

Report of the Chief Fire Officer

7. Potential Combination with Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service

Purpose of report

1. To seek approval for the Chief Fire Officer to progress discussions with Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service regarding future options for combination with Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service.
-

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- i) A joint officer project team be established with Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service to examine the feasibility and potential benefits of a possible combination with Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service.*
- ii) The Chief Fire Officer makes recommendations to the Authority based upon the project team's work.*

Background

2. As Members are aware, Hereford & Worcester Fire and Rescue Authority is a separate stand alone authority that provides fire and rescue services for the combined area of Herefordshire and Worcestershire. In the case of Warwickshire, the County Council provides Fire and Rescue Services for that county.
3. In early 2007, Hereford & Worcester Fire and Rescue Service (HWFRS) and Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service (WFRS) identified and agreed a number of common challenges and commenced a project to explore options for greater collaborative working or a full combination.
4. A joint review commenced in the form of an options appraisal that considered three potential scenarios:
 - Status Quo;
 - Expand existing collaboration; and

- Full combination and merger of the two fire and rescue services governed by a new Fire Authority appointed by Worcestershire County Council, Warwickshire County Council and Herefordshire Council.
5. In line with accepted good practice, the options appraisal considered each of the three scenarios in respect of its strategic, operational and financial impact.
 6. The initial options appraisal was conducted at a strategic level and its outcome was reported to each Authority in September 2008. Following those meetings, it was jointly agreed to undertake more detailed work to develop a single outline business case, which would provide adequate information for each Authority to make an informed judgement on the benefits and disadvantages of each option.
 7. As a consequence of a large fire at Atherstone-on-Stour when four firefighters tragically died, notably the potential impact and outcome of the on-going criminal, health and safety and civil investigations, both this Authority and the Warwickshire County Council Cabinet decided to defer the work on the business case until an appropriate opportunity to finalise the review presented itself.
 8. In December 2012, the Fire Minister, Brandon Lewis MP, commissioned Sir Ken Knight, to undertake a review of efficiencies and operations in fire and rescue authorities in England. The findings of the review were published in May 2013. The report acknowledged that although there has been a significant reduction in emergency incidents during the last decade, the overall expenditure and firefighter numbers had remained broadly the same. It also focused on the need for fire and rescue authorities to consider ways of transforming themselves to reflect the entirely different environment of risk and demand in which they now operate. In the key findings, Sir Ken Knight recommended that where fire and rescue authorities can provide business cases for local merger, showing clear, achievable efficiencies, central government should step forward to provide financial support for transition.
 9. In April 2010 this Authority appointed a new Chief Fire Officer (CFO) and in May 2013 an interim CFO was appointed by Warwickshire County Council. Taking into consideration the current financial climate of budget reductions, the content of the Knight report and that the Atherstone-on-Stour court cases had recently concluded, the two CFOs agreed that it was appropriate to reconsider the joint requirements of and arrangements for a possible combination scheme between the two authorities. On initial inspection it could be concluded that the two authorities, services and areas would be ideal for an investigation into a potential combination for the following reasons:
 - (a) A combination of the 2 Services would enable major structure and back room functions to be merged which it is anticipated would realise significant financial savings which in turn would protect front-line Service provision;
 - (b) They can be seen as culturally similar, i.e. an urbanised belt along the border of the West Midlands' conurbation, along with the challenges that arise from delivering services in more rural communities where a significant element of the workforce work the 'on-call' duty system.

Whilst HWFRS and WFRS are not identical in every way, there are sufficient synergies in the communities, risk and workforce make-up to suggest that solutions to manage and address issues in one Service are most likely to be appropriate in addressing the needs in the other;

- (c) HWFRS and WFRS have a good history of collaborative working including sharing of risk information, equipment research and development, and joint delivery of some elements of training and development; and
 - (d) a combination will contribute to securing long term viability and to boost internal capacity to respond to modern day fire and rescue service issues, whilst maintaining an effective front-line public service.
10. Taking the above factors into consideration, it is considered that a combination of HWFRS and WFRS is the most viable option for merger and worthy of further exploration.

