

London Assembly (Plenary) Meeting – 4 December 2013

Transcript of Agenda Item 4: Question and Answer Session

Darren Johnson (Chair): Then that moves us on to the main item of business today, item 4, which is to put questions to our guests on the policies and work of the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA), so I am delighted to welcome Assembly Member James Cleverly in his capacity as Chairman of LFEPA and Ron Dobson, Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning in London.

Welcome to you both. I believe you would like to make a short opening statement, so I invite you to do that now. Thank you.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): I do not intend to spend long on the opening statement but there are a couple of things that I would like to say.

Firstly, this has been a very busy year for the London Fire Brigade and LFEPA in particular. Obviously, we are going through a very significant period of change. The implementation of the Fifth London Safety Plan (LSP5) is a significant piece of work and I thank the officers of the Fire Authority for the production of that. Clearly, the implementation of that is still ongoing and we are at the moment awaiting the response of the judicial review (JR) over that and that will produce whatever it produces.

That, of course, has overshadowed a huge amount of incredibly proactive work that has gone on at the Fire Brigade and the Fire Authority. I am glad to see that a number of the questions are more forward-looking than retrospective because there is still a considerable amount of work to do to ensure that the London Fire Brigade remains the best fire and rescue service in the world. I am very pleased to have the opportunity today to talk about those.

Darren Johnson (Chair): Thank you. Commissioner Ron Dobson, would you like to come in?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): Yes, thank you, Chairman. Just very briefly and I will not duplicate what the Chairman (LFEPA) has already said. Last time I was here was about 15 months ago and the work of the brigade has continued since then. We have had to face some challenges, obviously, in terms of things like the London Safety Plan, the development of the Plan and obviously the national pensions dispute which is continuing to take place as we speak.

I am pleased to say that despite that the Brigade has continued to work very hard to protect the communities and peoples of London and actually we have managed to achieve some really good performance once again in the last 12 to 15 months. As a couple of examples there, the number of fires in the last 12 months was down 7,000 on the year previously, so we are very pleased we have been able to do that. If a fire does not occur, then there is no chance of

someone being injured by it. We have managed to also drive down the number of calls the Brigade has received by some very proactive community safety work by our firefighters at fire stations and by officers working in partnership with others in the boroughs, so we are continuing to drive down the risk of fire, which I am very pleased about.

Also, on top of that, we have continued our youth engagement work and over 700 young people have been through our various youth engagement programmes, mainly the Local Intervention Fire Education (LIFE) programme. Over 500 children or young people have been through that, which once again seeks to educate young people about the dangers of fire. I am really pleased that we have been able to continue with that work.

There have been a couple of other important things in the last 12 months and one very recently, actually. I would like to place on record my thanks to LFEPA Members for their support in implementing the recommendations from the Coroner from the Lakanal House Inquiry and I would particularly like to thank Assembly Member Shawcross for chairing that work on behalf of LFEPA and making some really good progress in making sure that the recommendations are implemented, not just in London but also nationally. There is really some good progress being made there.

Finally, just to highlight the dangers to firefighters as well as to members of the public, I would just like to spare a thought for one of my colleagues who actually is in hospital as we speak, having suffered 30% burns at a fire last week in Tottenham. He continues to make progress and the doctors are pleased with his progress, but he is going to be in hospital for some significant time. We are hopeful he will make a full recovery and I should like to thank LFEPA Members for their support in terms of messages of support and well-wishes for him, all of which I have passed on to him in hospital. Thank you.

Darren Johnson (Chair): Thank you. I am sure the thoughts of the whole Assembly are with him.

If there are questions on the opening statement, then we will come to those right at the end if there is time remaining, but now I am going to move on to each of the four questions that have been tabled and then Members can come in with supplementaries.

2013/4406 - Pension Dispute

[Fiona Twycross](#)

Do you think it is reasonable that London firefighters should be placed in a position where they face 'no job, no pension' if they cannot achieve the minimum level of fitness after 55?

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): I do not think that would be reasonable, but that is not the position that we find ourselves in, either in London or nationally. The proposals that are being put forward for a revised pension plan for firefighters do have a number of elements to it, one of which is the maintenance of the 2006 pension arrangements whereby the normal retirement age for firefighters is 60 and there is an actuarially reduced pension if they retire earlier than that on whatever ground. That position is no different to the current position for

the 2006 pension. The 'no job, no pension' phrase, whilst a good sound-bite, is not reflective of the situation that is currently in place and that is going to be maintained with the 2015 scheme.

Fiona Twycross (AM): The Government's own views demonstrated that two thirds of firefighters could end up having to retire on grounds of ill-health under the changes and that has been very clear from the review that they commissioned. I think the public thinks that the proposals are unfair, so I am slightly surprised that you have a different view on that. I wondered if you could comment on whether you would support us pushing for London's firefighters, and actually all firefighters, getting a similar deal to that put on the table by the Scottish Government, which has committed to no firefighter facing dismissal in response to failing a fitness test. Do you think it is fair that north of the border firefighters will be protected the way that firefighters in England and in London will not?

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): There are a number of points that were brought up during that question. I will try to address them all in turn.

You mentioned about the proposals that would see two thirds of firefighters failing a fitness test from the Williams [Normal Pension Age for Firefighters] Review. I do not recognise that as a position. The VO₂ max fitness test, which is the one referenced in that, is not the fitness test that we use in London, so the findings of that are largely irrelevant to London firefighters. That is not the fitness test that we use.

Fitness thresholds are set locally, so the idea that a single measure would see two thirds of firefighters, whether in London or anywhere else, fail is wrong. In the conversations I have had with my colleagues around the country, there is no expectation of having a single fitness measure which is non-age specific. My understanding was that the Williams Review fitness threshold was for entrants. In the same way, the armed forces have fitness tests; they have age-specific fitness tests. That, I suspect, would be the case across the country.

Indeed, someone who is not able to hit a particular threshold on a locally-defined fitness test would not be let go just because they failed a fitness test. There would be a period of remedial fitness. If it is just the case that they have lost their physical fitness, it will be a case of remedial fitness. If there was an underlying medical condition, then that would be a whole different procedure in terms of medical retirement. With regard to the line that two thirds of firefighters would lose their jobs for failing a fitness test, again, it is a premise that I do not agree with.

Fiona Twycross (AM): We will have to disagree on that figure because I am very clear that the Government's own review demonstrates that up to two thirds of firefighters could be adversely affected by this, notwithstanding what you say about local circumstances. I wondered; have you lobbied the Government to ask them to sit down with the firefighters and negotiate a settlement to this? Obviously, this is not a dispute between the London Fire Brigade or LFEPA and the Fire Brigades Union (FBU). This is a dispute between the Government which is trying to reduce the cost of the pensions bill, effectively, and the firefighters who have put their careers into protecting the communities. By whatever measure, they are facing a reduced pension and reduced pension rights. Have you lobbied the Government on this?

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): First of all, you are very right to highlight the fact that this is not a London issue. This is a national dispute. I speak regularly with the Government about the implications of the dispute on the London Fire Brigade and the effect that the dispute has on Londoners. Obviously, I am as keen as everybody else to see this dispute settled and to see it settled in a way which best addresses the concerns of both the Government and firefighters. I do not imagine that that is a position that is different to anyone else.

What I am not necessarily going to do is agree with your interpretation of all the elements of that. The message that I would take to the Government perhaps might not be the same as the message you would take, but I do make it clear that this industrial action is disruptive to the work of the London Fire Brigade. It is not good for Londoners. It is not good for the individual firefighters themselves and I am very keen to see it resolved.

Fiona Twycross (AM): I would be keen for you to actually push for protection for the firefighters as well as just for the resolution of the dispute.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): Sorry, there was a point that did bring me on to that, the second half of your previous question about the deal in Scotland. I think that is a really important point. There is no additional money going to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service for the deal that they have put in. It is a ring-fenced sum of money, so whatever money they allocate to their future pension liability will have to come out of their fire and rescue budget in the here and now. That is a balance that they have taken in that direction and that is something that would need to be considered with any deal that was put on the table. There is no additional money to Scotland for the deal they have put on the table.

Fiona Twycross (AM): What they have put on the table is a guarantee.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): Yes, but it has come out of a ring-fenced budget. Money that they are spending in the future on pensions will ultimately have to come out of the money that they would be spending on the day and now firefighting.

Fiona Twycross (AM): I do not think that is necessarily true.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): That is definitely true.

Fiona Twycross (AM): We are not going to agree on that because I think that the Scottish Government has put on the table a guarantee.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): Yes, but it has come out of a ring-fenced budget, so there is no additional money for that guarantee, so they are moving money from operational firefighting into paying for pensions. That is the choice that they have made and I am not going to second-guess that choice, but there is no additional money.

Fiona Twycross (AM): We have had discussions about pots of money before in relation to the fire cuts and the fact that a pot of money can be as big as somebody determines it is, so

ultimately at some stage in the future, if the pot of money is not enough to cover both the pensions and the fire service in Scotland, that pot of money by the Scottish Government's guarantee would be increased.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): It might be increased.

Fiona Twycross (AM): It might be? If they have a guarantee, they have a guarantee.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): There is no guarantee.

Fiona Twycross (AM): I would like to move on to the underlying tenor of the pension changes. I just wondered whether you thought the pension changes are flawed, given that if the opt-out rate is higher than the 1% - which is quite low - that the Government has assumed, the revised system will not actually deliver the expected £33 million that they are anticipating. There have been surveys carried out that suggest that up to 27% of firefighters would consider opting out of the pension scheme with 12% very likely to opt out of the pension scheme, given the rising contributions and the impact on their income. Are you concerned that actually these changes might backfire, given the increase in the contributions?

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): No pension arrangement is absolutely perfect or can give absolute certainty. If anyone was able to put forward a pension structure that gave absolute certainty, there would not be these periodic reviews because you would have had it right, you would have certainty and you would not need to change it again. The fact that circumstances change mean that no one pension structure is absolutely perfect in all respects.

