

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council

16 October 2018

West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority

Report by Councillor John Edwards, Chair of the Authority

1. Revenue finances:

In a very similar way to Metropolitan and City local authorities across the West Midlands, core funding provided by the Government to West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority (WMFRA) has have been reduced by circa 50% (£38-million) since the cuts began in 2011.

A four year settlement for 2016/17 – 2019/20 was secured from government by the provision of a WMFRA efficiency plan. This produces the following front-loaded core funding reductions during this period:

- 2016/17 £3.278m
- 2017/18 £3.985m
- 2018/19 £1.691m
- 2019/20 £0.690m

These reductions are in addition to the £28-million cuts in core funding between 2011/12 and 2015/16.

In February this year WMFRA set a revenue budget for 2018/19 of £95.468-million supported by Council Tax income of £41.296 million and a Band D property precept increase of 2.99%. Even taking into account this increase WMFRA still sets the lowest Council Tax level in England compared to all other fire and rescue services.

We agreed the use of general balances of £1.5-million. This is to support the costs of service transformation which include working with our partners in Councils and the NHS on the delivery of services to reduce vulnerability. An update on this work is provided below.

WMFRA has also agreed a capital programme for 2018/19 of £13.322-million funded by earmarked reserves.

2. Capital spending

It is extraordinary that the government provides no capital funding and no access to any transformational funding for the fire and rescue sector at a time when they are expecting transformation in the way in which the fire and rescue sector delivers its services.

WMFRA anticipated that following the constant attacks on revenue funding the government would do the same with capital spending and has for time been earmarking reserves to support our capital programme and the transformation of our service

Using earmarked reserves, Coventry and Aston fire stations are being replaced with modern, efficient, cost-effective and environmentally-friendly buildings. We are also using reserves to fund an essential vehicle replacement programme which includes front line fire appliances. Various other items of essential capital expenditure which we are supporting include extensive IT upgrades to equipment which is vital to our joint West Midlands/ Staffordshire fire control room which mobilises emergency responses for both services.

3. Services to meet vulnerability

For a long period West Midlands Fire Service (WMFS) worked with Coventry City Council, Dudley MBC and Wolverhampton City Council to deliver a response to their non-emergency calls from people who have fallen in their own homes. In Coventry, WMFS also worked in collaboration with the NHS to provide a pilot home safe and well service for people who are being discharged from hospital.

These services were supporting our declared aim of keeping West Midlands safer, stronger and healthier. They brought us into direct contact with some of our frailest and most vulnerable citizens who are at high risk of being involved in a fire or other serious incident. By working with them upstream we can help to keep them safer into the future.

Although it was secondary to our key aim of supporting vulnerability, these were commissioned services which were on track to provide projected income of £2-million over 4-years to help deal with our 4-year budgets cuts (mentioned in Section 1) and also help us maintain our service delivery model and our emergency response to life threatening incidents in high risk areas which remains the fastest in the country at 4 minutes 43 seconds.

These services were initially delivered through National Joint Council pilots and when that process was withdrawn delivery continued through local arrangements with WMFS volunteers while we sought a local agreement with trade unions and entered into new entrants contracts to enable the falls response to be delivered as part of our integrated service delivery model. Unfortunately no local agreement was reached and a trade dispute and strike days were notified to WMFRA by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU).

At this point the Authority ended its attempts to provide this service and we are now in the process of a planned withdrawal in agreement with our 3 local authorities.

The Fire Authority has now considered how to deal with the current budget deficit caused by a shortfall in commissioned income and the need to eliminate use of balances and reach a balanced budget. This will necessitate reducing the use of voluntary additional shifts carried out by firefighters. This in turn will reduce the availability of fire appliances but I'm confident that our target response time can be maintained in the current year.

4. Future governance of West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority

The 7 Local Authorities in the West Midlands and the Mayoral West Midlands Combined Authority, with the support of WMFRA, have agreed a move in governance from the current arrangements to a model of WMCA/ Mayoral governance.

Following public consultation a scheme agreed by WMCA was submitted to government. It included key red-line areas agreed by all stakeholders concerning the details of the Mayoral Fire Advisory Committee, ring fencing of the WMFRA budget and reserves and responsibilities of the Chief Fire Officer. Agreement was reached on the first of these but the Home Office was unable to accept the other two. Discussion has now taken place to secure these protections through local agreements and WMCA constitutional changes.

Should final approval be reached the change in governance arrangements for West Midlands Fire Service is expected to be made in April 2019.

4. Year to date performance

Performance indicators for WMFS for the current year to the end of September 2018 are:

Performance Indicator	Actual 2017/18	Target to end of Sep-2018	Actual to end of Sep-2018
The number of accidental fires in dwellings	1,631	781	826
The number of casualties from accidental fires in dwellings	51	30	18
The number of deliberate fires in dwellings	220	101	125
The number of accidental fires in non-domestic premises	437	208	222
The number of deliberate fires in non-domestic premises	202	97	75
The number of deliberate vehicle fires	867	449	409
The number of deliberate rubbish fires	1,924	1,165	867
The number of malicious false alarms calls received	545	N/A	282
The number of false alarm calls due to automatic fire alarms	5,406	2,747	3,065
Number led to safety from fires with brigade assistance	223	N/A	159
Number of rescues from fires	49	N/A	34
Number of RTCs attended	2,495	N/A	1,397
Number of extrications from RTCs	289	N/A	113

Accidental fires in dwellings are above target but casualty numbers are below target. Arson fires in dwellings are above target.

Arson attacks in commercial properties and on vehicles are below target.

During this 6-month period 193 people were rescued or led to safety from fires by firefighters. Fire crews attended 1397 road traffic collisions and extricated 113 people from vehicles.

Despite unprecedented cuts in government funding West Midlands Fire Service continues to maintain its 5-minute target response time to category 1 incidents which threaten life or property in high-risk areas

Our current average response time in our high-risk areas continues to improve on the target and currently stands at 4 minutes: 43 seconds.

Cllr John Edwards
Chair, West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority