

WILTSHIRE & SWINDON FIRE AUTHORITY

REPORT REFERENCE NO.	6
MEETING	Wiltshire & Swindon Fire Authority
MEETING DATE	11 November 2014
SUBJECT OF REPORT	Consultation in respect of 'Strengthening Our Fire and Rescue Service'
LEAD OFFICER	Simon Routh-Jones, Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive
RECOMMENDATIONS	<p>Members are asked to note:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) the findings of the report from Opinion Research Services on the Qualitative Forums; b) the findings contained in a presentation from Opinion Research Services delivered as part of this meeting; c) the assurance provided by the Consultation Institute that the consultation to date complies with good practice under the Compliance Assessment Scheme; <p>and to consider all of the above in their determination of the future of Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority.</p>
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	<p>At the CFA meeting on 10 July 2014, Members agreed to undertake a public consultation on three scenarios to help inform a decision on the future direction of the Authority and its Fire and Rescue Service. A full public consultation was undertaken between 21 July 2014 and 20 October 2014 and this paper, together with a presentation from Opinion Research Services (ORS) to be given at the meeting, explains the results of that consultation.</p>
APPENDICES	<p>Appendix A: Three Options for the Wiltshire & Swindon Fire Authority – An independent Report of the consultation Forums – Opinion Research Services</p> <p>Appendix B: Details on the consultation undertaken</p>

Introduction

- 1 At their meeting on 10 July 2014, Members of the Combined Fire Authority agreed to undertake a public consultation on three scenarios without expressing a preferred option. Members agreed to a formal and comprehensive 13 week consultation exercise being conducted from 21 July 2014 to 20 October 2014.
- 2 Opinion Research Services (ORS) were commissioned to independently facilitate the consultation and the Consultation Institute commissioned to validate the exercise. This paper contains the ORS report on the responses received at a series of qualitative forums involving the public, businesses and voluntary organisations. This paper will be supported by a presentation by ORS that will also include the results from the quantitative (on-line and postal questionnaires) element of the consultation.

The Consultation Approach

- 3 The public and stakeholder consultation process has been extensive and has been led by ORS. The Consultation Institute were commissioned to assess the consultation process against the Compliance Assessment Scheme and their assessments to date are detailed later in this report. The process ran for 13 weeks from the 21 July 2014 through to the 20 October 2014. An Inclusive Impact Assessment was also undertaken as part of the planning and delivery process and information on this is given later in the report.
- 4 The key elements included:
 - A range of documents being made available including:-
 - Public consultation leaflets, questionnaire and posters (5,000 leaflets to libraries, fire stations and other public buildings and available on-line (collectively referred to in this report as the 'open consultation questionnaire') and 6,000 postal leaflets to residents (referred to in this report as the 'household survey')

Within Dorset the following additional documents were supplied with a link from the Service's website:

- Draft business case for combination
- Draft vision for combination
- 2020 strategic assessment
- Information was sent to a large number of key stakeholders, including MPs, partners, neighbouring fire and rescue services, local authorities and community groups in accordance with an engagement plan approved by the Combination Oversight Board
- An on-line consultation portal with links from the website, which hosted the key documents and allowed on-line surveys to be accessed by staff and the public
- Contacts, which included presentations, briefings and letters, were given to local and national politicians and there were numerous meetings with officers of constituent authorities and other public bodies. There were briefings to

Community Area Boards and Localities to promote the consultation and provide information. This included two briefings to MPs

