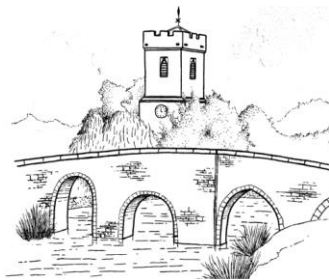


**BIDFORD ON AVON PARISH COUNCIL  
In the County of Warwickshire**



**RESPONSE TO WFRS RESOURCE TO RISK PROPOSAL 2a**

**March 2024**

*Copies to:*

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## Bidford Parish Council Response to WFRS Resource to Risk proposal 2a

### Contents:

1. Summary
2. Introduction
3. Sources
4. WFRS Challenges
5. Bidford Parish Council Priorities
6. Our concerns

Acknowledgements

Appendix: Comments from Bidford Residents

### **1. Summary:**

- Bidford Parish Council acknowledges the need for change but is opposed to proposal 2a as it stands now. We believe life and property in South Warwickshire will be put at high risk, particularly overnight.
- We believe there are solutions that will recognise the need for resources to be concentrated where they are needed most without leaving the rural south paying a heavy price in order to achieve better “average” statistics across the county.
- Our residents have expressed deep concern about the loss of an active fire engine in Bidford and particularly overnight when the village knows it currently has good availability of on-call firefighters. The overheads to maintain the fire engine will continue for very little purpose.
- We believe that there are alternative solutions which recognise the ability of fire stations to be crewed up and ready for action at speed under a system of **guaranteed** rota shifts (e.g. “Grade1 surge”, “super-surge”, “surge+”) – which could take the place of the current system of on-call shifts.
- We believe that fire stations could be more closely linked, with firefighters from nearby stations pooling together to cover their stations between them (e.g. Alcester and Bidford firefighters and appliances working more closely together, or Southam and Fenny Compton for example ). Fire stations kept active in that way would be constantly geared up to be called out at speed to support the rural areas of South West Warwickshire overnight, particularly in the case of multiple incidents.
- In its position on the other end of the Avon from Rugby, Bidford would make an ideal location for a specialist station for equipment such as drones, boat and bowser.
- We don’t believe the admirable overall increase of 13.2% of time spent on Protection and Prevention activity will outweigh the loss of live-saving cover for our residents.
- There are clearly HR issues involved in any of the changes and suggestions that have been made. WE make no comment on these as they are issues for local and national negotiation.

## 2. Introduction:

Bidford Parish Council acknowledges the challenges facing Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service in trying to reduce overall Fire and Safety risk within the financial constraints it carries. We understand that change is necessary to improve the service. and that the proposals provide an additional 13.2% of hours of Protection and Protection work to be carried out during the day and evenings.

However, the Parish Council is extremely concerned that severely reduced fire appliance cover will put the safety of people in Bidford and the rest of the South of the county at serious risk, especially overnight. Bidford has grown by almost 1,000 new homes in the last few years, and is now the size of Alcester. Road traffic accidents, and the charging of electric cars, bikes and scooters are adding more risk.

As a Parish Council we are not attempting to produce an alternative proposal. Our mission is to address the concerns of our residents and suggest ways in which the WFRS and WCC might think differently to avoid leaving us more vulnerable than we are at present.

## 3. Sources:

### **We have drawn our information from:**

- A special Bidford meeting organised for residents with the senior leaders of Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service (WFRS) and of Warwickshire County Council (WCC), including Chief Fire Officer, Ben Brook, WCC leader Councillor Izzy Seccombe and WCC Portfolio holder Councillor Andy Crump.
- Conversations and feedback from Bidford residents, adhoc and by e-mail as well as during organised PC surgeries.
- WCC Cabinet meetings (in person and online) where we have listened and put our case about Bidford's vulnerability.
- Numerous information sessions with WFRS across the south of the county
- Recordings of Stratford District Council and WCC meetings, relevant to the WFRS proposals
- FRSA union material and podcast.
- Direct conversations with senior WFRS officers, past and present
- Direct conversations with firefighters, past and present from fire stations across South Warwickshire, particularly Bidford.

## 4. WFRS challenges:

1. Currently the least number of engines are available between 8am – 10pm
2. Low on-call availability – 90% five years ago to 40% on average now. Most availability is at night. Turnout is **not guaranteed**.
3. Response times need to improve. The target has been to reach an incident in 10 minutes on 75% of occasions. This hasn't been achieved in the last 5 years.
4. Shift systems need to change – some are not legal (nationally) and open to challenge.