I would be very surprised if the opt-out rate were anything like double-digit figures. Taking it in isolation, I can completely understand. I have a significant degree of sympathy for firefighters or indeed anyone else who is looking at a less generous pension than the one they currently enjoy. I do not think there is any dispute that the pension offer that is being put forward is not as financially beneficial as the 2006 one. There is no debate about that.

However, I think if those firefighters looking at the 2015 proposal were to then start measuring that against other pension provisions that they might want to buy into, they will find it very difficult - indeed I suspect probably impossible - to get an alternative pension provision as good as the one that is on the table in 2015. I would be absolutely amazed if the dropout rate were anything like double figures.

Fiona Twycross (AM): Even if it is slightly higher and the 1% figure that the Government is basing these changes on is flawed, given that 143 firefighters opted out of the 2006 scheme in 2011 and 2012, which is 2.8%, obviously a lot less than 27% but significantly more than 1% in the scheme of things, the Government figures are incredibly over-optimistic about the dropout rate.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): It is worth bearing in mind that the difference between the 1992 pension deal and the 2006 pension deal was a much more significant change than between the 2006 and the 2015.

Fiona Twycross (AM): This was the dropout rate in 2011 and 2012. This is not even the dropout rate when the changes were made. It was 2011 and 2012, so it is a cumulative dropout rate. Anyway, I am going to leave it at that because I know other people want to come in on this, but I would urge you to push the Government to sit down again and negotiate properly.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): I have just been informed they are actually meeting today. In this regard, amongst any Member of LFEPA in the conversations I have had with people cross-party, or any of the members of senior management, or anyone in Government or indeed the firefighters I have spoken to - whether they are formerly officers of the FBU or current member - I do not feel there is any desire to prolong this industrial action.

The tone that has been taken during this industrial action by union members has been noticeably less confrontational than in previous industrial actions, which I take as very much a sign of goodwill. There is a genuine desire to get a result rather than to have a row. I take that as a very good signal. I do think there is a genuine desire to get a result. I am not suggesting necessarily when that result might come about. As I say, I am not privy to those negotiations directly, but I do very much get the view that everyone in this situation is trying to get a result.

Fiona Twycross (AM): OK.

Andrew Dismore (AM): I think you said when I was just listening to you, James, that there is going to be age-specific fitness tests that will be set locally. Was that right?

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): No, what I said was each fire authority is responsible for whatever fitness arrangement it chooses to put in place and I would be very surprised if there were not some recognition of age in those fitness tests.

Andrew Dismore (AM): Does that mean that a firefighter aged 59 who is operationally on a station would not have to make the same fitness standards as a firefighter aged, say, 45 or 55?

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): It is not up to me as an individual to decide what those bandings might be and all that kind of stuff, so I am not going to be drawn into whether there would be bandings at 45 or 55.

Andrew Dismore (AM): It may be that that is a question for Ron.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): Within the current dispute, there is an issue being discussed --

Andrew Dismore (AM): It is a straightforward question, Ron. Does it mean that the fitness standards that would be imposed on an operational firefighter aged 59 are going to be different to those imposed on a younger firefighter?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): Unless there is a national fitness standard introduced, which is part of the current discussions that are taking

place. That is the point I was trying to make. At the moment, there are discussions as part of this dispute about there being a national fitness standard for firefighters. There is a conversation taking place by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) around that at the moment.

Andrew Dismore (AM): It is the age-specific thing I am asking about.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): That is what I am trying to answer. In terms of that, the LFEPA response to that is that there should not be a national fitness standard because it discriminates against women. Whether or not that is going to be the case in terms of whether the Government does introduce that, if there was a national fitness standard, everybody regardless of their role and their age would need to meet that fitness standard. We do not think that is the right way to go. We think it should be different dependent on people's roles and dependent on people's ages. That is the way it should be done, I believe.

Andrew Dismore (AM): The question I am getting at is pretty obvious. Are you going to have two operational firefighters who are on the same pump having to meet different fitness standards?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): To some extent, we already do, yes.

Andrew Dismore (AM): The real risk, I suppose, then, to people who are relying on the fire service is that you may end up with firefighters who are less fit for the job because of their age. That is the logical conclusion.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): Less fit than somebody who might be 45 and have a high level of fitness, but there would be a standard which people need to achieve regardless of their age.

Andrew Dismore (AM): The logical conclusion of what you are saying is you will have lower expectations of two firefighters on the same pump.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): Probably, yes, which we already do.

Andrew Dismore (AM): Do you think that is fair to people out there? Are they going to be rescued by people who are, frankly, going to be a bit past it?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): The answer to that is no because at the moment people do work until they are 60 already and those people meet the fitness standards. People out there today will in some cases - not very many cases, I have to say - have firefighters who are 60 or approaching 60 and attending fires now. They are obviously available because they are fit enough.

Andrew Dismore (AM): How many operational firefighters on the fire stations, riding the pumps - as opposed to officers, who obviously have always had a higher retirement age because of the differential between officers and operational firefighters - are aged 60 in London?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): I cannot give you a number right now, but I can get that number for you.

Andrew Dismore (AM): Roughly?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): It is impossible to say. Not very many.

Andrew Dismore (AM): It is not very many, is it?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): I admit it is not very many.

Andrew Dismore (AM): No, not very many. It is a bit misleading, is it not, to suggest that that is significant?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): No, there are firefighters who are approaching that age.

Andrew Dismore (AM): What estimate have you made of the number of firefighters who are going to have to retire before the age of 60 if this thing goes through on fitness grounds?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): I cannot give you what the estimate is because, in our view, people will be able to maintain their fitness. Some people will not and, as I say, they will be able to --

Andrew Dismore (AM): How many people now retire before the age of 55, then, on fitness grounds?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): Most people.

Andrew Dismore (AM): Most people retire before the age of 55 now, so there are going to be even more retiring before age of 60, will there not?

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

Andrew Dismore (AM): It stands to reason, does it not? I am not trying to fence with you. I am just putting simple questions to you. It stands to reason that there are a lot more people between 55 and 60, does it not?

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

Andrew Dismore (AM): Yes, exactly. What is going to happen to their pensions under this scheme? How much will they lose?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): Under the current proposals, if they retire on grounds where they cannot meet the fitness standard through no fault of their own, they will be able to take an actuarially reduced pension.

Andrew Dismore (AM): How much will they lose?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): It depends on their age. It ranges from about 40% down to about 24%, depending on what their age is.

Andrew Dismore (AM): A significant chunk of their pension will be lost under these proposals?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): If they could not meet the fitness standard, yes.

Andrew Dismore (AM): Exactly. Of course, if you are an officer, you can go until 60 because the fitness demands of you are going to be less, are they not?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): You still need to meet fitness demands. Officers still have to get a full medical.

Andrew Dismore (AM): At the moment, it is one rule for senior officers and another for people in fire stations. This is just going to make it worse.

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

Andrew Dismore (AM): You do not agree it is one rule for senior officers?

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

Andrew Dismore (AM): What about your own position?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): I had a medical three months ago and I met the fitness standard, the same fitness standard that firefighters have to meet.

Andrew Dismore (AM): Under the proposals, you are able to retire at the age of 52, are you not?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): I am on a different pension scheme.

Andrew Dismore (AM): Exactly. It is not fair, is it?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): We all join at different times, unfortunately.

Andrew Dismore (AM): Yes, but it is not fair on the people under your command that some are going to lose 40% of their pension and you are able to take a big payoff and keep your job.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): I do not think it is about me personally, is it?

Andrew Dismore (AM): It is not about you personally.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): That is the question you have just asked.

Andrew Dismore (AM): The point I am putting to you is about senior officers having a much more beneficial arrangement than for the guys and girls on the pumps.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): No, it is not because the vast majority of firefighters in London are still on the 1992 scheme and will have absolutely no difference made to their pension arrangements. Nobody will be affected by this until 2022 anyway.

Stephen Knight (AM): As you said, this dispute is entirely really between the Government and firefighters. The Fire Brigade as an employer is caught in the middle. Mr Cleverly said that the current dispute has been less confrontational than some previous disputes, no doubt for that very reason.

There have nevertheless been some issues that have come up, most notably of course the difference of view over the major incident protocol which occurred around the fire in Dagenham on 1 November during strike action. I wonder if you can tell us a bit about the circumstances around why that fire was designated as a major incident.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): The officer that actually called that as a major incident was a police officer. The police Silver Command [tactical level of decision making at incidents] about the incident actually designated it as a major incident from a police perspective. I was not at the command during it or at the Silver meeting, so it is very difficult to double-guess what decisions people made on the incident on the ground and we should be very careful around doing that. As I understand it, the police officer at the incident had decided to call it as a major incident because of the time of day, the traffic congestion on the A13 and the fact that smoke plume was crossing the A13 and he was very concerned about that causing accidents and people being less safe on the A13. It was actually crossing the flight path for aircraft coming into the city and some other reasons apparently which were much more local. The officer in charge of the police at the time called it a major incident, as a result of which we instituted our major incident recall which was

previously agreed with the Fire Brigades Union, so it was quite straightforward and it was not the Fire Brigade that called it as a major incident. It was actually the police.

Stephen Knight (AM): Thank you for that. Was the impending strike action, do you think, a factor potentially in that decision and the fact that a number of firefighters would be imminently walking off the site? Was that a factor perhaps in the designation as a major incident?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): Once again, I cannot say what was in the police officer's mind specifically, but I am sure that he would have assessed that actually, if the firefighters were going to walk away, the chance was for the fire to get larger and therefore the danger to the people on the A13 and to the air traffic control might be increased, it may have been a factor in his decision-making, yes.

Stephen Knight (AM): As you know, the FBU took a view that the major incident did not meet the criteria under the major incident protocol that they had agreed with you. I do not know whether you know why they took that view, but I do notice that the protocol which I have in front of me says, "No incident shall be regarded as a major incident unless it would have been regarded as such irrespective of the FBU strike action". Your answer may, I suppose, give some idea as to why the FBU took the view that this would not have been deemed a major incident.

