

Appendix 1

Statement of Assurance 2020/21

Introduction

Fire and Rescue Authorities must provide annual assurance on financial, governance and operational matters and show how they have had due regard to the expectations set out in their Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) and the requirements included in the Framework.

The West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority is required to publish an annual Statement of Assurance as part of the Fire and Rescue National Framework for England. The Statement of Assurance for West Midlands Fire and Rescue Service is published annually, to provide an easy and accessible way for communities, government, local authorities, and partners to assess the Authority's performance and governance arrangements.

National guidance on the content of Statements of Assurance published in May 2013 suggests that where Authorities have already set out relevant information that is clear, accessible and user friendly within existing documents, they may wish to include extracts or links to these documents within their Statement of Assurance. This Statement includes extracts or links to key documents where relevant. This document sets out the approach taken to ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place in terms of governance and operational delivery. It is intended to provide transparent information about its financial, governance and operational affairs.

Foreword – Chairman & CFO

Welcome to the annual Statement of Assurance from Councillor Greg Brackenridge, Chair of West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority (WMFRA), and Phil Loach, Chief Fire Officer, West Midlands Fire Service (WMFS).

This Statement of Assurance provides the reassurance that in 2020/21 your Fire and Rescue Service contributed to our vision of 'Making the West Midlands, Safer, Stronger and Healthier'.

As we emerge from the devastating impact of the coronavirus pandemic, there has never been a more poignant time to reflect on that journey over the last 12 months. 2020/2021 has undoubtedly been one of the most challenging and transformational years WMFS has ever faced.

Whilst our outstanding emergency response continued as normal throughout the pandemic, and the majority of serious incidents were attended in under five minutes, all other areas of the Service had to swiftly flex and adapt ways of working. Evolving government guidance and announcements meant staff had to meet challenges head on, ensuring the most vulnerable were front and centre to every decision made. This was later reflected in Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) report that praised our new ways of working and our 'innovative' use of technology which enabled

flexible and efficient home working and allowed for the continuation and adaptation of critical prevention and protection activities.

As Chair of the WMFRA and Chief Fire Officer of WMFS, we can say that although we don't fully know what lies beyond the pandemic, what we can say with certainty is that WMFS will continue to put its communities front and centre to ensure we deliver our vision.

We are also satisfied that during 2020/21 the business of the service has been conducted in accordance with good standards and that public money has been accurately accounted for.

Finance

The WMFRA places significant importance in ensuring that its financial management arrangements are in line with the expectations of a public body. As a public service the Authority are responsible for ensuring that public money is properly accounted for and spent in a way that provides value for money.

Statement of Accounts

The Authority's 2020/2021 Statement of Accounts is prepared in accordance with CIPFA/LASAAC Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom, under International Financial Reporting Standards. The Authority's accounts for the financial year 2020/21 consist of the following:

- The Comprehensive Income and Expenditure statement, the Authority's main revenue account, covering income and expenditure on all services
- The Movement in Reserves Statement, which shows movement in the year on different reserves held by the Authority
- The Balance Sheet, which sets out the financial position of the Authority at the 31 March 2021
- The Cash Flow Statement, showing movements in cash and cash equivalents during the year and the cash position at the end of the year
- The Pension Fund Account, which summarises the movements relating to the firefighters' pension schemes

The majority of the net cost of Fire Service expenditure relates to the cost of services, £118.277m. The total Provision of Services in 2020/2021 shows a deficit of £55.211m. Within this deficit is total expenditure of the Authority which for 2020/2021 was £170.715m.

The total income of the Authority in 2020/2021 was £115.504m.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government provided £4.137 million of additional funding to support Covid-19 related service delivery. Two grants were received during 2020/21 to cover the cost of additional and essential services, offset income losses and provide financial support to local business. Further details of the grants provided by central government are contained in the Authority's Statement of Accounts 2020/21.

Governance

The Authority is required to produce an “Annual Governance Statement” which is published in July each year at the same time as the “Annual Statement of Accounts”. The Governance Statement is based on an ongoing process designed to identify and prioritise the risks to the achievement of the Authority’s policies, aims and objectives, to evaluate the likelihood of those risks being realised and the impact should they be realised, and to manage them efficiently, effectively and economically.