## 5. Bidford Parish Council's Priorities:

- For residents to feel safe and BE safe. The proposals leave us vulnerable, especially at night, and we need to do all we can to save (and ideally improve) Bidford's fire and safety cover, whatever that entails.
- To keep Bidford Fire Station active.
- Not to lose our loyal on-call firefighters.

## 6. Our Concerns:

### 6.1 Averages don't work:

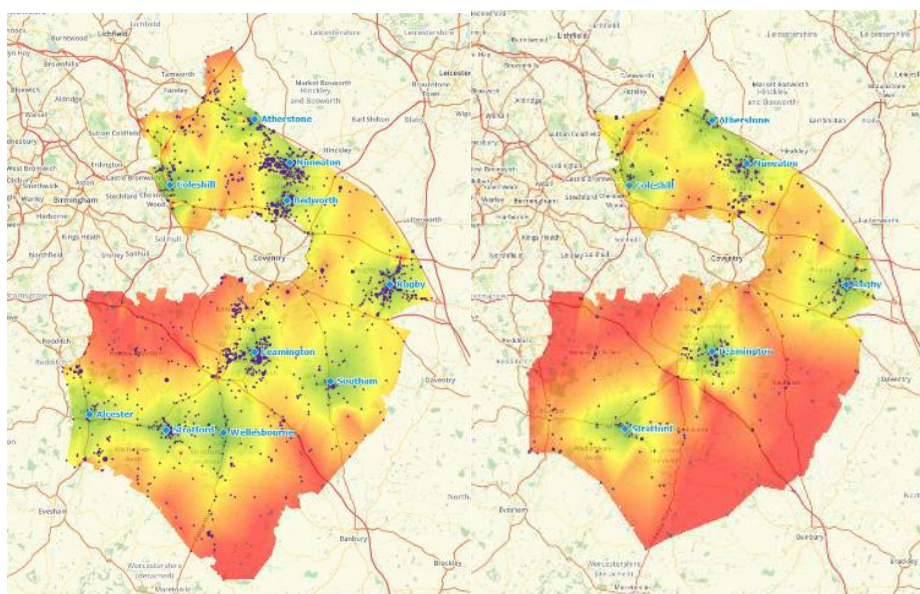
We're told the proposals are based on a desk modelling exercise carried out by an external company with a great deal of UK and international experience. It calculates that the **AVERAGE response time across the county for a 1<sup>st</sup> appliance will improve by 17 seconds**. However, South Warwickshire's response times suffer very badly under this model because of the particular challenges of a mixed environment.

The modelling averages the needs across an **urban north** and a **rural south**, which produces figures that don't recognise the very different needs. It results in most of the resources being concentrated in the urban areas in the north (which are closely packed together) as this is the easiest way to improve the average figures – whilst leaving the south barely covered overnight. The overnight heat map of response times shows clearly that the highest risk areas are all in the South where response times to the furthest parts of the county can be up to **24 minutes**. Because incident numbers are lower in the south doesn't mean people don't die in the south.

The heatmaps below show response times across Warwickshire. With the red colouring showing response times over 20 minutes it's clear that the South of the county is very vulnerable – especially so at night.

Day

Night



## 6.2 Reduction in Appliances available in Stratford District both day and night:

Whilst we understand that the WFRS is looking for more availability in the busy hours from 8am to 10pm this mustn't mean big sacrifices in both day and night cover for rural areas across South Warwickshire in order to provide optimal cover 24 hours a day in the north.

In the South of the county the proposal provides an increase of 1 whole time appliance during the daytime and evening but at the cost of **a complete loss of all on-call stations – including overnight**, when availability would naturally be highest.

For all of Stratford District the nearest appliance at night would be 1 fire engine in Stratford itself, covering the whole of the huge district. This would be backed up by engines as far away as Leamington and possibly Rugby.

### Currently in Stratford District there are:

- 24 hour: **2 full-time manned** appliances. **1** at Alcester and **1** at Stratford on Avon.
- Daytime only: **1 full-time manned** appliance at Gaydon
- 24 hour : **7 on-call appliances** at Stratford, Bidford, Henley, Wellesbourne, Fenny Compton, Shipston and Southam. Availability is very variable but highest at night, particularly at Bidford, Wellesbourne, Southam and Henley.

### Under proposal 2a

- 8am - 10pm **4 manned appliances** at Alcester, Wellesbourne, Southam and Stratford but **no on call support**.
- 10pm - 8 am **1 manned appliance at Stratford covering the whole district**: with **no on-call support**, just surge stations with call-out times of up to 2 hours.

