteries enter thermal runaway. Predicting future risks and the resultant demand on emergency services, is dependent upon the data and knowledge available at the time and cannot reasonably be expected to identify new risks emerging.

As our shared understanding of risks from climate change develop, it is inevitable that they will impact on both the type and scale of incidents the SFRS respond to. Such incidents are very challenging to assess and predict where, or at what time of day or night, they may occur. The increasing incidences of large-scale wildfires and flooding incidents, that have impacted so many local communities across Scotland over the last decade, alone demonstrate this point.

The known issues of recruitment and retention in the retained duty system, highlighted in the introduction to this consultation response, show that societal changes in how communities live, and work can develop over time, which can subsequently impact operational duty systems and SFRS ability to respond to operational incidents.

When faced with an emergency, the public expect to be able to dial 999 and receive an emergency response without delay and without consideration of what time of day or night they call.

Over the last decade average response times to incidents have continued to increase. Any proposed changes, developed as part of this consultation, or the wider public consultation, must not negatively impact on firefighters' ability to provide a timely emergency response, or on the vital community engagement work undertaken by SFRS.

**Question 3: Service priorities**  
**The 'Shaping Our Future Service: Your Say' document (Section 3) outlines the need for SFRS to change. From the list below, please select UP TO FOUR issues that you feel should be priorities for SFRS. Please RANK THESE IN ORDER with 1 being the most important**

Rank	Issues
	Crews should be based in areas where there is more risk and demand
	SFRS should have the right resources (i.e. fire appliances) in the right place – based on analysis of risk
	SFRS should work alongside communities to build resilience and better prepare for significant events, including flooding and wildfire.
	Fire stations should have dignified changing facilities for firefighters
	Reassurance that any changes won't make me or my family less safe
	There should be a visible SFRS presence near where I live.
	SFRS should undertake prevention work to protect the most vulnerable in communities
	SFRS needs to demonstrate best value for public money.
	SFRS should strive to reduce its carbon footprint wherever possible

**Not ranked – see below**

The FBU has a number of concerns with the above question, asking stakeholders to poll which risk or cost they are willing to accept, or less likely to object to, is likely to illicit substantially different responses based on individual or collective experience of both SFRS, and the organisation or body on whose behalf they are responding, geography and geographical location, and other socioeconomic demographics.

For example, asking stakeholders to rank whether they believe firefighters should have dignified facilities against whether SFRS should have the right resources in the right place appears perverse when SFRS have statutory, legislative and moral obligations that intersect both statements.

For these reasons it is the FBU's view that this question is inappropriate and unlikely to illicit statistically significant or reliable responses when seeking to set priorities for the future of SFRS.

With specific reference (in order) to the issues within the table:

- It is sensible in terms of risk, emergency response, community engagement, and financial accountability that SFRS *crews should be based in areas where there is more risk and demand*. This statement is obvious and fully supported by the FBU.
- The FBU fully support the statement that *SFRS should have the right resources (i.e. fire appliances) in the right place – based on analysis of risk*. Recognition that risk is dynamic in both the short and long-term based on multiple factors such as short-term population movement into city centres during traditional working hours, through to pandemics and impacts from climate change is vital in ensuring that risks to communities is not inadvertently increased by any proposed changes to how SFRS provide emergency cover or prevention activities across Scotland.
- The FBU is broadly supportive of the statement that *SFRS should work alongside communities to build resilience and better prepare for significant events, including flooding and wildfire*. However, the FBU would caution that attempting to back fill gaps in service provision with community partners and the voluntary sector has the potential to pose significantly increased risk to communities, to community responders and to firefighters. The FBU supports increasing community resilience and preparedness through education, signposting, and identifying individuals or groups who could need additional support or assistance during flooding or wildfires. The FBU does not support replacing highly skilled, highly trained professional firefighters with community responders whose training, skill and knowledge level, or understanding of fire and rescue service incident management and command and control, cannot be assessed or guaranteed.
- As identified in the FBU *Firestorm* report, *fire stations should have dignified changing facilities for firefighters*. This should be a priority for SFRS under their legislative obligations and their commitment to a diverse workforce and inclusive culture. The FBU fully support this being a priority for SFRS, however firefighters do not support the inclusion of this issue as part of a poll on future service priorities within this consultation. It should not be open for question or debate that SFRS should be providing dignified facilities for their employees.
- SFRS should go further than providing *reassurance that any changes won't make me or my family less safe*. SFRS should regard increasing public safety as their primary objective in any change proposals and should guarantee that safety will not be undermined. The FBU do not believe that this should be a choice for stakeholders or members of the public to poll against other SFRS priorities.
- Seeking views on whether *there should be a visible SFRS presence near where I live* is likely to give a false impression of the current reality. The FBU is aware that there are numerous rural and remote areas of Scotland where SFRS currently have a visible presence in the form of local community fire stations. However, the inability to recruit and retain operational firefighters in many of these locations (in part due to factors out with SFRS control) means that there is limited or no scope to provide an emergency response from these stations. The FBU make the point that it is less important to have a visible presence, and more important to have firefighters physically present to respond to emergencies, provide fire safety advice and education, and community engagement.

- The FBU has been at the forefront of making the case for increased prevention work and support the statement that *SFRS should undertake prevention work to protect the most vulnerable in communities*. However, the inclusion of this statement within the poll suggests that dependant on the responses, preventative work may no longer be a priority for SFRS, which would impact SFRS obligations under the Fire Scotland Act 2005 (as amended). The FBU do not believe that any individual or organisation would attempt to make the case that SFRS should withdraw or refrain from this vital area of work and have concerns that this has been included as part of this consultation when seeking to rate one priority over another.
- The FBU views the inclusion of the statement that *SFRS needs to demonstrate best value for public money* within this consultation as unnecessary and of no benefit or value to setting SFRS future priorities. It is incumbent on all public sector and taxpayer funded organisations to provide best value.
- The FBU is fully supportive of the urgent need to reduce carbon emissions. However, the FBU does not believe the inclusion of the statement *SFRS should strive to reduce its carbon footprint wherever possible* within this poll provides any value or merit when setting future service priorities. SFRS, like all Scottish public bodies, have had a statutory obligation, and therefore legal requirement, to reduce their carbon footprint and emissions since 2011. This is set out in the Scottish Governments statutory strategic delivery plan for meeting emissions reduction targets, the Scottish Government Climate Change Plan and the Climate Change (Emissions Reductions Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019.

