

Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service – Strategic Alliance with Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service. Initial Report – headline findings

Executive Summary

The pressure on WFRS to drive out efficiencies and explore all opportunities to transform will continue apace into the next decade coming from both central government and from within the county council, as the imperative to reduce spending whilst maintaining continuous improvement becomes even greater.

The Strategic Alliance model with a similar FRS presents a politically and organisationally acceptable approach to reconfiguring services, bringing many of the benefits of a more radical merger approach without the risks of losing local identity and accountability.

The early work with Northamptonshire has demonstrated many synergies and potential future opportunities for cost saving and service improvement and there have been some early ‘quick wins’ which have served well in building constructive and positive collaborative relationships between the two authorities.

The current hiatus in the progress of the strategic alliance, caused by the need to pause the process until the Strategic Commissioning Review is concluded, does pose a risk that there may be some loss in momentum and some tensions in relationships with Northamptonshire. Proactive and unambiguous communications both within WFRS and with Northamptonshire will be essential to mitigating this risk.

Much of the early work albeit well intentioned has been ad hoc and piecemeal with limited measurable benefits to date. This is largely as a result of there not yet being in place the governance and programme management structures to drive and lead the work at a strategic level. The exception to this would be the fire control work stream where good, purposeful joint work has resulted in the successful joint bid to DCLG and steady progress towards a combined procurement exercise which is likely to yield cost savings in both procurement and staffing in the short term and longer term potential opportunities for closer alignment of fire control and sharing resources.

There are no obvious alternative delivery methods that are being overlooked as a result of the alliance with NFRS, although it is not apparent at this stage that there is a clear mutual understanding of the precise benefits (both financially and operationally) that can be realised from the five areas. The priorities and desired outcomes from collaborative working need to be identified so that there is clarity and a clear mutual understanding of expectations from the beginning. A clear statement of priorities and outcomes will help to shape the nature of the work and influence potential areas for investigation. This will also help in identifying associated risks.

**Dianne Thomas
John Cotterill**

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At the operational level, there is clearly a willingness to share and learn from each other and recognition of potential mutual benefits from closer working relationships. This should provide a relatively strong basis for moving forward on a more structured and planned basis once the Project Teams and Board are in place.

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide an initial overview of the progress made to date to explore the strategic alliance between Warwickshire FRS and Northamptonshire FRS. To begin to look at what alternative delivery models may be open to Warwickshire and to evaluate the risk and benefits of pursuing the alliance, making some preliminary judgements about the next steps that need to be taken.

We met with key managers from Warwickshire, conducted telephone interviews with the work stream leads from Warwickshire and the senior officer from Northamptonshire leading on the alliance. We carried out an initial review of current notable practice and had some discussions with other Fire and Rescue services to further explore their approaches.

Context

The government's recent Fire Futures Review report in April 2011 identified a number of areas where central government believed savings and efficiencies could be made within Fire and Rescue Services (FRSs). There was a strong directive from government that FRSs should be looking at better procurement, sharing senior staff and voluntary amalgamations.

Bob Neil MP in his recent speech to the LGA Fire Conference in April 2012 said:

"Further funding reductions are on their way for the whole of the public sector, including fire and rescue authorities. Thankfully fatalities are at an all-time low and, thanks to innovation in industry, government action and the efforts of fire and rescue authorities, risks are falling.

If ever there was a time for strong local leadership, it's now. Fire and rescue authorities need to look closely at their own service configuration and recognise that we are all delivering services in a new environment."

In September 2011, Warwickshire County Council's cabinet considered a proposed framework for a strategic alliance between their own and Northamptonshire's Fire and Rescue Services. They endorsed the exploration of a strategic alliance model that would permit closer working and joint strategic commissioning arrangements and the development of a business case.

At the same time Northamptonshire County Council's cabinet considered a similar report and they too endorsed the exploration of a strategic alliance with Warwickshire Fire and Rescue service.

Both reports recommended that full merger of the two services into one authority was not a preferred option because of the loss of local accountability and identity. The strategic alliance was the favoured route as it could potentially bring many of the benefits of a merger without incurring

Dianne Thomas
John Cotterill

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some of the risks. Both reports contained a proposed business model for the strategic alliance which was based around a joint board leading joint project teams collaborating across five key areas:

1. Fire control provision
2. Training
3. Fire safety enforcement
4. Technical resources
5. Community safety

The key drivers for collaboration were identified as savings; efficiencies; resilience; robustness and good practice. Both cabinet reports used almost identical text, the Northamptonshire report differed subtly in their description of the extent of alignment. The Northamptonshire report stated:

“This alignment of service will enable greater integration of and joint delivery of services for the benefit of communities....our arrangement would go beyond partnership working to a potential aligned governance and decision making model for some or all of the service”

