



AGENDA ITEM: 8

NORTH WALES FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY EXECUTIVE PANEL

4th February 2013

IMPROVEMENT OBJECTIVES 2013-14

Report by Dawn Docx, Deputy Chief Fire Officer

Purpose of Report

- 1 To provide a summary and analysis of the responses to the Authority's consultation on its draft Improvement Objectives 2013-14 and to recommend amendments to the draft Improvement Plan 2013-14 for presentation to the full Fire and Rescue Authority for final approval at its next meeting in March 2013.

Introduction

- 2 At the Authority's Executive Panel meeting in July 2012, members approved a timetable for compiling and publishing the Authority's Improvement Plan 2013-14.
- 3 This timetable included a period of public consultation on draft Improvement Objectives for 2013-14 before final approval of the Improvement Plan 2013-14 in March 2013.
- 4 At its meeting of 15th October 2012, the Authority approved a consultation draft of its proposed Improvement Objectives for 2013-14.

Information

- 5 The public consultation on the Improvement Objectives has now closed and the comments received during the consultation have been analysed and summarised for members' consideration. This analysis and summary is attached at Appendix 1.

- 6 Any amendments agreed by the Executive Panel at this meeting will be incorporated into a final draft Improvement Plan 2013-14 for approval by the full Fire and Rescue Authority at its March 2013 meeting and publication on the Authority's website before the end of that month. Under statutory regulations, the Authority is required to publish its improvement plans as soon as practicable after the end of December in the year before the year to which they relate. In practice this has been interpreted as being before the end of March.
- 7 In the consultation, the questions around specific proposals were generally well-supported:
 - 74% thought that the Authority had identified the right priorities for 2013-14.
 - 89% agreed that the commitments made under the all-Wales Dwelling Fires Response Charter were the right ones.
- 8 Around 170 different comments, views and questions were received during the consultation.
- 9 To the question about which would the respondent prefer if they were forced to choose –
 - a) keeping a fire station open because it is close to their home, but accepting that it is not available for several hours a week, or
 - b) having a fire station that is always ready to respond, but accepting that it is several miles further away from your home,- around two-thirds of the responses opted for option b).
- 10 Many of the responses related to matters that the Authority and/or the Service have already tackled or are in the process of addressing – reducing costs, working collaboratively, improving engagement with other organisations and with the public, increasing efficiency and reducing inefficiency. Providing cover, especially in rural areas featured strongly, as did the wish to prioritise 'front line services' over management and support services.

- 11 A small number of responses favoured resisting making any further cuts to budgets, investing more instead on the basis that this would bring a greater overall benefit to society.
- 12 Members will notice from paragraphs 73 to 75 of Appendix 1 that during the course of the consultation period work was completed by the three Welsh fire and rescue services to develop a common call-handling target for all three Control functions.
- 13 As this all-Wales target has now been agreed, members have the option of replacing the draft North Wales call handling target with this more recent call-handling target.

Recommendation

- 14 Members are asked to approve the production of a final draft of the Improvement Plan 2013-14 based on the same proposals contained in the consultation draft but replacing the draft North Wales call handling target with the new all-Wales call handling target.
- 15 This final draft Improvement Plan 2013-14 will then be presented for approval by the full Fire and Rescue Authority at its March 2013 meeting.

APPENDIX 1

North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority public consultation on proposed improvement objectives for 2013-14 and beyond.

Timing

- 1.** The public consultation on the Authority's draft objectives for 2013-14 ran for 12 weeks from 15 October 2012 to 7 January 2013.

Distribution and Format

- 2.** Copies of the consultation document were distributed electronically to a range of stakeholders including representative bodies, political leaders, county councils, town and community councils, other emergency services and partner organisations.

A link was provided to an online survey questionnaire that people could submit anonymously. People also had the choice of responding via the Authority's website or by mail.

The consultation was further publicised internally to staff and externally via the Authority's website and through Twitter and Facebook.

Response

- 3.** Fifty responses were received through the online survey (44 in English and 6 in Welsh). Three were received by letter.

Summaries of the responses are provided on the following pages.

Question 1

4. The 2013-14 Improvement Objectives identified by North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority are:

A)to help to keep people and communities safe by preventing deaths and injuries from fires in living accommodation.

B)to find ways of reducing the overall cost of running the Service each year in order to operate within the annual budget.

Do you agree that we have identified the two highest priorities for next year?

