

## Report of the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Authority

This year has seen a sea change in the Fire Service, on two fronts – the successful combining with Oxfordshire FRS and Buckinghamshire FRS to deliver the fire control service; and a major change in the culture of the whole organisation.

The Fire Control Room, now situated for all three counties in our new Headquarters, has been functioning there for several months now. It was opened by the Fire Minister, Rt Hon Mark Francois in July. Initially there were recruiting and retention problems, largely because Buckinghamshire were insisting on short term contracts – which of course put people off, but this has now been resolved. One of the team leaders, Sarah Lewis, recently won the national Firefighters' charity award for the most successful newcomer, having through her encouragement of charity work, raised many thousands of pounds in Berkshire for the fire fighters' charity.

The second change has been the introduction of a new ethos of trust and consultation. This has come about through changes to the senior management team (SMT), who now consist of Andy Fry as Chief Fire Officer (CFO), Trevor Ferguson as Deputy Chief Fire Officer (DCFO), Paul Southern as Assistant Chief Fire Officer (ACFO) and Anne-Marie Scott as Head of OD (personnel and staff development in other words); all but Paul Southern are new to the team.

As a result of these changes to SMT a number of new initiatives have taken place and are starting to bear fruition. Firstly, officers and members have continued to develop their joint strategic plan which consists of more working with partners to make Berkshire a safer place. Wokingham and Bracknell Forest have been in the van of developing relations with the fire service officers, resulting in greater sharing of information on where the most vulnerable people live which aids both prevention work and, if the ultimate happens, their rescue; and also the earlier involvement of the fire service in planning issues, again to look at building in prevention strategies.

In parallel with the member/officer joint planning, the DCFO is working with the fire fighters themselves on improvements for the whole service, for example to evaluate how many fire stations and fire engines we need, and where they would best be placed to reach the greatest number of houses fastest – all the more important in view of the huge number of new housing developments across the whole county and the financial restraints similar to those WBC face.

This work has resulted in more joined up working between the Strategic Assets Management Committee which Angus Ross chairs, the Integrated Risk Management Plan working party, the budget working party and the overall Management Committee. One specific we shall be looking at over the next few months is where to build a new fire station to replace the old one at Dee Road, Reading, the site of the old headquarters.

Now that we are settled in our new HQ, the fire service will be able to sell the Dee Road site to fund new fire stations and other capital projects, as the Windsor site was sold to fund the new fire station in Wokingham: Windsor now runs from a less expensive site.

Anne-Marie Scott has been doing a great deal of work in training staff, and in particular with middle managers, who were raring for more responsibility which was never given them under the old

regime. They have really stepped up, and although they still need training in management and leadership skills, they are much more empowered, and therefore much more positive about their work and the whole Brigade. Working with Pauline Helliard-Symons who is the OD champion, she is preparing the service for a new Investors in People assessment – a national award which they failed to gain a few years ago. Working towards this award has supported much of the work that is being done to empower staff and raise morale generally.

Many Fire and Rescue Services are developing Co-responding work with the Ambulance Service, and our own fire fighters have been keen to do this for some while; it helps the overstretched ambulance service, and often a fire engine can reach a road traffic collision faster than the ambulance – and is also often called on to extract people from the cars; to give them medical aid as well increases their life chances. A Co-responding pilot has recently started at Hungerford fire station, and we hope this will develop quite quickly to other areas. All fire stations and fire engines have defibrillators, and some of the Co-responding activities have already been with people suffering heart attacks.

There has been a great improvement to relations with the Fire Brigades Union; this is partly because we have some excellent new local FBU leaders who are very positive in their approach, and partly because the senior team has worked hard to develop good relationships. There is also a new branch of the Retained Firefighters' Union, the Union specifically for retained fire fighters, who previously had to join the FBU.

Recruitment of retained fire fighters continues to be a problem, since these days far fewer people live or work close to their local fire station, but there has been a steady drift of new recruits.

The new HQ at Theale was formally opened in September by the Earl of Wessex, who also presented a certificate and ceremonial axe to the schoolboy who chose the name for the new HQ – Newsham Court: Newsham was a local man who invented the earliest fire pump, and which was first used at Bray in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The budget is currently healthy, and we are planning three years ahead, to keep it so, despite the reduction in Government funding.

The number of senior staff has been decreased, at both Chief Officer Management Team level and the level immediately below them, which has also had a positive impact on the budget, as well as aiding the plans to give more responsibility to middle managers, such as station commanders. We feel that the new top team is making a huge difference to the service and the results of their efforts are beginning to be seen. Pauline Helliard-Symons and Angus Ross were involved in the appointment of all three of the new chief officers, and we feel they are doing what they were appointed to do.

Pauline Helliard-Symons, Vice Chairman of the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Authority.

WBC Members on the Fire Authority are Councillors Alistair Auty, Pauline Helliard-Symons, Tom McCann, Ian Pittock and Angus Ross