

REPORT OF THE HEREFORD & WORCESTER FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY TO THE CONSTITUENT AUTHORITIES

Meetings Held on 18 May 2004, 14 June, 2004, 22 July, 2004 and 27 September 2004

ORGANISATIONAL OBJECTIVES

1. The Constituent Authorities were advised in March 2004 that the Fire Authority, having been empowered to set its own precept for 2004/2005, had set a revenue budget of £26.798 million, a Band D Council Tax of £60.21 per annum.
2. The Secretary of State announced in April that he intended to lower the Authority's budget requirement by £2.044 million to £24.754 million. Following representations by the Authority the Government subsequently capped the Authority's budget at £25.798 million, a Band D Council Tax of £56.48 per annum.
3. It is important to recognise that the Fire and Rescue Service in Herefordshire and Worcestershire continues to be relatively poorly funded through its share of national taxes. Its grant allocation is 24.5% per citizen below the average for shire Combined Fire Authorities. The Authority's budgeted cost per citizen at £35.71 will now be 6.5% below average for shire Combined Fire Authorities. The Authority would need to invest another £2.51 per citizen or £1.813 million in the Service for it to be funded at the level of the average. It is considered that it is a perverse system that would now deem any further investment in the service as excessive.
4. Unfortunately, the Government restrictions on the Authority's budget have slowed down the progress of the Authority's ambitions and aspirations. This has, in particular, impacted upon the implementation of the Fire Authority's Integrated Risk Management Plan, which has been constrained in a number of areas. In order to ensure the Authority remains within the restricted 2004/05 budget a number of support staff vacancies have been left unfilled. This has weakened support functions and created workload difficulties for remaining staff. However, whilst the budget difficulties are regrettable, the Authority can still achieve improvements and make progress, albeit at a slower pace than originally intended.

OPERATIONAL STATISTICS

5. During the period 1 April 2004 to 30 September 2004 the Brigade attended some 5,300 incidents (this includes all types of Fire, All False Alarms and Special Service Incidents). More statistics and details of notable incidents have been reported to the Authority and can be found on the Brigade's website (www.hwfire.org.uk).

MODERNISATION

6. The national agreement on Fire Service pay and conditions, finalised in June last year included a condition that the pay award at stages two and three was subject to verification by the Audit Commission. The aims and objectives of the national verification process were to identify if the intended benefits (including savings) of the various national changes were being delivered locally.

7. On the basis of the results of the verification study fieldwork, the Commission has made an assessment that little progress has been made by Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Authority, and therefore the Authority was graded as “red”, as were three other Fire Authorities within England and Wales.
8. The Authority has been advised that there are reservations about the study. In particular, while the auditor makes reference to the Authority’s funding difficulties and the difficulty in reaching agreement with local staff representatives on implementation of some aspects of the modernisation process, it was evident that in the final analysis these factors were largely ignored and the Authority was compared to all other Fire Authorities on the basis that it was operating in a mode of ‘business as usual’, which is clearly not the case. As a result of the cap on the budget, funding is not available to make progress as had been planned. However, the Authority recognises that it needs to move forward and has provided an action plan to the auditors indicating how it will do so.

INTEGRATED RISK MANAGEMENT PLAN

9. As previously reported the Authority is required to produce an Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP). The purpose of the Plan is to provide a strategic overview of all aspects of service delivery and determine current and future policy. It is intended to make the service more responsive to locally identified needs and better able to deliver community safety. The second annual action plan has been approved for consultation.
10. The first IRMP identified a number of areas where the Authority could contribute to improvements in community safety. Unfortunately the restrictions on the Authority’s budget have slowed down the progress in meeting the Authority’s ambitions and aspirations. This has, in particular, impacted upon the delivery of the Community Safety Strategy, including partnership working and plans to improve service provision to “hard to reach” groups. However, some improvements have been made.

FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICES ACT 2004

11. The Constituent Authorities were informed earlier this year of the provisions of the Fire and Rescue Services Bill. The Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 has now been enacted. This Act supersedes the previous 1947 Fire Services Act and has added a number of additional statutory duties, which Fire Authorities have a duty to discharge. Many of the existing duties/responsibilities and powers which were part of the 1947 Fire Services Act have been included in the 2004 Act. However, in some instances these will make little or no difference to the work of the Authority as the Authority has already been undertaking these tasks. The Act does however put these activities on a statutory footing and this is to be welcomed.
12. Principal features of the Act are:
 - **Fire Safety** - The Act extends the powers of Fire Authorities, providing a wider remit in relation to community fire safety. There is a new duty enabling a Fire Authority to make arrangements for the provision of information, publicity and encouragement regarding steps to prevent fires and death or injury by fire. While the Brigade has already been engaged in many fire safety initiatives this has previously been on a voluntary basis, there being no legislative requirement to engage in these activities. The Act now places this work on a statutory footing.

- **Road Traffic Accidents** - There is also now a statutory requirement for Fire Authorities to make provision for the purpose of rescuing people in the event of road traffic accidents in its area and an additional duty of protecting people from serious harm, to the extent that it considers reasonable to do so in the event of road traffic accidents in its area.
 - **National Resilience** - A new duty has been included in the Act which refers to the power to respond to other eventualities. This Section of the Act underpins the Fire and Rescue Services' contribution to national resilience, through new powers to direct Fire and Rescue Authorities during particular specific emergencies to ensure a co-ordinated and strategic response to a wide range of emergency incidents.
 - **National Framework Document** - The Act provides for the Fire and Rescue National Framework document, the latest version of which was published on 16 July 2004 to have statutory effect. It places a duty on the Secretary of State to keep the Framework up-to-date and report against it at least once every two years. The Framework sets out the Government's requirements for the Fire and Rescue Service and the support it will provide. The Act provides the power to ensure that the Fire and Rescue Authorities have regard to the strategic priorities/objectives and guidance set out in the Framework document.
 - **Combination Schemes** - The provisions of the previous Act with regard to reinforcement schemes and arrangements for discharging functions of one Authority by another have been retained in the new Act. Additionally, there is provision for the Secretary of State to combine Fire Authorities where it appears to the Secretary of State that in the interest of economy, efficiency and effectiveness or public safety there should be a single Fire and Rescue Authority for a combined area.
 - **Charging for Services** - The Act maintains the existing ability for Fire and Rescue Authorities to charge for particular services (these exclude statutory functions) but has added that a Fire Authority may not authorise charging for emergency/medical assistance. Whilst no specific charging regimes have been established, the Act has effectively limited the amount that the Authority may charge for services rendered. In this regard it states, *"in setting the amount of charge, the Authority must secure that, taking one financial year with another, the Authority's income from charges does not exceed the cost to the Authority of taking the action for which the charges are imposed"*.
 - **Failing Authorities** - The Act confers new powers on the Secretary of State to take action in respect of a failing Authority or one that is likely to fail. In this regard, the Secretary of State may by Order require the Authority to do something, stop doing something or not to do something.
 - **Government Support for Other Agencies** - A new power has been included in the Act which allows the Secretary of State to provide and maintain, or contribute to the provision and maintenance of, any equipment, facilities or services he considers appropriate for promoting the economy efficiency and effectiveness of Fire and Rescue Services. Additionally, the Secretary of State may establish, maintain or contribute to the establishment/maintenance of any organisation he considers appropriate for promoting the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the Fire and Rescue Authorities.
13. Finally, the title of the new Act reflects the changing role of Fire Services over the past fifty years and recognises the wider rescue role e.g. rescues from collapsed structures, vehicles and flooding. In this regard the title "Fire Brigade" is seen to be too narrow and the Act requires that this should be changed to one that more aptly

describes the role of Fire Brigades. As a consequence the Authority has agreed that the Brigade will now be called the Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service and the Authority will now be called the Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Authority.

COMMUNITY FIRE SAFETY

14. The Authority has noted progress on a wide range of Community Fire Safety (CFS) initiatives.

Home Fire Safety Checks (HFSCs)

15. The Brigade continues to make excellent progress in delivering home fire safety checks across all areas of Herefordshire and Worcestershire.
16. The CFS Department has also commenced a full review of Home Fire Safety Checks (HFSCs) in line with the IRMP Strategy.
17. The review consisted of: provision of smoke alarms for the hearing impaired, provision of interpreter services; procurement of smoke alarms; heat detectors and specific fire safety equipment, consultation exercise with Operational personnel, customers and referral agencies, amendments to HFSC's guidance notes, amendments to administrative procedures following discussions with District Co-ordinators, investigating potential partnerships with Crime Reduction Officers, ensuring customers are targeted more effectively.

