



22 September 2025

Chief Fire Officer
Peter Rickard

When telephoning ask for
Peter Rickard

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Dear Minister

Congratulations on your appointment as our Minister for Building Safety, Fire and Democracy.

I am pleased to see that on two occasions in November 2023, you have spoken in the House of Commons in support of FRS funding.

Please see my response below in relation to the Fair Funding Review 2.0 Consultation which was forwarded to your predecessor, Alex Norris MP, on the 6 August. I can confirm I received a response from him on 1 September and would like to correct a point made within the minister's letter; which stated Cleveland Fire Authority has received a 23.4% increase in our core spending in 2025/26 compared to 2024/25. This is incorrect. The actual figure is 2.3%, an easy mistake to make!

Before writing to you, I have considered the additional information I feel needs to be outlined in order to make our concerning financial position clear.

I have served in the sector for over 24 years and have worked in the London Fire Brigade and West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service (this was a County Council Fire and Rescue Service and as such I was a Director of the County Council) before being appointed as Chief Fire Officer of Cleveland.

I can honestly say that never in my career have I been more concerned about our financial position and subsequent impact to our communities than I am now. I believe that fire and rescue services should be seen as an anchor institution to the people we serve and support. In an area like Cleveland, with our high levels of crime, high levels of social vulnerability, highest level of arson and one of the highest levels of child poverty in the country, I believe that we can be part of the solution. However, many of the initiatives and programmes we deliver within the community that support vulnerable people are not a statutory responsibility.

Cleveland Fire Brigade

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Further reductions will impact our frontline services and our ability to make this difference. Delivery of non-statutory responsibilities will simply no longer be an option and this will severely impact some of the most vulnerable members of our community. An example would be our ongoing programme with Catcote Futures, a special educational needs establishment for people in post-16 education. Cleveland Fire Brigade have developed a placement programme for their students which has been highlighted in their recent Ofsted inspection as an outstanding example of an employee-led programme that supports personal development.

Sir Andy Cooke in his 2024 State of Policing report made the below observation:

“The result of both the police allocation formula and council tax system means that the more grant-dependent, deprived and urban parts of England and Wales are more likely to be underfunded compared to their needs... Cleveland is the force with the lowest numbers of officers compared to its number in March 2010. It has experienced a reduction of 12 percent. This is worrying, considering its policing area contains some of the most deprived communities in England and Wales”.

Whilst this is a statement in relation to police from Sir Andy, it equally applies to us in Cleveland Fire Brigade. The only difference being Cleveland Fire Brigade has seen a reduction of 34 percent of our wholtime firefighters. Based on our net forecast, Cleveland Fire Brigade could have a budget deficit of £2.973m. This is between 2026/27 to 2028/29, and could lead to a further reduction of over 20 percent of our firefighters in Cleveland, and possibly 60 further firefighter posts.

I understand that Alex Norris MP diary pressures did not allow for a meeting, but I am hopeful you might be able to make the time to hear first hand the effect that funding reductions having in the North East. I have spoken to the other three Chief Officer's in my region, and they would also appreciate the opportunity to attend this meeting if you are able to accommodate us.

I am incredibly proud to be part of the North East, and have chosen with my wife to move here from Kent to raise our family and make a difference. I know with the right support Cleveland Fire Brigade can truly have an even greater positive impact within the North East.

The final point I wish to make is most worrying. In the last twelve months, Cleveland Fire Brigade has had two significant fires, both of which have exhausted the total number of appliances that we had available in Cleveland. On the last occasion, fire cover had to be maintained across Cleveland by our two neighbouring fire and rescue services. This is against a backdrop of our 26 top tier COMAH sites and a Brigade that sits within the Metropolitan Service Family Group.

Cleveland Fire Brigade's Response to the Fair Funding Review 2.0 Consultation

I am writing as the Chief Fire Officer of Cleveland Fire Brigade (CFB) regarding the current Fair Funding Review. I am supported by the Cleveland Fire Authority. The Authority welcomes the opportunity to comment on this consultation and hopes the Government will address the concerns set out in the following paragraphs. The Authority greatly appreciates the actions the Government is taking to reform the funding system and return to multi-year settlements - which are essential for long term planning of local Fire and Rescue Services.

The Authority welcomes the statement in the Ministerial Foreword that “too many areas have felt the combined impact of reducing government support and low historical tax bases to raise income from.” This is exactly the position faced by Cleveland Fire Authority as a result of the previous government's austerity programme and is a concern we have raised for many, many years.

The assumptions set out within the consultation, and consequential modelling by the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC), would worryingly see a continuance of the North East and Cleveland Fire Authority, specifically, suffering even greater financial challenges in what are some of the most deprived areas of the country, with one of the highest concentration of COMAH sites in England. If applied as is proposed, this will lead to cuts in front line (Firefighters) service provision. Cleveland Fire Authority provides fire and rescue services to around 570,000 residents, living in 267,000 properties across Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland, and Stockton. Since 2014, CFB has lost 34% of its wholetime firefighters which is above the national average.

