

**Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council**

**15 October 2019**

**West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority**

Report by Councillor John Edwards

**1. Revenue finances/ impact of core government funding reductions**

To remind Members, core funding provided by the Government to West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority (WMFRA) has been reduced by 50% (£38-million) during continuous downward spending reviews since 2011, including cuts in the current financial year of £0.690 million.

We expect next year (2020/2021) to be the first year without significant reductions since 2011. However funding will still not allow for any growth or recovery since we believe it will be a flat-line amount taking into account inflation. It also will not include any capital funding.

This is very concerning when West Midlands Fire Service (WMFS) has mounting financial pressures particularly following the recent legal judgement against the government for age discrimination practices in firefighter pension changes made 3 years ago.

The significant costs from rectifying this unlawful behaviour by the government are expected to fall on the fire and rescue sector with no certainty of indemnity from the government next year.

This would impose a further funding burden of circa £5 million on WMFS at a time when staffing shortages have already led to a fall in fire appliance availability of 4.5% in the current year.

## **2. Capital spending**

As mentioned above, for several years the government has failed to provide any capital funding for WMFS and this continues to be the case going into 2020/2021.

Earmarked Authority reserves are currently being used to rebuild Aston fire station which is the oldest of our stations having been built in 1923. We are also using reserves to fund an essential vehicle replacement programme which includes front line fire appliances. Other items of essential capital expenditure which we are paying for include extensive IT upgrades which are vital to our joint West Midlands/ Staffordshire fire control room.

The problem with cash reserves is that they can only be spent once and those held by the Fire Authority to deliver its essential capital programme will be exhausted by 2021/2022.

## **3. Future governance of West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority**

Members will be aware from previous reports that a proposal was developed to transfer responsibilities for the governance of WMFS to the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA).

However, in the last stages of drafting the Parliamentary Order the government failed to provide surety for the future delegation of accountabilities and responsibilities of the Chief Fire Officer and also to include certainty in ring-fencing WMFS budget and financial reserves.

This understandably prevented the unanimous support of all 7 West Midlands local authorities being achieved and the proposal was withdrawn.

WMFS will therefore continue to be governed by the West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority.

#### **4. National pay and role negotiations**

Firefighter pay has fallen significantly in real terms during the prolonged period of austerity. Pay freezes or small increases below the rate of inflation have meant real terms pay cuts for fire service staff for a decade.

This issue has been the subject of discussion and negotiation through the National Joint Council for firefighter pay and conditions for more than two years. Due to unprecedented cuts in budgets (£38 million in the case of the West Midlands) fire service employers have been unable to fund any significant increases. The increase in July this year was limited to 2%.

Fire Authorities and the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) have jointly and separately lobbied the government and individual Fire Ministers for a substantial increase in grant to fund improved pay offers and to provide the basis for a meaningful negotiation with FBU about widening the role of firefighters to enable a wider range of work to be carried out in recognition of real-terms increased pay. The government has consistently failed to respond to this lobbying as demonstrated in the flat-line core funding forecast for 2020/2021.

The lack of progress in these negotiations over a long period of time has led to deep frustration and concern amongst firefighters, as a result of which the FBU has been increasingly discussing the prospect of industrial action. If this transpires the responsibility will lie with the government which is continuing to ignore the impact of austerity on the living standards of the people who provide life saving services for our communities.

#### **5. WMFS inspection by HMICFRS**

HMICFRS, the new government inspectorate, has carried out an independent inspection of WMFS. The headlines from the report are that WMFS is 'good' in all the areas inspected and 'outstanding' in its emergency response. WMFS is the only fire service inspected under the new regime to receive an 'outstanding' grading.

There were some communication and cultural issues mentioned in the report which in part arose from last year's trade dispute.

Last autumn, prior to the inspection, WMFS in partnership with our trade unions had already agreed to put in place an independent cultural review which has been published in the last few days. Its recommendations will now be analysed and developed into an implementation plan.

The full inspection report is available on the HMICFRS website.

## 6. Year to date performance April – August 2019

The performance indicators for WMFS for the current year to the end of August 2019 are:

Performance Indicator	Target to end of Aug-2019	Actual to end of Aug-2019
The number of accidental fires in dwellings	409	445
The number of casualties from accidental fires in dwellings	20	11
The number of deliberate fires in dwellings	56	46
The number of accidental fires in non-domestic premises	109	116
The number of deliberate fires in non-domestic premises	47	39
The number of deliberate vehicle fires	193	213
The number of deliberate rubbish fires	481	519
The number of malicious false alarms calls received	N/A	214
The number of false alarm calls due to Fire Alarm Equipment	1,355	1,429
Number of Road Traffic Collisions attended		1,173
Number of people extricated from RTCs		87
Number of rescues from fires		18
Number of people led to safety from fires		81

Accidental fires in dwellings are above target, casualty numbers are below.

Deliberate fires in dwellings are below target.

Deliberate fires in commercial properties are below target, deliberate fires involving vehicles are above target.

Accidental fires in non-domestic properties are above target.

**During this 5-month period 99 people were rescued and led to safety from fires by firefighters.  
Fire crews attended 1173 road traffic collisions and extricated 87 people from vehicles involved.**

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.

Our current average response time in our high-risk areas continues to improve on the target and currently stands at 4 minutes: 39 seconds.

Cllr John Edwards  
West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority

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