

Beyond fighting fires

The role of the fire and rescue service
in improving the public's health



Case studies

Foreword

The fire and rescue service is an integral part of keeping our communities safe and secure. Even with greatly reduced financial resources, the sector continues to deliver robust, professional and innovative front line services for local communities.

Firefighters remain one of the most trusted professions, commanding respect across all age groups and in a diverse range of communities. As the case studies contained in this publication demonstrate, so many of their activities are targeted at the most vulnerable individuals and families in our communities. The comprehensive access of the fire and rescue service to the public means they have a unique ability to provide critical interventions, promote health messages and refer to appropriate services.

Following the transfer of public health responsibilities to local government, the prevention work done by the fire and rescue service on improving the public's health is welcome. Councils work closely with their partners in fire, police, health, probation and the voluntary sector to respond to locally identified needs. It is clear that, for the fire and rescue service, preventing fires and keeping the public safe involves improving the public's health and wellbeing at the same time.

This resource commissioned by the Local Government Association describes how the fire and rescue service is working to improve health and wellbeing. The case studies were chosen because they show a range of ways in which the fire and rescue service puts prevention and tackling health inequalities at its heart.

They include programmes spread across England, covering both rural and urban environments and with varying levels of deprivation and affluence.

We look forward to seeing many more such examples of local energy and innovation in the months and years to come, and seeing the measurable impact it will have. The challenge for us all is not just to identify good practice, but to champion and share it.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Izzi Seccombe".

Cllr Izzi Seccombe
Chair, Community Wellbeing Board



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jeremy Hilton".

Cllr Jeremy Hilton
Chair, Fire Services Management Committee

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Kent Fire and Rescue Service helping support people with dementia

- Kent has focussed on improving the help and support it offers to older people, particularly those with dementia.
- All staff have been encouraged to complete an online training programme and nearly 400 have become 'dementia friends'.
- It is helping them to identify people with the condition and tailor their fire safety support around them.

Over half of all fire deaths and injury in the home happen to people aged over 60, according to the Chief Fire Officers Association. Recent research has also shown that impairment and disability increase the risk of injury or death from fire.

Kent Fire and Rescue Service has focussed on helping its crews understand more about the dementia.

A simple online staff training programme has been developed and offered to all 1,665 fire officers and support staff within the organisation.

The service has also encouraged staff to take part in the Alzheimer's Society's dementia friends initiative. Nearly 400 have signed up.

The work on dementia means staff are able to identify the early signs of the condition and – where appropriate – make suggestions to those affected about the help they can get from the NHS.

What is more, through the home safety visits they do, officers are also able to provide tailored help to reduce the risk of fire. Charlie Smith, Kent's Safety Service Delivery Manager, says: "Having a better understanding of what it's like to live with dementia means fire officers are better able to help people with dementia stay independent and safe in their own homes for as long as possible. People with dementia may get forgetful, and leave stoves on after cooking, or allow pans to boil over so we provide help where we can."

This involves practical safety advice as well as fitting smoke alarms, cooker shut-off switches, deaf alarms for the hearing impaired and eye-catching stickers to remind people to turn off their televisions, cookers, and not to overload electrical sockets.

Kent has also held an event at its Gravesend fire station to highlight to people with the condition the help it has on offer. Last October visitors from the Alzheimer's and Dementia Support Services, who are all in the early stages of the disease, came to a demonstration day.

Green Watch Firefighter Mike Edwards, who organised the event, says he was inspired to get more involved after having the dementia training. "We know how important it is for those living with dementia to feel understood and included in their communities, so we invited them to the fire station. It gave them a visual and interactive session, which they all enjoyed."

Sherry Boyd, an Alzheimer's and Dementia Support Services worker who accompanied the group, says the day was really informative. "Doing it at the fire station meant it wasn't so abstract for the group." She says the group then shared the information with their carers and families.

Through its work on dementia, Kent has emerged as a national leader on dementia among the country's fire and rescue services. Its online training programme, which it worked on in partnership with the Staffordshire and West Midlands Fire and Rescue Services, has been made available to all fire and rescue services across the country.

Kent also worked with Staffordshire and West Midlands Fire and Rescue Services to draw up a National Dementia Pledge, which asks fire and rescue services in England to take an active role on dementia. So far the majority of fire and rescue services in England have signed up to it and many are engaged in local work around dementia.

