

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council

5 March 2019

West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority

Report by Councillor John Edwards, Chair of the Authority

1. Revenue finances:

The Government provisional four-year settlement offer which was originally announced in December 2016 and been confirmed each year, resulting in the following core funding reductions:

- 2016/17 £3.278m
- 2017/18 £3.962m
- 2018/19 £1.673m
- 2019/20 £0.982m

This produces a total reduction in government funding for West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority (WMFRA) over the period 2011/12 – 2019/20 of £38m (50% of our original core funding).

On 18th February 2019 WMFRA set a revenue budget for 2019/20 of £96.778 million supported by Council Tax (CT) income of £43.215 million and a Band D property precept increase of 2.99%. Even taking into account this CT increase, WMFRA still sets the lowest Band D Council Tax level of all Fire and Rescue Authorities in England.

We have agreed the use of general balances of £1.1-million in 2019/20. This is to support the ongoing costs of service transformation and some reinvestment in our fire protection services and over stretched support services which have been cut by 40% and 26% respectively since 2011/12 as a consequence of the cuts outlined here.

WMFRA has also agreed a capital programme for 2019/20 of £6.52 million. The two largest items of capital spend are £3.25 million for our vehicle replacement programme (with the majority being spent on front-line fire appliances) and £2.15 million for the completion of the rebuild of Aston fire station (which will incorporate the West Midlands Fire Service Heritage Centre and a new branch library for Birmingham City Council).

Once again the whole of our capital programme for 2019/20 is being funded by WMFRA earmarked reserves. The government is still failing to provide any capital funding for the fire and rescue sector in England.

2. Impacts of budget reductions on West Midlands Fire Service 2019/20

The cumulative impact of cuts to our revenue funding for the past 9-years and the withdrawal from commissioned services for three West Midlands local Authorities, has led to a reduction in the budget available for firefighter voluntary addition shifts in 2019/20. This will mean less firefighters on duty at any one time, and a consequent reduction in the availability of fire appliances which will need to continue to be managed in an even more flexible and dynamic way under delegations to the Chief Fire Officer.

The service is committed to maintaining at least one pump rescue ladder (PRL) crewed with 5-firefighters at each of our 38 fire stations. Our additional PRLs at Coventry, Highgate and Walsall fire stations will be crewed flexibly as necessary to manage the reduced numbers of firefighters available.

The numbers of Brigade Response vehicles (BRVs) our smaller fire engines crewed with 3 firefighters will be reduced on a flexible basis from the current 19 to contribute to achieving a balanced budget. BRVs attend all incident types but also deal with thousands of smaller incidents leaving the larger PRLs crewed at 5 available to deal with more significant incidents. The reduced availability of BRVs will therefore have an impact particularly on the attendance times at incidents for the second and subsequent appliances. The reduction in the availability of fire appliances will also impact negatively on our prevention activities with a projected reduction in safe and well visits to the most vulnerable members of our communities.

In the face of these unavoidable reductions West Midlands Fire Service (WMFS) remains committed to maintaining its 5-minute risk based attendance target for first appliances to category 1 incidents which threaten life and property. The evidence provided to the Fire Authority as part of our decision making process demonstrates that this is a realistic ambition. However if these constant reductions in our revenue income continue after 2020 then ongoing deterioration in our critical service will become unavoidable causing additional risk to life and property.

3. Developments in inclusive recruitment

Since September 2017 WMFS have been operating a new approach to the recruitment of firefighters, moving away from campaign-based recruitment. West Midlands Fire Service supported by the Fire Authority is committed to ensuring that the staff we employ reflect the communities across the area we serve. Firefighter recruitment activity is now driven by a sustained approach to positive action, focusing attention on generating a candidate pool who are nurtured through selection.

Positive action intervention is proving to be successful. We are seeing more of our under-represented groups engaging with positive action and going on to be successful during selection. As an indicator of this success, the pre-recruitment programme that commenced in April 2018 was completed by 15 women. Of these, 11 went on to be offered a position on the Trainee Firefighter Development Programme. It is the intention to run a further programme early in 2019 which will be exclusive to BAME candidates.

WMFS have challenging targets for the recruitment of both women and BAME firefighters and currently we are seeing huge success in relation to these targets. Since April 2018 WMFS have employed 54 trainee firefighters of which 25 (46%) are women and 15 (28%) are BAME.

Our approach to the assessment of new candidates has developed over the last 12 months and those who are successful during the initial stages of online assessment, are invited to attend an assessment day.

The assessment day allows assessors to observe how a candidate performs in simulated reality. It is essential that our assessors for firefighter recruitment are diverse and every effort is made to ensure that the make-up of the panels are reflective of the communities that we serve. It is also important that our service delivery employees are directly involved with the recruitment of new firefighters. This creates an open and transparent approach to the process and gives our employees the opportunity to be directly involved in shaping the future face of West Midlands Fire Service.

Currently the assessors who carry out this role do so whilst off duty. These are normally Firefighters, Crew Commanders and Watch Commanders. In the last 12-months more than 400 candidates have attended an assessment centre. Support for positive action and recruitment activity has been largely run on the goodwill of our staff. We are now embedding this work through the creation of a Watch Commander post supported by Assessors.

4. Future governance of West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority

As a result of changes made to the draft Order at the JCSI stage a pause has been created in the process to move governance of WMFS to the Mayoral West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA). These changes centred on the delegation of the accountabilities and responsibilities of the Chief Fire Officer (CFO) and removed the absolute assurance that these would be delegated by the Mayor. This resulted in concern that the operational and organisational independence of the CFO role could be compromised.

