

West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority

Organisational Assessment

Dated 9 December 2009



for an independent overview
of local public services

West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority

Overall, West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority performs well

Managing performance	3 out of 4
Use of resources	3 out of 4
Managing finances	2 out of 4
Governing the business	3 out of 4
Managing resources	3 out of 4

Description of scores:

1. An organisation that does not meet minimum requirements, Performs Poorly
2. An organisation that meets only minimum requirements, Performs Adequately
3. An organisation that exceeds minimum requirements, Performs Well
4. An organisation that significantly exceeds minimum requirements, Performs Excellently

Summary

West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority is managing its performance well and providing good value for money.

The West Midlands is becoming safer from fire. Arson is greatly reducing. Public satisfaction is high. The number of house fires and injuries has reduced. The number of house fires is midway with metropolitan authorities but high compared with the rest of England.

The FRA is showing commitment to improve safety through its priority 'Communities and Partnerships'. Successful community safety activity is delivered both in partnership and independently and this is based upon a good understanding and knowledge of the area. In particular, targeting of home fire safety work towards the more vulnerable is good. Partnership activity is delivering positive outcomes in those areas of focus within the seven local area agreements' LAA that the FRA participates in. For example, targets in the Birmingham LAA to reduce road traffic related deaths and injuries. However the evaluation of community safety schemes is not consistent and the reduction in community risk is not always clear.

The fire and rescue authority's approach to securing value for money is good. The net cost of services is good in the context of high deprivation. The level of funding from council tax is low compared with others. Savings have been lower than other metropolitan authorities over the last two years. Financial management is good.

The fire and rescue authority is well prepared to respond to emergencies. Focus on operational training is better although it is less accessible to the late

shift. Attendance times are generally good, have been reviewed and targets improved recently. Arrangements are in place to ensure good data quality. Steady progress is being made in implementing many aspects of the requirements of the Fire and Rescue Service National Framework 2008¹¹. The FRA has a strong health and safety culture resulting in fewer accidents. Officer leadership is settling down after changes during the year and political leadership is being more fully integrated into developing the way forward. The 2008/09 proposals for improving the location of fire stations which involved closing 10 stations and building eight new ones did not lead to any station closures. Engagement with staff is becoming more effective. Internal functions such as human resource management are improving. The approach to diversity and equality is improving with Level 3 of the Equality Standard achieved this year. However, recruitment of operational staff representative of the community, albeit in a year with little recruitment, has been less successful. Plans to improve are more coordinated.

About West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority

West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority serves a population of approximately 2.6 million living in a million dwellings. It covers seven metropolitan authorities, each with different population demographics. Proportions of age groups vary across the area, as does the percentage change in age groups. However, it is clear that in general there is a greater minority ethnic population in the West Midlands area compared to regionally and nationally, and the Chinese/other ethnic groups population has increased the most over the last five years. It is similar to the metropolitan fire authorities of Greater Manchester and Merseyside.

The West Midlands has a very busy road network including the M6, M5, M42 and A38M. Birmingham International Airport is within the area. The FRA currently employs 2,500 staff which includes fire fighters, along with a support staff of 277 working in control, training, workshops and other services. There are 39 fire stations.

The FRA established its vision and ambition through its corporate strategy in 2006. The vision 'Making West Midlands safer' is underpinned by the mission statement 'Providing a quality service to reduce risk by: Prevention; Protection; Responding. The priorities reflect the requirements of the National Framework for Fire and Rescue Authorities. The FRA contributes to seven LSPs and Local Area Agreements in the West Midlands. The fire and rescue authority has four priorities which group its activities together. These are;

Communities and Partnerships - to educate, inform and target vulnerable people, meeting the needs of diverse communities through work with partners; to combat arson and fire crime; to protect businesses from fire

Response - to deploy appropriate resources that deal effectively with incidents; planning well for large scale emergencies

People - to develop organisation and leadership capacity, which rewards and recognises good staff and promotes health, safety and wellbeing of the

service

Value for Money - to deliver a value for money service and ensure continuous improvement

Organisational assessment

West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority provides a good service to local residents.

