



Three Options for the Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority

Report of Consultation Forums for Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority

**Opinion Research Services
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Acknowledgements

Opinion Research Services (ORS) was commissioned by the Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority (W&SFA) to conduct an extensive programme of public consultation, and also to review the outcomes from wider consultations conducted by the Authority in connection with three key options for the future governance of its Fire and Rescue Service.

This document reports twelve important deliberative forums and also assesses the overall scale, scope and rigour of W&SFA's consultation programme.

We thank W&SFA for the commission and we trust this report will be helpful. At all stages of the project, ORS' status as an independent organisation was respected; this is an independent report and has not been influenced or in any way shaped by W&SFA or any other party.



This study was carried out in compliance with ISO 20252:2012

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Consultation Programme

The Commission

1. Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority (W&SFA) is considering three strategic options for its future – options that have fundamental implications for the future governance of the Fire and Rescue Service and also for its financial management and resilience. On the basis of our experience of the fire and rescue service and many statutory consultations, ORS was commissioned by W&SFA to provide independent advice on the design and conduct of the consultation programme, undertake a programme of key consultation activities, and provide an interpretative report of the findings.
2. This document assesses the consultation programme and in particular reports the twelve deliberative forums ORS conducted for W&SFA in September and October 2014. Our full report reviews the other consultation activities in order to provide an independent commentary on the overall outcomes.

Extensive Consultation

3. W&SFA's consultation period ran from July 21st to October 20th 2014 and the full programme included all the following elements:

Independent research (conducted by ORS)

Provided advice on the nature and scope of the consultation in the context of the importance of the governance issues raised by the three options for the future of the Fire Authority

Designed informative and interactive presentation material suitable for use in deliberative forums

Recruited, facilitated and reported twelve deliberative **Forums** – including eight with randomly selected members of the public and four with business and voluntary sector stakeholders

Reported a **Household Survey** based on sending a postal questionnaire to 6,000 randomly selected homes across Wiltshire and Swindon

Analysed **Open Consultation Questionnaires** returned as paper copies and combined the resulting data with the outcomes of an **On-line Questionnaire** hosted by a third party in order to report the outcomes of both

Analysed and summarised written submissions received by W&SFA during the consultation period

Provided an independent report of the consultation findings and offer guidance on the interpretation of the material.

W&SFA's consultation activities

Printed and distributed consultation questionnaires (on-line and paper)

Printed and distributed 5,000 consultation documents (with questionnaire) and posters, which were sent to all libraries, public buildings and fire stations, and were available on request; electronic copies were available on the W&SFA website and copies were sent to all emergency services, partners, businesses and voluntary groups; leaflets were made available at many health fairs, the Emergency Services Show (attended by thousands of local people) and Senior Wellbeing days across Wiltshire and Swindon

Distributed 6,000 postal leaflets and questionnaires with freepost return envelopes to household randomly selected by ORS

Had 13 contacts, including presentations, letters and briefings with local and national politicians

Held 15 meetings with officers of constituent authorities in Wiltshire and Swindon and other public bodies, including the Police and NHS Foundation Trusts

Gave briefings to Community Area and Localities

Publicised the consultation in the local media (broadcast and print) via three press releases, social media, Twitter and Facebook

Provided a Consultation Helpline

Invited responses via email, telephone and in writing.

4. ORS was involved in the consultation programme throughout and, as well as conducting its own research and analysis, has been given access to all the material.

Proportionate and Fair

5. The key legal and good practice requirements for proper consultation are based on the so-called Gunning Principles, which state that consultation should:
 - Be conducted at a formative stage, before decisions are taken
 - Allow sufficient time for people to participate and respond
 - Provide the public and stakeholders with sufficient background information to allow them to consider the issues and any proposals intelligently and critically
 - Be properly taken into consideration before decisions are finally taken.
6. In this case, the consultation for W&SFA was certainly conducted at a **formative stage**. Shortly before the consultation began, ORS met with the Authority members and it was clear that no decision, not even in principle, had been made; and throughout it was clear that the Authority remained open-minded.
7. The 13 week consultation period gave the public and stakeholders **sufficient time** to participate. While there were relatively few submissions and no petitions during that period, the **Open Consultation Questionnaire** attracted 696 respondents (372 on-line and 324 on paper), and 611 of the **Household Survey** postal questionnaires were returned (a 10% response rate). (All figures are correct at the time of writing.)
8. Through the Fire Authority's consultation document and its website information, the public and stakeholders were provided with informative background information to allow them to consider the issues thoughtfully before completing questionnaires. More specifically still, the deliberative forums provided considerable detailed information and encouraged in-depth questions in order to ensure a proper exploration of the issues in each meeting – so there is no doubt that the participants understood the issues and were making informed choices after their deliberations.
9. In order to be inclusive while providing sufficient information and allow for considered judgements to be made, both W&SFA and ORS were clear that the consultation programme should include both quantitative and deliberative elements in order to:
 - Provide many people with opportunities to take part via the open questionnaire and other routes
 - Promote informed engagement via the deliberative forums with members of the public and other stakeholders.
10. Given people's general unawareness of how their fire and rescue services operate and manage their resources and costs, deliberative consultation with informed audiences (who have the opportunity to question and test the evidence for particular proposals) is especially valuable.

11. The final Gunning principle listed above is that consultation outcomes should be **properly taken into consideration** before authorities take their decisions. In this case, the considerable shortening of the planned reporting timetable has pressurised the analysis work and limited the time available for the W&SFA to consider the consultation outcomes. However, the urgency of the timetable has not impaired the quality of the ORS's analysis work and the summary findings from the forums. The results of the consultation forums are contained in this report and ORS will present the findings to the Members of the Fire Authority at dedicated Members' Seminars in advance of the final decision meeting.
12. Despite the reporting timetable, W&SFA's consultation programme was conscientious and rigorous, in the sense of being open, accessible and fair to members of the public and stakeholders across Wiltshire and Swindon. The extensive programme of meetings and other activities was proportional to the considerable importance of the governance, financial and organisational issues involved and conformed to good practice, both in its scale and the balance of elements. As well as providing the public and stakeholders with sufficient information to consider the proposals, the Authority conducted its consultation in a timely manner and at a formative stage, before making a decision.

