



**CFOA**  
Chief Fire Officers  
Association



# **West Midlands Fire Service Peer Challenge**

**17-20 October 2016**

**Report**

## 1. Introduction, context and purpose

This report outlines the key findings from the Local Government Association's (LGA) Fire Peer Challenge at West Midlands Fire Service (WMFS) in October 2016.

The report provides further detail on the themes that were considered under the heading of 'leadership and organisational capacity' as follows:

- Understanding of local context and priority setting
- Delivering outcomes for local communities
- Financial planning and viability
- Political and managerial leadership
- Governance and decision-making
- Organisational capacity

In addition to the areas above WMFS requested that the peer team consider some specific issues:

- **Prevention Linked to Marmot principles** - How well does the Service operate in the wider prevention arena working with the NHS and local authority health services,
- **Effectiveness of the Integrated Service Delivery** - Response and attendance standards; Integration of fleet response – is it providing an efficient and effective approach to service delivery?
- **Governance and Decision Making** - effectiveness of the current governance and decision-making arrangements for now and the future
- **Sections 13 & 16 Fire Services Act** - the completed business case for a more formal combination of fire services in the area, including the possible financial savings.
- **Fire Control** - How effective and efficient is the service provided to WMFRS?
- **Equality and diversity**- the Service's approach to positive action in recruitment both internally and externally
- **Strategic Management and Leadership** - what impact has the establishment of the Strategic Enabling Team had on the leadership and management of the service?
- **Training and Development**

## 2. The peer challenge process and peer team

Fire Peer Challenge is part of sector led improvement. Challenges are managed and delivered by the sector for the sector. They help fire services and fire authorities with their improvement and learning by providing a critical friend challenge.

The WMFS Fire Peer Challenge took place from 17th to 20th October 2016. It consisted of a range of on-site activities including interviews, focus groups

and fire station visits. The peer team met with a broad cross-section of officers, staff, front-line firefighters, partners and elected members. During the challenge the peer team were very well looked after and people the team met were fully engaged with the process and very open and honest.

The peer team undertook background reading provided to them in advance, including the WMFS Operational Self- Assessment. The evidence and feedback gathered was assimilated into broad themes and was delivered to WMFS on the final day of the challenge.

The peer challenge team for WMFS was:

- Alasdair Hay - Chief Officer – Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (Lead Peer)
- Councillor Rebecca Knox, Chair of Dorset and Wilts Fire Authority and Cabinet member for Communities, Health and Wellbeing at Dorset County Council (Conservative)
- Mark McAteer – Director of Strategic Planning, Performance and Communications – Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
- Nick Page – Chief Executive Solihull Borough Council
- Geoff Howsego – Director of Professional Services, Hampshire FRS
- David Sibert - Fire Safety and IRMP Advisor  
Fire Brigades Union
- Gill Elliott, Review Manager, Local Government Association

### **3. Executive Summary**

WMFS is a Service that places its communities at the heart of everything and every decision it makes. The Chief Fire Officer (CFO) and the Fire Authority Chair have an excellent working relationship which is serving the organisation well. The CFO provides clear leadership for the Service and the Chair is clearly respected by the Authority and wider constituent partners. Good relationships have also been built with all internal stakeholders, including Members and the workforce. WMFS understands the public sector environment it is operating in. It is proactive and keen to help shape the public sector agenda with its partners.

It will be important for WMFS to increasingly become a key partner in the Combined Authority for the area. The Authority wants to ensure that it has the best governance it can, to be able to respond to strategic governance arrangements both within the region and within emergency services. To that end, the Authority has set up a Governance Working Group with an independent Chair to review current governance arrangements for WMFS, with a focus on the scrutiny, accountability and transparency this provides to communities. Peers thought this was an excellent start. It was welcome to see the Chair of the Authority delegate to other Members to include them in the emerging new arrangements.

The FRA Chair is experienced and competent in his role. However as the decision making body, the FRA could offer more constructive challenge to the senior management team. We understand that Members are encouraged to liaise with their respective local stations and to act as champions for their stations and the Service as a whole within their Local Authorities, including specific areas of the Service such as promoting awareness of the Safeside educational facility. However we as a peer team feel that the role of Authority members might be further enhanced so that they also become change agents within the Service and influential ambassadors in consultation processes. Peers felt that the Service's Scheme of Delegation should be reviewed so that the organisation can satisfy itself that it remains 'fit for purpose', with the CFO able to operate in the increasingly complex and ambiguous environment whilst maintaining the correct level of scrutiny and political oversight.

