

TO: ALL GREATER MANCHESTER MPs

Dear Colleague

GREATER MANCHESTER FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

I know that many of you are understandably concerned about the funding and resource challenges faced by Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service. Given that, I thought it might be helpful for you to have a note setting out the facts and the latest position following the end of the consultation on the Programme for Change.

First, it is important to set out the background. When I came into office in 2017, I inherited:

- a plan to cut the number of pumps and firefighters across Greater Manchester (Integrated Risk Management Programme - 2016) which was being implemented by the former Fire Authority
- a high level (167) of frontline firefighter vacancies
- fire stations in a state of disrepair, some with no functioning female toilets or changing facilities, and
- a budget that was unsustainable and required savings of £7 million.

In late 2017, I suspended that plan following concerns about fire cover in our communities caused by the vacancy rate and inadequate overtime arrangements. Since then, I have introduced:

- an accelerated firefighter recruitment programme to reduce vacancies
- improved overtime with fairer recompense
- a family-friendly shift system in line with requests by firefighters, and
- a new annual leave system which allows people more choice of time off.

Far from cutting the frontline, I have strengthened it.

In May 2017, there were 1,121 firefighters. If I had left the 2016 IRMP in place, we would by now have only 1,058. Instead, the number stands at 1,183.

So there are more firefighters today in Greater Manchester than when I came into office.

As a result of all of these changes, it has been acknowledged by FBU colleagues that morale has improved. But I know the union has concerns about the proposals to change crewing levels on our fire engines which are shared by colleagues.

GMCA, Churchgate House, 56 Oxford Street, Manchester, M1 6EU

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The reality is that, in 2017, GMFRS was riding 4s for most call-outs. Also, more than half of fire services across the country have already implemented a crewing system based on 4s.

That said, having considered the responses to the consultation, I accept the need for caution in making any changes. So, for this financial year, I am proposing to maintain the number of firefighters at or above the May 2017 number. This will allow present arrangements to be maintained and more time for discussion with the FBU about the number of fire engines on the run and the crewing levels that can realistically be achieved. It will also give us an opportunity to present a case to the Government as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review for more funding for fire services.

However, given that GMFRS has seen its budget cut by nearly £20 million since 2010, the need to find savings has not gone away. So, alongside the number of fire engines and stations, we will also have to look at the number of support staff within the organisation whilst being determined to avoid any compulsory redundancies and treating our staff fairly at all times.

For this year, we will be able to meet the budget deficit through the use of an underspend in the operational budget and reserves.

There has been a suggestion in some quarters that GMCA has “raided” fire reserves. This is not true. I can give a clear commitment that fire assets and reserves will be used for the fire service. None of the reserves previously held by the Fire Authority have been used for other GMCA functions.

But our reserves will not last forever. If the financial outlook for fire services stays the same, and the Government fails to address these issues in the Spending Review, we will have no choice but to come back to the proposals in the Programme for Change.

That is why we need your support in presenting a united front to the Government in calling for an end to austerity and a properly-funded fire service going forward.

From the start of next year, we will face a pension shortfall of £5.3 million in GMFRS as a result of Government changes to the pension scheme. This needs to be met in full by the Government or our funding challenge will get much more worse.

As you can see, these are difficult issues and are not of my nor Greater Manchester’s making. But we have to face up to them and, in doing so, I am trying at all times to adopt a “frontline first” approach which seeks to maximise the fire cover for the communities you represent.

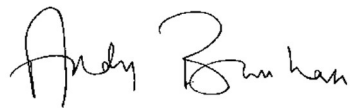
More positively, I am pleased that the recent HMICFRS inspection found that GMFRS remains good at responding to fires and I am committed to ensuring this remains the case. In any scenario, we will maintain our average response time at 7 minutes 30 seconds - one of the fastest in the country and a full minute faster than the national average.

So in summary:

- **No final decisions have yet been made and we are in discussions with the trade unions.**
- **We will maintain firefighter numbers at or above May 2017 levels for this year.**
- **I am determined to avoid compulsory redundancies for support staff.**
- **To maintain these commitments beyond 2020, we will need to lobby the Government to meet the pensions shortfall and to increase funding for fire and rescue services.**

I would be grateful for your support in Parliament for making this case to the Government.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andy Burnham". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Andy Burnham
Mayor of Greater Manchester

cc GM Leaders
GM Councillors