Education Activity

18. The Brigade continues to review and update its Education initiatives, albeit at a far more modest level as a result of capping restrictions. Such work has seen the development and production of a new Key Stage 3 pack, launched in September 2004 and assisted by working in partnership with "Smoke Free Worcestershire". Additionally, a rolling programme of Watch visits has been undertaken, aimed at assessing future development of resources for schools, which can be used to carry out targeted delivery of prevention messages with more specific emphasis on local issues. This more direct and tailored approach within the overall strategy will allow the schools' education programme to have increased relevance to young people.
19. As part of the First Year IRMP, the CFS department is undertaking extensive research to inform a future Youth Strategy. This research includes consideration of best practice identified in the thematic review 'Working with young people in the community', collaboration with a number of brigades on joint initiatives, evaluation of potential partnerships with other agencies, such as the Prince's Trust and also analysis of current youth education provision. It is envisaged that emerging outcomes will be available in Autumn 2004 and will provide the basis for a comprehensive Youth Strategy for the future.
20. Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service is one of only five Brigades in the Country who have been asked to work with the National Community Fire Safety Centre on the development of an Education Strategy. The Education Liaison Officer is currently leading on addressing Special Needs issues.

Arson Prevention

21. Sixteen Watches have received specific training in offering Arson Prevention advice, as part of an on-going programme of training aimed at increasing capacity to reduce arson related fires. The Brigade has also commenced initial discussions with both Worcestershire County Council and Herefordshire Council, looking at the feasibility of constructing a Second Generation Local Public Service Agreement 2 bid aimed at

reducing arson fires. The Police, Local Authorities and the Fire and Rescue Authority, have recognised that a range of similar problem areas exist for agencies within the two counties dealing with related issues of crime, anti-social behaviour, deliberate fire setting and vandalism. It is envisaged that a joint bid would provide a co-ordinated approach to dealing with some of these difficult issues. Further work will now continue to establish a viable bid suitable for inclusion in LPSA 2 agreements timetabled for spring 2005.

Single Inspection Methodology

22. Specialist Fire Safety Officers across the Brigade are now carrying out Fire Safety Inspections using the Single Inspection Methodology. This enables Officers to build up a true picture of the type, age and condition of the premises inspected, which will be used in two positive ways. One is to provide the Fire Service Emergency Cover (FSEC) model with tangible evidence as part of the continuing review of emergency cover. The other will allow Officers to action any trends that may arise in common areas of concern; such as a failure in testing fire alarms. This data can then be used to target specific sectors, raising the level of fire safety in businesses in a proactive approach.
23. The Fire Safety Department has been approached by the Cabinet Office Civil Contingencies Secretariat to use the Single Inspection procedure as an example of good practice where the Fire and Rescue Service can assist in raising the awareness on the issue of Business Continuity.

Buildings Regulations

24. Part B of the Building Regulations, which relates to Fire Safety, is going to be amended in the forthcoming year. As part of that process, Fire Safety Officers attended a preliminary consultation workshop to discuss common areas of concern and any possible additional safety matters, which could be included in the future amendment, such as domestic sprinklers.

National Escape Plan Campaign

25. The National Community Fire Safety Centre launched an escape plan campaign with two new leaflets, in addition to television, radio and press advertising. The first leaflet was aimed at 'standard' residences and the second, high-rise/multi-occupancy residences. The Brigade supported this campaign by handing out leaflets at open days and during Community Fire Safety activities, such as school visits. A number of stations organised 'Escape Plan' banners to be placed at suitable prominent locations throughout the summer months.

National Smoke Alarm Maintenance Campaign

26. In July, the National Community Fire Safety Centre (NCFSC) hosted a briefing at the Fire Service College in Morton-in-Marsh, to launch the smoke alarm maintenance campaign on 1 September 2004. In line with recent campaigns this will involve TV, radio and press advertising. The Brigade will support this campaign at a local level. The NCFSC has listened to representations made by various Brigades, including Hereford and Worcester, and has produced a limited number of Braille and audio tapes, alongside ethnic minority language versions of the smoke alarm advice. These will be used as appropriate to the needs of any 'at risk' members of the community.