In 2014 the Service replaced its corporate board with a Strategic Enabling Team. This was partly to make savings but also to achieve greater input from senior managers on strategic decisions. This change seems to have been a very positive one and the SET are supporting the CFO by actively participating in the making of decisions. Notwithstanding that, some SET members and other staff stated that there was a lack of clarity about SET's role.

The Service has a strong focus on its long term financial sustainability and future funding streams. It also has very healthy reserves which gives it a degree of financial cushioning if necessary. Budget mechanisms are well understood and devolved budgets at stations have increased understanding of financial impacts and budget management at station level. The Service has an Efficiency Plan to deliver £10m of savings by 2019/20. It includes saving of £4m from increased staffing flexibility and £2m from business development. Integrated resilience arrangements and voluntary shifts are key to the staffing reductions from staff retirements. The peer team felt that the Service should develop more robust financial delivery plans within its overall financial strategy. Peers didn't identify any specialist commercial experience within the organisation and it may be prudent to consider some commercial skills to deliver the business growth being sought. There is also a potential risk of underwriting the costs of some core staff by securing contracts to deliver services on behalf of health and social care - if the contracts are not forthcoming are the numbers of staff sustainable? WMFS should consider and appropriately manage these risks.

A key factor in the WMFS approach is its five minute response time for high risk (life and property) incidents which was developed on an evidence basis in partnership with The University of Central Lancashire and Fire Engineer Richard Walker. This is impressive and may well be unique within the fire service in the UK. Benefits for the Service include that it is an easily understood target and gives staff a strong focus for their work. The target cannot be viewed in a narrow sense as it is achieved as part of an integrated service delivery model (ISDM) which includes flexibility around rostering and shift patterns, voluntary additional shifts as well as changes to the types of vehicles used on different incidents according to their risk category. Although the number of fire

fighters has reduced by 280, this has been achieved without compulsory redundancies. The response target has been appropriate for WMFRS but may not be appropriate for the wider fire and rescue sector. It is important therefore, for the service to distinguish localised response need within its IRMP to demonstrate community risk need further. The Service may come under pressure to review it as budgets become more constrained. The response time is valued by the community so it is important that its value continues to be well understood by the community and by the wider fire sector. There are risks in making this a non-negotiable when considering the future financial savings.

Within WMFS there has been a conscious effort to change the organisation's culture to one that is decentralised and people are able to take independent action, with devolved authority. This has been generally welcomed across the Service. Operating procedures are being replaced with operating frameworks and protocols, within which staff have greater freedom to make decisions and direct activity. At the same time there is a desire to build the organisation from the communities upwards. Consequently the organisation is very outward focused with a strong desire to build community links. There has been a transference of activity on a range of issues from the centre to uniformed staff based on stations. These include prevention work as well as a range of workforce and people management responsibilities. Training is one activity that has been devolved and this has generally been welcomed by managers. Peers were satisfied that the organisation can assess its operational competence.

WMFS is keen to be at the forefront of working on the wider health agenda identified by the Marmot report. It was the first fire service in the country to be endorsed by Sir Michael Marmot for tackling health inequalities through its prevention and community safety work. The Service makes use of data and intelligence to target its Safe and Well visits. It has also started generating considerable income from its two Telecare contracts. The response service to telecare calls from the frail elderly clients is literally saving lives. Staff on station understood and could articulate what the Marmot report was seeking to achieve. The Vision to deliver this across the whole community will assist with future Fire Reform developments such as Independent Inspection.

The peer team was asked to consider how effectively and efficiently Fire Control is delivering services to WMFS following the establishment of a merged service with Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS). The team found fire control to be a team that is well managed with skilled and motivated staff. It should be noted, however that it did not speak to anyone from Staffordshire FRS as part of the review so cannot comment on their perspective. It was clear that some relatively recent interventions by the Chief Officers of both Services had provided some positive impacts. The joint vision developed by the two Services has been welcomed and staff feel they now have a secure future as a joint service for the next three years. Peers felt that it may now be time to develop some standard operating procedures across the two services as the logical next step. There was also some concern that fall back arrangements may not be sufficiently resilient in the event of catastrophic system failure.