It explains how our service manages its governance and internal control arrangements and measures the effectiveness of those arrangements.

Governance Assurance

WMFRA is a Joint Authority established under the Local Government Act 1985, amended “The Fire and Rescue Authority (Membership) Order 2017”. It is a supervisory body that ensure that WMFS perform efficiently and in the best interests of the public and the community it serves.

- WMFRA have statutory responsibilities laid down in legislation including the:-
- Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004
- Civil Contingencies Act 2004
- Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005
- Fire and Rescue Services (Emergencies) (England) Order 2007
- Localism Act 2011
- Fire and Rescue National Framework for England 2018
- The Policing and Crime Act 2017
- The Health and Safety Work Act 1974

WMFRA is led by its Chair, Councillor Greg Brackenridge and it comprises of fifteen elected Members who represent the seven local authorities that make up the West Midlands, the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner and two co-opted Members (one representing health and one representing business).

The seven local authorities are:- Birmingham, Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Walsall, and Wolverhampton councils.

WMFRA have a Constitution that outlines how it carries out its affairs. It explains how decisions are made and brings together in one document the detailed rules and procedures that govern the behaviour of those who work for or represent the Authority.

The Authority Members have developed and adopted a local Code of Corporate Governance document which incorporates how the Authority meets the seven principles of good governance. The Fire Authority ensures that its governance structures comply with the seven core principles and sub-principles of the CIPFA/SOLACE – ‘Delivering Good Governance in Local Government Framework 2016’.

These principles are adhered to via the processes outlined in the Constitution.

To enable the authority to carry out its duties effectively, in addition to the Fire Authority meetings there are several committees and regular forums that include

- Appointments, Standards and Appeals Committee
- Audit and Risk Committee
- Collaboration and Transformation
- Joint Consultative Panel
- Pensions Board
- Policy Planning Forum
- Scrutiny Committee

You can find out more about the Fire Authority and its Members on the website, www.wmfs.net In addition, there is a Committee Management Information System (CMIS) which provides details of all Authority and Committee meetings, reports, minutes, and records of decisions.

External Audit

The accounts are audited by independent external auditors (Grant Thornton UK LLP) who in addition to auditing the accounts, also provide assurance that the Authority has the correct arrangements in place for securing economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in its use of resources. The full external audit work programme and the risk-based approach are explained in Grant Thornton's Audit Plan. Their findings and their opinion on the Authority's accounts and the value for money is included within the Audit Findings Report. As a result of the external audit work in 2020/21, there were no significant matters arising that required the Authority to implement an action for improvement. The Annual Audit Letter summarises the key findings for the 2020/2021 year.

Internal Audit

Our Internal Audits are carried out by Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, the outcomes of which are reported to the WMFRA Audit and Risk Committee. The Annual Audit Plan is agreed by the Committee and progress reported on a quarterly basis. The 2020/21 annual Audit Plan included the following nine areas of review: Absence Management, Accounts Receivable and Payable, Budgetary Control, Data Protection, Fixed Asset Accounts, Governance, Payroll and Risk Management. Of these, eight were rated with Substantial Assurance and one Limited Assurance.

Each audit assesses

- The level of risk to the Authority assigned to each auditable area (high, medium, or low)
- The number and type of recommendations accepted by management
- The level of assurance given to each system under review (substantial, satisfactory or limited)

Other sources of assurance on which the Authority may rely include:-

- The work of the External Auditors (currently Grant Thornton)
- The result of any quality accreditation
- The outcome of visits by HM Revenue & Customs
- Other pieces of consultancy or third-party work designed to alert the Authority to areas of improvement
- Other external review agencies

Data Transparency & Accountability

In preparing this Statement of Assurance, the Authority has considered the principles of transparency, promoting openness and accountability through reporting on local decision making, public spending and democratic processes.

All relevant information is published on the West Midlands Fire Service website in line with the Local Government Transparency Code 2015, including information on how the Authority has spent its public money, demonstrating the Authority's commitment to transparency and accountability.

The audit of Governance during 2020/21 sought the objective of assurance on the adoption, adequacy and application of the Local Government Transparency Code by the Authority. The outcome provided **substantial assurance** over the adequacy of the controls reviewed as part of the process to mitigate risks to an acceptable level.