Nature of Consultation

13. The four Gunning Principles reviewed above do much to ensure the accountability of public authorities, but this does not mean that consultations should be interpreted as semi-referenda.
14. Properly understood, accountability means that public authorities should give an account of their plans and take into account public and stakeholder views: they should conduct fair and accessible consultation while reporting the outcomes openly and considering them fully. This does not mean that the majority views expressed in consultations should automatically decide public policy, for consultations are not referenda, and the popularity or unpopularity of draft proposals should not displace professional and political judgement about what is the right or best decision in the circumstances. The levels of, and reasons for, public support or opposition are important, but as considerations to be taken into account, not as decisive factors that necessarily determine authorities' decisions.
15. For public bodies considering the outcomes of consultation, the key question should not be, *Which proposal has most support?* but, *Are the reasons for the popularity or unpopularity of the proposals cogent?*
16. All elements of the consultation are important and none should be disregarded, but the deliberative forums reported here are particularly worthy of consideration because they explore the arguments and the reasons for people's opinions.

Programme of Forums

17. The consultation forums reported here took place in September and October 2014 – to provide insights into public and stakeholder views and attitudes about the three options for the future of the W&SFA. ORS's role was to design, recruit, facilitate and report the forums and we collaborated with W&SFA to prepare informative stimulus material for the meetings before facilitating the discussions and preparing this independent report of findings. Nearly a hundred (96) randomly selected members of the public from Wiltshire and Swindon took part together with 15 stakeholders. The programme of meetings is shown below.

Programme of Forums

	Participants	Place	Date	Numbers attending
1	Public	Salisbury	24 September	13
2	Public	Warminster	29 September	16
3	Public	Marlborough	29 September	13
4	Public	Swindon	30 September	11
5	Public	Malmesbury	9 October	8
6	Public	Chippenham	13 October	14
7	Public	Trowbridge	14 October	9
8	Public	Devizes	15 October	12
	Total Public	8 forums across Wiltshire and Swindon	As above	96
9	Stakeholder	Swindon Business Forum	30 September	5
10	Stakeholder	Swindon Voluntary Sector	30 September	4
11	Stakeholder	Salisbury Business Forum	14 October	1
12	Stakeholder	Salisbury Voluntary Sector	14 October	5
	Total Stakeholder	4 forums, with two each in Salisbury and Swindon	As above	15

18. The forums were designed to inform and engage the participants with the issues, with W&SFA, and with each other – by using a deliberative approach to encourage participants to reflect thoughtfully and in depth about the options, while both receiving and questioning background information and discussing important matters in detail. The meetings lasted at least two-and-a-half hours.
19. Participants were recruited by random-digit telephone dialling from ORS's Social Research Call Centre. Having been initially contacted by phone, all participants were normally written to, to confirm the invitation and the arrangements; and those who agreed to come then received telephone or written reminders shortly before each meeting. Such recruitment by telephone is an effective way of ensuring that the participants are independent and broadly representative of the wider community.
20. At each of the forums, the participants were asked about the recruitment process, to confirm that it was polite, encouraging and friendly rather than intimidating or too 'pushy' – and, happily, all the participants were positive about their experience.

21. As standard good practice, and to ensure a representative cross-section, the participants were recompensed for their time and efforts in travelling and taking part. In recruitment, care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by disabilities or any other factors, and the venues at which the focus groups met were readily accessible. People's special needs were taken into account in the recruitment and venues.
22. In contrast to the very good attendance at the forums with members of the public, attendance was lower than desired at the business breakfasts and voluntary sector forums—despite both W&SFA and ORS sending out many invitations and reminders to a wide range of businesses and voluntary organisations. For example, we:
 - Contacted all Chambers of Commerce
 - Sent invitations to a random sample of 500 businesses across the area and did follow-up phone call invitations
 - Contacted all umbrella voluntary sector organisations (including Voluntary Action Swindon (VAS)), Develop Wiltshire and all of the Councils for Voluntary Service or equivalent) – and VAS and Develop put an open invitation on their website
 - Contacted all of the voluntary organisations in the Salisbury area.
23. Generalisations are always difficult, but it seems that most organisations were unconcerned about the three options, despite their fundamental importance; certainly, it was not easy to engage the business and voluntary sectors – so we are inclined to conclude that they did not find the matters controversial.
24. Although, like all other forms of qualitative consultation, forums cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the meetings gave diverse members of the public and some stakeholders the opportunity to participate. Despite the lower attendance at the business and voluntary sector forums, the participants considered the issues carefully and in depth; the forums with members of the public did likewise, and their attendance was satisfactory and diverse (reflecting the inclusive recruitment method) – so we are satisfied that the outcomes of the meeting (as reported below) are broadly indicative of how public opinion would incline on the basis of similar discussions. The outcomes reported here are reliably indicative of the opinions and attitudes of members of the public across Wiltshire and Swindon about W&SFA's three options.

Conduct of Forums

25. ORS worked in collaboration with W&SFA to agree a suitable agenda and informative stimulus material for the meeting. The meetings were divided into two main sections

An introductory presentation by ORS covering:

The resources and roles of the Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service (Wiltshire FRS) and its severe financial challenges

The meaning and implications of the three options

Round table discussion in which the participants were invited to work through a discussion agenda based around the three options for consideration.