WMFS' approach to equality encompasses inclusion and cohesion as well as equality and diversity to produce its acronym DICE. Within the Service equality and diversity sits at the heart of all it is seeking to achieve for its diverse communities in terms of prevention, protection and response. As a result it has a strong business case for its work in the community and for establishing and maintaining a diverse workforce. However, as is the case throughout the sector, the Service is still some way off having a diverse workforce. Only 5% of its firefighters are women and only 15 % of all staff are black and minority ethnic (BME) compared to a local population of nearly 30% BME. Achieving a representative workforce will take some time and it will be important for the organisation to develop a bold strategy for change but one with realistic objectives and milestones.

Whilst it is evident that the Service is making progress in a number of areas, the analysis of its equality objectives against the time needed to achieve them would help manage expectations. It was heartening to see that within its approach to achieving a representative workforce the Service is using positive action to encourage applications from protected groups and for promoting minorities into senior positions. The recent recruitment campaign restricted applications to the Service's postcode area and in a recent promotion exercise positive action legislation was used to appoint a candidate from a BME background where there were two candidates of equal merit. We suggest that positive action is an area where more focus could be placed.

The pace of change within WMFS has been significant in recent years. It might now be time for the organisation to review how change is being implemented and how it can engage more fully with the whole workforce. More opportunities for staff from different teams to problem solve in task and finish would help to (a) eliminate barriers to change and (b) to review and revise new systems in the light of experience. This will ensure that the changes made to date are fully embedded and the workforce is ready to move forward again in the future. Early engagement around the Fire Reform agenda with Members and Staff will help the WMFS develop both its strategies for further reform and the organisation's longer term Vision.

#### **4. Detailed Findings**

The detailed findings in this report have been grouped under eight headings to reflect both the leadership and context criteria in the Peer Challenge Toolkit and the specific areas of focus which the CFO asked the team to consider.

##### **4.1 Strategic Leadership and Governance**

The importance of the relationship between the CFO and FRA Chair is well understood and it is a very positive one. Their roles are distinct, but complementary and this works well for the organisation. The Authority has shown decisive leadership in anticipating the wider changes that are facing the public service. A start has been made by the Service in setting up and leading the Governance Working Group to consider the best form of

governance for the organisation to address all the challenges and exploit the opportunities that a combined authority may bring. The Group involves a range of external agencies and has an independent Chair. WMFS now needs a major programme of engagement with wider partners to ensure they have the same understanding of issues before detailed options are worked up and decisions taken.

Elected members will continue to have a key part in taking the big decisions for the organisation. The Authority needs to be strong and fit for purpose but also have a “fleetness of foot” around decision making. A review of the Scheme of Delegation would provide some clarity about decision taking in the organisation. Peers felt that the role of members could be enhanced further to provide this. They should be considered as change agents within the Service and on behalf of the community. Where existing Member Champions can also assist is by allocating a Member or two to various aspects of the service so that they gain a far wider in-depth understanding of protection, prevention, equality and other areas so that when decisions are brought to the Authority, there are peers there who are recognised to have worked on the detail. With the widening public service agenda and the WMFS taking a lead role, the Authority will have skills sets within the roles and responsibilities of Members who sit on constituent authorities – capturing those skills could be very helpful in the emerging collaboration arena.

In light of the Home Office’s Fire Reform Programme, the development needs of Authority Members need to be reconsidered and a programme put in place. Members do currently receive development and all Members are provided with a development programme, although it is acknowledged that the take up of the development programme by Members is not consistent. Additionally, Members are regularly briefed on national issues via a number of means including the meetings of the Policy Planning Forum. The CFO and Chair are well embedded in this through their roles with CFOA (and the new CFOA) and the LGA Fire Commission. The various pillars of reform require Member communications as well as workforce input into the proposed changes. Standards, Independent Inspection, workforce reform and all the other programmes on the Home Office agenda will have an impact on the organisation’s business plans and vision for the future.

The CFO provides clear leadership for the organisation. He has an open door style that his staff at all levels appreciate. External agencies and stakeholders spoke of effective working relationships with WMFS across a range of issues that often go well beyond the traditional reach of a fire service.

