

Report to	North Wales Fire and Rescue Fire Authority
Date	16 October 2023
Lead Officer	Stewart Forshaw, Deputy Chief Fire Officer
Contact Officer	Stewart Forshaw, Deputy Chief Fire Officer
Subject	New Training Centre Land Purchase



PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1 This report provides an update to Members on the work undertaken to assess the suitability of identified land in St Asaph, Denbighshire, for the future development of a sustainable training and development centre in North Wales.
- 2 The report also confirms the recommendation for Members to support the land purchase and necessary new mitigation work, now the necessary due diligence has been completed.
- 3 The land purchase is the first step in developing a business case for Members to consider building a new training and development centre in North Wales, to mitigate current and future health and safety concerns regarding the operational and wider organisational training provision in North Wales Fire and Rescue Service (the Service).
- 4 The purchase of this land will not commit North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority (the Authority) to the construction of a new training centre. If this scheme does not progress the land purchase will provide the Authority with a valuable capital asset.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 5 The Authority is committed to the provision of essential operational training to its staff to support service delivery and ensure firefighter safety, in accordance with Health and Safety legislation, the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 and the Fire and Rescue National Framework for Wales 2016.
- 6 The Chief Fire Officer's (the CFO) assessment undertaken during 2021 identified training as a priority area, and Authority approval was given to undertake a full review of operational training and development provision within the Service.

- 7 This has involved a review of current operational training facilities, including those located at Dolgellau, Rhyl, Wrexham, and Deeside fire stations, as well as the Compartment Fire Behaviour Training (CFBT) facilities at Airbus in Broughton. The review has identified that existing training and development facilities fall short of contemporary standards in many areas. Therefore, there is a need to conduct an options appraisal for the future of training and development facilities within the Service. This appraisal will be included in a business case to ensure firefighter operational preparedness and safety for future generations.
- 8 The review of operational training facilities in the Service also supports the findings of the Chief Fire and Rescue Advisor's thematic review of operational training within the Welsh Fire and Rescue Services (October 2022), which recognises the need for significant capital investment required to replicate real-world conditions for firefighters to develop, maintain and refresh their operational skills.
- 9 Following approval by the Authority, on the 17 October 2022 to allocate a budget for the development of a detailed business case for a new training and development centre, a number of options have been explored by the project team.
- 10 This work has included the identification of a suitable parcel of land to locate a new training and development centre in St Asaph, Denbighshire.
- 11 The Authority approved a 6-month exclusivity agreement with the vendor which expired on the 27 September 2023. However due to the site being assessed as suitable following the necessary due diligence, the vendor has agreed to extend the agreement until the conclusion of this Authority meeting.
- 12 The exclusivity agreement has enabled the relevant surveys and suitability assessments to be undertaken on the site, and discussions have also been held with local planning officers prior to the submission of an outline planning application. The outcome of this due diligence supports the recommendation for the Authority to purchase the land.
- 13 A working group consisting of six Authority Members, one from each of the Authority areas, has also been established with the aim to develop and scrutinise plans and business case for a new training and development centre in North Wales. The working group has also visited neighbouring Fire and Rescue Service training and development centres to identify areas of good practice.

- 14 A budget for land purchase has been previously approved by the Authority, with its use conditional to Members approval. The land cost of £2.75m is included in the Authority's budget for 2023/24 and would be funded through external borrowing should Welsh Government assistance not be available. The full annual cost at the current prevailing interest rates would be £150k.

RECOMMENDATION

- 15 It is recommended that Members:
- (i) note the background to review fire and rescue training facilities in North Wales;
 - (ii) note that the current training facility provision is reaching its end of life;
 - (iii) approve the purchase of land in St Asaph, Denbighshire, that has been assessed as being suitable for the construction of a new training and development centre in North Wales;
 - (IV) approve commencement of newt mitigation work to ensure the site is ready for construction from December 2024. This would be subject to Member's scrutiny and approval;

BACKGROUND

- 16 At the meeting of the Fire Authority 20 September 2021 the three main priorities for the Service were identified by the Chief Fire Officer (CFO) in her situational assessment. They included improving availability, improving training and strengthening the corporate structure. Members endorsed these priorities and allocated initial funding to support these areas.
- 17 Training has been reviewed and improved by developing a new training strategy. Funding has been allocated to pay for more trainers and the breathing apparatus training facilities at Dolgellau have had some improvements that support its continued use in the short-term.
- 18 The report presented to the Authority on the 17 October 2022 recommended that an initial budget was allocated to develop the business case for a new training and development centre.
- 19 To assist in the development of the business case the new training centre project team have consulted with staff, building construction professionals, sustainability experts, an architect and members of the new training centre working group. This work has also included the identification of a piece of land assessed as being suitable because of its geographical location, size and ground conditions following the necessary due diligence.

- 20 Local planning officers have also been engaged as part of the process, to provide assurances that the proposal could be supported in principle provided sufficient detail is included in the planning application.