Current Position

11. The current environment that neighbouring fire and rescue services find themselves in, together with the publication of the Knight Review, mean that interest in securing efficiencies and better viability through alliances or combinations continues to be just as relevant today as when the Authority and Warwickshire County Council agreed to explore these possibilities in the past.
12. In recent weeks both the Authority Chairman and the Chief Fire Officer have met and held informal discussions with their counterparts at Warwickshire County Council. These early discussions have been very positive and there is clear political interest in both Authorities in restarting the project that was placed on hold in February 2009.
13. Officers have also met to consider the potential impacts on the level of Council Tax and the overall resulting budgetary position. Initial findings indicate that there are synergies in this area and therefore further exploration is warranted.
14. It is now therefore considered timely to re-visit the process to examine the potential options for the future combination of Warwickshire and Hereford & Worcester Fire and Rescue Authorities that was put on hold by the previous resolution of the Authority on 18 February 2009.
15. Members may also wish to note that West Mercia and Warwickshire Police are also examining a similar process.

Benefits

16. For HWFRS and WFRS, a significant increase in the organisational capacity would be delivered almost immediately by the combination of the two services. Removal of duplication would provide the short term capacity required to deliver harmonisation of processes and procedures across the new authority. Longer term the creation of better resourced teams in key departments or functions can be achieved at a lower cost.

17. A combined Service would provide organisational resilience in both the operational and training arenas as well as within support services. This would be evidenced in relation to better utilisation of specialist training staff and physical training resources, as well as reserve and specialist appliances. Having a single operational and risk policy unit would ensure that operational doctrine was robust, up to date and consistently applied. A standardisation of approach across the two services would then enable a more robust training and audit system to ensure firefighter and community safety.
18. A combination would allow the integration of good practice from the two authorities and build on those already established partnerships in the wider arena.
19. Greater flexibility in the important area of training and development can be achieved through the integration of the assets and services. The development of a single training and development policy utilising shared infrastructure will provide the maximum flexibility and ensure economic use of facilities. A combined authority would not seek to achieve these improvements in isolation, but would be in a stronger position to enter into and contribute towards suitable partnerships with neighbours.

Proposed Next Steps

20. Officers in both Hereford & Worcester and Warwickshire are now re-visiting the data available to both services from the previous work, and considering how to suitably resource the project. A bid for project funding from the DCLG (Department for Communities and Local Government) transformation fund has also been submitted and a response is expected mid October.
21. A wide range of issues will need consideration and political agreement will be necessary before any combination could proceed, particularly around issues such as political governance and budget. The Authority will be kept fully informed of the progress of the Project Team.

Conclusion/Summary

22. This report outlines previous work undertaken in respect of a potential combination between Hereford & Worcester and Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Services, which was agreed to be put on hold by resolution of the Authority on 18 February 2009.
23. In light of the need to secure long term viability, boost internal capacity to respond to modern fire and rescue service issues and maintain an effective front-line public service, it is concluded that now is the appropriate time to re-visit the process to examine the combination option. It is therefore recommended that the Authority gives approval for the Chief Fire Officer to progress discussions with Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service.

Corporate Considerations

Resource Implications (identify any financial, legal, property or human resources issues)	If the outcome of further discussions leads to future recommendations for combination resource implications will be fully scoped and reported back to the Authority.
Strategic Policy Links (identify how proposals link in with current priorities and policy framework and if they do not, identify any potential implications).	The recommendation contained within this report directly links to the Authorities Core Purpose 'providing our communities with sustainable high quality fire-fighting, rescue and preventative services'.
Risk Management / Health & Safety (identify any risks, the proposed control measures and risk evaluation scores).	Not applicable at this stage.
Consultation (identify any public or other consultation that has been carried out on this matter)	Not applicable at this stage.
Equalities (has an Equalities Impact Assessment been completed? If not, why not?)	Not applicable at this stage.

Supporting Information

Background papers

Hereford & Worcester Fire and Rescue Authority Agenda, Papers and Minutes:
27 September 2007, 13 December 2007, 16 June 2008, 19 December 2008, 18 February 2009.

Contact Officer

Jean Cole, Head of Corporate Services
(01905 368329)
Email: jcole@hwfire.org.uk