SET appears to be an effective model for enabling strategic decisions to be made by the executive management. However, it is still a relatively new structure in the organisation. Even amongst SET members we found some different views about its purpose. Some time spent on inward reflection by SET about its role and how this could be developed would be beneficial. Telling front line staff more about SET and how it works would be a way of demystifying senior management. Some frontline staff see SET as a filter for the

CFO and said there was no explanation given to them as to what it does and why it was set up.

There has been a conscious culture change within WMFS. The CFO has been keen to decentralise leadership in the organisation. This approach is widely recognised and welcomed by staff. They want to be part of the change. Activities that previously were centralised at Headquarters have been pushed out to stations and uniformed managers and frontline staff have been allowed to use their initiative within frameworks and guidance set corporately. Examples of this include: prevention activity; budget management; recruitment and other people management processes. However, from the perspective of some firefighters interviewed, decentralization and empowerment of middle managers could feel like inconsistency and even unfairness. This view was echoed by those taking decisions at station level. Station commanders said being empowered to make decisions worked well as long as they worked within the frameworks, however there was inconsistency between stations. One station commander said that he didn't always stick to the staffing framework to "put bums on seats"

Considering the fast pace of these changes it may now be timely to consider how they are working across the Service and whether policies are being implemented consistently. Providing more opportunities for staff from different teams to problem solve in task and finish groups will help employees to share learning and spread best practices more widely across stations and teams. The Safer, Stronger, Healthier vision is well recognised by staff. The Service should now be reflecting on how it can tell its story and its successes even better.

#### **4.2 Local Context and Priorities**

The CFO is very clear about the direction he would like to take the organisation. The wider prevention agenda is at the forefront of this. Staff at all levels have clearly "bought in" to it and are mostly enthusiastic. Officers including those based at stations, have high visibility in local partnership arrangements. Station commanders attend and play an active part in the seven Health and Wellbeing Boards within the Service's area as well as Community Safety Partnerships and Safeguarding Boards. Their role is recognised and valued by partners. The Service makes use of data and other local intelligence to target Prevention activities such as Safe and Well visits. It is also a source of data for partners and there are data sharing protocols in place. Ensuring there is effective communications about this local community activity with Members is important in light of the emerging public sector collaboration expectations of Government.

There was very positive feedback about WMFS' involvement in delivering within the Marmot agenda from health and other public sector partners. It is also important for the Service to understand the priorities of its potential local and regional partners and to consider the language that is used so as to help create the right conditions for active collaboration. Local authorities and health organisations all have different languages and cultures. WMFS needs



to understand what outcomes and targets partners are working to and what they are seeking to achieve. It will also be important to define WMFS' role, the added value and evidence based outcomes when working with others.

The team were specifically asked to consider the proposals for a regional collaboration with FRSs in the region. Peers noted that the Regional Collaboration document produced by WMFS may not have been positively received by the other Fire and Rescue Authorities in the way that it was presented. Looking at the now published Thomas Review 'Conditions of Service for Fire and Rescue Staff: Independent Review', there is an opportunity to revisit this as a partnership led from the community perspective.

The Service has an outward facing approach at all levels. It has a strong desire to build links with the community. Stations know their areas really well. Station commanders understand and support their delegated responsibilities and they understand the priorities in their areas and deliver against them. It will be important to maintain strong local links with diverse communities as the organisation changes and staff change roles or locations. Having a diverse workforce to deliver the prevention agenda is a huge asset and as the organisation and the communities change, maintaining and increasing that diversity will be important.

One of the stories that the wider public need to understand is WMFS' 5 minute operational response for category 1 incidents. This target is the cornerstone of its integrated service delivery model. A great deal of work has been done by the Service on the evidence for its benefits. There is no doubt that it provides a very high standard of safety in an emergency and it is received positively by the public. It keeps the Service in high regard in the community. It is also valued by staff and gives them a sense of purpose and indeed pride in the job they do. It is a valuable target for the Authority as it has clear benefits in terms of operational response. It is easy to measure and it underpins valuable operational flexibility around shift patterns; crewing models and vehicle use. However, as budgets become even more constrained, the Service may come under pressure to review it and as this is central to the Service's mission, the core narrative would require adjustment. For this reason, the Service needs to do more work on ensuring its value is quantified and well understood by the community and the wider fire service sector.

