

London Assembly (Plenary) Meeting – 2 December 2015

Transcript of Agenda Item 4: Question and Answer Session – London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority

Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair): Then we come to item 4. During this item, we will put questions and receive answers regarding the work of the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA).

Let me welcome our guests here this morning. We have the Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning and we have the Chairman of LFEPA. Can I welcome you both to the meeting.

I would like to ask the Commissioner to make a short opening statement and, indeed, the Chairman if he so wishes.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, London Fire Brigade):

Thank you, Chair. I will be brief. Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to appear before you again today.

I was last here in November 2014 and since that time LFEPA has had a busy, challenging and successful 13 months. I am pleased to report our continued good performance. Our incident response times across London remain on target with an average attendance of six minutes for a first fire engine and eight for a second fire engine when it is needed. I am sure this is something we will come back to later this morning.

Although numbers will fluctuate year on year, for 2014/15 fires were below 20,000 for the first time since records for Greater London began in 1966. This decline is despite the population of London increasing by 1.3 million since the turn of the millennium. We believe the downward trend since 2005 is very largely due to the huge amount of fire safety work carried out by our firefighters and their targeted approach to those most at risk. Firefighters have had considerable success in maintaining the momentum of community safety work, with them continuing to spend 14% of their on-duty time on proactive community safety work. Once again, over the last year, our firefighters completed over 86,500 home fire safety visits against our target of 73,000.

We continue to work very hard to reduce fires in care homes, hostels and sheltered accommodation and I am pleased to say our performance over the last 12 months shows that the number of fires in care homes and sheltered housing has again fallen. However, it is not an area in which we are complacent and it is an area in which Londoners should be safer than they are at the moment. We will continue to work very hard with the owners and providers of these services to make sure that number continues to come down.

We have continued to provide a professional response to a wide range of incidents across London. One significant example would be the very visible fire at Kingsway back on 1 April this year. This fire was in a subsurface tunnel and involved a gas leak. Firefighters remained on the scene for three days, keeping the public informed, providing reassurance and good liaison with other key agencies and, of course, extinguishing the fire.

Another good example of working with other agencies is our participation in Operation Strong Tower in June this year. This large-scale safety and security exercise involved a number of Government agencies, emergency services and others usually involved in responding to a major incident, and tested the arrangements we all have in place.

Looking forward, it is exciting that the London Fire Brigade (LFB) is hosting Exercise Unified Response in February next year. This will be the biggest multi-agency training exercise in our history. The exercise has received European funding and all of London's emergency response organisations will be involved, along with specialised teams from across the United Kingdom (UK) and from Hungary, Italy and Cyprus. It will be based on a significant building collapse incorporating heavy transport and mass casualties and will be testing both the multi-agency response and the recovery arrangements.

Finally, 2016 is a very important year for the LFB: it is our 150th anniversary and we have plans to use this as an opportunity to both celebrate our history and talk to Londoners about how we continue to strive to make London a safer city through fire prevention and community safety work. We have a programme of events across London planned for next year including fire station open days in every borough and I do hope to see many Assembly Members, hopefully, being able to spare some time with us during our celebrations. Thank you.

Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair): Thank you very much. Chairman?

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): Thank you, Madam Chair. I am approaching the end of my first year as Chairman of LFEPA. It is a distinctively different experience being Chairman as opposed to simply being a member of LFEPA, which I have done for many years.

Over the past 12 months, I have visited many fire stations. It has been a really enjoyable experience to see firefighters and officers on their home turf, as it were, and get to talk to them in a very informal way. I spent a day with Wembley Blue Watch. That was extremely enjoyable and interesting. Running up and down the training tower wearing breathing apparatus kit and personal protective equipment was interesting. I am sure they made me do it more times than was strictly necessary, but never mind.

I went to the Fire Training College as well and spent a couple of days there. That was particularly eye-opening because I was able to go into the fire environment and get a feeling for what it is actually like to be in a fire. That was very, very good. I can honestly say that the people I have worked with in the LFB are some of the best people I have worked with anywhere ever and it has been a privilege to do that.

As the Commissioner has just outlined, the LFB's performance over the last 12 months has been nothing short of exceptional. To have achieved the lowest number of fires and fire deaths since records began at a time when the LFB is managing its largest single operational change is testament to the hard work and dedication of our firefighters and fire and rescue services staff and I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to all of them.

On LFEPA itself, we have had our combative moments over the last year or so, it is fair to say, but we have managed to come together in a very useful and slightly unusual way in the sense that we have agreed with the Government consultation. We have an agreed response about how we move forward.

There are a number of issues that we will discuss today and later this afternoon [at the LFEPA meeting], but the one thing that I do want to make some progress with very soon is on co-responding. It is a frustration to me that we have yet to find common ground with the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) on that. I see that as vital for London's emergency services going forward and, over the next year or so, that is something I would like to make progress on very rapidly. Thank you, Chair.

Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair): Thank you very much. I will take any questions on the opening statements at the end of the session if there is any aspect of what has been said outstanding.

2015/3980 - LFEPA Cuts and the Safety of Londoners

Fiona Twycross AM

Since 2009/10, the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority has had to make cuts of £105.8 million and a further £50 million has been taken from the LFEPA reserves. Are you confident that in light of these and future budget cuts, the London Fire Brigade will continue to be fit for purpose and can ensure the safety of Londoners?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): The short answer is yes. Despite the savings that have been made – and I do take the safety of Londoners very, very carefully when promoting any savings that need to be made to the LFEPA budget – we still continue to deliver one of the best emergency responses in the world.

Since the year which was mentioned in the question, 2009/10, the numbers of fires and other incidents have continued to reduce very significantly in the capital. In fact, the number of fires in properties and vehicles has gone down by some 23% since 2009/10. All fires, including outdoor fires, have gone down by some 31%. The number of all incidents the LFB attends has gone down by 27%. The rolling ten-year average for fire deaths in London has fallen from 63 down to 49.

As I have said, we do continue to deliver one of the fastest emergency response times in the UK and we model our resources on being able to meet our London-wide target attendance times of having the first engine at an emergency in an average of six minutes and the second one, when it is needed, in an average of eight minutes. In saying that, it is a really important point to remember that fire engines and fire stations do not stop fires happening. It is proactive fire-prevention work that helps reduce fires and save lives.

As an example, our home fire safety visits are a key to our prevention work. We have evaluated these and reported to LFEPA Members in 2013 that between 2006 and 2012 we believe that we prevented over 4,500 fires taking place in London. There is a significant economic cost, obviously, attached to having prevented those fires. We have continued to deliver more home fire safety visits in 2012 --

Fiona Twycross AM: Quite a lot of this was in your opening statement. Gareth, do you have anything to add as Chairman?

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): Yes, I do. I will pick up one point, the reserves point, because this is something that gets talked about often, principally when people are opposing any budgetary changes to the LFB.

On the reserves and the £50 million that is talked about very often, it is a source of slight frustration to me that people talk about that as though we are talking about the budget. It is not the same thing. Reserves can, obviously, be used only once. You cannot use reserves to plug revenue shortcomings over a period of time because it is an unsustainable budget strategy --

Fiona Twycross AM: With respect, that is not what the question says. It does say that the reserves were removed. It does not imply that there is £50 million every year. I can appreciate you might be frustrated --

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): It does not acknowledge, Fiona, that that money has been replaced because it has. The way the reserves were taken is that --

Fiona Twycross AM: How has it been replaced? Can you explain where it has been replaced? I do not understand that at all.

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): Yes, certainly. Of course I can, yes. I have no problem with that at all.

In 2012/13, £30 million was reduced from the precept funding from the LFEPA and transferred to the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS). That was a one-year thing only and we funded the gap in the LFEPA by using reserves and so that £30 million came from there. That came back the following year and so that was replaced straight away.

On the £20 million, over the course of 2014/15, the Mayor had to fund LFEPA to the tune of a further £20 million to cover further Government cuts and that has remained in the budget as well, which is what went straight into his commitment to not --

Fiona Twycross AM: With respect, you are focusing on the reserves rather than the cuts we have to make. I accept that it was in the question and so it gave you licence to do that but --

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): You wrote the question, Fiona, and I am giving you the answer.

Fiona Twycross AM: Absolutely, but you are focusing entirely on the reserves rather than on the overall cuts.

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): With respect to you, that is because the Commissioner answered the question with regards to the funding cuts and gave you a lot of the information. The fact that he said it twice does not make it any less right. He did not answer the question about reserves, which I just picked up and gave you the answer to.

Fiona Twycross AM: We appreciate your answer on reserves, although we probably dispute the answer.

Clearly, the ideal starting point for us as the Labour Group [on LFEPA] would be that we are in a position where we do not actually have to make further cuts. At some point, in all these emergency services, there will come a point at which the luck runs out for the organisation and something drastic happens as a result of the cuts. However, we do accept that we are legally required to make these cuts.

Our main issue in regard to the cuts we have to make this year is that the approach that has been recommended, which so far appears to have the support of the Conservative Group [on LFEPA], appears to be a ridiculously simplistic approach to cuts. For example, you are saying, "We have 13 fire engines that are not in use and so let us just get rid of them", even though in local areas it is possible to demonstrate that there has been an impact on attendance times. As we all know, it is not necessarily the number of fires that is the overall issue; it is how fast a fire engine can get to a fire when an incident occurs. We do have quite a lot of to-and-fro about this and I can see that a colleague opposite is chuntering away because, obviously, I have raised this with him in the past as well. However, to say that we have these 13 fire engines that are not used and should just get rid of them is incredibly simplistic.

We would welcome the letter that we received as Fire Authority Members from Sir Edward Lister [Chief of Staff to the Mayor and Deputy Mayor, Policy and Planning] in which he welcomed the initiatives shown by my colleague Andrew Dismore [AM], Chair of LFEPA's Resources Committee, in putting forward his own budget option. I just wonder whether you also welcomed the initiatives shown by the Chair of Resources and whether you will be recommending as Chairman that you change the position that the group seems to have had previously and back the alternative put forward by the Resources Committee in order to protect the front line.

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): We are prejudging a meeting that will take place this afternoon, of course, but I certainly do welcome the initiative shown by Andrew Dismore AM. It is in marked contrast to what we have seen before. Actually having alternatives to discuss and go through is definitely a good step forward. I do not see why anyone would object to that. It seems like a very good idea.

In terms of which option is ultimately chosen, that is not for me to say today. I cannot tell you. We have to have that discussion at the LFEPA [meeting].

Fiona Twycross AM: What is your understanding of the Mayor's promise to protect the front line, however? Do you think that if he does push LFEPA to cut the 13 fire engines, he would be effectively deceiving Londoners, given his previous commitments to not make further cuts to the front line during the duration of the Fifth London Safety Plan (LSP5)?