The Dementia Pledge was launched at a Dementia Conference hosted by Staffordshire University in 2012. Kent's leading role in improving the quality of life of people

with dementia came after David Cameron launched the Prime Minister's Challenge on Dementia four years ago. Steve Griffiths, who was then Kent's Director of Service Delivery (he retired recently), was the representative for UK fire and rescue services on the Prime Minister's Dementia Friendly Communities Champion Group.

Mr Smith says: "We want this to be useful for everyone, because at some point in their life everyone will come into contact with someone who has dementia, whether that's family, friends or through work." He also says the work with older people has focussed on other hazards too. "We have worked with the NHS on its slips, trips and falls initiative because we want to help prevent people from falling over and breaking a hip, but also because if someone falls, knocks a pan over and causes a fire, the consequences can be much worse."

But the push on dementia is just one part of Kent's efforts to tackle health inequalities. The service has a dedicated vulnerable persons team who work with people on a daily basis to reduce their risk of fire. A team of specially-trained officers work closely with social services, mental health teams, local authorities, housing associations and the police to put intervention measures in place, often at short notice.

Mr Smith says: "We are realistic enough to know that if someone has been smoking for 30 years and we suggest that stopping smoking would be better for their health and their fire safety, they're probably not going to. But we can provide fire retardant blankets and bedding, metal bins and fire retardant sprays, that may decrease the risk of fire."

The Fire and Rescue Service also runs a youth-directed programme called Fire Fit, which it takes out to summer fetes and other events. It involves a challenge course completed against the clock with exercises similar to those that fire officers use. "We are always looking at ways we can have an impact," adds Mr Smith.

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Wigan Council using firefighters to be 'health champions'

- Firefighters in Wigan have become 'health champions' in their local community.
- Thanks to specialist training they are able to use their contact with residents to promote healthy messages, give advice and signpost people to help.
- In total, they work with 20 different agencies.

Firefighters in Wigan have become part of the drive to change behaviours by becoming 'health champions'.

All 190 firefighters have been given specialist training in public health as part of the local council's Making Health Everyone's Business initiative. The scheme was launched seven years ago to make the most of the daily contact that non-health specialists have with people in the community.

So far more than 1,000 people have been trained from council workers to people involved in amateur sports clubs. Like them, firefighters have also been trained.

It allows them to offer basic health advice and signpost people to relevant services that can help. The support is normally delivered alongside the service's wider fire safety checks services which sees visits made to 6,500 homes a year.

During these visits the firefighters take the opportunity to raise any health issues when appropriate and signpost people to relevant services. Wigan Borough Manager Steve Sheridan says: "With the work we do we gain access to people in the community who may need help – not just with fire safety but with wider issues. We can help link them in with the health and social care agencies that are best able to help. So if Mrs Wigan is in a property and looks to be living in poverty and is cold, fire crews will refer her to the relevant agency that might come in and assess fuel consumption and other health needs.

"Likewise, if officers notice that someone has problems with drugs or alcohol they'll ask if they want to be referred. Sometimes they say no, sometimes they say yes."

The firefighters are also trained to recognise signs of domestic abuse or safeguarding issues for children. "We're not trying to make firefighters into social workers. But they can be the eyes and the ears. Because of our work six or seven children under the age of 10 were taken into care in a two-year period. I'm not happy this had to happen, but I'm quite satisfied that it did. We can save lives in different ways."

But it is not just one-way traffic. The Fire and Rescue Service also accepts referrals from other agencies. It is currently working with 20 agencies, including Age UK, mental health organisations, midwives, social care, hospitals and social housing provider Wigan and Leigh Homes.

Anyone from any of these agencies who is out visiting people in the community and believes there may be other issues relating to fire safety can fill out an electronic form that goes directly to the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service.

The referral is then triaged and for those deemed to be very high risk a Wigan-based community safety adviser will attend. For those considered to be of lower risk one of the local fire crews will attend.

All fire officers and the service's six community safety advisers receive the same training, however the community safety advisers work only in the community and do not attend fires. They, therefore, have more time to spend with the high-risk cases.

Fire officers are also trained in Heart Start, a scheme run as part of the Making Health Everyone's Business programme in partnership with the British Heart Foundation. It aims to teach people practical skills such as performing CPR and putting someone in the recovery position as well as using defibrillators. It is offered each year to every primary school in Wigan for children in year six.