The organisation is changing at a fast pace and it is important for its successes to be recorded so that the rest of the public sector can learn from it. Retention of the organisational memory may become a factor. As with many other fire services the average age in the organisation is over forty and there is already considerable organisational churn. When someone moves on their knowledge may be lost unless it is carefully transferred to prevent that loss. The organisation needs to consider its next generation of leaders so that they understand the story and the Service's unique selling points. It could also benefit from understanding how to best transfer knowledge from those either leaving the Service or changing roles within it.

### **4.3 Financial planning and viability**

Within WMFS there is a strong focus on long term financial sustainability and future funding streams. There is also a clear plan of intention for delivering the £10m of savings required by 2019/20. Strong reserves provide an element of financial resilience and could be a safety net if projected savings do not materialise as planned. The peer team felt that the Service would benefit from having a more visible long term financial strategy (5-10 years), a medium term financial plan (2-5 years) and a short term financial plan in year. WMFS questions the value of a 5-10 year long term plan in light of the current political and economic environment. It makes the point that a short term and a medium term financial plan already exist.

Budget mechanisms are well understood and there are clear plans and statements of intent in place right down to station level. Devolved budgets have fundamentally changed the understanding of financial impacts at station level. However, the organisation also needs to be clear on the difference between budget strategy and a longer term financial strategy. It needs to consider its resource mix as well as the affordability of its assets. By mapping out a long term strategy it can model different scenarios and see how they evolve.

The Service can demonstrate that it already has a track record of delivering savings, which will stand it in good stead. Since 2011/12 it has made savings of £28m. These have impacted on both organisational support and community facing delivery functions. It has also undergone major organisational change with the merger of Fire Control with Staffordshire FRS. This experience provides valuable lessons for future change projects.

The peer team was not fully convinced about the deliverability of the Service's Efficiency Savings Plan 2016-2020. They were not shown any compelling analysis underpinning the plan, which has a strong reliance on growing other funding streams such as commissioned Telecare response. However the peer team recognises that, as with any plan some of the deliverables are about intentions and that there is a need to constantly review plans with the potential for flexing, depending on how each element of the plan progresses. The Corporate Risk register has identified the risks of having to maintain contracts. However there are more detailed risks around commission budgets being used to underpin the cost of core staff. The register should reflect that level of risk and the Service should consider contingencies for how it might manage if those commissions are not sustained. These risks need to be articulated better in a coherent delivery plan that is properly monitored and enforced. Currently the organisation appears to be weak concerning intrinsic business acumen. This could be bought in to help deliver the income generation target.

#### **4.4 Service Delivery and Outcomes for the Community**

The integrated service delivery model has enabled WMFS to be more responsive to the needs of its community. An example of this is the way that the reduction in the number of unwanted fire alarms has freed operational capacity to deliver better outcomes. Response times to incidents are impressive. The average response time during the Peer Review was around 4 minutes and 40 seconds. The 5 minute attendance time target enables the Service to reduce the risk to firefighting and increase the survivability of victims. It also reduces the impact of fire on the local community and economy.

Several factors make up the approach undertaken by WMFS to speed and weight of attack including the crewing of five personnel on a Pump Rescue Ladder, 3 personnel on a Brigade Response Vehicle, and developments in the use of technology to inform the mobilising of the correct resources, for example 999eye. Additionally, WMFS in conjunction with a software provider, has developed the Dynamic Cover Tool which provides a real-time visual aid to Fire Control resource managers, supporting decision making and enabling Fire Control to manage, deploy and move resources to provide optimum response times and match resource to risk when managing prevention and protection priorities.

The Service is genuinely focussed on understanding and working on the health agenda. Staff understand the new and changing role of the fire service in arenas like Health and Wellbeing Boards, and other bodies. It would serve the Service well to continue to analyse and adapt the business case for working in the community. A performance management framework with inputs, outputs and outcomes would ensure greater sustainability of service delivery.

The move to operational frameworks is delivering flexibilities and freedoms for management. They see the fact that operational procedures are being rewritten to remove “musts” as positive with more decisions being made locally. However there was not an entirely positive response from firefighters. The example most often quoted as a sign of delivering flexibility to managers was the removal of fire station staffing guidance. Previous guidance was said to be verbose and contradictory so it was replaced with three simple principles that are to be used as boundary conditions for local decision making by managers. However two of the three principles are value for money and fairness. Firefighters gave examples of where these two principles contradicted each other so decisions made by managers were seen as complicated and opaque. It was claimed that some line managers could spend up to four hours making phone calls to arrange staffing. Staff are motivated to deliver services that are focused on community outcomes but some of the systems that have been put in place to achieve this appear to be in need of an open minded reassessment from an end user’s point of view.

