

IRMP Consultation Feedback

This paper summarises the consultation feedback from all sources.

Clearly the scope and diverse nature of some responses means that the detail is not exhaustive, but does include all those comments or suggestions which were shared by several respondents. This produces themes regarding each area within which such comments can sit. Many of these themes are repeated across different groups

Issues raised at focus group sessions also led to responses from Service personnel delivering the session (Principal Officers and Area Managers). Where appropriate, these responses are also recorded.

A Watch Managers Challenge Group was held to look at our proposals to address concerns raised during the consultation and look at how our plans will work in practice. Feedback from this session is included.

Response Standards

Q1 Do you support our proposals for new response standards for fires in buildings and RTCs?

34% respondents said YES
 29% respondents said NO
 14% Undecided

The general themes that emerged from the comments made:

- Support was given to new response standards for RTCs and bringing down response standards for rural areas.
- There was concern expressed about the ability to meet these standards in rural areas, and that they may be difficult to meet if Firefighter posts were reduced by 12. Additionally there was concern expressed that these standards were a way of cutting Fire Stations and pumps.

“Having good standards enforces an efficient and professional service so setting realistic targets and objectives is a good way forward” – Respondent.

Q&As from the Focus Groups:

- Q: Does adoption of the new attendance standard for fires enable fire cover to be reduced at certain staffing (without an apparent reduction in service delivery to the public)?
- A: The current performance against the draft standard suggests that there is little room to reduce cover at any Station without adversely affecting front-line service.
- Q: 73 % of risks cannot be reduced by improved attendance times alone, how can risks in the other 27% be reduced?
- A: There are a number of initiatives that will be considered as part of the community safety strategy.
- Q: Does adoption of the new attendance standard for fires enable fire cover to be reduced at certain stations (without an apparent reduction in service delivery to the public)?

A: The current performance against the draft standard suggests that there is little room to reduce cover at any station without adversely affecting front-line service.

Reducing Firefighter Establishment

Q2: Do you support the proposal to reduce the Firefighter establishment by 12 posts?

11% respondents said YES
84% respondents said NO
4% undecided

There was overwhelming opposition to reducing Firefighter numbers, with a whole range of concerns including the Health and Safety of Firefighters; the fact that 7 per watch has been tried before and doesn't work, although this was matched by comments confirming that we would bring Hereford & Worcester in line with other Fire and Rescue Services; front-line staff felt they were already overstretched, and that training was difficult to complete.

"I understand the rationale and the financial constraints the organisation is under but again am concerned that any reductions do not impinge on the level of service we provide." Respondent

Q&As from the Focus Groups:

Q: Will the 12 operational posts be lost through redundancy?
A: The operational posts will be lost through natural wastage.
Q: How will the budget be met if the savings cannot be achieved through natural wastage of operational posts?
A: The Authority believes that the planned retirements will deliver the savings.
Q: How will losing 12 posts not impact on service delivery?
A: The reduction of the twelve posts must be accompanied by improved management of crewing levels, that is 5 and 4 riders for each attendance to fire 75% of the time. Maintaining this standard means the reductions will not impact on service delivery.
Q: What will be the increase in detachment costs due to cutting 12 jobs?
A: The detachment costs should not rise as the reduction in posts will be accompanied by improved crewing management.
Q: What effect will the reduction in posts have on the increasing requirement for staff training?
A: This is part of the development work that needs to take place during the coming months in order to keep crewing levels within our standard and maintain training commitments.

Streamlining Back Office Services

Q3: Do you support our proposal to streamline back office services to achieve efficiencies?

79% respondents said YES
8% respondents said NO
8% undecided

Although in principle most respondents were happy to agree with this proposal, the caveat was that it should not affect the front-line staff and our emergency response, whilst some felt that there was not enough detail to comment.

“The streamlining of the back office to achieve efficiencies is acceptable provided Service Delivery is maintained.” Respondent.

