

Notes of the Policy Planning Forum

**4 November 2019 at 11.30 am
at Fire Service Headquarters, Vauxhall Road, Birmingham**

Present: Members of the Authority
Councillor Brackenridge (Chair)
Councillor Iqbal (Vice Chair)
Councillors Barlow, Barrie, Cooper, Dehar, Edwards,
Hogarth, Jenkins, Miks, Miller, Spence, Walsh and
Young
Professor Simon Brake
Mr Ager

Officers: West Midlands Fire Service
Deputy Chief Fire Officer Brown
Assistant Chief Fire Officers G Taylor and S Warnes
A Afsar, S Barry, S Burton, P Fellows, S Timmington

Clerk and Monitoring Officer

K Gowreesunker (Clerk)
S Sahota (Monitoring Officer)
M Griffiths (Treasurer)

Apologies: Councillors Gill and Spence
Gurinder Josan
Sarah Middleton

Observers: Nil

22/19 Chair and CFO Announcements

Cllr Greg Brackenridge, Chair of West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority (WMFRA), welcomed all attendees to the Policy Planning Forum.

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The Phase 1 report of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry had been published. A response to the report would be provided as a Service and Authority. Any changes in policy and other areas as a result of the findings of the inquiry would be communicated to Members.

The Chair noted that he had written to Baroness Lawrence following comments that she had made in reference to the Grenfell Tower incident. It was acknowledged that the Baroness had withdrawn her comments and had issued an apology.

The Chair noted the approach that Birmingham City Council had taken to sprinklers in high-rise buildings, including the retrofitting of sprinklers which was not an insignificant task considering 10% of all high-rise buildings in the country were in Birmingham. Wolverhampton City Council were also taking the same approach. The Service were hosting an event for Local Authorities and other partners regarding high-rise and Safe and Wells, and Members were asked to attend if they were available. Leaders from across the West Midlands were also being invited to the event as it was believed that there was a need for a regional approach to be developed.

The proposed public consultation on the Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) had been delayed due to the Purdah period as a result of the calling of a general election. The consultation would now take place after May 2020 elections.

A stakeholder group had been set up following the publication of the Cultural Review report. The group had met and had been extremely well attended. There would be a number of meetings held across the Service and Members were encouraged to attend.

23/19 Strategy Timelines

Karen Gowreesunker, Clerk to the Authority, provided an overview on the strategy timelines.

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It was confirmed that the public consultation of the IRMP would commence after the general election. The Service would continue with its strategy planning process, with the key dates being:

- November – Policy Planning Forum and Fire Authority
- December – Policy Planning Forum:
 - Vision statement
 - Priorities and outcomes aligned to strategy (external and internal horizon scanning)
- January – Policy Planning Forum
 - Review of above
- February – Policy Planning Forum
 - Review of above
- February – Fire Authority
 - Approval of priorities and outcomes for 2020/21
 - Budget
- ‘Our Plan’ to be published April 2020

24/19 Delivery of the Strategy

Sarah Warnes, Assistant Chief Fire Officer, Strategic Enabler People, provided an overview of the presentation on the delivery of the strategy.

The implementation of a risk-based approach to flexible fleet management was introduced on 1 April 2019. The approach had been introduced to achieve the required savings within the Financial Efficiency Plan (FEP) of £3.8m within the financial year 2019/20.

In terms of fleet availability, a difference of between -4.5% and -5.1% had been observed during quarters one and two, although this did fluctuate on a daily basis. The ridership factor was currently 15.3, above the target of 13.5. This had resulted in an overspend within the staffing budget. The largest factor contributing to this was attributed to attendance management and an increase in the number days / shifts lost due to sickness. A Task and Finish Group had been set up to address this and review attendance management.

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The group would first examine policy and ensure staff possessed the tools to manage short and long-term sickness. Additionally, there was a need to ensure that staff recorded sickness correctly including absence reasons and return to work information. It was noted that more people were off work due to long term sickness than had been previously experienced, and the group would also look at long term sickness and restricted duties, with a view to exploring ways in which cases could be managed more effectively. Familiarisation sessions had been delivered to middle managers and combined sessions would be scheduled with supervisory managers. It was noted that the work around sickness would only see a small reduction in the ridership factor due to the number of long-term sickness cases, however it would enable a positive direction of travel going forward.

Prevention –

The Service continued to ensure that Safe and Well visits were carried out for the most vulnerable in our communities.

The target for the percentage of Safe and Well visits from partner referrals had been reduced to 40% (previously 55%). Performance was currently recorded at 36.7%. It was noted that a data cleansing exercise had been carried out and that this had resulted in an impact upon the figures.

The average points per Safe and Well visit had reduced from 8.51 to 7.53, compared to the target of 8.5 points per visit.

The Service was carrying out work to target and link in with partners across the West Midlands. The Prevention team hosted fourteen Continual Professional Development events during September, aimed at frontline staff and managers from partner agencies. The events resulted in over 500 attendees.

A new online learning facility was launched in September so that partners could undertake learning regarding recognising and referring risk and vulnerability to fire.

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The Service was running a trial in the Black Country South Command Area based on the Tymly system which saw referrals booked through the Contact Centre, then passed to Fire Control, resulting in a crew being mobilised to a Safe and Well visit. The trial was designed to make the process more efficient and it was intended that the Tymly system would be relaunched (as Tymly 2) complete with refined processes.

The target for the total number of Safe and Well points achieved was reduced from 300,000 to 259,690 for 2019/20 to take account of the reduced appliance availability. Year to date performance was currently 6% below target.

Protection –

The number of accidental fires in non-domestic premises and the number of false alarms due to fire alarm equipment were both within their respective tolerance levels.