OPERATIONAL

Community Risk Management Plan

WMFS has adopted the title Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) in replacement of the Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) previously reported upon. The Service has been in the forefront of the development of a CRMP framework nationally, through its contribution and engagement with the National Fire Chief Council (NFCC) project. WMFS implements its CRMP in conjunction with its medium-term financial plan and Annual Plan which together comprise our three-rolling strategy for implementing our Service Delivery Model.

In late 2020, following the previously reported delay due to the General Election and subsequently Covid-19 pandemic, the Service undertook a public consultation on its next CRMP. There were 9,569 respondents to the consultation, which was conducted in accordance with the professional requirements of the Consultation Institute. The outcomes of the consultation are subject to a project and pilot evaluation of evidence and options, for the approval of a new CRMP in early 2022 by the Fire and Rescue Authority. Details of the

project and its process for realisation will be reported in the 2021/22 Statement of Assurance.

Mutual Aid Arrangements

WMFRA has mutual assistance arrangements in place with all the Fire and Rescue Services that surround the West Midlands – Hereford and Worcester, Shropshire, Staffordshire, and Warwickshire. Arrangements are in place to support the neighbouring Fire Services in the event of a large-scale incident or where the resources of our neighbouring Fire Services were greatly reduced.

The Authority is a partner in the West Midlands Conurbation Local Resilience Forum (LRF), the statutory multi-agency partnership set up to ensure the local authorities, emergency services and environment agency in partnership with other services including utility companies fulfil their duties under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. The forum enables the planning to be in place in preparation for localised incidents and disastrous emergencies which may impact on the communities within the West Midlands.

In parallel the Police and Crime Act 2017 places a duty on Fire, Police and Ambulance services to collaborate to improve the efficiency and the effectiveness of emergency services. WMFS work with partners to optimise multi-agency response and resilience through enhanced working relationships, in line with the Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Programme (JESIP).

During 2020/21 these arrangements were significantly drawn upon to co-ordinate and manage the evolving impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. WMFS was represented as joint Chair of the Strategic Co-ordination Group (SCG) for the West Midlands region following the declaration of Covid-19 as a major incident in March 2020. The group comprised the principal public sector agencies for liaison on response and prevention activity to assist the communities across the breadth of the region. The HMICFRS Covid-19 inspection drew reference to the effective influence of the Service within the SCG during the period of its standing.

In support of National Resilience and enabled through Central Government funding, the service has enhanced its capability to respond to major emergencies such as terrorist attacks, industrial and domestic accidents, and natural disasters. WMFS are also a partner in the Multi-Agency Specialist Assessment Team (MASAT) which provides an initial assessment of potential Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear or Explosive (CBRNE) incidents.

The Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) and International Search and Rescue (ISAR) teams are on call 24/7 providing the ability to rapidly respond to incidents locally, nationally, and internationally, assisting and undertaking search and rescue operations.

Health Safety & Wellbeing

The Service is committed to complying with its duties under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and associated legislation for health, safety, and well-being. In line with delivering

a “safer, stronger and healthier West Midlands”, it is important to maintain focus on ensuring that the service continues to develop a positive approach to employee health, safety and wellbeing and to protect others from harm from its activities. To this end, the aim is for an assertive, effective, and safe approach when responding to emergencies.

The national tripartite agreement between the NFCC, NJC, and the FBU to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, introduced a framework of activities additional to the role map. These ranged from delivery of food and medical parcels, ambulance service assistance and mass casualty movement of bodies. WMFS ensured that all additional activity was comprehensively risk assessed and process for delivery approved by local partners to the agreement. The Coronavirus Act 2020 was at the forefront of consideration and adherence in both core and additional activities.

The Service adopts an assertive, effective and safe approach to its activities. In support of this approach, service delivery was amended for the safety of both employees and communities. The Safe and Well/Safe and Strong programmes were digitally enabled through mobile phone technology, ensuring risk management was appropriate to the level of vulnerability. Each WMFS site was limited to essential access only and core teams retained and transferable cover by significant service need only.

