



## Hereford & Worcester Fire Authority

### 2023 Annual Report to Worcestershire County Council

#### Appointment of Chairman and Vice-Chairman

Both 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 again in June 2023.

#### Organisational Priorities

The Service (HWFRS) has published and aligned all 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. Since their publication two years ago, the three Core Strategies have been reviewed to ensure they remain current and objectives are being achieved.

These three core strategies are closely linked to mitigating risks highlighted in the Fire Authority's Community Risk Management Plan 2021-2025 (CRMP). The core strategies are well embedded and have been well received by the workforce, providing clarity of purpose and strategic direction for all. The Service has realigned its internal structures to support this model, that also supports the current expectations of the Home Office led Inspectorate (HMICFRS) who inspected the Service in 2023.

Beneath the core strategies the Fire Authority (FRA) 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 has now moved into a delivery phase whereby a number of investment areas has already seen the Service's carbon footprint reduce.

This year also saw a drop in applicants for all Firefighter jobs, perhaps reflecting wider changes in society and attitudes. 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 Service's employees which is around 400 people in total.

Working collaboratively with partners to target those most at risk continues to be a priority as part of the Prevention strategy, for example the Service annually educates cohorts of school children to take part in the Dying to Drive Scheme (now known as Your Impact), and Young Citizens Challenge.

## **The Fire Authority (FRA)**

The Hereford and Worcester Fire Authority is made up of 25 Councillors, nineteen from Worcestershire. There are three committees; Policy and Resources chaired by Cllr R Phillips (Herefordshire), Audit and Standards Committee chaired by Cllr M Hart and an Appointments Committee chaired by Cllr C Taylor.

The Authority recently considered some changes to how the Service deals with unwanted fire signals from Automatic Fire Alarms (AFAs), and based upon an extensive evidence-based report approved some changes to operating procedures that should see around a 10% reduction in the number of these calls the Service attends. The outcome of these changes will be implemented in 2024.

In December 2023 the Authority gave approval for consultation to commence in early 2024 on some significant changes to nine On-Call fire engines, six of which are based in Worcestershire. The full Resource Review report published in December proposes changes to how resources are allocated across the 25 fire stations, which have 41 fire engines in total.

The report focusses on eight of those fire stations that have more than one fire engine where the additional fire engines are underutilised, have significant staffing issues, and suffer from low levels availability. The eight fire engines proposed for removal only have an average availability of 32% per year, and respond to a very low number of calls.

The report does not propose closing any fire station, removing or reducing any first fire engine at any of the 25 locations, and all the savings made will be reinvested in improving the resourcing and availability of the remaining fire engines.

## **Cultural Improvements**

Cultural improvement, leadership and staff development are critical for the future management and leadership of the Service and during the past 12 months the Service has undertaken an independently led whole staff survey, commissioned an independent cultural audit and commenced the roll out of a specialist bespoke Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training programme. The Service has also been working with a specialist leadership company to deliver high quality development programmes, promoting self-awareness and positive leadership skills at all managerial levels.

Recent national reports that have been in the media have brought to the public's attention some of the unacceptable poor behaviours in the emergency services, notably the Fire and Police Services. Whilst HWFRS has a proud and robust track record of cultural improvements and change, alongside driving core values and behaviours, these national events were a stark reminder not to become complacent.

The reports and reviews undertaken this year within HWFRS involved many hundreds of HWFRS staff, many of them more than once in a range of online, face to face, group and individual sessions, alongside robust independent examination of a range of evidence in the Service. These reports are all published in full on the Service's website.

However, in summary it can clearly be seen that HWFRS has a positive culture, strong leadership and a robust track record of addressing poor behaviour.

Whilst there is always room to improve and there may be individual issues of poor conduct, it is fair to say that all the evidence that was examined independently does not find HWFRS to be institutionally or systemically poor in regards to culture and behaviours. In fact quite the opposite was found in that it shows an organisation with a strong sense of values and behaviours that normally operates professionally and to a high standard.

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. Progress continues in the recruitment and development of female staff, with over 40% of all middle and senior managers now being women in HWFRS. 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.

The Service continues to struggle to attract people from a wider range of backgrounds into the operational uniformed roles, especially women. It is believed this is mainly due to the historic stereotype of a 'male Firefighter' and the widely held perceptions around the levels of strength and fitness required for the roles.

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

The Service has now received the latest inspection report from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS). This is the third full inspection by HMICFRS of the Service since 2017.

The results of this inspection contain the Inspectorate's assessment of the Service's effectiveness and efficiency, and how well it looks after its people. The Service was measured against 11 assessment areas and given a grade for each.

