

## CHESHIRE FIRE AUTHORITY

**ITEM: 4**

**MEETING OF** : FIRE AUTHORITY  
**DATE** : 12<sup>th</sup> FEBRUARY 2014  
**REPORT OF** : DEPUTY CHIEF FIRE OFFICER  
**AUTHOR** : MARK SHONE/ANDREW LEADBETTER

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**SUBJECT** : LYMM SAFETY CENTRE

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### **Purpose of report**

1. This report provides details of the proposal to build a safety centre at Lymm. It complements the business case that is attached to this report with a view to allowing Members to fully consider the proposal and make a decision about whether to proceed with building and running a safety centre at Lymm.
2. It also includes and/or signposts Members to the additional information which they requested at their Planning Day on 17<sup>th</sup> January 2014. In doing so, this should enable Members (should they wish to proceed) to determine key elements such as the design of the centre and the groups which might benefit from visiting it.

### **Recommended:** That Members confirm that:

- [1] They are satisfied that the business case attached as an Appendix 1 to this report is sufficiently developed and robust to enable them to make a decision;
- [2] They wish to proceed with the development and running of a safety centre at Lymm;
- [3] Whilst authorising officers to pursue planning permission for the combined operational hub and safety centre, they expect officers to robustly challenge the approach to the development of the building in order to secure value for money;
- [4] In principle they wish to see further work in relation to extending the safety centre's education provision to benefit older people and other vulnerable groups;
- [5] They wish officers to explore all avenues for funding (both capital and revenue) for the safety centre, including the potential of setting up a separate legal entity to own and run the undertaking.

## Background

3. Members have received information about the proposal to build and run a safety centre at planning days in September and November 2013 and January 2014. Presentations included information about the cost and impact of accidents to children and older people and how safety centres in other parts of the country have been developed in response.
4. On January 7<sup>th</sup> 2014 a group of Members and officers also visited SkillZONE, managed by Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service, to see for themselves how a safety centre operates in practice.
5. The draft Integrated Risk Management Plan for 2014-15 (IRMP11) included the following wording:

*“The Authority is also carrying out a feasibility study over the potential of establishing Cheshire’s own dedicated Safety Centre for young people...”*

In the summary the draft IRMP11 refers to the safety centre being sited at Lymm and the question that was asked during public, staff and stakeholder consultation was:

*Young People’s Safety Centre*

*Do you support plans for the Fire Authority to build a new interactive Safety Centre in Cheshire specifically for young people?*

6. Members received a report on 17<sup>th</sup> April 2013 about a number of sites required to deliver the outcomes of the emergency response review. They agreed to the purchase of a piece of land at Lymm for an operational response hub. The site was sufficiently large to accommodate a safety centre. When the idea was presented to Members they seemed keen to explore the possibility of including the safety centre in the planning application at Lymm, hence the change of emphasis of the consultation.
7. Members received a report on 18<sup>th</sup> September 2013 which included advice from planning consultants that have been retained to work on the planning applications for all of the sites that are required in order to deliver the outcomes of the emergency response review. Their advice was that a safety centre could be included in the planning application for Lymm without compromising its prospects of success. Members agreed the principle of including the safety centre within the planning application for the Lymm site. However, until a firm decision has been made this cannot be progressed further at this stage.

## Information

8. Members are asked to consider the business case, which has been refined since they last had access to it last month at the Member Planning Day. It is attached to this report as Appendix 1.

9. The following information seeks to summarise some key issues that have been raised during the consultation and/or by Members.

10. **IRMP feedback**

Members are reminded that they should take into account the IRMP11 feedback contained in the report elsewhere on the agenda insofar as it relates to the safety centre. They will see that in general terms external support for the safety centre was significantly greater than the opposition, whilst there was slightly more opposition than support from staff.

Comments urged caution about, and/or questioned the logic of, pursuing a safety centre at a time when firefighter numbers were being reduced. Timing is an issue that will be returned to later in the report.

11. **Member questions**

Members asked a number of questions during the Member Planning Day last month. Some of the issues were covered in the business case already, but it is acknowledged that Members may not have had time to review it fully. In any event some of the questions have led to parts of the business case being developed further. The following paragraphs attempt to summarise the issues raised.

11a. *Location – travel times*

The information on page 9 of the Business Case plots travel times from schools in the boroughs of Cheshire East, Cheshire West and Chester, Halton and Warrington. A total of 98.9% of primary schools and 98.3% of secondary schools in the Service area are within an hour's travelling time of the proposed safety centre site. These figures are based on travel being at 70% of the speed limit, bearing in mind bus or coach will be the preferred mode of transport. The travel times should be achievable given that the trips will be made outside the rush hour.

As the site is near to three major motorways it is also fair to assume that access to the centre from places outside Cheshire is also favourable.

11b. *Usage of Existing Safety Centres – sustainability of concept*

Pages 6-7 of the Business Case includes details of responses from a July 2013 survey of primary schools. It also includes a table of visitor numbers (with trends) from the existing safety centres. The business case concludes that all but three of the safety centres are showing an increase in visitor numbers or stable visitor demand. Three safety centres are showing relatively small decreases in visitor demand and cite issues about reductions in subsidy as the most significant contributor to the decline.

Currently, all of the safety centres are set up to deal with children as the core visitor group. The safety centre could be marketed to all primary and

secondary schools. However, some existing centres have admitted that this might be too narrow a focus and there appears to be the potential to include an element or elements within the centre that might benefit older people or other vulnerable people through engagement with their carers about safety issues affecting older vulnerable people.

11c. *Effectiveness*

Pages 4-6 of the Business Case includes a section which covers this issue. There is a body of evidence which supports the concept and approach of immersive learning – the kind of environment that would be created within the safety centre.