26. In more detail, the introductory presentation by ORS covered of the following issues in some depth:

Governance role of the W&SFA

Current resources and roles of the Wiltshire FRS

Funding of the W&SFA – 40% in government grants and 60% from council tax

Budget reductions and savings achieved over the last four years

Financial outlook to the end of 2017-18 – with a projected ‘funding gap’ of between £3.1m and £3.9m if the current levels of expenditure were maintained

Savings of sufficient scale only possible by reducing the number of employees

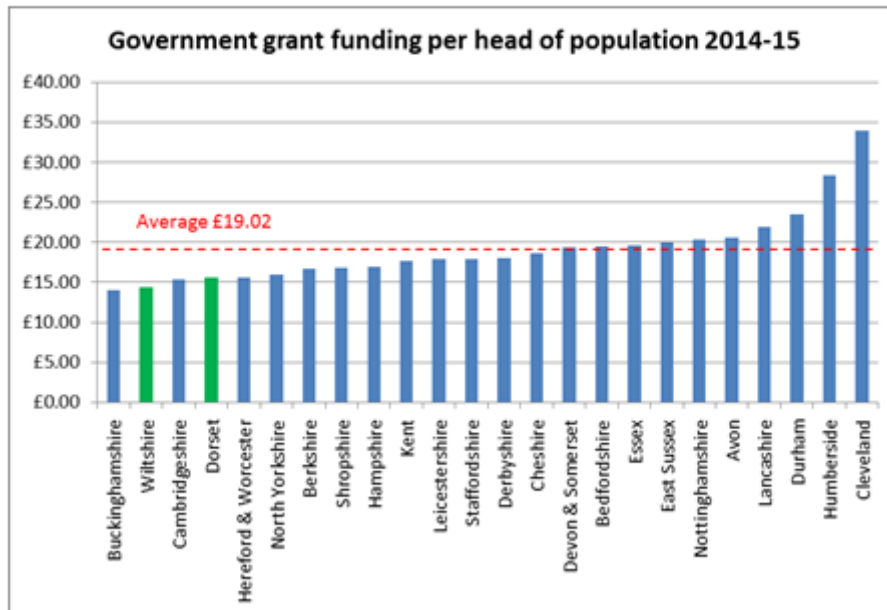
The meaning of the three options – including their financial savings

The need to consider accountability, governance and ‘localism’ as well as finances in any overall judgement on the merits of the options

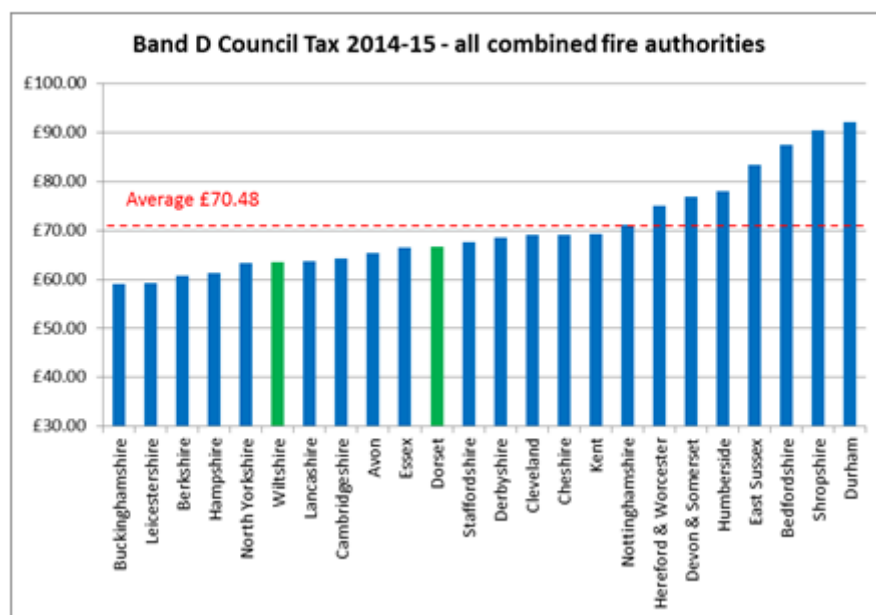
Variable track record for fire authority mergers – including Devon and Somerset (achieved), Hampshire and the Isle of Wight (abandoned after unfavourable consultation outcomes), West and East Sussex (abandoned after favourable consultation outcomes), and Scotland (imposed by the Scottish government).

27. The following is a small selection of the slides used in the initial presentations in the forums. The first two slides were used to explain W&FRA’s financial position, which results partly from being under-funded in terms of both central government grant and council tax precept levels. The forums were interested in these data and recognised that there are no ‘quick solutions’ to the funding issues, due to the nature of the national grant formula and restrictions on council tax increases.

Wiltshire FRS: c.40% of budget from government

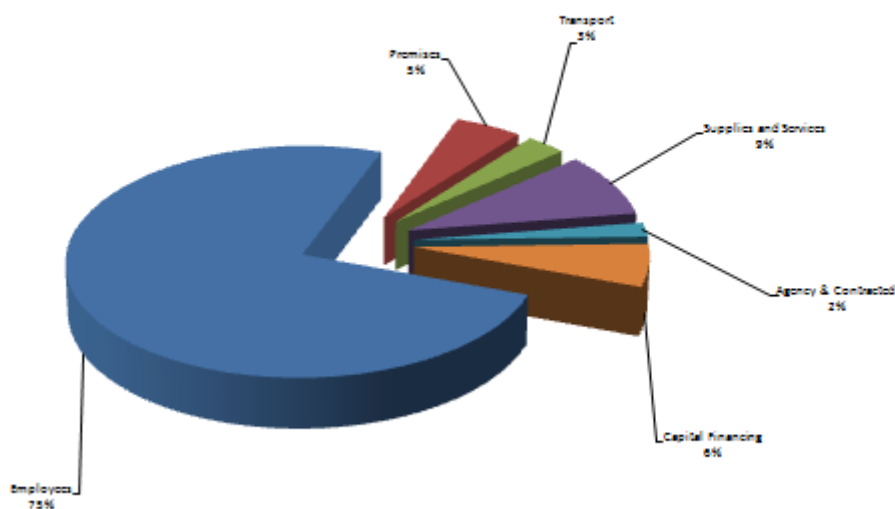


Wiltshire FRS: c.60% of budget from Council Tax



28. The following two slides were used to show why making substantial budget savings has to involve reducing the numbers of staff employed by W&SFA. Once more, the forums understood this data and recognised their implications clearly: while sympathising with the staff at all levels, the forum members appreciated that major savings cannot be made except by reducing the number of employees in appropriate ways. They recognised the need for staff reductions, while wishing the process and outcomes to be as 'humane' as possible.

Breakdown of Revenue Budget 2014/15



Corporate or back office departments

£2.95 million

**Cost of support
departments in
Dorset**

£2.71 million

**Cost of support
departments in
Wiltshire**



29. The next slide shows how the three options were first introduced, by emphasising their *differences* to ensure that participants were considering clearly differentiated choices. While these options might seem complex, there is no doubt that the participants in all the forums understood each of the options and appreciated the fundamental importance of the issues involved.