As approved by the Authority, the Service had invested £600k into the protection function which had enabled the recruitment of eleven new members of staff ensuring that the function was fully established. The new members of staff were undergoing training to ensure competency (by quarter two 2020). The introduction of the new members of staff had enabled the review of how all work came into the function. This had allowed the implementation of a triage process which assigned work to the appropriate resources, for example, to firefighters, Business Support Officers, and to Fire Safety Officers.

Audits were now more targeted towards high risk premises and 99% of statutory building regulation timescales were being achieved, previously 48% and 78% respectively.

The added capacity had enabled Officers to influence proposed high-rise building design, for example, as a result of the advice from the Service, a recent building design had been amended to include two rather than one stairwell.

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It was noted that an incident had occurred at a high-rise building where sprinklers had been retrofitted. The sprinklers had activated and suppressed the fire. The level of response mobilised to the incident was reduced following receipt of information. The activation of the sprinkler system had resulted in no danger to the occupant of firefighters.

Gary Taylor, Assistant Chief Fire Officer, Strategic Enable Process, provided an overview high-rise organisational assurance.

The Phase 1 report of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry had been published. Phase 1 focussed on the events of the night of the incident. Phase 2 would focus on building construction and systems of regulation.

Immediately following the Grenfell Tower incident, the Service had reprioritised resources and carried out visits at all 551 high-rise premises across the West Midlands. The Service also supported the strategic briefing and undertook the role of co-ordinating interventions nationally.

The work undertaken by Birmingham City Council in retrofitting sprinkler systems in its high-rise buildings was highlighted and Members were informed that an Officer had been seconded into the council. The Service realised the importance of building relationships with partner agencies and organisations.

It was noted that it was very positive that buildings were being adapted to include extra fire protection measures including the retrofitting of sprinkler systems. However, there was a need for the Service to be informed of such adaptations to enable it to alter its plans accordingly, for example, to take into account the impact on water supplies.

The Services high-rise policy had been reviewed. Domestic high-rise buildings featured the majority of life risk. However, the Service's policy now included other high-rise buildings including business premises. High-rise policy was also being developed via the National Operational Guidance programme with a view to share consistent policy nationally.

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The 'Stay Put' policy had worked well to date. However, it did not in the event of a catastrophic compartmentation failure. Additionally, the number of calls received by Fire Control during such an incident meant that Fire Control Operators were not able to remain on the phone to callers to provide fire survival guidance. As a result, the Service had examined when the 'Stay Put' policy could be changed as well as changes to evacuation procedures when / if required. A further change to the policy had included the provision of a dedicated resource to externally monitor a high-rise building during an incident and to link back to the Incident Commander and Fire Control. It was noted that if there was a need to change strategy at an incident, it would be changed based on evidence.

It was noted that high-rise incidents were some of the most challenging incidents, including in terms of command and control. The Service had developed a simulation approach to test procedures and competencies and had invested in the simulation centre and simulation software to help enable this. Live training exercises were undertaken at the bespoke high-rise training facility in Oldbury and when possible, at vacant premises. A casualty simulation group were also utilised as part of such exercises.

As part of the development of the Standardised Assessment process, a team of stakeholders reviewed what the Service needed to do more of, and what it needed to do less of. Following the Grenfell Tower incident, it was identified that there was a focus required on incident command, particularly at high-rise incidents. All Officers undertook standardised high-rise competency assessment.

The site-specific risk inspection process included visits to high-rise buildings. 551 high-rise buildings had been visited. These buildings were now visited on an annual basis due to the change in policy and the retrofitting of sprinklers. These visits ensured staff knew what to do on arrival and were able to access information regarding the building, such as what fire protection measures were in place and the layout and features of the building.

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It was noted that such plans had to be flexible as it was not always possible to implement a pre-determined plan due to a variety of circumstances, for example, the lift could be out of order, or the hydrant(s) may not be available.

E-learning training packages were provided for staff on high-rise incidents and these were updated regularly to reflect ongoing developments.

Station peer assessments were carried out annually and these included the checking of policies and training. These included the undertaking of desktop scenarios with the watch, which was then backed up with the standardised assessments for Officers, plus the live training exercises.

The Service conducted research and development into high-rise policy which had included the introduction of new hose laying techniques, examining the utilisation of smoke curtains and smoke hoods, and the use of electric powered fans rather than petrol powered fans when implementing tactical ventilation.

In answer to Members' questions, the following points were raised:

- High-rise premises covered some hospitals. However, the evacuation procedures differed due to the nature of the buildings and occupants. Additionally, evacuation procedures had to be applied locally as a lot of hospital buildings were unique.
- The Service was taking a rigorous approach to visiting high-rise premises and ensuring the correct procedures were in place and that landlords fulfilled their responsibilities. For example, a recent visit had highlighted an issue where the wet riser was not being tested on a regular basis.
- Fire hoods were expandable and allowed fresh air for the user. Fire hoods were used within other Services. It was noted that if they were introduced into the Service, the learning from other services would be taken into consideration regarding the use of the fire hoods and sensitivities regarding some religious beliefs.

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- There was no statutory requirement under the Building Regulations or fire risk assessment and therefore, no trigger, to inform the Fire Service of alterations to buildings. There was only a requirement to inform the Fire Service if an alteration would affect the Building Regulations or a feature such as the means of escape. There was no mechanism in place to ensure the Fire Service were informed of alterations that enhanced the fire protection measures of a building and where improvements went above and beyond the statutory requirements. However, such improvements and enhancements to fire protection measures, although positive changes, did have an impact upon fire and rescue procedures.
- It was noted that sprinklers were a game changer. Smoke alarms provided an early warning of fire and enabled the ability to escape but did not provide the level of protection that sprinklers could provide.
- It was noted that Members were able to provide a level of influence that Officers were not able to.

The meeting closed at 12:50 hours.

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