

10. Warwickshire FRS Improvement Plan

Purpose of report

1. To inform Fire Authority Members of the proposals and implications arising from Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service's Improvement Plan and the associated response made from this Authority.
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Recommendations

The Chief Fire Officer recommends that:

- i) the Authority notes the content of this report; and***
- ii) that the Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive continues to engage with colleagues in Warwickshire to monitor progress in relation to their plans;***
- iii) that the Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive and senior management team draw up contingency plans to ensure that communities in Herefordshire and Worcestershire are not adversely affected by Warwickshire's plans;***
- iv) the Authority reviews its position once finalised proposals are made by Warwickshire.***

Background

Main features of Warwickshire's Plan

2. Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service recently produced their 2009/10 Improvement Plan and embarked on the statutory requirement for consultation on 15 September 2009. Consultation lasted for 12 weeks with the closing date for responses being 8 December 2009.
3. The general objective of Warwickshire's Improvement Plan is to reduce incidents and injuries to people through pro-active preventative work. The main drivers cited as prompting change are a change in risk profiles, RDS vehicle availability, a need to improve skills levels due to reduced operational activity and also an imperative to achieve efficiencies/best use of physical resources.
4. The Improvement Plan outlines how Warwickshire aims to meet these identified objectives through internal management strategies. These include increasing the number of home fire safety checks, reduction in the attendance to automatic fire alarms, improved training for hot fires and incident command, the utilisation of specialist units to attend RTCs as an alternative to main pumping appliances and also improved sickness management.

5. However, there are specific proposals which cover their physical resources which are as follows:
 - Reduction in the number of Stations from 19 Stations to 12 Stations and the number of fire appliances from 26 down to 19 with the addition of 2 small rapid response RTC units. To do this 6 Retained and 1 Day Crewed Station are to be closed for firefighting response.
 - The Stations at Bidford and Studley, based in south west Warwickshire along the border of Hereford & Worcester, are two of the Stations planned for closure with the loss of 2 appliances.
 - Alcester Station, which sits between Bidford and Studley, is planned to be upgraded from Retained to Wholetime/Retained cover.
6. Warwickshire's current IRMP has established attendance standards at 10 minutes to higher risk urban areas and 20 minutes for rural areas, such as those along our joint boarder. Hereford & Worcester have a generic 10 minute first appliance response standard for fires in buildings, with a second appliance within 5 minutes regardless of locality.

Summary of implications/concerns for Hereford & Worcester

7. The information made publicly available by Warwickshire in support of their proposals was insufficient to enable a full assessment of their impact on Hereford & Worcester to be made.
8. Whilst their proposals were not discussed with us prior to public consultation, Officers working within our Policy, Planning and Performance team, led by Deputy Chief Fire Officer Lucy Phillips, have been in contact with Warwickshire's staff during the consultation period to request the information necessary for us to undertake an effective evaluation. A formal request for further information was also made by the Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive.
9. Unfortunately, whilst we have received some further clarification on the data already available, Warwickshire has not been able to provide all the additional data and analysis requested. Our consultation response has therefore been limited by the available data and must be considered with this caveat.
10. In designing an operational response structure, account must be taken of both the speed of response required to meet published standards of cover, and the weight of response necessary to ensure sufficient resources are available for a safe system of work for responders. Account must also be taken of the impact of larger scale, but routine, activity and incidents on a Service's ability to maintain strategic cover across an Authority area.
11. Our evaluation of Warwickshire's proposals suggests that whilst they have considered the speed of first attendance that could still be maintained with a reduced level of resources, they may not have fully taken account of the resources necessary to deliver a safe system of work for responders or the impact of routine of activity on their ability to resource operations.

