

Cheshire FBU Response to 'Draft' Corporate Plan & IRMP 2009/2010.

In responding to the draft IRMP document it remains the intention of the FBU in Cheshire to be supportive of any improvements to the Fire Service and to help in improving the service we offer the public. Equally, where we believe proposals within the IRMP will not improve the Service, we will voice our concerns and expect our views to influence the final draft and proposals. We hope, therefore, that any changes can be approached in a spirit of partnership, where modernisation of the way we work and deliver our services can be guided by ministerial frameworks and remain within the spirit and intent of nationally negotiated conditions of service.

The changes proposed in the IRMP6 are considerable and extensive, so to avoid confusion, and to instil a sense of workforce inclusion in these proposals, we ask that all matters affecting FBU members be the subject of thorough consultation/negotiation with a view to reaching agreement prior to the implementation of changes to policies, practices or protocols.

In an effort to assist in this process we make the following preliminary observations to the points raised in the draft IRMP2 document.

'Zero preventable deaths'

The FBU commends Cheshire Fire Authority's vision and the reductions in the numbers of accidental house fires, injuries and incidents of arson throughout Cheshire, Halton and Warrington. We would wish to see CF&RS go a step further and adopt a vision of zero fire deaths and recognise all deaths from fire are preventable. This would not only be seen as a bold statement of intent but it would also address the current confusion between what is deemed a preventable and non-preventable fire death.

Assessing Risk

We have concerns regarding some of the software that CF&RS are relying on to assess risk and having previously raised our concerns regarding the use of 'Process Evolution', we are now faced with a new package of the 'Cheshire Rapid Risk Calculator'. IRMP6 provides some headline findings from the review of the Service's approach to risk planning although we have not been provided with the full report.

Cheshire Standards

Whilst we appreciate a review and further work has been carried out regarding response standards we are disappointed no response standard has been introduced for the attendance of 2nd appliances. Although the initial attendance time is critical the standards should reflect how quickly we get the full required resources to an incident.

We are also disappointed that our issues raised in previous responses regarding lowering of response standards following the removal of the national standards of fire cover to the Cheshire Standards have not been picked up. For example; under the national standards a fire in Warrington had a response standard of 1 appliance in 5 minutes and a second appliance in 8

minutes, under the amended Cheshire Standards the standard is achieved with a 1 appliance response of between 11 and 15 minutes.

We welcome the introduction of an RTC response standard of 15 minutes. However we express concern and using Warrington again as an example; the previous Cheshire Standards would have required a 6 to 10 minute RTC response. Again this is seen as a lowering of the standards.

We are concerned that the new simplified response standards have dropped 5 categories of incident type and in particular the removal of a response standard for life risk special service calls.

Faster, more flexible response

Very little detail of how this proposal would work has been provided and therefore it is difficult for the FBU to comment. Ahead of any detailed proposal, we would wish to emphasise we would not support, simply using attendance times of smaller than normal crews to achieve response standards. The limited ability to deal with certain types of incident with less than fully crewed appliances would not give an improved service, would merely mask attendance times and be used to give a false impression that we are achieving response standards.

CBR Checks

We question the need for the service to undertake CRB checks for all operational staff, although we now have greater contact with vulnerable adults and young children, most if not all operational staff only come into contact with these groups as support and not in a leading capacity. The majority of work by operational staff does not involve these groups and when it does there is a supervisory person present at all times.

If the majority of work by a member of CFRS puts them into a lead position then we agree there is a need to CRB that member of staff.

A fair proportion of staff joined the service prior to CRBs and were not obliged to disclose any spent offences under the rehabilitation of offenders act. This proposal will rake up their past with the only result in embarrassment to the individual. The point of the Rehabilitation of offenders act was to let people who had made a mistake put it behind them and move forward with their life.

We are opposed to a blanket CRB check for all operational staff and as it is a proposed new contractual condition of service and we expect the normal consultation and negotiation to take place.

There is a cost to this proposal which has not been disclosed to the FBU and we would suggest that if the law does not require a CRB check then the money saved could be put to better use.

Concerns staff have regarding this proposal are; How safe will CF&RS keep this data? What implications will this data have on their future employment or

promotion prospects? Will CF&RS need the individual's consent for a CRB check and what will be the consequences if they refuse consent?

Fire Investigation

We welcome the proposal to enhance the skills of staff that look into the causes of fire. The proposal is based around the need to promptly issue key messages reflecting their findings. We therefore suggest that these skills are given to the front line crews that have been constantly requesting some training in this area since the cessation of the basic Fire Prevention course.

Review and analysis of working patterns

We are disappointed that soon after the previous best value review and changes to the working patterns that CF&RS are again looking to make changes to the working patterns. Firefighters are strongly opposed to the introduction of 12 hour shifts.

