

**North Yorkshire Fire Brigades Union**

Brigade Secretary Steve Howley

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**North Yorkshire Fire Brigades Union Formal Response to the York and North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Plan / CRMP 2025-2029**

Dear Mayor Skaith / CFO Dyson

On behalf of North Yorkshire Fire Brigades Union (NYFBU) the professional voice of Firefighters in North Yorkshire, I am writing to submit our formal response to yours and the services CRMP / York and North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Plan 2025-2029. As a key major stakeholder, we have a statutory duty and a moral obligation to scrutinise any plan that impacts the safety of Firefighters and the public they protect.

The FBU acknowledges that this is the first Fire and Rescue Plan under the new Mayoral Combined Authority. This moment represents a significant opportunity to break from the past, a past defined by a devastating legacy of austerity and chronic under-investment that has left North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service (NYFRS) in a perilous state. We are willing to engage constructively with your office and Service leaders to build a service that is genuinely resilient and fit for the challenges of the 21st century. However, any credible strategy must be built on a foundation of honest financial planning, a realistic assessment of operational risk, and a genuine commitment to the safety of our communities.

Regrettably, the Plan currently presented fails to meet these fundamental criteria. It is a document that, while acknowledging past failures, proposes a future of managed decline. It is predicated on a deceptive funding model, promotes dangerous gambles with public safety under the guise of "efficiency," and fails to address the systemic collapse of the on-call duty system, which is the crumbling bedrock of fire cover in our region.

This response will detail our concerns and articulate why the FBU cannot, in its current form, support this Plan. We urge you to withdraw it and commit to a process of genuine and meaningful consultation with frontline professionals to develop a new strategy one that invests in safety, not one that manages risk by transferring it onto the public.

The central pillar of the Plan's financial strategy is a significant £24 increase in the Band D council tax precept, presented to the public as a necessary investment to rectify years of neglect. The FBU does not dispute the need for greater investment; indeed, we have campaigned for it for over a decade. However, a forensic analysis of the service's budget

reveals that this precept increase is not for growth, improvement, or enhanced resilience. It is a financial sleight of hand, a mechanism to backfill a substantial and damaging reduction in funding from central government.

The detailed budget proposals for 2025/26 reveals the stark reality. The local government settlement has seen the complete removal of the Rural Services Delivery Grant Circa £750k per year, the Services Grant Circa £750k per year, and partial funding of the NI increase leaving a deficit of Circa £800k. Compounding this, the abolition of the minimum funding guarantee has resulted in a direct annual funding reduction for NYFRS of over £2.3m. The precept increase, therefore, is not an injection of new money to improve services; it is a desperate and regressive tax hike on local residents to plug a financial hole created by Whitehall.

While your Plan acknowledges a duty to "make the case for fair central funding," the first budget under this new Mayoral authority does the opposite. It passively accepts these swingeing cuts and immediately passes the financial burden onto the local taxpayer. This has created a precarious and unsustainable financial structure for NYFRS. In the 2025/26 budget, an alarming 68% of the service's total funding will now be drawn from the local council tax precept. This represents a dangerous over-reliance on a local tax base, making the service vulnerable to future economic shocks and central government caps on precept increases.

The fundamental issue is that a regressive local tax is being used to subsidise national austerity. The framing of the £24 rise as a local solution to the problem of under-investment is misleading. It is a direct transfer of the financial burden from the progressive national tax system to a regressive local one, disproportionately affecting lower-income households. This is not a sustainable funding model for a critical 999 service. It is a political choice that makes the safety of North Yorkshire contingent on the continued willingness and ability of local people to pay more whilst getting less, for a core emergency service that should be funded adequately as a national priority. We urge you, as Mayor, to reject this model, refuse to absorb these cuts, stop the postcode lottery of fire cover in North Yorkshire and lead a robust campaign to demand the fair central funding that North Yorkshire deserves.

The Plan's third priority, to "Provide an effective emergency response... as quickly as possible," is the most fundamental duty of any fire and rescue service. Yet, this ambition is utterly divorced from the operational reality in North Yorkshire. An analysis of the service's capability reveals an organisation that is failing to meet this objective, critically hampered by a broken staffing model, geographical challenges that are amplified by chronic under-funding and under-resourcing.