It is intended that the governance arrangements for the strategic alliance would include portfolio holders as the political representatives and the Chief fire officers along with other officers as needed from both councils to act as management advisors. In order to allow this board to establish policy and reach decisions mutually for both authorities , it is anticipated that there would need to be sufficient political representatives and officer support ... to enable the board to set and approve policy direction and resource levels for the strategic alliance “

The language in the Warwickshire report was less explicit and more circumspect in its description of the alliance and the powers of the board;

“The alignment of the two organisations with peer support at strategic levels including elected members, principal officers and service management teams”

“The development of the strategic alliance will help to close the gap between the two services in terms of strategic thinking and operational service delivery”

The Government terminated the FiReControl programme in 2010 and invited FRAs to submit bids for improving their control service. £1.8M was made available to each FRA with an additional fund of a further £1.8M to provide extra support where national benefit could be secured.

It would be remiss to omit the impact of the Atherstone on Stour fire and the investigation and legal actions that followed. This is one of the most significant investigations in the history of the Fire service nationally. It has brought into tragically sharp focus the need to look again at fire fighter safety, inspections, the use of the retained duty system and risk critical training. It will inevitably have a significant impact on any future service transformation decisions in Warwickshire (and nationally).

Dianne Thomas
John Cotterill

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Progress to date

A Memorandum of Understanding was signed in April by both authorities signalling the commitment to work collaboratively together and to develop a framework for a comprehensive business case for the strategic alliance. The agreement included the intention to establish a Project Team, a Joint Management Team and a joint Board.

The need for WFRS to complete the strategic commissioning review before embarking on implementing this agreement is understood by Northamptonshire although there is a concern that some momentum may be lost during this hiatus in the development of the strategic alliance.

Prior to the commencement of the Strategic Commissioning Review, joint working had begun with the establishment of five work streams for the five areas in scope, each with a nominated lead from Warwickshire and Northamptonshire. Some early work and quick wins were achieved although in the absence of the board and project teams providing strategic direction, the approach has been somewhat ad hoc and piecemeal with limited benefits realised so far.

The exception to this would be the fire control work stream where good, purposeful joint work has resulted in the successful joint bid to DCLG and steady progress towards a combined procurement exercise which is likely to yield cost savings in both procurement and staffing in the short term and longer term potential opportunities for closer alignment of fire control and sharing resources.

In the areas of Fire Safety and Community Safety progress to date is still in the exploratory stage and has primarily centred round exploring possible areas of closer working at a relatively low operational level rather than at a more strategic level. Sharing information and comparing organisational practice is happening frequently and openly, which is leading to a building up of trust and mutual understanding. Examples of joint actions taken so far include joint press release, using Warwickshire County Council's Press Office, one officer attending meetings on behalf of both organisations where there is considerable travel and time away from the office involved and sharing of policy statements and guidance notes. Discussions have also taken place about different practices in relation to procurement (e.g. fire blankets) and this is expected to lead to comparisons in value for money and appraisal of different procurement options.

Work has begun in looking at the potential financial benefits of closer working and this is planned to continue. A comparison of financial budgets and other resource information (e.g. stations, appliances and staffing) is underway and should help to identify areas for future collaboration.

Next Steps – Potential benefits and risks

Whilst the work undertaken so far has been limited in delivering benefits, at the operational level, there is clearly a willingness to share and learn from each other and recognition of potential mutual benefits from closer working relationships. This should provide a relatively strong basis for moving forward on a more structured and planned basis once the Project Teams and Board are in place.

Dianne Thomas
John Cotterill

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At this stage, potential benefits in the form of shared information and some shared practices have been identified and are being acted upon. It is important though that in order to maximise the benefits of closer working, a more structured and formal approach using suitably tailored project management techniques is adopted.

The priorities and desired outcomes from collaborative working need to be identified so that there is clarity and an agreed mutual understanding of expectations from the beginning. A clear statement of priorities and outcomes will help to shape the nature of the work and influence potential areas for investigation. This will also help in identifying associated risks.

The area of joint training presents an obvious area where economies of scale and improved outcomes can be readily realised and the willingness of both partners to develop shared standard operating procedures will make joint training much more viable.

There is a risk during the hiatus caused by the need to conclude the work for WCC on the strategic commissioning review that some impetus may be lost and some relationships may become strained.

For example, NFRS are under the clear impression that they have been asked by WFRS to stop all work on the strategic alliance until after the strategic commissioning review, whereas Area Commanders at WFRS whom we spoke to seemed to be becoming frustrated by what they see as a lack of activity from Northamptonshire. Clear and unambiguous communication both with NFRS and with senior managers in WFRS is essential to ensure that misunderstandings do not unnecessarily add to the risks.

Our initial impression (and it is only an initial impression) is that there appears to be a stronger imperative from Northamptonshire to pursue collaboration with more vigour and more willingness to consider radical approaches, partly because they are being driven by pressure to find cashable efficiency savings to balance their medium term financial plan.