**Question 4: Investing in change**

**Section 4 of the 'Shaping Our Future Service: Your Say' document outlines the need for SFRS make better use of our resources. One way we can do this is to work in partnership with other public bodies (e.g., Police Scotland and others) to explore how we can provide better value for the public. Do you:**

**Agree**

The FBU agrees that public bodies should seek to collaborate where appropriate. However, the driver for closer collaboration should mean improved outcomes for the people of Scotland, not on savings by reducing headcount.

The focus on best value across multiple sectors, including fire and rescue, has historically been used across the UK to justify cost cutting which has led to attacks on members terms and conditions and firefighter safety through the loss of jobs, resilience, reduced ridership factors and removal of pumps and stations. This has resulted in increased response times and increased risk to the public and firefighters. The FBU argue that the resultant societal cost of these historic cuts does not offer genuine best value. Since 2010 SFRS uniformed operational headcount has reduced by more than 1,400 firefighters across all duty systems, amounting to almost one in five firefighter posts being cut. This damaging trend cannot continue.

The FBU has sought to progress meaningful partnership working that is outcome led through our National Joint Council (NJC) facilitated negotiated principal agreement with SFRS to develop the role of Scotland's' firefighters. It is our view that closer collaboration with other services such as NHS Scotland and the Scottish Ambulance Service through



co-response to appropriate emergency medical incidents, expanded home safety visits and community engagement with vulnerable groups will deliver best value by delivering better outcomes for society.

Opportunities to share buildings and training venues are one area that the FBU broadly support however, the lack of dignified facilities and DECON procedures, including zoning, across much of the SFRS estate would need to be rectified before serious consideration could be given to such ventures.

Projects and reviews based principally on reducing costs for support functions such as payroll are likely to see fewer employees undertaking increased workloads and negatively impact output from these departments. The experience of the FBU in Scotland and across the UK, is that where support functions are streamlined as a cost saving measure, the service provided becomes poorer.

It is important to assess and understand that the trust placed in firefighters by the public is likely to be damaged if there is a shift, perceived or otherwise, away from being a humanitarian service due to closer collaboration with police or law enforcement. While the SFRS and the Scottish Government have no stated intention to alter their governance model, it should be noted that the FBU is firmly opposed to a move away from distinct governance arrangements for fire including the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (PFCC) model used in parts of England. It has created significant issues for services and damaged public confidence.

**Question 5: Our appliances**

**Section 5.2 of the 'Shaping Our Future Service: Your Say' document (Changing Where our Stations and Appliances are Based) outlines why we need to review where our appliances are located. For communities to be safe, we need to have the right**

**Agree strongly**

The Community Risk Index Model (CRIM) carried out by SFRS provides important and valuable analysis of historical incident data and societal demographics including population shifts, age, and socioeconomic/deprivation indexing for all of Scotland.

This data is broadly useful in understanding where historic risk existed and identifying trends. Much of this data appears to confirm what was already known; where you have higher density of human activity, in domestic, commercial and industrial settings, or via transport networks, predominantly the road network, there will be higher levels of demand on the fire and rescue service. Where there are higher levels of deprivation and poverty, there will be higher demand on the fire and rescue service for both emergency response and community engagement.

The CRIM data does seek to identify changing risks and therefore demands from an aging population and climate change, it is impossible to fully predict events that have societal impacts. The necessity to work from home during the COVID 19 pandemic saw significant reductions in road use and population shifts into city and town centres during normal working hours. The impacts of climate change are constantly being modelled, it is impossible to fully predict where and when wildfires and large scale flooding events will occur. This has been evidenced in the wildfires that swept across London in July 2022 destroying homes, the wildfire at Cannich in 2023, Storm Arwen in 2021 which devastated

large areas across the east coast of Scotland and Storm Babet that resulted in a number of deaths across the UK in 2023.

The FBU entered and committed to develop the role of Scotland's firefighters in 2022. The Scottish Government continue to state their support for the realisation of an agreement but to date have not provided the necessary funding to allow SFRS to progress the relevant areas of work.

It is vital that any proposals brought forward by SFRS are not developed purely on a cost saving basis. Understanding historic, anticipated shifts in human activity and accompanying risk alongside anticipated risks from external factors such as climate change, anticipated increases in demand from new roles and work will be vital in ensuring that proposals do not increase risks to communities. The FBU does not want to see risk increased through reduced firefighter numbers and increased response times, or reduced resilience across SFRS due to changes in appliance location, crewing models or resources being diverted or delayed via the proposed new areas of work, should the developed role be realised.

**Question 6a: Where we're located**

**Section 5.2 of the 'Shaping Our Future Service: Your Say' document (Changing Where our Stations and Appliances are Based) outlines why we need to review where our fire stations are located. To do this, we must consider how the communities we serve have changed and are continuing to change.**

**Agree strongly**

As stated in response to question 5, the FBU recognise the need for SFRS to assess and plan according to known and anticipated risks, societal and environmental changes. It is vital that when developing proposals, SFRS fully assess anticipated impacts from emerging risks and the impact of any proposed new work under the proposed developed role for Scottish firefighters.

The location of SFRS stations and resources should take full consideration of the impact of large- scale flooding events that have previously cut off whole communities from traditional emergency response due to the road network becoming impassable for fire and rescue vehicles due to flooding and landslides.