Three Key Options have emerged

- Should your Fire Authority and Fire and Rescue Service ...
 1. Stay separate and independent as now, but **increase collaboration with Wiltshire Council, Swindon Borough Council and other partners?**
 2. Stay separate and independent as now, **but increase collaboration with Dorset Fire Authority** - while also collaborating with Wiltshire Council, Swindon Borough Council and other partners?
 3. **Combine (or merge) with Dorset Fire Authority** - while also collaborating with Wiltshire Council, Swindon Borough Council, Bournemouth Borough Council, Dorset County Council, the Borough of Poole and other partners?

30. The next slide was used to explain the meaning of a merger of W&SFA with Dorset Fire Authority.

A new Combined (merged) Fire Authority

- Single new 'Combined Fire Authority' for Wiltshire & Swindon and Dorset
 - Governed by elected councillors from ...
 - Wiltshire Council
 - Swindon Borough Council
 - Bournemouth Borough Council
 - Dorset County Council
 - The Borough of Poole
 - Proportionate representation on new fire authority board
- Five constituent authorities
 - But own authority
- **New Employer**

31. The next slide was used to explain how a merger could save significant amounts of money by creating a single senior management team, a single corporate support service, and a single team of flexi-duty operational officers.

How would a merger save money?

- Single Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive
- Single senior management team
- Rationalise support services
 - Avoid duplication
- Single Control Centre
 - Will happen in any case – decided as a collaboration
- Rationalise Fleet and some special appliances
- Other technical and specialist opportunities
 - Flexi-duty operational officers (currently 30 in each FRS)
 - Specialist officers – technical policy and training
 - Full-time and day-crewed stations

32. The different experiences of various attempted and actual mergers were reviewed in all the forums – partly to show the difficulties of achieving an effective merger and partly to ‘dramatise’ the wide range of non-financial considerations that can legitimately influence people’s choices – for example, by using the following slide to outline the localism, accountability and autonomy issues that led Isle of Wight residents resoundingly to reject a merger of their fire and rescue service with Hampshire’s; and by referring to the difficulties of council tax equalisation and other political issues that led to the abandonment of the merger of the West and East fire and rescue services.

Has a merger been done before?

- Devon and Somerset - successful
- Hampshire/Isle of Wight – good reasons
 - But rejected by IoW
- East/West Sussex– good reasons
 - But rejected by West Sussex
- Scotland– national FRS created
 - Previously 8 separate FRSs
- Others will probably happen...

33. The review of some attempted and actual mergers (above) was helpful in demonstrating that there is nothing 'inevitable' about a merger; for the facilitator was keen to avoid any implication that any one option took priority over the others.
34. The following three summary slides were used concisely to outline the main features and financial benefits associated with each of the three options.

Option 1 for Wiltshire FRS

– Independence

- Continue as separate organisations

– Governed by Wilts & Swindon Fire Authority as now

– Collaboration with LAs – Wiltshire and Swindon – some back office or corporate functions could be joined up

– Potential savings for Wiltshire FRS of about £712K, leaving deficit of £2.4m - £3.2m

- More work on-going to see what additional savings can be delivered

Option 2 for Wiltshire FRS

– Independence

- Continue as separate organisations and governed by two fire authorities as now
- Many councils and public services share management teams

– Collaboration with Dorset Fire Authority

- Many organisations share some support services
- Complicated financial accounting – based on complex legal agreements
- Difficult to share operational-critical resources

– Potential savings for Wiltshire FRS of £864K, leaving deficit of £2.2m - £3m

Option 3 for Wiltshire FRS

- **Two fire authorities merge (combine)**
- Single combined committee of elected councillors
- One Chief Fire Officer and single team of officers
- Single team of support staff
- Some operational staff savings
- Savings would be made more quickly
- Improved resilience and economies of scale
- **Combined savings = about £4m per year**
- **Leaving combined deficit of £1.4m - £3.1m**

35. When using these slides and throughout the meetings, the facilitator took care to present a balanced picture, without implying that the financial issues should determine people's views; and in this context, the examples of the Isle of Wight and West and East Sussex fire and rescue services were particularly important in highlighting the potential importance of democracy, accountability, autonomy, and local services alongside financial considerations.
36. To avoid any possible issues of 'prior determination', and to ensure that the forums were seen to be independently run and not subject to political influence, members of the Fire Authority were asked not to attend, and they kindly co-operated in this approach. However, the chairs of the W&SFA and Dorset Fire Authorities were invited to attend one forum each to confirm they were content with the process.
37. Each forum was attended by one senior officer from each of the two fire and rescue services in order to answer technical questions, but they did not take part in the general discussion or debate. The public and stakeholders found their attendance helpful, for they had many questions about emergency cover, resources, cross-border cover and the like.
38. But when participants asked, *What do the officers think about this?* the facilitator intervened to explain that the officers' role was technical, not 'political'.
39. To confirm the independence and sense of balance, at the end of each forum the facilitator confirmed with the participants that the meeting had fairly captured their true views and that they were content for the outcomes to be reported fully to the W&SFA.

Round Table Discussions

40. Having introduced the three options using the slides above (which are selected examples only), the eight public forums used small round table discussions, in which participants were asked to review the issues and options by focusing on a key agenda, namely the:

Strengths and weaknesses of each option

Choice of first and second preference options

Appropriate relative 'scores' for each of the options compared to the others

Mitigation of problems or challenges associated with the first choice options.

41. The smaller stakeholder forums remained in a plenary format throughout, but nonetheless addressed the above issues. In both sets of forums, participants were also asked probing questions about:

Key reasons for choosing their first-choice option

Suitability of different models of collaboration

Whether their final choices were selected primarily as *necessary evils based on financial constraints* or as *sound policies worthy of being pursued independently of any financial constraints* – a simplifying polarity that invited respondents to consider their deeper, underlying views on the issues facing the W&SFA.