- A number of reminder letters, emails and press releases were sent including a general notice on all press releases advising the consultation period
 - Leaflets were also made available at the many health fairs, which took place prior to Area Board Meetings in Wiltshire in September and the Emergency Services Show attended by many thousands of local people. They were also available at the Senior Wellbeing days on 1st, 6th and 7th October across Wiltshire and Swindon
 - Social Media, Twitter and Facebook were used to promote the consultation process
 - A consultation telephone and email helpline was provided
 - Staff meetings took place with station based, fire control and corporate staff and promotion and consultation reminders were sent by e-mail, internal newsletters and through wage slips. Discussions or meetings took place with representative bodies on a number of occasions both formally and informally.
- 5 More detailed information on the breadth and depth of the consultation undertaken is given in Appendix B.
- 6 In order to be inclusive and provide sufficient information and considered judgements to be made, the consultation used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative techniques in order to:
- promote informed engagement through a series of forums with members of the public and other stakeholders; and,
 - provide as many people as possible with opportunities to take part using a freely available consultation document and questionnaire.
- 7 Given the understandable limited awareness that most residents have in how their fire and rescue service operate and manages its resources and costs, an in-depth consultation with informed audiences who have the opportunity to question and test the evidence for options, which is what the qualitative forums deliver, are considered to be especially valuable. All elements of the consultation are important and none should be disregarded, but the forums provide Members with the opportunity to reflect on the views of residents who have been able to explore the arguments in depth and the reasons for people's opinions.

Qualitative Stakeholder Consultation

- 8 This was provided in a number of ways through forums for residents and the business and voluntary sector.
- 9 Residents Forums were created by bringing together a representative cross-section of residents, independently recruited by ORS to reflect the make-up of local communities. Residents were provided with information on the governance role of the Fire Authority and the financial difficulties facing it. This approach allowed for a more

detailed in-depth discussion on the scenarios, which provided insights for consideration that may not be obtained by just considering quantitative questions. 8 Forums were held throughout Wiltshire and Swindon as agreed by Members as follows.

Location of Residents Forum	Date of Meeting
Salisbury	24 September
Warminster	25 September
Marlborough	29 September
Swindon	30 September
Malmesbury	9 October
Chippenham	13 October
Trowbridge	14 October
Devizes	15 October

- 10 There were 4 Business and Voluntary Sector Forums held covering voluntary sector groups and the business community, which were conducted in a similar manner to the resident's forums.

Location of Business and Voluntary Sector Forum	Date of Meeting
Swindon voluntary sector forum	30 September
Swindon business forum	30 September
Salisbury voluntary sector forum	14 October
Salisbury business forum	14 October

- 11 The results of the qualitative stakeholder consultation are provided in the report from ORS which is contained in Appendix A and as part of the presentation to be given at this meeting. Overall there is significant support for scenario 3.

Quantitative Stakeholder Consultation

- 12 This comprised on-line and postal elements, namely Online Questionnaires and Residents' Surveys.
- 13 *On-line Questionnaires* - An on-line consultation questionnaire was created to widen the scope of participation and allow residents and other stakeholders the opportunity to influence and inform the result. This outlined the three scenarios, with supporting evidence and documentation and asked a series of questions about people's views in relation to the three scenarios. The on-line consultation was managed using a third party supplier, with ORS reviewing the approach and ensuring data quality. 372 on-line responses have been received.
- 14 *Residents' Survey (postal questionnaire)*. Given the large area covered by the Fire Authority, it is recognised that it is important that residents had the opportunity to give their views on the proposals. 5,000 leaflet questionnaires with freepost return envelopes, were made available through libraries and other public buildings which contained information about the three scenarios, together with a self-completion questionnaire. Postal questionnaires, to a representative cross-section of 6,000 residents, were also issued. These residents were randomly selected by ORS to

receive the postal questionnaire. 935 questionnaires were returned to ORS.

- 15 ORS will be presenting the full results of the quantitative consultation through a presentation at the Fire Authority meeting on 11 November and the headline information will be available through the Members seminar on the 3 November and subsequently on-line. This will support Members to make an informed judgement.

Summary - Stakeholder Responses

- 16 A summary of some of the core stakeholder's responses to support this business case is provided below

17 **(a) Local political opinion**

Wiltshire Council. The political debate has been particularly active in Wiltshire. Members in Wiltshire Council have expressed differing views on options for change. Some have felt that the fire and rescue service should remain within the framework of the existing CFA allowing closer joined up service delivery and no dilution of democratic accountability. There remains considerable concern towards the distancing of the Ambulance service when it regionalised and there is a fear that this could happen to fire and rescue services should the governance arrangements move beyond the boundaries of Wiltshire and Swindon. Others have argued that scenario 1 and 2 give rise to significant cuts to service delivery which fundamentally threatens the future viability of frontline services. Formally Wiltshire Council passed a resolution on the 21 October that 'This Council understands the financial challenges that the Wiltshire & Swindon Fire Authority faces and appreciates the work that has been done to spell out the options for the future as set out in the consultation document and the draft business case. This Council has concerns about the gap in funding, the uncertainty with regard to equalisation of precepts and the governance arrangements which could disadvantage Wiltshire. The Council seeks assurance in these matters and prefers not to commit to any option until such time as these issues are resolved. Whichever option the Fire Authority decides upon this Council would welcome closer cooperation to reduce costs in both organisations.'

