

Reflections on an aspect of accountability

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'HELP OUR FIRE CREWS'

■ Hundreds sign petition

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WORRIED Knutsfordians have launched a petition opposing the changes in staffing at Knutsford Fire Station.

The petition, which was set up by a group of residents, stated that the Moberley Road station would be down-graded from full-time to part-time, bringing the call-out time from 90 seconds to seven minutes and that if the service cannot recruit part-timers, the station would close.

But Cheshire Fire has dismissed the claim there are plans to close the station, however it confirmed plans are in motion to change it to an on-call station in 2015/16.

Petition originators John Parrin, Max Jackson and Joanne Jackson have gained support from neighbours and friends, including signa-

ture gatherer 91-year-old Gwen Coleman, and the petition has been placed in 23 establishments.

Joanne Jackson, of Manor Park North, said: "The fire-fighters are always there, we take these heroes for granted until we need them. Well they need us - now is the time to stand up and be counted."

"Apart from our needs, these brave lads have families of their own. Everyone we have spoken to feels the same."

The petition is of particular importance to Joanne as she has had first-hand experience of the service provided by the fire-fighters.

Joanne added: "I personally experienced a fire at home when we lived in Parkgate. The usual chip pan fire. I was terrified but they arrived in a very short time, did not ruin my home, and did their job with such

RECORD Mayor hands over charity cash



KNUTSFORD Town Mayor Barbara Coan wrapped up her mayoral year by presenting her chosen charities - Knutsford and District Lions Club and Cheshire Search and Rescue - with an impressive £4,626.80 each.

A total of £9,253.60 was raised for the causes during Cllr Coan's year as mayor - beating the previous record of £6,080.

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The protest

- Change in crewing
 - Part time staffing
 - Change to an 'on call station'
- Increased response time
- Problem with recruitment
- Eventual closure of fire station
- 'They [firefighters] need us – now is the time to stand up and be counted'
- Reference to a chip pan fire and great job done by firefighters
- Up to 1000 signatures on petition placed in 30+ sites(pop 13,919+ surround)

FRS response

- No plans to close fire station
- Will be a change in crewing-model (tried and tested)
- Part of a wider plan to improve emergence response and attendance times
- Includes new fire stations (including one 9 miles from the town)
- Widespread public consultation
- Cuts and austerity
- No compulsory redundancies
- Overall improvements in community safety

Two discourses

- First is one of local public protest
- Unifies the interests of local population and ‘their’ firefighters in relation to localised provision
- Second is the response of a large public service organisation with a local(ish) remit (approx 1m pop)
- Couched in the terms of planning, strategic review, overall improvement, no compulsory redundancy thorough consultation and overall democratic accountability.

Relationship between discourses

- Scenario reproduced thousands of times in relation to range of services (usually closure announced)
- Discourses don't connect
- Why is this?
- Is the disconnect important and in what way?
- What questions about accountability and local democracy?

What is the focus?

- FRS Integrated Risk Management Plan
- Statutory, regularly refreshed strategic plan
- Plan developed by FRS management and elected Fire Authority members
- 2014/2016 trying to do 'more with less'
- Subject to (approved) consultation

Comments in consultation

- 'Do not agree with the plans for Macclesfield and Knutsford. It is ludicrous that Knutsford is to be completely on call and Macclesfield is not to be staffed at night.'
- 'You have stated about making new fire station but you are reducing the amount of fire engines which are covered by full time and replacing with on-call firefighters'
- 'Removing full time fire engines can only be a bad move, also I don't think you should be spending ,money on interactive road show vehicles at the same time as removing full time fire engines.'
- "Strongly support" on the basis that it will have received comprehensive scrutiny from the elected representatives. As a person ignorant of most of the facts it is difficult to come to any other conclusion.

Themes

- Opposition to increase in on call crewing
- Opposition to reduction in number of fire engines
- In favour of more fire stations
- In favour of more safety education, free HSAs, free smoke and CO alarms
- Faith in the wisdom of representative democracy
- Overall 'the same' in 'my place'
- Scandinavian service levels at US cost
- (detailed oppositional comments from a range of people with 'inside' experience/knowledge)

What kind of accountability?

- The FRS puts a great deal of effort (as evidenced by its website, use of social media and printed newsletter)
- Is it the right kind of effort?
- Is there a some kind of engagement deficit?
- Is this kind of protest inevitable (ride the storm)
- Or do you just say 'tough, we did our best this is what will happen'

Improvements and resolution

- CFRS to close a fire station (anguish and protest in one place)
- Knutsford full time community FRS (more expensive, non-compliance with current law)
- Knutsford volunteer FRS (see USA, France, Germany) again need to change law, national culture and so on