

WEST MIDLANDS FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

5TH DECEMBER 2005

1. HOME FIRE SAFETY CHECKS - HOME APPROACH POLICY

Report of the Chief Fire Officer.

RECOMMENDED

- 1.1 THAT the Authority approves the Home Approach Policy, attached as Appendix 1 to this report, as the means for undertaking Home Fire Safety Checks (HFSC's).
- 1.2 THAT the Authority approves the policy being forwarded to the representative bodies for consultation.

2. PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report is submitted to seek the Authority's approval to introduce the Home Approach Policy for undertaking HFSC's, attached as Appendix 1. Following a decline in the number of HFSC referrals, recent surveys carried out within the West Midlands have shown that the "home approach" will significantly increase the Authority's ability to reach those individuals most at risk from fire within the community.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 West Midlands Fire Service has identified the need to effectively engage with high risk groups within the community if it is to achieve its targets for reducing deaths and injuries from fire, as well as reducing the number of fires that occur in the home each year. This was to be achieved by visiting high risk groups in their homes and offering to undertake free 'home fire safety checks'. In order to do this, the Service needed to have in place a policy for doorstep calling.
- 3.2 The policy for doorstep calling was produced earlier this year but following extensive negotiations with the Fire Brigades Union, no agreement could be reached. The Fire Brigades Union's objections were based on their belief that the doorstep calling policy was actually cold calling and was not compliant with the Local Government Association's own cold calling policy. The issue became the subject of a dispute and the matter was referred to the Authority's Appeals Committee on 11th July 2005.

3.3 The Appeals Committee decision was to reject the policy for doorstep calling and instead made a number of recommendations for the introduction of a policy for undertaking Home Fire Safety Checks. These were:

3.3.1 The policy should be fully compliant with LGA Cold Calling Policy.

3.3.2 The new policy should use a free phone number or tear off slip with pre-paid envelope – a process that will allow individuals to positively indicate that they want a firefighter to call.

3.3.3 To produce a leaflet in a variety of languages.

3.3.4 Men and women firefighters to attend HFSC's together if possible.

3.3.5 There should be a review in 6 months with statistics on the number of positive responses and smoke alarms fitted.

3.4 Having completed this review of the policy, it has become apparent that the current procedure for gaining HFSC referrals has not been as effective as planned. This has resulted in a lower number of referrals being received compared to targets and has begun to impact upon some of the Best Value performance indicators. In addition, this has impacted upon the ability to spend the HFSC funding allocation to the Authority from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. (ODPM).

3.5 In order to address this, it is proposed that the Service now introduces a new policy – The Home Approach Policy.

3.6 Home Approach Surveys

In order to provide evidence in support of the Home Approach Policy, two surveys have been conducted. These were carried out in separate locations and compared the number of referrals gained from a leaflet drop and those gained using the home approach. The results of these surveys were as follows:-

3.6.1 Survey 1

The leaflet drop achieved a 12% return from properties targeted, whereas the home approach achieved a 51% return from those properties where personal contact was made with the occupier.

3.6.2 Survey 2

The leaflet drop achieved a 1.7% return from properties targeted, whereas the home approach achieved an 80% return from those properties where personal contact was made with the occupier.

- 3.7 These results indicate that HFSC referrals can be significantly increased when the home approach policy is used. With a 1.7% take up of HFSC referrals through leaflet dropping, the cumulative risk reduction within that area would be a slow process. It can be seen that with a 50% take up of HFSCs through the home approach method, the cumulative risk reduction within that area will be achieved more quickly.

3.8 Home Approach Policy

In support of the Home Approach Policy, and taking on board the recommendations from the Appeals Committee, the policy will include the following:

- 3.8.1 A clear code of conduct for all personnel when gaining HFSC referrals using the home approach.
- 3.8.2 A code of conduct and protocol that will protect older persons and vulnerable members of the community from becoming victims of doorstep crime.
- 3.8.3 An approach that will significantly increase the ability to target those high risk individuals who are proving hard to reach.
- 3.8.4 Personnel will be able to effectively target specific communities in support of directed action plans. This will enable 'face to face' contact with individuals to explain what a HFSC is and appointments to be made for attendance at the property at another time.
- 3.8.5 This will assist in the effectiveness of quick strike campaigns by allowing firefighters to talk directly with individuals.

- 3.9 The policy is outlined in the appendix to this report. Given that the means by which HFSC's are undertaken was the subject of a dispute with the Fire Brigades Union, the Authority is

recommended to approve the new policy and agree to it being forwarded to the representative bodies for consultation.

4. **EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS**

Fire generally discriminates against members of the community in the lower socio-economic groups. The HFSC initiative is designed to target those most at risk from fire in the home and the adoption of the Home Approach Policy will improve their fire safety.

5. **CORPORATE AIMS SUPPORTED**

The principal corporate aims supported by the information in this report are as follows:-

3. Reducing risk in the community.

11. Modernising and improving the quality of service.

6. **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

The course of action recommended in this report does not raise issues which should be drawn to the attention of the Authority's Monitoring Officer.

7. **TRADE UNION CONSULTATION**

The Fire Brigades Union registered a dispute over cold calling which was subsequently referred to the Appeals Committee under the agreed disputes procedure. The Committee upheld the dispute, whilst making recommendations for a new policy which would be the subject of a review within six months. In view of this, it is proposed to enter into further consultation with the representative bodies over this change to the way that HFSC's will be undertaken. A report will be brought back to the Authority once consultation has been concluded.

8. **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Any increase in smoke alarm fitments arising from the proposed policy would be funded by the Home Fire Risk Initiative Grant currently received from the ODPM.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Standing Order No. 17/4 - Home Fire Risk Assessment
Trading Standards Institute National "Doorstep" Calling Protocol
Report to the Appeals Committee – 11th July 2005.

F J Sheehan
Chief Fire Officer