

## WILTSHIRE & SWINDON FIRE AUTHORITY

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| <b>REPORT REFERENCE NO.</b> | 6  |
| <b>MEETING</b>              | Wiltshire & Swindon Fire Authority   |
| <b>MEETING DATE</b>         | 10 July 2014   |
| <b>SUBJECT OF REPORT</b>    | Public consultation  |
| <b>LEAD OFFICER</b>         | Simon Routh-Jones, Chief Fire Officer & Chief Executive  |
| <b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b>      | <p>It is recommended that the CFA approve:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The public consultation process as outlined in the report proceeds in parallel with further analysis on the potential for savings with local councils</li> <li>2. That the consultation process commences on the 21 July 2014 and runs for a 13 week period until 20 October 2014</li> <li>3. That the Members consider the consultation responses together with the final business case at the November meeting of the Authority.</li> <li>4. That the Dorset Fire Authority is formally informed of any further changes to the consultation process and strategic options.</li> </ul> |
| <b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>    | This report sets out the proposed public and stakeholder consultation associated with the strategic options contained within the business case to realise financial savings necessary to meet the financial gap set out in the medium term finance plan. The report outlines the governance, structure and timescales associated with the proposed consultation process and seeks approval to proceed in tandem with additional financial analysis to be undertaken with local councils. The results of this independently conducted and validated consultation process can then be considered in November, together with the strategic options available to the Fire Authority. |
| <b>APPENDICES</b>           | Appendix A: Draft public consultation leaflet  |

## **Introduction & Background**

At its meeting on 12<sup>th</sup> December 2013, the Authority agreed that, subject to due diligence and a full business case, to work towards the goal of a combined Authority in April 2016 whilst maintaining local identity. A Combination Oversight Board was established with Members from the Authority and other senior officers to work with Dorset Fire Authority and its senior officers to develop this business case and other supporting documents.

At their meeting on 12 June, some Members expressed concerns around the lack of wider involvement of the Authority and asked for further time to consider the range of documents approved by the Combination Oversight Board at its meeting on the 5 June 2014. They also requested that the public consultation process be outlined and approved at a special single agenda item meeting to be held in July. This paper sets out the proposed governance, structure and timescales associated with the revised consultation process.

### **Governance**

To ensure that the consultation process is conducted in accordance with best practice, it is proposed that the overall approach be externally validated by the Consultation Institute using the Compliance Assessment Scheme. The assurance process will ensure that the consultation is carried out properly and effectively. It may also reduce the possibility of a successful legal challenge.

The consultation process will be both qualitative and quantitative. This will be provided in a number of ways and managed by Opinion Research Services (ORS), who are an independent public consultation company with particular expertise in Fire and Rescue Service issues and have been previously used by both Fire Authorities. ORS will be commissioned to conduct focus groups and will be running each event. ORS are employed under a framework agreement provided within the Fire and Rescue Service Consultation Association (FRSCA) and have been certified as fully compliant with national research and consultation standards.

All analysis will be independently undertaken by ORS with the final report presented by them to both Fire Authorities at their respective meetings in November.

### **The consultation process**

It is proposed that the consultation will run for 13 weeks, starting on 21 July and finishing on 20 October and comprise the following:

- **Residents forums:** As part of the qualitative element of the consultation, it is intended to hold a number of forums across Wiltshire, Swindon and in Dorset across Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole to provide a representative understanding of the views of residents. The public participants would be recruited by ORS and selected through random digit dialling. They will each receive a small incentive payment to encourage diverse participation by a cross-section of residents. The focus group events will include a brief overview of the role, responsibilities and resourcing the Authority. ORS will then pose questions associated with any change of fire and rescue service governance ranging from remaining independent and reducing costs through to the potential combine with Dorset Fire Authority. They would also then explore some questions around wider collaboration with local councils, police and

other public services. Whilst an officer would attend these events to answer technical questions, ORS will be expected to independently manage the entire process, including the presentation of information and responses to questions. Members would be welcome to attend as observers. Representative bodies may also be invited to observe a focus group to maintain confidence in the process. It is intended to hold 8 forums in Wiltshire and Swindon and 8 across Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole.

| Location    | Day       | Date         |
|-------------|-----------|--------------|
| Salisbury   | Wednesday | 24 September |
| Warminster  | Thursday  | 25 September |
| Marlborough | Monday    | 29 September |
| Swindon     | Tuesday   | 30 September |
| Malmesbury  | Thursday  | 9 October    |
| Chippenham  | Monday    | 13 October   |
| Trowbridge  | Tuesday   | 14 October   |
| Devizes     | Wednesday | 15 October   |

Members will be informed of full details of these events when the location and venues are finalised.