Response:

5. 39 (74%) thought that North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority had identified the two highest priorities for 2013-14. 14 disagreed.

Question 2

- 6.** **If you do not agree that we have identified the two highest priorities for next year, what else would you suggest?**
- 7.** 19 respondents made further comments (the 14 who had disagreed in Q1 plus a further 5 who had agreed in Q1)
- 8.** Two comments suggested widening the first objective out to preventing deaths and injuries in other circumstances too, rather than limiting it to dwelling fires only (in other premises, in deliberate fires and in road traffic collisions; and from falls from height and drowning).
- 9.** One comment differentiated between 'true improvement' led by those who run the Service as opposed to improvement arising from being forced to act by the current economic situation
- 10.** Three were of the view that a reduced budget should be resisted, that a contracting budget is not an 'acceptable proposition', is 'unsustainable', that the Authority should 'seek expansion'. One argued that 'the financial aspect of a service should not be in the highest priority'. One suggested 'seeking expansion and providing evidence to support the benefits of increased protective, preventative and responsive capacity'. One suggested introducing a precept to raise money in the same way as the Police service does.
- 11.** Three wished to see increasing efficiency and maintaining or improving standards of service as the second priority, as opposed to simply reducing costs. However, the need to also reduce costs was acknowledged. Driving down the number of false alarms was proposed in one response as a way of reducing their impact on future budgets
- 12.** Two responses proposed that keeping retained firefighters in the job should be one of the Authority's priorities, and one response expressed a view that it is difficult to keep communities safe by cutting the number of front line staff. Investing in front line services was suggested as an alternative priority in two responses.

- 13.** Two responses suggested putting more emphasis on dealing with serious flooding. One response asked whether the Authority had taken welfare reforms into account during the development of its plan.
- 14.** One response reminded the Authority of the need to cross-reference the Improvement Plan to the Authority's Strategic Equality Plan, and to ensure that through collaboration the needs of different groups in the community can be met.
- 15.** One response commended the clear and concise document and the Authority on having "clearly carefully considered the fire and rescue needs of North Wales and how best to respond to them".

Question 3

16 In setting our 2014-15 Improvement Objectives, what do you think are the important things for us to consider now if we are to continue to provide excellent fire and rescue services in future with increased demand but less money to run the service?

17 51 respondents (96%) provided comments about what they thought the Authority should be considering now to prepare for the future. These have been categorised under seven headings.

Service Delivery

18. As might have been expected, a number of comments advocated protecting front line services and questioned the justification for the current top management structure, middle management structure and non-operational staff structure. Some wished to see additional investment being made in front line personnel, and called for more recruitment and no job losses.

19. Some emphasised the importance of local services, of keeping local fire stations open, of retaining local knowledge at fire stations.

20. A number of responses acknowledged the problem of recruiting people to the retained duty system. One suggested raising awareness of fire service careers in schools and colleges and providing taster sessions to attract potential employees. One suggested that different contracts for personnel to work at any station might help. One reminded the Authority of the importance of having a diverse workforce. One considered that the difficulties with the Retained Duty System were not confined to North Wales and the Authority should involve the Welsh Government and authorities across the UK in finding a solution.

21. A few suggested employing more Wholetime firefighters to cover the smaller stations, and to provide greater reassurance of availability. Some wished to see more being done to resource the retained duty system, but one counselled against placing too much reliance on part time firefighters. Conversely, one suggested training up volunteers to augment the existing levels of service delivery.

- 22.** One response was concerned at increasing demands being placed on managers. The Authority was encouraged to evaluate its previous decisions involving staff reductions to check that service delivery had not been “detrimentally affected”.
- 23.** One response also reminded of the need to conduct equality impact assessments on any reviews, developments and proposals
- 24.** However, not all were concerned with persevering with the current. One response favoured closing one station if it meant increasing staffing in another, thereby guaranteeing availability. One response questioned the need for RDS crews at all on Wholetime stations, and suggested increasing productivity (‘make stations work harder’). One urged the Authority to challenge the need for some retained stations to remain open – however unpopular that might be – and to weigh up the running costs against the benefit of less than 24 hour cover and only a slightly quicker response than a neighbouring station could provide. One challenged the Authority to admit that the only way to cut the budget would be to reduce the number of staff, and to “be honest and say so, and indicate which stations are to be cut and why”.