The Authority supports many of the comments made by the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) in its response to the consultation. However, as the consultation proposal has different impacts on individual Fire and Rescue Services (FRSs), this letter outlines those areas most relevant to Cleveland Fire Authority and the wider North East.

1. Legacy of Austerity funding cuts

In responses to previous years' annual Local Government Finance Settlements, we highlighted the disproportionate impact of the previous government's funding cuts on the Authority. This situation was compounded by our low tax base, which means we only fund **43%** of Core Spending Power from Council Tax, compared to an FRS average of **60%** and **73%** for the FRSs least reliant on Government grant funding.

Consequently, Cleveland Fire Authority had to reduce the number of wholetime firefighters by 34%, which is a third greater than the total reduction for all FRSs of 25%.

We appreciate the funding challenges facing the Government and are not arguing for restoration of previous funding levels, or a levelling up of the previous reduction in the number of whole-time firefighters.

However, this position needs to be recognised in the funding arrangements for 2026/27 and future years, as individual FRSs are starting from different places. Therefore, we believe all FRSs should have the same percentage increase in Core Spending Power for 2026/27 and future years. The following points explain why this is important and how it can be achieved.

2. Future Spending Pressures 2026/27 onwards

The Fire and Rescue Service is a people-focused service, and the majority of all FRSs annual budgets are spent on pay budgets – typically 80%. All FRS therefore face the same financial pressures in relation to national pay awards for both Green and Grey book staff.

Similarly, non-pay budgets are spent on the same broad categories (including derv for fire appliance, energy costs/business rates for operational fire stations, insurances and uniform costs). Therefore, all FRSs face the same annual percentage inflation increases.

In view of the broadly similar percentage increase in costs facing all FRSs the future funding system needs to provide all FRSs with the same basic increase in Core Spending Power. If this is not the case this Authority will continue to face the combined impact of reducing government support and a low council tax base to raise

income from. This will result in the stark reality that many FRSs, including this Authority, will again be cutting services (including cuts in the number of fire fighters), whilst other FRSs will have resources to increase services, or avoid having to increase Council Tax by £5.

3. NFCC proposal for a dedicated funding system

We support the NFCC view that there is a strong rationale for the Fire and Rescue Service to be considered in a comparable manner to policing, with its own dedicated funding system.

4. Cleveland Fire Authority further proposal for dedicated funding system

A dedicated funding system would recognise that individual FRSs do not act alone and support a system of national resilience. We believe that a dedicated funding system could address the issues detailed in point 2 above.

We agreed with the view expressed in the NFCC that the Government should not assume full utilisation of referendum principles as a justification for a reduction in Government grants.

We would be content if use of the referendum principle assumption was built into a dedicated funding system and sat alongside an increase in Government funding. This would then create a known national funding “resource” and enable the Government to allocate more Government funding to areas with a low Council Tax base.

The objective of the system would be to ensure all FRSs receive the same annual increase in total funding, accepting the principle that some individual FRSs would achieve less of this increase from the £5 referendum increase and more from an increase in Government funding. With other FRSs achieving more of the increase from the £5 referendum increase and less from an increase in Government funding.

To make such a system work, a national percentage increase in total FRS “resources” (i.e. Council Tax income plus Government support) would need to be set. It will be a decision for Government to set this total, although it needs to recognise unavoidable inflation pressures.

5. Specific Grants

We understand the rationale for the government’s plan to simplify the grant landscape. It is our understanding that for council grant regimes there is significant duplication and overlap and better service outcomes can be achieved from the Government proposals.

However, for grants paid to FRSs we have very significant concerns these proposals may produce unintended outcomes and compound the impact of potential core grant cuts.

We believe that grants provided for specific cost pressures (i.e. to cover increases in the Employers’ Pension contribution for fire fighters arising from national actuarial revaluation and increases in Employer’s National Insurance contributions for Green

and Grey book employees) should continue. This will ensure transparency for the impact of national policy decisions on costs and the funding provided.

In summary, Cleveland Fire Authority had to manage some of the largest reductions in Core Spending Power as a result of the previous Government's austerity regime. We addressed these issues successfully and believe the Authority is efficient and effective.

However, this means we will be starting 2026/27 in a more challenging position than most other FRSs – as evidenced by the 34% reduction in whole-time firefighters compared to an FRS average reduction of 25%. Therefore, it is essential that the significant concerns we have raised and our proposal to address these issues are addressed before the funding reforms for 2026/27 and future years are determined.

This is a similar position faced by my colleagues in the fire and rescues services across the country, noting the North East is disproportionately impacted.

My hope would be in welcoming you to the North East, and Cleveland Fire Brigade. This is an offer I am sure you have received from the other Chiefs in the region. We are a proud, passionate and dedicated group serving our communities, who are concerned about the risks we face with the reduction in funding.

We look forward to welcoming you to the North East when your diary permits.

Yours sincerely,



PETER RICKARD
CHIEF FIRE OFFICER

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