

ALTHOUGH THIS LETTER REFERS TO WILTSHIRE & SWINDON FIRE AUTHORITY THROUGHOUT, IT WAS SUPPLIED BY NFU IN SOUTH WEST WHO CONFIRMED THAT IT SHOULD BE READ TO INCLUDE DORSET FIRE AUTHORITY AND WAS INTENDED TO BE CONSIDERED BY DORSET FIRE AUTHORITY MEMBERS AS WELL AS WILTSHIRE & SWINDON FIRE AUTHORITY MEMBERS



Your ref:

Strengthening our Fire & Rescue Service Public Consultation 20104 – NFU Comments

The South West NFU welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Wiltshire & Swindon Fire Authority consultation which closes this month. As you may be aware, the NFU represents approximately 50,000 farmers and growers nationally including landowners and tenants from all sectors and commodities - around 800 farm in Wiltshire. Our members rely on the effective and efficient operation of the first response services across Wiltshire and Swindon particularly as over 80% of the land area in our county is farmed.

We understand that the Wiltshire & Swindon Fire Authority are considering the following three options with regard to the future of the service in light of continuing budget cuts:

1. Remain as an independent service and increase collaboration with Wiltshire Council and Swindon Borough Council;
2. Remain as an independent service and increase collaboration with Dorset Fire Authority, while also collaborating with Wiltshire and Swindon Borough Council;
3. Merge with Dorset Fire Authority to create a single Combined Fire Authority, while also collaborating with Wiltshire Council and Swindon Borough Council

On behalf of our farming members and their businesses the NFU have the following comments to make:

- Financial reductions which have, and are, being applied to the Wiltshire and Swindon and Dorset Fire Authorities should not negatively impact the ability of front line staff or equipment to operate quickly and effectively in rural and /or remote areas.
- Similarly, structural changes to the operation of both Authorities should not impact the ability of front line staff or equipment to operate quickly and effectively in rural areas regardless of if the two Authorities remain independent or merge in the future.
- Response times to rural areas are notably longer than urban equivalents and in Wiltshire and Swindon much work has been done to ensure that the gap becomes smaller over recent years. Changes to the financial and structural operation of the Authority must not increase rural response times and must continue to ensure that rural incidents are attended speedily and with appropriate urgency at all times.

LETTER FROM NFU IN THE SOUTHWEST

- Local knowledge of call centre staff should not be compromised as part of any financial or structural changes. There is a risk that such changes could have a negative impact on response times to rural and remote locations, in addition to reducing the understanding of the urgency and complexity of farm business needs in emergency situations.
- In Wiltshire and Swindon engagement with the farming community with regard to fire safety and management has been good to date – notably with regard to Property Information Boxes which aim to reduce the time spent on site fact-finds in order that the incident is tackled faster. Initiatives and engagement such as this should not be compromised in rural areas and must be continued under any new financial or structural arrangements.
- Consideration must also be given to the needs of vulnerable persons in rural farming communities – such as the elderly and very young – when discussing financial or structural changes.

Thank you for inviting the NFU to respond to this consultation. We would be interested to view in-depth analysis of the impacts of each of the three proposed scenarios as and when you decide to commission it, but we are confident the Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority will deliver the best solutions for its farming customers.

Yours sincerely,