



Dorset Fire Authority



Three Options for Dorset Fire Authority

Report of Consultation Forums for Dorset Fire Authority

Opinion Research Services
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Spin-out company of Swansea University

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Acknowledgements

Opinion Research Services (ORS) was commissioned by the Dorset Fire Authority (DFA) 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 ten important deliberative forums and also assesses the overall scale, scope and rigour of DFA's consultation programme.

We thank DFA 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 DFA or any other party.



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

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Consultation Programme

The Commission

1. Dorset Fire Authority (DFA) 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 DFA to provide independent advice on the design and conduct of the consultation programme, to undertake a programme of key consultation activities, and to provide an interpretative report of the findings.
2. This document assesses the consultation programme and in particular reports the ten deliberative forums ORS conducted for DFA in September and October 2014. Our full report reviews the other consultations activities in order to provide an independent commentary on the overall outcomes.

Extensive Consultation

3. DFA'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 ten deliberative **Forums** – including eight with randomly selected members of the public and two with business and voluntary sector stakeholders

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

Analysed **Open Consultation Questionnaires** returned as paper copies and combine 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 DFA during the consultation period

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

DFA's consultation activities

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

Printed and distributed 5,000 consultation documents (with questionnaires and freepost envelopes) and posters, which were sent to all libraries, public buildings and fire stations, and were available on request; electronic copies were available on the DFRS website and copies were sent to all emergency services and partners, and to businesses and voluntary groups

Distributed 6,000 postal leaflets and questionnaires to households randomly selected by ORS

Gave presentations to 15 local and national political groups; and there were meetings with officers of constituent authorities in Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole, and with other bodies, including the Police and NHS Foundation Trusts

Publicised the consultation in the local media (broadcast and print) and via social media using Twitter, Facebook, CFO blogs and podcasts

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 it 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 DFA 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 433 respondents (269 on-line and 164 on paper), and 670 of the **Household Survey** postal questionnaires were returned (an 11% 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 DFA 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.
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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 DFA 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 of 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, DFA's consultation programme was conscientious and rigorous, in the sense of being open, accessible and fair to members of the public and stakeholders across Dorset. 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 deliberative 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 DFA. ORS’s role was to design, recruit, facilitate and report the forums and we collaborated with DFA to prepare informative stimulus material for the meetings before facilitating the discussions and preparing this independent report of findings. In total, 124 randomly selected members of the public from across Dorset took part, together with five stakeholders. The programme of meetings is shown below.

Programme of Forums

	Participants	Place	Date	Numbers attending
1	Public	Gillingham	18 September	18
2	Public	Wimborne	22 September	18
3	Public	Christchurch	23 September	16
4	Public	Weymouth	1 October	11
5	Public	Bridport	2 October	16
6	Public	Wareham	6 October	17
7	Public	Bournemouth	7 October	14
8	Public	Poole	8 October	14
	Total Public	8 forums across Dorset	As above	124
9	Stakeholder	Dorset Business Forum	7 October	2
10	Stakeholder	Dorset Voluntary Sector	7 October	3
	Total Stakeholder	2 forums (business and voluntary sectors)	As above	5

18. The forums were designed to inform and engage the participants with the issues, with DFA, 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 DFA 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 and the Federation of Small Businesses
 - 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 Dorset Community Action (DCA)) and all of the Councils for Voluntary Service or equivalent) – and DCA put an open invitation on their website
 - Contacted all of the voluntary organisations and the majority of businesses in the Dorset area with the help of the DFRS.
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.

25. The outcomes reported here are reliably indicative of the opinions and attitudes of members of the public across Dorset about DFA's three options.

Conduct of Forums

26. ORS worked in collaboration with DFA 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 Dorset Fire and Rescue Service (DFRS) 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.

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

Governance role of the DFA

Current resources and roles of the DFRS

Funding of the DFA – 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 £2.3m and £3.2m if the current levels of expenditure were maintained

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

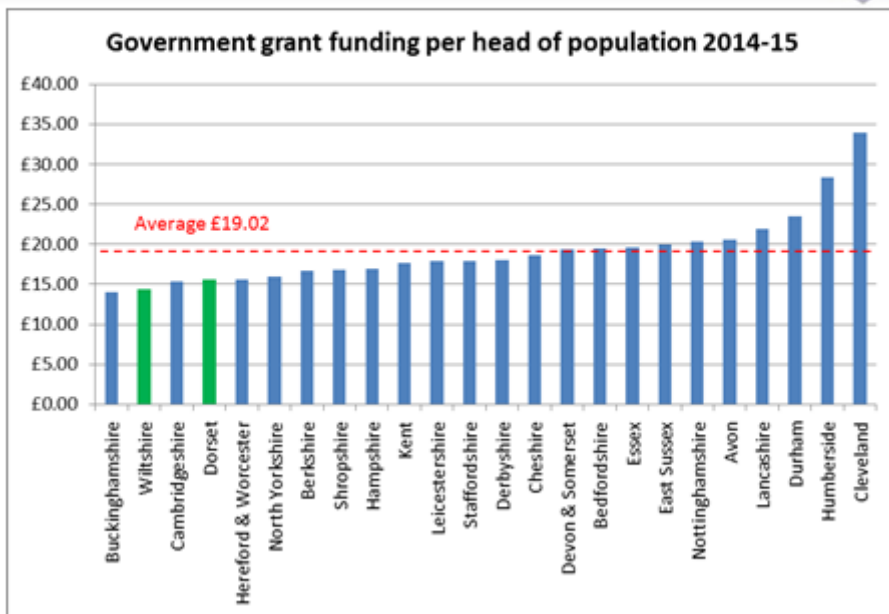
The meaning of the three options – including their financial savings

