

UK: South Yorkshire fire service faces £13 million in cuts

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The South Yorkshire Fire Authority is due to meet Monday to consider proposals to cut fire services in the county as a result of a £10 million funding cut by 2015, with a possible further £3 million to be cut by 2017.

The proposals include the non-replacement of retiring firefighters and closing four fire stations. The stations, Barnsley, Rotherham, Doncaster and Sheffield Parkway, will be staffed overnight by just one crew as opposed to two crews during the day. A part-time crew would be available on call overnight. The six-minute response time will be scrapped.

A Fire Brigades Union representative told the BBC, “We just seem to be getting fewer and fewer and the job’s getting harder to do.”

By 2015 government cuts will have reduced the fire authority’s annual budget from £60 million in 2010 to £51 million.

Speaking at the beginning of the year, Rotherham MP John Healey noted that in the years 2011 and 2012 the six metropolitan areas of England, including South Yorkshire, which covered some of the poorest areas with higher risks of fire, had their fire services budgets cut more than other areas. He added that the areas were faced with cutting over 1,200 full-time firefighters, nearly 70 retained firefighters and 550 other staff, warning the cuts would mean “more people will die.”

The South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue service report in June noted a 55 percent reduction in small arson fires, a 26 percent drop in death and injuries from accidental house fires over the previous year, and a 40 percent reduction in accidental house fires over the last decade.

Chief Fire Officer Jamie Courtney noted that the “figures represent another excellent year’s work from our firefighters, community safety teams and partner agencies... We will strive to continue these

improvements, but this level of performance is undoubtedly threatened by government cuts to our budget ... from our own statistics ... fires typically rise during periods of economic hardship ... any reduction in fire cover... [as the result of cuts]... will make our job much more difficult.”

The picture in South Yorkshire is mirrored in the rest of the country. The Chief Fire Officers’ Association (CFOA) released a report a year ago which spoke of cuts creating a “perfect storm”.

Writing in the *Guardian*, the newly installed president of the CFOA, Vijith Randeniya, said, “We bring together the senior officers of more than 50 fire and rescue services, and so have unique insight into the likely impact of these cuts. A recent questionnaire has shown that 97 percent of our members have made significant cuts to their frontline service provision already, with 90 percent expecting to make further frontline cuts in the next two years.

“All this is despite our best efforts to find savings elsewhere. In England, we have identified about £117 million of potential non-frontline efficiencies, many of which will have already been made. This leaves us with an £80 million shortfall, which can only come from frontline firefighters, fire engines and fire stations. If our fears are realized and the localization of council tax affects us badly we estimate we may need to find a further £60 million.”

The CFOA report published in autumn last year, entitled “Fighting Fires or Fire fighting: The Impact of Austerity on English Fire and Rescues Services,” noted:

“During the summer of 2012 CFOA conducted a survey of England’s Fire and Rescue Services to determine how Services plan to meet the challenges of ‘*doing more of the same with less*’ (emphasis in the

original). The early results are stark...”

The report continued, “English Fire and Rescue Services are expected to find savings of £207 million and together may lose as many as 4,050 firefighters, 60 fire stations and 150 fire appliances as a result...”

The report emphasized the situation could only get worse: “The Fire and Rescue Services in particular faces a near ‘perfect storm’ of issues which will make managing budget reductions very difficult ... As we approach the grant settlement for years three and four of the Spending Review we know that the cuts from years one and two are just beginning to be felt. We also face much greater cuts to come as reductions have been back loaded for fire. Current estimates suggest a national average cut in grant of 14.4 percent for 2013-15... The impact of a weakened economy is to increase deprivation and pressures on the business community—two key risk areas for the Fire and Rescue Services workload.”

Mayor of London Boris Johnson has overruled London Fire Brigade’s governing body and is pushing ahead with plans to cut 10 fire stations and 552 firefighters’ jobs. In addition, 14 fire engines will be stood down and the minimum crew number reduced to four from five.



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