Reporting the Forums

42. At the end of each forum meeting, the facilitator confirmed with the participants that the meeting had been conducted fairly and that they were content for the outcomes to be reported fully to the W&SFA.
43. The following chapter is organised around the issues summarised above. We have sought to be concise by analysing people's choices and the key factors influencing their decisions, illustrated where appropriate with some key quotations. We have not sought to be exhaustive by including voluminous and in some cases repetitive quotation, for that would lengthen the report and make it less accessible. Verbatim quotations are used only to illustrate important and/or recurrent points of view; but, of course, the use of quotations does not imply that ORS agrees with the points of view they represent.

Forum Findings

Introduction

44. After reviewing the evidence and issues associated with each of the options, in their small groups the participants were asked to award relative 'scores' to each of the options, to indicate their relative preferences; and, in order to avoid an undue emphasis on 'group-thinking', all participants were also asked to register their first and second preferences separately as individuals.
45. For the scoring exercise, each round table group within the forums were given '100 points' to allocate between the option, and then the scores were totalled to generate an overall score and ranking for the meeting as a whole. Presenting the outcomes of this exercise may look unduly 'quantitative' but in reality the numbers in the table below are only convenient symbols of the relative preferences of each forum.

Summary

46. In three out of four forums who were asked, between a quarter and a third were aware to some extent at least of the consultation issues before being invited to the forum – suggesting that W&SFA's publicity and consultation activities had a 'reasonable' impact in raising public awareness.
47. None of those who were aware of the issues before the forums had perceived any of the options as being particularly controversial.
48. After detailed discussions the relatively well-informed participants in the twelve forums were asked to score each of the three options in small groups, and also to register their preferences separately as individuals. On both counts, there was an overwhelming preference for option 3, for W&SFA to merge with Dorset Fire Authority.
49. In terms of the points awarded, option 3 was more than six times more popular than option 1, and more than three-and-a-half times more popular than option two. In terms of 'first choices', option 3 was almost twelve times more popular than either options 1 or 2.
50. Options 1 and 2 had eight first choices each; but their respective points scores showed option 2 as significantly more popular than option 1. Therefore, the overall hierarchy of support was:

Option 3 – overwhelmingly the most popular, by a very large margin

Option 2 – equal with option 1 on first choices, but with a superior points score

Option 1 – a very distant third in comparison with option 3, and somehow behind option 2.

51. Option 2 was seen as a more complex, less convincing and watered-down version of option 3.
52. All the forums (except the small Swindon voluntary sector meeting) favoured option 3 by a big margin. This degree of consensus was remarkable. The main reasons for people favouring option 3 so markedly were that:
- Most participants thought there is more affinity between the two fire and rescue services than with their respective local authorities. They were six times more likely to believe that Wiltshire FRS has greater affinity with Dorset Fire and Rescue Service than with their local authorities.
- Most participants also valued the specialisation and the synergy of two fire and rescue services working together rather than W&SFA co-operating primarily with its local authorities
- Most participants valued the efficiency of a fast and effective emergency response service above locally-run services; they felt that making 'local services' a key priority was unrealistic for a life-and-death emergency service.
53. The dominant theme was that local authorities are not the most suitable partners for emergency services because there is little synergy between their respective operations, and local government has problems of its own to deal with.
54. Option 3 was not seen as simply a financial necessity, for most forums considered it to be sound public policy regardless of immediate financial considerations. That is, the majority agreed with option 3 in principle for the sake of efficiency and resilience.
55. The issue of council tax equalisation was taken up in some forums, but it did not become an obstacle to the popularity of option 3. The dominant point of view was that the difference between the two Authorities for Band D households (currently £2.98 a year) was small and insignificant alongside the benefits of a merger.

Public Awareness

56. Given the profound importance of the governance, identity and financial issues associated with the three options, one might expect that the publicity and consultation programme would raise public awareness considerably. In order to 'test' this assumption impressionistically, the participants in half the public forums were asked if they had heard about the options prior to being recruited for the forum. The proportions saying they had been aware of the issues before hearing of the forum were:

Malmesbury – none (0/8)

Chippenham – just over a third (5/14)

Trowbridge – a third (3/9)

Devizes – a quarter (3/12).

57. In other words, in three out of the four groups who were asked, between a quarter and a third had been aware, to some extent at least, of the consultation issues; but in one group none of them had heard of the matters. Without a baseline or comparative information it is hard to judge whether this proportion is 'high' or 'low' or 'average'; but (given the difficulty of getting the public to follow matters of governance in public services) the findings do imply that the publicity and consultation activities had a 'reasonable' impact in raising the awareness of some people.
58. Interestingly, none of those who were aware of the issues before the forums perceived the issues as being particularly controversial. The truth seems to be that most people take the reliability of their fire and rescue services for granted and do not react to what might seem to be abstract governance issues unless there is very focused local controversy (perhaps fuelled by fire-fighter protests, as can happen in relation to some integrated risk management plans). In this case, even those who were aware before the forums were relatively unconcerned.

Ranking the Options

59. As well as awarding relative 'scores' to each option after lengthy discussion in small groups, the participants were asked to register their own first preferences separately as individuals (in order to avoid an undue emphasis on 'group-thinking'). The following table reports both these ways of assessing the balance of opinion in each forum by showing the:
- Overall forums' 'scores' for each option (based on allocating '100 points' between the three options (the more points the better); and the
- Number of participants selecting an option as their 'first choice'.
60. In the table on the next page, the first and second columns from the left identify the forums' locations and the second column also shows the number of participants for each meeting in brackets. The third, fourth and fifth columns give the 'points score' for each option in the relevant forum; and the number selecting an option as their 'first choice' is also shown in brackets in each column.