Shift working always puts a strain on workers, we believe the present arrangements give the flexibility and capability required whilst at the same time is popular with staff. It has proved that flexibility can be achieved and requests from female firefighters for flexible working and reduced hours have been facilitated. Capability has been achieved and the staff have constantly achieved and surpassed all targets. The arguments that the shift system had profile issues were the driving force behind the removal of the beds in 2007, and the re-negotiation of the rest periods.

Large savings were achieved with the introduction of Optimum Crewing in 2006 with 20 firefighter posts removed from the establishment. This was achieved mainly with the removal of a ridership factor for training detachments and reduction in absences from shift.

It may be timely for a review but we do not see the need to change to 12 hour shifts, compared with need to re-introduce detachments for training and modifications to the central resource that has not functioned as intended.

We are prepared to get involved with a review, provided it is carried out in an open and transparent manner with no preconceived outcomes, despite some senior managers and authority members, going around stations, stating the 12 hours shifts are a done deal.

Covering staffing shortages with RDS staff

Whilst we welcome the current recruitment campaign to cover the staffing shortages on the RDS stations, we have serious reservations that this proposal is more about staffing shortages on wholetime stations. Our concerns are that RDS are seen as a cheaper option than employing wholetime firefighters to provide this cover.

Reduction of supervisory staff

We have been provided with little detail, how this proposal would work. CF&RS have already reduced the number of crew managers on 2 pump stations and we can not see the scope to reduce numbers further. We are

already over reliant on temporary promotions and firefighters volunteering to act up to cover shorter gaps. We are opposed to a reduction of supervisory managers at operational stations.

Second contracts

We require further detail regarding these contracts. We are unsure whether these contracts are for RDS duties and if so, why the RDS would require a second contract. As for wholetime, would it not be covered by a wholetime/retained contract?

We are concerned about the hours firefighters will be working and how second contracts are being used to avoid paying overtime. Proposed changes to the working time regulations should be factored in ahead of introducing second contracts.

Wilmslow

The FBU strongly oppose this proposal and are not convinced the case has been made to remove full time fire cover from Wilmslow. The increased response times of at least 5 minutes will undoubtedly increase the risk to life at both residential premises, business premises and at road traffic collisions. We do not believe the case has been made; no evidence has been given that the risk to life and property in the area has decreased. Using the FSEC modelling we would wish to see exactly what is the predicted increased risk to life with the slower response times.

We do not believe sufficient scoping has been carried out into the availability of RDS firefighters and the proposal is being rushed through following a swift u-turn from last years proposal of a LLAR station. During these consultations, assurances were given that there would be no increase in response times from the current 24/7 status.

RDS review

We request consultation regarding any improvements to emergency response identified in the review and that are proposed in the IRMP.

Pool of staff and appliances

We agree these proposals will bring more flexibility and resilience to the fire cover provided and we wish to work with management to achieve workable policies. Our reservations are that CF&RS does not become over reliant on overtime (by virtue of second contracts or not), these policies are not to cover for planned deficiencies in the establishment and staff are paid the correct remuneration in line with NJC rates of pay.

CARPs

We wish to re-iterate our previous concerns regarding this proposal although we accept CF&RS have afforded ourselves and our members the opportunity to contribute to the specification requirements with the order of the first vehicle. We now wish to be afforded the same involvement in agreeing the required staffing levels for the CARPs and suggest a great degree of caution before commissioning the second vehicle, following the increased number of

problems arising in other Fire & Rescue Services with CARPs. i.e. handling issues and local authority weight restrictions.

Midi Fire Appliances

Our concerns regarding this proposal are long and well documented and we maintain that conventional appliances should not be replaced with TRVs. The design and axle weight limitation of these vehicles means they carry fewer crew members and less equipment i.e. just over half the water capacity, no 70mm hose, no rescue ladder, and only one hose reel. Therefore for the vehicles to be used in this way, the crews are reliant on the attendance of a conventional appliance.

Crews are now highlighting these limitations at operational incidents as full testing and evaluation has not been carried out ahead of deployment.

Operational Excellence Strategy

The FBU welcome this initiative and supports the changes and emphasis being placed into the training and development of firefighters and incident command with the introduction of the resilience unit. The recent increase in the number of firefighter fatalities has demonstrated that something has gone wrong and without second guessing the outcome of the HSE's investigations it is already evident that as well as improvements in standard operating procedures, availability to risk information to crews there is a need to increase the focus on real, practical training and assessment. We do however have reservation regarding how quickly improvements can be achieved as previous reductions in the operational establishment do not facilitate detachments for training. Proposals to get BA and EFAD refreshers back on track are being implemented; however we wish to see greater robustness that ensures that 100% of staff receive the appropriate training.

