

Another 18 minute delayed response to a Selsey fire



A home in Beach Gardens, Selsey was badly damaged on 21st January 2017, when it took the first fire engine **18 minutes** to arrive.

It is now 5 months since there was an **18 minute delay** attending the Selsey Academy fire. Yet West Sussex County Council is still failing to properly protect the 10,000+ residents of Selsey.

Initial safe response took over half an hour to reach Selsey

At least 9 firefighters are required at a building fire for safe and effective firefighting. It was **31 minutes** before that minimum response, sent by the Sussex Fire Control Centre, arrived at the Selsey Academy fire

It was only luck that meant Selsey firefighters heard about the fire and responded. Without that piece of luck WSCC's arrangements would have seen an appalling delay.

Cabinet Member misleads Council on Selsey fire

After finally admitting the initial delay at the Selsey Academy fire last August, Cabinet Member David Barling told a County Council meeting that "lots of other engines all turned up within a few minutes of each other".

A Freedom of Information request has shown that to be untrue. It was nearly **3 hours** before the 14 fire engines needed had all arrived. The real times were:

1 fire engine	18 minutes
4 fire engines	31 minutes
8 fire engines	1 hour, 5 minutes
14 fire engines	2 hours, 56 mins.

Such delays are unacceptable. Sadly, it is only a matter of time before such delays cost lives.

Poor Fire & Rescue Service accountability & scrutiny

Council Leader Louise Goldsmith would have us believe that WSCC has effective accountability and scrutiny for the service. So let us see how effective that has been.

WSCC uses the Environmental & Community Services Select Committee to carry out that role. It was scheduled to meet 11 times last year, but cancelled the December meeting "for lack of business".

Last year our fire & rescue service was only discussed at two of those meetings. So, in 2016 there was just:

1 hour and 15 minutes of accountability & scrutiny

Compare that with East Sussex, where Councillors discussed the fire & rescue service at 14 meetings. Four meetings were of the fire & rescue Scrutiny & Audit Panel. By comparison, West Sussex accountability and scrutiny is wholly inadequate.

It is time for Louise Goldsmith to wake up and realise that rubber stamping a couple of reports, after a few questions, is not effective accountability and scrutiny.

Labour, Liberal Democrat and UKIP Councillors do their best to challenge and question, but Conservative Councillors blindly back their Cabinet Member.

"The quicker our crews can get to a fire in someone's home, the better chance they have of saving both lives and property."

WSFRS 2011-12 Annual Report

So why is it now taking longer?

Less Calls?

WSCC often talk of less calls. 2015/16 saw a slight rise on the previous year. Worryingly, the 2016/17 figures so far show a **5% increase** on the 2015/16 figures (April to November).

Sussex Control Centre secret report



The vital combined mobilising system for the Sussex Fire Control is nearly **four years overdue**. Is it the fault of the suppliers, or of the Fire & Rescue Services? We don't know, because this fiasco is shrouded in secrecy. We know the supplier has mobilising systems working in other fire authorities, including some ordered after the Sussex contract.

Perhaps the problem lies closer to home. We need to be told if reports that senior managers in East and West Sussex have been bickering about how the system will operate are true. Were changes made to the specification after the contract was signed? How many times has the system failed tests and why? How many more failures will be accepted?

These are just some of the questions that need to be answered, but **East Sussex Fire Authority excluded the press and public when they discussed a report on the Sussex Control Centre last month.**

This Control Centre is responsible for handling all West Sussex fire & rescue calls, sending West Sussex fire engines and day to day management of available resources. So it is wrong for West Sussex residents and Councillors to be kept in the dark. What are the East Sussex Fire Authority trying to cover up?

It is reported that a consultant has now been brought in to manage the project. Has the consultant been told to get the system right, or simply to get the system in use, even if it is not up to standard? Consultants have the luxury of being able to walk away without having to deal with any subsequent problems. It should be staff working in the Sussex Fire Control who should have the final say on whether the system is safe and reliable.

Our Councillors must investigate the unacceptable delay and ensure that the system is only accepted when it is proven to be suitable. WSCC must not just pass the buck to East Sussex.

West Sussex deserves better.

Did West Sussex County Council inspire President Trump?