The crews host a two-hour workshop and also cover basic fire safety and other issues alongside the Heart Start work. "If a school is near a water risk, we'll address water safety, if it's near a busy road where there are lots of accidents, we'll address road safety," says Mr Sheridan. "The firefighters know the area really well."

This is just one element of the wider work it does with young people. Wigan borough runs two cadet schemes for young kids in the community. They learn the skills that firefighters have – not just how to pump water but about the hydraulics that are involved. It is for teenagers aged 14 to 16. They attend one night a week for two years.

On top of this all four fire stations in Wigan open their doors one night a week as youth clubs. The initiative – called the Doorstep Club – is run and supervised by the Wigan and Leigh Cultural Trust and offers activities such as boxing, football, dance and climbing walls. It was set up two years ago with a £350,000 grant from Sport England.

Professor Kate Ardern, Wigan's Director of Public Health, is full of praise for the work. She says the local Fire and Rescue Service plays a "pivotal role in supporting public health messaging and raising awareness."

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Norfolk and Suffolk Fire and Rescue Services tackling child obesity

- Fire crews in Norfolk and Suffolk are working in partnership with local NHS teams to help overweight teenagers become more active.
- The teenagers get to take part in eight-week activity and nutrition courses at two local fire stations with the firefighters acting as role models.
- Those who have taken part have reported it has helped them change their lifestyles.

Child obesity is a growing problem that is proving difficult to tackle. But in Norfolk and Suffolk progress is being made thanks to the help of firefighters.

The Fire Fighting Fit and Healthy Programme offers children aged 13 to 17 who are overweight access to weekly healthy lifestyle sessions. These are run by firefighters themselves and allow teenagers take part in a range of activities based around what firefighters do in their day-to-day jobs. This can include everything from hose running to climbing towers. The sessions, which take part over the course of eight weeks, are run by the firefighters who have been given specialist gym instruction and nutrition training.

Each session lasts two hours and combines 30 to 40 minutes on nutrition with over an hour of physical activity. The aim is to help develop the youngsters' understanding of the importance of staying healthy and how it can be achieved so when they are finished they are able to incorporate the new regimens into their everyday lives.

The scheme was launched four years ago in partnership with East Coast Community Healthcare (ECCH), which runs the Childhood Healthy Weight Service for the two county councils, and the two Fire and Rescue Services. It started at Suffolk's Lowestoft fire station before it was expanded to the Great Yarmouth fire station in the Norfolk region two years ago.

ECCH Childhood Healthy Weight Services Manager Steph Edrich says: "It is a difficult age to get health messages across so what we have tried to do is use the standing that firefighters have to encourage these teenagers to adopt healthier lifestyles.

"They bring something a little different to what we offer. They are role models and therefore are able to motivate youngsters in a way traditional health and local government services cannot. Those who have completed the programme have made great improvements to their lifestyles and feel much more confident. A number have also reported they even want to become firefighters afterwards, which can't be a bad thing."

The sessions are held after school and are normally attended by between five and 10 teenagers. Three courses are run at each fire station every year with referrals coming from a variety of sources, including GPs, school nurses and via self-referral.

They are structured to gradually build up the participants' knowledge, skills and confidence. The youngsters are also encouraged to keep a diary throughout.

The first week is a meet and greet session and then in the following weeks they learn about everything from what a healthy plate looks like to how to read food labels before a cooking demonstration is held in week six.

Alongside the firefighter-related activities, the youngsters also play games, such as unihockey, and get to work out in the fire station gyms. The final session is set aside for a "passing out parade" to recognise and celebrate the journey the youngsters have been on. ECCH then follow up with the children who have taken part, to help them keep up the good habits they have learnt.

Neil Henderson, Watch Commander at the Lowestoft fire station, says: "It is great to see the progress they make. These kids often come from quite difficult backgrounds, but they really respond to the course. Most will lose a significant amount of weight during the course and that normally continues".

But it is not just about losing weight and getting fit. You can see with many of them that their whole approach to life and their attitude changes. They gain confidence by being part of a group and learning about health.

"We have one lad who is 18 now and volunteers as a student instructor and we are hoping we can get him trained as an on-call firefighter soon. He came to us when he was 15 and has become so dedicated."

