



Clerk,
County Durham and Darlington
Combined Fire Authority,
County Hall,
Durham DH1 5UL

Safest People, Safest Places

This matter is being dealt with by: Cllr John Shuttleworth
Ext: 5555
Date: 7 October 2024

Jim McMahon OBE MP – Minister of State (Minister for Local Government and English Devolution)
jim.mcmahon.mp@parliament.uk

The Rt Hon Darren Jones MP - Chief Secretary to the Treasury
darren.jones.mp@parliament.uk

by Email

Dear Minister of State and Chief Secretary to the Treasury

Fire Funding for 2025/26

We are writing to you today to make the case for a fair funding settlement for the Fire and Rescue Service and to ask for your help to avoid the Combined Fire Authority (CFA) having to make further cuts to frontline services that will increase the risk to the communities in County Durham and Darlington.

Following challenging budget settlements for fire over a number of years, the service has reduced staffing, collaborated with others where appropriate, invested in technology, removed waste and duplication, restructured every department and reduced spend. To mitigate the funding shortfall for 2023-24 and balance the budget, the CFA, following consultation, agreed to reduce the operational establishment, resulting in less firefighters available to serve our communities.

Appropriate funding for County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service (CDDFRS) continues to be an issue as we have lost in the region of £10M in government funding over the last thirteen years, when inflation is taken into account.

The demographics within County Durham and Darlington mean that almost 80% of properties in our Service area are in council tax band A or B, and with Council tax representing 67% of CDDFRS funding we are disproportionately impacted by the council tax referendum limit. This together with high levels of deprivation means many residents are either exempt or qualify for discounts to their council tax bills.

Notwithstanding the fact that CDDFRS is a productive, efficient and well-run service with a track record of delivering change against a reducing budget, without additional financial support from government it is inevitable that further reductions to the operational establishment will be necessary, directly leading to a reduction in fire cover which increases the risk to our communities.

CDDFRS is efficient and effective; the HMICFRS report from Jan 2023 highlights that the service is graded as good across all 3 pillars with 10 out of the 11 diagnostics viewed as good. Our operational staff are highly productive delivering significantly more fire safety audits and Home Fire Safety Visits compared to the English average.

Furthermore, our fire appliances operational activity is above the English average and when we are required to attend an incident, for example to a fire within a home, we respond faster than the English average and faster than any other predominantly rural FRS in England.

To maintain this position, we require funding increases in the Local Government Finance Settlement, otherwise the result will be a reduction in frontline wholetime and on-call firefighters with the removal of fire engines and a resultant degradation in service. This will increase response times, increase risk and reduce the level of vitally important prevention and building safety inspection work such as achieving the recommendations from the Grenfell Tower phase 2 public enquiry.

In addition, over recent years, the Service has played a key role in supporting national resilience for either fire specific issues or multi-agency response to extreme weather events and without sufficient funding this will not be possible going forward.

We are therefore asking that as a minimum grant funding is maintained in real terms, with all grants made to Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) added to baseline funding and uplifted by inflation.

The sector believes there should be no referendum principles, but if limits must be in place, FRAs should be able to increase Council Tax by the greater of £5 or 3% for band D properties without the need for a prohibitively expensive referendum.

Finally, we believe additional funding should be provided to support much needed capital investment in all FRAs and this should be distributed proportionately rather than through a time consuming and costly bidding process.

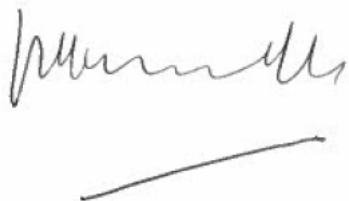
Capital funding for investment in buildings, new technology, environmentally friendly vehicles and collaboration is essential and since being removed in 2014-2015, CDDFRS funding is approximately £1.3M per year less due to this change. Consequently, to fund items such as fire engines, estates improvements and the essential ICT systems we need to run our control room operations, we are forced to borrow money which in turn is impacted by the increase in interest rates. Furthermore, CDDFRS hold the lowest level of financial reserves of any Combined Fire Authority therefore the ability to use our limited reserves to support capital investment is not an option.

We hope that the information set out above illustrates our concerns and as always, we warmly extend an offer for you and your officials to visit staff within CDDFRS to discuss matters further.

Thank you for your continued support.

We are copying this letter to The Rt Hon Angela Rayner MP Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, as well as to Members of Parliament for County Durham and Darlington.

Yours sincerely,

Handwritten signature of John Shuttleworth, consisting of a series of connected loops and a long horizontal stroke at the bottom.

Cllr John Shuttleworth

**Chair of County Durham and
Darlington Fire and Rescue
Authority**

Handwritten signature of Steve Helps, featuring a stylized 'S' and 'H' with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Steve Helps

**Chief Fire Officer
County Durham and Darlington
Fire and Rescue Service**

Cc The Rt Hon Angela Rayner MP Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Housing,
Communities and Local Government
Members of Parliament for County Durham and Darlington