When it comes to the Fire & Rescue Service, WSCC have been using “alternative facts” for some time. Of course “alternative facts” are not facts at all, just inaccuracies or fiction. Here are just a few examples

WSCC Fiction	The Real Facts
“Hampshire Fire & Rescue don’t actually come a great deal in to West Sussex, approximately its about 50 times every year” - <i>Cabinet Member David Barling</i>	Hampshire fire crews attend West Sussex incidents on average 145 times per year. They also standby at West Sussex fire stations, but those figures are hidden.
“We absolutely do not agree that the changes will lead to an extra death every two years” - <i>Claire Byrd (WSFRS spokesperson)</i>	WSFRS published figures were: No change = 53.7 deaths each year. Planned changes = 54.3 deaths (or 0.6 extra per year).
Referring to the ‘reverse the fire service cuts’ petition statement – “the biggest piece of misinformation I have heard in this chamber” - <i>Cabinet Member David Barling</i>	Every statistic used was published by West Sussex County Council, or the Government. Every fact in the statement was verified by serving firefighters.
Fire service prevention work has “helped to significantly reduce the number of people killed or seriously injured in fires in the home” - <i>WSCC public consultation documents</i>	When this was published, official figures showed fire deaths had increased in West Sussex in each of the previous five years, from one to six. Injuries increased by 21%.
Asked how WSCC would respond to the Hampshire fire service cuts consultation, concerned residents were told, “we do not comment on other authorities, because we just don’t do that” – <i>WSCC Leader Louise Goldsmith</i>	The following morning Louise Goldsmith emailed her Chief Fire Officer and said: “I expect there have been discussions about this change and we are responding to the consultation”.
At a County Local Committee meeting in Chichester - “There are no proposals to reduce the number of fire engines” - <i>Adrian Murphy, Area Manager for WSFRS</i>	The proposals were to reduce the number of fire engines from 40 to 35. Two of those to be cut were in the Chichester District Council area. They have all now been cut.

Crewing Optimisation Group

Cabinet Member David Barling told Councillors that this group was keeping an extra four Retained (part-time) crewed fire engines available. Yet now it appears that COG firefighters are being diverted from crewing fire engines, resulting in only one or two extra fire engines being available.

COG firefighters were recently sent on a community event, even though Petworth’s fire engine needed more firefighters. When a house fire was reported in Petworth, fire engines had to travel 7 miles from Midhurst and 9 miles from Billingshurst. Luckily, the fire turned out to be minor and no lives were endangered, but it could have been very different.

WSCC has other staff to cover these events, so **firefighters should not be diverted from crewing fire engines.**

West Sussex failing to comply with legal duties

The Fire & Rescue Services Act says that West Sussex County Council must provide “personnel, services and equipment necessary efficiently to meet all normal requirements”.

The dreadful response times shown in this newsletter and elsewhere cannot be regarded as efficient. Having fire engines out of action more often than they are available, because there are not enough firefighters to crew them is not efficient.

Yet instead of finding solutions, Cabinet Member David Barling just makes excuses. He clearly has no respect for the law. The Fire & Rescue Services Act does not say you don’t have to do it, if you can come up with excuses. It is not optional Mr Barling, it is your duty.

You may ask why WSCC has not been taken to task for their failure. Partly it is because the Minister responsible and the Cabinet Member are in the same political party. Mainly though, it is the lack of an independent inspectorate that lets WSCC provide an inferior level of protection to West Sussex residents.

Then there is the Civil Contingencies Act. The Act deals with ensuring essential services can be provided at times of high demand or when major problems undermine day to day service.

WSCC cuts have undermined the ability of the fire & rescue service to meet normal demand. Less firefighters and less fire engines now make it impossible to properly meet the requirements of the Civil Contingencies Act.

West Sussex Response Targets below par & missed

Hampshire 8 minutes - West Sussex 14 minutes

West Sussex County Council has set targets for the arrival of the fire & rescue service at critical fires of between 8 and 14 minutes. They are only required to achieve that on at least 80% of calls. So, if you live in the wrong place you have a one in five chance of help taking **more than 14 minutes to arrive.**

How does that compare? The 80% target in **Hampshire is just 8 minutes.** In Kent, Norfolk, Surrey and Devon & Somerset it is **10 minutes.** In Suffolk and Oxfordshire it is **11 minutes.** Those times apply to all locations in those fire service areas.

Not only does West Sussex have very low response targets, they can’t even achieve them all. For life-threatening incidents, such as crashes with people trapped, the target is 13 minutes.

Latest figures show casualties wait more than 13 minutes for help at one in four of those calls (25.5%).