Swindon Borough Council. In discussions with Officers, Swindon Borough Council wished to avoid frontline service cuts that may include reductions in Swindon and a degradation of partnership working. The Cabinet considered the matter at its meeting on 10 September and authorised the Director of Law & Democratic Services, in consultation with the Leader of the Council and the political groups leaders on the council to develop, finalise and submit the councils response. This was that 'Swindon Borough Council is supportive of Scenario 3 (i.e. Merge with Dorset Fire Authority and increased collaboration with local partners) whilst recognising that there are a number of issues to be resolved before any final view could be taken, in particular around:

- The funding gap identified in the Consultation Paper;
- The equalisation of precepts and the impact on Swindon residents; and,
- The governance arrangements of the proposed merged authority and what assurance can be given that the views of the relevant constituent authority are given full weight when considering matters relating to that authority's area.'

Members of Parliament for Wiltshire and Swindon. There have been two briefings for MPs and a number of individual discussions. In discussions with the Chief Fire Officer and within the briefings undertaken, the vast majority of MPs have expressed their support for any solution that best protects frontline services.

However, James Gray MP has been particularly outspoken in support of the Fire and Rescue Service remaining within the current governance arrangements. His views are largely predicated on the basis that scenario 1 will allow more integrated service provision and will help guard against the future dilution of resources that has been suggested has been experienced from the changes to the ambulance service. Full information on his response is given in Appendix B and his response has been made available to Members on-line.

For the information of Members in respect of Dorset:

- **Dorset unitary authorities.** The overwhelming support from the Cabinet of Dorset County Council and Bournemouth Borough Council is for scenario 3 on the basis that it helps protect frontline service provision and allows for continued prevention programmes. Democratic proportionality and continued engagement in strong partnership working are key assurances that are being sought.
- **Members of Parliament for Dorset, Bournemouth and Poole.** There have been two briefings for MPs and a number of individual discussions. The vast majority of MPs have expressed their support for any solution that best protects frontline services and four MPs have written specifically to support scenario 3.

18 (b) General Public/Residents

There is an overwhelming preference for option 3 from residents in the qualitative forums. The main reasons for this support were that scenario 1 and 2 do not provide levels of savings that best protect frontline service provision. The sharing of governance and democratic control was less important to them, than the need to protect frontline services and being more efficient with public money.

19 (c) Business and Voluntary Sector

In much the same way as the public, three out of the four business and voluntary sector forums shared the same views. Despite a great deal of effort by ORS with support from Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service, attendance at the voluntary and business sector forums was disappointing. Nevertheless, ORS have judged that those who were able to attend were able and qualified to scrutinise the proposals in detail.

For the information of Members, the findings from Dorset show a significant majority in favour of scenario 3 and the presentation from ORS will contain more information on this.

20 (d) Staff

An extensive programme of staff engagement was undertaken with senior managers holding 32 briefing sessions for the four staff groups (i.e. Wholetime Firefighters, On-call (Retained) Firefighters, Fire Control and Corporate Staff) and this is detailed in Appendix B. Staff were not asked to register their views in open meetings but were encouraged to complete the on-line or written questionnaire. During briefings, staff raised a number of questions associated with concerns for job security (largely corporate staff), and any changes to terms and conditions or future cuts to frontline services. The views of staff will be reported to Members as part of the presentation by ORS.