The issue for Londoners is really that it is not good for there to be a disagreement between the Fire Brigade and staff over what does and does not constitute a major incident and therefore where officers will return to duty during a strike action and where they will not. What are you doing to sit down with the FBU and thrash out what went wrong in this situation and reassure them that the agreement is working properly and reassure yourselves that actually the agreement is working properly for the protection of Londoners?

Darren Johnson (Chair): Can I ask for a very quick answer on that? We are straying well away from the pension dispute now and going more into industrial relations generally, which is your question on the order paper. If we can have a very quick answer to that, it is something we can explore later on in the agenda.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): Just very briefly, there is an agreement at national level with the FBU about recalls to duty. The agreement we had in place in London was based very closely on that and therefore our view was that it was an agreement which was very clear. There have been meetings with the FBU since then. We have listened to what they are saying, we have listened to the changes they want to make and we are looking for further meetings with the FBU to try to resolve this matter before there is any further industrial action.

Roger Evans (Deputy Chairman): I want to cover a couple of points for clarity, really. Commissioner, can you tell us? If someone does fail the fitness test, what is the procedure that is put in place to get them back on track? Also, can you tell us how difficult it would be for someone under 60 to actually maintain the level of fitness required?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): The process is that people take a fitness assessment. If they fail that fitness assessment, they are given support by internal fitness advisers, by our medical adviser and by a range of other people to assist them in returning to the level of fitness we need for them to be an operational firefighter. That is something that routinely takes place in the brigade for people at all ages for various reasons; so people coming back from hospitalisation, from operations and things like that or people just for various reasons whose fitness has dropped off. We provide that to everybody routinely and that is something we do already. That would continue.

Obviously, as someone gets older, it is more difficult for them to maintain a higher level of fitness. I think that is a medical fact. As I said before, we do have people, not only in London but elsewhere, who are 60 or approaching 60 and who do manage to maintain that level of fitness. There may well be fewer people who can do that at that point, but those people once they get to 55 will be able to take an actuarially-reduced pension if they want to.

The other issue, of course, is the issue of 54 because there is no magic switch at 55 when suddenly you become less fit or it is more difficult. Actually, my concern more is people at 53 and 54 who, through no fault of their own cannot meet the fitness standard. They are the ones who may be asked to retire without any pension because they will not be able to take an actuarially-reduced one.

Roger Evans (Deputy Chairman): That is useful. Can you tell us to inform the debate, really? You have contingency measures in place to cover for this particular dispute. What are those contingency measures costing Londoners?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): At the moment, the net cost is about £1.9 million.

Roger Evans (Deputy Chairman): So far?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): So far.

Darren Johnson (Chair): Thank you. We will then move on to the second question on the order paper today, which is in the name of Assembly Member Tracey but Assembly Member Evans will be pursuing the line of questioning.

2013/4407 - Cost savings and the Sir Ken Knight Review

[Richard Tracey](#)

A recent review conducted by the Government's former Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser, Sir Ken Knight, identified nearly £200 million worth of potential savings across England and Wales' 46 Fire Authorities. Given the size and complexity of the London Fire Brigade, in comparison to the brigades on which the review focused, how many of the areas highlighted in the report offer a real opportunity for cost savings in the provision of fire and rescue cover to the capital?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): We took part in the review by Sir Ken Knight. He came along and he spent some time with officers in LFEPA including myself and we did actually submit a response to the review as well.

There are many things in the review which the London Fire Brigade and the LFEPA have already implemented, actually, so we are very proactive. We have made some changes in terms of efficiencies over the last five or six years. We have actually driven savings out from the authority in the region of about £71 million during the last five years. None of those have involved making frontline cuts, which is what Sir Ken is basically talking about, so we have implemented a lot of what Sir Ken had in the review.

Sir Ken has made some assumptions there in terms of future savings that fire and rescue services could make and we are interested to look at those. Sir Ken makes some quite significant points around the size of the fire authorities and how many fire authorities there are in England and Wales. The London Fire Brigade is, in my personal view, about the optimum size, although we could obviously debate that for quite a long time. The review is very much targeted on those outside of London.

We have not, of course, seen yet the Government's response to the Sir Ken Knight review, so there was a Select Committee and I went along and gave evidence to the Select Committee personally a couple of months ago. We are still waiting for the result of that.

There are two issues, though, that the review would have benefited from. The first one is national resilience and I will come on to national resilience assets in the question about sustainability in a moment. The national resilience assets that are placed in London and elsewhere around the country at the moment were not part of the review, but I do think they should be part of a national review in the future to see whether we are actually getting best value from those.

The other thing which was disappointing and was missing from the report - and LFEPA said this in its submission - was the issue around equalities in the fire and rescue service. It was not raised at all, so the fact that we still have a great under-representation from women firefighters and from people from black and ethnic minority (BAME) communities and other under-represented groups is a concern that was not addressed by the report and that it would have benefited from if it had been.

Roger Evans (Deputy Chairman) (on behalf of Richard Tracey): I am surprised to hear about that, actually, given Sir Ken's background. I would have thought that quite a lot of the recommendations he made might have stemmed from his time and experience at the London Fire Brigade.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): Not to speak for Sir Ken, Sir Ken would recognise that he could have given a lot more evidence and examples of what the London Fire Brigade has done in terms of efficiency and economy than he did, but he was trying to provide a very balanced review to all areas of the country, not just those where he had some personal experience.

Roger Evans (Deputy Chairman) (on behalf of Richard Tracey): He talks a lot about the potential for back-office efficiencies. How does the London Fire Brigade compare to other brigades across the country when it comes to back-office savings?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): In my opinion, we compare very favourably. I do not have the figures in front of me now, but if you look at the way in which the London Fire Brigade made its savings in the last five or six years, they have been predominantly or almost exclusively in the back-office areas. It has seen us reduce our fire and rescue service staff, so otherwise called an 'un-uniformed staff', very significantly in the last few years. The ratio of, for example, fire and rescue service staff to operational staff in the London Fire Brigade when compared to other brigades is very much in our favour and I am happy to provide some figures to the Assembly about that if that would be helpful.

Roger Evans (Deputy Chairman) (on behalf of Richard Tracey): Yes, that would be extremely helpful. What are you doing to encourage co-operation between the London Fire Brigade and neighbouring brigades? I think you have a pretty good record on shared services, actually, compared to some other members of the Greater London Authority family, but there is always more you can do and you can always be more imaginative. There is a view that that boundary around London is almost like an Iron Curtain. It is quite hard to share. It seems to be easier to share services between boroughs on opposite sides of London than it is across the boundary.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): That certainly would chime with my experience. It is actually easier for us to make progress in sharing services within the London community rather than outside it.

That said, there are some good examples of where the London Fire Brigade has assisted and used the expertise in areas outside of London for things like in the areas of procurement. For example, we replaced our breathing apparatus, the personal protective equipment (PPE), a couple of years ago and we bought that from a national framework that had been set up by other brigades, which was obviously very useful. All the contracts that we let nowadays we try to let in a way in which our framework contracts like the fire and rescue service can buy into if that is to their advantage. We do not see a great deal of evidence in doing that, but there are some small shoots of it happening.

Another example of where we have been trying to work with other brigades that has been successful is in the area of operational guidance, where LFEPA agreed to fund, for three years, a national guidance programme, which is currently being very successful. We are currently in the process of negotiating with other fire and rescue authorities and DCLG for match funding for that in the future, which will take the burden away from LFEPA but will ensure that the programme will continue, which is to the benefit of all fire and rescue authorities.

Roger Evans (Deputy Chairman) (on behalf of Richard Tracey): Is there a possibility that other authorities could buy into that programme so it would provide a source of income for LFEPA?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): That is what we are trying to achieve at the moment. We have had some productive, positive discussions at the Fire Service Management Committee [of the Local Government Association] recently about exactly that. We have a bid in with DCLG already for them to match fund what fire authorities might contribute and that would see the production of the guidance remain in London but actually be funded by DCLG and other fire authorities.

Roger Evans (Deputy Chairman) (on behalf of Richard Tracey): Current legislation now allows you to raise money in that way? There have certainly been problems in the past.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): We would not be able to make a profit. We would be able to do it at cost for the time being. As part of Sir Ken's review, where Sir Ken has mentioned issues around fundraising and being able to generate income, we are hopeful that might change in the future.

Roger Evans (Deputy Chairman) (on behalf of Richard Tracey): His review is also quite enthusiastic about using retained firefighters as a way to reduce costs. Obviously, that is practical out in the counties. Is it something that you would consider for London?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): We need to keep all options under consideration and we have looked at retained firefighters in the past. My experience in speaking to colleagues and chief officers, outside of London as well, is that nowadays, due to the way the population works and lives, attracting retained firefighters into other services is even more difficult now than it used to be. Some local communities and some brigades are having real difficulty getting the right number of retained firefighters to maintain availability. Certainly what we have found before is that that was exacerbated in London to make it more difficult.

That said, we do need to keep all areas under review. The financial constraints we are under mean that we need to never close our minds to any particular options, so, whilst it is not something I am recommending at the moment, it is certainly something that we would need to look at in the future.

Roger Evans (Deputy Chairman) (on behalf of Richard Tracey): I have a couple of questions for the Chairman about governance issues. I know, because I helped to write it, that you did a report last year suggesting the emergency services could actually share more services between them. What progress have you made towards the implementation of those proposals?

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): Thank you. The explicit proposal in that paper was looking at the sharing of real estate between the fire service and the Metropolitan Police Service. We are in discussions with them and there are some plans which are fairly well advanced. The fire station in Purley is under discussion at the moment.