The work that is already in train on joint procurement for the control rooms ICS and the data link between the two services presents a good opportunity to develop closer working relationships, drive out some efficiencies in the short term. In particular the ability to remotely mobilise each other's resources from having the same IT platform could lead to reductions in staff costs from overtime savings. In the longer term the initiative presents the opportunity to consider moving to a single shared control facility.

Alternative delivery options

There are a range of alternative FRs with whom WFRS could potentially partner for all of the areas in scope. There are in addition a range of other sector providers with whom they could collaborate for elements of the functions in scope.

However there are clearly a number of important similarities and synergies between WFRS and NFRS which make them a suitable partner, including:

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John Cotterill

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- Similar governance and funding and precepting arrangements
- Shared understanding of the dynamics of operating in a county council structure
- Similar appetite for partnership
- Similar logistics for example, Whole time/part time split in the workforce
- Similar sized organisation in terms of staff and budgets
- Serving similar population – rural/urban split and demographics

This, coupled with the fact that the joint work on Fire Control has already established a natural bridge between the two services, means that developing the alliance in a more structured way has many advantages and a greater understanding of the risks involved.

Collaboration with Northamptonshire will not and should not be a barrier to either Fire authority exploring service improvements and cost savings through closer working with other partners.

Notable Practice Elsewhere

This section is very much an initial trawl of notable practice and will be developed as our work progresses:

Bob Neil announced in March this year an intention to provide some funding from the £1.8 million fund for interoperability to a collaborative partnership of 13 fire and rescue authorities which has submitted a bid to develop standard operating procedures. DCLG officials are currently working with the authorities concerned to significantly reduce costs and ensure proposals align and support wider work now underway on cross 'blue light' service interoperability and have potential to be adopted across all fire and rescue authorities. They will be reviewing the further work underway on cross-service interoperability and will consider whether there is other essential work that ought to be funded from the £1.8 million interoperability fund.

The South East Fire Improvement Partnership

A collaborative procurement partnership providing work-wear uniforms for nine fire and rescue authorities involved in the partnership [Buckinghamshire; East Sussex; Hampshire, Isle of Wight; Kent; Oxfordshire; Royal Berkshire; Surrey and West Sussex]. Initial savings are of over £500,000 with further efficiencies predicted over the whole life of the contract. This contract is now being rolled out to other fire and rescue authorities

Greater Manchester

Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Authority are moving to a four shift annualised system where firefighters operate a much more flexible duty system by attending work outside of normal hours of duty to cover shortfalls, allowing for reductions in the size of the workforce overall. Further savings are being made by fire risk based availability of fire engines and the banking of firefighters hours to cover shortfalls during busier times. These changes in cover have been made against a backdrop of reductions in incidents driven by fire prevention work in communities.

Dianne Thomas
John Cotterill

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Devon & Somerset

Devon & Somerset. They have signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Falck EMS in June 2011 to develop ways of working together. Falck is a company providing emergency, training and assistance services, including fire fighting, fire training and fire consultancy services.

Hampshire Co-Responder scheme with South Central Ambulance service

The scheme, initially a local service partnership agreement (LSPA), achieved the targets set to improve

SCAS's attendance times to patients, and continues to do so. The unique features of HFRS's co-responder scheme include: HFRS's emergency response standards are never compromised; HFRS co-responders provided over six per cent of SCAS performance in Hampshire; volunteer retained fire fighters who can respond from their homes or workplaces are provided with vehicles by SCAS – does not tie up fire and rescue vehicles and co-responders are mobilised directly by SCAS and backed-up by conventional ambulance staff

The main success factors are the results that are being achieved and the enthusiasm of the firefighters. They took on the challenge in the early period and assisted the organisations to improve and develop the schemes. This was supplemented by the willingness of SCAS staff to share training and experience to further improve the skills of co-responders.

It is anticipated that more than 6,500 calls a year will be dealt with from 2010 onwards. As retained firefighters are used, all costs are fully recovered from SCAS – including a contribution towards their retaining fee. The schemes are very cost effective for SCAS in providing this level of improved performance and for the local community.

Staffordshire & Stoke on Trent

- Committed to exploring collaboration with anyone if it improves customer service in line with their priorities. They are partnering West Midlands FRA in developing a joint Incident Control Room.
- Incident command was identified early on as a key issue and they have put in place training to up-skill officers and maintain standards in collaboration with the fire service college. This is done through the running of incident command training week-ends. Incident commanders have to pass the course to be qualified. Ticket to ride scheme – every 3 years tested skills. Staffs are the Regional Lead in this area. Course has been offered to other FRAs.
- Fire safety enforcement – developed a new strategy underpinned by priorities of sustainability and economic viability. Working with local authorities and delivering fire safety advice.

Dianne Thomas
John Cotterill

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- 999 operators trained to interrogate callers to identify appropriate response. Has saved significant amounts of money in tailoring response to specific circumstances.

Dianne Thomas
John Cotterill

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