Relative support for the options

	Forum (and number of participants)	Option 1 Score (and first choices)	Option 2 Score (and first choices)	Option 3 Score (and first choices)
1	Salisbury Public (13)	0 (0)	65 (0)	235 (13)
2	Warminster Public (16)	40 (1)	105 (4)	155 (11)
3	Marlborough Public (13)	18 (1)	59 (0)	223 (12)
4	Swindon Public (11)	5 (0)	45 (1)	250 (10)
5	Malmesbury Public (8)	32.5 (1)	22.5 (1)	145 (6)
6	Chippenham Public (14)	0 (0)	55 (0)	245 (14)
7	Trowbridge Public (9)	70 (2)	35 (0)	195 (7)
8	Devizes Public (12)	25 (0)	30 (0)	245 (12)
9	Swindon Business (5)	15 (1)	20 (0)	65 (4)
10	Swindon Voluntary (4)	130 (1)	145 (2)	125 (1)
11	Salisbury Business (1)	0 (N/A)	0 (N/A)	100 (1)
12	Salisbury Voluntary (5)	0 (1)	0 (0)	100 (4)
	Total scores (and 'first choices')	335 (8)	581 (8)	2,083 (95)

61. Clearly, the table above shows the overwhelming popularity of option 3 (a full merger between the two fire authorities) when compared with options 1 and 2. In terms of the points awarded, option three was more than six times more popular than option 1 and more than three-and-a-half times more popular than option two. In terms of 'first choices', option 3 was almost twelve times more popular than either options 1 or 2.
62. In terms of the numbers of people across all the forums selecting options 1 and 2 as their first choices, the two options appear equally supported, with eight first choices each. However, the respective points scores for options 1 and 2 show that option 2 is significantly more popular overall than option 1. Option 2 is about 1.7 times more popular than option 1. Therefore, the overall hierarchy of support is clearly in the following order:

Option 3 – overwhelmingly the most popular, by a very large margin

Option 2 – equal with option 1 on first choices, but with a superior points score

Option 1 – a very distant third in comparison with option 3, and some way behind option 2.

Variations by Area

63. In a statutory consultation about options of such fundamental importance, it is striking that there are no clear area variations in the findings reported in the table above – for all the meetings except one clearly favoured option 3 by a big margin.
64. The single exception was the small forum of four people from the voluntary sector that met in Swindon – for in terms of both points and first choices there was a division of opinion, but with option 2 just emerging as the most popular in that group.
65. However, this does not imply that opinions differed generally in Swindon because the Swindon public forum massively favoured option 3 and so, too, did the Swindon business forum. In fact, the different outcome in the Swindon voluntary sector group reflects more about the individual characteristic of its members rather than a general difference of view in that area (for three of the four were Rotarians from Chippenham and two of them were married (and so were likely to take a similar view, which was influential in a small meeting of only four people).
66. However, the forum with members of the Malmesbury public did differ from the others, not in relation to overall support for option 3, but in their views on the degree of ‘affinity’ between the Wiltshire FRS and their local councils, on the one hand, and Dorset Fire and Rescue Service on the other. Therefore, the support for option 3 in the Malmesbury forum was based on financial considerations rather than notions of ‘affinity’. The next section takes up the theme of affinity in more detail.

Organisations’ ‘Affinity’

67. Clearly, the lack of significant variation by area in the general and substantial support for option 3 invites explanation: why was option 3 the most popular? In order to explore this systematically, seven of the public forums were asked whether they considered the Wiltshire FRS to have more ‘affinity’ or ‘more in common’ with their Wiltshire or Swindon Councils or with the Dorset Fire and Rescue Service. This question was not asked in Warminster due to pressure of time.
68. It is striking that across Wiltshire and Swindon, with the single exception of Malmesbury, a big majority of the forum participants thought there is more affinity between the two fire and rescue services than between their local service and their local authorities – as the following table shows.

**Relative affinity between W&SFA and (a) its local councils
and (b) Dorset Fire Authority (DFRS)**

	Forum (and number of participants)	Greater affinity with local councils	Greater affinity with DFRS	Don't know
1	Salisbury Public (13)	0	12	1
2	Warminster Public	Not asked	Not asked	Not asked
3	Marlborough Public (13)	2	9	3
4	Swindon Public (11)	0	11	0
5	Malmesbury Public (8)	6	2	0
6	Chippenham Public (14)	0	14	0
7	Trowbridge Public (9)	2	7	0
8	Devizes Public (12)	1	11	0
	Totals	11	66	4

69. Overall, participants were six times more likely to believe that Wiltshire FRS has greater affinity with Dorset Fire and Rescue Service than with its own local authorities. In this case, 'affinity' was explained as meaning 'more in common that enables the organisations to work together effectively'. With the exception of Malmesbury there is no significant variation in the pattern of views; it is probably significant that Malmesbury is one of the furthest areas from Dorset. It seems likely, in this context, that the support for option 3 in the Malmesbury forum was based on financial considerations rather than on notions of 'affinity'.

'Specialisation' rather than 'Localism'

70. There were certainly some vocal participants who valued services that are more local and smaller in scale, particularly if they involve Wiltshire and Swindon people and organisations working together within their joint boundaries. For example, in this context some typical comments in Malmesbury were:

We have good governance now – the smaller authority works well!

The whole [merger] area is very large and could involve a lot of travelling [for officers and managers]. And could the single control centre deal with the local knowledge aspects of the service over such a big area?

Mergers do not necessarily have a good track record – for example, the one with Suffolk and Cambridgeshire failed!

71. There were others who supported this view – for example:

Option 1 retains local identity and keeps services local and accountable – they can be ‘in-house’ with no outside agencies involved: it’s geographically acceptable and accessible (Trowbridge public)

72. In the small voluntary sector forum in Swindon similar sentiments were voiced:

People like Wiltshire services to be local; that’s a consideration – and we have to have a fair balance

Will you risk losing local knowledge in a bigger area? It’s important to ensure this doesn’t happen!

73. Yet some people observed that affinity is not an exclusive relation: fire and rescue services naturally work together on operational issues, but local authorities are suitable partners for prevention and community work:

Local authorities [are the best partners] for reducing risks of fires – they work well [as partners] on this; but another fire and rescue services is the best [as a partner] for emergency cover.

74. Overall, though, as the table of perceptions of ‘relative affinity’ (above) implies, most respondents heavily favoured specialisation and the synergy of two fire and rescue services working together rather than W&SFA co-operating primarily with its local authorities. For example, some typical comments were:

A merger could be an equal partnership and like-minded – they would be two willing parties that want to work together and have professional experience – and there will be no “politics” involved [as there would be] with different organisations trying to collaborate on the basis of different interests (Salisbury public)

Two specialist organisations [fire and rescue services] could work as one! (Marlborough public)

There [would be] synergy in fire and rescue services making savings together – it makes business and cultural sense and financial efficiency (Chippenham public)

Conceptually, it is much easier for the two fire and rescue services to make savings together (on a specialist, like-for-like basis) rather than by working with local authorities, who have different interests and priorities (Swindon voluntary sector)

Option 1 would encounter vested interests within local authorities! (Swindon business).