INFORMATION

- 21 During the past decade the Authority will have noted the number of fires and other emergency incidents have reduced significantly. Although this is a success story for the fire prevention work that has taken place in our communities during this time, it has resulted in the risk of firefighters having less exposure to the wide range of hazards and complex situations they are likely to face when attending such incidents.
- 22 Fire contaminants are also a significant health and safety risk for our staff, they are present in the smoke and toxic flammable gases released during fires. Exposure to these contaminants has been linked to cancer and other health conditions in firefighters. The management of fire contaminants must be intrinsic to any new training and development centre design.
- 23 Although interim measures have been put in place, the long-term management of fire contaminants is a health and safety concern for Service staff using the current breathing apparatus training facilities at Dolgellau and Airbus, Broughton.
- 24 Therefore, the Service has undertaken a review of its operational training facilities and as a result it has become apparent that they do not provide the facilities required to train staff operating in a modern-day fire and rescue service for its long-term future.
- 25 Although the fire house training facility at Dolgellau fire station continues to be used for operational training, it requires significant investment to extend its medium-term life span for risk critical breathing apparatus and firefighting tactics training. It cannot be considered as a long-term option for operational training and is therefore a health and safety concern for the future training provision for firefighters in the Service. It is also located in an area of North Wales which is a considerable distance for the majority of our staff to travel and attend breathing apparatus courses.
- 26 The breathing apparatus training facilities at Rhyl, Wrexham and Deeside Fire stations have also been reviewed and have been found to provide adequate 'cold smoke' localised training opportunities for staff, though some minor improvements are required.

- 27 It has also been identified that these facilities are not designed to allow firefighters to train in an environment that exposes them to realistic conditions including heat and smoke, a requirement for all breathing apparatus wearers to act in accordance with National Operational Guidance, Breathing Apparatus Training Specification and Service policy.
- 28 The Service also has CFBT facilities located within the Airbus factory site, Broughton. The site appraisal has identified that there are many shortcomings to the Service relying on the facilities for its primary usage. They include some access issues for staff and maintenance contractors due to site security policy, with limited access to classrooms and welfare facilities.
- 29 It has also been identified that none of the above sites are suitable to meet the long-term welfare and the management of contaminants requirements for our staff when they attend breathing apparatus training courses involving the use of fire, heat and smoke.
- 30 To mitigate these risks, operational training and development for our staff in a realistic and immersive training environment which includes adequate health and safety measures, needs to be at the forefront of our thinking and training and development centre design.
- 31 The full review of our current facilities and an options appraisal for the future provision will be included in a new training centre business case, to be presented at a future Authority meeting following scrutiny by the new training centre working group.
- 32 To support this project, at the meeting of the Authority on the 17 October 2022 the recommendation to allocate an initial budget to the project was approved, which included the option to enter into an exclusivity agreement with a vendor of a suitable site.
- 33 Since that meeting a suitable parcel of land for locating a training and development centre has been identified and following constructive conversations with the land agent and local planning office, the Authority entered into a 6-month exclusivity agreement with the vendor to allow the necessary surveys and land suitability assessments to take place. This agreement does not bind the Authority to the purchase but allows for all due diligence to be undertaken.

- 34 During the past 6 months a working group consisting of Authority Members from each of the Authority areas has been established, to develop and scrutinise ideas for a new training centre in North Wales. This group has met regularly with members of the project team, and has visited other Fire and Rescue Service training and development centres in the United Kingdom.
- 35 The Service has also worked with specialists, who have conducted the relevant land surveys and assessments, supported by dialogue with the Denbighshire County Council planning office to satisfy their requirements prior to the potential submission of a pre-planning application.
- 36 The outcomes from the working group, site surveys and discussions with the local planning office are favourable and support the recommendation to purchase the site in St Asaph, Denbighshire for the future construction of a new fire and rescue service training and development centre in North Wales.
- 37 A revenue budget for the purchase of land valued at £2.75m has been included in the Authority's 2023/24 budget, with its use conditional to Members approval, following the due diligence being completed on the site which has now concluded. The land purchase would be funded through external borrowing at an annual cost of £150k at the current prevailing interest rates. Welsh Government financial support is also being sought although this cannot be confirmed.
- 38 If the land purchase is approved, a business case including an options appraisal, timetable and costs will be developed for Members to review prior to any decision to proceed with the new training centre build programme.
- 39 However, newt mitigation work is required on this site which can only take place during a single period of the year. Therefore, this work will need to proceed from December 2023 up to October 2024 to have the site ready for any potential future development from December 2024.

IMPLICATIONS

Well-being Objectives	This project is aligned to all of the Well-being and Corporate Objectives 2022/23 and will promote firefighter safety, support operational preparedness and ensure sustainability over the longer term
Budget	Members approved the provision budget of £2.75m for land purchase in the 2023/24 budget, funded through borrowing at an annual cost of £150k at the current prevailing interest rates. Welsh Government financial support is also being sought although it cannot be confirmed.
Legal	<p>The Authority has a duty under the Health and Safety legislation to ensure the sufficiency of training of its staff, management of risks such as contaminants.</p> <p>The Authority must also secure the provision of training for personnel in relation to fire-fighting, road traffic collisions and emergencies under the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004. The Authority also needs to ensure a safe and effective response as detailed in the Fire and Rescue National Framework for Wales 2016.</p> <p>The project also addressed the wider legal obligation to reduce carbon emissions.</p>
Staffing	Project team and stakeholders are included in the Project Initiation Document (PID) for approval at Service Leadership Team. The project supports staff health and safety and wellbeing.
Equalities/Human Rights/ Welsh Language	Implications for the protected characteristics are covered within the PID Integrated Impact Assessment.
Risks	All risks are included in the PID risk register.