

Annual Summary Overview of the West Midlands Fire & Rescue Authority

1. Budget and Financial Issues

The current year's budget was set in February 2013. The four year comprehensive spending review, covering 2011/12 to 2014/15 meant that the Fire Authority was facing a 25% grant reduction which equated to £21million. As part of the 2013/14 Finance Settlement, the Government recognised that the Authority was one of the lowest preceptor authorities and as such, gave a special dispensation to increase Council tax by 2% or £5, whichever was the greatest, before triggering a referendum. As a result, the Authority increased its Band D Council Tax by £4.99 to enable 38 fire stations to be maintained and limited recruitment of firefighters to be undertaken. The Authority still has the lowest Council Tax for any Fire Authority, with a Band D Council Tax of £52.82 per year.

2. Sprinkler Systems

The Service is committed to promoting the installation of automatic fire suppression systems in all premises, particularly new premises, where their inclusion would support the vision 'Making West Midlands Safer'. In September 2013, the Fire Authority endorsed 'One voice: a national sprinkler promotion strategy' ('National Sprinkler Strategy') produced by the Local Government Association. The strategy represents 'the Fire and Rescue Service's vision and direction on the issue of mandatory sprinklers for the vulnerable groups of our society' particularly within domestic, educational and residential premises. However, there is concern that despite sprinklers minimising the impact of fire and essentially helping to save properties and lives, the Government are still reluctant to legislate them. A strong lobby on this issue is now being built and a sprinklers campaign is due to be held for a week in February 2014, led by Chief Fire Officers Association supported by the Local Government Association.

3. Service Changes

Following a successful trial, the Fire Authority has approved the introduction of a total of 19 Brigade Response Vehicles (BRVs) to ensure that WMFS have the most versatile fleet & enable it to assign a proportionate response to any incident. BRV's are smaller than 'traditional' fire engines, carrying less equipment and staffed by three firefighters, but are able to deal effectively with most incident types. The introduction of these vehicles will enable the Fire Authority to maintain its current average target response time of 5 minutes to the most risk critical incidents, whilst delivering savings to meet the challenge of grant reductions arising from the Comprehensive Spending Review. The target response time is the quickest set by any Fire Authority in England.

4. **Major Fire Incident**

The fire at J. A. Young Ltd, a recycling plant in Smethwick, which started on 30th June 2013 was one of the longest and most demanding fires dealt with in the history of the West Midlands Fire Service. It involved 35 fire engines and 200 firefighters. The fire was started by a Chinese lantern and the event was classified as a major incident.

5. **Solihull Fire Station**

Following refurbishment work on the annexe building adjoining Solihull Fire Station building, Solihull Life Opportunities (SoLO) moved into the building at the end of July 2013. SoLO deliver health and social care services to vulnerable adults. This closer working relationship should help generate referrals to the Fire Service to help support the most vulnerable in the community. A multi agency activity at the NEC with Fire Service, Police, Ambulance and NEC demonstrating the dangers of drink/drug driving to young adults throughout the Borough. Working in partnership with Solihull Town Centre Management team WMFS will give it's support to the seasonal drink driving campaign during the winter months.

6. **Industrial Action**

On 29th August 2013 it was announced that the Fire Brigades Union had voted in favour of industrial action in a national dispute over pensions. The union called for a 4 hour strike on 26th September 2013. The issue remains unresolved with the threat of further strikes a real possibility.

7 **Chief Fire Officer**

The Chief Fire Officer of the West Midlands Fire Service was the President of the Chief Fire Officers' Association (CFOA) for the 12 months up to September 2013. CFOA is the professional voice of the UK Fire and Rescue Service and the Chief Fire Officer's role provided the opportunity to work at a national level and to promote the West Midlands Fire Service in a wider context. Following this role and having worked for more than 30 years for the fire service across the country (13 years for the West Midlands Fire Service) The Chief Fire Officer will be retiring from the Service on 15th November, 2013.