Q&As from the Focus Groups:

- Q: Why not take all the savings from back-office efficiencies?
 A: To make the equivalent savings and necessary investment through back-office efficiencies alone is not sustainable; the Authority would not be able to operate effectively and front-line service would suffer due to a lack of support. The Authority is committed to improving community and Fire-fighter Safety, this it cannot do with a non-functioning back-office.
- Q: What will be the impact of £200k back-office efficiencies?
 A: There will be an increase in workloads for all departments as budgets are reduced and staffing posts unfilled. The exact impact is difficult to predict, there will inevitably be some reduction in support, reduced investment and potentially job losses; this may involve redundancies.
- Q: What avenues have been explored for raising revenue through charging for certain activities?
 A: This issue will be considered within any process set up to identify back-office efficiencies.
- Q: Why in 1986 did we have roughly 30-40 personnel as support staff, why in 2004 did we have 85 and why now in 2008 have we got 127?
 A: The Service has increased the number of support staff in order to meet the increasing corporate demands placed upon the Service through increased legislative requirements, performance assessments and the need to meet internal stakeholder expectations such as improved HR support, stronger financial support and effective policy development.
- Q: Could we not sell HQ and utilise current empty buildings in the brigade to accommodate HQ staff?
 A: The property strategy identified a centralised HQ as the best use of the existing assets, particularly when considered against the ongoing costs of maintaining the various premises and meeting legislative requirements. This strategy has not changed and the costs involved in reversing this would also need to be added to the calculation making such a move unlikely to be sustainable.

Management of Leave and Sickness Absence

Q4: Do you support our proposals to review arrangements for the management of leave and improve the management of sickness absence to support the reduction of operational posts?

- 33% Yes, they agreed with these proposals
 51% No, they disagreed
 14% Undecided

Key themes expressed in the responses suggested that people felt there was a lack of flexibility with current leave arrangements, with some people suggesting that this should have been discussed before proposals for cutting operational posts were put forward. It was also felt by some respondents that the proposals were not clear, and further details were required. There was also concern expressed over sickness levels, with some people suggesting that there should be incentives for good attendance, whilst others suggested that this may lead to people coming back to work before they were ready, and thus ultimately lead to increased sickness levels.

"Leave and sickness management should be reviewed in a fair way across the whole Service and not just aimed at Operational staff." Respondent

Suggestions/Comments from the Focus Groups:

The Service should introduce private sector management models, especially absence management to increase productivity.

A: All aspects of absence management will be considered as part of the revision, these include looking closely at how sickness is managed.

However the new leave system and the increased training requirements has meant that it is very difficult to take PH days which could be having a knock on effect.

Incremental Investment for Risk Critical Training

Q5: Do you support our proposals to make an investment of £100k to support the cost of cover arrangements to enable the release of staff for risk critical training?

52% Yes, they supported this proposal
40% No, they didn't support this proposal
5% Undecided

There was a very positive response regarding investment in training, but a number of issues were raised with regards to the process of training. Support was requested for a system to allow watches to train together, and that the current system is reliant on the goodwill of Firefighters, who should not have to come in on their days off to complete risk critical training.

Concerns were raised that this was to "soften the blow" of the establishment reduction, the suggestion being that this system wouldn't be necessary if we kept the 12 posts. Concern was also expressed that this money was being cut from other budgets, so it wasn't actually new investment.

"Absolutely. Training and the continued improvements of our staff is vital to both the service we provide and their own safety, health and welfare". Respondent

Comments from the Focus Groups:

Does the total training days allowed include station based competency training?

Issue regarding SRT training – stations are supposed to work together however it is not possible to take 2 pumps off the run in neighbouring stations to allow training together. In the past you would block out every 8th week so that leave could not be taken to allow training to be done.

A: The Service will be addressing this issue and there will be tighter central management and co ordination of training across the Service.

Continue to Examine Further Opportunities to Delivery Efficiency Savings and Service Improvements

Q6: Do you support our proposals to continue to examine further opportunities to deliver efficiency savings and service improvements including collaboration/combination with another Fire and Rescue Authority?

71% Yes, they agreed
19% No, they didn't agree
8% Undecided

There was overwhelming support for this proposal, with the caveat that it should not reduce the standards of fire cover or the quality of our service. Concerns were expressed over the loss of identity, the potential for job losses and concern over training provision.

Issues were raised over extra costs potentially incurred vs. efficiency savings achieved, this included the cost of a new logo/identity. Respondents also expressed that there was a lack of information regarding these proposals.

"Efficiencies through economies of scale are to be welcomed as long as they don't compromise the ability to deliver services." Respondent

Additional Comments

Q7: Any other Comments

Additional comments varied greatly, but included key themes that were repeated. The most prominent point being the settlement figure itself, with many respondents suggesting we should be arguing with Government for more money, as it was suggested our budget was less than ¼ of the national average per head.

It was felt that these proposals were driven by financial constraints rather than strategic thinking.

