

## **ESFRS Rural Review – Formal Response from Burwash Parish Council**

### General Comments

- Firstly, we wish to put on record our thanks and appreciation to ESFRS for the service it provides to all communities in East Sussex, and our particular regard for the contribution, dedication and commitment so evident from our fire crews at Burwash fire station. They, and the service they provide ensure that this community has confidence and peace of mind in fire safety and rescue-related issues; confidence being a critical issue for very rural parts of Rother as they appear to experience disproportionate reductions in the provision of many publicly-funded services (vs. urban areas).
- While the ESFRS Rural Review is motivated by a drive to achieve greater operational efficiencies and response times, in the present economic climate it can be seen by many to presage budgetary cuts, and reduction in staffing costs. There is a widespread feeling among many local residents that the proposed changes to the staffing arrangements at three smaller rural stations, including Burwash, constitute the first planned step towards their inevitable closure.
- The review is based upon a series of robust risk management planning principles, and consequent analyses. We lack the knowledge and experience in interpreting much of the analysis undertaken, and accordingly must accept many of the general findings and conclusions of the Review. However, we do differ in some of the interpretations of the data.

### Comments on Burwash Fire Station

- We acknowledge that Burwash station is one of the smallest rural stations run by ESFRS, albeit one with a large operational territory relatively free of conventional high-risk fire and safety concerns.
- The local area analysis indicates that Burwash station may not be optimally positioned for many of the demands made of it, and specific mention was made of the high proportion of call outs made in the eastern area of the Burwash district. This of course highlights the dangers created by the single lane nature of the majority of the major trunk road A21 running along the eastern boundary of the Burwash district, the high incidence of road traffic accidents along its route, and the absence of a fire station in Robertsbridge.
- Capital expenditure on widening of the A21 and the planned bypass of Hurst Green is likely to be delayed for the foreseeable future (if not cancelled); with increased traffic this will only result in more road traffic accidents on the A21. Wadhurst station no doubt attends to many accidents along the northeastern corner of the county, but without a station in Robertsbridge it is doubtful whether any other station in East Sussex is better placed than Burwash to attend many of these incidents.

- Given the low risk profile of the Burwash station area it is to be expected that the Burwash appliance would have a lower than average level of utility (incidents attended etc). However the Review claims that the Burwash appliance is “typically off the run” at 32.5% non-availability and attributable to staffing problems; the implication being this is an unacceptably high level.
- However staff shortages are apparently a major problem for ESFRS. In November 2009 there was a 24% retained staff shortfall. Only six out of nineteen stations operate with relatively few RDS staff vacancies – with establishment levels of 90%+.
- Burwash Fire Station has a particular staffing problem. Against the retained staff average of 76% vs. RDS Operational Establishment across the rural areas, Burwash was only 60% fully staffed in November 2009. Only Lewes at 46%, and Battle at 48% have lower averages for RDS personnel; both of these stations are of coursed day crewed so are better placed to function without RDS personnel.
- Moreover, the availability of the Burwash appliance is further compromised by the lack of leadership resource. There is a Watch Manager, but two Crew Manager posts remain unfilled. If the Watch Manager is unavailable for whatever reason, without subordinate leadership available the appliance is genuinely “off the run”!
- Without junior leadership, full annual leave taking alone by the Watch Manager accounts for 10% of total “appliance unavailability. We understand that the Crew Manager posts have been vacant for some years; currently, two members of staff are now sufficiently experienced to begin training for management roles.
- As a probable consequence of the imbalance in numbers between senior management and firefighters at Burwash, the station has the lowest cost per Full Time Equivalent member of staff in the rural areas at £8,120. Notwithstanding the claimed low level of availability and usage of the Burwash appliance, Burwash station has a below average cost per call of £710 vs. Rural Area average of £1,222. Both of the above sets of statistics highlight the relative cost efficiency of the Burwash station.
- Although the nature of the future planned investment by ESFRS of £2.426 million in the rural areas from 2010/11 to 2014/15 is not revealed, BPC was surprised to discover that Burwash is one of only three stations destined not to receive any of this investment over the next five years - the others being Crowborough and Broad Oak (stations with allegedly fewer operational challenges).
- With a 24% retained firefighter shortfall, staff recruitment becomes a critical issue for ESFRS. Estimated costs for recruitment in 2009/10 were £123,000, with an average cost per 16 wholetime firefighter

candidates of £5,000; the average cost per 10 retained firefighter candidates was £4,000. It is surprising given the importance of recruitment that no further details of recruitment strategy are provided in the Review.