Communities and partnership

The fire and rescues authority is making homes safer. It carried out 45,993 home fire safety checks targeting 70 per cent of these at the most vulnerable. It understands the complexity of its community well. Vulnerable groups include the hard of hearing, those with special educational needs, faith groups and those with mental health issues. Despite good targeting, full evaluation of the effectiveness of home fire safety work has not been effectively undertaken.

Arson is greatly reducing. Deliberate car fires and house fires continue to reduce by more than ten per cent each year. Public satisfaction is high. The number of accidental house fires has decreased from 1,958 to 1,867 in the last year. The level of improvement is good at five per cent but is lower than previous years improvement of ten per cent plus. Overall the number of house fires is high compared with other less deprived areas. While the number of injuries reduced from 137 to 124, fire deaths are reported to have increased from eight to 12. However, the impact of targeted community safety work such as Operation Grandslam which involved 10 appliances concentrating prevention work in one area over a fortnight is unclear.

The understanding of inequalities and diversity of local communities and analysis of the issues around Children and Young People, Older People, Arson and Road Safety feeds into the targeting of its prevention work. The fire and rescue authority works well with children and young people. The Your Choice programme provided safety education and antisocial behaviour awareness to 30, 000 young people in secondary schools in the last year. Antisocial behaviour fires have reduced by 19 per cent. There is no separate strategy for improving the safety of older people.

Partnerships activity is good across the seven metropolitan areas but the outcomes it is targeting are not clearly measurable. A broad range of activity is undertaken aimed at reducing inequality. Innovation is encouraged and implemented. Partners speak highly of the fire service. LAA targets are generally being met. In Walsall, the Primary Care Trust have agreed to pay £1.5million towards the delivery of the healthier eating message in schools alongside the fire and road safety message already in place. A more robust approach to partnership agreements which now include exit strategies is in place. Full evaluation of the impact of these community safety initiatives has started.

The fire and rescue authority is making businesses safer. It works well with partners to inform businesses of the risk of fire. Fires continue to reduce with more success in reducing deliberate fires. The service is developing a strategy

to improve the protection of businesses. And the sharing of information with crews is inconsistent.

The FRA is starting to take a stronger approach to address environmental and sustainability issues. The new headquarters is a high quality modern building which gained a gold environmental award. A range of targets across all areas of the service have been set. While, most home fire safety checks are undertaken by crews in appliances, the impact on the environment has not been measured.

Response

This year the Service had a peer review of its Operational Assessment 'OpA'. Self assessment by accredited peers from the fire sector. The findings of this evidence based review are used in this organisational assessment. The fire and rescue authority is well prepared to respond to emergencies. Operational training has increased. This works well because there is a regular daily slot across the brigade. It allows effective planning for exercises and joint activity. Larger exercises are held quarterly. This daily slot is less accessible to staff on the late shift.

Fire fighters have good equipment and appliances. Targeted response vehicles have been piloted to tackle small fires with an initial investment of £0.75million. These use a smaller crew and the project is being properly evaluated. Mobile data tools on appliances are being populated with site risk information and National framework requirements in providing risk information are met. However, communication by email is overloaded. For instance, a new operational directive was made everyday through email for a few months. This risks important information being missed.

Fire fighters are used flexibly to meet demand levels using the late shift which covers the busiest time of day. However, the number of fire fighters per appliance is higher than in other authorities. Attendance times are good, have been reviewed and targets improved recently. These are monitored using an averaging method which can make it more difficult to identify weaker performance.

Collaboration with neighbouring fire services and engagement with Local Resilience Forum 'LRF' is positive. The West Midlands leads on several key projects. It was particularly helpful in providing support to a nearby investigation. However, the LRF lacks strategic direction which the authority could provide.

Improvements to fire cover have been identified in the asset management strategy. This involves closing 10 stations and building eight new ones. The 2008/09 consultation did not lead to any station closures. It is recognised that early development of plans with key stakeholders such as members and staff is key to making difficult changes.