The FBU recognise that changing population trends in some remote and rural communities has resulted in local recruitment and retention difficulties. SFRS have a legislative and humanitarian responsibility to ensure that adequate emergency cover is provided to all communities in Scotland. Any proposals in relation to station closures and/or relocation must ensure that response times are not further increased and that steps are taken to reduce risks in communities where known or anticipated recruitment and retention issues exist in order to protect and improve future service provision. Consideration must also be given to how any change proposals may impact other sectors or industries.

**Question 6b: Shared premises**

**SFRS should consider sharing premises with partners (e.g., Scottish Ambulance Service, Police Scotland and local authorities) to provide a better service for our**

**Agree in part.**

Shared facilities should bring organisational, financial and societal benefits and opportunity. However, the FBU believes it is vital that any proposals to share facilities with other organisations are based on more than potential savings. Robust assessment of community and societal benefits or impacts should be fundamental in developing any plans for shared facilities. Equality impact assessments should be conducted as a matter of course to consider all impacts from any proposed changes.

As has been noted in the FBU *Firestorm* report and by SFRS, much of the current SFRS estate is ageing and does not offer dignified or DECON compliant facilities for firefighters and existing premises users. It is vital that other workers are not exposed to these working conditions or the recognised risks of cross contamination from fire effluents transferred by firefighters into their surroundings. If SFRS are to develop proposals for increased sharing of facilities then this must be done alongside significant investment and modernisation of their estate to provide safe, fit for purpose workplaces for all staff groups and visitors.

The SFRS also needs to fully consider the full impact of which partner organisations are most appropriate to share facilities with. Firefighters and fire and rescue services have had widely recognised success in accessing many communities where other partners, for example Police Scotland, have experienced greater challenges. Consideration must be given to ensuring that recognised shared premises does not unintentionally undermine those successes and therefore we oppose the sharing of premises with police and/or other law enforcement agencies.

**Question 7a: Our role in local communities**

**Our prevention, preparedness and protection work can help reduce the risk of fires and other potentially life-threatening situations. It can also help us better plan for events such as flooding and wildfires.**

**Agree strongly**

The FBU supports a joint approach to risk reduction through community engagement and education. It is recognised that firefighters are on the front line of climate related emergencies and as such, SFRS should be a primary contributor to developing preparedness for such events. Ensuring that community resilience and action plans are evidence based, well founded and rehearsed is key to reducing risks and harm from these events.

While the FBU support closer partnership working to reduce such risks, the FBU does so with a note of caution, as it is firefighters that remain best placed to carry out emergency response to such incidents. While community responders play a key role, it is vital that professional, highly trained firefighters, who fully understand SFRS command and control and incident management procedures provide the emergency response. Due to their knowledge and experience of responding to such incidents, firefighters also remain key to developing and delivering community engagement in relation to large scale environmental incidents.

**Question 7b: Our role in local communities**

**SFRS should contribute towards Net Zero by, for example, reducing our own carbon emissions. Do you:**

**Agree strongly**

As previously covered in response to question 3, SFRS have legislative obligations to contribute to Net Zero. The FBU fully support the Scottish Government's intent to deliver on their climate targets and the need for all public sector bodies to contribute to the aim of Net Zero by 2045. The size of SFRS as a Scotland wide organisation, and scale of the issues faced in relation to reducing their carbon footprint poses significant challenges, but also offers significant opportunity to the organisation.

If the SFRS are to meaningfully reduce their carbon emissions, this will require significant investment in their estate and fleet as new technology is developed, which will subsequently require ongoing, long-term financial support from Scottish Government. This cannot be achieved through cuts to other areas of the service or changes that negatively impact operational response or community safety.

**Question 8: Consulting with our communities**  
**SFRS may wish to hold a future public consultation on some of the issues detailed below. Please tell us to what extent you think the public should be consulted on each issue.**

<u>Change Proposal</u>	<u>The public should be fully consulted</u>	<u>The public don't need to be consulted, but should be informed</u>	<u>The public don't need to be consulted</u>	<u>Unsure</u>
Changes to firefighter role (e.g., to include emergency first aid responder)			Changes to firefighter roles are negotiated through recognised collective bargaining mechanisms – the NJC. Public consultation may be beneficial to assess the public desire for such changes but should not undermine this structure or the contractual or legal rights of firefighters.	
Modernisation / upgrade of a fire station(s)		The FBU do not believe there is a need for public consultation to deliver improvements to existing SFRS buildings. Building users/firefighters should be consulted on these improvements to ensure their ideas are considered. A positive example of this has been the		

		upgrade to Inverness community fire station that involved watch based firefighters in design and implementation ensuring DECON factors were considered.		
<b>Closure of a fire station</b>	The closure of fire stations in local communities has the potential to negatively impact community safety. Communities should be fully involved in any decisions that could see risks increase.			
<b>Moving a fire station to a new location</b>	Moving fire stations to new locations has the potential to negatively impact community safety in one area while improving cover in others. Communities should be fully involved in any decisions that could see risks increase.			
<b>Permanent removal or relocation of a fire appliance(s)</b>	The permanent removal or relocation of fire appliances has the potential to negatively impact community safety in one area while improving cover in others. Communities should be fully involved in any decisions that could see risks increase.			