Thaine Hacon, Watch Manager at the Great Yarmouth fire station, agrees. "We are delighted to be involved in such an innovative and worthwhile programme. Fire Fighting Fit is a fantastic opportunity for youngsters to learn about being healthy and have fun while also getting fit. A young person may feel self-conscious going to a typical club but here everyone will be in the same boat. They all get to exercise with firefighters, use firefighting equipment and take part in sessions including basic first aid and fire safety in the home."

Feedback from those who have taken part also shows the impact the scheme has. One recent participant reported that they had "changed their lifestyle by eating less and eating more fruit", while another said they were "eating better, smaller portions".

The programme has also started to be promoted through a new mobile web app that ECCH has just launched. The app includes a body mass index calculator so parents can assess whether their child is a healthy weight. It also has health and fitness advice, recipes and information on the programmes run by ECCH.

As well as the Fire Fighting Fit and Healthy scheme, these include the national MEND programme for seven to 13-year-olds, Health, Exercise and Nutrition for the Really Young (HENRY) for zero to five-year-olds and Better Life, Achieve and Succeed Together (BLAST), an eight-week after-school healthy lifestyle club.

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West Midlands Fire and Rescue Service reaching out to the most vulnerable

- West Midlands has made working with the most vulnerable people a key priority.
- The service's 1,322 fire officers have been given public health training to support the people they come into contact with.
- They also do specific work with young people to get them back into employment and with homeless people.

The West Midlands Fire and Rescue Service (WMFS) plays a key part in the region's health improvement programme – and in doing so has started developing its own initiatives to reach out to some of the most vulnerable communities.

Using the Making Every Contact Count approach, the service's 1,322 fire officers have been trained in how to deliver basic health messages – and put this to use during home safety checks.

Officers look at key things within people's homes that relate to fire prevention, but they are also concerned with wider health and wellbeing issues, including social isolation, mobility, domestic abuse, poverty, mental health and the quality of housing.

Where appropriate they initiate conversations with people and can signpost them on to the relevant services.

This work frequently brings officers into contact with people living in poor conditions in deprived communities, including those suffering from poor mental and physical health, and has led to it paying particular attention to the most vulnerable groups.

More than 100 officers have been trained as vulnerable persons officers (VPOs) to work alongside agencies such as Age UK, local housing associations, local councils and Dementia UK.

Pete Wilson, the Head of Community Safety at WMFS, says the fire service has contact with everyone. "Other health services tend to specialise in one area – adult services, child services, etc. Whereas we focus on all areas in a community that are vulnerable to fire," he says. "It's not just for some charitable motive that we do this. We'd rather get there before the fire starts and prevent emergencies."

Mr Wilson says the WMFS has focused on safety measures aimed at improving public health and in November last year published a report called "Improving Lives to Save Lives" to promote these initiatives.

The service is one of the country's largest metropolitan Fire and Rescue Services, serving a population of 2.7 million people in seven local government authorities, and covers areas of high deprivation.

Among the most vulnerable to fire risk are the long-term unemployed and the homeless. The WMFS runs youth programmes that focus on increasing motivation, self-confidence and team work. The service also offers work experience, and runs courses at schools offering alternative curriculum provision and for Special Educational Needs groups. "It's a long-term investment" Mr Wilson says. "If we reduce unemployment, we reduce the risk of fire. And that's why we work with young people to help get them into employment and training."

Work with the homeless is more specialised, led by firefighter Ian Sturmey, a VPO who links in with Birmingham's homeless agencies, including Sifa (Supporting Independence from Alcohol).

Mr Sturmey says his work with the homeless began five years ago when there was a fire in a derelict building that resulted in the deaths of two people. Birmingham Sifa contacted the Fire and Rescue Service to find out what was being done and what could be done to help the homeless. The answer five years ago was very little.

But since then Mr Sturmey has spent a lot of time getting to know the homeless and building up their trust.

He goes into Sifa's drop in centre, mostly when he's off duty, but also goes into squats and disused buildings that may be sheltering people. "I've spent time just talking to people, being genuinely interested in them. When I go into a squat, most people don't see you as a threat when you're with the Fire and Rescue Service, but it works better if you have their trust."

The misuse of candles and smoking are the two greatest fire risks among the homeless. "Most won't use or don't have candle holders, and if they have money they're not going to spend it on that."

"My mum gave me a load of candleholders, so I carry them and hand them out. And with the smoking, I encourage them to make sure they extinguish cigarettes properly and to use an appropriate ashtray."