We understand that the Service does constantly review and develop its systems in its aim to be as effectively technologically enabled as possible, with current

examples including the implementation of the InPhase business intelligence and analytics system, Gartner, new MDTs, the roll-out of MS Office 365, Sharepoint, Skype for Business, the refreshment of the in-house programme Activity Assistant, and the development of a data warehouse which will result in the consolidation of data into one place to provide more holistic views of organisational activity. The implementation of all of these examples has included consultation and active engagement with a variety of staff at all levels, to ensure end user input into their development.

The Service would benefit from a more structured approach to transformational change. Programme management needs to be more apparent and consistent. It was not entirely clear to the peers who is actually responsible for the transformation programme in the organisation and how it is monitored and understood. Risk awareness needs to be better understood at every level. There were a number of examples where it appeared that change had been implemented but there had been no subsequent planned review to make sure that the change was delivering the intended outcomes or benefits.

The Service could be clearer about the interdependencies across the organisation and the risks created by change. There has been a conscious culture change away from bureaucracy. One risk from that is that SET members are often only sighted on their own area. Another risk is lack of consistency with managers interpreting frameworks differently. Staff on stations said that getting through to some support functions is an issue, although when they do get through, the service and advice they get is sound. Empowerment down from the CFO is welcomed but the organisation might now require more resources in support areas to deliver the benefits intended.

WMFS is clearly on a transformation path. Managers understand the vision but not all the operational and community facing staff may have “got the message”. The organisation needs to think about how it communicates its vision both internally and to the community. The public will need to be able to understand what the Service is delivering and how it is changing. Members have a role to play here too. Their reach within the community is considerable and expanding their community role particularly with outside bodies and partners, will create more opportunities for better consultation and engagement as mentioned earlier. Clearer communications on change proposals might be considered to assist with organisational change implementation for staff and Members. Seeking the views of Members and staff on this point may well provide ideas for how communications could be improved.

#### **4.5 Prevention and the Health Agenda**

It is clear that the service is committed to the Prevention and Health agenda across the West Midlands. The philosophy is already embedded in the organisation. The Fire Service’s strong brand earns it immediate respect and often entry into the community and people’s homes. Health partners spoke highly of WMFS commitment and energy and the tangible impact it is making to people’s lives through its Telecare service.

Staff understand the Service's role in the Marmot agenda and feel empowered to identify and respond to local prevention needs. Safe and Well visits are targeted by local knowledge and partner intelligence. Vulnerable Persons Officers have provided a one to one response. Again there is clear evidence of impact.

These are early days for the Service's work on what is a complex agenda. This might be the right time to reflect and consider a more strategic overview of its medium to long term approach. Is the organisation sufficiently well equipped to carry out Telecare and other wellbeing activities? During interviews, some confusing messages were given about the Telecare activity. This may just be due to natural progression of this areas of work. What started as a 'business development' issue, is now mainstream 'prevention' activity, but also has health safety and welfare implications. These health safety and welfare issues appear to be getting lost between the Health and Safety Department, the Prevention Department and the Business Development Department. Firefighters and their union said that they do not know who to approach to improve the delivery of this valuable service.

A wider prevention strategy would help set and capture expected outcomes. The focus on health could be broadened from health to well-being to work on issues like skills and housing needs with other partners. Through the Combined Authority there is an opportunity to lead the use of data to drive performance. There are potential business development opportunities for the Service to generate income from new areas of involvement. At the same time there is also a need to consider the risk of creating perverse financial incentives. For example, working to prevent trips and falls could reduce income where contracts contain an element of payment by results measures. WMFS should seek to work with commissioning agencies to ensure no perverse incentives are built into contracts to ensure the most vulnerable remain protected.

#### **4.6 Fire Control**

The leadership, management and staff of the fire control service are impressive. They have been through a major change process and in their view the merged service is now in a good place after some considerable challenges. It will be important for WMFS to consider the lessons learned from this change programme both for future collaborations/mergers and other internal change management processes. It may also want to explore whether the new Cultural Framework developed for Fire Control actually aligns with desired cultural norms in the two organisations.

