

Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Authority have launched their Service improvement plan consultation document. Within this document there are plans to cut a third of all fire appliances and the closure of seven fire stations.

The stations proposed for closure are Studley, Bidford, Brinklow, Fenny Compton, Kenilworth, Warwick and Bedworth. This will result in approximately 100 firefighters working the retained duty system being axed.

The removal of fire engines from these stations will greatly increase the risk to the public and to firefighters. The result of these cuts will be far fewer firefighters spread much more thinly across the County effectively leaving towns and villages being left without any vital emergency rescue cover or having to wait approximately 20% longer for a fire engine to attend.

These are the biggest cuts and closures plan ever proposed by a fire service and they are under the guise of an improvement plan which is an insult to the public and firefighters.

If you have the read the document you will find that the questions within it are overwhelmingly loaded towards obtaining a positive response. As a supposed open and transparent document then why does it only list the perceived benefits but no mention of any disadvantages?

The Fire Brigades Union will be strongly campaigning against these draconian plans and urge all members of the Warwickshire community to oppose them by taking part in the consultation process.

Below is a quick draft response by the FBU to the section of the document entitled 'Why we need to change'

Have your say.....

1. The risk profile and range of incidents we attend has changed considerably from when our current response arrangements were designed.

The risk profile within Warwickshire has obviously altered dramatically due to the increase of housing developments and industrial areas. There is a short, medium and long term development plan for Warwickshire County with substantial house builds so any response plans should not only reflect the current response arrangements but also any future response arrangements that can be preplanned for. This appears not to be considered in the consultation document.

2 We need to improve our current level of operational training. This is exacerbated by the 'skills decline' caused by the overall reduction in fire incidents.

Firefighters have been banging on for the past few years about how training has declined. This mainly due to an over emphasis on community fire safety activities and poor funding. The FBU agree with community fire safety but not to the detriment of quality training for operational crews. The organisation needs to identify the time and resources required to ensure trained competent firefighters and allocate adequate time for wholtime and RDS to achieve that competency.

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3. On an average day up to 43% of retained fire engines may not be available due to insufficient crewing.

Insufficient crewing is a result of poor management of the Retained Duty System. The units (number of personnel) per retained station were reduced in the mid 1990's and have not been increased, therefore this means less firefighters to be available to crew the fire appliance. Also poorly managed retained recruitment campaigns have led to under establishment in these areas. Furthermore management have also been taking RDS personnel off stations on temporary Wholetime contracts to backfill the shortfall of the Wholetime establishment thus resulting in RDS stations with fewer personnel to cover the appliance. The level of remuneration needs to be attractive to members of the public to ensure that they take up the opportunities in these under established areas.

4. We have new responsibilities as a category one responder and as part of the critical national resilience infrastructure.

With fewer appliances available across the county responding to incidents as part of the national resilience will mean even less appliances available to attend incidents within Warwickshire. There are no funding burdens to WFRS to provide the responsibilities of providing response as a category one responder; in fact funds are given to the Service to pay for training of staff.

5. There is a very clear relationship between home fire safety checks and smoke alarm ownership and reducing public risk. We carry out significantly less of this work than many other services.

The FBU recognises the value of home fire safety checks and smoke alarm ownership. However WFRS are proposing a ten fold increase in these areas and are proposing to use partner agencies but has this been agreed between these partners and will there be a cost incurred for their services.

6. Incidents on the roads are our fastest growing area of work; we need to manage our response more flexibly

With fewer fire engines how will this be achieved?

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7. We need to improve protection to our firefighters to deal with the risks associated with widespread flooding and with water related incidents.

Following the Pitt report on flooding within the UK, Fire and Rescue Services should receive funding from central government rather than finding the finance from their own budget. Also there is no legal requirement for Fire and Rescue Services to attend incidents of this type and no funding, so why burden an overstretched budget?

8. We must make a step change in the way we use our resources in order to drive out efficiencies to build capacity elsewhere.

Wriggling within our skin to rob frontline services or robbing peter to pay Paul will place the public and firefighters in danger. Let's have the correct investment into the Fire Service.

9. We need to rise to meet the demands of the range of government and audit reports highlighting some of the weaknesses in Fire and Rescue service improvement.

Why when improvement is mentioned it is always linked with cuts and reductions to frontline services.

10. We need to create more time during the working shift to spend on training and community safety activity.

The FBU concur with the sentiments of this statement but not to the detriment of frontline operational services.

11. Our health and safety procedures are continually under the spotlight and we must ensure that risk information is available to our crews.

Risk information is valuable to crews but having enough resources to tackle these risks is equally as important.

12. We need to develop the capacity to respond more reliably and quickly when the public need us. This requires innovation in the resources we use to respond with as well as flexibility in crewing which allows us to maximise our availability.

How can a service respond more reliably and quickly when a third of its fleet has been withdrawn?

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13. We must identify and eliminate activity which wastes our time and resources such as false alarms and malicious calls.

Non attendance to fire alarms and waiting for someone to physically make the 999 call may result in major property damage.

14. We need to reduce sickness absence which compromises availability, safety and performance.

Introduction of unfamily friendly shift systems and pressure from potential longer working hours and busy activity due to fewer resources will increase the sickness levels.

15. We need a framework which engages all of our staff and stakeholders in innovative ways to provide our range of services.

A load of management gobbledegook.

16. The Service has delayed the recruitment for Wholetime firefighters to allow the opportunity for any migration of retained duty system firefighters following consultation.

The loss of 100 retained duty personnel and the introduction of 25 wholetime posts still leaves a massive reduction in firefighters and appliances across the county.

17. We need to ensure that our physical resources are used most effectively to the benefit of the communities they belong to.

Reducing the resources by a third will make this very hard to achieve.

18. The Audit Commission have already raised concern that without significant change we are unlikely to realise the potential efficiencies and performance improvement.

The Audit Commission report 'Rising to the Challenge' basically infers to Fire and Rescue Authorities to make further cuts on already dwindling vital front line services.

19. We can be better, we can save and protect more lives, and knowing that have a moral obligation to do so.

How can we be better and save and protect more lives with less fire engines and longer attendance times.

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20. Growing pressure on the retained service can be reduced by increased support from Wholetime colleagues through more resilient working practices.

Pressure can be reduced on the retained service by robust investment and more effective management of this duty system.

21. We need to consider the impact of our activities on the environment. Using a wider range of smaller vehicles to reduce CO2 emissions and fuel consumption.

These smaller vehicles are a replacement for fully crewed and equipped fire engines and how long will it be before more are introduced again resulting in a further reduction of appliances.

22. The 8 steps in this consultation document are key projects in improving our capacity by identifying the things we need to do more of and the things we can do less of in order to do them.

How does reducing the Service realise the capacity

23. The improvement proposals do not require an increase in the Fire and Rescue Service revenue budget.

But they do require cuts to frontline services.

24. The individual key elements of this plan will be subject to trial and continual refinement.

What, further cuts?