The CFO issued an assessment to all seven constituent authority Chief Executives to this effect, with the result that constituent authorities did not provide the required consent to the Home Office for the Order to be laid before Parliament on the 14 January 2019.

The Mayor, WMCA, CFO and Chair of the Fire Authority are now considering whether additional local safeguards could replace the specific provisions that were removed from the draft Order and thereby secure the key asks of constituent authorities with and the FRA. These provisions would need to ensure that the accountabilities of the CFO as defined in the original draft Order 'must' be delegated by the Mayor to the CFO. This approach will ensure the CFO is able to utilise professional judgement, skills and experience underpinned by operational independence and organisational leadership, to actively manage assessed risk on a dynamic basis. If they can be negotiated these local safeguards will form clauses contained in the WMCA Constitution which will put in place clear and robust processes which will provide for wide consultation, appropriate scrutiny and approval of the WMCA before any decision to change or amend the CFO accountabilities could be enacted.

Following recent meetings between the Mayor, Fire Authority Chair, and CFO each party has re-affirmed their commitment to the governance transfer to the WMCA. This however is subject to acceptable assurances around the role of the CFO in any new arrangements being aligned to that intended in the locally agreed draft Order submitted to the Home Office in September 2018 which was approved by Sandwell MBC and the 6 other West Midlands Local Authorities.

WMCA Officers have proposed five distinct areas which are intended to provide assurance around the independence of the CFO role and key accountabilities. These are set out below. WMCA and WMFS officers are considering these proposals and developing the detail that will be proposed for inclusion in the WMCA constitution.

The five proposed areas are:

- 1) A clause within the WMCA constitution which provides security around authorisation by a WMCA Mayor of delegations to the CFO. This would remove any doubt about the explicit delegation of accountabilities and decision making authority to the CFO only. This clause would aim to directly address the underlying concern with the amended Order which currently makes such delegation optional.
- 2) A specific decision making route should any Mayor/WMCA member seek to change the constitutional position in point 1. This would incorporate usual and explicit stakeholder consultation including the CFO, Mayoral Fire Committee, and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee within the process to change point 1.
- 3) In parallel, a specific clause as a 'reverse lock' which would offer a second point of assurance such as specifying that other officers of the WMCA 'must not' take on what are currently CFO accountabilities.
- 4) A period within which any proposed constitutional change in relation to CFO functions shall not be considered/implemented. For example, until the next Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) is completed. This will enable the consideration of the validity of any decisions to change the constitution in relation to CFO functions, to be implemented aligned to the WMFS planning period and will enable the CFO to assess the impact of these decisions on risk.
- 5) In order to develop and implement the IRMP as defined by the National Fire and Rescue Framework, the CFO must be the Officer who has the necessary competencies to do so. The competences of this role will be defined by the National Framework and guidance produced by the fire sector through the National Fire Chiefs Council.

It is intended that following the development of these assurances. the constitutional detail and the assessment of the CFO, the proposed constitutional clauses as developed will be submitted to the WMCA board on 22 March 2019. Any recommended changes in the WMCA Constitution aligned to this matter will need the unanimous support of the CA. At the Board meeting on 22nd March Council Leaders will need to decide whether it should be referred back to the 7 local Authorities for further discussion and decision before final consideration by the CA Board at a subsequent meeting.

4. Year to date performance

Performance indicators and outcomes for WMFS for the current year to the end of January 2019 are:

Performance Indicator	Actual 2017/18	Target to end of Jan-19	Actual to end of Jan-19
The number of accidental fires in dwellings	1,631	1,359	1,352
The number of casualties from accidental fires in dwellings	51	50	40
The number of deliberate fires in dwellings	220	174	179
The number of accidental fires in non-domestic premises	437	343	369
The number of deliberate fires in non-domestic premises	202	152	106
The number of deliberate vehicle fires	867	746	671
The number of deliberate rubbish fires	1,924	1,748	1,360
The number of malicious false alarms calls received	545	N/A	473
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	348
Number of rescues from fires	49	N/A	49
Number of RTCs attended	2,495	N/A	2,366
Number of extrications from RTCs	289	N/A	197

Accidental fires in dwellings are slightly below target as are casualty numbers. These are the lowest figures since 1988/99.

Deliberate fires in dwellings are slightly above target.

Deliberate fires in commercial properties and on vehicles are below target.

Accidental fires in non-domestic properties are above target.

During this 10-month period 272 people were either rescued or led to safety from fires by firefighters. Fire crews attended 2,495 road traffic collisions and extricated 289 people from vehicles.

Despite sustained and unprecedented cuts in government funding for the last decade West Midlands Fire Service continues to maintain its 5-minute target response time to category 1 incidents which threaten life or property in our highest risk areas. Our ambition is to maintain this despite the constant reductions in funding, firefighters and fire appliance availability.

The current average response time in our high-risk areas continues to improve on our category 1 target and currently stands at 4 minutes: 44 seconds. We believe that this remains the fastest response in the UK.

Apart from initial consultation, the government have not embarked on specific consideration of public spending plans beyond 2020. The excellent performance of West Midlands Fire Service outlined here will be increasingly difficult to maintain if cuts to the fire and rescue sector continue after the coming financial year.

This will increase further the risk to life and property from fires and other incidents across the West Midlands in the next decade.

Cllr John Edwards
Chair, West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority

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