The Service established a Scientific Cell comprising senior leaders from the medical community and WMFS to advise a framework within which all employees would work. The ‘three domains’ of health, safety and well-being across the Service was health surveillance, infection protection control and safe systems of work. The communication of these domains was through a bespoke intranet site and staff briefings; their application and assurance were via managerial oversight and personal accountability of all to the risk assessments in situ. A series of professional development objectives were introduced to supplement engagement.

The Occupational Health Team composed a comprehensive programme of emotional health and well-being support for all employees. These sought to provide specialist expertise to assist the personal and professional resilience of staff in the changing working environment and circumstances of service delivery.

Effective safeguarding is integral to the delivery of WMFS strategic objectives, specifically Prevention and Protection. A review of safeguarding in WMFS was completed during 2019 by a consultant from the West Midlands Association of Directors of Adult Social Services. A significant outcome of the review was the appointment in late 2020 of a Safeguarding Manager within the People Support Team of the Service.

The role was appointed to progress the action plan arising from the safeguarding review. In so doing, the role holder acts as the Delegated Designated Safeguarding Officer as defined in legislation and on behalf of the Strategic Enabler for People, leading and managing safeguarding responsibilities across WMFS. The Safeguarding Manager engages and works with key stakeholders and employees to embed a safeguarding culture based upon robust policies and procedures.

External Operational Assurance

Our Plan forms part of the WMFS rolling three-year strategy. The operational year of 2020/2021 has undoubtedly been one of the most challenging and transformational years WMFS has ever faced. While our outstanding emergency response continued as normal throughout the pandemic, all other areas of the Service had to swiftly flex and adapt ways of working.

Evolving government guidance and announcements led to staff meeting new challenges head on, ensuring the most vulnerable were front and centre to every decision made. A significant project was our teams assisting in the commissioning the NHS Nightingale Hospital Birmingham. It was the second of the temporary hospitals set up by NHS England to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, constructed inside the National Exhibition Centre, Solihull, and opened on 16 April 2020

This collaborative contribution was reflected in [Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services](#) (HMICFRS) report that praised our new ways of working and our 'innovative' use of technology which enabled flexible and efficient home working and allowed for the continuation and adaptation of critical prevention and protection activities.

The West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority (WMFRA) governance of the Service was amended during the year in accordance with emerging legislation and with due regard to the WMFRA Constitution. During the period 03 April 2020 – 07 May 2021, the Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Meetings) (England) Regulations 2020 were applied to all WMFRA business. The impact was the maintenance of informed, effective and timely governance, together with safe working relationships of all contributors to the governance process.

During the period above, the Authority invoked Decisions under Matters of Urgency (Section 17.1 Authority Standing Orders), enabling the continuity of decision making by the Chief Fire Officer in consultation with the Chair of the Authority on items of strategic importance. These items were subsequently reported to the Authority when it re-convened.

Internal Operational Assurance

In order to continue to deliver our services as effectively as possible during the pandemic, there were several of our practices that were amended to support the new approach to working. These were enacted through our Business Continuity Plan. The senior leadership established themselves as a Business Continuity Management Team, supported by a Business Continuity Planning Team of middle managers and specialist roles. The alignment of activity was delivered via a bespoke Covid-19 risk assessment framework and project, in conjunction with a meeting and reporting structure.

Over the last 12 months, we've utilised every hurdle, success and experience in order to adapt, learn, evolve and plan more effectively for the future. This informs not only our role locally to communities but also our influence within the NFCC to develop CRMP and adopt digital transformation throughout the fire sector. While we don't fully know what lies

beyond the pandemic, what we can say with certainty is that WMFS will continue to put its communities front and centre to ensure we deliver an assertive, effective and safe service.

The performance of WMFS during 2020/21

Staff skills competency, values and behaviours are at the very core of our service delivery. Regardless of role, we want all staff to understand how significant their contribution is and how it fits in to the bigger picture in terms of helping us to achieve our response, prevention and protection priorities. Embracing awareness of value for money and progression of a digital approach to working underpins our service improvements and cultural development.

Response

WMFS know that its five-minute response is based on evidence and knowledge of risk and that it saves lives, homes, and businesses. In our last national inspection by [Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services](#), our response delivery among our communities was graded as 'Outstanding'. We have continued to deliver within our defined response times throughout the 2020/21 and the period of the pandemic.