People

The fire and rescue authority is steadily improving its leadership, capacity and capability it needs to deliver future improvement. Officer leadership is settling

down after a period of change. Political leadership is being more fully integrated into developing plans and strategies to direct the future of the service. The move to the new headquarters was well managed. Investment in changing the culture has been made through focus groups. 'Have Your Say' visioning events are now taking place for the second year. Staff have become responsive and engaged in these events. The FRA has a comprehensive policy designed to reduce sickness absence. As a result, sickness absence has reduced to 5.4 working days or shifts lost in 2008/09, which is good compared with others.

Capacity is further enhanced through a culture of innovation across the service. Staff feel they are empowered to try new things, particularly in working with partners and contributing to wider community outcomes. Sharing good practice across the service is recognised as a key aspect of future development. The service has recently changed its structure to improve the coordination of activity and streamline learning. An evaluation specialist has also been employed to help the service improve its use of resources. This shows that the service is willing to change to drive improvement in service outcomes.

The FRA has a strong health and safety culture. The management of health and safety is embedded in the organisation with arrangements in place to address any safety issues on a daily basis. The framework for consultation on health and safety is robust. As a result, it has achieved a 50 per cent reduction in injuries over the last four years. This has been recognized by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents in their gold award for Occupational Health and Safety.

Other changes such as the introduction of the late shift and the changes to fire cover proposed in 2008/09 were not developed as well with staff. For example, staff working at one of the stations where closure was proposed were only informed two days before the public. Unions do not have regular dialogue with operational leaders. Although this has made operational changes difficult, new leadership is now in place.

Personnel development is well established and operational training plays a strong part. Succession planning and talent management is developing through an improved approach to Assessment and Development Centres from supervisory to strategic levels. However, annual individual appraisals are inconsistently applied across the service.

Equality impact assessments are comprehensive and Level Three of Equality Standard has now been achieved. Recruitment rates for women were 20 per cent which is above the level required in the national Equality & Diversity Strategy. However, minority ethnic recruitment is low '8.3per cent' compared with the 30 per cent representation in the area, though there has been little recruitment during the year. Workforce plans do not have targets for equality and diversity across all strands of the equality standard.

Value for money

The fire and rescue authority's approach to securing value for money is good. WMFRA has a track record of operating within its budget while maintaining good service performance. It has a high level of reserves and its medium term

financial plan 'MTFP' indicates financial stability over the medium term. The net cost of services is good in the context of high deprivation. The level of funding from council tax is low compared with others. The comparative net cost and greater efficiency savings have been achieved while improving overall service performance.

Savings have been lower than other metropolitan authorities over the last two years. These were £0.6million in 2007/08 and £1.1 million in 2008/09. Costs are low allowing for deprivation and savings have been achieved. The main area where the authority continues to be an outlier is the number of whole time operational fire fighters compared with the number of operational appliances. These trends could be used to investigate areas for improvement.

A value for money strategy has recently been developed with a wide range of stakeholders. In 2009/10, the authority plans to introduce a robust process for measuring, monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness and performance of all partnership activities.

The service has integrated financial and corporate planning. The corporate strategy working group drives this process and comprises officers from all functions of the service. The service is 68 per cent grant funded and the impact of potential government cuts has not been clearly shown to the public or staff.

Over the last year, the service has had many external assessments. Together these provide a good basis for improvement planning. One overarching plan bringing all the issues identified has been drafted. Previously, recommendations from reports have not been systematically addressed such as the fire safety report.

CAA looks at how well local public services, working together, are meeting the needs of the people they serve. It's a joint assessment made by a group of independent watchdogs about the performance of local public services, and how likely they are to meet local priorities. From 9 December you will find the results of Comprehensive Area Assessment on the Oneplace website - <http://oneplace.direct.gov.uk/>

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Audit Commission, 1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4HQ
Telephone: 0844 798 1212
Fax: 0844 798 2945
Textphone (minicom): 0844 798 2946
www.audit-commission.gov.uk



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