Ironically enough, our swifter progress seems to have been with the London Ambulance Service, which was not explicit in that report. There are lots of opportunities, particularly in light of the fact that in a number of our stations we are going through a fairly major rebuild or refurbishment programme which will put into our fire stations the ability to have increased capacity above and beyond that which is immediately necessary by the London Fire Brigade. The Commissioner and senior officers, including the Chief Executive of the London Ambulance Service [Ann Radmore] have met on a regular basis to explore how that might work in practice. Having nailed my colours to the mast of closer police and fire physical integration and interoperability, it looks as if it is more likely to be with the ambulance service, but there are some good conversations going on there.

One of the things that also came out of the LSP5 consultation process was looking at non-emergency services sharing our real estate. I discussed with a number of people about having the administrative functions of local government sharing real estate. Take Lewisham, one of my local stations, for example. It was built as a divisional headquarters back when that function existed. There are three floors of empty office space sitting above an operational fire station which we cannot get rid of and would not want to get rid of, but it could be better utilised for someone else. We are having discussions. In terms of physically how that happens, we do not have boots on the ground yet, but I envisage that is probably not very far away.

Roger Evans (Deputy Chairman) (on behalf of Richard Tracey): I get the impression there is a degree of institutional stubbornness within the Metropolitan Police Service when it comes to sharing services and sharing properties. Is that something that we might be able to help you challenge through our officers here at the Assembly?

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): I would not want to necessarily suggest that I subscribe wholeheartedly to the phrase 'institutional stubbornness'. I would suggest they are unused to sharing real estate with other agencies and that might be a habit which they could beneficially learn to get out of. There are some practical difficulties. Sometimes those practical difficulties are overstated by all organisations. The opportunities outweigh the challenges and any help that Members could usefully give through the Police and Crime Committee or the Mayor's Office of Policing and Crime (MOPAC) Challenge on 12 December, anything like that would be welcomed.

Roger Evans (Deputy Chairman) (on behalf of Richard Tracey): The review also suggests that savings might be made if we were to review governance arrangements. Is that something that you would consider beneficial in London? I know there have been proposals by the CLG Select Committee recently to make changes. Maybe as well as having a MOPAC we could have a MOLFEPA – a Mayor's Office for the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): When I started as Chairman of LFEPA, I made some relatively small changes to the governance arrangements and the personal support arrangements for the Chairman which have reduced the cost of governance of the Fire Brigade. I felt that if we were going to ask operational firefighters to carry some of that operational burden, it was only right that we did the same. There is both a practical and a moral imperative

for us to look at that. We have to look at saving money within every function of LFEPA from stations right through to governance, so there is a financial imperative.

As well as that, the discussions around LSP5 and the torturous process that has got us to the position we are in at the moment has actually shown in my mind - and certainly this was reflected by the CLG Select Committee - that LFEPA's current structure is no longer the most appropriate for its function and there is a question mark over whether it was ever the most appropriate for its function. There is a massive blurring of lines between its executive function and the scrutiny of the Fire Brigade, and the scrutiny of that executive function. There is a terrible blurring of lines. That was identified by the Select Committee.

A much clearer distinction between the execution of the executive function and the scrutiny of that would be clearer and the political governance of the Fire Brigade could and should be much clearer, slicker and cheaper. I would welcome a review of how the Fire Authority function is executed.

Roger Evans (Deputy Chairman) (on behalf of Richard Tracey): Thank you.

Fiona Twycross (AM): I would be extremely concerned, just referring back to a comment by Ron Dobson, if measures which are generally agreed not to be appropriate for London were put on the table as part of a Government drive to cut services. For example, I would be concerned if there was serious consideration of measures such as retained firefighters for London, particularly as by the Commissioner's own admission they are struggling to work effectively elsewhere because of changes to working patterns.

I would like to ask James whether, having made around £100 million in cuts to the London Fire Brigade over the past seven years, you think that the London Fire Brigade has made its savings required from Sir Ken's report or whether you think there are more cuts to come.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): There are two separate issues here. To address the first comment that you made and the implied question behind the comment in terms of retained firefighters, I have spoken with fire authorities that have retained firefighters. Back in the 1950s and 1960s when the habit of people working in the towns and villages where they served as retained firefighters meant that they could run from the butcher's, the baker's and the candlestick maker's. Now a high proportion are commuters, so I would imagine it would be very difficult to absorb that kind of system for the London Fire Brigade.

However, we should never say that "because we do not think it is going to work for us, we should not look at whether it might work for us". I think we should look at it. I would be very surprised if it would work, but we should be willing to look at it.

On the broader point about whether there are more savings to be made and whether there are more cuts to come, those are actually separate questions. Are there more savings to be made or that could be made? I believe there are. As part of LSP5, a review of the senior middle management structure is part of that. I have already made the point that there are financial savings as well as efficiencies in terms of its operations that can be made with a review of the

governance of the Fire Authority. London physically changes and the risk to Londoners evolves, so the risk of primary fires has diminished significantly but the Fire Brigade now deals with a much broader range of risks. I would be uncomfortable doing crystal ball gazing about whether there are significant greater savings. I do think there are going to be significant changes and we would need to respond to those changes.

Are there more cuts to come from the Government? There has been a degree of good news on deficit reduction, but we are still a massively indebted nation and I want to make sure that the Fire Brigade is flexible enough to absorb any future changes. I would make the point that I do not want to play ducks and drakes on this, but I am very conscious that over the last few years a number of other metropolitan fire brigades in the country have already lost operational firefighters and closed fire stations where we have not. We have gone very much non-fire station savings first, which now puts me in a very strong position when negotiating with the Government to say, "Look, we have done the back-office savings. We have had to make some very difficult decisions with regard to firefighters and fire stations. Look elsewhere if there are significant further savings to be made", because I am not at all sure that all the other fire brigades have been as effective as we have at taking costs out of the organisation in the non-station-based part of the brigades.

Fiona Twycross (AM): You mentioned the cuts under LSP5. What contingency plans do you have in place if and when the judge hearing last week's JR states that the planned cuts should not go ahead? Has the Mayor committed to finding the relatively small amount of money required to keep the ten fire stations open?

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEP): What we have to remember is what a JR looks at. A JR looks at process, not result. I have looked at both cases. I still strongly believe the JR will find in favour of the Fire Authority. If it does not, it will be a comment on process rather than result. No JR in the world will dictate to a budget-holder how they distribute the budget. The Mayor has put forward a proposal which is better than any other fire authority in the country, so our settlement is better than any other fire authority in the country. More than that, he has given us budget certainty over the next few years, which again is not a position that is employed everywhere.

Fiona Twycross (AM): How long is he committed to protecting the Fire Brigade budget?

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEP): It is the future two budget years, which as a position is unique. No other fire authority in the country has budget certainty over the next couple of years. As I say, I do not suspect it will be the case, but even if the JR does not find in the Fire Authority's favour, I am not expecting more money. If we have to restart the process either fully or partially, we will have to use a different process of finding a way of protecting Londoners within the budget envelope we have. That may still mean and probably will still mean the closure of some fire stations in London. Even if the JR does find against the Fire Authority, I do not think anyone should go away from that believing that means there will be no closures of fire stations. We would have to rerun the process. With the additional financial pressure that rerunning the process would provide, it may well even mean we have to close more fire stations than if we were successful with the JR.

Fiona Twycross (AM): There is a threat for you. I will finish with that.

Valerie Shawcross CBE (AM): James, you were talking about how difficult it is to see into the future, but actually it is one of the jobs of the Fire Brigade to try to project the risks and where things might go in the future. We are just seeing this big round of station closures and removals of fire appliances as part of LSP5, but is there a contingency plan for what to do if the scenarios significantly change in London or if the calculations are wrong? It is not that unforeseeable that there might be some big shift in risk or some big change in something like traffic congestion in a particular area. What is your contingency plan if actually we find that you have over-cut the Fire Brigade?

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): Sure. I do not want anyone to think that any of the London Safety Plans (LSP), including LSP5, are some arrogant, "This is the way the world is and we refuse to accept that there could be any evolution during the life of LSP5". That has never been the case before. Indeed, through the operational lifespan of the LSP4, it was identified that in north east London around the Harold Hill station area there was a --

Valerie Shawcross CBE (AM): What would you do if you discovered that it was a mistake to close Southwark Bridge Road or to take an appliance out of Peckham? What would you actually be able to do?

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): I was just going to come to that. The contingency is the same as in all the previous LSPs, which is that the London Fire Brigade puts forward a structure in terms of station deployments and that kind of stuff, but then it continually assesses its performance. We do not then pause for three or four years and then retrospectively see how we have gone. Through the life of the LSP, whichever one it may be, there is a constant process of evaluation and assessment. I will call it 'remedial action'. It is probably not the best term for it. Where action needs to be taken to address a particular emerging issue, action is taken. In the same way that Harold Hill was created midway through LSP4, action like that is taken.

In the areas where fire stations are looking to be removed, we still have some of the highest concentrations of fire stations in the world. Actually, if there were attendance time issues that started to come out through this process, the reallocation or the redeployment of fire appliances would be able to address that. Actually, the distance between stations, particularly in inner London which is where most of the closures are going to be, are remarkably small. The reallocation of appliances would be able to address that problem.

Valerie Shawcross CBE (AM): Perhaps the Commissioner might like to say. If, for example, it was discovered that there was a very marked deterioration in attendance times in a sensitive area, the whole South Bank, for example, or in some of the poorest estates in London, would you actually have the capacity to fill that gap? Would you need to be moving appliances from elsewhere in London? How quickly could you respond to something very profound? For example, we did see a major piece of building work in the Knightsbridge area for about three years. It clogged up the traffic in the area. There is sometimes a short-term rapid requirement for capacity change. Could you respond to that and how would you do it?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): There are two issues, really. The first one is we do keep risk under constant survey, so it is not just at the point we do the LSPs that we actually look at the risk in London and the allocation of resources.

