



Hereford & Worcester Fire Authority

2021/22 Annual Report to Worcestershire County Council

Appointment of Chairman and Vice-Chairman

Councillor C A Taylor, from Worcestershire County Council, was elected as Chairman of the Authority and Councillor R Phillips, from Herefordshire Council, was elected as Vice-Chairman.

Appointment of Chief Fire Officer, Deputy Chief Fire Officer and Assistant Chief Fire Officer

Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive Jonathon Pryce was appointed in April 2021. More recently Guy Palmer was appointed to Temporary Deputy Chief Fire Officer on the 1st August 2022, following the retirement of the previous post holder. Adrian Elliott was appointed Temporary Assistant Chief Fire Officer on the 1st May 2022. The long standing Treasurer and Director of Finance Martin Rehorn remains in post.

Organisational Change

The Service has published and aligned internal structures around the three core delivery strategies; **Response** – operational fire engines, **Protection** – legislative fire safety enforcement, and **Prevention** – our work in the communities to reduce fires and other emergencies.

These three core strategies are closely linked to mitigating risks highlighted in the Fire Authority's Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP). The core strategies developed last year are now well embedded and have been well received by the workforce, providing clarity of purpose and strategic direction for all. The Service is now currently realigning its internal structures to support this model, which also supports the current expectations of the Home Office led Inspectorate (HMICFRS), and are supported by key performance indicators reported on regularly.

Beneath the core strategies the Fire Authority has a range of enabling strategies and plans, such as ICT, Assets and People. One of the newer plans is the Environment Sustainability Plan 2021-25, which following a full assessment of the carbon impact of all our sites is now moving into a delivery phase whereby a number of investment areas will see our carbon footprint reduce over the next few years.

The Service has in the last year seen a rise in the amount of staff turnover in all areas mainly due to natural retirement of staff recruited in the late 1980's, and has therefore prioritised succession planning and recruitment drives. The Fire Authority has supported the Chief Fire Officer in a wide ranging 'Invest to Improve' programme which as an example, includes a dedicated and funded On-Call Firefighter marketing and recruitment team. On-Call Firefighters make up around 50% of the Fire Services employees which is around 400 people in total.

Working collaboratively with partners' continues to be a priority as part of the new Prevention strategy, for example the Service annually welcomes cohorts of school children to take part in the Dying to Drive Scheme and Young Citizens Challenge.

Cultural improvement, leadership and staff development are critical for the future management and leadership of the Service, and during the past 18 months the Service has been working with Trans2 (a specialist leadership company) to deliver training programmes, promoting self-awareness and positive leadership skills at all managerial levels.

The Service is also continually striving to recruit and retain staff from a range of backgrounds in order to broaden the diversity of its employees and become an employer of choice across both Counties. The most significant progress to date has been made in the recruitment and development of female staff. Internally there has been a focus on ensuring that all staff needs are being effectively met, ranging from facilitating staff consultative forums to improvements in staff welfare facilities, clothing and uniform. Additionally the Service is seeing a rise in the number of female staff applying internally and externally for progression through the organisation with more female middle and senior managers/officers than ever before.

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS)

The HMICFRS visited the Service in April 2021 and conducted their inspection against three core pillars of Effectiveness, Efficiency and People. A full report of their findings was received in December 2021 and a full action plan against their recommendations has been created and approved by the Fire Authority in early 2022. The Service is working hard to close their recommended areas for improvement and is anticipating another full inspection in 2023/4, alongside all other Fire Services in England.

As part of the 2021 inspection, the Service unfortunately received a formal Cause of Concern in relation to its prevention activity, primarily as a result of a backlog of Home Safety Visits, due to the Covid pandemic and staffing issues. An action plan to show how the Service will discharge these concerns was provided to the Inspectorate by 31 August 2021 and all elements of the action plan were deemed to be completed by the Service earlier this year. The Service is awaiting a revisit to review progress against the Cause of Concern by HMICFRS, which has been deferred twice this year due to capacity issues within HMICFRS.

Strategic Alliance with Shropshire Fire Authority

The Strategic Fire Alliance between Hereford & Worcester and Shropshire Fire and Rescue Services continues to make progress, with replacement of our Fire Control / 999 mobilising functions being the key project that will form the focus of the Alliance plan moving forward and for the next few years. Specifications and tender documents are being prepared to ensure a resilient Command & Control function (taking into account the Grenfell Tower and Manchester Arena Inquiry recommendations).