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): It is important to remember that the 13 appliances you are referring to were off the run before LSP5 came in place. The target times that were recommended during LSP5 have been exceeded since they have been off the run and so the Mayor is quite legitimate in saying that if those 13 appliances do come off the run permanently, he will not have broken that promise.

Fiona Twycross AM: How does this fit in with the request from Sir Edward [Lister] [Chief of Staff to the Mayor and Deputy Mayor, Policy and Planning] for us to remember that the Mayor's commitment was to fund LFEPA so as to avoid any further major frontline realignment? This is a major frontline realignment whether or not the fire engines were in place compared to what LSP5 suggested we should have.

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): The wording that he uses is that it should "avoid the need for any further major frontline realignment over the lifetime of LSP5 from 2013 to 2017", which --

Fiona Twycross AM: Are you excluding these 13 fire engines from this?

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): These fire engines were not in service throughout the lifetime of LSP5. If they are ultimately taken off the run permanently, it will not be in any way at odds with what Sir Edward and the Mayor have said.

Fiona Twycross AM: Londoners would probably disagree. There is a significant difference between a temporary removal of fire engines and a permanent removal of fire engines. I would dispute - and we would dispute quite strongly - that this is not or would not represent a major frontline realignment. I am quite concerned that you seem to be shifting the goalposts a little bit on this, as I am sure --

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): I am sorry. Could you clarify that? How are the goalposts shifting?

Fiona Twycross AM: It has never been suggested before that this was not a frontline realignment. You are saying that because the fire engines --

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): I beg to differ. It has, absolutely, been the case all along. The argument has not changed one bit.

Fiona Twycross AM: This is a major frontline realignment compared to LSP5 and the majority of the Members of LFEPA would dispute the argument that this does not represent a major frontline realignment.

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): You may well be right, Fiona --

Fiona Twycross AM: We can discuss this further this afternoon.

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): -- and we will see this afternoon. That is fine.

Mayor John Biggs AM: Thank you very much for your earlier answers. I obviously have a parochial interest as the Assembly Member for East London. Particularly Newham but also Tower Hamlets have been adversely affected by the closure of fire stations and the loss of appliances. In your current proposals, potentially we lose another three appliances in Poplar, Plaistow and Stratford and a fourth nearby in Shoreditch.

Can you tell us what the cumulative impact would be on residents in my constituency in East London and whether there would be more areas that will fall outside the six-minute response time, for example?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): Firstly, can I just go back to the point made by Ms Twycross earlier in terms of how we have been 'lucky' so far. We plan the emergency service in London very carefully in a very sophisticated way and we have dealt with lots of major incidents or large incidents since the last London Safety Plan. We certainly do not rely on luck, I would say. We do plan the service very carefully.

Any reduction in the amount of fire engines in a particular area has an impact in terms of the attendance times in that local area, but I am confident that the attendance times at a borough level, where we set our standards that we are measured against, whilst they might rise slightly, will still stay within the attendance time targets that we set of six and eight minutes.

Mayor John Biggs AM: Can you tell me whether you have carried out any assessments of the impact of increased attendance times in Newham and Tower Hamlets?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): Yes, we have.

Mayor John Biggs AM: And?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I do not have the figure in front of me right now, but we certainly have carried that out and it still remains within our attendance time targets.

Mayor John Biggs AM: All right, but in terms of the risk to property and to personal safety, are you confident that that in no way has been affected by your closures so far?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I am confident and the evidence of the last two years, when those fire engines have been away from service anyway for two years, would support my confidence.

Mayor John Biggs AM: You are, potentially, going to take another four tenders out of Tower Hamlets, Newham or Tower Hamlets border areas. The impact of those would be what?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): It will have an impact. The attendance times will be as they have been for the last two years, which are slightly longer than they were in the years previously when those fire engines were there. But as I said, the attendance times that will continue into the future if those fire engines are taken out will be the same as residents have experienced in the last two years already and they have been within our targets.

Mayor John Biggs AM: Obviously, there is an interaction between your recommendations and the political decision-making. Can you tell us why you are picking on particular parts of London as against others?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I am relying on the modelling that we carry out. As I have explained to Members before, we have a very sophisticated modelling technique that we have relied on now for about 12 years. On the changes that we have made in terms of operational cover, either redistribution of fire engines or a reduction in the number of fire stations, the results of that have demonstrated that the modelling is actually very accurate.

I am able and very willing to rely on the modelling that we have. In this particular case, we also have two years of evidence when those fire engines have been missing from service for two years and so I am even more confident to rely on the modelling in terms of the outcomes of these reductions.

Mayor John Biggs AM: My constituents have been mollycoddled with too many fire engines for too long?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): No, I do not believe that that is the case at all. I am not saying that. I am saying that we operate within the resources that we are given. We plan our fire cover in way to deliver an equal level of service across all areas of London, across all boroughs and London-wide. Our targets are set at borough level and they are the ones that, therefore, we seek to achieve. Your residents have been receiving a good level of fire cover for the previous years and they will continue to receive that in the future.

Mayor John Biggs AM: In Newham, ten of the wards saw a first response of six minutes. I do not know if experience has shown that to be less drastic than it seemed or more so. In Tower Hamlets, two of the 20 wards saw the same.

Have you monitored that? Have you assessed whether that is better or worse than was predicted? Are you confident that there have been no domestic fires or other fires in which injury has been suffered to a greater degree as a result of a slow response time? A six-minute response time is there for a reason, is it not?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): Yes, we do monitor our response times at all levels and we do keep an eye on the ward levels as well. Just to remind Members, though, the targets that were set for us back in 2008 were to achieve attendance target standards at a borough and a cross-London level. We do not seek to achieve targets at ward level.

We have modelled that to see whether we would need extra resource to achieve that at ward level. If we were seeking to try to achieve our targets at ward level, we would need an extra 103 fire engines and approximately 73 fire stations. We do not seek to do that and so we are still seeking to achieve our attendance targets at a borough and a London-wide level.

We do look at the impact of every fire that we attend and every fire death is analysed very carefully. I am confident that there have been no adverse impacts in terms of outcomes that have occurred as a result of lengthening ward times in some areas.

Mayor John Biggs AM: Mr Bacon, then, can I ask you? I remember several years ago I potentially made myself unpopular by saying that we could accept the loss of one fire appliance in Bethnal Green and we were told that this was once-and-for-all. Since then, we have lost Bow, Silvertown [fire] station has closed, Whitechapel has lost a tender and you are proposing another three and another just over the border in Shoreditch. What message is that giving to my constituents in East London?

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): It is giving the message that the cover that we have was at a level that was higher in the past than it is at the moment. However, as the Commissioner said fairly well just now, the cover that we are providing is still exceptionally good.

There is a contextual point here, which is that the attendance time targets that London has and hits are significantly better than any of our neighbours. For those of you who enjoy statistics, I can give you some. In Essex, the first appliance average attendance target is 80% in eight minutes – that is slower than our first appliance – and 90% in ten minutes. They achieve 79.6% and so they are not even hitting their targets, whereas we exceed --

Mayor John Biggs AM: Presumably, the comparators should be urban areas, I would have thought.

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): Could you name another urban area that is comparable to London?

Mayor John Biggs AM: Greater Manchester.

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): In Kent, for life-threatening incidents, it is 80% in ten minutes, which is slower than our second attendance. In Surrey, the first appliance is 80% in ten minutes; in Hertfordshire, the first appliance is 90% in ten minutes. We exceed six minutes for our first appliance across London and we exceed eight minutes for our second appliance across London.

The coverage that we plan, as the Commissioner said, on a pan-London and borough basis exceeds the targets, which are already the best targets in the country. London has excellent fire cover and continues to have excellent fire cover.

Roger Evans AM: If you consider the 13 appliances that you are considering taking away plus the ones that were removed before, I believe the saving is around £25 million.

If by some miracle you were to have £25 million returned to your budget, Commissioner, would you ideally spend it on putting those appliances back or would you have other priorities that you think would keep London safer?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I would refer back to my point that I made in my opening remarks or in answer to a question, which is that fire engines and fire stations do not prevent fires; they deal with fires once they have occurred.

My priority, if I were ever in the fortunate position of having that sort of money available, would firstly be to rebuild some of our fire stations in different places to where they are now because they are in the place they are now based upon standards that were introduced in 1947. We are working to try to deliver a standard that

is much higher within locations that do not necessarily support that in all cases. Therefore, I certainly want to rebuild some of our fire stations in other places.

I would probably want to invest in some new technology. I know there is a question about new technology later on in today's agenda, but I certainly would like to invest in some new technology in order to achieve greater safety for firefighters and a greater response in terms of preventing fires.

However, as a really key way in which we could reduce the number of fire deaths and injuries, I would very much like to invest some of that money into proactive fire precautions in some people's homes when we know those people are more vulnerable. I know for a fact that there are people out there in the community who are vulnerable to the effects of fire. If we could install things like portable sprinkler systems in their homes, it would make a significant difference in reducing the number of fire deaths in London and would make people a lot safer. At the moment, unfortunately, the money does not exist either within local authorities' budgets or our budgets to do that. That £25 million could be very well invested in providing things in people's homes when we know they are most at risk.

Roger Evans AM: That was interesting. It is not just a question of numbers of fire engines or fire stations. It is more about how you use your resources.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): It is, yes.

Roger Evans AM: We have this same argument with the MPS, actually, which we understand well.

Compared to other brigades around the country, how has the LFB fared in this Spending Review?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): In the Spending Review we have at the moment, I do not know because we have not seen the grant settlement from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). We will not get that until later at Christmas.

However, if we look back over the last few years, I do not have the actual figures in front of me but I know for a fact that London has fared better than most other fire and rescue services. We have fared better for two reasons. One is that the level of grant has been reduced slightly less for us than it has for other fire authorities. Also, in the last couple of years, as the Chairman has already remarked, the Mayor has protected us against the Government grant. This year, the total amount of protection is around £19 million that we have in our budget, which is protected from the Government reduction from the DCLG.

Richard Tracey AM: First of all, Commissioner, you have dealt to some extent with this question of ward-level response, but can I ask you a straight question? Is it actually practical to talk about ward-level calculations? Is that really a practical point in the nature of firefighting or do you have to look over a wider area than simply a ward of - whatever it is - 10,000 people?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): It is practical to do it because, obviously, we have to produce statistics that are at a ward level. Whether those statistics at ward level are particularly meaningful is a different question. We know that many of the wards are very limited in terms of numbers of residents. Some wards are down as low as about 250 people living in a ward. Actually, many of the wards in London suffer very, very few fires. Statistically, I do not believe that those numbers are safe on which to base appliance distribution and resource allocation.