It is a very difficult issue to relocate fire engines in London at the moment. I think we should be more flexible around that, personally, so we do that to some extent. Where there are major developments, where there are things going on like major road closures and things, we have in the past moved fire engines from one station to another for a period of time to cover particular risks. We do that quite often in relation to events in London, so for things like the London Marathon and other things, we always move appliances around. We review our ability to actually meet attendance.

If that was a long-term thing in that way, I would ask the Fire Authority for permission at the moment to move a fire engine from one station to another to meet that additional risk. That is something that I would not be reticent on doing. We should be more flexible around that and be able to do that more easily. I do not think this will be the case but if there was evidence to suggest in future years that actually we needed more resources or another fire station, I would have to go to the Fire Authority and I would not be frightened to ask for those additional resources.

Tony Arbour (AM): I would like to ask you, Commissioner, about relationships with the county fire services near us. Is it possible that some of the counties that border on our area are taking advantage of the fact that your staff are ready to go in if there is an emergency?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): There is evidence that the fire and rescue services surrounding London, in reviewing their levels of service in recent years, have retracted away from the border, which has placed an additional burden on the London Fire Brigade. That is something that was well recognised and publicised in the LSP. One of the recommendations of the LSPs that we do have a policy of charging fire authorities across the border for our attendances into those areas because that evidence does exist.

Tony Arbour (AM): Can I put it that maybe some counties are more likely to take advantage of the service you provide than others?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): There is certainly evidence that our call rates into some counties have certainly increased more than they have in others.

Tony Arbour (AM): Is it possible, therefore, to charge a premium price to those counties?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): We are restricted by the legislation, unfortunately, as to what we can charge. We do need to charge a uniform rate, unfortunately.

Tony Arbour (AM): Again in relation to that, for two of my boroughs, Surrey County fire stations are much closer than fire stations in London. For example, the fire station at Sunbury is much closer to large chunks of Richmond than Twickenham fire station. Similarly, Leatherhead fire station is much closer to big chunks of Kingston.

Suppose, for example - and I think this is a sight that is familiar to all the Members sitting around here - there was a fire at Chessington World of Adventures, which is very long way from Surbiton fire station, but it is very close to Leatherhead. Would the first response be from the county?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): The call would go into the control group within which the fire exists, so for that particular one it would go into the London Fire Brigade, so the call goes into the area where the fire exists. Our control would then deploy and mobilise resources to that, but they would also speak to the county that borders it to let them know there is an incident taking place. If we thought they could get there more quickly, we will request their resources to attend as well.

What we do not do at the moment, which one of the things in Sir Ken's review moves us towards, is actually disregarding some of the boundaries and mobilising directly from other fire and rescue services. We do not do that as much as we should. It does happen and we do rely on other brigades occasionally or they rely on us more, but it probably should be more proactive than it is at the moment.

Len Duvall (AM): Can you just tell me in terms of your assessment whether there is a link between deprivation and fire risk?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): In the London Safety Plan - and this was discussed very significantly last week, obviously - there is a link between deprivation and fire risk, but our assessment is it is more about lifestyle rather than the protective characteristics that go with some areas of deprivation. Just because someone may be elderly, it does not necessarily put them at more risk of fire. Actually, their lifestyle and other issues arising from that in terms of their wellbeing actually affects their risk of fire more than just the fact that they are within one of the protective groups.

Len Duvall (AM): Woolwich fire station is in a deprived area. We would establish that by some of the facts and figures. You have chosen to move the engine to East Greenwich, so we still get the coverage. It is a lifestyle issue rather than a deprivation issue therefore, in terms of your assessment around that?

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

Len Duvall (AM): OK. Let us turn to Downham, then, which is a deprived area and one of these lifestyle areas maybe in terms of the wider issues, not just covering its immediate patch but also supporting other services in the disintegrated pattern of support that we have built up over the years. In that sense, how do we justify Downham not retaining an engine to service

that area and other patches, including the Chairman's [James Cleverly] patch of Bromley as well? How does that work?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): The way it works is that we look at fire cover across the whole of London to start with, so one of the misconceptions throughout the consultation on the plan has been that we do design cover on a borough-by-borough or ward-by-ward basis. We do not. We are charged with fighting fire across the whole of London and --

Len Duvall (AM): Sorry, it is two boroughs that it covers. In fact, it is three boroughs because Downham comes into Greenwich as well as Bromley and Lewisham and obviously will be called on to the wider issues, so I understand the London-wide bit. If we can concentrate on the sub-regional bit, if we can call it that, it would be a sub-region with three boroughs, maybe. Is that fair to say?

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

Len Duvall (AM): If you could concentrate on how you would calculate that sub-regional risk?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): Once again, what we do is we look at where populations are. We look at where the incidents have occurred in the past because, where incidents have occurred in the past is a really good prediction, in our experience, of where they are going to occur again in the future. We look at the number of incidents that occur in particular areas and we then calculate our attendance time to get to those incidents. What we seek to do is to minimise the time it takes to get a pump and a first and second appliance to anywhere in London and in particular those local areas.

Len Duvall (AM): Can you now flesh out, in answer to an earlier question, about how we monitor risk and about decisions that we might have taken in the past to see if they need to be readdressed in the future, what would happen for somewhere like Downham? How do I, as an elected representative, follow some of the real-time monitoring that goes on and assessments that you will continue to do? How does that work?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): We monitor attendance times at a brigade-wide level and at a borough level. We publish all that information through the Mayor's open network of information. One of the things that has been highlighted to us through the consultation on the LSP5 is that perhaps people would like to see monitoring information available at a lower level than that. A proposal has just been taken to the LFEP Strategy Committee, which is actually looking at whether or not we publish data in the future at a ward level. Undoubtedly we will in future start to publish information about attendance times at a lower level, probably at ward level.

Len Duvall (AM): Where would somewhere like Downham feature, along with maybe some of the other decisions you have taken? Is there is a list of ones that you will be monitoring more so than others? Do you know what I mean? In terms of that coverage that the Chairman earlier

mentioned, you thought that we were over-provided as a comparison to other urban areas. Do you think that Lewisham and Greenwich and Bromley are over-provided on that model?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): No, I do not think they are. We would be looking across the whole of London at that level. We look at all of London and all of the boroughs at the moment. We will be looking much more closely at the ward levels as a result of the consultation. That area will be one of the areas that we look at, the same as everywhere else.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): Can I just clarify? I would not want it to be thought and indeed I do not think I used the phrase 'over-provided'.

Len Duvall (AM): You did.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): Just as a point of clarification, I said that we were more generously provided for than almost anywhere else in the world in terms of the concentration of fire stations. That is not the same as saying we are over-provided for. We are better provided for than almost anywhere else on the surface of the planet.

Len Duvall (AM): I will put the question to you, then. Do you think we are better provided for in the areas of Bromley and Greenwich and Lewisham once these cuts are made? What was the word you used again? Just remind me.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): We are better provided for in those areas --

Len Duvall (AM): Better provided. Do you think we are better provided for after the decisions that were taken in those areas? You say worldwide comparisons. I am thinking of UK comparisons.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): Indeed. Those parts of London are still better provided for than many other parts of London and are still better provided for than almost anywhere else in the UK.

Len Duvall (AM): Do you think Bromley is better provided for than other parts of London in terms of an outer London borough, your own patch?

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): You are talking about that area around Downham. You used Downham as a specific area. That area of London still has a higher concentration of fire engines than almost anywhere else in the country --

Len Duvall (AM): Post cuts?

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): -- than a number of other parts of the city and of almost anywhere else in the world, so it is still very, very well provided for, bearing in mind that there is planned to be the removal of that fire station. Even counting that in, it is still better provided for than almost anywhere else in the world.

Andrew Dismore (AM): A question for Ron. LSP5 is an integrated risk management plan (IRMP), is it not?

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

Andrew Dismore (AM): As an IRMP, it is supposed to focus on risk rather than cost, is it not?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): It is supposed to focus on both.

Andrew Dismore (AM): My understanding of the legislation is that an IRMP is about, first and foremost, focusing on the risk to Londoners from fire and other incidents, of course.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): Through the JR last week, it was very clearly identified that the guidance documents that sit with IRMPs are clear that, yes, it is about risk and assessing the risk in your area of all natures, but it is also about the benefit between cost and risk. That was also made very clear with Sir Ken Knight's review. Cost was actually an element of an IRMP in our planning when it was first introduced.

Andrew Dismore (AM): It is quite clear that these cuts are cost-driven. If we look at your letter dated 29 January 2012, for some reason - I think it should be 2013 - you say here,

"I regard the budgetary position as being a significant influencing factor in the proposals which I have produced. My proposals represent my preferred approach to achieving cost reductions, my preferred approach, taking into account the constraints and considerations outlined"

and so on. It is cost-driven, is it not?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): Cost is certainly part of it, as I said in my answer, yes.

Andrew Dismore (AM): It is wrong to suggest that somehow Londoners are going to be safer as a result of these plans, is it not?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): I do not agree with that because, actually, it is an IRMP. It is not just about fire station response times. It is not just about the number of fire stations. It is also about all the other elements of the plan where we describe how we are going to go about proactive prevention as well. A fire engine responding to a fire in an area is not the only way of keeping people safe.

Andrew Dismore (AM): If we look at the numbers, the Mayor kept going on about this bigger picture with the boroughs. If we actually drill down, 38 wards in London moved from inside the target time to outside and only 3 wards moved in and those are actually relatively quieter wards out in Richmond and around there. 3,476,000 Londoners will see increased attendance times

but 1,260,000 will see a decrease in attendance times; 3.8 million will see themselves outside the target time for first attendance and that is 48% of the population and, of the 100 most deprived wards in London, 71 will see an increase in attendance times, will they not?

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

Andrew Dismore (AM): That is safer, is it?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): It depends what else you put in place in those boroughs to actually prevent the fire in the first place. I would argue that to reduce the number of fires in London is the most important thing. If a fire does not occur in the first place, then that person is not at risk.

Andrew Dismore (AM): Of course, but, if it does, they are in a worse position, are they not?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): In some places, yes.