### The effect on attendance times – P1 and P2 incidents:

According to the data modelling average attendance times for Stratford District are considerably **worse** under these proposals:

**P1** incidents pose an immediate threat to human life

**P2** incidents pose a serious hazard and high risk threat to human life.

P1 & P2 Incidents – Average First Attendance (mins: secs)

Area	Current	Option 2a
Service Wide	10:37	10:20
Stratford	11:45	<b>13:49</b>

P1 & P2 Incidents – Average Second Attendance (mins: secs)

Area	Current	Option 2a
Service Wide	14:16	14:28
Stratford	16:53	<b>20:15</b>

## 6.3 Empty stations – wasted resources:

Under the proposals, all the current fire appliances will need to be maintained to the same level - even ones that will hardly ever be used. This would be a huge waste of a

resource when they could continue to be put to good use if only there were **guaranteed teams** available to be called out to run them.

With the proposals, 5 Fire stations across South Warwickshire would become full-time surge stations only, and a total of 8 would only be surge stations overnight, unmanned and unable to respond quickly to emergencies. Firefighters would only be called up to support major incidents, or expected events (floods/heat waves etc.) with a target response time of up to 2hrs. Bidford would have an appliance and other equipment lying unused for the vast majority of the time, effectively mothballed.

#### **6.4 Availability:**

Average availability for on-call firefighters across the county is currently quoted as 40% (Feb 2024). This doesn't describe the situation and covers huge variations from station to station and between day and night. For example there are stations that have less than 10% availability at times, others (including Bidford) can have as much as 90% overnight. Every station has better on-call support overnight when firefighters are at home. We acknowledge that the peak time for incidents is during the day and the evening. But this mustn't mean **abandoning cover altogether** overnight.

#### **6.5 Overnight added vulnerability:**

If 68% of fatalities occur between 8am and 10pm that means **32% of fatalities happen overnight**. Overnight incidents, such as house fires, are acknowledged as being more dangerous, where fires have often taken hold before the fire service is alerted as occupants may be asleep when they start. Potentially fatal road traffic accidents can also be more prevalent at night, as well as electrical fires from electric cars, bikes and scooters being charged at home.

#### **6.6 Two grades of "Surge Station"?**

Under the 2a proposals, Alcester would be a full-time station between 8am and 10pm and becomes a surge station overnight (i.e. only available with a long response time when it is triggered by a major incident). Bidford would be a surge station at all times.

If Bidford, were to become a **guaranteed on-call station** overnight (or call it a "Grade 1 Surge Station") it would always have at least 4 committed firefighters on standby at home ready to be called out. Then Alcester and Bidford between them would provide an alert and responsive facility for the south east of Warwickshire 24 hours a day. This would mean a second responsive engine overnight for Stratford District. Other parts of the County could follow the same pattern. The pool of Grade 1 Surge firefighters might not even all live in Bidford --- Alcester is near enough for firefighters in the two villages to make themselves available on the rota for either fire station. If there was an incident with a second engine needed in South Warwickshire, **both Alcester and Bidford** would be all set up and in a position to respond quickly to callouts.

Grade 1 Surge firefighters could come from anywhere in the county to be rota'ed to cover any surge station for particular response times from 10mins to 30mins, 1hr or 2hrs.

#### **6.8 Specialisms – Boats, Drones, Bowsers etc. :**

Rugby has the only boat station in the county – it's at the far end of the Avon from Bidford. With floods becoming more common and higher and more dangerous it would

make sense to have a boat station in Bidford where the Avon floods are particularly bad. This would tie in well with it being a drone station, so that rescues can be carried out for people who are stranded in flood water. Bidford, being surrounded by farmland, is also very well placed to store bowsers and other equipment useful for agricultural incidents.

#### **6.9 Road Traffic Collisions:**

Bidford is well placed to respond quickly to road traffic accidents, particularly on the A46 which wraps round the north and west of the village and which has a high level of incidents.

#### **6.10 County Boundaries:**

We cannot rely on support from fire stations in other counties such as Hereford and Worcester, Gloucestershire, West Midlands and Oxford which are carrying out their own reviews at the moment and are reducing their own capacity.

#### **6.11 Training and Part-time:**

There is concern that taking part in 1 drill night a week is not adequate to ensure sufficient training. If 2 nights a week is needed this would mean the station being manned during those hours and the firefighters could additionally be on rota to guarantee to be available for shifts where they are based at home.