12. Our evaluation suggests that the scale of reductions being proposed will leave Warwickshire without sufficient resilience to deal with routine operations without a significant increase in requests for over the border mutual aid from neighbouring Authorities such as ourselves. Our concern is not simply in relation to the reduction in resources proposed along our immediate border area, but that the reductions proposed across Warwickshire would adversely impact their ability to resource day-to-day activity.
13. The practical impact of these reductions in capacity would be to draw our front-line resources into Warwickshire more frequently, and for longer periods of time, than they are at present. This would reduce the levels of emergency provision available for our own communities and increase the workload of our Retained Duty staff.
14. In addition to concerns about Hereford & Worcester resources being drawn into Warwickshire more frequently in the future, a reduction in strategic capacity may reduce Warwickshire's ability to meet their current mutual aid obligations to us, provided through our historic mutual aid agreements. This, again, could have a detrimental impact on communities in Hereford and Worcester.
15. A further concern relates to the financial impact of these proposals on Hereford & Worcester. For a Fire and Rescue Service which answers calls in a neighbouring Authority's area there is a national compensation figure of £286 per response (2009 figure), provided it meets certain criteria: i.e. not an RTC, call not mobilised through the FRS' own Control. However, this fee is for each incident, not for each appliance, and it applies regardless of the duration of the incident. Hence, should our resources be drawn into Warwickshire more frequently in the future, with multiple appliances over an extended time, we would still only receive the basic fee for each attendance.
16. Because the current support we provide to each other is fairly even, Hereford & Worcester and Warwickshire have traditionally operated on a "knock for knock" basis, with no monies being transferred between either Authority. However, should we move away from the current balanced position in cross border support to one which would see us effectively supplementing Warwickshire's resources on a regular basis, national funding systems will not fully compensate us for services provided, generating an additional cost to the Hereford & Worcester council tax payer.
17. On the basis of evidence Warwickshire has provided, and in light of the above issues, I have grave concerns that proposals to reduce front-line resources across Warwickshire would have a directly adverse impact on communities in Herefordshire and Worcestershire.

Liaison with regional FRS bordering Warwickshire

18. Close liaison has taken place between Hereford & Worcester and West Midlands Fire Service as we share a considerable border with Warwickshire. Both Services have undertaken similar analysis where possible and have requested further information from Warwickshire where consultation data has been insufficient to effectively assess their proposal implications. Although West Midlands have had greater success in obtaining additional data, it is evident from the work undertaken by both Services that a range of similar concerns exist.

Hereford & Worcester's response

19. The Authority has formally responded to the Warwickshire Improvement Plan consultation raising significant concerns about their proposals to reduce operational resources. The response outlines that in our view, the proposals to reduce the number of Fire Stations and fire appliances across Warwickshire, if enacted, would inevitably lead to an increase in the numbers of times front-line resources from Hereford & Worcester are called upon to support operations in Warwickshire.
20. We have made clear that in our opinion, unless we took action to limit the impact of these changes on our own Service, Warwickshire's plans would adversely impact Hereford and Worcester, increasing risks to our communities and staff, with an associated impact on our own running costs and council tax.
21. The Authority has firmly stated that its primary responsibility is to protect the communities of Herefordshire and Worcestershire through the provision of an effective and efficient emergency service. This extends to a necessity to reassure our community that actions taken by Warwickshire will not be allowed to adversely impact on the service they receive or the costs they are expected to pay through council tax.
22. We have also informed Warwickshire that we will take action to reassure staff that this Authority will take all steps necessary to ensure that their safety and welfare will be protected should these proposals go ahead.

Conclusion/Summary

23. Although Warwickshire has been unable to provide all of the data and analysis we have requested to enable us to undertake a full evaluation of their proposals, it is clear from the data that is available that a reduction in the number of Fire Stations and front-line resources across Warwickshire could have a significant effect on our service and communities unless we take action to limit the impact.
24. Should these proposals go ahead, we will need to conduct a more detailed analysis of their impact, re-evaluate the levels of mutual aid provided, and amend or withdraw from current agreements.

25. The publicity surrounding these proposals has generated a great deal of anxiety amongst stakeholders across Hereford and Worcester. In light of this anxiety and the above concerns, the Authority will need to reassure communities across Hereford and Worcester that any actions taken by Warwickshire will not be allowed to adversely impact the services they receive or costs they are expected to pay through council tax. The Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive will also need to reassure staff that he will take whatever actions may be necessary to ensure that their safety and welfare will be protected.

Supporting Information

Formal response from the Chief Fire Officer
Formal response from Chair of the Authority

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