As well as that, as I mentioned earlier, within the level of resource that we have we seek to provide standards at both borough and brigade level. They are better measures for us to use. That was recognised by LFEPA back in 2008 when those standards were set within the Third London Safety Plan (LSP3) and it was very clear that Members' expectations were that we would provide our service at a borough and a London-wide level in terms of the measuring of that.

Richard Tracey AM: It would be quite wrong of us not to congratulate the LFB on the enormous success story, frankly. It is remarkable how few fire incidents and fire deaths there have been compared to a few years ago. We really must congratulate you and the LFB on that.

There is one other question I have. Gareth Bacon AM was talking about comparisons of response and mentioned Kent, Surrey and Hertfordshire. What about comparisons with Birmingham, Manchester and Glasgow, say? They are much more comparable to the London situation in the main, are they not?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): Yes.

Richard Tracey AM: Do you have those sorts of comparisons with you?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I have some of it. I do not have all the detail. Certainly, I do know that in places like Manchester and Birmingham what they have sought to do is to set differential attendance standards across their areas. In London, Members made the right decision back in 2008 to set a London-wide attendance standard. If you have a fire anywhere in London or an incident anywhere in London, we seek to get our first fire engine there on average within six minutes. That is the right standard to have and it is right to do it across the whole of London.

Manchester and Birmingham particularly have set differential attendance standards depending on where you live in that city. That is partially determined by how they assess their risk and they determine their own way of assessing risk and, secondly, by the resources they already have and where those resources are. In some of the outer areas in those cities, just like London, the fire stations are further apart because they are trying to achieve the old 1947 standards. They set their targets on how they perceive their risk and also on where their resources currently are and their ability to increase the level of resource in some of those areas. We are the only metropolitan brigade that seeks to set a single service standard across the whole of our area.

Richard Tracey AM: Chairman, do you have the actual timings? I saw you were looking at some papers.

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): I was looking for them, but I do not. As the Commissioner said, it is sometimes difficult to make a direct comparison because people measure their attendance times and their targets in different ways. I cannot trump what the Commissioner has just come up with.

Andrew Dismore AM: First of all, Gareth, I am pleased that you welcome that we have put forward an alternative budget and I look forward to debating that with you this afternoon. I hope that it will mean we can save Kentish Town's pump, which is in the mix of the 13 fire engines. After the Belsize and Clerkenwell closures in the LSP5 round, Camden has taken more than its fair share of cuts, as the attendance figures show.

What I really want to do, though, is to concentrate on the future Sixth London Safety Plan (LSP6). From Camden's point of view in particular, one of the issues will be the impact of High Speed 2 (HS2) and the road closures and disruptions that come with that, and we hope that that will be featured in the mix for how we develop LSP6.

However, I want to look at it in a more strategic way. I suppose the first question for you is this. Will LSP6 – which is the next LFB safety plan due to come into force in 2016/17, assuming we agree to extend the current plan this afternoon – be risk-based or cuts-based?

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): It is always risk-based. Everything we do is based on risk.

Andrew Dismore AM: The question for the Commissioner is this. What, if anything, is ruled out for LSP6?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): From my personal perspective, retained firefighters. I do not believe that a retained firefighting service would be right for London. Our city is far too complex for that and it would introduce a degree of complexity into our system that we do not need. Therefore, for me, retained firefighting would be ruled out.

However, I would like to think that everything else would have a potential to be considered because there are other things we might be able to do in the future that will improve the service we deliver for Londoners.

Andrew Dismore AM: You do not rule out more cuts in frontline fire engines?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I cannot rule anything out at the moment because I do not know. The London Safety Plan is always a balance of our risk assessment and the resources we have available to deliver that service. I do not know what the level of budget will be in the future and so we would need to keep that one open.

Andrew Dismore AM: All right. Your answer to the question that I put to Gareth would be this: “It is not just risk-based but it is also cuts-based”?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): It is resource-based. It depends on the services we are trying to deliver against the risk we have perceived. Obviously, part of that is to look at the resource we have available to deliver that service. It has to be part of that.

Andrew Dismore AM: If the financial package available to the LFB was less because of cuts, the resources would be less, yes?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): Yes.

Andrew Dismore AM: Therefore, it is not just risk-based, is it?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): It is because I would say that in future we might not actually be looking at it the way we have done previously by looking at fire station or fire engine reductions. There are other ways in which we can look to deliver our service. I have ruled out retaining firefighting because it will not be the right way, but there are lots of other ways in which we might be able to provide our service other than the wholly whole-time 24/7 service that we have at the moment. Looking around the country, there are some really good and very innovative examples now of the ways services have dealt with providing the same level of service with a different amount of staff working different types of systems.

Andrew Dismore AM: OK, let me come to that in a minute. You have not ruled out more cuts in frontline fire engines. Do you rule out cuts in fire stations?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I cannot. I am not ruling that out. I cannot rule out anything.

Andrew Dismore AM: All right. Let us talk about firefighter shift patterns. From what you are saying, you do not rule out changes in the shift pattern?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I have no desire to change the firefighter shift pattern against how we currently assess risk and the way we provide our service. However, part of that is the London Safety Plan and we should look at all options. We should not be ruling anything out before we actually start the process. Therefore, the alternative shift patterns that other brigades have already used and have been using to very good effect should be one of the things that we consider. I am not saying that that would be one of my recommendations, but it is certainly something that we should consider because a London Safety Plan should look at all areas of risk and all opportunities.

Andrew Dismore AM: What sort of shift patterns are we talking about?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I do not know yet because we have not done the work on that.

Andrew Dismore AM: Let us look at alternative crewing. Do you rule out alternative crewing with specials, fire rescue units (FRUs) and aerials, for example?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): No, I do not rule that out.

Andrew Dismore AM: Do you think it is likely to form a feature of recommendations for LSP6?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): Possibly in some areas, yes.

Andrew Dismore AM: By 'some areas' do you mean geographically or by 'some areas' do you mean --

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): No, I mean some types of specials, not necessarily geographically.

Andrew Dismore AM: What about FRUs?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): My personal view at the moment is that we have mentioned in the London Safety Plan before we need to consider the alternative crewing of specials, FRUs being one of those. My personal preference is not to crew FRUs because I believe that the training loading on the staff that work at those stations is too great to reduce it down to only one crew available. Actually, the FRUs provide such a level of different types of specialist capability now, particularly around things like flooding and others, that I do not believe we should have any doubt about their availability.

Andrew Dismore AM: What about aerials?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): For aerials, potentially there is a case for alternative crewing in some areas, yes.

Andrew Dismore AM: Do you rule out further cuts to the numbers of firefighters?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): Depending on the shift pattern. If we look at different types of ways of providing the service, then inevitably there will be different numbers of staff that we would need, but I do not know what those numbers would be at the moment because we have not done that work yet.

Andrew Dismore AM: We are likely to see fewer firefighters?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I would not say that we are likely to. I am saying that I would not rule it out.

Andrew Dismore AM: If we change the shift pattern, you do not rule out cuts in fire engines and you do not rule out cuts in fire stations, then, presumably, that implies we are going to have fewer firefighters, does it not?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): It might do; it might not. It might be that we deploy our firefighters in a different way. It does not necessarily mean fewer firefighters. As I say, I would not rule it out but it certainly does not definitely mean that.

Andrew Dismore AM: Are we likely to see recommendations for reductions in officer numbers above the rank of Group Manager? We currently have 80 officers above that rank and only 103 fire stations.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): We have around that number of officers spread across four duty systems and we have only about 20 on each duty system, and so it is not quite as big as the number might suggest.

It looks like one of the recommendations this afternoon is - and Members have already agreed it through the Resources Committee - that we should look at the numbers of officers at Station Manager and Group Manager level as part of next year's budget round. We will definitely do that. I would like to think that, if Members agree the recommendation about the London Safety Plan this afternoon, the budget consideration and the London Safety Plan will work together next year because that will be the best way to do it. I would not rule out a reduction in the number of officers, either, no.

Andrew Dismore AM: What assumptions are underpinning your preparatory work on LSP6? Presumably, you have started some preparatory work already.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): Members have a paper this afternoon, actually, talking about what we might do in terms of public consultation on the ways in which we look at risk. That is our preparatory work and I cannot really say whether or not it is going to be accepted because Members are going to debate that this afternoon.

Andrew Dismore AM: You are not working on any assumptions at all?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I am not working on any assumptions at the moment, no.

Andrew Dismore AM: Under LSP6, do you anticipate that we will see a further increase in first and second pump attendance times?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): The standards?

Andrew Dismore AM: No, not the standard - the standard is six [minutes for first appliance attendance] and eight [minutes for second appliance attendance] - but in actual attendance times. I am more concerned about actual attendance times.

For example, when Belsize's pump went, we saw a dramatic increase in attendance times in that ward. In July, it took 15 minutes for a pump to get to the person who reported [the fire]. It came from Dowgate and all the way to Belsize. Then, of course, we had the fatal [fire] the other week. I am not going to go into that in any more detail at the moment because there are inquiries into that, but it did take 14 minutes for the pump to get to the fire in Camden Road; that is a matter of record. In Belsize, we saw a dramatic increase in attendance times in that area.

What I am saying is this. Will we see a further increase in actual attendance times - not the target but actual attendance times - for first and second pumps as a result of LSP6?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I cannot say whether we will or we will not, to be honest. It depends on the work that we do around how we are going to provide the service in the future.

My personal view is that we should maintain the attendance standard targets that we have at the moment of six and eight minutes. I always strive, whatever we do in terms of the design of the LFB and the London Safety Plans, to achieve those targets and to improve our attendance time as much as we possibly can. That is some of the work that we have done around firefighter turnout times when they receive a call and a new mobilising to be designed in the future to achieve quicker attendance times. We are doing whatever we can to improve and speed up attendance times within the constraints with which we work.

I do not necessarily know what those constraints are going to be in the future. LSP6 will be about looking at what we have and how we can deliver that service better. One of the intentions with that - and my intention would be - to speed up attendance times across the board, not only in those places where we have seen increases recently.

Andrew Dismore AM: Will we see an improvement in the unequal attendance times between different parts of London? Some parts of London - particularly outer London - have dramatically higher attendance times and do not meet the six- and eight-minute targets. Will we see improvements there?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I hope so. As I mentioned in answer to Mr Evans's question, one of the things I would very much like to do is to have a programme of rebuilding some of our fire stations in better places. We have been through a period of replacing some fire stations - nine stations over the last few years - and that is drawing to a conclusion, but we do know that some of our stations are in the wrong place. It is not quite as simple as just saying, "It is in the wrong place; we need to move it", because we have to have the money to be able to do that, we have to find the land to do that and we have to go through a whole range of things. However, I would like to think that LSP6 would seek Members' approval for a plan where we have a programme over a number of years of moving fire stations from their current locations to new locations, designed exactly to improve attendance standards

across the board and to even them up. We are trying to provide a London-wide standard and that is very important. I would like us to continue to get closer to that if we possibly can.