75. There were many participants who clearly valued the efficiency of a fast and effective emergency response service above any other consideration. Indeed, they felt that making 'local services by and for local people' a key priority was a narrow and unrealistic focus for a life-and-death emergency service. For example, some of the typical comments were:

If people dial 999, they don't mind how the fire engine comes to them – providing it is there efficiently – that governance structure does not matter to them (Salisbury voluntary sector)

Most people don't mind how the service is organised or where the HQ is, providing they get a good responsive service when it's needed – the best you can have for the money (Devizes public)

LA boundaries are just 'historical' and don't denote sensible areas for fire and RTC services. The decision has to be about the assessment of risk and resilience (Swindon business).

76. Such was the focus on excellence of service and making effective and real savings, that a few people advocated a regional (or in some cases a national) solution, at least eventually. For example, a member of the Swindon voluntary sector forum declared:

The Scottish experience is to have a national service – so this [merger option] seems like tinkering with the problem (though £3M is really a small amount) – so I suggest we need a regional solution for the South West from Cornwall to Bristol...I'm in favour of a merger of the two authorities now, but it will be superseded by larger changes later on. Politically a regional service would be unpopular, but it will come before long.

Consideration of Option 1

77. Out of 96 people in the forums, option 1 had eight first choices, but was clearly behind option 2 on the points score. Overall, then, option 1 was the least popular option, partly for the reasons outlined in the section just above, and partly for the reasons below.
78. The idea that local councils are not the best partners for fire and rescue services was prominent in most of the groups – and a wide range of considerations cited for the conclusion, including all the following:

Local authorities are too political

They are facing severe financial pressures themselves

Local authorities have a wide range of interests and concerns – much wider than fire and rescue services, which are more specific and specialised in their focus and expertise respectively

Fire and rescue service issues and finances would compete against many other priorities in local government, including education and social services

Councils lack the specialised expertise that fire and rescue services require

It is unclear how W&SFA would collaborate with more than one council

Saving money by outsourcing services to local councils seems unclear and 'aspirational' – and there is no assurance of success

Local government is outsourcing some of its own services and has reduced its staff – so could it cope?

There is no guarantee that local councils could provide good value in the services they offered to W&SFA

In any case, outsourcing support services to local councils would save insufficient money.

Without seeking to illustrate all the above summary bullets with a one-to-one quotation, the following comments are typical of the range of opinions on option 1:

Wiltshire council is expensive – so the payroll for W&SFA is outsourced to Devon! I fear councils will be too expensive and not as efficient. The councils don't necessarily understand how the fire service works (Salisbury public)

The third option is the only clear and politically transparent way ahead – options 1 and 2 are unclear of how savings will be made (Marlborough public)

Options 1 and 2 are not really viable – the LAs don't have the resources to outsource-to effectively – they have their own cuts to take care off – and they'd need more staff (Devizes public)

It's all about efficiency – as a taxpayer I want people to take responsibility for being as efficient as possible – we have to make safe and efficient savings (Chippenham public)

The local authorities are not very efficient as partners for the fire service – the councils try to be jack of all trades; and councillors rarely have the skills or experience necessary to monitor the fire service (Salisbury voluntary sector).

Overall, the dominant theme was that local authorities are not the most suitable partners for emergency services because there is little synergy between their respective operations, and local government has plenty of problems of its own to deal with. These perceptions combined with people's relatively slight emphasis on the importance of the purely local provision of services to downgrade option 1 in comparison with the other two.

Consideration of Option 2

79. Many respondents could see some strengths in option 2- in terms of two cognate organisations working together effectively to achieve savings in co-operation that neither of them could achieve alone, but ultimately the virtues of this option were seen as just watered-down benefits of option 3, rather than as real merits justifying option 2 instead of option 3.

80. Therefore, out of 96 people in the forums, option 2 had eight first choices, but was clearly ahead of option 1 on the points score – so, overall, option 2 was the second most popular option. In summary, the main reasons people gave for rating it far below option 3 were:

Sharing support services on a contractual basis between two different organisations and fire authorities is potentially complex and uncertain

The projected savings are not necessarily convincing – would they really be achieved in practice, in a context of so many unknowns?

There would be no reduction in senior operational staff or flexi-duty officers

The prospect of collaborating with Dorset Fire Authority is an unconvincing half-way house that does not go far enough in terms of making savings or achieving greater resilience and efficiency

81. The following comments are typical of the range of opinions on option 2:

Savings would be at the lower end of the scale, both organisations might still be 'top heavy' and there could be possible confusion over the division of services and resources. Why not just merge? (Salisbury public)

I'm not clear how this would save enough money and each organisation would still have to make savings separately (Devizes public).

We don't want a half-way house – a full merger is best! (Malmesbury public)

Do it properly if at all! Collaboration can fade away or be discontinued – so do it properly and merge! Get on with it! (Salisbury voluntary sector).

82. Overall, then, the dominant theme was that option 2 is more complex (contractually), less convincing (in terms of making savings) and a watered-down versions of option 3. It seemed to most people a very poor second best to option 3.