Mr Sturmey also fits smoke alarms where appropriate and when possible. "At least if they have a fire, they get an early warning. Then a chance to escape." There have been no fire-related deaths among the homeless since he began his work.

The other side of Mr Sturmey's work is knowing where homeless people are sheltering, so that in case of a fire the Service knows if people are likely to be in the building. "Fires in derelict buildings will be dealt with in a different way if we think someone is inside them, so it's important that we know," Mr Sturmey says.

The work of WMFS has even attracted the attention of world-renowned public health expert Professor Sir Michael Marmot. He has praised WMFS for recognising the link between people's risk of fire, and the social determinants of health. He says he is "delighted" with the work they have done. "They have used their trusted brand to work across the whole community."

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Bolton Council and Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service looking out for babies and toddlers

- In Bolton, fire crews have placed a special focus on trying to keep babies and toddlers safe.
- The Fire and Rescue Service distributes cots and Moses baskets to vulnerable families to try to reduce the risk of sudden infant death.
- Plans are in place to adapt the home safety checks service to place more emphasis on keeping the under five's safe.

The Fire and Rescue Service in Bolton is helping babies and toddlers sleep safely by distributing cots and Moses baskets to vulnerable families in the community. The campaign, Safe Start, is a joint initiative between Bolton Council, the Bolton arm of Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service (GMFRS) and the charity Urban Outreach, and is now in its second year.

In the first 18 months 140 cots were distributed by community safety advisers to families who have babies under the age of 18 months and did not have a safe place to sleep. The project was launched in a bid to reduce the risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Every year 300 babies across the country die suddenly and unexpectedly in their sleep as a result of SIDS. The north west has the highest death rate in England and Wales.

While there is no advice that can guarantee the prevention of SIDS, there are a number of things parents and carers can do to reduce the risk to their baby. One of the most important is to provide a safe place for a baby to sleep - a cot or Moses basket in their parents' bedroom. Babies who co-sleep in a parents' bed, or sleep in a pushchair, car seat, or on a sofa, are at greater risk of SIDS.

The Safe Start programme involves health services, social care agencies and housing agencies in getting that message out.

Midwives or health visitors refer families to the programme. Urban Outreach, which is a Christian charity that gives support and care to those in need and provides emergency food parcels to struggling families, is responsible for ordering and storing the cots.

Derek Dempster, GMFRS Bolton Community Safety Manager, who is also a member of the Bolton Safeguarding Children Board, says he saw an opportunity for the fire service to deliver the cots and at the same time carry out home safety checks.

"The scheme gives us access to potentially vulnerable people so it really makes sense," he says. "This is a great example of effective partnership working."

While community safety advisers are in the home delivering the cot, they can assess how people live and give fire safety advice or make practical changes to reduce the risk of fire and other emergencies, such as fitting smoke alarms.

Mr Dempster says: "If people are using an old chip pan fryer we can replace them with a deep fat fryer. If there are people who smoke within the home, we can provide them with fire retardant throws and bedding.

Mr Dempster says people did not often refuse to be part of the Safe Start programme. "It's not an intrusive service, and everything we give is free" he says.

After the fire officers have carried out their home safety check they send a follow-up report to the public health team at Bolton Council.

Sharon Tonge is Bolton Council Health Improvement Practitioner (Communities) and the Sleep Safe and Safe Start Project Manager. She says the cot referral project was developed after an awareness campaign in 2011 – called Sleep Safe – discovered that not everyone could afford a cot or Moses basket. "We found that we had the highest incidence of cot deaths, and felt it was important to raise awareness," Ms Tonge says. "One of the problems, we discovered, was that people were confused about what was okay and what wasn't. We needed to get

a consistent message out to parents, and to do this it had to be embedded into all of the services who had contact with parents."

Ms Tonge says the parents of every baby born in Bolton should get this information. All health care professionals – from midwives, health visitors, caretakers in children's centres and health centres and the community safety advisers – undergo a two-and-a-half-hour training session on how to get the Sleep Safe message out to families.

A guidance leaflet is also available at these agencies and is handed out by fire officers when they deliver the cot. The community safety adviser will also discuss the family's sleeping arrangements and give advice on safe sleeping arrangements.

Mr Dempster says: "It's a really good example of the Fire and Rescue Service and health and social services working well together. We have access to vulnerable people, and it's not just about their fire safety where our actions are effective, it's about people living in situations that may be beyond their control who can't help being unsafe, or don't even know what's unsafe. Getting access to vulnerable people is important."