Outreach

Horizon Centre Homework Club - Worcester

27. The Horizon Homework Club has been successful in attracting youngsters from five to twelve years of age to the Centre in Worcester. The Centre provides children with a range of indoor and outdoor educational activities. By working in partnership with the Centre, the Brigade was able to set up meaningful Fire Safety sessions relevant to the age and cultural needs of this group, re-enforcing messages delivered in the Key Stage 1 and 2 sessions in school.

Sure Start

28. Through successful partnership working, the Brigade has been able to target parents with young babies and children about the key Community Fire Safety messages and the Home Fire Safety Scheme, on an on-going basis in Worcester and Redditch. A new partnership project aimed at travelling communities has been commenced with Sure Start Leominster. This project builds on Brigade research that has highlighted the need for improved fire safety delivery to this community.

Redditch Caribbean Family Fun Day

29. The Brigade was invited to have a presence at this annual event held in August 2004. A wide cross section of visitors came to the Brigade's marquee and, it was clear from the comments made, that the local community were supportive of the Brigade's efforts to promote fire safety issues and welcomed the positive public service support offered by the Brigade at the event.

LOCAL PUBLIC SERVICE AGREEMENTS

30. As previously reported, the three year Local Public Service Agreements (LPSAs) entered into by each of the Constituent Authorities both contain an objective to be delivered in partnership with the Brigade: to achieve a reduction in the incidence of accidental fire and fire related deaths. The Agreements have a three-year life cycle to March 2005. The Authority continues to deploy the now well-established education and prevention initiatives, towards successful completion of the agreements and achievement of full LPSA targeted performance. A guideline projection indicates that final performance overall looks extremely encouraging. However, as reported previously, successful performance in the agreements is based on the final year. The Authority must therefore strive to maintain or even improve on reductions in fires, deaths and injuries for the remaining period to the end of March 2005. As referred to above, work on a second LPSA bid is underway.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

The Equality and Diversity Strategy

31. Work to implement the action plan is continuing. In line with this activity, locally based departmental delivery plans have been developed which set out local objectives and activity.

Policy Development

32. Following the internal assessment, a three-year action plan of policy review is being developed, to ensure all policies are in line with current legislation and good practice. The development phase will risk assess policies to ensure that those with highest relevance to equality and diversity are targeted earliest.

Regional Project

33. Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Authority has the lead on the Regional Management Board's (RMB) 'Improving Opportunities' Project. A regional team to take the project forward has been established and the preliminary phase of utilising a planning framework (in line with RMB guidelines) has been developed, outlining both the activities and ultimate objectives for equality and diversity across the region.

CORPORATE ISSUES

Statement of Accounts 2003/2004

34. The Authority has approved the Statement of Accounts for 2003/2004. At the time of preparing this report the external audit was still to be completed. However, there is no indication of anything other than an unqualified audit opinion being issued.

Performance Plan

35. The Authority has approved the Performance Plan for 2004/2005. The Brigade is performing well in comparison with the latest Fire Service Performance Indicators for 2002/2003 published by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. The Brigade is in overall first place for average rankings against the national suite of indicators. Performance has improved from 2001/2002, when the Brigade was in the top quartile for seven of the 24 indicators, to the position where it is now in the top quartile for 12 indicators. Although there is no longer a requirement to set top quartile targets, the Brigade will continue to monitor nationally published data and aspire to perform in the top 25% of all Brigades.

Comprehensive Performance Assessment

36. The Audit Commission has informed the Authority that it will be inspected under the Comprehensive Performance Assessment framework in February 2005.

Risk Management

37. The Authority has approved a Risk Management Strategy as part of its corporate governance arrangements. The Strategy is designed to ensure the Authority adopts best practices in the identification, evaluation and cost effective control of risks to confirm that they are eliminated or reduced to an acceptable level and that systems are in place to track and report upon existing and emerging risks that could cause damage to the Authority or its stakeholders.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS

Agenda papers of the meeting of the Combined Fire Authority held on 18 May 2004, 14 June, 2004, 22 July, 2004 and 27 September, 2004