<p><b>Changes to firefighter duty systems</b></p>			<p>Changes to firefighter duty systems are negotiated through recognised collective bargaining mechanisms - NJC. Public consultation may be beneficial to assess the public desire for such</p>	
			<p>changes but should not undermine this structure and the contractual or legal rights of firefighters to negotiate and agree duty systems in line with the scheme of conditions of service.</p>	
<p><b>Sharing locations with other partners (e.g., Police, Ambulance, local authorities.)</b></p>		<p>The FBU believe there is a need to consult with current building users and prospective building users to ensure their expectations of shared buildings and locations are considered and that the service provided is not negatively impacted. There is a possibility that changes such as these may be viewed negatively by some members of the public therefore, the public should be involved in the decision making process to ensure their expectations are considered ahead of making any changes.</p>		

<p><b>Building a new fire station</b></p>	<p>Beyond the need for normal consultation as part of the planning process, the public should be consulted to ensure their views and the needs of the local community are fully considered prior to building new fire stations. End</p>			
	<p>users/firefighters, through the FBU should be fully involved in each stage of any new design and build of fire stations to ensure their ideas and needs are fully considered, (see previous comment regarding upgrade of Inverness fire station).</p>			



**Question 9: Any other comments**

**Please give us any other comments that SFRS should take into account when considering the future of the Service.**

The FBU *Firestorm* report highlighted many of the issues that SFRS recognise in the documentation accompanying this consultation. The FBU welcomes SFRS undertaking a review of current service provision with the intent to develop change options to improve the service provided to communities of Scotland and to the working life of our members.

It is vital that changes of this potential scale, which are likely to have multi-generational impacts are well thought out, well planned and based on a desire to improve service provision, not based solely on savings. The FBU has been explicit in our statements, that this review cannot be used as a smokescreen for cuts, and welcome SFRS early commitment that this is a view shared by the SFRS senior leadership team. FBU's priorities are listed below:

- **The FBU will not accept further reductions to firefighter numbers as part of this change process – more firefighters are needed not less.**

In the last 14 years SFRS have cut over 1,400 firefighter posts through 'natural wastage'. This has seen increases to response times and will have undoubtedly negatively impacted the level and quality of community engagement. There are also concerns regarding current resilience levels and the ability to implement relief strategies at large scale incidents to allow firefighters who become exposed to fire contaminants to properly decontaminate.

- **The FBU will not accept reductions to the agreed safe crewing model.**

The agreed safe crewing model ensures that the initial response to an incident of a primary appliance allows a full crew of five firefighters to effect immediate rescue of casualties while maintaining minimum safety levels. The appliance reductions imposed in 2023 resulted in an increased number of single pump stations, increasing the likelihood of single crews being the sole attendance at incidents for protracted periods. Any proposals to reduce safe crewing levels on appliances undermines the safety of both the public and firefighters and will not be accepted by the FBU.

- **The FBU has significant concerns regarding any proposals to reduce fire cover at night.** It is our view that reductions to fire cover overnight pose an increased risk to communities and to the health safety and wellbeing of firefighters. It is likely that any such proposals would negatively impact on the contractual conditions and work life balance of our members.

The FBU support the SFRS commitment to being an employer of choice, while this is not specifically referenced within the *Shaping Our Future* documents, it is accepted and welcomed that this is a long standing position held by the organisation. This review offers opportunities for SFRS to further this aim by increasing their commitment to implement best practice in relation to fire contaminants, cancers and diseases through both station design and crew availability ensuring relief strategies can be implemented to allow firefighters to decontaminate quickly following exposure to fire effluents.

- **The FBU demands support for pregnant firefighters**

The FBU campaign *Fight for 52* focussed on the need for firefighters to have 52 weeks maternity leave on full pay. SFRS should take the opportunity through this review to improve the working conditions of their staff. The FBU believe this will have positive outcomes in relation to diversifying the workforce while minimising secondary exposure risks to newborn children and demonstrating that SFRS are a family friendly employer.

**•The FBU calls for SFRS to acknowledge the vital role control firefighters play**

The *Shaping Our Future* documentation makes no detailed reference to the vital role carried out by our firefighters that work in control. This staff group has undergone the most significant changes since the inception of the single service with the reduction from eight to three control rooms, changes to shift patterns, changes to mobilising protocols and systems with further changes imminent when a new mobilising system is implemented in coming months/years. Control firefighters have seen the scope of their role change and the level of knowledge and understanding required in relation to incident types significantly increase. Control firefighters will be impacted by most or all changes brought forward following this review – the SFRS need to recognise and properly support the role our control members play in the service.

**•The FBU is committed to a welcoming, hospitable work culture**

The current work by the SFRS Cultural Development Group will require a commitment to training and development in soft skills and leadership, the current structures in training departments are unlikely to be able to deliver the required development, delivery or volume of training. This review provides opportunity to bolster training departments to enable increased levels of formalised training and development in all disciplines. Should SFRS identify frontline resources that are no longer protecting known risks (due to changes such as deindustrialisation) consideration should be given to moving the spare capacity into training roles to better equip remaining operational crews.

**•The FBU supports fair pensions for firefighters**

The SFRS, like all fire and rescue service employers, will be impacted by the changes to nominal pension age and will likely see increases to the number of operational staff working to sixty years old. Existing research identifies that maintaining operational fitness to this age will increasingly become a challenge for increasing numbers of staff. As part of this review, SFRS should consider opportunities and mechanisms to be able to move staff that are unable to maintain operational fitness into non-operational roles within departments such as community safety or training, ensuring that individuals can work to their normal pension age and SFRS can maximise benefits from the operational experience gained by such individuals.

**The FBU believes SFRS needs significant investment if it is to be fit for the future.**

***Further reading***

FBU Scotland, [Firestorm Report](#)

## **Fire and Rescue Services Association**

### ***State of the service***

While the availability of Wholetime appliances remains high, the overall On Call 1st Appliance availability is now at its lowest ever figure of 72% (57% daytime, 83% evening, 71% weekend).

There are significant variations across Scotland with overall On Call 1st appliance availability ranging from more than 92% in some areas, to less than 20% in others.

Recruitment of more On Call firefighters and the retention of current firefighters are key to improve fire appliance availability. We have encouraged and supported the Service in developing pilots of Joint Mobilising of crews. While this is not a long-term solution, it is encouraging to see the Service be innovative in its approach to this issue.