- **Business and voluntary sector forums:** It is proposed that there will be 4 forums (2 in Wiltshire/ Swindon and 2 in Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole) covering voluntary sector groups and the business community. These will be conducted in a similar manner to the residents' forums and will be held in Wiltshire and Swindon on 30<sup>th</sup> September. Again, ORS will be expected to independently manage the entire process, including the presentation of information and responses to questions
- **Public leaflet and questionnaire.** A public leaflet setting out in summary form the key questions will be produced. Although they will essentially be the same leaflet, they will be branded separately for the respective Fire Authorities (see appendix A). This approach mirrors the approach taken elsewhere during similar exercises. The short questionnaire will seek broad views in relation to the proposal. This leaflet and questionnaire will be available in public buildings, such as libraries and also on-line through a dedicated consultation portal linked to our respective websites. Given the large area and populations covered by both Authorities, it is necessary and important to the external validation that we are proposing to pursue, to capture the views of a representative cross-section of residents. For this to be statistically valid and assuming a typical return rate of 20% the questionnaire, this will be distributed to a sample of 10,000 households across the two areas which the authorities represents.
- **Key Stakeholders:** Key Stakeholders will be sent a core documents and encouraged to complete the questionnaire or supply a written submission.
- **Staff and representative bodies:** Staff will receive a planned briefing (3 in Dorset, 3 in Wiltshire) and receive regular briefings and updates through internal newsletters and be signposted to the questionnaire to enable their views to be taking into account. A joint briefing for representative bodies has also been arranged.
- **Constituent Councils, Area Boards and Locality Teams meetings:** A letter will be sent offering specific presentations to allow a fuller discussion.

It is intended that the consultation be promoted using the following mechanisms:

- **Website.** A web enabled consultation portal has been created to house all consultation material and link to the questionnaire. This will be hosted externally to each Service but contain a link from our respective websites.

- **Social media.** Facebook and Twitter will be used to signpost stakeholders and allow the public and interested parties a full opportunity to participate in the on-line questionnaire
- **Press and specialist media.** Regular press briefings will take place to both inform and signpost stakeholders and provide them with information on the consultation, how to participate. It is anticipated that a number of advertisements in the local press will be required to support the publicity campaign. Articles will be written for inclusion in specialist sector media
- **Posters.** Posters in public offices and libraries will signpost the consultation. We intend to ensure that every fire station has a poster, signposting residents to the website and providing information on proposed combination
- **Petitions and submissions.** We intend to signpost within the website to cover the process should residents or other stakeholders wish to petition or supply a detailed written submission

## **Timescales**

It is proposed that the consultation process run for 13 weeks from the 21 July through to the 20 October 2014. The findings will be independently analysed and reported to the Authority at a November meeting.

## **Policy Implications**

There are no significant policy implications arising specifically from this report.

## **Risks**

There are three principal risks to any delay or cessation of the consultation process. Firstly, should the Authority subsequently decide to combine with Dorset, the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) have advised that the required Combination Order under the Fire and Rescue Service Act 2004 would need to be with them by the end of 2014 to ensure an April 2016 commencement. Any delay may significantly increase the risk of an April 2016 commencement due to delays forced by the general election. Secondly, and in accordance with the Authority's recommendation of 12 December 2013, we have submitted a joint bid of £5.6m to DCLG transformation fund. This will allow us to either create a significant safety centre in the Salisbury area or provide significant investment in campus arrangements. The bid will also allow us to provide a small multi-agency hub and assist with the harmonisation of ICT and general programme costs. The joint bid is predicated on a potential combination of CFAs and any delay in consultation could jeopardise securing these significant funds should the Authority decide in November that it wishes to combine with Dorset. Finally, any further delays in the consultation process will require Dorset Fire Authority to be formally notified as there is an increased risk to their preferred option of a combination with this Authority.

To help offset these risks, officers are proposing a twin track approach. Firstly allowing the public consultation process to proceed and during this period to undertake a detailed analysis of corporate savings and potential integration of frontline services with Wiltshire Council and Swindon Borough Council. The findings from this analysis may then be considered at a November CFA alongside the public consultation findings and final business case for combination.

## **HR, Equality and Diversity Implications**

There are no significant issues arising from this report.

## **Environmental Implications**

There are no significant environmental implications arising from this report.

## **Financial and Legal Implications**

The principal mechanism for developing the consultation processes to date has been through the Combination Oversight Board. Although Members have raised issues around the whether the Board was sufficiently operating with its terms of reference, it has nevertheless previously agreed a consultation process which has incurred some costs. Should Members wish to pursue the consultation process as outlined in the paper; the costs falling to the Authority will be around £40k. Should they wish to stop or delay the process then abortive costs would need to be determined and apportioned through negotiation with Dorset.

## **Combination Implications**

DCLG have indicated that the local process for developing and consulting upon the business case is down to local determination. However, officials have indicated that there is a Ministerial expectation that a public consultation with key stakeholders will have been undertaken at a local level to support any application for a Combination Order. While there appears to be no specific statutory duty to consult as part of the business plan process, Members need to satisfy themselves that the decisions that they will take in November will have been sufficiently informed by local opinion and that this has been achieved in an inclusive manner.

## **Recommendations**

1. Public consultation process as outlined in the report proceeds in parallel with further analysis on the potential for 'back office' savings with local authorities
2. Consultation process commences on the 21 July 2014 and runs for a 13 week period until 20 October 2014
3. Members consider the consultation responses together with the final business case at the November meeting of the Authority.
4. The Dorset Fire Authority is formally informed of any further changes to the consultation process and strategic options.

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## **Unpublished documents used in the preparation of this report:**

None.

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### **Media enquiries concerning this report should be made to:**

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Appendix A Draft of public consultation leaflet and questionnaire