

INVESTIGATION OF CO-RESPONDING ARRANGEMENTS WITH LANCASHIRE AMBULANCE SERVICE

Issue for Consideration

Integrated Risk Management Plan 2004/09 (Year One). Project No 13: Investigate the potential for co-responding arrangements with Lancashire Ambulance Service.

The Combined Fire Authority adopted and endorsed its Integrated Risk Management Plan on 26 March 2004. Included within the plan was an action item to investigate whether there was potential to develop a co-responding scheme in co-operation with Lancashire Ambulance Service.

Definitions

First Responders

First Responders are local volunteers who receive additional first aid training, including the use of automatic defibrillators. A rota is operated and the person on call is alerted via pager by the ambulance service control. They then attend the casualty and attempt to sustain life until the arrival of paramedic ambulance staff.

Co Responders

In a number of areas Fire and Rescue Authorities have entered into partnerships with local Ambulance Trusts and agreed, on receipt of a medical emergency from ambulance control, to dispatch a fire appliance and crew equipped with a defibrillator. These are termed co-responder schemes to recognise the simultaneous despatch of both emergency services.

Background

Section 3.14 of the Fire and Rescue Service National Framework for 2004/05 states that 'Fire and Rescue Authorities should ...explore the benefits of implementing co-responder schemes in partnership with other agencies.'

Early in 2003 the LGA agreed to investigate the responsibility of developing guidance jointly with CFOA for authorities wishing to develop co-responding schemes with their local ambulance trusts. It was considered there was ample evidence that the provision of emergency response schemes in which firefighters attended medical emergencies such as cardiac arrest could save lives. This work has now culminated in a number of guidance documents being issued. These include a framework document, a draft memorandum of understanding for use by fire and ambulance authorities and practical guidance as to how such schemes can be set up.

The clear government expectation that fire and rescue authorities would examine the possibility of entering into such agreements led to its inclusion in the Year 1 IRMP Action Plan.

Information

Calls for medical emergencies are graded for degree of seriousness by the ambulance service. Those that pose the greatest threat to life are then allocated a maximum time that can elapse before medical assistance is available. This is 8 minutes for the category that includes cardiac emergencies.

In recent years the ambulance service has seen greatly increased activity levels as public expectations have grown. Workloads and travel distances are two factors that can prevent attendance times being met. One method of addressing this was the introduction of co-responder schemes.

There are clear advantages to such arrangements. It is possible for the fire engine to cover a greater distance within the time limit than a member of the public. Since a full crew is present they have mutual support and are less vulnerable to interference. Leicestershire Fire and Rescue Service are currently piloting the most recent of these agreements.

However, there are also disadvantages. There is a potential impact on available fire cover. The need to maintain operational availability from fire stations, potentially already short of retained personnel, has resulted in LFRS adopting a policy that those of our retained staff who undertake first responder duties should not be available for both first responding and fire calls at the same time.

There are also training, competence, financial and liability issues that must be addressed. It may also be the case that in the early years the public will be disconcerted to see a crew of firefighters arriving when they have dialled 999 for an ambulance.

The position in Lancashire

A number of serving and retired members of the service are operating as first responders around the county. In addition the recently appointed Tri Service Community Wardens are being trained in the extended first aid skills required for first responding.

The retained personnel of Silverdale Fire Station approached Lancashire Ambulance some time ago wishing to join the local first responder scheme. However, they wished to be mobilised as a crew rather than individually. Unfortunately, Lancashire Ambulance were unhappy with this arrangement. It is their opinion that mobilising a fire engine that will be delayed for 5 minutes while the crew assembles does little to meet the 8-minute attendance time. In addition, the crew may actually pass the location of the emergency on the way to the station.

In 2003 the Chief Fire Officer wrote to Mr David Hill, Chief Executive of Lancashire Ambulance, detailing the various initiatives nationally towards co responding schemes. Copies of our IRMP documents were also supplied.

Mr Hill replied in September last year. He stated clearly that he had no plans to enter into a co-responder agreement with Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service. He cites as his reasons the extent and spread of first responder schemes across the county, together with level of performance achieved against the 8-minute attendance target for cardiac emergencies.

Lancashire Ambulance Service had at that time a total of 740 trained first responders available.

Mr Hill later confirmed this position in his response to consultation on our Year 1 IRMP Action Plan.

It should be added that these exchanges have not been wasted. Our two services are consulting ever more closely on ways to improve our co-operation at incidents in which members of the public are injured.

Conclusion

LFRS have actively considered undertaking co responding in Lancashire with the aim of maximising available help to the public. In the opinion of Lancashire Ambulance Service such support is not required at this time. Given these circumstances there is no benefit in pursuing a course of action requiring capital and training expenditure.

Experience with recruitment and retention of Retained Firefighters gives LFRS a clear understanding of the problems of maintaining the motivation and availability of community based volunteers. LFRS maintains a close working relationship with Lancashire Ambulance Service and this can be used as a forum to communicate any changes to the ambulance service's approach. Should this occur, LFRS will respond positively to changes in expectation with future strategy being amended accordingly

Consultation

It is proposed that a consultation exercise takes place with the Fire Brigades Union and relevant external stakeholders, with the consultation period ending 31 December 2004.

Decision Required

The Committee is asked to:

- note the report; and
- approve the consultation arrangements.

Background Papers

The following background papers (as defined in section 100 D (5) of the Local Government Act 1972 and amended by the Local Government Act 2000 – Commencement No 1 Order) have been relied on to a material extent in preparing this report.

- Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service Integrated Risk Management Plan 2004/09 Year One.
- Fire and Rescue Service National Framework 2004/05.

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