The operational model of NYFRS is built on a foundation of sand. Approximately 70% of its fire cover is dependent on the on-call (or retained) duty system. Twenty-seven of our fire stations are crewed solely by on-call firefighters, with a further seven day-crewed stations reliant on them for additional cover. This model is in a state of national crisis, a fact recognised by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) in their 2023 State of Fire Report, which highlighted the "unsustainability of the current on-call duty system" as a major challenge requiring a "system-wide and constructive response."

In North Yorkshire, this national problem is dangerously acute. Our own data and the experience of our members on the ground point to a chronic shortage of on-call firefighters, plagued by unsustainable recruitment and retention problems. The Plan's objective to

"maximise the availability of fire engines" is therefore a hollow promise, as it is fundamentally undermined by the systemic unsustainability of the very model it relies upon, despite the unwavering professionalism, dedication and commitment of our On Call / RDS members. Without a radical and funded plan to reform or replace this crewing system, fire engine availability, particularly in the deep rural areas that characterise our county, will continue to be dangerously and unpredictably unreliable.

The direct and inevitable consequence of this failing model is starkly illustrated in the service's own performance data. A 2024 study, analysing Home Office data, revealed the shocking fact that **North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service has the slowest average emergency response time in the entire United Kingdom, at 12 minutes and 37 seconds.**

This is not an unavoidable consequence of the county's rurality; it is a direct result of political and financial choices regarding funding, crewing models, and strategic fire station location. The service's own response standards, an average of 13 minutes for all incidents and 11 minutes for dwelling fires are unambitious and appear to have been set to manage public expectation downwards rather than to drive genuine improvement. These standards tacitly accept a level of service and a time delay to life-threatening incidents that would be deemed utterly unacceptable in other brigades.

The slow response time is systemically embedded in the over-reliance on the on-call model. The service's own documents acknowledge that on-call crewing incurs a "five-minute turn in time" for firefighters to travel from their homes or workplaces to the fire station *before* an appliance can even begin its journey to the incident. This is a built-in, five-minute delay that wholtime crews, who are based at the station, do not have. When this initial delay is compounded by the significant travel distances required to cross England's largest county which is now the norm due to years of scathing cuts and appliance unavailability, the result is the slowest response in the country. Any plan, such as the one under review, that fails to address this fundamental flaw in its crewing model cannot credibly claim it will improve response times. It is merely managing the symptoms of a chronically under-resourced and broken system.

The Plan is underpinned by a Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) consultation that puts forward two specific proposals framed as "efficiency savings." The FBU contends that these are not efficiencies in any meaningful sense. They are dangerous and reckless gambles that transfer risk directly from the fire and rescue service to the public and will inevitably lead to more developed fires, greater damage, and a higher risk of injury and death.

The service proposes to extend its current policy of not attending automatic fire alarms (AFAs) at commercial premises where no one sleeps from 12 hours a day to 24 hours a day. The rationale provided is that the majority of these alarms are false, diverting crews from other duties. While the FBU acknowledges the issue of unwanted fire signals, this proposal is a dangerously simplistic and unsafe solution.

This policy forces untrained members of staff at the premises to first investigate the cause of the alarm and then make a subjective judgement before calling 999 to confirm a fire. This process guarantees a significant, and potentially catastrophic, delay in the arrival of professional firefighters at a genuine, developing fire. It is particularly dangerous during night

hours, when a large commercial building may have only a skeleton staff of security or cleaning personnel on site, who are ill-equipped and untrained to carry out such an investigation safely or effectively.

This proposal stands in direct and shameful contradiction to the lessons learned from the Grenfell Tower tragedy. The Grenfell Inquiry has repeatedly emphasised the catastrophic consequences of delayed intervention and the critical importance of a swift, professional, and assertive fire service response. The Plan itself makes a hollow commitment to "actioning recommendations from Grenfell Inquiry Phases 1 and 2." Yet, this AFA proposal runs counter to the entire spirit of the post-Grenfell safety regime. It replaces an immediate, professional response with a delayed, amateur one. It operates on the reckless assumption that a fire will wait patiently to be "confirmed" before it develops into a major incident. For a service already grappling with the UK's slowest response times, to deliberately build in a further policy-based delay is a dereliction of its statutory duty under the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004.