The 54 full time On Call Support Watch Commander posts have proven to be a valuable asset and we fully support the development of other full time On Call roles.

### ***Challenges***

Terms & Conditions. More than 11 years into a national service and On Call Retained Ts & Cs are still not finalised. So much of what the Service wants and needs to do, is on hold because of this. We are actively engaged with SFRS in negotiations and are hopeful that an agreed On Call Retained Ts & Cs package may be completed soon.

Leavers versus joiners. Recruitment is not keeping pace with the number of leavers.

To keep the current stations open. On-Call stations are not just fire stations they are the Hubs of the community, we need to work with the Service to make sure that the fire service is relevant to their communities and that fire stations do not close.

Mobilisation system. Look at new technology available to make the firefighters role as safe as can be and make best use of any additional funding.

### ***Financial pressures***

The SFRS estate will never be fit for purpose, without hundreds of millions of pounds of investment. Significant investment is required to bring stations up to an acceptable level.

Value for money. SFRS must demonstrate value for money in all that it does. We fully support the Service in asking for increases in budgets and we would also support additional targeted funding to tackle station specific issues.

### ***Reform***

Broadening of the firefighter role. Firefighters join the Service to respond to incidents and help their communities. Since the introduction of the new UFAS guidelines, station calls have dropped significantly. The result is that, particularly On Call stations, are far less busy. Firefighters are not getting the opportunity to do exactly what they joined to

do, this can affect morale within a station which has a knock on effect on recruitment and retention. A drop in operational activity can also lead to skill fade in key competencies, like driving, BA and Incident Command.

The 43 recommendations made by the On Call Improvement Team, and approved by the Senior Leadership Team, need to be funded and supported to bring about the change that is needed in On Call.

SSRP is an opportunity for SFRS to demonstrate innovation and deliver an improved service for all of Scotland.

**Dave Crawford**  
**Crew Commander**  
**R45 P6**  
**Fochabers.**  
**Scottish Official for the FRSA**  
**National Executive Board of the FRSA**

## Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

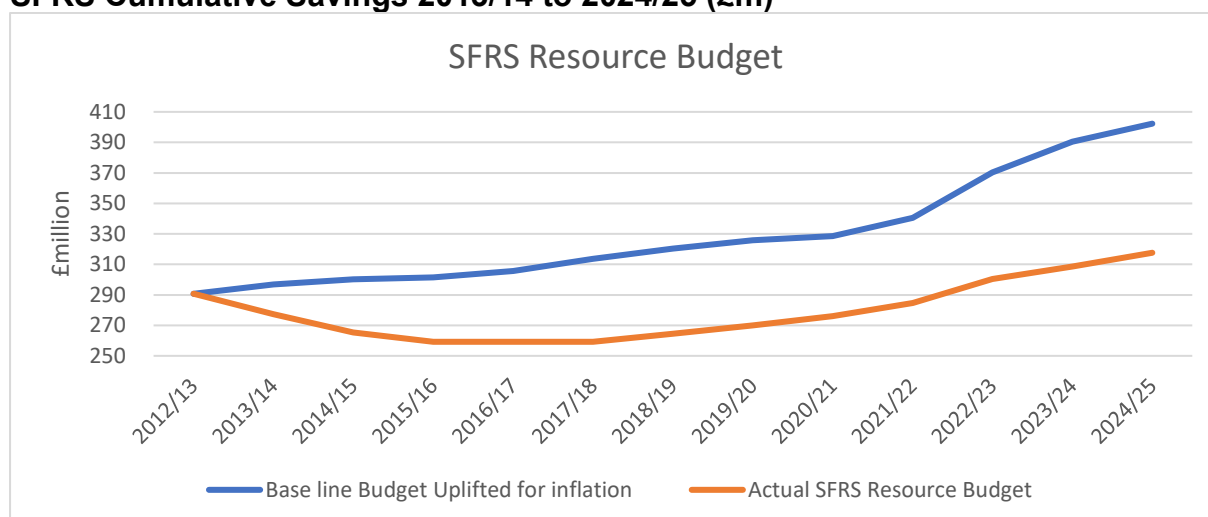
### Introduction

The Criminal Justice Committee of the Scottish Parliament has asked for information regarding the proposed reforms to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) and the budget challenges facing the Service.

In exploring the budgetary challenges, it should be remembered that the reform of the Fire and Rescue Service in 2013/14 was intended to deliver significant savings through the creation of a single national service for Scotland.

It was estimated in the Financial Memorandum for the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012 that the reform of the Fire and Rescue Service could generate efficiencies of £328m by 2027/28. To date SFRS is on track to exceed the efficiency target set out at the point of reform.

### SFRS Cumulative Savings 2013/14 to 2024/25 (£m)



We forecast that, since the reform of the Service, the cumulative total of all savings achieved by SFRS is projected to be approximately £908.5 million by 2027/28. These savings have been delivered due to a systematic efficiency programme that included the development of a Target Operating Model (TOM) that reduced the number of Whole-Time (WT) operational posts by 511 and a significant reduction in executive and senior management posts while protecting community safety. We have also rationalised our non-operational property estate, reviewed the locations and numbers of specialist vehicles, undertaken process efficiency reviews, restructured internal elements of the Service and secured procurement benefits by operating as a single organisation.

### SFRS Budget: 2023/24 to 2024/25

Following the publication of the Resource Spending Review (RSR) in May 2022, SFRS initially planned for annual flat cash settlements in the budget for the 4-year RSR period. While in the first two years of the RSR period our budget position has been better than flat cash, we have still experienced significant budget pressures.