*According to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (in its report 'Delivering Accident Prevention at a local level in the new public health system'): "Learning about safety by experiencing risk through practical, interactive scenarios teaches children aged 9 to 11 how to deal with hazards in a positive and practical way. 'Learning by doing' benefits children hugely throughout life as it teaches them to assess risk and become more independent and enjoy activities."*

At this time there is only one, relatively old, study that looks at the effectiveness of safety centres. While this was compelling in proving children were more likely to retain information about risk following a visit, RoSPA acknowledges there is nothing newer looking at the safety centres that have been developed more recently and is currently working with a university partner on an up to date evaluation. Notwithstanding this officers feel that Members can take some confidence that the safety centre concept will be effective as the kind of inputs that will take place within the centre have largely been the subject of separate studies which have confirmed their effectiveness. Officers believe that there is little doubt about the effectiveness of these individual interventions. The safety centre would draw together and reinforce the safety messages into a coherent narrative.

11d. *Timing*

This issue was raised by Members and has also been alluded to in the IRMP feedback – i.e. spending money on a safety centre when reducing firefighter numbers and continuing to focus on core business and not discretionary matters.

It is fair to say that officers have attempted to bring this proposal forward quickly. The intention was simply to carry out a feasibility study during the next IRMP period (2014-15). However, as there was land available which could accommodate both the operational response hub required at Lymm and a safety centre it seemed like too good an opportunity to ignore. This could also help to safeguard and open up further opportunities for capital and potentially other funding which may not be available in the medium term. Securing a separate site and building a separate building appears likely to prove more expensive than incorporating the safety centre into the plans for a new fire station (operational hub) at Lymm.

There is a sense that if the safety centre is not pursued now the chance of the proposal being resurrected in the future seems slim given the state of public finances.

## **Other issues**

### **12. Design**

The costs associated with the safety centre have been calculated by retained experts but can only be indicative until there is a firm tender accepted by the Authority. However, the costs are predicated on the erection of a building that will be quite different to the other safety centres and which will be likely to cost significantly more than a traditional building. The design aims to promote a flow to the experience of 'travelling' around the safety centre. Currently, the intention is to achieve this by building a curved (essentially round) building.

Given that there is such a challenging financial picture, officers felt that it was important to share with Members the extra cost and 'justification' for the extra cost of building a non-traditional structure ( a round building) to house the safety centre. Advice was obtained from three of our retained experts: architects, planning consultants and quantity surveyors in relation to this issue.

The quantity surveyors have indicated that they estimate that the additional cost could be as low as 8 per cent more than a traditional build. However, 8 per cent equates to around £467,000.

The architects have provided a commentary, an extract of which appears as Appendix 2 to the report.

The planning consultants have been involved in initial discussions with the planners as part of the pre-planning process. Whilst the round building appears to have been viewed favourably initially, the planning consultants state:

'...the shape of the building is not a key issue for planning, it is the way in which the impact on the openness of the Green Belt can be minimised through the design and siting of the building and the landscape strategy.'

### **13. Costs**

The business case includes appendices that provide indicative figures relating to the capital and revenue costs associated with a safety centre of the kind that is being considered (albeit some costs are not certain, e.g. fit out costs).

Officers do not wish to promise to deliver income for the safety centre; although the existing safety centres have managed this with varying degrees of success. It is believed that only one of the existing safety centres has managed to break even but given comments about school funding and the

information on page 15 of the Business Case about funding opportunities, nothing should be taken for granted. However, that is not to say that income opportunities wouldn't be fully explored.

## **Legal implications**

14. The proposal relates to activities that do not fall within the Authority's statutory duties. Essentially, the Authority will be embarking on a project that will involve the delivery of discretionary activities. However, key elements of the Service's successful prevention strategy and initiatives over recent years have strayed into discretionary areas. The Authority has broad powers in Section 5 of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 and the effective delivery of the kind of interventions that are proposed for inclusion in the safety centre should have a positive impact upon the Authority as the demand for response activity should reduce.
15. The right approach to procurement and contracting should help the Authority to contain costs and secure the quality that will be required. Marketing activity may secure income that will need to be protected as far as possible by robust legal agreements.
16. The formation of a separate legal entity will need to be explored. There will be pros and cons of the different structures and Members will need to understand the options open to them and the governance that will be in place to protect the Authority's interests.

## **Financial implications**

17. The Business Case for the Safety Centre presented at the Members Planning day on 17 January 2014 showed an indicative revenue budget of £550k per annum, including an estimate of £200k per annum for capital charges. The detail of the revenue budget is shown in last page of the business case attached, with a slight change to allow for an increased estimate in travel costs of £4.5k. Whilst every effort will be made to ensure that the revenue budget does not significantly alter, it will be kept under review and any significant changes will be reported to Members.
18. The latest estimate of capital costs for the Safety Centre is £3.895m, based on the Safety Centre being developed as part of the Lymm site.
19. Members will note that there is no inclusion of any revenue income or specific capital funding included in the estimates. As Members have pointed out, there may well be opportunities to generate revenue income at the Centre from selling a range of activities, utilising sponsorship, etc. Every effort will be made to maximise these opportunities.
20. Similarly the Authority will seek to identify opportunities for capital funding both from grant giving bodies and from partners who will benefit from the activities of the Centre, or who may wish to develop activities within the Centre.

21. However, officers do not feel able to promise to deliver income, although the existing safety centres have managed this with varying degrees of success. It is believed that only one of the existing safety centres has managed to break even, but given comments about school funding and the information on P15 of the Business Case about funding opportunities, nothing should be taken for granted.

## **Risks**

22. The Business Case lists risks and assumptions around the proposal for a safety centre on pages 16-17.

## **Conclusion**

23. Building a safety centre at a time when the public funding situation is so challenging is a bold step.