Reducing Risk

- 25.** A number of responses related to reducing risk and preventing fires. Suggestions included working with young people to prevent RTCs, raising awareness of the dangers of older electrical appliances and reducing the number of outdoor fires (which tend to be resource-intensive). One advocated better targeting of prevention activity on the most vulnerable. One included the idea of developing an automatic extinguishing device for placing inside electrical products
- 26.** One response was concerned about the potential for welfare reforms to affect lifestyles and increase risks in the community.

Reducing Costs

- 27.** Some suggested re-prioritising spending – suspending any non-urgent building or refurbishment work in order to protect spending on personnel, and cutting back on prevention activity in order to protect emergency response. Conversely, some saw the cost benefits of reducing the number of false alarms and actual incidents attended, and encouraged more prevention work.
- 28.** Suggestions were made about sharing 'back-office' support services and infrastructure with other emergency services, sharing office accommodation space and other resources. Amalgamation or outsourcing of some services was also suggested.
- 29.** However, one response challenged the acceptance of the need to reduce costs, and encouraged the Authority to give more of an explanation about the overall community benefits of increasing investment in the Fire and Rescue Service.
- 30.** One unitary authority specifically welcomed the Authority's development of a financial strategy up to 2017 as helpful in developing its own.

Income Generation

- 31.** A few suggestions were made about how the Authority might generate some additional income for itself – for example by having mobile phone masts on drill towers, renting out rooms, selling or leasing buildings to either the public or the private sector, or charging for providing some services including providing fire safety tuition.

Collaboration

- 32.** Collaboration was promoted in several responses, with the other two Welsh FRSs, with North Wales unitary authorities including through the Local Service Boards

Quality Improvements

- 33.** One response advocated taking a longer term view of investment in Information Technology and infrastructure
- 34.** Some underlined the need for workforce succession planning, ensuring adequate training, developing staff skills and ensuring that the right skills and attributes are used to develop others for the future.

Public Engagement and Accountability

- 35.** Some focused on a need to raise awareness and gain the community's support and help in reducing fire risk, widening ownership of safety improvements within the community. One response wished to see more information being made available on the Authority's website about how the budget is spent. One response promoted the adoption of a co-production model by increasing the involvement of local communities and third sector organisations in designing and delivering services.

Question 4

36. What do you think we should be thinking about as we develop our next three-year financial strategy?

- 37.** 46 responses were received to this question. These have also been categorised under seven headings.

Specific potential savings

- 38.** One response suggested that money was being wasted through having stations too close together, and one questioned the need to keep all the retained stations operating around the clock.

Specific references were made to the second wholetime fire appliance in Wrexham and the potential to introduce phased alerting systems.

- 39.** Two responses suggested looking at the cost of new equipment and vehicles, with one suggesting avoiding overspending on new appliances and equipment while there was nothing wrong with older appliances. Two referred specifically to the cost of officers' cars.

Investment

- 40.** One response referred to ensuring contingency plans were in place to deal with unpredictable weather events, and one pointed out that flood and fire could occur simultaneously.

- 41.** One encouraged the Authority to take a longer-term view of the need for investment in crucial areas of operation, and one expressed the view that the Service had been cut too far and that more money should be sought from county councils.

Priorities

- 42.** A number of responses referred to protecting the fire and rescue function as a priority. Two referred specifically to reducing the cost of management and the non-operational sections of the service. One asked whether senior managers had expensive company cars, and one wished to see the number of managers being reduced before any firefighters were made redundant.

43. Several responses advocated paring services back to 'core' functions or going 'back to basics' as a way of dealing with reduced budgets. Maintaining speed and weight of response, safety, local services, reducing fires, reducing death or injury from road traffic collisions and the impact of flooding were all variously proposed as other priorities for the Authority to consider.
44. One suggested reducing the number of fire stations, and one proposed looking into the possibility of having fewer but better staffed, more efficient retained and wholetime stations. One referred to maximising performance and front-line capability whilst remaining in budget.
45. One response referred to increasing workforce flexibility; another emphasised the need for long term planning. One saw having clear direction and maintaining a focus on priorities as important. Two referred to the Government's responsibility to resource fire and rescue services.