Consideration of Option 3

83. It is clear already that option 3 was overwhelmingly popular when compared with options 1 and 2. In terms of the points awarded, it was more than six times more popular than option 1, and more than three-and-a-half times more popular than option two; in terms of 'first choices' option 3 was nearly twelve times more popular than either options 1 or 2.
84. Some of the key reasons for people's opinions have been reviewed above, in the sections headed 'Organisations' Affinity' and 'Specialisation rather than Localism'. Clearly, a key reason for the popularity of option 3 was that participants were six times more likely to believe that Wiltshire FRS has greater affinity with Dorset Fire and Rescue Service than with its own local authorities (when 'affinity' is interpreted as 'having enough in common to work together effectively'). Also, participants valued a fast and effective emergency response service above other considerations: overall, they felt that making 'local services' a key priority was unrealistic for a life-and-death emergency service.
85. In summary, the other, more specific reasons for favouring option 3 were:
- A merger achieves the biggest savings by facilitating the maximum integration of two services that now run in parallel but separately in their respective areas
 - It is the most streamlined and effective solution
 - A merger is the best way to protect front-line services from arbitrary cuts that might otherwise be necessary
 - The larger organisation would be more resilient and better able to cope with the further necessary financial savings
 - There would be considerable economies of scale – not only in support services but in procurement, senior management and operational resources as well
 - Across the whole organisation, additional savings would be possible by sensible and safe economies in areas with substantial wholetime fire-fighter resources
 - A bigger organisation would be able to invest in new IT and other technology to enhance its services
 - What is currently 'cross-border support' between Dorset and Wiltshire and Swindon would become 'internal resilience'
 - A merger is likely to be supported by the government
 - A bigger combined organisation would have much more influence nationally and would be one of the larger combined fire authority areas
86. The following comments are typical of the range of opinions on option 3:
- It's the biggest savings! (Warminster public)*

My heart said option 1, but being realistic recognised the savings to be made [by a merger] – it's the most cost effective... We don't want a half-way-house – a full systematic merger is best! (Malmesbury public)

There's less ambiguity and uncertainty [with a merger] – it could work very well (Devizes public)

The option that best protects front line services! (Warminster public)

There would be a capacity to make savings more effectively in the larger area if there was a merger (Warminster public)

It would be the most effective administration – more streamlined and efficient, with a reduction in senior management costs. And it would do most to maintain front-line services...with less impact on each area (Trowbridge public)

It has to be option 3! Fleet maintenance can be streamlined with reduced costs by effective outsourcing to specialist organisations that will get to know your business and provide a maintenance system based on your requirements. For example, our vehicles are done overnight. You need to combine your fleet maintenance systems – and could also consider outsourcing the work properly (Salisbury business)

Technology is developing and becoming more costly, so a bigger [merged] service could use it better within a wider context – which requires investment (Marlborough public)

Money is not necessarily the main advantage – it would improve resilience and capacity: option 3 will make us stronger and more resilient (Swindon business)

With the real synergy, it could make service reductions more effectively and safely (Trowbridge public)

The two fire and rescue services have a good relationship already – that's a good basis. It's better to have a specialised partnership for life-critical services (Devizes public)

The services are a good match and could work well together – but it would not be so good with other fire and rescue services (Devizes public)

87. To clarify people's reasoning further, in the public forums (except Warminster due to time pressures), those who supported option 3 were asked whether they had seen their choice as a *necessary evil* (based on regrettable financial necessity only) or whether they saw it as a *sound policy worthy of being pursued anyway* (for the sake of greater efficiency and value-for-money to the public). The balance of opinion is shown in the table on the following page.

Option 3 as 'necessary evil' or 'sound policy'?

	Forum (and number of participants)	Necessary Evil	Sound Policy	Don't know
1	Salisbury Public (13)	5	8	0
2	Warminster Public (16)	Not asked	Not asked	Not asked
3	Marlborough Public (13)	6	6	1
4	Swindon Public (11)	2	7	2
5	Malmesbury Public (8)	2	5	1
6	Chippenham Public (14)	0	14	0
7	Trowbridge Public (9)	5	4	0
8	Devizes Public (12)	3	7	2
9	Swindon Business (5)	2	3	0
10	Swindon Voluntary (4)	3	1	0
11	Salisbury Business (1)	0	1	0
12	Salisbury Voluntary (5)	Not asked	Not asked	Not asked
	Totals	28	56	6

88. Overall, in the ten forums where the question was put, participants were exactly twice as likely to consider option 3 to be a sound public policy regardless of immediate financial considerations. In other words, a majority agreed with option 3 in principle and did not feel constrained in their choices by financial considerations. There were a number of comments that illustrate this way of thinking – for example:

We should think about the best way forward, not just do the same things because they've always been done. [A merger] is a sensible policy, but we don't want to reduce to the most basic service possible, we don't want the minimum. But we should look at all value for money options realistically – not just do what we've always done! (Swindon public)

This is not just about financial pressures – it's a sensible policy. Financial pressures can force us to look at new options and have new ideas about organisations, like a joint [merged] fire and rescue service (Devizes public)

It doesn't matter who it is, we need better services based on greater economy – the services need the challenge of doing more with less to become better at what they do! (Devizes public)

The reduction in the risk of fires makes it sensible to consider how to give more value for money with less resources – the current level of cover could seem a luxury rather than a complete necessity. (Chippenham public)

89. One issue that might have been expected to concern forum members was the equalisation of council tax, particularly because one of the introductory slides highlighted the difference between the precept levels for W&SFA and Dorset Fire Authority. The issue was certainly taken up in some forums, but it did not become a matter of real concern or an obstacle to people selecting option 3 as the best. The two dominant points of view on this topic were that the difference between the two authorities for Band D households (currently about £3 a year) was small and in any case insignificant alongside the benefits a merger would bring in terms of additional savings and resilient services.

Some Concerns

90. In connection with fundamental options such as these, people are bound to have concerns about the issues and the implementation of their chosen options. These do not undermine their choices, but they do identify a range of matters the W&SFA should take into account in pursuing its chosen policy. The major reservations expressed by some (not a majority) in the twelve meetings were that:

A merger is irreversible – so it has to be made to work properly or it is not worth doing

A merger has to be really well managed to be effective in achieving real savings rapidly

Any merger should be a partnership of equals – not a take-over by one organisation of the other

Operational officers on the ground should know about each other's areas – in order to work together effectively

Other ways of making operational savings should also be considered – like crewing more fire engines with four rather than five

All the options will lead to some loss of jobs and redundancies – so these should be handled as sensitively and humanely as possible (there were many such comments)

The fire service should manage its estate actively and use its fire stations and premises more commercially – by sharing them with suitable tenants, with proper charges for the space used

A fire authority of 28 or even 25 members is too large and should definitely be streamlined – partly for more effective decision-making and also as a symbol of a slimmed-down and more effective organisation (there were many such comments).