- One of our council members has extensive experience of advertising strategy and advises that recruitment-led media strategies tend to follow population densities, i.e. are more weighted towards urban and suburban areas – and are potentially less suited for recruitment in low population density areas. We believe this may explain the recruitment issue facing Burwash, and other rural stations. We are unaware of any specific local recruitment drives by ESFRS.
- The Burwash appliance and crew attend a number of local events as part of their local campaign to raise awareness and interest in becoming a retained firefighter. We believe that these relatively informal efforts should be actively supported by a centrally managed recruitment drive highly focussed around the fire stations with staffing problems, including Burwash. We believe that the use of events, active exploitation of existing firefighter social networks, mobile information units and vehicles might be more appropriate than the use of regional media.
- Burwash Parish Council has already offered to run recruitment messages for ESFRS on the community website [www.burwash.org](http://www.burwash.org); we are awaiting a formal response from the Rother Borough Commander, John Drinkwater.
- Given the acute staffing problems affecting the Burwash station and thereby its operational availability we question the wisdom of the proposed changes to the duty system at this station. If staff shortages exist for day time duty systems we fail to see how the situation would be improved by moving to an evening/night time duty system. If anything we believe this would make the recruitment challenge even more difficult, and adversely affect morale and commitment of existing staff leading to staff losses, and increase the risk of station closure.

### Summary and Conclusions

Burwash is one of three Retained Duty System stations identified as having extremely low response activity. We have argued that low response is a function of the innate characteristics of the area (and we must defer to your analysis and agree that the area is relatively low risk), together with availability of the station appliance.

We believe that limited availability noted in the analysis is a function of extreme staff and leadership shortages at the Burwash station. More efforts should be made to address the training of crew managers able to deputise for the Watch Manager (thereby increasing availability), and to attract additional retained firefighters. Persistent and long running staff shortfalls have impacted dramatically on historic appliance availability.

ESFRS maintains that the closure of Mayfield, Herstmonceaux and Burwash stations would not impact on current service attendance standards. However, we note that neighbouring fire stations are also Retained Duty System stations, and poor availability of firefighters could impact dramatically on attendance standards in the area if Burwash station were to close. All of these stations scheduled to provide cover for the Burwash area currently operate below the 76% RDS staffing average for the rural areas - Wadhurst 72%, and Heathfield 64%. These staffing levels provide little comfort for the Council that safe cover could be maintained in the event of the closure of the Burwash station.

Given the size and rural character of the Burwash area, isolated properties, and challenges of identifying locations local area knowledge is critical. The Burwash station and its crew have that knowledge; this is profoundly important to ensure ongoing community support for ESFRS. Firefighters from other stations do not possess that level of local knowledge.

A recent incident some distance from Burwash Common highlights the importance of local availability and local knowledge. A man was trapped and severely injured in isolated woodland outside the range of mobile communications. A seven-minute journey to make a 999 call ensued; by the time the caller returned to the accident scene, the Burwash appliance was approaching. The crew oversaw the recovery of the man until ambulance crews arrived. Faced with risk of serious spinal injury that timeous response was critical; the second fire appliance from Heathfield arrived eight minutes after the Burwash appliance. The absence of a Burwash appliance could have resulted in a permanent spinal damage to the injured man.

ESFRS also maintain that keeping these three stations operational at certain times would be beneficial to the overall resilience of the Service. We obviously lack an understanding of the HR related issues in switching staff from day time to night time retained duties, but we cannot envisage that night time operations would either attract more recruits to the Service, improve morale, or act as a career motivation for existing firefighters.

The lack of proposed investment in the Burwash station, and the absence of obvious local recruitment activity by ESFRS raise anxieties for the Council, and suggest that closure of the station is something of a foregone conclusion. ESFRS maintains the Review is not a cost-cutting exercise; we trust it is not.

Neither ESFRS nor Burwash Parish Council wishes to see a deterioration of service standards, or support within the community for ESFRS. Burwash Parish Council and the community invite ESFRS to rethink their proposals for the Burwash station. We wish to encourage ESFRS to promote and recruit locally, train appropriate firefighters to take on leadership roles, and thereby enhance the availability, and usage of the Burwash station. We are more than happy to assist in this campaign.