Andrew Dismore AM: You talk about 'evening up'. Presumably you mean 'evening down' rather than 'evening up'?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): Sorry, yes.

Andrew Dismore AM: Does that mean that inner London, which has traditionally had better times, is going to end up with worse times, as we saw as a result of LSP5 and all the cuts particularly in central London with fire stations like Clerkenwell, Belsize and the ones that Mayor Biggs was talking about earlier on?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): Not necessarily because, as I have said, what I would like to do is to move the location of some of our fire stations. When moving the location, we know much more information now about where the risk is and where fires are likely to occur and we are able to model that much more closely than we have ever been able to before. I would like to think that we will be able to even down the attendance standards across London whilst not impacting on central London. I do not want to make attendance times in central London any longer than they are in the moment.

However, in having a rebuilding programme where we can build new fire stations in new locations or, indeed, find another way of providing the service, maybe, we will probably need to look at what the London Ambulance Service [LAS] does in terms of deploying its resources from static locations outside of its ambulance stations. That is not something we have done previously, but it could be something we will look at in the future. All of that would be around trying to make sure that we do not adversely impact on attendance times in some places in order to improve them in others.

Andrew Dismore AM: That would mean having a fire engine parked on a roundabout somewhere waiting for a fire call with, presumably, the firefighter sitting there and not doing very much?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): Yes. The reason we have not done that so far is because the number of fire calls is so low. The number of fire calls continues to go down every year and, therefore, it would not be an appropriate use of our resources to deploy in that way. The LAS is in a very different position, as we know. Its attendance standards are based upon its utilisation rates and it may need to do things like that. We do not need to do that at the moment and, actually, it would not be a good use of firefighters' time. I would rather have them out delivering proactive community work than sitting in a car park somewhere.

However, it is certainly one of those things once again, as I said. We will need to consider all options as part of LSP6. It might be something that we dismiss quite quickly, but it certainly needs to be something that we consider.

Andrew Dismore AM: The options include potentially having fire engines parked in car parks or roundabouts. The options include cutting fire engines, cutting fire stations, cutting firefighters, changing the shift pattern, potentially reducing officers and alternative crewing. Yes?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): The options also include doing none of those. The options also include rebuilding fire stations to improve attendance times, providing different ways that firefighters can deliver the service, providing more community safety work to

make Londoners safe and to reduce the number of fires again and providing a more specialist service in some areas so that our firefighters' skills in special areas like the FRUs can be used to greater effect. All of those things are possible but are also not possible.

Andrew Dismore AM: All right. Would you like to have a little wager with me? Let us have £5 on it --

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I do not bet. I never bet.

Andrew Dismore AM: -- that LSP6 will have, as I think, cuts in the matters that I referred to. Would you like to have a little bet with me on whether it will or it will not?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I am not a gambling man.

Andrew Dismore AM: No, I am sure you are not, certainly not when it comes to fire stations, fire engines and firefighter cuts.

James Cleverly AM MP: I am happy for either the Commissioner or the Chairman to answer this. When the traditional disposition of London's fire stations was brought about, I suppose, with the early 20th century expansion, is it fair to say that fire and fire risk was the single biggest driving factor in the equipment disposition of fire stations and fire appliances?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): It is. Back in 1947 was when we first had attendance standards provided for us by the Home Office at the time. Those attendance standards were based solely upon the risk of fire. Obviously, in those days, the risk of fire was much higher than it currently is.

As time has moved on, those standards stayed in place with some amendment until earlier this century when the new Fire and Rescue Services Act [2004] changed those standards and made it available to each fire and rescue authority to set its own standards. LFEPA at the time took exactly the right decision and was to decide to apply those standards to all incidents the LFB attends. Therefore, our attendance standards are not just about fires; they are for any incident that we attend. Given that the number of fires is dropping, has dropped and is continuing to drop so significantly but the number of incidents we attend in other areas - such as flooding and road traffic collisions - is changing. It is right that we should have attendance standards for all incidents rather than just fires.

James Cleverly AM MP: It is interesting that you make that point because, as you say, as the number of fires continues to decline, the proportion of fires to other types of response is going to shift. Obviously, the geographical risk implications of that change in challenge, shall we say, surely needs to be reflected in the future-proofing of the LFB.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): It does. That is why the paper that Members will have before them this afternoon talks about maybe a slight amendment to the way in which we assess risk in London and the way we make those judgements. We are seeking this afternoon Members' support to go out and speak to the public about that in terms of the service they want from the LFB and what sorts of risks they perceive for their local areas they would like us to have a response to or what other response there could be. Part of LSP6, probably in a more sophisticated way than we managed to do it

previously, will be to look at those other risks as well and ask what response the LFB can reasonably apply to things other than fires in a more co-ordinated and sustained way than perhaps we do at the moment.

James Cleverly AM MP: I do not want to tread on the toes of colleagues because I know one colleague is asking about the implications of climate change and another colleague is asking about the use of technology. However, there is a shift in risk through a 24-hour period and through the seasons. We are not entering rural and suburban grassfire season, but during the summer it is a more significant risk.

Can you envisage through LSP6 a more dynamic and flexible deployment model for the LFB so that, for example, residential areas during the periods when those people are resident and business areas during the periods when those business are active might see a dynamic movement of assets to meet that dynamic movement of risk?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): That was mentioned in LSP5, actually. That is perhaps the way of dynamic deployment that we need to move towards in the future. We do not have that arrangement in place at the moment, although I have some limited ability to move fire engines between stations for specific risks, things like large events taking place in London or major roadworks. We do amend the cover slightly around that sometimes.

However, to have a more proactive way of moving fire engines from one place to another across the time of day, week and year would be a more sophisticated way to do things and would address the risk better than we do at the moment.

James Cleverly AM MP: I am conscious that I am asking you to speculate on LSP6, which, as you have gone through in some detail, is still – whatever the appropriate word is – ‘before embryonic’ in its design at the moment. However, I know that in your report you mentioned a major incident response exercise, multi-agency working and interoperability through the Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Programme (JESIP) and other programmes. This is very much the direction of travel.

Will you ensure that in your advice during the production of LSP6, the implications towards interoperability and multi-agency working are also taken into consideration when the geographical planning of the future LFB is put in place?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): Indeed. I am very keen that we work much more collaboratively with our colleagues in the other emergency services in London. That can mean a range of things. It can mean our incident planning in terms of the way we work together at the incident ground. As you say, JESIP has addressed some of that. Equally, we could be sharing sites and we could be doing other sorts of planning in a more collaborative way as well. LSP6 will certainly need to address the collaborative work that we need to do in the future, once again, in order to provide a better service to the public across all three emergency services, not just the LFB.

James Cleverly AM MP: Thank you.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: This is a question about LSP5 seeing one appliance go away in Hayes and now the risk of another appliance going away in Ealing. Can you tell me what the impact has been across my constituency, West London, of losing the appliance from Hayes and what the impact will be of losing one in Ealing?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): The impact in Hayes has been that the attendance times, certainly at ward level in the local area, have increased, as we said at the

time we made the proposals. The removal of the fire engine from Ealing will mean that the service that has been provided over the last two years – because, of course, it has been missing for two years already – will continue at that level in the future, which does mean increased attendance times at a ward level.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: Does that worry you?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): Any increase in attendance time worries me. However, as I said before, we are continuing to provide a really good service both at a borough and a London-wide level, which is where we get measured. The proactive work we are doing around community safety and prevention is meaning that Londoners are at less risk anyway. Whilst any increase in attendance times is something that I do not want to achieve, sometimes unfortunately we are in a position whereby that is a risk we have to accept given that we are still achieving our attendance targets largely across London and at a borough level, which is where we are measured.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: It may be a risk that you are prepared to accept, but the risk for people who are in a fire is a risk that is unacceptable to them. Every two minutes of time it takes to attend quadruples the intensity of the fire. That is an unfair risk for people who are in a fire.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): The other thing we have not discussed is that unfortunately we do know as well that at many fire deaths that we attend, there has been a delay in calling the LFB and the person has suffered the injury they are going to receive before we even leave the fire station. Whilst of course it is always good to get to a fire as quickly as possible, unfortunately we are not able to do it every time.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: Look, this is extremely worrying for me and it is worrying for people who are in a fire, particularly in my constituency. In Hayes, in Hillingdon, there are 16 wards that have seen increases in the first appliance attendance time and four wards had increases of one minute in Hillingdon last year. As I have already said, a delay of two minutes quadruples the intensity of the fire. In Ealing, 14 wards have seen increases in attendance times and eight wards were going over the six-minute target time for the first appliance.

These are bad statistics and we cannot tolerate or sustain any further cuts. I would really urge you to reconsider your position and to put yourself in the position of people who are in a fire waiting for the LFB to turn up. Thank you.

Navin Shah AM: I have a couple of questions to the Commissioner. Given the safety risks from the scale and nature of the changes and cuts that will be faced by the LFB over the next years, how can you meaningfully get the views of London's firefighters and their representatives?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): We have just completed quite a significant staff engagement exercise. We have been out and visited many workplaces and many Members of staff across all sections of our workforce, and so we have started that engagement process already. We will continue with that engagement process. We are just about to go into phase two of that after Christmas. Part of that engagement process is to talk to staff about the future of the service, what they feel we should be delivering in the future, what new things or other things they think we could be doing, where we might improve their training and all of those sorts of things. We are getting information back from them about that.

Also, we have a very extensive industrial relations process whereby we seek the views of the trade unions. I have to say that, having carried out the staff engagement process recently, the information we had back from the staff engagement process is quite significantly different in many areas to the views we get from the staff representatives through the trade union process. It is quite interesting to see in terms of balancing up those views what staff are saying to us as opposed to what their union representatives are saying to us. Our task is to try to join those things together and seek agreement, obviously. We always seek to consult properly with the FBU. We listen to their views and we seek to amend proposals in a way in which we can seek agreement in the future.

The staff consultation process, as I said, is very significant. We carried out the first phase of that recently and phase two will start in the New Year. It is a process that is intended to be continuous into the future, particularly as we go into a London Safety Plan year next year.

Navin Shah AM: You have just heard concerns about Ealing risking its fire engine. Similarly, I have been talking to firefighters in Willesden, again, at the fire station and there is the potential risk of losing a fire engine there, too. There is very strong opposition to any such loss given the borough profile in terms of risk of fire as well as the attendance times, which are there on record.