The second key proposal is to replace only one of the service's two water bowsers when they are due for renewal, in order to achieve a one-off capital saving of approximately £500,000. This is presented as a sensible saving, accompanied by a vague promise to explore "more modern and effective ways of dealing with wildfires" at some unspecified point in the future.

This proposal is astonishingly short-sighted and demonstrates a wilful disregard for recent operational experience. It comes as we are still dealing with the Langdale Moor wildfire which has clearly identified a need for significant investment in improved specialist wildfire equipment, and vehicles along with a service adequately resourced with increased firefighter numbers. This incident was declared a major incident, ultimately covering 25 square kilometres, and required a massive multi-agency response that stretched NYFRS and its neighbours to their absolute limits. The response necessitated mutual aid from at least eight other fire and rescue services and the deployment of national resilience assets. The crucial role of water transport was highlighted by the extensive support from local farmers and gamekeepers, who used their own slurry tankers to help get water to the remote fire ground, all which has come at a significant cost to the Service.

The Langdale Moor fire provided the starkest possible evidence of the immense challenge of supplying water to large, remote moorland fires. To propose cutting the service's specialist water-carrying capability in the immediate aftermath of such an event proves that this decision is not being led by a strategic assessment of risk. It is a finance-led cut, pure and simple. The saving of £500,000 is a false economy that pales in comparison to the immense economic, environmental, and social cost of a major wildfire. With climate change making such incidents more frequent and severe, this proposal represents a wilful and dangerous disregard for the most significant and obvious emerging risk facing North Yorkshire along with flooding and Water Rescue which is surprisingly not identified within this Plan.

## Conclusion and FBU Recommendations

The Fire Brigades Union cannot and will not support the North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Plan 2025-2029 in its current form. It is not a strategy for a safer North Yorkshire. It is a roadmap for managing decline, a document that locks in unacceptably slow response times, introduces dangerous new risks to public and firefighter safety, and is built upon an unstable financial foundation.

The FBU's alternative vision is for a service that is genuinely resilient and fit for the future. This requires:

- A service funded fairly and sustainably by central government, with a funding formula that recognises the true cost of providing comprehensive fire cover across England's largest and most sparsely populated county.
- A response model based on a professional and resilient mix of wholetime firefighters, strategically located to reduce response times, supported by a properly reformed and resourced on-call system.
- A service that is equipped to meet the challenges of the 21st century, including the increasing threat from climate change, rather than one that sells off its vital equipment to make short-term savings.

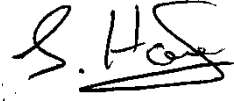
We believe this is the vision that you, as Mayor, should be pursuing. We therefore make the following formal recommendations:

1. **Withdraw the Plan:** Immediately withdraw the Fire and Rescue Plan 2025-2029 and the associated Community Risk Management Plan proposals pending a fundamental, independent, and transparent review.
2. **Demand Fair Funding:** Immediately launch and lead a cross-party campaign, with the full support of the FBU, to demand the reinstatement of the Rural Services Delivery Grant and to secure a new national funding formula that adequately reflects the unique costs and risks associated with providing fire and rescue services in North Yorkshire.
3. **Scrap Dangerous "Efficiencies":** Immediately and permanently scrap the proposals to extend the non-attendance policy for Automatic Fire Alarms and to reduce the service's fleet of water bowzers. These proposals introduce unacceptable risks and are based on a false economy.
4. **Invest in Wholetime Crewing:** Commission an independent review, with full FBU participation, to identify strategic locations where a shift from on-call to a wholetime or day-crewed duty system would have the greatest positive impact on improving emergency response times and providing essential resilience to the wider on-call network.
5. **Fundamentally Reform the On-Call System:** Commit to working in genuine partnership with the FBU to address the systemic crisis in on-call recruitment, retention, and availability. This must include a comprehensive review of remuneration, training commitments, and the development of robust employer support schemes to make the role a viable and attractive long-term option.

The FBU is not opposed to change, but we are implacably opposed to changes that compromise firefighter and public safety. We urge you to reject this flawed Plan and work with us to build the fire and rescue service that the people of York and North Yorkshire deserve.

We look forward to your response and to meeting with you and the CFO to discuss these grave concerns in person.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Howley', with a horizontal line drawn underneath the name.

**Steve Howley**  
Brigade Secretary  
North Yorkshire Fire Brigades Union