Balancing the budget in 2023/24 required in-year savings totalling £11.06m. The savings were achieved by reducing employee costs by £4.7m and non-employee costs by £6.36m. The time pressures we faced in doing so were incredibly challenging as we are driven by an annual rather than a strategic budget planning cycle. By modelling changing community risks through our Community Risk Index Model (CRIM) we can understand how community risk is changing in Scotland and identify where change to SFRS resources (people and assets) across our station network could be made with the least impact on community safety. Based on our evidence-led modelling we temporarily removed 10 second or third appliances from multi pump stations. Aligned to this we implemented changes to our high reach appliances, placing them in the most strategic locations where they can provide more optimised and effective resilience on a national basis. We also amended the crewing for water rescue at Polmadie Community Fire Station to be more in line with all other water rescue stations throughout Scotland. These savings delivered a reduction in the WT Service resulting in some 166 firefighter posts being removed from the TOM on an interim basis.

In the 2024/25 budget settlement the Service received an increase in both its resource and capital budgets. The resource budget for 2024/25 was £317.6m which is an increase of £13.6m, or 4.5%. This included a previously agreed element to cover the cost of the second year of a firefighter pay settlement (£4.1m) meaning the cash uplift was £9.5m or 3.1%. While welcomed by the Service, we were still faced with making further savings of approximately £4m in 2024/25 on the resource budget to offset pressures arising from staff pay awards and non-pay inflation. To achieve a balanced budget a range of actions were taken including a delay in bringing new employees into the Service and the introduction of a 10% vacancy factor within support staff functions. In training we decided to reduce the number of training events that required overnight accommodation costs and ran local training events in their place.

In July 2024 through the UK wide National Joint Council (NJC) the issue of modernising the structure of retaining fees paid to On Call Firefighters was settled. The new arrangements, while welcomed by SFRS, will add approximately £4m to the cost base of SFRS when they come into full effect. The first payments on these new arrangements will commence in January 2025 adding £900,000 to Service expenditure for 2024/25.

The Capital budget for 2024/25 was set at £43m which is an increase of £10.3m or 31.5%. This increase was also welcomed by the Service. However, the Service is facing a capital backlog of some £818m of which £496m is to develop the operational estate up to modern station design standards. Our estimate is that we require a capital budget of approximately £80m per annum sustained for 10 years to deal with our investment backlog challenges. Without this investment that modernisation will be challenging to deliver.

### ***The Look Ahead***

Notwithstanding the savings we have delivered and assuming a flat cash budget settlement figure through to 2026/27, as set out in the RSR, SFRS is now facing acute financial and budgetary pressures that will necessitate hard choices in how we deliver our services in the year ahead and beyond.

As SFRS operates on an annual budget cycle, we do not have the ability to hold financial reserves over a period of years. This makes long term financial planning and investment challenging. Consequently, we are required to make assumptions about our long-term resource and capital budgets, meaning our investment plans are contingent upon the actual annual budget position each year. This further means that when savings must be achieved these come as short-term cuts to balance the budget.

In anticipation of further budgetary pressure, but with our 2025/26 budget unknown until the end of 2024, we have developed financial scenarios to enable us to model those pressures and plan, as best we can, how we can manage them.

It is important to note, as we have previously submitted to the Committee, about 80% of our Resource Budget is spent on staff salaries and of that, 80% is spent on Operational staff salaries. Operational salaries are further broken down as follows: 66% WT Firefighters, 3% Control Firefighters and 11% On Call Firefighters. This means that, given our previous savings exercises, when the Service experiences significant budgetary pressures the ability to make savings without impacting on employee cost areas are extremely limited.

We have modelled four financial scenarios that show the funding gap in the Service, if these come to pass. Each scenario is based on SFRS experiencing inflation within its cost base which matches SGs most recent assumptions.

**Financial Scenarios Funding Gaps: Cumulative Totals**

<b>Funding Scenario</b>	<b>Funding Gap 2025/26 (£m)</b>	<b>Funding Gap 2026/27 (£m)</b>
Balanced base budget each year	0	0
Flat cash base budget each year	11	23
1% reduction in base budget each year	15	29
2% reduction in base budget each year	18	36

To illustrate the impacts of such financial scenarios in staffing terms and based on our current employment numbers across the Service, we have set out below what this would look like in terms of the numbers of staff posts that would need to be removed to meet the budget gap. The figures are modelled on the basis that the funding gaps set out above for the whole Service are proportionally split between operational and support budgets based on an 80/20 split that reflects the salary cost balance in the Service. We have then calculated the number of firefighter posts and support staff posts that would need to be removed from the Service to achieve those levels of savings in each area using the hourly salary rate for firefighters and the average salary for support staff.

**In Year Staff Posts Cuts Required to Meet Funding Gap: Cumulative Totals**

Funding Scenario	Firefighter Posts		Support Posts	
	25/26	26/27	25/26	26/27
Balanced base budget each year	0	0	0	0
Flat cash base budget each year	- 215	- 423	- 53	- 97
1% reduction in base budget each year	- 274	- 539	- 68	- 123
2% reduction in base budget each year	- 334	- 653	- 83	- 149

For context the Service is anticipating 309 WT firefighter retirements / leavers over this two-year period. In each scenario we would not backfill those vacancies but would in all cases need to remove additional firefighter posts to meet the funding gap. For support staff post removals, both short and long term, will impact on our capacity and capability to procure and maintain assets, support and develop our people, manage our money, and deliver change across the whole Service.

In operational terms the different financial scenarios and firefighter post reductions would require us to remove operational appliances from the Service. At the beginning of 2023/24 the Service operated with 116 WT appliances. To meet in year budget pressures, we removed 10 appliances or 9% of WT appliances on a temporary basis. The number of appliance removals set out in the financial scenarios below illustrate the cumulative number of required withdrawals including the 10 temporary withdrawals.

**Impacts of Financial Scenarios on Number and Percentage of WT Appliances: Cumulative Totals \***

Funding Scenario	2025/26		2026/27	
	Number	% of WT Appliances	Number	% of WT Appliances
Balanced base budget each year	-10	9	-10	9
Flat cash base budget each year	-19	16	-27	23
1% reduction in base budget each year	-21	18	-32	28
2% reduction in base budget each year	-23	20	-36	31

\*Includes 10 temporary appliance withdrawals from 2023/ 24



Reductions in staffing and WT appliances on these scales would likely result in the closure of some stations across the country.