21 (e) Representative Bodies

Fire Brigades Union. No opinion was directly expressed in relation to the scenarios. The FBU have stated that they believe that local, as well as national, political decision-making have created the financial circumstances being faced by us. They believe that that the consultation approach was flawed in so far as the CFA should have consulted the public over a greater fire-precept level to create a financially sound situation that is less reliant on the retained duty system and allows the age profile of the workforce to be rebalanced. They have expressed some concerns about the future democratic accountability of any new CFA and sought assurances that there will be no reductions in fire stations, appliances or uniformed station based posts and that employment terms and conditions will be protected.

Unison. The Wiltshire Council Unison Branch has responded that option 1 'Remain independent and increase collaboration with Wiltshire Council and Swindon Borough Council' is the best way forward. They did not provide any further explanation or amplification as to their reasons or rationale.

For the information of Members, the FBUs position in Dorset was much the same, although Unison and the Fire Officers Association stated that their position was that scenario 3 represented the best way forward.

Key findings from ORS

22 ORS have confirmed that the consultation was conducted at a formative stage and the consultation information gave the public and stakeholders sufficient time to participate. Through the consultation document and its website information, the public were provided with informative background information.

23 Forum Findings

- After reviewing the evidence and issues associated with each of the options, in 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.
- For the scoring exercise, each round table group within the forums were given '100 points' to allocate between the options, 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 are only convenient symbols of the relative preferences in each forum.
- 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 the fire authority's publicity and consultation activities had a 'reasonable' impact in raising public awareness.
- None of those who were aware of the issues before the forums had perceived any of the options as being particularly controversial.
- 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 Wiltshire & Swindon Fire Authority to merge with Dorset Fire Authority.

- 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.
- 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 some way behind option 2.

- Option 2 was seen as a more complex, less convincing and watered-down version of option 3.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

24 Findings from Consultation Questionnaires

- The data from the questionnaires sent to libraries, fire stations and other public buildings, together with the on-line questionnaire (open consultation questionnaire) and the survey posted to residents (household Survey) show option 3 is the most popular.
- Option 3 has an overwhelming absolute majority support in the open consultation questionnaire and achieves majority support in the full analysis of the household survey.

25 As mentioned above, it is felt by ORS that all elements of the consultation are important and none should be disregarded, but the forums provide Members with the opportunity to reflect on the views of residents who have been able to explore the arguments in depth and the reasons for people's opinions.

26 Appendix B contains details on comments made as consultation responses and the issues raised both internally and externally. The results and comments from the on-line and written questionnaires will form part of the presentation by ORS that will be made available after the Members Seminar on 31 October.

Quality Assurance

27 The Consultation Institute have provided assurance that the consultation has followed good practice to date and have confirmed that the consultation has been carried out properly and effectively.

Policy Implications

28 There are no policy implications arising directly from this report as it provides information to support Member decision making.

Risks

29 The risks arising from this extensive consultation have been considerably mitigated due to the engagement of a chartered professionally acknowledged consultation company who have a sound track record and by validation by the Consultation Institute.

HR, Equality and Diversity Implications

30 In line with the provisions of the 2010 Equality Act 2010, a full Inclusive Impact Assessment (IIA) was carried out on the Consultation Programme. The Equality and Diversity Advisor from Wiltshire and the Community Engagement & Inclusion Manager from Dorset were fully engaged with the creation of the Inclusive Impact Assessment, which will be signed off by both advisors and will include the results of the consultation. They were satisfied that the consultation process was proportionate and planned to be as inclusive as possible of community groups in Dorset and Wiltshire. The Equality and Diversity Advisors from both fire services attended Staff Forums and Community Focus Groups, to ensure that there was no differential impact. The full Inclusive Impact Assessment will be made available on-line with other consultation documentation for public scrutiny.

Financial and Legal Implications

31 There are no financial implications and the legal implications arising from this report.

Recommendations

32 Members are asked to note:

- a) the findings of the report from Opinion Research Services on the Qualitative Forums;
- b) the findings contained in a presentation from Opinion Research Services delivered as part of this meeting;
- c) the assurance provided by the Consultation Institute that the consultation to date complies with good practice under the Compliance Assessment Scheme;

and to consider all of the above in their determination of the future of Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority.

Simon Routh-Jones

Chef Fire Officer & Chief
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Unpublished documents used in the preparation of this report:

None

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