

Report of the Chief Fire Officer

9. Chief Fire Officer's Service Report

Purpose of Report

1. To inform the Authority of recent key developments and activities.
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Recommendation

The Chief Fire Officer recommends that the report be noted.

Fire Safety Prosecution

2. The Service has recently been successful in taking a prosecution under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. This prosecution against the owner of Abbey College, an independent school in Malvern, was heard at Worcester Crown Court on 15 January 2014. The owner was found guilty of serious breaches in fire safety law and was fined £24,000 and agreed to pay prosecution costs of a further £25,000.
3. The Service brought the prosecution against Mr Hekmet Kaveh after our Technical Fire Safety inspectors visited Abbey College, Malvern and identified a number of serious fire safety concerns. These included defective smoke alarms and fire doors which were not working in student sleeping areas.
4. This was an extremely serious case where those living and sleeping inside the premises were being put at risk. In such serious cases, the Service will undertake enforcement action under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Orders 2005. The successful outcome of this prosecution and fine imposed sends out a clear message that in severe cases where fire safety responsibilities are ignored, the Service will prosecute in order to highlight serious infringements of fire safety.
5. The court decision concludes a lengthy, difficult and complex case that various members of the Technical Fire Safety team have been involved with since 2011. The conviction, and fine imposed reflect the seriousness of this case.

Merger of Droitwich and USAR

6. Following approval by the Authority in 2013 to merge the Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) team into Droitwich fire station I am pleased to report that this has progressed well. The station now operates as a single unit and in early February 2014 re-aligned their working practices, dis-establishing the USAR unit and USAR station as a stand-alone entity.

7. The final agreements for additional voluntary duties by the remaining staff to cover both fire service and USAR incidents is also nearing completion and is due to go live by April 2014. Alongside this realignment of the two sets of staff is a program of minor capital building works at Droitwich to provide appropriate facilities for these new working arrangements. Management and staff have worked hard to agree a series of new and innovative working practices to meet the operational needs of the Service and station. Staff have also agreed to new flexible working practices that will provide for the additional delivery of technical rescue support and training around the Service and support operational resilience within existing budgets.
8. There will now begin a program of technical training and support that will endeavour to up-skill the staff over the next year and aims to build further resilience into the USAR provision, as well as adding value and supporting the main stream activities within the Service. This will include not only operational response, incident support, and USAR response capabilities, but also an additional specialist rescue boat team and rope rescue team that will add resilience into the existing arrangements across the Service.
9. The staffing has been proportionately reduced through natural wastage and voluntary changes and it is anticipated that the savings identified of circa £300k will begin to be realised in 2014/15.
10. As was also agreed by the Authority in 2013 the transfer of the National Resilience asset, "Incident Response Unit" (IRU), which was located on Droitwich fire station, is also nearing completion. The transfer has been agreed by DCLG and is due to be formally handed over to Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service in the near future. The unit is currently deployed at the Fire Service College as part of the contingency arrangements for National Resilience during the on-going period of Industrial Action and it is envisaged that the vehicle will not return to the Service, but transfer directly to Gloucestershire FRS.

Fatal House Fire

11. A man died following a fire at his home in the Charford area of Bromsgrove on Tuesday 7 January 2014.
12. The Service was called to the address in Bishop Hall Crescent, Bromsgrove at 4.27pm. Four fire appliances were deployed to the incident and on arrival firefighters were faced with a severe fire involving the first floor and roof space of the semi-detached property.
13. Crews wearing Breathing Apparatus were immediately committed to the property to search for an occupant known to be inside. Crews battled through an intense fire to reach the occupant, however sadly he was later pronounced dead at the scene.

Sky Lanterns

14. At the Authority meeting on 11 December 2013 the problems associated with the use of sky lanterns (commonly referred to as Chinese lanterns) were discussed. It was agreed that the possibility of legislation being introduced to prevent the use of sky lanterns should be investigated and that a report be provided back to the Authority.
15. As Members will be aware, there has been national debate regarding the mitigation of the risk to livestock posed by sky lanterns. DEFRA is currently reluctant to support a complete ban on usage, preferring instead to work with lantern manufacturers to ensure that clearer guidance is published to raise awareness of how to use lanterns responsibly. However, it is interesting to note that the Government has recently launched an independent study on the impact of sky lanterns, not only on livestock, but also the impact on crops and the environment.
16. In July 2013, the Chief Fire Officers' Association (CFOA) called for an urgent review of the permissive use of sky lanterns due to the risk not only to livestock but also to agriculture, camping activities, thatched properties and hazardous material sites (see Appendix 1). The Service has issued press releases warning the public of the dangers associated with sky lanterns, which aligns with the CFOA position following the serious fire at Croft Farm Leisure Park near Tewkesbury that was caused by a sky lantern.
17. The National CFOA Events Safety Group, which includes representation from this Service works to improve safety at mass public gatherings, events and festivals and is currently examining how the use of sky lanterns can be restricted using existing legislation. The work of the National Group will support engagement with partner agencies locally within Herefordshire and Worcestershire to explore the feasibility of controlling the use of sky lanterns through the licensing arrangements for public events. This work has commenced and will continue during 2014, more extensively as summer events are programmed, and licenses are sought.
18. To complement local initiatives, Worcestershire County Council has a policy of prohibiting the use of sky lanterns at events on its land and recently Harriett Baldwin MP raised questions in Westminster about the use of sky lanterns. The West Worcestershire MP has also written to DEFRA calling for the Government to act to control the use of lanterns at public events.
19. Tesco recently announced that it would stop selling sky lanterns following lobbying by various pressure groups and the Chief Fire Officers' Association, to review the sale of these lanterns.
20. Your officers will continue to research and examine the issue of sky lanterns and campaign for their safe use and ultimately their removal from sale. Although there does not yet appear to be any development of legislation to prevent the use of sky lanterns at this moment in time, the proposal to use licensing arrangements to prohibit use at public events locally will continue to be explored.

Collaboration between West Midlands FRSs

21. In order to ensure the best possible operational and financial efficiency across the five Services in the West Midlands region a jointly signed Memorandum of Understanding or Statement of Intent is being formulated to be signed by all five Services.
22. This work was agreed at a meeting of all five Chairs (portfolio holder for Warwickshire FRS) and Chief Fire officers in order to be clear about all five services' intent to collaborate more closely to achieve operational and financial efficiency.
23. It is anticipated that any agreement would be agreed by the FRA prior to adoption.

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Appendix 1 - CFOA Position statement: Chinese Lanterns, July 2013