In the On Call service, in financial planning terms every 5 On Call firefighter posts equates to 1 WT firefighter post. Therefore, in all the financial scenarios outlined above the proportional impacts of the budget reductions on the On Call budget would be highly destabilising of the On Call Service. Each fire appliance in an On Call station requires 10 On Call firefighters to maintain it on the run. In reducing staffing numbers in the On Call Service in the proportions required from the above scenarios this would disproportionately skew community risk in rural and island communities. This in turn would undermine our need to balance our resource deployment to meet community risk across the whole country. This means that the only realistic options the Service would have in finding savings of the scale outlined above is to look predominantly at WT firefighter posts and a proportionate share in Corporate Service posts with a reduced proportional impact on the On Call service.

In all the financial scenarios we can model it must be noted that our ability to reduce the number of firefighter posts is limited. It would be impossible to achieve budget reductions on these scales in year or through natural attrition in the workforce. To minimise the need for initiating severance arrangements, we would require to immediately halt all recruitment to the Service. This would have an immediate impact on capacity and operational service delivery, generating a likely overspend in the additional cost of overtime to maintain operational delivery until changes to the operating model could be made. It is also important to note that there are no mechanisms to make firefighters redundant. SFRS would require the support of SG to secure changes in pension regulations to enable this if it were required. These practical considerations are highlighted to make the point that the means through which we can act to make savings of this scale, if required, are limited and invariably take time to deliver.

Until we know our actual budget situation, all we can do is model such financial scenarios and explore the consequences of the hard choices they will necessitate. This lack of long-term financial certainty and planning is a persistent challenge in building a sustainable Service for Scotland.

### ***Spending Pressures***

Despite all efforts in the last few years to deliver ongoing savings within SFRS, we are still faced with significant and complex spending pressures. These challenges require hard choices that we will need to take in the short term but will also require longer term change in how the Service is delivered if a financially sustainable Service is to be achieved. In the next 12 months the most pressing challenges we face are summarised below.

Firefighter pay is negotiated through the NJC and pay awards to firefighters once agreed are paid from July to June the following year rather than in financial years as is common in many other public services. The Pay deal reached through the NJC for 2024/25 exceeded the budget uplift and therefore had to be partially funded from savings. For WT firefighters the total cost amounted to £4.7m from July 2024 to March 2025. For Control Room firefighters the pay award added £0.2m for the same period and for On-Call Firefighters it amounted to £2.042m, of which £900,000 was not

anticipated and was therefore unbudgeted by the Service. The support services staff pay offer for 2024/25 is not yet settled at the time of writing and therefore any additional budgetary pressures this may bring are unknown.

There is growing evidence internationally of the higher risks firefighters face in developing several types of cancer arising from exposure to contaminants caused by carrying out their roles. SFRS is working jointly with the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) to tackle this issue and is doing as much as we can to protect firefighters from this risk. We established a joint working group with the FBU to that effect. In 2024/25 we approved a budget of £3.2m for managing fire contaminants in 2024/25. This comprises of capital expenditure of £2.9m, resource costs of £0.3m. It is anticipated there will be an annual recurring resource cost of £0.5m each year thereafter. This financial investment to managing this emerging risk will assist in achieving firefighter safety. But much more and sustained Capital and Resource investment will be required in the years to come if we are to truly tackle this issue.

We noted in the above sections the Capital budget pressures we face, and our latest estate assessment highlights that 45% of our operational property estate is in poor or bad condition, and in terms of suitability 77% of the operational estate is classed as poor or bad. This is likely to worsen when our estate is assessed against the standards that are being developed by the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) for Contaminant Control. Around 65% of our buildings are over 30 years old and should be considered for full refurbishment or replacement. While priority is given to the most urgent needs, our current capital funding means it will take years to resolve problems while the condition and suitability of our estate continues to deteriorate. In addition, we have 14 stations with Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete, (RAAC) roof panel problems. Dealing with these station problems remains a Service priority despite the Capital Budget limitations and adds to resource budget pressures in the interim period.

The Service operates with 1687 vehicles within our fleet and of that 482 are older than their planned replacement age. This equates to 29% of our total fleet. Breaking the total fleet down into heavy and light fleet, 32% of the heavy fleet is older than the planned replacement age, that is 251 out of 784 vehicles. In our light fleet 26% of vehicles are older than the planned replacement age, that is 231 out of 903 vehicles.

To help meet our budgetary pressures and free up limited capital investment, we are now slowing down our replacement programmes which, in future years, will lead to maintenance and other costs increasing within the Service. To fully modernise our estate and fleet will require sustained and higher levels of investment if they are to meet the needs of a modern fire and rescue service.

Lastly, climate change is having an increasing impact on Scotland and consequently our ability to meet the pressures arising from this. In response to this, we have developed a Wildfire Strategy and have provided additional vehicles, equipment, training and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) on a risk based and tiered model across Scotland. The wildfire specific PPE that has been provided is currently deployed to the 25 strategically situated stations identified in the tiered approach. However, providing this PPE to all operational personnel if budgets allow will be an ongoing consideration.

In periods of prolonged wildfire risk, the whole Service may be stretched in its capacity to manage wildfire incidents when they occur. Fighting prolonged incidents of this nature, over rough terrain and at times large land mass areas requires support from across the whole Service. Due to the gruelling nature of the tasks on the incident ground this also requires crews to be relieved to provide proper rest and recuperation. When complex, multiple incidents of this nature occur concurrently this places strain on the Service in dealing with them while also remaining resilient to respond to all other varied incidents, that we routinely do on a day-to-day basis across Scotland, simultaneously. In addition, the implications of fighting wildfires for On Call crews is further compounded as those fires predominantly occur in their communities and their actions in tackling these fires over a long period of time places significant demands on them, their private and family lives, and their primary employment. These pressures for On Call crews adds a further driver to the need to modernise the On Call Service which we have initiated and which in turn requires sustained investment.