What weight will you give when you get these responses from firefighters and other stakeholders? What is your plan?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I am aware of the views of firefighters, particularly at the stations where the fire engines have been absent for the last two years. I have to say that many of the views that I get from firefighters also is that they accept that these fire engines have been missing for two years and they accept that the risk of London has continued to reduce over that time. Therefore, whilst they would not accept or would not propose that the fire engines do not go back, they accept the reason for it. That is not the case for every firefighter, obviously, but my answer to them is that these fire engines, particularly these 13, have been out of service for two years already. The evidence we have of the performance of the LFB in terms of attendance times, numbers of fires and numbers of fire deaths has continued to improve and, therefore, there is not a case for putting them back in the face of the significant savings that we need to make.

Navin Shah AM: Commissioner, the evidence that you say does not stack up when you actually look at a ward-by-ward analysis of response times, which have gone up.

If I can move on to the whole aspect of engaging, consulting and listening to the responses, I am pleased that via Sir Edward Lister [Chief of Staff to the Mayor and Deputy Mayor, Policy and Planning] the Mayor has asked that the consultation on the cuts should be carried out in a neutral and fair manner, which is very welcome. Therefore, there again there is public engagement, which is critical.

How are you going to take into account public opinion? I am afraid the record is not very good. Last time with LSP5, when 96% of the responses from the public did not want station closures: you did not listen to them, did you? What are you going to do in terms of dealing with public opinion? I am sure it will come out against what you are trying to do with the cuts because of safety risks.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): The consultation itself will be as the Mayor has directed in terms of being fair and balanced. I am sure that LFEPA Members will be, through the process that we have this afternoon and maybe in the subsequent days, making sure that the

balance is to the LFEPA Members' satisfaction. I am sure that that will be the case and so I am very confident that the consultation process will be fair, equitable and as open and transparent as it can possibly be.

In terms of using those results, the results of the consultation – as they were previously – will be reported back to LFEPA exactly as they have been received. In terms of whether that public consultation affects the outcome or how it affects it is perhaps not a question for me. It may be more for Members of LFEPA and for the Mayor.

Valerie Shawcross CBE AM: You mentioned earlier, Commissioner, collaboration with other emergency services and so I just wanted to ask both of you about the co-responding model. I have seen it operate successfully in rural areas with retained firefighters, but of course the dynamics of serving a very sparse rural community are very different from London.

What is your view on whether or not co-responding is an appropriate model for London at all, both of you?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): It is an appropriate model for us to trial in London anyway. We have been talking about having a pilot to start with to see whether or not it is an appropriate model and whether it is something we should maybe think about for the future.

There is no doubt, going back to the question from Mr Shah, from the staff engagement we have been carrying out with our staff that our staff want to do to co-responding. Almost unanimously across all fire stations, staff have said that we should be doing co-responding. There is no doubt about that. We have the defibrillators on the fire engines. They know how to use them. There might be some additional training required, but overall we should be doing it. Our staff accept that. It is the right model for the future.

Some metropolitan areas are already running pilots at the moment. These arise from the national agreement last year. The [Greater] Manchester Fire and Rescue Service in particular has a pilot running, as has Birmingham. We need to see the outcomes of those in terms of the actual detail around it, but certainly my personal preference really is that we should be at least trialling it in London to see whether or not it is a model that can be successful in the future in terms of delivering better outcomes for the patients or the people who need to be defibrillated. Our staff agree with us.

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): I echo that. I have been going around and talking to firefighters in stations. They – not all but overwhelmingly most – have welcomed the idea of getting into co-responding. The thing that comes back all the time is that they want to be properly trained and they want to have a proper understanding of exactly what they are doing on the co-responding. The fear is that they will be sent to something that they are not simply trained to deal with and will stand over somebody while they die. Obviously, the detail of that would be worked out.

The co-responding model would be to go to what they call 'Red 1 shouts' – I know you know what that is but other Members may not; it is when a cardiac arrest is possible – and the firefighters would be going to sustain life. It is not their job to passport them to hospital or anything like that but to sustain life until the LAS can get there and then move the patient to hospital.

The pilot that we are looking at doing would be in four London boroughs in east London where we have the highest proportion of Red 1 shouts so that we can get a proper representative feel for how that will work. I said in my opening remarks that I am very keen that we make some progress on this with the FBU so that we can actually implement the pilot and get a better understanding in practice of how that would work and how we could support the LAS, with a view to then rolling it out across London.

Valerie Shawcross CBE AM: It is interesting to do a pilot on it, but I have this feeling that maybe the wrong question is being asked. Maybe the question should not be whether we could do this and whether the staff accept it. Maybe the question is, if you want to increase survival rates from heart attacks in London, whether mobilising the LFB would be the answer or whether it would be having a really good, proper, multi-agency strategy to roll out defibrillators and training right across the community into every supermarket, every office and every public building. It seems to me that that would be a more successful approach to tackling the problem than going first to co-responding. Certainly we know that where there is widespread and visible availability of defibrillators and people trained – which is not very onerous – survival rates are much better in those environments.

Are we fast-forwarding to maybe the wrong solution when there is a better way of tackling the problem?

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): Personally, I think it is part of the solution, not the total solution. The total solution is much more along the lines of what you have just outlined, but the LFB can work in a particular way and can be part of that solution. That is what we are trying to do.

The MPS have embraced this, interestingly. I saw a press release last week that said that the police are now doing some co-responding shouts with the LAS to support the LAS along the lines of what we are trying to do with the Fire Brigade. The more partner agencies that can do that the better, as far as I am concerned. If I were to have a heart attack in the middle of the street, I would not care what uniform – or no uniform – anyone was wearing. As long as they stayed there and kept my heart going, I really would not give a monkey's. However, the LFB has a role to play in this and we should just get on with it.

Valerie Shawcross CBE AM: It does not ultimately solve the resource problem for the LAS. It has to mobilise an ambulance anyway. I would say that I think most Londoners would want to see the LAS well-resourced and properly run.

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): I am inclined to agree --

Valerie Shawcross CBE AM: Also, there is a problem. A six-minute attendance time is actually too long in order to save the life of somebody in cardiac arrest and so it is only ever going to be of occasional use, I am inclined --

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): Yes. It is not a substantial extra burden for the LFB at all and no one is pretending that it is, but every second counts in the case of cardiac arrest and the LFB has the fastest response time of any emergency service. It does make sense for firefighters to be deployed in that way, but not all firefighters. We would have to work out the detail of who would do it and how that work out, but it is something that we should be pursuing.

Andrew Dismore AM: Just to build on Val's point, it is also important that we really promote first aid training in schools. I remember doing it when I was in the Sea Scouts and then, 20 years later, actually having to do it for real. It did take the ambulance some time to get there. Unfortunately, the chap died, but I did bring him back twice.

The point I wanted to make is for Ron, really, and it is what Gareth said about the police doing co-responding, which they are. I was discussing this with a senior police officer the other evening. She said that one of the problems that has arisen from this is that the LAS tends to take a back foot and police officers are then left tied up with a casualty for an hour or an hour-and-a-half. Hopefully, it would not be the case with a heart

attack, but there is a risk in the system that we end up effectively looking after somebody for far longer than would be appropriate, firstly, and, secondly, tying up our own resources because the pump is off the run for anything else while that person is being attended to.

Also, I read in the *Evening Standard* that police cars are being used to take people to hospital. Are we going to end up with a situation where we are having to use pumps to take people to hospital because an ambulance just has not turned up? We already have queues of ambulances outside hospitals waiting to get people to accident and emergency (A&E). If we have fire engines joining the queue as well, there is going to be one hell of a traffic jam outside A&E departments, is there not?

What discussions have you had with the police about the implications for them? Effectively, although we are talking about doing a pilot ourselves, which we may or may not end up doing, at the moment the police are acting as a pilot for us and are learning some of the problems that have arisen.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I absolutely accept that point and I have discussed this with police officers as well. Part of the discussions we have been having with the LAS has been tri-service with the police as well and so we are aware of those sorts of issues.

It is about how you define the pilot and what agreements you make with the LAS about how it is going to respond in these circumstances. It is absolutely clear that once it has already been triaged through their control room, they will only seek to mobilise if they know they cannot get there in a reasonable time. It is not just going to be any call that comes in that we could get mobilised to.

The other thing we are being very clear with the LAS on is that our staff are there for the minimum amount of time possible looking after a casualty without an ambulance member of staff there. It has absolutely undertaken that it would mobilise just as quickly as it possibly could. It is just that we might be able to get there quicker and therefore make an intervention before the ambulance gets there.

There are things that we need to see, agree the terms of the pilot and get the pilot running. If there are issues around whether or not the LAS is slowing down its response if we have already mobilised, it would be something that would need to be resolved before we could go anywhere near taking the pilot any further forward. All of the issues you have raised are absolutely part of the discussion we are having with the LAS and, indeed, with the trade unions because they have raised issues as well. They are things that I would be really keen that we resolve before we get into actually running the pilot. We have had some positive discussions with the LAS about it. It is very keen that we are part of the solution and part of the improvement in terms of patient outcomes. We are not the solution to it and there are things that we are need to carry on discussing with it to make sure that, one, the pilot is run on a fair basis and that, two, our staff are not exposed to any unnecessary risks in terms of the amount of time they spend with a casualty.

On the availability issue, you are absolutely right that if a fire engine was attending a cardiac response call, it would not be available for something else. However, unfortunately, our call rates are such that we do not believe it would have a very large impact. We are modelling how many cardiac arrest calls we might get and at the moment the numbers are relatively low.

Andrew Dismore AM: Will that feature in the LSP6 assessment?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): It depends on what happens with the pilot.

Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair): Thank you. Let us move on to the second of the starter questions.

2015/3981 - Dissolution of LFEPA

Tony Arbour AM

In light of the similar responses from the Mayor, Assembly and Fire Authority to the Government's consultation 'Enabling closer working between the Emergency Services', what impact do you envisage the dissolution of LFEPA and the establishment of a Deputy Mayor for Fire and Emergency Planning would have on the London Fire Brigade?

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): Thank you, Tony. This has achieved a remarkable level of consensus amongst decision-makers in London. The Mayor, the Assembly and LFEPA submitted responses to the Government consultation that were very closely aligned.

As set out in the response, it was agreed by the Appointments and Urgency Committee on behalf of LFEPA that what would happen is that the Mayor would discharge his or her responsibilities for fire through a statutory Deputy Mayor for Fire and Emergency Planning, who would be responsible for the relevant policy and budgetary powers for the LFB on behalf of the Mayor. The response that was sent by LFEPA set out that the LFB should become a corporation sole, which means that it retains its own identity as it currently has but, in the absence of a new mayoral agency, it would become a functional body of the Greater London Authority (GLA). One impact of this would be that the London Fire Commissioner would become a statutory role as the executive head of the LFB and would be directly answerable to the Mayor of London. The London Assembly would have a statutory Fire and Emergency Planning Committee, which would then provide scrutiny and oversight of the new structure.