While fire officers have access to vulnerable people, they are also able to recognise other issues that may be affecting their health such as drug use, smoking, alcoholism and poverty – and can refer or signpost them into other social or health services.

Falling asleep with a baby significantly increases the risk of SIDS if the parent is a smoker, under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or just very tired. As a result of the programme, the Fire and Rescue Service is looking to adapt its home safety check to include ways to reduce the risk of accidents in the home to children under five. Previously the focus was on adults and children over five. The review is now in its final planning stages but additional equipment and advice could include the supply and fitting of corner cushions, cupboard door locks, bath mats, fire guards and scald prevention tea towels.

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Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service getting people active

- The Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service has been encouraging people to keep active and healthy through its Fire Fit programme for the past five years.
- The scheme is for the whole community, but is particularly aimed at schools.
- Firefighters go to schools each week and conduct 60 to 90-minute sessions, which include activities such as football and running.

Firefighters in Merseyside are tackling social and health inequalities in the community by educating people about the benefits of fitness, healthy eating and living a healthy lifestyle.

The initiative – Fire Fit – was launched by Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service in 2010 after it identified a strong link between the threat of a fire and lower levels of education, income and housing.

The need for a social programme of this type was first conceived when Liverpool hosted the World Firefighter Games as part of the larger celebration of Liverpool as the European Capital of Culture in 2008.

The Fire Fit programme uses the expertise and social status of the Fire and Rescue Service to educate people about the benefits of fitness and healthy eating. Firefighters are used as role models to help encourage people to take part in sporting activities.

The programme is rolled out across the whole community, supporting more than 40 community events a year, but particularly targets children by visiting junior and senior schools across Merseyside.

Twelve schools are currently taking part in the programme. Firefighters go to these schools each week and conduct 60 to 90-minute sessions with children, which includes activities such as football and running. There is also access to a climbing wall.

The firefighters and other Service staff volunteer their time for this role. Some have specialist qualifications such as FA coaching level one, while others have expertise in nutrition. All have a passion for sport and wellbeing and for the communities they serve.

The Fire Fit programme also includes a rewards-based system, where volunteers earn points for the time they spend delivering the programme. These points are translated into a ‘bursary fund’ that is spent at the school on sporting resources such as basketball hoops and footballs.

Merseyside Deputy Fire Chief Phil Garrigan says: “The work we do is quite special. Engagement through sport is really effective. Each Fire Fit delivery team member who provides support for a community-based activity does so not for any financial reward but for the reward of knowing that they have personally put something back into the community.”

“The model only works because we have excellent highly motivated people who want to make a positive difference to our community.”

Mr Garrigan, who is also a member of the Chief Fire Officers Association and is their Lead Officer on Children and Young People, says: “It’s about building up a relationship – with a school and with the children. We find that with the prolonged relationship, it allows us to deliver safety messages throughout the year. So around times like bonfire night we can be getting the fire safe message out.

“The programme helps to kick start a healthy lifestyle. Young people clearly value it, and the schools value the programme, particularly having the firefighters as role models. Schools have said that’s a good thing.”

One of the schools that benefited was Blueberry Park Primary, where the programme ran for 12 months ending in autumn 2013. The children, mostly year five, took part in monthly sessions.

Headteacher Kath Honey says: “We are delighted that our school was part of the Fire Fit programme. It was highly engaging and

the children looked forward to the sessions with enthusiasm. The Fire and Rescue Service added real value to our school.”

The most visible element of the Fire Fit brand is the £5.2 million Toxteth Fire Fit Hub, which opened in 2013.

The Hub is a brand new purpose-built youth centre with facilities that include a sports hall, martial arts studio, a gym and dance studio and four five-a-side football pitches. Every evening from 5pm to 10pm the facilities are dedicated to young people.

Jennifer Van Der Merwe, the Fire Fit Hub manager, says: “The Hub is still only just over a year old, so we’re still quite new, and still evolving.”

But already the Hub has more than 1,500 young members and about 400 adult or corporate members. Each night between 70 and 150 young people come in to the Hub to use the facilities and take part in supervised activities ranging from golf and hockey to netball and karate. “You name it, we’ve probably got it going on here. There’s the gym, boxing, aerobics, Zumba... the list goes on.” said Ms Van Der Merwe.