Respondents requested feedback on their responses and some still felt there was not enough detail to do a detailed response. However, this feedback should outline how consultation responses have changed/informed the proposals.

Focus Group Responses

Q&A

Q: Did the Service lobby Government for an increase in revenue support grant?
A: The Authority was unable to persuade Government for an increase in funding.

Q: Can we look to supplement wholetime crews from RDS crews from quieter stations?

A: This is a suggestion that will be investigated as part of a flexible support to maintain crewing levels.

Q: USAR budget - does the Service get the money direct - can we make savings there?

A: The USAR facility is funded by central government.

Q: How are we going to reduce non-domestic premise fires by 30%?

A: This target is being reviewed alongside all targets in the light of the potential capacity issues arising from the budget settlement.

Direct suggestions:

We should stop doing that for which we are not directly funded and we have no legal obligation to do i.e. Water/Rope Rescue.

A: The FRA adopted these elements as part of previous IRMP's in response to a community need and legislative duties to keep Firefighters safe. Given the nature of our community risk it is not possible to cease these activities. We continue to lobby the Government to fully fund these key activities.

We should consider volunteer stations as they do in Scotland.

A: This is not an option as the community risk for the two counties would not support that level of service provision. Also it would not provide appreciable savings.

We could save money by not implementing ICP.

A: This project has been funded from the current budget and is a necessary safety requirement. Future commitments will be scrutinised in line with our budget planning process.

We should cut the number of glossy publications.

A: The cost of our publications is relatively low when compared to the importance of presenting the professional image of the Service. However, all budgets will be considered in due course.

Senior managers should take on extra responsibilities, work longer hours and reduce staffing levels.

A: Senior management costs will be considered as part of the back-office efficiencies, not just for 2009/10 but for the following year as well.

The maintenance of Fire Control staff morale will be a major issue during the lead up to the cut-over to RCC and within a cuts agenda.

A: The Authority is committed to maintaining the morale of all staff and we will endeavour to communicate effectively throughout what will undoubtedly be a difficult time.

Mobilisation to RTC zones rather than to the accident site, could provide a more realistic measure of attendance.

A: This will be considered as part of the revision of attendance times for RTC's.

The Authority must challenge the performance assessment regime which has become too onerous and requires inordinate amount of resources to meet.

A: This is major issue and one that is being debated throughout the UK. We are lobbying hard to reduce the inspection burden, however, in the short term we are legally constrained to participate.

The amount of temporary promotions will have a negative impact on the crewing figures if we drop to 7.

A: This will be offset by the new absence management system.

Long Term Temporary Promotion Issues:

- 1) People taken off watches to deliver training
- 2) People taken off watches to work on projects

It should only be in exceptional cases that operational staff are used if it affects crewing levels. This should be centrally planned to ensure that acting up is managed. The new acting up policy has led to staff refusing to act up both on a daily basis and long term.

A: The Service will be addressing this issue and there will be tighter central management and co ordination of temporary promotions.

There will need to be extensive support for groups for staff that feel under pressure as a result of uncertainties caused by the cuts agenda, collaboration/combination or the RCC project.

A: This element of transition will need to be addressed regardless of the final direction of travel decided upon.

The new leave system is currently working in practice. It is possible to get all the leave booked in advance however the problem is with booking PH days. If you block book them then you are likely to get them however odd days are very difficult.

Day Crewed stations have a particular problem with this.

A: The IRMP team will consult further with representatives from Day Crewed stations.

How are we going to manage the Local Resilience Register to ensure transparency? The issue is equality of opportunity to access to training and skills. There are very few enhanced trained RDS staff. There is the potential to discriminate by not providing sufficient training to be on the register. As a Service we have diversified skills so much there is clearly potential for discrimination.

A: The IRMP team will feed back to Operations.

Direct suggestions currently under consideration:

- Bromsgrove should revert to day-crewed.
- We should introduce nucleus crewing.
- The provision of water for firefighting is not adequately addressed within the IRMP; its is currently under-provided and the water companies are introducing inefficiencies.
- We should look at different shift systems at each station.
- Day crewed stations are under pressure to attract sufficient recruits.
- The Service must look to reduce the temporary contracts.
- We should look hard at consumables and stationery costs.
- The Service must consider the increased workloads for individual staff that may result from the reduction of any posts.
- Investment in private health-care and physiotherapy would make good business sense when comparing long term sickness against health care costs.
- We should aim to improve on our % achievement on Attendance Standards on a yearly basis