The advantage of that is that at the moment LFEPA has morphed into a bit of a hybrid function. It is actually supposed to be an executive board along the lines of Transport for London's board's function, but it is trying to simultaneously perform the function of scrutineer of mayoral activity. As a result of that, we get this fairly murky compromise where drift and delay becomes the norm and conflict that perhaps does not need to happen does happen. Ultimately, the changes would increase the accountability of the Mayor for fire and emergency planning policy. It would speed up the decision-making process and I believe it would generally be good for the LFB because the LFB would be able to get on with its work in a more timely manner. Scrutiny would not be neglected; it could be carried out by the London Assembly, which is where really the scrutiny should belong.

Tony Arbour AM (Deputy Chairman): Can we have your views on that, Commissioner?

Darren Johnson AM: Do not start unravelling the consensus!

Tony Arbour AM (Deputy Chairman): He knows better than that.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I do not think I will do that. I agree with the views that Members have made, really, in terms of the agreement on LFEPA. Members are best placed to decide on the governance structures rather than me.

My one comment, I suppose, is that we need to make sure that there are proper scrutiny arrangements in place for either me or my successor in the future to make sure that the LFEPA is properly accountable. However, actual decisions and comments about what that structure looks like are for Members rather than for me.

Tony Arbour AM (Deputy Chairman): Do you think that the catalyst for this proposal has been the intransigent way in which the current majority on LFEPA has taken the opportunity to see it as a way of getting at the Mayor and not accepting that the Mayor does, at the end of the day, have powers of Direction?

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): Possibly. I might put it in slightly different language, Tony. It is undeniably true that a situation has arisen over recent years where LFEPA has not entirely recognised its role as an executive decision-maker, has morphed into a position where it sees itself as trying to provide a scrutiny and check-and-balance role to the Mayor and has then ended up in a prolonged standoff, which is only ever resolved by a Mayoral Direction, which is a power, of course, that was granted to the previous Mayor but has been used - or has been needed to be used - extensively by the current Mayor.

Tony Arbour AM (Deputy Chairman): If I can ask the Commissioner, you have told us that you agree with your Chairman and it is absolutely right. I cannot imagine there ever being a Chairman whom you have not agreed with. However, there is a suggestion that this is going to free up time. Do you agree that having the proposed new structure will in fact liberate you and your colleagues to do frontline work?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I would hesitate to say that we have been stopped from doing any frontline work by the current arrangements. We have managed to do all we needed to do. Potentially, looking at the structures that are maybe going to be proposed, there will be less time on officers in terms of preparation for committees and reports and things. However, that said, as I said, there needs to be proper scrutiny arrangements in place and proper decision-making in place. I do not know exactly what that would look like at the moment or how much time it would take up and so it is quite difficult to answer the question in any more detail than that, really.

Tony Arbour AM (Deputy Chairman): Finally to you, Chairman, there has been a suggestion that the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) might see fire and emergency planning as part of its role and therefore, in terms of there being a separate Deputy Mayor for Fire, in fact the Deputy Mayor for Policing [and Crime] should take over fire as well. Do you have a view on that?

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): I do. I would not support that, primarily because in terms of size of budget - if for no other reason - the MPS's budget dwarfs fire by a considerable margin and there is a danger if that were to happen that the focus on fire would be entirely lost and would be subsumed within a focus on the MPS. That, I do not suggest, would be a good result for London. Fire is a very important emergency service and it needs to be recognised and kept separate.

That would not, of course, preclude interagency working. There is a considerable amount of interagency working that goes on between the blue-light services in London already and that can continue anyway. It does not need to have one Deputy Mayor overseeing all of it for that to happen.

Fiona Twycross AM: I wanted to correct the impression that was given that the way it has been operating at the moment has been simply about opposition Members [on LFEPA] getting at the Mayor. The fact is that the Mayor has insisted on managing by Direction even when there has not been an impasse, including on issues over which there has been cross-party agreement by LFEPA Members.

I just wondered if you could focus a little bit on what impact the Mayor's insistence on management by Direction has had. To be honest, we have had Directions on all sorts of things, not just on the big, strategic issues. I wondered if you could comment on that briefly.

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): Ultimately, it is undeniable that impasses have been reached and the only way to get things done and moved on is by Mayoral Direction or has been in circumstances by Mayoral Direction. The key thing for me is that the LFB needs to move forward and to make decisions and some of that decision-making has been, undeniably, slowed down. Once you have breached the dam of Mayoral Direction, inevitably, more Directions follow. There is an argument and it is an argument that I subscribe to, which is that the only person democratically accountable for running the LFB is the Mayor of London. None of the Members of LFEPA are elected to those posts. They are elected to other posts and seconded to LFEPA and they are all appointed by the Mayor.

Fiona Twycross AM: Should the Mayor be sitting where you are today instead of you, given that we effectively almost have a 'mayoral directorate'?

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): I am the Mayor's appointed Chairman, as was James [Cleverley AM MP] before me and Val [Valerie Shawcross CBE AM] next-but-one before him. Under the new arrangements, if we do end up with a Deputy Mayor model, that would remain true.

Fiona Twycross AM: Where does the scrutiny of the Mayor lie? Obviously, the Mayor is not here for this major scrutiny bit today. Where would the scrutiny of the Mayor on fire work --

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): As I said before, the --

Fiona Twycross AM: Obviously he does get called to the [London Assembly's] Police and Crime Committee.

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): Yes, and he can be called in front of the Assembly. The mayoral responsibility is delegated in this instance to the Chairman and, going forward, as I say, it may be to the Deputy Mayor. The response that was submitted to the consultation recommended that the Assembly would have the power to summons the Mayor or the Deputy Mayor and the Commissioner and so it would be perfectly possible to scrutinise him under those arrangements. That is why we are in favour of it: because the transparency is clearer to the end user than it is at the moment.

Richard Tracey AM: Chairman, probably this is one for you as the politician of the two of you. The fact is, surely, that government, particularly local government, has been changing very considerably over recent years. That is accepted. The straight point to you: is it not correct that perhaps LFEPA in its current form is out of date and past its sell-by date, really?

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): There is an argument to say that it has become so. That is why it is specifically mentioned in the Government Bill and why we have achieved consensus in terms of responding to it.

Richard Tracey AM: Of course, the Bill is in part a product of the investigation by the Communities and Local Government Committee. I had the honour of appearing as one of the witnesses, along with several others in here. There is no question that the Committee and the Chairman particularly, who came here and spoke to us afterwards, accepted completely the view that there should be, for fire [services] in London, a similar or totally the same body as is controlling police and crime. It is now a totally logical step, it seems to me. Would you agree with that?

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): Yes, I would. I would not want to make it absolutely identical to police and crime because we do not need to create a fire version of MOPAC.

Richard Tracey AM: No.

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): Creating a big administrative bureaucracy to sit beneath a potential Deputy Mayor for Fire would be an unnecessary use of taxpayer resources but, broadly speaking, it would be much more sensible to have a similar delegated power as the Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime has.

Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair): Thank you. Let us move to the third lead-in question.

2015/3982 - Impact of climate change on your work

[Jenny Jones AM](#)

Are you well prepared for the impact that a changing climate might have on the Fire Brigade's work over the coming decade?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I am going to focus - at the start of my answer, anyway - on how we have assessed the impact and what we have done in order to mitigate that impact rather than what we are doing to try to mitigate climate change in itself, which we have discussed here before.

Back in 2008, as part of LSP5, we did assess the impact of climate change on the work of the LFB. We did that also as part of the work we have been doing in terms of responding to the Mayor's Climate Change Adaptation Strategy as well. We assessed at the time that the major impact of climate change on the LFB was likely to be an increase in the amount and frequency of flooding that we see within London. We assessed that on the basis of our staff availability. We have sufficient staff. In fact, we have more than enough staff to deal with flooding but we were not equipped as well as we could be in order to do that. Since that time we have managed to significantly improve our ability to deal with flooding not only by training of our staff but also introducing quite a significant amount of new equipment.

I will just go through what some of that equipment is that we have introduced. We now have floating pontoons that can assist in the rescue of people affected by flooding. We have mud rescue paths - we are the only emergency service in London at the moment that has mud rescue paths - so that we can get people away from areas of rivers and things, perhaps. All of our fire engines have been adapted so that their air intakes are now higher off the ground. They are able to go through flooding up to about half a metre of water. We have updated our standard design brief around new fire stations as well. Our new fire stations that are currently being built take more account of issues around flooding and the potential for them to be involved in flooding.

We have bought 40 light portable pumps. We have six operational support units that carry our flooding equipment. Nine of our FRUs have now been equipped with inflatable boats with outboard engines, inflatable rescue paths and dry suits and things for our staff to work in flooded environments. We have six national high-volume pumps provided by the Government. We have had those for a while now and they have been seen to be used in flooding instances around the country over the last few years. We have a range of other equipment in terms of safety equipment for our staff. We have taken great care to assess the impact of climate change in terms of the impact on us, particularly around flooding, and we have responded very appropriately.

Jenny Jones AM: That sounds really positive. I am sure I know the figures as well as I do, that 140,000 Londoners are at risk from excess surface water flooding. My concern is: if we had several critical incidents at once, which is of course entirely possible with flooding, how many incidents could you get to? You talked about six operational units. Does that mean that is the number of incidents that you could deal with?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): No, the six operational support units carry equipment that could be delivered around London to more than one incident. We carry more equipment on those vehicles. They are six of them but they could then attend all the incident scenes, if needed, to drop off equipment supply for firefighters. I cannot put an exact number on how many flooding incidents we could deal with because it depends, once again, on the scale and the complexity of what we are dealing with, but we have demonstrated back in 2014 we are able to respond to a number of flooding incidents at one time. In fact, the Kenley incident down in Croydon we responded to over quite a significant period of time as well.

Jenny Jones AM: That took four high-volume pumps, 15 pumping appliances and three FRUs to deal with that one incident, so you can see my concern that there could be other incidents of the same sort of scale. Do you really feel you have the people and the resources to deal with several high-volume incidents at the same time?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I do. Of course, it is not just the LFB's responsibility to deal with and mitigate the impact of the flood. Local authorities obviously have a significant responsibility in that as well. During the flooding in 2014 we dealt with very closely with lots of local authorities. We were supporting the local authority effort to deal with flooding. We very much would rescue the people, if people needed to be rescued, or play a part in that rescue and co-ordinate the rescue efforts. Then actually dealing with pumping and so on would be largely or very significantly an Environment Agency and a local authority issue as well.