Expansion of operational training facilities.

The FBU welcome this investment and support the need to increase the number and availability of practical training facilities. Although it is proposed to introduce more flexible training packages, these are no substitute for realistic training.

Specialist Animal Rescue Team

The FBU are interested and be supportive of this proposal, however location and travel distances may be an issue. Regardless of this proposal we would suggest a review should be undertaken into equipment, rescue techniques and training as very little has changed in the last 30 years in this area, other than changes in mobilising policy.

Co-responding schemes

The FBU are disappointed that Management have seen fit to by-pass the FBU on this issue and try to negotiate directly with our RDS members. Management are well aware of the long standing FBU policy on co-responding and have openly suggested alternative representative organisations to our members that are willing to co-respond at this moment in time. Despite the FBU's successful legal action that co-responding is not part

of the firefighters role map, the national leadership have given an indication that they are willing to resolve this issue with the employers. CF&RS have already committed monies to the unsuccessful legal action in Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire and would be better placed in trying to move the agenda along with the national employers.

This controversial proposal has inevitably led to industrial unrest and local disputes within other fire services as a moral argument is used against the arguments of funding, fire cover, litigation and adequate training. Previously Cheshire FBU members have refused to participate in co-responding and we deplore the financial inducements now being offered to encourage participation.

Currently there is a successful first responder scheme in the Nantwich area and this proposal will offer a lesser service both to the fire service and the public of Nantwich and at far greater costs to tax payers.

National fitness standards

The FBU will support the proposal for increased level of fitness for firefighters, provided the help and support required to maintain those levels are available to staff. We are cautious of any impact the new standards will have with regard to age and gender and envisage a need for greater fitness awareness to eliminate potential problems achieving the new standards.

Investors in People

The FBU believes that all individuals should have every opportunity to fully develop their true potential, both at work and in their personal lives therefore the FBU in Cheshire commends and supports the statement made in the CF&RS draft IRPM 6 that the Authority intends to demonstrate its commitment to developing its staff by working to attain the Investors in People award.

The IIP standard itself requires employers to maintain 'constructive relationships' with recognised Trade unions and to consult with them about the organisation's business plan. The FBU in Cheshire has been working on developing a learning partnership with managers in Cheshire for some time now. The FBU in Cheshire wants to work in partnership with managers to up skill all CF&RS employees.

Skills for Life are an integral part of the Investors in People award. Employers aiming to attain Investors in People award will need to show evidence that they are supporting Skills for Life with their employees. The FBU in Cheshire through its work involving the Union Learning Fund have been promoting and coordinating Skills for Life courses for all CF&RS employees.

This commitment to attain the Investors in People award by CF&RS can only enhance the development of a learning partnership between the FBU and CF&RS managers in Cheshire and the progress that has already been made towards this.

The FBU in Cheshire looks forward to being fully involved in joint briefings with management on Investors in People including the setting up and sitting on any joint learning forums to manage the Investors in People journey.

To go along with the commitment to attain the Investors in People Award by CF&RS managers, the FBU in Cheshire will be promoting the Skills Pledge to CF&RS managers. The Skills Pledge is a public commitment to increasing the skills of the workforce; a promise through training, you'll work to boost the productivity of your business and realise the potential of all your employees. The FBU believes the Skills Pledge goes hand in hand with the Investors in People award.

High Potential Fast Track

We do not support a fast track scheme for staff that have an operational role as qualifications are no substitute for experience and development.

The role of a commander at an incident serious or otherwise can only, in our view, be carried out by someone who has gained experience of actually doing the job and therefore understands from first hand experience, the nature of an incident, its development, limitations of equipment and staff, risks, likely outcomes to name a few considerations that only experience can give you.

This route has the potential of increasing the risks to firefighters at incidents and will affect the confidence of all staff in the decisions of a fast tracked commander with very limited or no practical firefighting experience.

Legal advice and support

At present we understand that the service has two full time solicitors plus a registered solicitor at corporate level giving three solicitors for an organisation with approximately 1000 staff. The IRMP wants to further increase the legal cost by "partnership with a private sector law firm to support our prosecution work" and we would question this need.

The service to our knowledge is not making prosecutions on a daily basis, though there is an alarming increase in the number of discipline cases. (1998-2002 there were 9 cases. 2002-July 2008 they were 115 cases plus 6 watches-source *Freedom of Information request*).

This culture has led to an enormous amount of managerial hours, increase workloads in human resources and employee relations as well as an increase in employment tribunals and out of court settlements.

Should you require further clarification regarding the points raised in this submission, please do not hesitate to contact a Brigade Official.

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