To meet the demands arising from extreme rainfall patterns across Scotland and the heightened risks of flooding in many cities, towns and villages that this brings, we need to identify which critical national infrastructure sites, public services, high risk commercial premises and households are most vulnerable to the impacts of flooding. When these events occur, we need to be able to swiftly respond to protect those communities and households over prolonged periods, where it is highly likely there will be multiple events occurring concurrently. Consequently, we need to ensure our firefighters are appropriately trained and equipped to support people during these emergencies. The challenge of the climate emergency is happening now and requires us to continue investing in our Service Delivery model to ensure that we can respond appropriately in the years and decades ahead.

### ***SFRS Change Ambitions***

In 2023 we launched the Strategic Service Review Programme (SSRP) which has an overarching aim of modernising the Service as a whole. These plans are not simply to deal with short to medium term financial challenges; they are to develop the organisation into the Service it needs to be if it is to continue protecting Scotland's communities and meet changing community risks across the country.

At its core the SSRP operates on the basis that in achieving change we can identify savings in how we work and reinvest that money back into the Service to develop new functions, adopt new technologies and safeguard communities and firefighters into the future. For this to work though it will also require continued investment in the Service. By investing in change, we are confident that a more sustainable, modernised, agile and stable Service can be delivered. To achieve our ambitions set out in the SSRP we have established three work programmes to review and modernise how the Service operates.

Firstly, the Service Delivery Programme is reviewing all aspects of the operational models of SFRS. This includes exploring options from where stations are best located to meet changing community risks, to how the On Call service of the future can be redesigned to meet the specific challenges facing rural and island communities across Scotland. The programme is also exploring different duty systems, different firefighting technologies and the possibility of an expanded role for firefighters in keeping communities safe and in protecting their wellbeing. It also includes the further

development of our partnership working with other emergency services and the wider public service system in Scotland. As we explore these matters and bring forward change options, which will undergo full community and stakeholder consultation, our ambition remains clear - keeping communities and firefighters safe. However, these ambitions require investment. If that investment is not available and if we must find budget cuts, those ambitions will be limited and, in some cases, impossible to deliver.

The Second programme of work relates to Corporate Support Services and the need to ensure they are as effective and as efficient as they can be in meeting the needs of the Service as a whole. During 2024 we worked with Police Scotland to explore if deeper levels of collaboration and integration could offer a better way of delivering these functions and achieve savings to both Services. An Outline Business Case (OBC) was commissioned from an external professional support organisation which explored matters in depth. The conclusion of the OBC was that significant up-front investment was required to generate limited financial benefits over a ten-year period. However, the risks associated with this option were deemed to be significant against the outlined benefits and savings. As such the SFRS Board and the Scottish Police Authority Board concluded that an integrated set of support services was not a priority given wider pressures in both SFRS and Police Scotland. For SFRS this means our corporate support services review programme will explore other means of modernisation, which will still include collaboration with other bodies, to ensure the design and delivery of support services is fit for purpose for a modern fire and rescue service.

The third SSRP programme, Enabling Infrastructure, covers property, fleet, operational equipment and technology. We are committed to providing our firefighters with modern, up to date facilities, fleet and equipment that enhances their safety and maximises our capability to meet the needs of communities. We are piloting a new concept of a Rural Community Resilience Hub in Portree where modular building techniques are being utilised to build a new modern Community Fire station that is also carbon neutral. The structure design is flexible and will enable partners to share the premises by adding additional modules to the structure. This will offer the prospect of building sustainable community service hubs for local communities at a much lower cost to the public purse than via traditional construction methods. It will also help us and partners reduce our carbon footprint, channel employment opportunities into the local construction communities of Scotland, enhance rural public service presence and critically for SFRS help enhance local On Call firefighter recruitment and retention by providing modern work facilities.

All our SSRP review activities are aligned to SG's Public Service Reform ambitions and are intended to deliver a modern, efficient and effective set of services to the communities of Scotland. It is intended that the Service continues to evolve and adapt to the pressure we and our communities face and to do so while keeping firefighters safe. Our emerging plans offer an alternative to a fiscally challenged future. They offer the prospect of change being achieved on a planned and managed basis and where safety for communities and firefighters remains paramount. We know those changes will still present us with challenges, but we are convinced they offer a better future for SFRS and Scotland. However, ambition must be matched with investment if those plans are to be realised. They offer an alternative path to the future and one we remain convinced is better for Scotland.

## **Conclusion**

SFRS has made significant savings to date while still protecting the people of Scotland. We have an enviable track record in doing this in recent years and in delivering reform at the same time. However, our ability to keep modernising in the face of financial pressures is becoming increasingly difficult. Consequently, this would in turn further impact on the national resilience of Scotland and of our communities.

Despite the challenges we face, SFRS remains ambitious for Scotland. We see our change ambitions through the wider lens of Public Service Reform. But to realise our ambitions we require sustained and planned investment. That investment will enable us to change, adapt and modernise, but without it our ability to change will be compromised and our underlying cost pressures will never be resolved. Without change our future may be one of organisational retrenchment with the prospect of compromising community and firefighter safety despite our wishes.

We have set out an ambitious reform programme in SSRP which will enable us, if it is invested in, to deliver the change we need to make and to build a sustainable Service for the future. We know from our own experience of reform that change brings challenges, but our track record of reform gives us confidence in our future ability to modernise further. To be able to fully meet the changing risks facing Scotland's Communities and the challenges this is creating for the country, we must change. We are committed to working with and consulting with our communities and partners to deliver the change the country needs of us. We invite others to join with us in making this happen.