Collaboration/harmonisation

46. Two responses proposed the possibility of merging 'backroom' functions with those of other local authorities – examples given were personnel, buildings and vehicle maintenance. Another proposed amalgamating the 'front office' services with other public bodies and looking at how the Service's administration could be made more efficient.
47. One response referred to information sharing with other Fire and Rescue Services, and one asked how the Authority might communicate better with other agencies and deliver one educational package.
48. One respondent advocated taking a longer term perspective in planning (5 – 7 years), and one asked whether the Authority would be looking at the change to a single fire and rescue service that is happening in Scotland

Increasing efficiency

49. A number of responses referred to generally removing waste, driving efficiency, making more efficient use of staff, and reducing 'red tape'. One referred specifically to selecting strategic personnel of a quality and experience necessary to lead an essential public service.
50. More were concerned with the need to ensure efficiency in the provision of fire and rescue services – suggestions included considering changing 24-hour shift stations to day crewing stations; changing wholetime stations to retained stations; rationalising retained stations; using wholetime firefighters to support the retained duty system; matching the provision of fire cover to risk (different levels of cover during the day and overnight); utilising wholetime staff more effectively; utilising the retained system more productively; and extending the turnout time to avoid calling in another station.
51. One response referred to the need to ensure that incidents could be reached even where access was difficult (narrow lanes) and the importance of knowing the best routes to take to reach locations.
52. One response asked whether the IT systems were robust and compatible with those of other Services, and one response advocated that consideration be given to the types of appliances used by the services – specifically water carriers and small fire units.

Community engagement

53. A number of responses touched on the need to engage with service users to help people to improve their own safety. One suggested working especially with local communities facing hardship, which they thought would be the least likely to consider their own fire risks.

One advocated working with communities to keep fire stations open.

Income Generation

54. Two respondents made specific suggestions for generating income – selling off unused assets (old computers, vehicles, mobile phones etc.) and seeking more funding support from the private sector, such as through sponsoring schemes.

Question 5

55. The Authority's commitments under the all-Wales Dwelling Fires Response Charter are that it will:

- 1. Take the lead in driving down the number of dwelling fires that occur and in reducing their impact on people.**
- 2. React quickly and efficiently every time we receive an emergency 999 call to attend a dwelling fire.**
- 3. Attend dwelling fires swiftly and properly equipped to deal with them.**
- 4. Deal with dwelling fires effectively, efficiently and professionally.**
- 5. Help to restore normality to communities in the aftermath of dwelling fires.**
- 6. Investigate the causes of dwelling fires and hold relevant people to account when appropriate to do so.**
- 7. Strive to maintain high standards and improve aspects of what we do.**

Do you agree that we have adopted the right seven commitments in the Dwelling Fires Response Charter?

- 56.** 47 responses (89%) agreed that these were the right commitments.
- 57.** One response highlighted how equality and tailoring services to the needs of different protected characteristic groups would have an impact on outcomes.
- 58.** One response acknowledged that the overall time to arrive at a fire will depend on where it occurs, but wished there to be maximum effort made to maintain a rapid response, particularly for high risk properties and rural areas where travelling time is greater.

Question 6

- 59. Would you have included anything else or phrased anything differently in our commitments in the Dwelling Fires Response Charter?**
- 60.** 24 respondents (45%) would have included something else or phrased something differently (the 6 who had disagreed in Question 5, plus 18 of the ones who had agreed in Question 5).
- 61.** One response suggested adding ‘...and undertake targeted work with our partners to reduce the higher level causes’ to commitment 6.
- 62.** Another response pointed out that the Service would already have been aiming to achieve all seven commitments and that “the real lesson is for the general public to realise that they should take more care themselves and be more responsible to ensure that some of their actions could have been better managed.”
- 63.** One organisation – Diverse Cymru – made an offer to help in the development of local criteria linked to the Charter commitments.

Question 7

64. The Authority is proposing to set the following targets to measure the speed of response to dwelling fires.

A. To answer 85% of all 999 calls within 7 seconds, 95% within 10 seconds and 98% within 20 seconds.

B. To initiate a response to a dwelling fire within 1 minute on 70% of occasions and within 2 minutes on 95% of occasions.

C. At least two fire appliances and eight firefighters attending every dwelling fire. The officer in charge of the incident will assess whether to bring in additional resources, depending on the extent of the fire.

What are your views about the criteria that we intend to adopt for measuring our speed of response to dwelling fires? Would you have included anything else?

65. 43 respondents made a comment or asked a question about the proposed targets.

Requests for additional Information

66. Five respondents asked for additional explanation of:

- Whether the Service had local call centres.
- How quickly the Service can obtain an address from the person reporting the fire.
- Why national response time standards had been discontinued.
- Why attendance time targets had not been included.
- What would constitute a 'delay' in response time.