Jenny Jones AM: Do you have training sessions with other emergency services like the police on things like flooding? Do you have joint training?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): Yes, we do. We not only exercise our flooding response as well with the London agencies but we also exercise our flooding response with brigades from outside of London. We saw flooding in recent years in other parts of the country. At one point particularly, for the Somerset flats, every single high-volume pump in the country in a fire and rescue service was mobilised to that incident. We were part of that response as well.

Jenny Jones AM: You are pre-empting all my questions. I was going to ask you about the Somerset Levels flooding because that was extremely destructive and over a huge area. There is a possibility here in London that many rivers could flood simultaneously. I am concerned that there is the potential for a number of widespread incidents and that there just will not be enough and you cannot deal with it.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): There is certainly the potential for a number of widespread incidents. We know that through the work we do with the London Resilience Forum because obviously flooding is a significant risk on the London Resilience Forum's risk agenda. We work with all the other agencies in London, the London Environment Agency, local authorities, police and emergency planning teams from elsewhere as well to make sure the plans in place are as robust as they can be to respond to more than one flooding incident at a time. To go back to last year, when we were supporting the effort at the Somerset flats, we were also supporting the efforts in other counties as well.

Jenny Jones AM: That was going to be my next question, actually. Just how much support can you call on from other areas? Some of these incidents will be known about several days in advance when rivers start to flood upstream and so you would have time to call in help.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): Absolutely. The national response is co-ordinated through the LFB command centre down at Merton. We run a thing called the Fire and Rescue Service National Co-ordination Centre and it has a control room in Merton. Its task is to co-ordinate all the national assets for a range of different risks, flooding being a particular one of those. We have 52 high-volume pumps across the country. The latest mobilisation of those pumps in terms of pre-planning took place only last week when we were expecting quite a surge up in the north-west. We pre-deployed about 20 high-volume pumps from around the country into that area, ready in case that surge had taken place. Fortunately, it did not on that occasion but we do try to plan as far ahead in the future as we can.

Jenny Jones AM: This is something I have asked you before and I do not know if you have done it. I do not think you have and so, Mr Dobson, I want you to do it if you possibly can in the future. It is that when you go around talking to households about fire risk, it would also be useful if you would talk to people about flood risk. Things like paving over front gardens increase the likelihood of surface water flooding and, if you explain that to people, it might stop a few households from paving over their front gardens and increasing the problem for all of us.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): That would be a really good idea.

Jenny Jones AM: Thank you. When can I expect you to do that?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): Unfortunately it would be something we would need to consult with the FBU on because it depends on the way in which we provide our home fire safety visits. We went through a very extensive process of agreeing with the FBU what home fire safety visits include quite a number of years ago. We would need to go back and have that consultation, unfortunately, and so it might slow it down.

Jenny Jones AM: Yes, all right. I am happy to help you with speaking to the union, obviously.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): Thank you.

Jenny Jones AM: I am also concerned that we are moving into a completely different situation because in possibly ten years' time all the good work you have done on fire reduction will presumably have paid off more and more and we will be moving to a situation where there could be because of climate change - and I know Gareth does not believe it is happening but I am sure you see - extreme weather events --

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): Do not put words in my mouth, Jenny. It is very serious.

Jenny Jones AM: You could be dealing with a different sort of fire in that you could be seeing parks catch fire because of extreme periods of drought and that sort of thing. Are you thinking ahead about what could happen in a decade or so, so that you do not have to suddenly reorganise things in a completely different way?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): Yes. Our response to flooding generally has demonstrated that we are doing that. We looked at that in the last London Safety Plan and the improvements we have made in terms of availability of flood rescue equipment has been as a result of that planning done through the last London Safety Plan. Changes in the distribution and the types of calls that we receive will almost certainly be part of the next London Safety Plan next year. Things like the way the climate is changing and therefore the different risks we are going to have to respond to will certainly be one of

the things that is part of the London Safety Plan next year as one of the risks that we have to address, which will then influence us in the way in which we design our service for the future.

Jenny Jones AM: Thank you ever so much. I only have 20 seconds. I do not know whether you want to say something, Gareth, in 20 seconds.

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): Jenny, I take climate change incredibly seriously. The LFB reacts and plans for what it sees on an evidence basis. Things like grassfires periodically happen now in the summers anyway and fire brigades are geared up for dealing with that. The Commissioner has given a very good example of how the LFB is dealing with flooding. I do not see either of those things receding in terms of things that we need to do and so that will carry on.

Roger Evans AM: I just wanted to add my support to Jenny's suggestion that fire prevention people might look at flood prevention as well. I wondered if there was also a role for them to do some joint working with the MPS on crime prevention because at the moment we have fire prevention people who go out and tell people largely to provide more means of exit and entrance from their properties and then crime prevention people who go around and tell them to lock them up. Might it not be better if the two services worked together and more convenient for customers as well?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I absolutely agree. We are already seeing some fire and rescue services where the home fire safety visit is broadening out into other areas, let us say, and it is certainly something we should be doing with our home fire safety visits that we do in London. It should be a collaborative approach. Other people who enter people's homes should be talking about the risk of fire as well. It should be a broad safety message that we are trying to get across to Members of the public. When anyone from the emergency services or any other local authority enters their premises, we should be trying to get across a broad safety message and capitalise on the opportunity to speak to them, rather than it being a very narrow one.

Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair): Thank you. Let us go to the fourth and last question.

2015/3983 - New Technology

[Stephen Knight AM](#)

What role are advances in technology playing in the Brigade's work, both in terms of new challenges posed and new tools available to it, or likely to become available to it in the near future?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): Technology and the opportunity that technology provides for the LFB is something we take very seriously. There are some examples of that, obviously. The way in which we now control our breathing apparatus when people go into fires is a very good example of technology helping us to make our firefighters safer and more effective. Now we are able to automatically, via Bluetooth, monitor how much air they have left in their cylinders and how hard they are working directly outside the incident so that we can know whether or not people are in difficulty, when we expect them to come out and when we send relief in. That is an example.

Our new mobilising system that went into place a couple of weeks ago is a good example of technology that will deliver benefits to us in the future. I am certainly very confident that the new mobilising system, in terms of our ability to mobilise absolutely the closest fire engine to the incident, will improve our attendance time in

future. The ability for the control office to monitor exactly where a fire engine is on its route to a fire or other incident means they can keep the person on the other end of the phone apprised of how quickly we are going to be there and how long it may still be before we get there.

The Assembly is already aware of the Emergency Services Mobile Communications Programme that is taking place, being led by the Government at the moment, to replace the current Airwave system that all emergency services work on. I am hopeful that that is going to provide us with some improvements around technology as well.

The area that is sometimes more difficult to think about is the operational firefighting aspect of things, but there are changes on the horizon around that as well. Some fire brigades are currently looking at a system called Cobra, which is where they use very high pressure water jets with an abrasive in the jet, very often ball bearings. It avoids firefighters having to go into buildings. They can fight the fire by cutting through the wall. That is an interesting development and it is one that I am very interested to look at and to see the implications for London. It does have some potentially significant downsides in that if you have a casualty on the other side of the wall, when you cut through it, you are likely to do some significant injury to them. We need to be careful around that. At the moment you cannot use it above the ground floor. It is something we are looking at, but that is obviously not very useful to us in terms of high-rise firefighting.

Stephen Knight AM: Thank you. That is very interesting. Clearly, technology presents new challenges for the LFB as well as opportunities.

If I can start with the challenges, I notice there is a stall in the Christmas market just outside this building selling so-called 'hover boards'. There has been quite a lot of publicity recently about instances of these things exploding in people's homes. That is obviously one example of an electrical device that is becoming increasingly popular in the run-up to Christmas where there are safety concerns. Presumably, with modern technology, we have a huge number of different devices that use charging systems and batteries that could potentially be explosive or cause fires.

Is this becoming a bigger challenge for the LFB? How are you going to meet it in the future?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): It certainly is. I cannot comment on how many hover board fires we have had recently but we have certainly had a lot of fires in terms of inappropriate charging mechanisms for mobile phones and things. One of our key safety messages is to make sure, if you are charging your mobile phone, you are using the charger that is approved by the manufacturer of the phone rather than one you bought at a market stall because we have had quite a lot of fires involving mobile phone chargers. That is one of our key safety messages. Also, we go back to the Electrical Safety Council and to the Government to try to influence changes in the legislation to make sure those things can be reduced in future.

Stephen Knight AM: If you are charging a phone or a hover board, your advice would be to look very carefully at the charger?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): Make sure it is the right one, yes.

Stephen Knight AM: Make sure you use the right one. On the challenges side, obviously that is one bit of new technology.

On the opportunities side, another bit of technology on display in the Christmas market outside the building is a drone the size of a £2 coin that can fly around. These things are so cheap now that they are almost stocking-fillers. On a serious note, there are fire brigades around the world – indeed, a couple in the UK here – that are already trialling drones for use in aerial reconnaissance during firefighting operations.

What plans does the LFB have to introduce this kind of new technology to make life safer for firefighters?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): We are part of a national working group looking at the advantage that we might get from the use of drones. As you quite rightly say, there are a couple of fire brigades that have already bought drones. They are very much for aerial reconnaissance of large-scale incidents or incidents over a wide area. In London, we are fortunate in that we have a very successful arrangement with the MPS that when we need aerial reconnaissance, it is provided for us by their helicopter service. We do not have to buy our own helicopter because we --

Stephen Knight AM: The MPS not only has helicopters; it also has its own drones, of course.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I understand that the MPS is looking at drones, yes. I do not know whether it has them or not, to be honest, but it is looking.

Stephen Knight AM: It is very cagey about whether or not it does operate drones.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): Is it?

Stephen Knight AM: There have been some reports that the MPS has drones in the sky. Would that reconnaissance data be available to the LFB when approaching a serious incident?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): We are certainly able via the helicopter – and certainly would be if it has a drone service as well – to use that to get information for our benefit. Particularly, on the helicopter there is a thermal-imaging camera that is very useful to us for large warehouse fires.

Stephen Knight AM: All right. That information is available to commanders at the scene in real time or through the control centre?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): It is available to the commander on the scene on the command unit and also back to the control centre. We can see it at both locations.

Stephen Knight AM: That is excellent. I note that at least one university in the United States is working on a project to develop drones that can fly into burning buildings, fly around, detect people using thermal imaging cameras and provide reconnaissance from inside a building, doing the sweep which at the moment firefighters have to do on their knees almost in very hazardous, dangerous conditions. Is this kind of technology something that you would like to see in use within London?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): It is the sort of thing that will be considered by the national working group that we are part of. The other constraint with drones, I have to say, is that we did have quite a significant incident recently when somebody else was using a drone to monitor our incident and they crashed it into the building, which caused more hazards for firefighters. The uncontrolled use of drones that we see at the moment is actually to some extent a hazard. However, in a

controlled way the use of drones in any sort of environment, if it can improve the safety of firefighters, I would be very interested in.

