

**Using an evidence based approach,  
how do we fully embed the strategic  
business partner model in West  
Midlands Fire Service in readiness for  
the challenges that face the  
organisation over the next 3 years?**

**Aspire (Cohort 2) Business Partnering Programme**

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# Executive Summary

## About this Report

The origin of this report stems from the desire to fully embed the Strategic HR Business Partner Model in West Midlands Fire Service. Whilst the Service has indicated that the HR Business Partner model is the right approach for the Service, it is evident that there is a difference of view across the organisation as to what this really means.

Historically our HR activity has been very administrative in focus, with only the Head of HR making decisions about people management issues. Due to the nature of our Service, our managers have developed their skills with regard to Command and Control on the incident ground; skills that have encroached on the way in which some of our managers approach people management in other situations. Following several reviews, both externally and internally, we have seen a shift in our approach to people management.

The report finds however, that HR still struggle to move forward at a local and strategic level. We remain the 'go to people' but this is still often when things have gone wrong and when it's too late. HR is not able to influence the strategic debate in a cohesive and consistent way and our managers do not always consider HR as a strategic partner.

This report provides an analysis of research carried out to consider the approach to Human Resource Management in West Midlands Fire Service. It considers the journey of the HR teams over recent years, identifying where we have come from, where we are now, and what the future organisational requirements are in order for HR to fully influence the strategic direction of the organisation.

## The Current Situation

Our approach to collecting evidence to support our transition to effective business partnering has taken a variety of forms. It was important to gather a range of both internal and external views so we firstly turned to our workforce and in particular our middle managers. We used questionnaires and engaged with a group of university students to gather further evidence and opinion. Our aim was firstly to understand existing views on the service that our HR teams provide. These were followed up by a series of workshops which enabled us to drill down further and explore the range of views that currently exist.

It became apparent that whilst our managers clearly understand what they want from HR, the view is still very much about providing a service that involves transactional support and in some cases HR dealing with all people related decisions thus removing this 'burden' from them. What was also clear was that our managers do not fully understand the range of support that our HR teams are able to provide.

Evidence gathered during promotional selection processes also demonstrates poor people management skills and a workforce that has a command and control approach rather than people centric. Case management including disciplinary investigations and employment tribunals also clearly shows that poor people based decisions are impacting on our ability to meet organisational people objectives, addressing this is key in any new model we consider.

External evidence collection gave us the opportunity to explore the wider HR context and how this is applied in other organisations. Discussion with Leading HR professionals including Angela O'Connor from the HR Lounge, Sue Evans of Warwickshire County Council

and Melanie Dudley of Sandwell Council gave an overriding view that Business Partners need to be more 'business savvy', to understand the business needs of the organisation and put in place solutions to meet these objectives. Business partners need to understand what keeps the CEO 'awake at night' and what they can do to demonstrate the added value that the business partner can make to the bottom line.

### **Challenges Facing the WMFS and HR**

There will be number key challenges facing the Fire Service over the next three years, these being both internal and external. There will be significant reductions to the funding of the Service and this will bring about a number of changes. Creating a culture where change is more readily accepted by employees will be a key challenge for managers. Changing the culture and refocusing the roles of supervisory management will be a focus for our HR teams. Other challenges will be around the retention, progression and diversity of the workforce as we reduce recruitment opportunities. A challenge for the HR team will be to refocus and align people strategy more directly with strategic priorities and ensure that we have a strategic influence and build credibility. The overall challenge will be about supporting the maintenance of the Service Delivery Model with a reducing number of employees and ensuring we have the right people in the right place at the right time.

Behaviours and competencies aligned to the Business Partner role are key. Competency, Confidence and Capability are key attributes along with an approach of 'diagnose, design and deliver' when working with managers.

HR analytics need to feature heavily - knowing our performance against key performance indicators provide the opportunity to demonstrate how we add value to the organisation.

The ability of Business Partners to adopt a coaching style is crucial; making a clear move away from offering a solution based approach to one of providing a range of people options and outcomes for managers to consider when making business decisions.

### **Conclusions**

- In supporting the Strategic direction of the Service and the outcomes identified in our corporate strategy, our HR teams need to provide an optimum service to support the delivery of our strategic objectives to the local community and the needs of the Business and embed HR as an 'Enabler' for our managers.
- Prevention, Protection and Response remain the key objectives and from a Human Resource perspective, it is essential that all activity is aligned to these outcomes. In achieving this, the development of our managers and teams to deliver our people objectives continues to be a priority.
- Making the transition to a Business Partner model that is effective and business driven provides a significant challenge. Our existing structure does not effectively support a business focussed service and while we are making a slow transition from a transactional to transformational approach we need to consider how we change

the mind set of our teams and the structure of our approach to meet these challenges.

- Our business partners need to be agile to change and to changing behaviours, we need a 'sleeves up' approach to the way that we work with managers in aligning more closely to business strategy and using HR Analytics to drive the objectives of People Support Services and demonstrate the business value that we add.
- Becoming more Business Savvy will ensure greater influence at strategic level, adding greater influence to the debate, providing business focussed solutions and ensuring that People Support is the 'first name on the team sheet' when it comes to business related projects and the formation of business strategy.

### **Embedding the Business Partner Approach**

Driving the performance of West Midlands Fire Service and responding to changes in the VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) environment is key to ensuring that the business partner model is effectively embedded within the strategic core of the service.

Aligning HR operations and structure to the business and making it accountable to senior leaders will require restructure and re-alignment of responsibilities with a focus of HR specialisms as well as generalist skills with a focus on effectiveness and outcomes, not just efficiency.

Meeting the critical need for HR to be educating itself and our managers through effective Learning and organisational development tools and strategies and through targeted professional and personal development. Taking advantage of a range of innovative learning tools and methods which are effectively coordinated and shared across the service to transform culture and embed desired behaviours

Ensuring that people management processes support new priorities for organisational development at WMFS and are effectively aligned to the organisational objectives.

Removal of transactional activity to maximise business focus. Supporting and coaching managers to be more confident and effective in people related decisions and more open in recognising decisions that have direct people impact.

We need to ensure that HR resources are effectively distributed across the service and across all 38 stations, so that HR advice is readily available. Our Business partners need to be more visible at all levels of the service and remove the 'something must have gone wrong' view that many of our employees have when they see a member of the HR team. We need to embed our Business Partners into the areas for which they are accountable whilst maintaining their connections with each other and the core of People Support Services.

At strategic level we must ensure a lead figure who is 'laser-focused' on the business and on delivering objectives against business outcomes, a visionary with strategic impact, focussing on how HR solve local business problems rather than just providing a service which is only available upon request.