The report shows that Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service has significantly improved since the previous inspections in 2021 and 2018, and HMICFRS have acknowledged the excellent work and progress that has been made.

There are no major causes for concern highlighted in the report, and there are no areas graded as 'requiring improvement', however as always there are some minor areas for learning and actions that can be taken.

In the 11 assessment areas HWFRS is deemed to be 'Good' in four areas and 'Adequate' in the remaining seven areas. This is in stark contrast to our last inspection which found 9 areas to be requiring improvement and the Service was issued with a Cause of Concern letter.

Unlike previous inspections, HMICFRS have not given separate grades for effectiveness, efficiency and people. This is designed to encourage services to consider the inspection findings as a whole and not focus on just one area. The previous four-tier system of graded judgements has been expanded to five with the addition of the 'adequate' grading.

Please see the link below for access to the Inspection report:

[Effectiveness, efficiency and people 2023/25 – Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service - His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services \(justiceinspectorates.gov.uk\)](https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hereford-and-worcester-fire-and-rescue-service-report-2023-25/)

### **Strategic Alliance with Shropshire Fire Authority**

At the Fire Authority meeting held in early 2022 Members approved the utilisation of funding against the Fire Control reserve to secure an appropriate replacement Command and Fire Control system.

Subsequently, the Alliance Board approved a project to procure a jointly funded Command and Control system able to work across both Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) and HWFRS areas from 2 sites (Telford and Hindlip).

In October 2022 the project was re-scoped following an approach from Cleveland Fire Brigade and County Durham and Darlington Fire & Rescue Service who asked us to consider involving them in the procurement and project.

In January 2023, HWFRS commenced a full procurement process, acting as the lead Authority on behalf of all four Services.

Following a rigorous evaluation of submissions by representatives from all 4 FRSs, the panel recommended that the contract be awarded to Motorola Solutions. It is hoped the new system will be 'live' in the next two years delivering new modern technology for Herefordshire and Worcestershire in how fire engines are mobilised, alongside significantly increased resilience with a single hosted system across four geographically separate Fire and Rescue Services.

### **National Operational Guidance**

The National Operational Guidance (NOG) project reached a significant milestone in June 2023 with the successful launch of a new Operational Training Program (OTP).

NOG is deemed to be 'industry best practice' and it is vital that firefighters and officers are working and aligned to these national standards. The OTP is how we deliver this complex and extensive training to ensure our staff have the opportunity and ability to be as highly skilled as possible in the wide range of incidents and services we provide to our communities.

The OTP introduced an entirely new approach to training and upskilling staff within Hereford & Worcester Fire and Rescue Service. Beyond streamlining training processes, it fundamentally transformed and digitalised how training is conducted. The program encompasses technical input, practical exercises, and simulations, effectively embedding the new national standards.

A noteworthy advancement within the project is the integration of electronic tablets. Utilising this type of technology allows the program to accommodate diverse learning styles, allowing personnel to train in a manner that suits them, emphasising our commitment to digital modernisation and improving communications.

### **Fire Reform White Paper**

In late 2023 the Government published its long-awaited response to the consultation paper 'Reforming our Fire and Rescue Service' from May 2022. The Fire Authority provided a formal response following their meeting in June 2022. At this stage it does not appear that all the proposals in the white paper are to be implemented but there are some key areas that will be progressed:

- Establish a new professional 'College of Fire' to develop and govern new national guidance and standards.
- Developing a provision for 'operational independence' for Chief Fire Officers.
- Tasking the National Joint Council to review the pay negotiation mechanism.
- Taking action to improve integrity and culture in fire and rescue services through improved training, more open recruitment practices and working toward a statutory code of ethics for fire and rescue employees.

### **Property Update**

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

### **Major Projects:**

**Broadway Fire Station Rebuild:** 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. Construction work is progressing well on site and is on target to be completed in January 2024.

**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 and the PCC, construction of a new joint Fire and Police facility is well underway, building upon the concept of the existing Bromsgrove joint Fire-Police station. A detailed planning application was approved by Redditch Borough Council in June 2022 and, enabling works started in early 2023.

Relocation of Fire Service Training Centre, that is currently part of Droitwich Fire Station, to Wyre Forest Fire Station is currently in development. Initial scoping works for the proposed requirements of a new Training Centre facility have been completed.

General maintenance and building works continue across the Service's estate, notably, fossil fuel systems have been removed at Tenbury Wells and Upton-Upon-

Severn Fire Stations and replaced with electric heating systems, and solar panels installed with support from external funding in order to reduce the Service's carbon footprint.

