

London Safety Plan Team  
London Fire Brigade  
169 Union Street  
London SE1 0LL

17<sup>th</sup> June 2013

Dear Sir/Madam,

**Re: Consultation on the Fifth London Safety Plan 2013-2016**

I am responding to the consultation on the Fifth London Safety Plan.

In the last few years alone, there have been three major fires in my constituency. I've seen fire fighters battle huge fires in Warner Road in Camberwell, Sumner Road in Peckham and, of course the terrible blaze at Lakanal House in Camberwell, one of the most tragic fires in London's recent history.

The Plan shows that the London Fire Brigade (LFB) are going to make £45 million cuts over the next two years and has decided to close 12 fire stations and cut 18 fire engines and 520 fire-fighter posts across London.

While I appreciate that frontline emergency services, including the LFB, are facing a squeeze on their budgets as a result of the Government's austerity drive, I am concerned that these proposals fail to take account of potential new risks.

**Camberwell and Peckham**

Camberwell and Peckham has high levels of deprivation with many people living in temporary accommodation and crowded social housing.

Southwark also has a large number of high rise blocks (68 blocks of 10 storeys and above) and large estates with complex entry and exit roads with one way systems which can make speed of response and access difficult for fire engines.

Peckham Fire Station, located metres from Lakanal House, was the first to respond to the Lakanal House fire, with fire fighters arriving within minutes. I strongly support the work of our local fire-fighters as I made clear on a recent visit to the Peckham station to discuss the essential work that they do for our communities.

The Plan proposes to close Southwark station completely, leaving three stations to cover the whole borough and cut one engine from Peckham station, which means it will lose 50% capacity.

### **Longer response times**

According to LFB, the impact of these closures will mean it will take longer for both the first and second fire engines to arrive at an incident in the Southwark area. Research by the LFB shows that fire engine arrival times in all Southwark wards will increase by an average of 32 seconds for the first engine and 38 seconds for the second one.

In Camberwell and Peckham specifically, two wards will see an increase of over 1 minute: Nunhead, the 3<sup>rd</sup> most deprived ward in Southwark, will see an average increase of 1 minute 35 seconds and Peckham Rye will see an average increase of 1 minute. This is important because seconds count as fires can escalate quickly.

In the case of Lakanal, the conditions on that day (high wind, open windows with flammable curtains, fire spreading downwards, the failure of 'compartmentation' to contain the fire) caused the fire to escalate in minutes reaching heat intensities that even experienced fire-fighters said they had never faced.

The fire-fighters had to climb several flights of stairs wearing breathing apparatus and carrying heavy equipment which added several valuable minutes to the rescue attempt.

I am concerned that the inevitable increase in response times for some of the most deprived areas of my constituency would put at risk some of the most vulnerable members of the community.

### **Fire prevention and familiarisation visits**

Fire fighters also spend time on fire prevention work, educating communities about fire risks and undertaking familiarisation visits to residential buildings. The Lakanal House fire showed how crucial it is for local fire services to be familiar with the complex and sometimes unusual layout of key buildings in their area.

Lakanal House had not been risk assessed before the fire and the unusual maisonette style layout confused fire-fighters at the height of the fire causing precious minutes to be lost. The coroner made a number of recommendations for improved fire safety inspections to prevent such incidents from happening again. These visits which are essential, take time and resources.

I am concerned therefore that any reduction in the number of officers or fire engines would risk improvements to this important area of preventative work.

In recent years, the number of fires and deaths caused by fire in London has been steadily decreasing. But this should not be used as justification for the proposed cuts which I believe pose an unacceptable risk to communities in my constituency.

We should never be complacent when it comes to public safety. Lakanal was devastating for the families who lost loved ones, to the fire-fighters who were not able to save them and for the confidence of communities living in high rise buildings.

My constituents need to be assured that their local fire service is able to respond quickly and effectively and that any cuts in service would take account of a rigorous risk assessment and not just financial cost. As Val Shawcross, London Assembly Member for Lambeth & Southwark has outlined in her response to this proposal, there are ways to make appropriate levels of savings at Mayoral level without cutting London's frontline emergency services.

I do not therefore support the Plan as proposed because I believe that if implemented in full, it will put lives unnecessarily at risk. I would urge the Mayor to take into account the strong views expressed by local communities and other stakeholders who have participated in this consultation, and to think again in light of the concerns I have raised above.

Best wishes,

*Harriet Harman MP*

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