

# **Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council**

**20 October 2015**

## **West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority (WMFRA)**

Report by Councillor John Edwards, Chair of the Authority

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### **1. Financial Update- Key points**

1.1 Government grant and business rates income contributes 62% to the Fire Authority's 2015/16 budget. The Council Tax set by the Fire Authority (£52.94 per annum for a Band D property) is the lowest Fire Service Council Tax charge in the country. The net revenue budget in the current year is approximately £99million.

1.2 The Service has suffered Government grant reductions of £28million during the period 2011/12 to 2015/16. This has been achieved predominantly through:

- Reductions in firefighter numbers
- Closure of one fire station
- Management and administration reductions
- Reductions in fire safety staff
- Collaboration with other public service providers

### **2. Financial forecasts for 2016/17 to 2018/19**

2.1 The budget report approved by the Fire Authority on 16<sup>th</sup> February 2015 recognised the need to plan for further grant reductions. The medium term financial plan assumed annual grant reductions of 8% over the period 2016/17 to 2018/19 which equates to further grant reductions of £14million.

2.2 As a result of the above, work has focussed on changes to operational staffing arrangements and on-going collaborative opportunities to produce the required level of efficiency savings. With regards to alternative staffing arrangements, recruitment has been suspended whilst trials are undertaken in advance of any permanent changes.

Linked to the collaborative opportunities, the Fire Service is seeking to be commissioned for work linked to health and wellbeing, with an example of this being a pilot with Coventry City Council to provide a non-emergency falls response to those individuals in receipt of 'Telecare' services.

### **3. Recruitment and staffing**

Due to the budget uncertainties mentioned in section 2, firefighter recruitment has again been suspended while we continue to lose an average of 60 firefighters each year, due in the main to retirements. As a consequence, our numbers are falling rapidly and will continue to do so for several years as we move through a further period of significant cuts in government formula grant. If no action is taken then fire appliances would come 'off the run', stations would be closed and our risk-based 5-minutes response time to incidents which threaten life and property would be unsustainable.

In order to prevent this degradation of the service as numbers fall, we are about to carry out staffing trials which involve buying back additional shifts from those firefighters who remain in the service. This will ensure that we have the staff available to maintain our service delivery model.

### **4. Collaborative and Partnering Opportunities – Health and Wellbeing**

West Midlands Fire Service is currently working with its strategic local authority partners, blue light responders, and care agencies to identify possible opportunities to be commissioned to provide care and wellbeing services on behalf of and in partnership with these public bodies. Currently emerging work-streams around which our capability to respond is being discussed are:

- Telecare/Falls response service
- A&E/hospital Discharges follow up visits
- Out of Hours/Walk In patients follow up visits
- Ambulance 'welfare' visits
- Frail and Elderly winter warmth NHS Challenge

The proven fire service prevention skills, which have driven down fires and deaths and injuries substantially plus our capability to respond 24/7 365 days per year presents a highly skilled, efficient and cost effective approach to the delivery of this service when compared to the current way these services are provided. Having a 'needs led approach' delivered through our safe and trusted service will help many vulnerable people to remain independent. If commissioned, we will potentially reduce costs to the NHS and partner agencies (social services for example) associated with lack of movement, hospitalisation and reliance on social services.

Of equal importance to WMFRA is that undertaking this work will support the delivery of our strategic document 'The Plan', through helping the most vulnerable in our community, therefore making West Midlands safer. It will provide the opportunity to strengthen our delivery model through an evolving and enhanced local delivery of prevention based services. This will be achieved by us getting instant referrals for home safety checks and enable us to target and engage some of the most vulnerable people in our community to make them as safe as we can. This will reduce the personal burden upon delivery crews, time and costs associated with identifying and delivering home safety checks to some of our most vulnerable people.

Working in Coventry City Council area we are currently delivering a pilot Telecare response and we have opened up similar discussions around health commissioning with other Local Authorities in the West Midlands. All of this could become more important given the progress of development of the West Midlands Combined Authority, possible devolved health budgets and the recognition by the NHS of the need for an expansion of prevention measures to drive down demand.

At the same time we are working closely with Public Health England to identify potential commissioning opportunities which would also improve health outcomes for people in the West Midlands.

#### **4. Performance**

Performance figures for the year to date are attached on Appendix 1. False alarms generated by automatic fire alarms (AFA's) continue to run into high numbers but fire safety officers using our trio of specialist Business Support Vehicles are now responding to these incidents and providing advice on servicing and maintenance of AFA's. This is already starting to drive down these calls and keeping our fire appliances available for real incidents.

House fires and fires in non-domestic premises are within targets. It is worth noting however that so far this year, 87 people have been rescued and led to safety from fires and 154 have been extricated from road traffic collisions. More than anyone, those 241 people understand the value of a professional, highly trained, whole time fire and rescue service which provides the fastest response time in the country to life threatening incidents.

**John Edwards**  
**October 2015**