

27 February 2014

Our Ref: 74/74/005188/14

Mr Tam McFarlane
Executive Council Member
Fire Brigades Union
South West Region
158 Muller Road
Horfield
Bristol
BS7 9RE

Re: Large Scale Floods in the South West

Dear Mr McFarlane,

Thank you for your letters of 3 February 2014 to Dan Rogerson MP and George Eustice MP, about cuts to fire authority funding in the South West and the impact on the fire sector's ability to respond fully and effectively to incidents including the large scale flooding in the region. Your letters have been passed to Brandon Lewis MP, the minister responsible for fire and I have been asked to respond on his behalf along the same lines as responses the Minister has previously sent in relation to this letter.

Fire and rescue authorities do, of course, deliver a number of very important services for local communities beyond responding to emergencies. This includes working within their communities to target fire prevention and safety messages. In the last decade there has been a forty six per cent reduction in fire and rescue attendance at incidents and, thankfully, deaths from fire are now at an all-time low. However, despite the increasing levels of public safety, expenditure has remained broadly the same. It is only right that fire and rescue authorities, along with other parts of local government, play a part in cutting the deficit.

Under the 2014/15 local government financial settlement, single purpose fire and rescue authorities outside London are set to receive £1.46 billion of revenue spending power, of which approximately £0.74 billion is grant and business rates baseline funding, with further substantive funding to be supplied through council tax. South West fire and rescue authorities are set to receive a total of £105.5million in 2014/15.

In terms of wider funding streams, a further £280 million of capital grants will have been provided over the four year spending review period to 2015 and the Government also continues to fund existing national resilience capabilities (for radios, and specialist national resilience capabilities to cover events such as flooding and search and rescue requirements) with a further £67 million being provided for this from 2013 to 2016. For 2015/16, Government is making available an additional £75 million for fire and rescue authorities to bid for. This additional funding will help

them continue to make efficiencies, including further collaboration across blue light services.

Turning to your particular concerns about cuts to the front line in the South West, it is ultimately for individual fire and rescue authorities to identify and assess the full range of risks they face, allocating their resources appropriately to deliver prevention, protection and emergency response activities. In doing so, authorities must consult effectively with their local communities. There is no role for central government to intervene in such local decision making, such as fire station closures and appliance removals. It is right that the elected members of each fire and rescue authority make the decisions on operational proposals in their area, acting on professional advice from principal fire officers and balancing competing local demands on available resources for the benefits of the communities they serve.

In terms of mutual aid, there are well established arrangements between all fire and rescue authorities for providing mutual assistance on both a local and national level. These arrangements are reviewed regularly and would be prepared in conjunction with other local agencies via Local Resilience Fora, as required by the Fire and Rescue National Framework for England.

There are also statutory requirements under the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 for fire and rescue authorities to enter into agreements to provide mutual assistance. These have worked well in the floods and should continue to do so in future. As the Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser, Peter Holland, has recently pointed out, over 1,000 fully equipped fire-fighters from right across the country have been doing an incredible job working in shifts to reduce water levels and help communities deal with the flooding giving support wherever and whenever it is needed. These crews are specially trained professionals who have the very best equipment for dealing with the floods including high volume pumps, rescue boats, four by four fire vehicles and dry suits. And there are still plenty of fire engines in local areas to respond to non-flood emergencies.

Finally, regarding the issue of introducing a statutory duty to attend flooding events, this Government considers that the current legislative framework fully recognises this work. Both the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 and the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 detail the roles and powers of fire and rescue authorities in respect of both emergency response and rescue in a wide range of situations, including from flooding. Fire and rescue authorities are required to identify and assess the full range of risks that an authority's service is expected to face. The analysis informs each authority's decision on the appropriate allocation of resources to deliver its prevention, protection and emergency response activities, which is taken after effective consultation with the local community. Integrated risk management plans are expected to dovetail with the community risk register which is developed and implemented by the Local Resilience Forum (a multi-agency grouping of which fire and rescue authorities are key members). These expectations are clearly set out in the statutory National Fire Framework published in July 2012.

Yours sincerely,



Debbie Gibson-Leigh