



Cllr R Knox
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Service Headquarters
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Dear Rebecca

Strengthening our Fire and Rescue Service: A Consultation by Dorset Fire Authority

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the future direction of the Dorset Fire Authority. From my own work with Dorset Police I fully appreciate the extreme financial challenges that you must be facing and the difficult decisions that need to be taken as a result.

I have taken the time to review the consultation material that has been produced and commend you on the professional way in which you have clearly presented the available options and relevant supporting material to assist people in making an informed response. From the information provided it seems clear that option three, the preferred option of the Fire Authority, appears to be the most practical option for both maintaining services and making the required savings over the years ahead.

That said, the consultation did raise some questions in my own mind which did not appear to be addressed in the consultation pack – and apologies if these were overlooked in any way. I therefore felt that it might be helpful to set these in a letter to you to help feed into the consultation process, and which you may be able to respond to in due course:

Fire Authority merger

It is clear from the documentation that Dorset and Wiltshire & Swindon have a long history of collaboration and many natural similarities in terms of size and resource that make a potential merger attractive. However, it was not clear to me what, if any, potential mergers with other Fire Authority areas were considered and why they were potentially ruled out? Similarly, I have recently been made aware of the H3 partnership that has already launched in Hampshire, merging the back office functions of Hampshire County Council, Hampshire Constabulary and Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service – with other agencies set to join the partnership shortly. Were potential partnerships such as this considered as part of this process?



I was also unsure what the impact of the proposed merger between Dorset and Wiltshire & Swindon would mean in real terms? For example, what would the future staffing structure look like? What reductions in staff numbers would be likely? What would the impact on the estate be and what would coverage of the larger geographical area look like? It would be helpful to have a fuller understanding of the future look and feel of a potential joint Dorset and Wiltshire & Swindon Fire and Rescue Service and how this may impact on future service delivery.

I am also slightly concerned by the proposed make-up of the new Combined Fire Authority. Whilst I understand the desire to maintain appropriate representation covering the local authority areas affected, an Authority of 28 members does appear to be quite a cumbersome governance structure that may hinder efficient and effective decision making in the future. I assure you that I am not just making this observation given my own role and the changes made to policing governance structures in recent times!

The wider 'Bluelight Collaboration' agenda

Wider collaboration between the emergency services has been on the agenda in recent times and is likely to come to greater prominence again after the General Election in 2015. Given this assumption, it would be helpful if you could reassure me that the proposed merger between Dorset and Wiltshire & Swindon would not hinder any further collaborative work in the future with Dorset Police and other relevant partners. The Police and the Fire and Rescue Service have a particularly close working relationship in Dorset and I trust that this will continue and develop further in the coming years, regardless of the future structure of the Fire Service locally.

Financial considerations

As with any major change programme, there will be a number of upfront costs involved in making the required changes that will ultimately realise the required savings. I note that a significant bid has been made to the Government to help meet some of the early costs of merging. Whilst I clearly wish you every success with this bid, what is the contingency should this be unsuccessful and these costs need to be met by funds from elsewhere?

I also note the ongoing discussions regarding precept alignment and would be interested to learn how these are developing. From my own experience in exploring a Strategic Alliance with Devon & Cornwall Police I understand the potential minefield in trying to bring two different precept amounts and authorities together and do not underestimate the challenges that this may present. Is this likely to be a similarly difficult issue for the two Fire Authority areas to overcome which may have an impact on any proposed merger?

I would welcome a meeting in due course to learn from your experience as, given the future finances of all public services, this approach of merger as opposed to collaboration may need to be considered by many of us.



Thank you again for allowing me the opportunity to contribute to this important discussion and I hope you do not mind me raising these issues with you in this way – not only to highlight some queries with the possible combination but also to increase my understanding of the process and the potential impact it may have for both the police service and the public in Dorset in the future.

Yours sincerely

Martyn Underhill
Dorset Police and Crime Commissioner