During interviews it was said that morale in Control was poor immediately after the merger, but staff were eventually given 'change management' courses which were said to be excellent, but should have been delivered before the process began. Other lessons to learn were said to be earlier management of change, better communication from management to staff and better listening to staff by management. Staff also said that 'difficult

conversations' should be had at the outset instead of being put off. One member of staff said "we don't fear change, we fear the lack of control over that change".

The new joint Vision with Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service has been well received by WMFS Fire Control and frontline staff. Staff are highly committed to the service they perform and are willing to take on new services. They see themselves as a "vital cog" in the organisation and believe that station staff also recognise this. They are looking forward to moving location into the HQ building and are keen to assist in the design of their new workspace. Building in room for expansion will enable the organisation to consider the potential synergies of co-location with external partners for work such as emergency planning.

Staff feel that they now have real operational discretion in the fire control room. Where previously they always had to follow procedures, they can now take their own decisions and if necessary justify them later. The Dynamic Cover tool provides information that enables flexibility. Before they were monitored through every call. Now there is recognition that they know the job and can mobilise unsupervised. As one employee put it "there is less monitoring and micro-managing"

The Service had moved away from a centralised structure, providing benefits linked to the Service Delivery Model and attendance standards. Further alignment of mobilisation protocols would be a natural evolution for the fire control service. Currently there are different operating procedures for WMFS and SFRS. Standard operating procedures across the two organisations could be established. We understand that work is ongoing to address this area of the joint fire control. The Service should consider whether its fall back systems would be sufficiently resilient in the event of a catastrophic failure. The current arrangements rely on 'handraulic' arrangements. The technology available today, could provide dynamic links with other control rooms who could take over in the event of n systems failure/building evacuation and may also be able to assist during spate conditions. These kind of arrangements now exist in other areas of the country and could be explored as options.

#### **4.7 Training and Development**

Training is recognised as important in the organisation. Operational staff understand that updating training and maintaining competence is a personal as well as a corporate responsibility. Managers generally appreciate that the Distributed Training model is the right direction of travel for the Service. Peers applaud the move away from a centralised structure and the benefits this provides linked to the Service Delivery Model and attendance times. It might now be time to pause and consider how the system is working and allow staff to fully understand it. Some crews reported a feeling a sense of loss by the move from a centralised training function and reported a wide variation in the quality of e-learning packages from good to very poor. Some crews also commented on the turnover of the peripatetic trainers and lack of consistency

in message. They said that they were getting different information from different trainers each time they visited.

Station commanders are confident that there are systems in place to assure professional competence. There are multiple ways that station managers are able to cross reference and understand the levels of fire fighter competence. These include exercises, peer assessment, incident de-briefs and detailed assessments of watches on station carried out by an independent fulltime watch commander.

The value of the large scale weekend training exercises as an assurance method is questionable. It was reported that in some case five or more pumps could simply wait in a holding area and never actually be deployed into the exercise. They were seen to be of more benefit to senior commanders than operational fire fighters. Staff acknowledged the point of the exercise but needed to feel that it had value for them as individuals. An evaluation of this exercise should be carried out to assess its value. The SET member with responsibility for training takes part in these training exercises, but as a 'trainee', rather than as a training manager assessing the whole process and its value. It would appear that nobody is taking the 'helicopter view' and seeing whether or not it needs revising and improving.

Training resources are stretched. Availability of Level 1 instructors is an issue once sickness and annual leave is taken into account. Trainer skill is also an issue. The most favoured station based trainers are frequently being drawn away to deliver training away from their watch and this can impact on watch staffing. There is a shortage of Level 3 specialist trainers which could be an organisational risk. There are now plans to replace the level 1, 2 and 3 trainers with station based trainers for core skills and specialist trainers for subjects like water, breathing apparatus (BA), working at height and first-aid.

The organisation is now very lean and maintaining optimal crewing levels affects availability of crews for specialist training. The peer team felt that having to organise training for one or two people at a station as a result of devolved training is not particularly efficient. WMFS do not believe that the conclusion of the peer team is necessarily correct. They feel that providing training locally is a lot more efficient than sending one or two people to a central location. Introduction of new fitness standards and tests could be an organisational risk once the policy is in place but before all members of staff are tested. The implementation plan needs to consider this.