General comments

67. A number of different general comments were received in this section:

- Pointing out that speed of response was only one factor, and that the quality of that response was more important
- Doubting that the targets could be achieved if budgets are cut.
- The proposals reflect what staff already strive to achieve.
- Suggesting that a comment be added explaining that total attendance time will vary considerably.
- Suggesting that overall attendance time should be measured.
- Suggesting that the Service should monitor whether the correct appliance arrived at the incident via the correct route, and learn lessons from any failures.
- Encouraging the publication of more information on the Service's website.

- Suggesting the addition of a target time for fire appliances to be en route to an incident in order to keep turnout times as short as possible. Suggesting targets of 1 minute for wholetime crews and 5 minutes for retained crews.
- Observing that 'targets are fine as long as they are achieved'.
- Noting that it can take some considerable time to arrive in some rural locations, and asking whether more could be done to raise awareness of the availability of fire extinguishers for use in domestic kitchens.
- Reiterating the importance of ensuring sufficient resources for safe systems of work.

Comments on the specific targets proposed

- 68.** Supportive responses saw these as 'perfectly reasonable', 'well set out' and 'provides all the information that is needed'.
- 69.** A number of responses, however, referred to the absence of a target for the total time it will take to arrive at an incident. One suggested that the public is entitled to know how long it takes from when the call is received to when an appliance will arrive at the emergency. Another suggested that considering the rural nature of large sections of North Wales there should be a target time by which the first fire appliance should arrive at a dwelling fire.
- 70.** One respondent maintained that targets would need to be measurable against national response times to have real meaning.
- 71. TARGET A:** To answer 85% of all 999 calls within 7 seconds, 95% within 10 seconds and 98% within 20 seconds

The majority of responses supported this target – seeing it as 'positive' and agreeing that it should relate to all 999 calls not only those to dwelling fires. Only one alternative proposal was received, suggesting that 100% of 999 calls should be answered within 10 seconds.

- 72. TARGET B:** To initiate a response to a dwelling fire within 1 minute on 70% of occasions and within 2 minutes on 95% of occasions.
- 73.** Several responses disagreed with the detail of this target and proposed instead the adoption of an all-Wales target that has been agreed recently.
- 74.** One response pointed out that having two different targets would be confusing.
- 75.** The agreed all-Wales target is:
- To initiate a response to a dwelling fire within 90 seconds on 80% of occasions and within 120 seconds on 100% of occasions
- which replaces the draft target which was 'to initiate a response to a dwelling fire within 1 minute on 70% of occasions and within 2 minutes on 95% of occasions.
- 76. TARGET C:** At least two fire appliances and eight firefighters attending every dwelling fire. The officer in charge of the incident will assess whether to bring in additional resources, depending on the extent of the fire.
- 77.** 7 responses disagreed with this target:
- One was concerned about the absence of any distinction between a fire in an occupied and an unoccupied dwelling.
 - One questioned whether it was necessary to send two appliances to every dwelling fire, and suggested that the first would be best placed to assess on arrival whether a second one was actually required.
 - Conversely, one advocated adopting a standard of 3 appliances when people are known to be present in the dwelling.
 - Two were concerned that the minimum of eight firefighters on the two appliances might not be sufficient, and that unless both appliances were coming from the station then the safety of the first crew arriving could be compromised during the time when still awaiting the arrival of the second crew if only four firefighters were present. A target of ten firefighters attending was suggested as an alternative.

Question 8

- 78. If you had to choose between the following two options, which would you choose, and why?**
- A. Keeping a fire station open because it is close to your home, but accepting that it is not available for several hours a week.**
 - B. Having a fire station that is always ready to respond, but accepting that it is several miles further away from your home.**
- 79.** 20 responses (38% of the total, 39% of all who answered) favoured Option A, and 31 responses (59% of the total, 61% of all who answered) favoured Option B. Two respondents chose neither.
- 80.** Although around two-thirds of the respondents preferred to have a fire station that is always ready to respond, but accepting that it is several miles further away from their home, a number of comments were made about the choice offered:
- Beaumaris Town Council put forward a number of reasons in favour of keeping an RDS fire station in Beaumaris.
 - One response pointed out the futility of a fire station without personnel available.
 - Two saw the real answer as being to recruit more in order to maintain cover.
 - Two respondent questioned what would constitute 'several miles' away, and preferred that neither option should happen, as proximity and availability were both important.
 - An alternative view was that the problem of non-availability could be addressed by closing some stations but giving crews the opportunity to move to the next station if they wished.