Memberships is £5 a year for children aged six to 10 plus 50p per visit and £10 a year for those aged 11 to 19 plus £1 per visit. Adults who wish to hire venues must pay membership fee of £10 a year plus the hire costs.

The Fire Fit Hub was built with funding from Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service, the Department for Education and Liverpool City Council. It comes under Myplace, a government initiative backed by the Department for Education.

The Fire Fit Hub as well as the Fire Fit programme have been recognised by the International Olympic Committee’s (IOC) Sport For All initiative and have been included in the IOC guide to managing Sport For All programmes. The programme has also been used nationally as a model for other fire and rescue services to develop their own health and fitness programmes.

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Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service

working with others to save lives

- Following the death of an elderly resident, Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service started working more closely with services that work with older and vulnerable people.
- The Fire and Rescue Service teaches health, social care and others how to identify fire risks and deal with them.
- More than 6,000 people have been trained to date and 2,800 referrals made to the fire service.

In November 2006, an elderly woman called Olive died in a fire in her home. Her home – a two-up, two-down house called Dove Cottage in South Staffordshire – was isolated and had fallen into a state of decline.

Flammable materials were kept near an open fire which had no fireguard and overgrown plants blocked the back door.

Eighty-year-old Olive lived alone and mostly in one downstairs room. She had a habit of collecting things she didn't really need, and was also a smoker. She extinguished her cigarettes by putting them under a rug and standing on it with her foot.

Olive was visited regularly by representatives from health and social services. But she was not known to the Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service, therefore no fire safety measures had been put in place.

The woman's death highlighted the need for local agencies to work more closely together to help safeguard vulnerable people. And so the Olive Branch training initiative was launched. Its aim is to prevent similar deaths by helping agencies such as Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service and Staffordshire County Council's social care and health services work more closely together.

Olive Branch was launched in February 2011 after a report by the coroner investigating the death of Olive said fire and rescue services must work more closely with the Care Quality Commission.

Statistics show that most people who die in an accidental house fire are aged 65 years and over, while those aged over 80 years are 10 times more likely to die in a fire than those aged 30.

Through the Olive Branch initiative, Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service teaches social care and health workers, and others who are involved regularly with the care of the elderly, disabled and vulnerable, how to identify fire hazards, and how to deal with these risks to assess the fire risk when they visit a house.

Each free training session lasts about 90 minutes, and a certificate of attendance is awarded to each person who completes the course. The programme also highlights how to refer vulnerable people to the fire and rescue service for a free home fire risk check.

Already almost 6,300 people have undergone the training and to date more than 2,800 referrals have been made to Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service by care providers including NHS Trusts, volunteer groups, housing providers, and private care providers.

Alan Snell, Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service's Partnerships and Engagements Officer, says a key element of the initiative is that all care providers who are commissioned by local authorities must have Olive Branch training. "It is incorporated within their contracts," he says.

Mr Snell says that while the Olive Branch scheme focuses on fire risk, it has also highlighted the need to recognise other vulnerabilities that people in the community have in relation to health and wellbeing, such as poor mental or physical health, substance or alcohol misuse, lack of mobility or poor living conditions. "Using the Olive Branch model we are exploring the concept of setting up other referral pathways," Mr Snell says. "Health and wellbeing is part of a larger agenda, of which we are a part. "It's recognising that there are other factors along with fire risks that cause a fatality. If people are vulnerable to fire, they are vulnerable to a number of other things. But if we can reduce their risk of fire, we can help reduce other

vulnerabilities. We're trying to bring all these together working with local authorities, mental health agencies and the NHS."

From picking up on obvious fire risks, even if spotting them doesn't fall into a home visitor's traditional service area, through to sharing potentially life-saving information, the Olive Branch initiative has been a success.

The Olive Branch model has also been the basis for other fire safety programmes, including Gloucestershire County Council's Safe and Sound programme.

And the success of the Olive Branch training initiative resulted in the launch of the Let's Work Together project in February 2012.

The scheme started in the Lichfield district of Staffordshire and has since been rolled out to other parts of the county.

It has provided training to professionals who go into people's homes as part of their work, such as police, health professionals and council staff as well as fire officers, to enable them to spot dangers that might not traditionally be part of their work area and to explain to residents how they can get extra help and support.