The Service should pursue a more holistic view of succession planning and talent in the organisation. There are formal development and leadership programmes like Leading Excellence, but a great deal of talent spotting also happens at station or area level. For example in the Black Country area management away-day days are held and potential high fliers are identified and invited to attend. These individuals are then "assessed" for future progression. This is not done in other areas. There is a risk of inconsistency in the access to opportunity across the organisation that the Service may want to consider.

Some further training and specialist support is needed for staff providing the Telecare service. This is a new service for WMFS and experience is proving that staff may not be fully equipped for the emotional effect of the role. There may be some associated process issues which are linked to these, such as ready access to staff to provide intimate care. Specifically, staff would welcome training from agencies who are used to dealing with issues such as end of life care.

#### **4.8 Equality and Diversity**

The senior leaders of the organisation fully supports the Diversity, Inclusion, Cohesion and Equality agenda. (DICE) The organisation has made the business case for equality and inclusion by linking it to its integrated approach to delivering prevention, protection and response services. The Service has also championed positive action as one way of achieving a workforce that is representative of the community. A senior appointment was recently made using the Equality Act 2010 which allows for a candidate from an under represented group to be appointed if there are two candidates of equal ability. The recent recruitment campaign restricted applications to the Service's postcode area and in a recent promotion exercise positive action was used to appoint a candidate from a BME background where there were two candidates of equal merit. We suggest that positive action is an area where more focus could be placed, for example, with greater use of minority role models in internal and external communications.

Achieving a fully representative workforce is a long term project and the organisation would probably benefit from having a bold strategy for this with realistic time scales linked to their objectives and milestones.

Equality is embedded at all levels and staff understand the links to serving a diverse community, their prevention work and delivering within a health agenda. Managers understand the concept of positive action and there was no evidence of resentment about the approach from majority groups. There is an inclusive culture in the organization. Staff from protected groups feel that there are no barriers to them succeeding in the organisation and that the organisation is pleased to see them succeed.

The Service is making progress on capturing workforce equality data. It also has detailed data from previous recruitment programmes, although this not fully analysed in preparation for the next recruitment round. Data such as this and other qualitative information will help to inform the organisation about the barriers facing people with protected characteristics in applying to join the Service and being successful once they do apply. The organisation will be launching a new apprenticeship scheme which has huge potential for encouraging diversity. It should consider lessons learned from the cadet scheme where senior cadets tend not to be from protected groups.



The equality forums are a vehicle for progress on equality. They are now titled Aspire for black and minority ethnic issues and Affinity for gender issues. They are open to all staff and not just those from protected groups. The leads are very enthusiastic and knowledgeable. The forums are potentially an excellent resource for the organisation as they could also be involved in policy development, equality impact assessments and community events. There may be an issue around the capacity of the forum leads, as they take part in their own time. Some additional time resource and even an activity budget would enable them to broaden their DICE activities and other positive action initiatives in support of organisational strategies.

The appraisal system is one way that the Service identifies potential and training needs for staff. It is important that all staff receive an annual development review. The organisation needs to ensure that Individual Performance and Development Reviews (IPDRs) are consistently applied across the organization. Some support staff said they had not had an appraisal for several years.

The Service may wish to take the opportunity to evaluate its maternity and paternity provisions to evaluate the new pay arrangements during maternity leave to see whether they have influenced when mothers return to work and how many fathers are taking paternity or joint leave.

## **5. Conclusion and contact information**

Through the peer challenge process we have sought to highlight the many positive aspects of the West Midlands Fire Service but we have also outlined some key challenges. It has been our aim to provide some detail on them through this report in order to help the service consider them and understand them. The senior managerial and political leadership will therefore undoubtedly want to reflect further on the findings before determining how they wish to take things forward.

Thank you to WMFS for commissioning the challenge and to everyone involved for their participation. The team are particularly grateful for the support provided both in the preparation for the challenge and during the on-site phase and for the way people we met engaged with the process.

Helen Murray, as the Local Government Association's Programme Manager for your region, will act as the main contact between WMFS and the Local Government Association going forward, particularly in relation to improvement. Hopefully this provides you with a convenient route of access to the organisation, its resources and packages of support.

All of us connected with the peer challenge would like to wish WMFS every success in the future.

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