Andrew Dismore (AM): In Camden, for example, in my constituency, Belsize, which you are planning to close - and we do not know you are going to do with it because it is a listed building, but no doubt you will try to cash in on that; not you personally of course - will see its attendance time go up by over three minutes. Six wards in Camden will go up by over a minute both because of the closure of Belsize and the closure of Clerkenwell, will they not?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): That is the published data, yes.

Andrew Dismore (AM): Clerkenwell is in a pretty strategic position, being on important crossroads leading up to King's Cross and into central London.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): That is the published data, yes.

Andrew Dismore (AM): Yes, that is right. Obviously, Clerkenwell will see increased attendance times as well. There is a big problem with the LSP5 attendance time arrangements because they do not really reflect the problems facing high-rise buildings. I have here notes of a meeting held in 2006 of the Joint Committee on Health and Safety at Work which say quite clearly that for high-rise buildings you need a minimum of 12 firefighters on initial attendance, do you not?

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

Andrew Dismore (AM): That is three pumps and those pump times are going up, are they not?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): We will always mobilise three pumps to any high-rise building incident.

Andrew Dismore (AM): Yes, and the attendance times for three pumps are going to be even worse, are they not?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): The attendance time for a third appliance does deteriorate slightly, yes.

Andrew Dismore (AM): Yes. The real problem here is, if you are in a high-rise like Lakanal House, for example, which went up or the one that went up in Swiss Cottage not so long ago in my constituency, you are going to see a worse attendance time, are you not?

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

Andrew Dismore (AM): Yes, bearing in mind you are starting from a worse position than you are if you have a street property because with a street property you can get to work with a couple of pumps as soon as they arrive, pretty well. If you are in a high-rise, it is going to be a quarter of an hour or more before you start fighting the fire, is it not?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): Potentially in some places, but you also should remember that high-rise buildings are built in a completely different way and they are designed to prevent the spread of fire for that sort of period. Actually, if you live in a high-rise --

Andrew Dismore (AM): A bit like Lakanal House was supposed to be?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): There are a number of reasons why the Lakanal House fire spread as it did, as we know, and I cannot really go into that because --

Andrew Dismore (AM): Exactly. There were going to be other buildings which may have been messed around with in the same way.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): Not that we have seen at the moment.

Andrew Dismore (AM): We will see. Putting all that together, do you still think London is a safer place?

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

Darren Johnson (Chair): Thank you. We will then move on to the third question on the order paper.

2013/4408 - Impacts of climate change

Jenny Jones

Are you monitoring climate change research suggesting that, on the basis of current policy failures, the world may warm by more than 2°C within 30 years, and are you reviewing your risk analysis and adaptation actions to consider this high emissions scenario?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): The answer is, yes, we are. As part of the LSP, we reviewed the climate change risk to London as a whole. We are also part of the climate change risk assessment that is being carried out nationally. What we have seen throughout the country in the last five or six years is an increase in the national resilience assets that were available to fire and rescue services. For things like flooding, there are many more boats available now. The London Fire Brigade has changed its operational capability as a result of that assessment, so we now have many more boats available to us. For example, for flooding, we have new equipment coming in, high-volume pumps and things, to be able to move water around. The answer is, yes, we do. We have assessed that at the higher end of the emissions predictions. What those assessments have shown is that we do not necessarily identify any new types of incidents that we may encounter, but for the types of incident that already occur which could be related to climate change such as, for example, flooding, we do identify an increased precedence or increased rate of those incidents occurring. Maybe they will take place over a wider area than perhaps they have done previously. The answer is, yes, we do assess all of that.

We are also very proactive in terms of what we are doing to reduce our carbon emissions across the whole of London. We have seen some significant improvements in LFEPA across the board, actually, in relation to this.

There is one particular issue, if I may, which I would like to bring out. We do see some issues nationally - and certainly in London we have seen it recently - with regard to things like recycling sites like the site down in Orpington at the moment where we have attended many fires at the moment. One of the things that we believe is that the legislation that controls the safe and effective use of those sites is lagging slightly behind the commercial interests of people that are involved in actually storing them. For example, to take that one site, and I will not go into too much detail, our ability to actually control the management of that site is quite limited. It really relies on the Environment Agency and even their ability to control it in a way which prevents the fires and our attendance there and all the carbon emissions that arise from that is actually quite limited.

Jenny Jones (AM): Thank you very much for that. I know you are doing a lot internally and that is great. Have you done any exercises? For example, if we had something like the floods of 2007, it was chaos elsewhere in Britain. If we had that sort of event again, are you doing exercises to make sure that we can cope? I declare an interest. I have a ground-floor flat in Southwark which is very low-lying, so if there are problems and you do not cope with it, I will be on your doorstep.

Darren Johnson (Chair): You could get on your boat!

Jenny Jones (AM): That is another option.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): We do. One of the focuses of the London Resilience Partnership training and exercise programme is very much on flooding. We do exercise our response above a 'table-top' level and actually exercise with 'boots on the ground', as we like to call it, quite regularly really in terms of flooding. We also take part in national exercises around flooding as well because the national resilience arrangements enable fire and rescue service resources to be moved around the country to support other areas. We saw that very much in Gloucestershire with the floods back in 2007 and more recently in Cornwall, Cumbria and elsewhere where the London Fire Brigade was able to deploy outside of London to assist with the flooding in certain places. The same thing will be able to happen within London.

Jenny Jones (AM): Thank you. Can I ask Mr Cleverly about the London Resilience Partnership? I know that the Mayor has hit his target for river restoration of 15 miles or whatever. It is my impression that the partnership has short-term targets. Are you beginning to think a big more long term? That is not a criticism. It is a straight question.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEP): Thank you. I am genuinely very pleased you asked that question because it does highlight one of the completely shared frustrations of the Resilience Partnership. Our function is to deal with the response-orientated stuff and we have a whole load of very well worked-up response plans. When you start doing that risk analysis and start looking at the risk register, you start identifying things that we as a forum would want to intervene in. Actually, there are some of the areas where we can say, if we could be a bit more proactive, there is a whole avenue of risks that we are currently working up responses for that we would actually prefer to spend our time, effort and resources avoiding. Risk mitigation rather than risk response is an area that we want to look more into.

For some of the climate-affected risks, so extreme weather and so on, there are actions that we would like to take to do a bit more mitigation rather than just response, so I am very pleased. If you are happy to continue pushing on that, you would be pushing an open door.

Jenny Jones (AM): That is brilliant. Presumably, there are options for partnership working on storm defences and that sort of thing?

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEP): Yes. The Resilience Partnership does not have a statutory footing and it cannot dictate the action to any of its component organisations, but there is a very good working relationship where, when organisations recognise things that they could be doing either individually or in partnership, action is taken. There is no statutory footing. The resilience forum cannot dictate to anybody actions, even if we collectively feel they are the right things. They tend to happen anyway because they are obviously the right things to do, but there is no statutory footing for that.

Jenny Jones (AM): If you are going to look at bit more long term and look at mitigation rather than adaptation or risk management, who are you getting advice from?

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): One of the big advantages of the forum is that it has around the table basically the experts in the field. We have the Environment Agency. We have representatives from the utilities sector, the business sector and the charitable sector, so we do plug into a lot of those knowledge bases. We get information from whomever. In terms of the Government, we plug into the Cabinet Office and obviously the Home Office, the Department of Health and DCLG through the respective 'blue light' services and others.

Jenny Jones (AM): General awareness of climate change is not that well developed. That is my impression, sitting here for quite a long time. For example, the World Bank actually asked the Potsdam Institute to look at the issue of climate change and they think that we are moving much faster towards some real problem areas and that we are on course for 2°C of warming by the late 2030s. That is really close. You might still be in post and you might still be living in London and this might affect us quite strongly, so I am saying some expert advice - and I am afraid I do not include the Environment Agency in that - might be timely, just to have somebody along to talk to you about just how it could be experienced in London.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): One of the things that has happened through a number of different organisations, so it has happened partially through the resilience forum and our Gold Group exercises that we have had, is we have had guest speakers talk to us. It is lucky that we have in-house experience as well, but very recently the Deputy Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Service spoke about his experience in Cumbria when he had to deal with the Cumbrian flooding and the implications of that.

We do not have the capability, the time or the resources to do the real big-picture change in direction of travel which is at the Governmental level. What we do is we look at the current and emerging risks: severe weather, flooding, issues around evacuation and shelter. These are the kinds of things which may be by-products of the climate. We focus on those rather than energy production and fossil fuel utilisation. That is too big a picture, so we do deal with the responsive side of things more.

Jenny Jones (AM): You can. If we are going to face, for example, more flooding, a lot of brigade officers go out and talk to people and they could talk to them about things like permeable paving, very simple stuff that they can do or not do to make themselves a bit safer.

Darren Johnson (Chair): A quick answer to this now because the Green Group is running out of time.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): There are many things. Our firefighters, when they do home fire safety visits, are really good. They are not blinkered. They do talk about fire safety but they also talk about a range of other things as well. I am a little bit cautious, however, about giving them everything because there is a strong argument for first aid advice. There is a strong argument for healthy eating advice. There are lots of strong arguments and actually, if we are going to keep them moving and keep them visiting lots and lots of properties, we have to trim their natural exuberance a little bit.

Murad Qureshi (AM): I am glad we have moved on to flood risk, really. James, is it really wise to propose closing so many stations in the centre of London given the flood risk we have in areas particularly like Pimlico?

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEP): I do not want to sound glib. There is a very strong argument for not having flooded fire stations.

I do not want to sound critical, but the Assembly chose not to have a meeting specifically to generate a response to the LSP5 consultation. That was the choice of the Assembly and that is fine. I am a bit uncomfortable now retrospectively doing that submission to LSP5 at this stage because many of those issues with regard to emerging and changing risk, locations, travelling times and all the questions that Mr Dismore discussed were thrashed out at quite some length during the consultations. Members did not have those discussions at that point, but the plan is in place. The mayoral direction has been issued. It is currently being judicially reviewed. Through you and at your discretion, Chair, I am unconvinced that this is the best time now to have those discussions that perhaps could and should have been done during the consultation period for LSP5.