The Service has also dramatically reduced its single use plastics, introduced electric cars and vans, and improved its recycling and paper usage. Further progress against our Environmental Sustainability Strategy will be pursued in the next two years.

### **Operational Incidents**

Whilst every incident (around 8000 per annum across both Counties) is clearly notable for those involved, at the time of writing this report the Service has not had any 'major' or particularly large or notable incidents in the last twelve months. However, the effect of storm Babet recently did pose some challenges across the Service area and a peak in activity between 19<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2023.

The Service and its partners through the Local Resilience Forum (LRF) are well practised in responding to major emergencies and significant threats including wide scale flooding, and supporting our communities. This recent period of wide scale flooding was more as a result of direct heavy local rainfall (similar to, but not as severe as 2007), and therefore behaves slightly differently from the more familiar river and tributary flooding related events we have become more used to.

Over the four days of flooding the Service responded to around 176 call, more than double that would normally be expected over this period. Nearly 100 of these calls being flood related or water rescue.

All Firefighters are trained to work near water and carry out bankside and roadside rescues, however many Firefighters (over half) have specialist water rescue training and equipment (dry suits) enabling them to enter the water. Three fire stations have dedicated boat crews (two in Worcestershire), that work closely alongside voluntary water responders also based at Wyre Forest Fire Station.

Last year the Authority supported the CFO in the ambition to roll out specialist equipped water responders on all fire stations in HWFRS by 2025. This demonstrates the Authority's support for enabling the Service to adapt to our communities changing needs and climate change. Similar work has been undertaken in regards to responding to wildfires, following last year's unprecedented operational activity in the summer, which was thankfully not the case again this year.

### **Protection (Fire Safety)**

The Protection Department has increased its establishment of 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 professional development. The Service has maintained corporate membership of the Institution of Fire Engineers, allowing Fire Safety Inspectors and managers to accredit their development through a nationally recognised organisation.

The fire safety team continues to work with partners concerning all forms of compliance via Multi-Agency Targeted Enforcement (MATE) activity. The Service continues to enforce when necessary, and this year has successfully prosecuted a Ross-on-Wye restaurant and business director for breaches of fire safety law.

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.

## **Prevention**

The Service has dramatically improved its Prevention work in our communities with the number of completed Home Fire Safety Visits (HFSVs), going up from 3301 in 2021/22 to 6519 in 2022/3; an increase of just under 100%. A target of 7,500 HFSVs completed has been set for 2023/24.

These visits are targeted at those most vulnerable in the communities, such as the elderly, people living alone and those with reduced mobility. A HFSV will help to reduce the risk of fire in the home and can include the fitting of smoke alarms and other specialist smoke alarms for those who are hard of hearing, alongside a range of other fire safety related advice and guidance including electrical safety and evacuation planning.

The Prevention team work closely with partners to promote the HFSV and develop partnership working arrangements and last year a total of 2,708 referrals for HFSVs were received from partners; this is an increase of 21% on the previous year.

A host of other prevention activities are undertaken annually including youth engagement activities mentioned previously in this report. The Service attends many large events and uses a team of dedicated specialist prevention staff, fire station-based staff and a volunteering programme to be able to ensure we have highly skilled staff to deliver the range of prevention advice we offer across our communities.

The Service is also a partner in road safety events and has road safety alongside fire and water (focussed on flooding) safety as its three core aims. The Prevention Department also leads the Service's safeguarding team and the Fire Cadets.

## **Training**

The Training Department have welcomed the appointment of three qualified Paramedics who are leading a variety of specific scenario based training packages, including improving Firefighter skills and competencies for Front Line Emergency Care training for all operational personnel. All fire engines are fully equipped with advanced trauma care equipment, oxygen and defibrillators.

## **Pay Negotiations Update**

Industrial action relating to operational staff through a formal pay dispute in 2023 was averted due to the National Joint Employers' revised pay offer for operational Firefighters. The 2023 pay dispute for non-operational/support staff has now also been resolved.

As with many public sector organisations, the need for increased pay settlements will have a longer-term impact on services and budgets in the future. HWFRS is no exception to this and The Fire Authority may 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. This is validated by a range of independently verified evidence and reports, from Inspectors and auditors in the last twelve months.

The Fire Authority is also working well with engaged elected Committee Members from both counties, 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 2022-23 on the Service's website at [www.hwfire.org.uk/your-right-to-know/our-publications/](http://www.hwfire.org.uk/your-right-to-know/our-publications/)