The new mobilising system will be resilient across both Fire and Rescue Services and is likely to encompass a multi-million pound investment in a modern system to meet the demands of the future, embracing new, but tried and tested, technology where possible.

Fire Reform White Paper

The Government published its long awaited consultation paper 'Reforming our Fire and Rescue Service' in May 2022. This contains a number of proposals, broken down into three broad areas covering People, Professionalism and Governance. The White Paper was considered at the Fire Authority's meeting in June 2022 and a formal response was submitted with cross-party support.

The Fire Authority welcomed and supported a number of the White Paper's proposals, including:

- greater freedom for Chief Fire Officers to deploy resources to help address future threats beyond core Fire & Rescue duties (such as the response to the COVID pandemic).
- a review of current pay negotiation arrangements.
- introduction of a new mandatory leadership programme for senior managers.
- creation of a College of Fire & Rescue, along similar lines to the College of Policing, to drive standards, undertake research and provide operational guidance; and
- ensuring the operational independence of Chief Fire Officers.

However, there were a number of other proposals which the Fire Authority did not support:

- a proposal for minimum entry requirements for the UK Fire & Rescue Service, which could make it more difficult to recruit on-call firefighters in largely rural services such as Hereford & Worcester.
- the introduction of a statutory Code of Ethics for Fire & Rescue Services, on the basis that we already have an existing code issued by the Fire Standards Board and there is no need for this to be put on a statutory footing.
- a requirement for all staff to take a Fire & Rescue Service oath. The Authority viewed this as unnecessary and likely to be counter-productive in terms of both recruitment and industrial relations.
- a proposal for Chief Fire Officers to become corporate sole, like Chief Constables which is linked to the government's proposals in respect of governance (below).

In terms of governance, the White Paper sets out the government's view that responsibility for all Fire & Rescue Services in England should be transferred to a single elected individual – in the case of Hereford & Worcester that would most likely be the Police & Crime Commissioner. The Fire Authority has strongly disagreed with the government's premise that governance of Fire & Rescue Services is best undertaken by a single elected individual for two reasons:

- (i) Public accountability – The role of the Fire Authority is to ensure that the Fire & Rescue Service meets the needs of the local communities. Although Fire Authority members are not directly elected to that role, they are the elected representatives of those communities and their details are readily available on an Authority's website; they are far closer to the community and represent a much broader range of views than a single individual. Transferring responsibility for Fire & Rescue Service to a single individual creates a significant democratic deficit compared to multi-member committee based structures.

- (ii) Scrutiny & transparency – a Fire Authority meets in public, publishes agendas & reports and is accessible to the public. Decision making is open to scrutiny by the public, who can make representations and influence decisions, as well as by other members of the Authority from across the political spectrum. None of that is applicable to a PCC and there is currently little effective scrutiny of PCC decisions. In our view these issues are far more important to the public than whether or not they can name the members of the Fire Authority.

The Police and Fire & Rescue Services are distinctly different functions. The governance structures applicable to one are not necessarily appropriate to the other.

Property Update

It was previously reported that the Fire Authority entered into an agreement with the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) to deliver our property management functions as part of a joint property and estates team, as a result of the wind down of PPL. The new service became operational in April 2021 and is now well established and delivering against our planned property programme.

Major Projects:

Broadway Fire Station: Broadway is a single fire engine on-call station. It has been recognised for some time as being in a very poor state of repair and lacking the facilities necessary for a modern fire station. The existing site is constrained but, following several unsuccessful attempts to identify a suitable alternative location, the Fire Authority gave approval for the redevelopment of a new station on the existing site. A detailed planning application was submitted in May 2021 and planning approval has now been granted by the local authority. Evaluation of tenders and interviews with prospective contractors has taken place and a preferred contractor has been selected. Works are planned to commence on-site in November 2022.

Redditch Fire Station: The replacement of Redditch Fire Station has been part of the Authority's approved capital programme for several years. In collaboration with West Mercia Police, the Service has developed plans to provide a joint Fire and Police facility, building upon the concept of the Bromsgrove joint Fire-Police station. A detailed planning application was submitted in December 2021 and approved by Redditch Borough Council in June 2022. Interviews were held with four potential contractors in January 2022 via a construction procurement framework and the selected contractor is currently working with the design team to develop the detailed designs and specifications and prepare final project costs.