Murad Qureshi (AM): I am just grateful that the Greater London Council left us as its legacy the Thames Barrier. Otherwise, this would be a much more severe issue than I think James realises. Can I just make a comparison to --

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEP): No, I am sorry --

Murad Qureshi (AM): Sorry, James. I have made my comment to your preamble. I will continue.

Can I make the comparison with one of your home boroughs, Bromley? In Orpington, you gain a fire engine whilst the City of Westminster actually loses two stations? They are Westminster and Knightsbridge fire stations. That is on the border of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster and 60% of its trips are in the city. Given the Westminster fire station covers quite a unique area with a huge concentration of historic buildings, the footfall of daytime population is the highest anywhere in town, it has a vibrant residential population, we have just heard about the flood risk there in particular, does all this just confirm the suspicion of local residents that that station has been flogged off to get the highest capital receipts to plug the financial gap that you have in your budgets?

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEP): I am very glad that you asked a question that is so tightly specific to climate change. The simple fact of the matter is --

Murad Qureshi (AM): No, respond to that. I never actually mentioned climate change at all.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEP): Local people, I am sure, stimulated by conversations with you and your colleagues, may have suspicions of all kinds of things. I can give you a categorical assurance that the sales value of fire stations was not a consideration in their choice.

The locations and travelling times, emerging risk and running costs were. Recent and future investments in refurbishments were. The future sales value absolutely was not.

To bring it back to climate change, which I am sure was the intention behind your question, actually, whilst Westminster fire station is close to an area in which there may - in extreme, but not so extreme that they are unforeseeable circumstances - be the risk of flood. Westminster fire station is not itself inherently better prepared to deal with flood-related incidents than a number of other stations and indeed in some instances worse.

We did take a full range of current and predicted risks into consideration when the Commissioner and his team did the modelling to choose the fire stations, but I can assure you that risk and response, not value and income, were the reasons to sell the station. Otherwise, the list would be very different. Whilst you highlight the point that Westminster is in a highly desirable and expensive location and Mr Dismore highlighted that Belsize is similar, Mr Duvall has highlighted that Woolwich fire station and Downham fire station very much are not and Silvertown fire station very much is not. For every one station that you can say, "You are choosing this because it is worth lots and lots of money", I am getting criticism from other places saying, "You are picking them because they are in areas of deprivation". They cannot by definition both be right. The simple fact of the matter is neither of them is right.

Murad Qureshi (AM): I will be amazed if it does not get the highest capital receipts when you put it up for sale under your chairmanship. Can I for the record just confirm? I did not actually mention climate change. I just concentrated on the flood risk in my question.

Kit Malthouse (AM): Incidentally, I do not remember Murad and Val [Shawcross AM] protesting quite so much when they slammed the doors of the Manchester Square fire station, but there we are.

One of the issues in terms of climate change would be the type of vehicle that you use, but that also has an impact on other things. For instance, smaller, more manoeuvrable vehicles might cut response times. I wondered what advances had been made in researching new types of vehicle that might both speed up responses, particularly in central London where manoeuvrability is important, and also cut climate change or cut your emissions.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): I will answer briefly and then I am going to ask the Commissioner to intervene. I have had discussions with both the Leader of Westminster and the Leader of Kensington and Chelsea about the specific implications of those station closures. Ideas have been put forward which are very much in concert with ideas that we have been thinking about within the Fire Authority in terms of the nature of the risk. I have already highlighted that fighting primary fires, while still a very significant part of the Fire Brigade's work, is diminishing in proportion to change driven by climate change and changing risk. The manoeuvrability, the water-carrying capacity, the crew-carrying capacity, the agility, the speed of response of our primary appliance fleet is something that I do think is well worth looking at, as I say, prompted by conversations with colleagues in central London but also very much in the direction that we were thinking. That is something that when we do the fleet review in a few years' time or next year we will take very serious consideration of.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): One thing that is very clear in the LSP is that we need to look at alternative types of deployment because the risks in London are changing. The risks in London are changing, the environment is changing, we need to be responding to that in some way. Outside of London there has been some small evidence of fire and rescue services looking at alternative types of vehicles for particular risks. I do think that is one of the things we should be looking at for the future. Members of the Assembly will already be aware of the problems we had with our provider of vehicles and equipment a couple of years ago, and we are in the process at the moment of a re-tender for that. One of the things that is part of that is for them to be much more proactive with us in working with the way in which we could change the fleet to make it more responsive to change in risks in London.

One of things we should be looking at is smaller vehicles not only for quicker response times, but also because we can have a greater impact in reducing our impact on the climate by reducing our emissions. The smaller the vehicles the more opportunity there is for things like hybrid technologies and electric vehicles. Currently at the moment, given the size of our fire engines and the weight they are, those technologies do not necessarily exist, although I have spoken to officers in Transport for London about what lessons can we learn from them because obviously they have been quite successful in terms of hybrid buses, hydrogen buses and that sort of stuff. If you can do it for a bus, I cannot work out why you cannot do it for a fire engine. Those are the sorts of things we should be looking at for the future and that is clearly signposted in the LSP.

Kit Malthouse (AM): My other question was about the largest piece of your work or the largest bit of business that you do that is driving your emissions, particularly vehicular, is false alarms. By far the largest thing that you attend. I wondered how confident you were about your ability to drive down the number of false alarms over the next few years. Looking at the data that you have provided, it pretty much tracks the rest of your level of activity. There is no change in false alarms compared to actual incidents that you have to attend. If you have been doing work over the last four or five years on false alarms, it has not had any proportional impact. I wondered what, if anything, was going to change because obviously lots of appliances driving around London to the 100,000-odd false alarms you attend each year is a crazy waste of diesel.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): You are absolutely right in terms of the proportionate decrease. There has been a decrease that needs to be seen also in terms of the number of new automatic fire alarm systems that are going in in London as a result of new buildings going up. We are doing reasonably well in terms of suppressing that additional demand and still making some inroads into it. What we have done over the years is reduce the amount of fire engines we actually send to automatic fire alarms, which has reduced the impact to the environment and also risk on roads of large red fire engines going at high speeds.

Kit Malthouse (AM): Just remind me of the proportion. It is more than nine times out of ten an automatic fire alarm was a false alarm?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): Yes. The authority has just agreed as well as part of the LSP a charging regime. Where people hit a particular threshold in a building and there is no indication that appropriate steps are being made to reduce the level of false alarms, we will start to introduce a charge for that now. That has been very successful in relation to the amount of people shut in lifts that we have attended across London over the last seven or eight years. That has reduced very significantly. We are hopeful that that will once again be a factor in improving people's maintenance of automatic fire alarm systems and a reduction in the number of false alarms we attend. There is a lot of national work going on around false alarms as well. Some fire and rescue services have taken the approach that they will not attend automatic fire alarms now. I do not think that is the right approach for London at the moment. We are taking a very measured and staged approach towards charging, and I am hopeful that will have a more significant impact than perhaps what has been done in the past.

Murad Qureshi (AM): Thank you very much. As Kit mentioned, I just confirm that at the time that LFEPA dealt with Manchester Square it was coming to the end of its lease and I was not actually present at the meeting which voted on agreeing to walk away from the lease and to look for other provisions in the City of Westminster. In comparison to Kit who has voted for a budget which has approved the closure of two fire stations in Westminster, I can simply say I have looked out for Westminster residents in the way that he has not and is not intending to.

Valerie Shawcross (AM): A point of personal explanation, if I may. I was also named. I have to say that the time that that fire station was closed there was complete and utter cross-party agreement that it was surplus to requirements and was in need of extensive refurbishment. I do not think Kit has a ground to complain on this one.

Darren Johnson (Chair): Thank you. We will then move on to the final question on the order paper today.

2013/4409 - Professional Relationships

[Stephen Knight](#)

What are you doing to improve the professional relationships between London's firefighters, their union and Fire Brigade managers?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): The short answer to that is, yes, we would of course. I certainly would like to have better professional relationships. There are number of issues I would like to raise.

Firstly, the pensions dispute that is taking place at the moment, and the fact that there is industrial action taking place over that, should not distort our view of industrial relations in London because that is a national dispute and it is not a dispute with the London Fire Brigade, therefore that is slightly separate.

The other thing I suppose I should emphasise is that with regard to LSP, there is no industrial dispute with the FBU about that at the moment. The FBU has not raised an industrial dispute with London Fire Brigade about those closures and therefore that could be an indication of reasonable relationships, but I am not seeking to make that point.

I would very much like to improve professional relationships and we do take significant steps to try to do that. We have very detailed process for formal negotiation. Informal meetings do take place with the FBU very frequently. I generally am very committed to having relationships. However, it is a two-way street. Actually, good relationships beget good relationships. It relies on both parties to actually try to foster those.

Stephen Knight (AM): Indeed, it does. Obviously, it is in the interest of Londoners and the safety of Londoners that those relationships are good. I raised earlier this morning a dispute which had happened on 1 November around the major incident in Dagenham. I wonder whether you think the FBU would have been more willing to overlook, perhaps, the fact that arguably there were circumstances surrounding that incident which fell outside the return to work protocol if industrial relations between managers and the union had been better and had been on a more constructive footing?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): I could speculate and say possibly. It is very difficult to say because that was a very specific circumstance. I personally think the agreement was very clear, and I personally think that where there are actually incidents and large fires taking place in London is not an area where we should be discussing an industrial relationship. Actually, a police incidents commander took that decision to make that a major incident and my personal view is that both the Brigade and the Fire Brigades Union should have supported that police commander in that decision making and managed that incident. The rest of London could have gone on dispute and gone on strike, but that incident should have remained exactly as it was.