#### **6.12 Recruitment and Retention:**

Councillor Andy Crump told the special Parish Council meeting that if Fire Stations had the 80%+ availability of the 2010s there would be no need for change. We understand that working patterns and communities have changed since then. But instead of just getting rid of all on-call stations they could be improved and future-proofed with new contracts, recruitment and retention of firefighters. New "Grade 1 Surge" shifts with guaranteed availability could be established in places, like Bidford, where there is currently a strong pool of on-call teams.

#### **6.13 Proposal from Julian Benz – Commitment to On-call**

Julian Benz's proposal for change was well received by the Parish Council. Whilst we are not experts in the details, we are largely in support of the principles such as Contracted Night shifts from home, (similar to the Grade 1 Surge mentioned above), with maximum turnout times of 30min/1hr/2hrs right down to a minimum of 5 minutes if a full crew can provide quicker cover.

It largely satisfies our priorities of:

- Improved cover for Bidford, especially overnight
- Keeping Bidford Fire Station active
- Keeping our loyal on-call firefighters involved

#### ***Acknowledgements:***

*We would like to thank the many residents, firefighters, officers and others who have contributed their knowledge and concerns in particular Ben Brook, Lee Tresigne and George Johnson for the time and effort they have put into sharing information with us and our residents, and to Julian Benz for generously sharing his ideas.*

#### **APPENDIX: A FEW OF THE COMMENTS FROM BIDFORD ON AVON RESIDENTS:**

**The residents who have been in touch with us have all expressed worries about their vulnerability at night and grave concern about the lack of an active fire engine in the village.**

1. It is very important to keep the Fire Station open and working. It covers a large area, and it has been good to know the brave fire fighters are there to help in an emergency. It would be a travesty if it were to close.
2. An example of the need for local knowledge: There was an Incident with car stuck in floods beside Barton Marina. An appliance came from Alcester but couldn't cross Bidford bridge due to intense flooding. The Stratford crew came out, had to turn back due to flooded roads and take a wider route to get to Barton Marina travelling back via B439 to Stratford. Couldn't cross at Welford due to bridge repairs/reconstruction.
3. Surge teams may not be adequate cover. We need a 1st appliance as quick as poss. Followed by the 2nd appliance asap.
4. We have been here before. I recall that we made a great play on the fact of Bidford having a boat section (does it now?) which was able to get onto the River Avon much quicker than sending a boat by road from Stratford to Bidford to launch here. If there is a boat section, the point needs to be made again.
5. If 2 engines are required for a house fire, where will the resources come from for farm or crop fire or an industrial unit? This is a rural community and if there are no on-call firefighters available in Bidford, what use is mutual aid from Worcestershire if they are in the same position.
6. A surge station will only be of use if there are retained firefighters based there. The idea of mustering 4 times in 5 years shows that the architect of this proposal has never had to train to meet both a level of fitness and of expertise leading to the fire service equivalent of the Home Guard (no disrespect to that body) being pensioned off personnel who once had the ability to undertake the requirements of the service but are rusty and unfamiliar with the equipment before them.
7. More resources may be necessary in the urban areas but pruning one layer of management should deliver this allowing for extra engines if there are currently sufficient station accommodation for them, whilst at the same time, ensuring that the level of safety net provided in the rural areas at night is available. This is where the retained firefighter system is most efficient - available when needed but not idle at cost when not.
8. Firefighters used to have to commit to shifts on a board. If there weren't enough signed up for a shift the boss would ring round and get commitments to fill the shift rota. When firefighters were ill etc. they kept in touch with to see how they were. There was a responsibility to your colleagues not to let them down, and the managers made sure the team were ok and the shifts were covered.



9. This consultation and its proposals seem just to be VANDALISM because the FBU demanded that their members be recognised for the dirty and dangerous work that they do, to keep the rest of us safe.
10. I have suggested that they try harder to get volunteers for the on call firefighters vacancies. However they seem determined to get rid of this system and I got the impression from the meeting at the Parish Council office that they won't change their minds.
11. Second suggestion was as they are going to recruit part time firefighters why not man Bidford on a part time basis. This would give cover for the latter part of rush hour for RTC's and give fire cover for evening meal time for local homes.
12. Also as they were going to ramp up fire safety they would be able to visit homes while people were at home in the early evening to give advice and check smoke alarms etc. It would also mean the fire appliance and the station building would have regular use to keep them serviceable
13. The current fire service provision should remain. Cover from Stratford or Alcester is insufficient.
14. Why isn't a levy charged to insurance companies to be paid direct to the Fire Service. When resources are low and fires aren't put out quickly insurance companies have to pay out – which we all then pay for. Why not charge them to enable better resources?
15. I don't trust the response times. As a former policeman I know how long it takes to get from place to place on a blue light.