Hereford Fire Station: Following approval to progress the redevelopment of Hereford Fire Station at St Owen Street, a high-level feasibility options appraisal of the existing fire station site has been completed, along with a number of surveys of the site. The preferred option proposes a new four bay fire station with associated accommodation, improving access and egress from the site and enhancing car parking, to be rebuilt on the current site. Additional surveys and assessments have been completed during August 2022 and a formal planning application was submitted in September 2022.

North Herefordshire Strategic Training Facility: The Police and Crime Commissioner has given provisional agreement in writing to permit the use of the site and a legal agreement is currently being developed. Design proposals are progressing to provide a 'hot fire house' training facility along with proposals to potentially relocate Leominster fire station to the Police site by converting vacant space in the Police Station. The design team is completing final designs and surveys and are eager to submit a formal planning application in late October 2022.

Relocation of Training Centre, that is currently part of Droitwich Fire Station, to Wyre Forest Fire Station: Initial scoping works for the proposed requirements of a new Training Centre facility have been undertaken. A number of layout options have been received, and comments returned. The design team is now preparing final spatial layouts for further assessment and a cost feasibility study will be submitted for consideration by the end of 2022.

Planned and reactive property maintenance: General maintenance and building works continue across the Service's estate. Notably, the significant refurbishments of Pershore, Ledbury and Leominster fire stations have now been completed.

Notable Incidents

Since the beginning of the year the Service has attended four large building fires requiring 10 or more fire engines. These include building fires at Waldron Transport in Bromsgrove, Clean Services Laundry in Ross-on-Wye, Redhill Manufacturing in Redditch and four semi-detached houses in Buckfield Road, Leominster. In addition to these, the Service has also dealt with a large number of 'fires in the open' throughout the spring and summer months, in the dry weather. This resulted in more than a 220% increase in fires compared to last summer, many of which could be classified as 'wildfires'.

Of these wildfires, one fire on the Lickey Hills required over 15 pumping appliances plus a number of specialist appliances and officers and an attendance by the Service that extended over a number of days.

Protection (Fire Safety)

The Protection Department increased its establishment by two Fire Safety Inspectors. This increase ensures that an additional 200 commercial premises can be inspected every year as part of the Risk Based Inspection Programme. In addition, the new Inspectors provide resilience to meet the requirements of new Fire and Building Safety Acts.

Current and new Inspectors completed additional fire engineering and legal training as part of their continued professional development (CPD). The Service also successfully achieved corporate membership of the Institution of Fire Engineers, allowing Fire Safety Inspectors and managers to accredit their CPD through a nationally recognised organisation.

Operational personnel on fire stations are also being formally trained to carry out Fire Safety inspections of less complex buildings. This helps staff to increase their operational knowledge as well as promoting fire safety and increasing compliance.

Potential for Industrial Action and Pay Offer

At the time of writing of this report the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) Executive have rejected a revised pay offer for operational Firefighters of 5%, but have given the membership an opportunity to vote upon whether to accept the offer or not. Should this ballot result in a rejection of the pay offer, then it is likely the FBU will then ballot for industrial action, which could lead to periods of strike action by some Firefighters in Herefordshire and Worcestershire beginning in late December 2022, at the earliest.

Whilst the Fire Authority has well developed and effective resilience plans in the event of industrial action, it is not possible to offer the same level of service to our communities during periods of industrial action by the FBU. It is very much hoped that the FBU membership will accept the current pay offer so that the threat of industrial action can be averted.

As with many public sector organisations the need for increased pay settlements this year will have a longer term impact on services and budgets in the future, and Hereford & Worcester Fire and Rescue Service is no exception. The current 5% offer is 3% above the budgeted affordable amount; therefore should this offer be accepted the Fire Authority will need to find efficiencies beyond 2024 to fund this.

Summary

The Service is currently in a healthy and productive state, with sound leadership, motivated and dedicated staff delivering well against their plans and providing our communities with a highly skilled, efficient and professional Fire and Rescue Service. The Fire Authority is also working well with engaged elected Committed Members, providing effective strategic oversight, scrutiny and support to officers.

**Cllr C A Taylor, Chairman and Cllr R Phillips, Vice-Chairman
Hereford & Worcester Fire Authority**

FURTHER INFORMATION is available in the Annual Service Plan and Annual Service Review 2011-22 on the Service's website at www.hwfire.org.uk/your-right-to-know/our-publications/