During 2020/21 our Fire Control handled 45,027 calls, in an average of 76 seconds per call. Our firefighters attended 25,216 incidents and they arrived at the most serious in an average of just 4 minutes 32 secs.

People who use their smartphone to call us on 999 could now also be asked to send photos or videos of what they can see. We came up with the idea of '999Eye' and developed it with Capita. It has been used more than 9,245 times to help operators in our Fire Control ensure that the most appropriate resources are sent to incidents.

Prevention

The prevention work focuses on reducing people's vulnerability to the type of emergencies to which the service responds. WMFS also have specialist prevention and partnership teams who support its firefighters in reducing anti-social behaviour, including arson, and improving road safety

We carried out over 18,422 Safe & Well visits in 2020/21, of which 8,746 originated from partner referrals.

We have handed out 14,674 pieces of equipment such as smoke alarms, hearing impaired alarms, mailbox protectors and fire-retardant bedding, which has contributed to a 7.7% reduction in the number of casualties.

Although 944 people were killed or seriously injured on West Midlands roads in 2020/21 this was down nearly 10.9% from 2018/19. Our firefighters and Road Casualty Reduction Team engaged digitally with 3,599 children and young people, delivering key road safety messages.

Protection

The protection work focuses on helping businesses to thrive, making the West Midlands stronger. WMFS advises companies how best to comply with fire safety legislation, to keep its staff and customers safe.

In 2020/21 we recorded 326 accidental fires in non-domestic properties.

We have three vehicles and a team dedicated to bringing down the number of 'unwanted fire signals' from automatic fire alarms.

We attended 5,629 false alarms caused by fire alarm systems.

How WMFS do it?

WMFS aspires to continually manage delivery of risk reduction in our communities in the most relevant, effective and efficient ways available to us. As with every year, our achievements have been made possible by an exceptional and agile workforce, a blended fleet of vehicles, innovative approaches to digital communication and our ability to implement our contingency plans. We have maintained our core service provision whilst the whole world has struggled to maintain normality with Covid 19, and within the on-going financial challenges for the public sector.

During 2020/21 WMFS has adapted to the variance in activity, whilst also progressing reform to service delivery resultant of influences external and internal to the service. There was a decrease in the number of fires and road traffic collisions during the year, predominantly correlated to the pandemic, however there was an increased severity generally in these incidents.

Fire Safety Inspecting officers continued to work on progressing a Building Risk Review (BRR). On-site inspections continued to focus on high-risk premises with cladding, whilst the processing of data continued in conjunction with Response crews and Data Governance Team to establish a repository of Site Specific Risk Information (SSRI) that could be more readily accessed by all stations and Fire Control. This enabled the on-going development of SSRI management into a digitised format embracing the needs of both Protection and Response teams. A review of procedural guidance for fire safety was included to this work and approved within the Joint Consultative Committee.

Ready Willing & Able campaign

WMFS was proud to be part of the #ReadyWillingAble campaign, initiated in conjunction with the NFCC.

Launched in April 2020, the 12-week initiative threw a spotlight on extra activities carried out by fire and rescue services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic – made possible by an agreement between the NFCC, the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) and Fire and Rescue Employers.

Members of our staff who volunteered to help ensured that some of our most vulnerable residents received food and medical deliveries. We worked with various organisations

including local councils, volunteer groups and charities to identify and help those most in need.

Sadly, others were also involved in the movement of the bodies of some virus victims. We were also #ReadyWillingAble to support with the fitting of face masks and driving ambulances if needed.

Firefighters and WMFS staff across the West Midlands took to this social media campaign to share stories and videos about how they used their wide range of skills to offer community reassurance and help, in response to the national crisis whilst keeping core prevention, protection and response services operating as usual.

Statement of Assurance 2021/22

The next reporting year will feature how the Service sought to deliver within an environment of 'living with Covid-19', as a long-term feature of everyday life. The CRMP proposals will have been developed to advise revision of the three-year rolling strategy, together with the impacts of continued public sector financial efficiencies. The adoption of an agile working policy and on-going resource transformation, will illustrate how the Service continues to represent a genuine commitment to embrace continuous service development to the benefit of the communities it represents and serves.