Stephen Knight AM: Absolutely. Clearly, there is this national working group that you have spoken about but the LFB is, it is often said, the biggest firefighting organisation in Europe. Clearly, we have a leadership role in terms of developing new technology and we have a very different urban environment. The challenges here are perhaps different from other parts of the UK. We also have, here in London, some of the most advanced research and development facilities. Imperial College is about to open the most advanced drone lab in Kensington in a year or so.

Should we be working with the universities here in London to make sure we have the right kit to help us fight fires in the future in London?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): Absolutely. I am keen to work with anybody who has information that might enable us to provide a better service and make firefighters safer. I did not know about that particular work stream that you just mentioned there, Mr Knight, and so I would be more than happy to make contact with them to see if we could work with them.

Stephen Knight AM: Do you think the LFB ought to look to perhaps sponsoring a project at a university in London to develop the firefighting drone of the future? Not just for fighting fires, but I have seen drones on the internet that are dropping lifebuoys to people in the river and so on. All of these things are potential new uses.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): It is worth looking at. I am not convinced that it would be something we would do in isolation. It is something we would want to do in collaboration with the other emergency services. The days of us developing these sorts of things in isolation are probably gone and, given that we already have a good collaboration with the MPS around the use of the helicopter, it would be something we might want to do across all emergency services.

Stephen Knight AM: Clearly, we would all want to see – or I would certainly like to see – more collaboration across the emergency services, particularly around things like aerial reconnaissance of serious incidents. If we are talking about robotic drones that can enter burning buildings, then that is clearly something that arrives on the fire engine and flies in. That kind of robotic vehicle is being trialled and tested around the world, most notably in the US.

I would like to hear something a bit more positive about the LFB taking on more of a leadership role in bringing this technology to the UK. I do not know whether you could take this away and talk to your fellow senior officers to see whether there is something that could be done because university departments are working on this and drones are very low-cost. You can buy one of these things in the market out here for £30 for your Christmas stocking. What we need is for some clever people in universities to take low-cost technology and turn it into things that can save lives here in London. I hope that we might enter some collaboration with London's universities on this kind of work.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): I can certainly take that way and look to see what we can do in terms of leadership in London.

Stephen Knight AM: Thank you very much.

Tom Copley AM: As you know, Commissioner, I went down to the operation centre last week to discuss the new mobilising system with staff and there have been a number of issues with the system. I wonder if you could provide us with an update on the Vision system.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): The Vision system went live two weeks ago. Since then it has been performing very well in terms of supporting mobilisation to incidents. We have had some teething problems, not surprisingly – very often it does happen when you have systems like this – and we have put fixes into place in terms of either staff awareness or staff familiarity with the system. Where there are technical issues that have arisen that needed to be solved, then the company that provided the system for us are onsite in our mobilising centre, ready to solve those things for us as quickly as possible. They will be onsite until the end of this week. At that point we will make a decision whether or not we need them onsite for longer and, if we feel there are still issues to be resolved or potential issues to be resolved, we will require them to stay there for as long as we need them to be there.

Most of the issues that had arisen initially within the mobilising system were about familiarity of staff with a very new way of working. The people in our control room, who were trained on it and who have not used another system, think it is great and have no issues. The ones who have worked on other systems before, not surprisingly, have some issues in terms of the changeover to the new system.

I am very pleased with the way it is performing overall in terms of supporting incidents. We have seen so far, which I am very pleased with, that the call-handling time in control since the new system was introduced is much the same as it was previously and our attendance times to incidents are still much the same as they were previously, although I am hoping that in the future both of those will get quicker as staff get more familiar with the system.

Tom Copley AM: What you are saying about the difference between people who had not used a system before and people who had, certainly there is truth in that.

Can I ask you about a specific issue with the paging system? There were issues with that. We had the FBU tell us that one officer was called to the same incident 35 times. We were told that that was going to be patched on Friday. Has that gone ahead and has the issue been resolved?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): The patch was due to be put into place yesterday. I must admit that I have not had an update yet but I am more than happy to get an update today and inform Members about that immediately afterwards, if I can.

Tom Copley AM: We were told it was going in on Friday. Why was there a delay?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): No, what you were informed was that one of the other things was being resolved on the Friday and that the paging one was going to be resolved on Tuesday. I am pretty sure that that was what was said but I will check that and make sure to give you the information.

Tom Copley AM: Perhaps I could move to the Chairman. This has been a long and quite a sorry saga. It is hardly an example of good procurement given that this has dragged on and is 18 months late. It is a piece of software that has been used by other fire brigades around the country. I appreciate that it has to be adapted slightly depending on the individual needs on the particular brigade, but why do you think this has been so badly managed and what processes do you think we need to go through in order to learn lessons from this for the future?

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): I would not accept it has been badly managed. There have been delays in delivering the product and, of course, we manage that through our contract management. [The supplier] ended up paying daily fines of several thousand pounds for every day that they were late, so there was motivation for them to get it right more quickly. As the Commissioner has said, it is a very big and complex project that is brand new and as a result, there are some teething problems. The reassuring thing from my perspective when I went to talk to officers about it was that it was not impacting on attendance times. The attendance times post-implementation were pretty much identical to those immediately pre-implementation. Had that caused delays to responding to incidents then I would have been very anxious indeed. I would have been jumping up and down about it. As it happens, it has not. It is teething issues around the edges, which you are going to get with any complex project like this.

Tom Copley AM: It has resulted in over-mobilisation at a number of incidents, though. Although that is obviously better than no mobilisation at all, it is still taking a resource away that could be needed elsewhere.

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): As I said, the point of the emergency response is to get there as quickly as possible and to maintain life and property as far as you can. That has been maintained, but there are, as has been acknowledged by the Commissioner, me and other senior officers, some glitches in the system, most of which are not the system itself but familiarity with the system, which will obviously improve over time as people get more used to using it. I am confident that this is going to be perfectly good. In private conversation with the Commissioner, this is the third mobilising system that has been introduced to the LFB while he has been Commissioner and it has been, it is fair to say, the smoothest. It is inevitable, as I have experienced in other walks of life, that when you introduce a new way of working there will be glitches.

Tom Copley AM: I would be interested to hear the history of that because an 18-month delay is absolutely astonishing. I do think that LFEPA does need to look at this and learn the lessons going forward but I will leave my questioning there.

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): Just on that final point, Tom, if I may, I completely agree with you that it should have been delivered on the timescales that the contractor suggested that it should be. Fortunately, we will not be introducing a new mobilising system any time soon so on this particular project, we are not going to go through that again. This is a more extreme example, I would suggest, of a contractor missing their deadline but it was not as though we had no mobilising system. We had the pre-existing one. This one was just slow getting in and there were penalties paid for that.

Roger Evans AM: Commissioner, the MPS is currently conducting some very positive trials with body-worn cameras. Would you see any use for that type of technology within the LFB?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): In some instances, yes. Things like the transmission of information from the inside of incidents to the outside so that incident commanders could get a better picture of what is being dealt with could be a very useful thing. It is slightly more difficult in our arena, obviously, because if there is smoke in the environment we are not going to be able to get very good pictures. We do have things like thermal-imaging cameras that we are already taking to all fires so that crews can see where the hotter parts are and deal with the fire appropriately. Some of that information can be fed back outside to the incident commander as well. Body-worn cameras are an interesting concept. I would not say that it was necessarily something we need to do, but in the future it is something we need to think about.

Roger Evans AM: Certainly that would be useful for attendance at terrorist incidents, would it not?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): Yes.

Roger Evans AM: On the subject of items you can buy from market stalls that may not be safe, I had a meeting with Trading Standards a couple of weeks ago and they said there is a big problem now with items that people can order from the internet that are imported because, even if those items that are ordered from another country meet that country's safety standards, they may not be the same standards or the same conditions of use that they will experience when they get to this country.

Given that the internet is notoriously difficult to control, is this something that deserves a public information campaign on the part of the LFB so that people are aware of the potential dangers of buying these things?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): We already have a public information campaign around the use of things like mobile phone chargers and making sure it is the properly certificated one that is approved by the manufacturer for use. The sources where people get those from I am not sure is necessarily part of our campaign but it could be in the future. That is something I would like to take away and talk to our press team about to see how we could amend our communication to take that point on board.

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): On that point as well, if I may, Chair, we do not just do it ourselves. We rely on partner agencies to do that as well. For example, a few weeks ago I chaired a seminar at Union Street [LFB headquarters] for local authorities and we invited executive Members who have community safety responsibilities, whatever their title is, as long as that is part of it. This is one of the things that we laboured on. They had a presentation about this and the dangers of it. We showed them some quite horrifying pictures of the consequences of some of those things and encouraged them to take that message out through their community safety partnership working with their bodies in their boroughs. That is very important. It is going to have to be a multi-agency response, not just something the LFB does on its own.

Andrew Boff AM: On the subject of safety, on 25 November 2015 there was a fire at a tyre shop in Walpole Road, N17. This shop has now reopened. Is it standard practice for there to be an investigation or an inspection subsequent to an incident and could you write to me and say whether or not there has been an inspection of these particular premises? The reason I chase this with you is that there have been some concerns from local residents for a considerable period but they do not seem to be getting any joy from Haringey Council with regard to this. I am hoping you can provide them with some more comfort.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning, LFB): After every significant fire there is, firstly, a post-fire audit, which is where our fire safety officers attend the premises to see whether or not there are any breaches of fire safety regulations. We also carry out a fire investigation as to how the fire started and there is also a debrief of our crews to make sure we took the right action when we got there to the fire. I am more than happy to write to you with some of that detail.

Fiona Twycross AM: We obviously have to make sensible use of resources in the face of cuts. Some of the new technology that could come online is really interesting and will offer exciting possibilities, but do you agree with the Londoner who contacted me yesterday to say that £283,000 for a website rebuild is bordering on scandalous?

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): No.

Fiona Twycross AM: What would you say to people who would say that you could do a similar piece of work, as he stated, for considerably less than that? How would you make sure that the procurement process is up to scratch if we do go ahead with a rebuild?

Gareth Bacon AM (Chairman, LFEPA): The procurement process is open, transparent and competitive. The process around procuring these things is firmly established. Members agreed it. If this person had bid for it, we would have received the bid and treated it like any other.

Jennette Arnold OBE AM (Chair): May I thank the Chairman and the Commissioner for their attendance and for answering the Assembly's questions here this morning? Thank you very much.