

Birmingham City Council

City Council

04 February 2020



Subject: West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority
Report of: Cllr Zafar Iqbal, Lead Member

Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? ☐ Yes ☒ No

1 Introduction

- 1.1 At the September meeting of the Fire Authority, Wolverhampton Councillor Greg Brackenridge, a former firefighter, was elected Chair of the Fire Authority with myself being elected as Vice-Chair.

2 Recommendation

- 2.1 That the report be noted.

3 Budget and finances

- 3.1 The West Midlands Fire and Rescue Service (WMFS) continues to face severe pressures on funding. In the last ten years it has suffered cuts of nearly £40 million. This means that there is a continuing effect on the service that it is providing.
- 3.2 It is currently facing a difficult three-million-pound deficit which must be managed, and dwindling reserves to call upon in an emergency. Changes have been made in how the Service operates, making sure that frontline services are maintained.
- 3.3 But clearly something has to give. This means taking decisions about the number of fire appliances available to deal with incidents and prioritising areas of work. The prevention work is an area that has been affected by the cuts. Much of this work focuses on reducing people's vulnerability to the type of emergencies to which the fire services often respond to, but it will be impossible to maintain the level of this work. Safe and Well visits and home fire safety checks are part of the educational work carried out by the service but with the number of firefighters cut by a fifth since 2010 it is no wonder that decisions have been taken for some of this crucial preventative and advice work to have been cut back.

- 3.4 The precept paid by West Midlands Council taxpayers is still the lowest charge in England. Band D council taxpayers are paying just over sixty pounds a year for the safety and assurance provided.
- 3.5 The Service remains committed to its risk-based attendance time of five minutes and are currently managing four minutes and forty-one seconds. It is a credit to the organisation and to the commitment of the workforce that the WMFS is the only fire and rescue service to date to be rated as outstanding by Her Majesty's Inspectorate for the response element of our service.
- 3.6 This is a massive achievement in such challenging financial times but it becomes harder with each year and each budget reduction to maintain such standards. The Service has worked to be as 'lean and efficient' as it can be given its position but is clearly reaching a point where frontline services will be affected with further budget reductions. There is an urgent need for the government to invest in the fire and rescue service and recruit more firefighters and we must continue, across all parties, to pro-actively lobby for the service to be properly funded and resourced.

4 Transfer of Governance

- 4.1 You will all be aware that there were proposals to transfer the governance of the Service to the Mayoral West Midlands Combined Authority. This was withdrawn after the proposal failed to get the unanimous support of the seven local district councils. This was because amendments were made to the Draft Parliamentary Order that had not been agreed by the constituent Councils regarding assurances that the operational independence of the role of the Chief Fire Officer would be provided for in the statutory Order. As a result, the Fire Authority was reformed and remains in place as the supervisory body for the Service.

5 Cultural Review

- 5.1 Last September saw the conclusion of an independent root and branch cultural review of the Service. Broadly speaking, the purpose of the review was to assess the culture and relationships within the service and the impact they have on its successful operation, along with the health and wellbeing of employees within the existing culture.
- 5.2 The review found areas of good practice but also identified that there was a need to support and improve effective and functional relations between all parties in the future.
- 5.3 The implementation of the recommendations of the review are subject to planning, scrutiny and review to make sure that all of the potential benefits are realised. I have been assured that implementation will continue to be a focus for the Authority and the Service as they look to build upon and address the findings of the report and this will be closely followed by representatives on the authority via their respective committees.

6 Observer Status for the Trade Unions

- 6.1 The Authority has recently agreed that four observer positions on the Fire Authority be available for the recognised unions, the Fire brigades Union, Unison, the Fire Officers Association and the Fire Leaders Association. This is a decision that not only shows commitment to the recommendations of the cultural review but will also be a major contribution to openness, transparency and communication within the organisation.

7 The Grenfell Inquiry

- 7.1 The report from Phase One of the Grenfell Inquiry was published in October last year. The fire safety protection work of WMFS includes auditing high-risk buildings, including residential high-rises, to ensure public safety whilst also providing public reassurance about the risks of fire. Following the Grenfell tragedy, action was immediately taken to identify buildings with flammable cladding. The Service worked closely with the 'responsible persons' for those buildings and supported the Government on behalf of the NFCC in the national co-ordination of the checking of high-rise premises and the cladding materials. Policies and tactics for tackling fires in residential high-rise buildings are under constant review and strengthened whenever there is opportunity.

8 Workforce Diversity

- 8.1 As we all know, the West Midlands Region is incredibly diverse part of the country. There have been concerns in the past that that diversity is not reflected in the workforce and the service has been working to ensure that the staff employed better reflect the communities across the area it serves.
- 8.2 WMFS have challenging targets for the recruitment of both women and BAME firefighters and currently 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.
- 8.3 As it serves such a diverse community, an equally diverse workforce helps to engage with people more effectively and is a huge advantage when working with the community on preventative work.
- 8.4 The commitment to workforce diversity has recently been recognised with the Service winning the Workplace Diversity category in the Guardian newspaper's Public Service Awards for 2019.

9 Further Information

- 9.1 The West Midlands Fire Service plan sets out their priorities and objectives in 'Our Plan'. It's a rolling, three-year document which covers things like reducing serious traffic accidents, helping people have safer, healthier lives and making sure emergencies are tackled effectively and safely.

<https://www.wmfs.net/our-plan/>

9.2 Agendas and reports considered by the West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority can be found here:

<https://wmfs.cmis.uk.com/cmis5/Committees/WMFRA2014-onwards/ActiveCommittees.aspx>