This can involve anything from fire safety and falls risks to alcohol dependency and smoking. Stafford Borough Council Head of Policy and Improvement Norman Jones says: "By partnering with other organisations and training their staff we utilise resources better and increase our reach of protecting people and homes from fire and other hazards."

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Bury and Salford reducing falls in the home

- Firefighters in Bury and Salford have been given advice and training on falls.
- They are now able to identify when people are at risk and refer them on to the local falls services where appropriate.
- An evaluation of those who were helped shows that 80 per cent reported feeling like they were less likely to fall at home.

Falls are responsible for more than four in 10 deaths in the home. Fires by comparison cause less than one in 10. So firefighters in Bury and Salford are playing their part in trying to reduce accidents by identifying those who are at risk of falling as part of their day-to-day work.

Crews have been given advice and training on the warning signs to look out for and where they find someone who needs help they are able to refer them on to the local falls service. The scheme was launched as a pilot in 2012 and has proved so successful that it has become a permanent part of the firefighters' work, as Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service (GMFRS) Assistant County Fire Officer Peter O'Reilly explains.

Mr O'Reilly, who will take over GMFRS as Chief in June 2015, says: "National research shows that the older members of our community are at higher risk from both falls and having accidental fires at home so we decided to team up with two local services to improve the support available to these people. The project allowed us to put our existing home safety check service to better use. Along with the usual safety checks carried out by GMFRS' firefighters and community safety teams we added an assessment on the risk of falls for people aged over 65 and referred those at higher risk to the health service's falls prevention team."

During the pilot, which ran for a total of 16 months, hundreds of people ended up being referred to the local falls service so steps could be taken to try and prevent them from having accidents at home.

This has included steps such as handrails being installed and people being given walking aids. An evaluation of those who were helped shows that 80 per cent reported feeling like they were less likely to fall at home.

Alec Watson and his wife, Hazel, from Bury, are just one couple who have been helped. They were referred to the falls team in the latter part of 2013 and they now both feel safer at home. Mr Watson, aged 72, said: "We heard about the home safety check service offered by the Fire and Rescue Service while at the doctors and were more than happy with our visit by firefighters – they fitted new smoke alarms and gave us safety advice. The crew talked to us about a falls team run by the health service and explained that we might be able to get some help with walking aids fitted around the home to help us get around.

"Soon after the falls team came to see us and fitted an extra handrail on the stairs, a rail outside the front door and gave Hazel a walking stick." Mrs Watson, also 72, says: "The teams that visited us were very pleasant and even vacuumed the dust after fitting the rail on the stairs.

"Since getting my walking stick I haven't fallen over so I'm very pleased we came across the service. We have nothing but praise for the service and would highly recommend a visit if people are unsure whether to take up the offer."

Another woman who was referred to the falls team after having a home safety check was 85-year-old Margaret Conroy, also from Bury. Mrs Conroy says: "After having smoke alarms fitted by firefighters during a home safety check a therapist from the health service came to see me and talked over an exercise plan. I now go to the gym several times a week to strengthen my legs as I have suffered break injuries over the past few years."

"I use two sticks to help me get around and am hoping to get down to one stick when my legs are stronger."

Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service has recently launched another project to provide services to people at greater risk.

This pilot is being run in partnership with the North West Ambulance Service and Greater Manchester Police to reduce the demands on blue light services.

Community Risk Intervention Teams (CRIT) have been established in Salford, Wigan and Manchester to respond to low priority incidents such as falls or concern for welfare call outs, as well as carrying out the traditional home safety checks and other preventative activities.

They are also trained to offer risk reduction advice covering everything from health and wellbeing to crime, and can fit handrails and other measures to help prevent falls.

A team of 32 staff, including two coordinators, have been appointed and are on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The scheme only started being rolled out at the end of 2014 but by the start of March 2015 had attended over 1,000 homes.

GMFRS Head of Transformation Geoff Harris says: "Through the home safety check service we go into 60,000 homes a year and it has proved to be incredibly effective."

"Over the last 10 years the number of fires have fallen by 40 per cent. But going into so many homes also provides us with an opportunity to help people in different ways. The falls work has been a great example of that and in the future we are hoping firefighters can be fitting some of the anti-falls measure rather than just referring people on for help."

"But we are always looking for new ideas – and CRIT is an example of that. There are huge demands on services and so we have to look at different ways of working. The project has been funded for six months, but the signs so far are really encouraging."

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