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Surrey FBU  
Region 11 South East  
42 Goldsworth Road, Woking,  
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Dear Councillor Tim Oliver,

We are writing to express our serious public safety concerns after the fire in Banstead on Friday 19 March.

The Banstead fire was a tragic incident and our thoughts and condolences are first and foremost with the family and friends of the woman who lost her life.

This fire, however, highlighted the growing public safety risk caused by cuts to Surrey and Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS). On this occasion, we believe that the loss of life on 19 March, could well have been avoided had these cuts not taken place.

As you will be aware, in January SFRS pushed ahead with the second phase of its cuts under the Making Surrey Safer Plan, which saw three more fire engines cut and three fire stations closed at night. This follows cuts made in April last year, where four fire engines were removed from the service.

SFRS claimed that the plan would prioritise putting 'the right resources in the right places at the right time' to ensure that Surrey residents are safer. However, this incident has shown that the service is failing to live up to its promise:

- It took **fourteen minutes** for the first fire engine to arrive at the scene in Banstead. SFRS's target response time for the first fire engine is **10 minutes**
- The service's equalities impact assessment of the cuts states the expected response time in Banstead should be **7 minutes 57 seconds**
- Banstead Fire Station, which was **closed** in the round of cuts in January, was only **four minutes** away from the location of the incident
- **Three firefighters** who would have been involved in the response were **stranded** at Epsom Fire Station as there were not enough firefighters to crew a fire engine
- **Two fire engines** had to be brought in from London because of the lack of resources available in Surrey

Firefighters warned of the dangers of these cuts and the impact it would have on response times and the safety of residents. However, these warnings have continued to be ignored, with the fire authority, and chief fire officer prioritising cost cutting over public safety.

As outlined above, Surrey County Council's own Draft Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) identified that cutting frontline operational response would negatively impact Surrey's most vulnerable residents:



*“...at times of emergency the public will have to wait longer for a fire appliance than the current response. There is evidence to suggest that the people most vulnerable to these outcomes are disproportionately likely to come from certain protected characteristics, the elderly and people with disabilities in particular”.*

In Appendix C of the EIA, the expected response times for the first fire engine to arrive at an incident are outlined. It states that it will take 43 seconds longer for the first fire engine to arrive at incidents in Banstead and Reigate, increasing from 7 minutes 14 seconds to 7 minutes 57 seconds.

It took 13 minutes 37 seconds for the first fire engine to arrive at the incident on 19 March. It is therefore clear that the response times in the EIA are inaccurate and calls into question the entire response time modelling. Tragically, the person who lost their life in the Banstead fire was one of the very people who Surrey County Council identified would most be at risk from these cuts.

Unfortunately, this incident is not a stand-alone incident, but part of a pattern of failures from SFRS.

At an incident in Esher last June, crews waited for over 57 minutes for a high-reaching aerial fire appliance to arrive at an apartment block fire. At the same incident, it took 12 minutes for the first Surrey fire engine to arrive, while the next two fire engines took 22 and 26 minutes to arrive from Berkshire. Six of the 10 appliances in attendance came from neighbouring brigades.

SFRS claimed that the Making Surrey Safer plan would prioritise putting ‘the right resources in the right places at the right time’ to ensure that residents are safer. However, it is clear that the service is failing to live up to the promise it made and is unable to guarantee an effective emergency response.

As frontline firefighters in Surrey, we call on you to reverse these cuts to ensure more lives aren’t lost.

Yours faithfully,

Graham Whitfield  
FBU Surrey Brigade Secretary