

**Regulatory Committee response**  
**Lea Marston: Fire Training Facility**  
**Meeting 2<sup>nd</sup> February**

**Introduction**

There is a statutory responsibility placed upon all Fire and Rescue Services under the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, and the National Framework for Fire and Rescue Services, to have a competent and well-trained workforce in order to deliver effective and efficient fire service activities.

Since 2013 Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service (WFRS) has been seeking to provide an in-house Breathing Apparatus (BA) and hot fire training facility in order to be confident of maintaining a competent workforce. Risk and vulnerability is continually changing and evolving within our communities and the type and range of incidents being attended by the Fire and Rescue service is expanding. Whilst more traditional activities such as building fires are reducing, the complexity of them is increasing as a consequence of the drive to make buildings more energy efficient, Grenfell Tower is, sadly, an extreme example of this phenomenon. Fire related incidents remain a wholly foreseeable event in Warwickshire and our firefighters, with less building fires occurring, are required to maintain their competencies through ever more realistic training.

This training resource is therefore essential for the safety of our firefighters our communities of Warwickshire.

**Background and History**

The need for better BA and hot fire training for WFRS operational personnel was originally identified as part of the investigation following the loss of four firefighter in a fire in a highly insulated food production facility at Atherstone Upon Stour in 2007. For several years after this WFRS had a mutually advantageous arrangement with the Fire Service College (FSC) to effectively use the FSC as a BA training facility, staffed by WFRS instructors, and with WFRS fire engines and equipment stored on site. Unfortunately, WFRS was unable to retain this arrangement after the FSC was sold to Capita early in 2013 and continued large scale use of the FSC became unviable, both for financial and logistical reasons. From that point onwards WFRS has been seeking to provide a BA and hot fire training which is “in house” or which it at least has an agreed level of access to and control over.

WFRS have been open to, and looked for, any suitable location across Warwickshire on which this training unit could be positioned. Across Warwickshire there are few locations where such a training facility could be positioned, and a full range of options have been explored across the County over the years, both in the north and the south of Warwickshire.

In January 2015 Warwickshire County Council (WCC) Cabinet agreed further exploration of options around two identified sites which appeared promising: Coney Grey Farm on the A423 at Ryton, and Blue Boar Farm on the A45 near Thurlaston. Unfortunately, after pre-planning consultation with officials from Rugby Borough Council, it became apparent that neither of these sites could developed as suitable and effective training facilities and a further search of possible sites was undertaken.

Officers conducted extensive site searches across the WCC's own property portfolio and a network of property agents. In total 34 sites were considered, including 19 sites in Council ownership. Several meetings were held with the owners of Coventry Airport with a view to sharing facilities within the airport curtilage and other sites in the control of the Airport's parent company. A shortlist of seven sites was agreed and from that the site at Hollywell Business Parkin Southam was chosen.

Development of the Southam proposal progressed well. All value engineering had taken place to ensure that the proposal met the budget allocation for the project. This would have included site surveys and some pre works required on site. It was around this time that government frame works and fresh holds changed, meaning we could only engage one company for tender, this being Wilmott Dixons.

In relation to the Design and Access Statement, regarding the cost of implementing versus the available budget. The tender price submitted was £700,000 over the original projections. This, in conjunction with additional costs of around £400,000 for value engineering meant a cumulative increase of £1.1 M, clearly taking the project beyond reasonable adjustment and therefore out of scope to continue and a need to find an alternative site.

An independent review was commissioned and the project to provide BA and hot fire training was redirected towards a collaboration with West Midlands Fire Service (WMFS). The collaboration had several strands but the main initial workstreams were a proposed combination of mobilising services (Fire Control) and development of joint training facilities at an existing WMFS site at Radford Road in Coventry. As a result, the Southam site was deemed no longer necessary, and the site was released for new planning options. This also left WCC with an outstanding contractual liability for the partially built Minerva Unit, a modular BA training facility.

After almost a year of collaborative working a final decision was made that the mobilising project with West Midlands was cost prohibitive and unviable for WFRS. As a result, WFRS having been told that West Midlands Fire Authority viewed the two workstreams as an interdependent package, WMFS withdrew their support for the Radford Road training project.

Whilst development of the Radford Road BA site had been under discussion WFRS had identified a former WCC youth education centre which was vacant and which, with some expansion, would be ideal for classroom based training and other basic, non-BA training. This building is located at Kingsbury, adjacent to the WCC owned Water Park and the Environment Agency at Lea Marston, which was already in use by WFRS for some High-Volume Pump and water training activities.

Once development and use of the Kingsbury site was agreed with WCC discussions began with the EA about further partnership working, initially around water rescue and flood response. These discussions were ongoing as the Radford Road training project came to an end.

With the need for an efficient and effective method of delivering realistic hot fire training, Warwickshire FRS urgently reviewed all options for a training facility within the County. We reviewed the Southam location again, but the site had subsequently been re issued for planning and currently is in line to have industrial units and office space built on the land that was available. We also looked at all land and development opportunities within the Warwickshire property and land portfolio.

Due to already good partnership working with the EA (a fellow Category one responder under the Civil Contingencies Act), we discussed the possibility of our live fire training Minerva Unit being sited on the Lea Marston site, given its close proximity to the Kingsbury site which would allow both theoretical and practical training to be delivered efficiently and effectively.

As we assessed the site further it was felt there were further opportunities to create a swift water training facility and expand the community offer, to provide flood and water safety training to the community. Later in discussion with local stakeholders we also identified opportunities to help maintain the ecological health of the weir, as part of our offer.

No other sites were assessed and suitable or viable and the combined Kingsbury and Lea Marston sites met all of our training requirements and added greater value to the public purse and the local community.

The primary special circumstance for this planning application was the urgent need to provide statutory and vital realistic training. It was felt that the loss of the Southam site and unsuccessful review of other possible sites, coupled with the opportunities and added value of the Kingsbury - Lea Marston site met our criterion and the special circumstances.