Stephen Knight (AM): Clearly, it is impossible to write a protocol which covers all possible eventualities and therefore, I suppose, the working relationship between the Union and management must be important in managing these sorts of situations. Do you think that relationship was helped by the decision taken about two weeks before that incident to bar firefighters from wearing their uniforms during a protest march around the disputes in London?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): No, I do not think it was helped by that, but I still think it was the right decision because actually firefighters wearing their PPE is different nowadays than it was previously. Our new PPE in London is provided on fire stations and people wearing it when they go off in the industrial dispute depleted the amount of PPE available in the fire station. As a matter of fact that did not make any difference on the day because we did not have any other incidents take place. It did actually deplete the amount of PPE available to firefighters in London. I took steps to try to maximise the PPE available to London firefighters and I still think that was the right decision.

Stephen Knight (AM): At the time it was suggested that the protection equipment might be damaged in some way and needs to be protected if it were used on that dispute.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): That was one of the reasons.

Stephen Knight (AM): Many Londoners, understandably, were concerned as to why it was that this protective uniform which was designed to protect firefighters from running into burning buildings somehow would be damaged by them marching through the streets of London in the rain. Clearly that decision looked to a lot of firefighters and arguably to Londoners as well like potentially an inflammatory decision by management.

Darren Johnson (Chair): A quick answer to that because the Liberal Democrats have run out of time.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): It may have appeared that way, but it certainly was not. It was not all about damage to the equipment, but for things like, for example, it getting wet. If a fire tunic was returned back to the fire station wet, then it cannot be used for operational purposes. We very clearly say to firefighters, "You do not go into buildings with wet or damp PPE because that is a health and safety risk". I was taking action to try to maximise the PPE available to London firefighters on that evening when they come back to work. I still think it was the right decision.

Darren Johnson (Chair): Thank you. The Liberal Democrat Group are now out of time. It may be that other Members wish to pursue this, in which case I will bring them in.

Fiona Twycross (AM): I just wanted to go back to the Dagenham incident and have a quite a short question on this, actually. Given that the police called it a major incident and there was a Silver-level meeting held, which presumably was minuted, it would be helpful if the minutes of that meeting were released to at least LFEP Members but, given this is an Assembly meeting, to Assembly Members just so we can get some clarification and transparency about actually how that decision was taken at that meeting.

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): That is a good suggestion. I would need to check with the Metropolitan Police Service whether or not that is possible to do because obviously the incident is still under investigation at the moment. That would help clarify matters. That would be a good solution.

Fiona Twycross (AM): Thank you.

Andrew Dismore (AM): Yes, just on this fire tunic thing, Ron, when you issued that instruction, did you have industrial relations in mind and what the impact might be?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): I had it in mind, yes. Of course I did. I recognise that would have some industrial relations consequences in terms of people's perception of that. However, that does not mean that I should override the health and safety issue that I felt was important. Therefore, I took the decision to take that action anyway.

Andrew Dismore (AM): Do you think the net result was that more firefighters wore their fire tunics than might have otherwise been the case on that demonstration because of your instruction?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): I do not know. I could not possibly say. I do not think the demonstration was particularly well attended anyway, so it would be hard to say what the result of that was.

Andrew Dismore (AM): It was because I was there and saw it. I do not think I saw a firefighter not wearing a fire tunic, whereas I have been on previous demonstrations and quite a few have not worn fire tunics. Do you not think that was really an opportunity where you might have had to engage a little discretion before issuing that instruction?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): I could have done, obviously. I wonder if the question might have been slightly different, if it had been a very wet day or whatever and we had a very large incident in London that night and firefighters did not have PPE available, I am sure different arguments would have been made to me. On the day that did not happen, but that was my decision to make it.

Andrew Dismore (AM): Actually, it was a rather wet day. Were any firefighters not able to wear their PPE that night as a result of being on the demonstration?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): No, because there were spares available for them.

Andrew Dismore (AM): It was not a problem after all, then?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): Not on that night, no.

Andrew Dismore (AM): No. There probably would not have been on another night either, would there?

Ron Dobson CBE QFSM (Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Planning): However, there was no large incident where actually we needed lots of firefighters on that night. It is all hypothetical.

Andrew Dismore (AM): You see, my concern is that when James was first interviewed for his position by the Assembly in his confirmation proceedings, James said he wanted to improve industrial relations. It seems to me part of the problem is what seem to be relatively minor wind-ups going on all the time which simply make things worse. For example, when firefighters were banned when they are on duty from talking about LSP5 if they are asked by members of the public. That does not really help. It might technically in a disciplined service make some sense, but in the end it just makes things worse, does it not?

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): The last point you made is absolutely at the heart of this. You say it might be technically right in a disciplined service. You say that in a tone of voice as if the London Fire Brigade is not a uniformed discipline service. It absolutely is. The ability of firefighters to keep safe personally and to execute the difficult and testing work they do is absolutely predicated on the technical and professional discipline that they execute. It is not some arbitrary thing and when I said --

Andrew Dismore (AM): Hang on. The fire service is not --

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): No, I will finish. No, I will finish this point.

Darren Johnson (Chair): Just let James finish his point and then I will bring Andrew back in.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): You mentioned my confirmations hearing and I absolutely made the explicit desire to improve industrial relations. As I have discussed, the fact that the London Fire Brigade is going through the largest structural change in its history and has done so without industrial action of any kind is testament to the fact that we have improved industrial relations. I am on, I would like to think, relatively positive personal terms with all the members of the FBU. My Christmas card went off in the post to them yesterday.

Andrew Dismore (AM): I am sure that will be very welcome. I am sure it makes the highlight of their year.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): Good industrial relations is not the same as saying yes to any and every request that comes from the FBU.

Andrew Dismore (AM): That is not the point.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): The Commissioner's professional judgment about the safety of firefighters has to be paramount. You say: "It did not". Captain Hindsight is a wonderful superhero, but the simple fact of the matter is had the weather been worse on that day and had there been a major incident that evening, then the situation would have been very different. Turning around and saying: "But there was not, was it? Therefore, you were wrong in your judgment call", is childish beyond belief.

Andrew Dismore (AM): Look, the fire service used to have formal discipline regulations and the equivalent of a court-martial. All that went away. Now, of course, people have to, on fire grounds, observe disciplinary procedures within the structure of command and control in an incident and in the stations, too. Equally, management ought to have some common sense sometimes and that is sadly lacking.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): I will counter that by saying --

Andrew Dismore (AM): Let me finish now.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): Yes, fair enough.

Andrew Dismore (AM): The fact is I know you have a military background. The fire service is not the armed forces. It has changed. It has changed dramatically since I started working with them in 1978 as a young solicitor. There needs to be some common sense towards industrial relations and my concern for industrial relations in the fire service is if you have uniformed managers who have not had proper industrial relations training, who have grown up in the environment where there was the formal disciplinary system that there used to be and have not grown out of it. My concern is, frankly, that silly orders like this just make things worse, not better.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEP): I would counter that by suggesting that this was meant to be a strategic discussion about the long-term direction of the Fire Authority rather than a raking over the coals about one particular march. I absolutely understand firefighters wanted to be identified as such when they were on that march; I completely get that. There are a number of uniforms available to them which would have made it completely obvious that they were operational firefighters for the London Fire Brigade. Their caps and tunics would have easily identified them. Therefore, I ask the question: why was there an obsession about wearing the PPE and having a row over this? You say it was an unnecessary --

Andrew Dismore (AM): You tried to ban it. That is why. Ron tried to ban it. It was an unnecessary dispute.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEP): That is your point. The point I am making is that we are not suggesting going back to some form of military discipline, but you are saying industrial relations - and the Commissioner has already said - it is a two-way process. There are very sound operational reasons why the wearing of PPE in a non-operational environment is not appropriate. There are a range of other uniforms that protesting firefighters could and, in my mind, should have worn to identify them as firefighters. I ask, again, a rhetorical question because I know I am the answerer rather than the asker: why was the union's position so explicit about the wearing of PPE? I would suggest it was an action which in hindsight was unnecessary. It caused friction between the firefighters and management which was unnecessary. There were a range of other uniforms that protesting firefighters could and should have worn, which would have had no impact whatsoever about the future operational effectiveness and more importantly the safety of individual firefighters in the event of a fire. The fact that you so willingly disregard the professional advice of the Commissioner about the safety of our firefighters is wrong, massively wrong.

Darren Johnson (Chair): Thank you. Are there any more questions on professional relationships? Finally, are there any questions from Members on other issues that were raised in the oral update at the start?

Fiona Twycross (AM): It is a question for James and I will try to make it quick, obviously. Cuts came up a lot and you have mentioned the Government position in that everything filters down from the Government's decision to cut the money and so on. I just wanted clarification on what your view is on big state and small state. For example, if you were in charge of

deciding the overall budget, not just what to do with what we are given, what would you have done?

Darren Johnson (Chair): A quick answer to this because the Labour Group do not have much time left.

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): I said this in my confirmations hearing because I reread the minutes of my own confirmations hearing and I have not moved an inch on this position. The job of a public service, whether it is the emergency service or any other public service, is to deliver that public service. It is not to find creative ways of using up public money. If you are able to deliver safety for less money than you have historically, then it is your duty to do so. It comes to the point that Kit was making about driving down false alarms.

Fiona Twycross (AM): You would have cut?

James Cleverly (Chairman, LFEPA): When a pump and crew are attending a false alarm, they are unavailable to attend another real incident. Actually, therefore, by driving down false alarms, we are actually able to have a higher proportion of the fire brigade available for shouts at any given point in time. That will make London safer. I have a plan from the Commissioner which makes London safer, not in relative terms, in absolute terms, and does it for less money than we have historically been able to. In that circumstance, it is entirely appropriate for that money to go back to the taxpayer.

Darren Johnson (Chair): Thank you. No other Members have signalled, so that concludes the questioning. I thank Ron Dobson and James Cleverly for coming along.