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

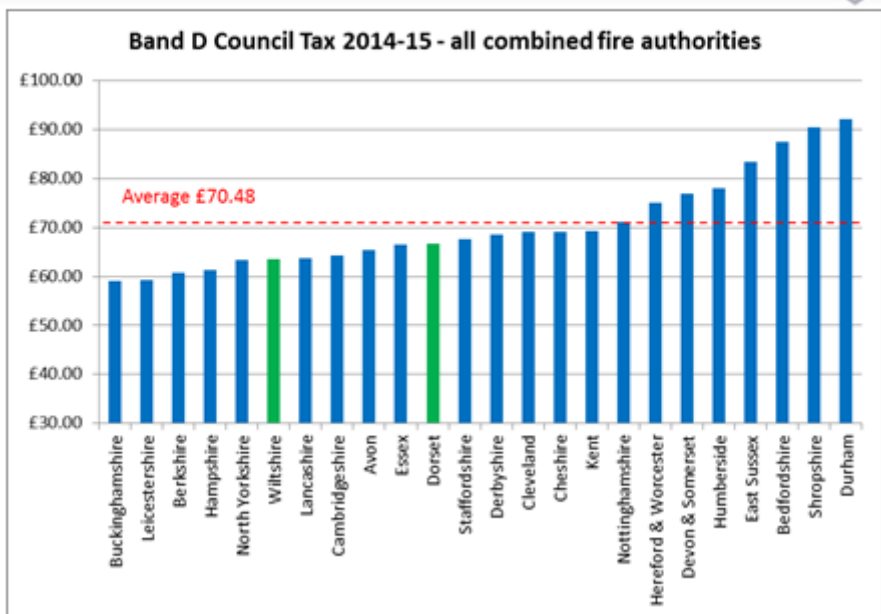
Variable track record for fire authority mergers – including Devon and Somerset (achieved), Hampshire and the Isle of Wight (abandoned after unfavourable consultation outcomes), West and East Sussex (abandoned after favourable consultation outcomes), and Scotland (imposed by the Scottish government).

28. 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 DFRS' 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.

Dorset FRS: c.40% of budget from government

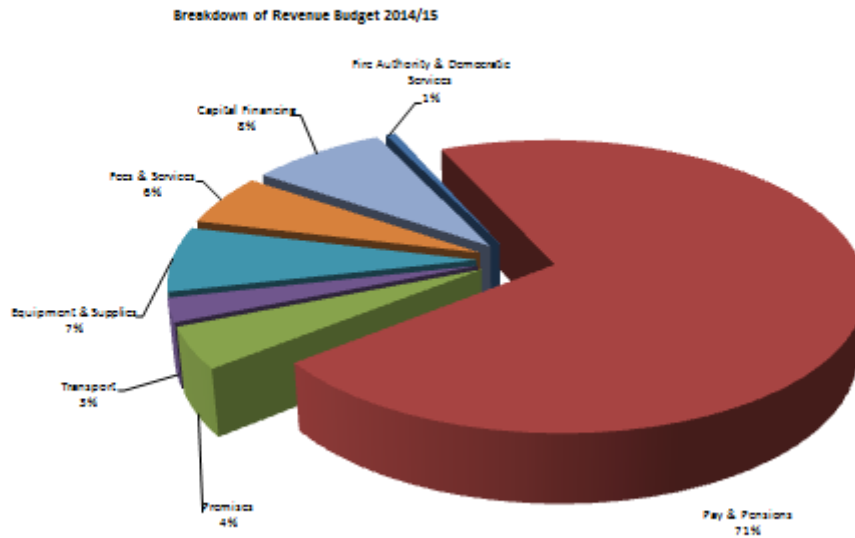


Dorset FRS: c.60% of budget from Council Tax



29. The following two slides were used to show why making substantial budget savings has to involve reducing the numbers of staff employed by DFA. 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



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

31. The next slide was used to explain the meaning of a merger of DFA with Wiltshire & Swindon Fire Authority.

What would a merger mean?



Single new 'Combined Fire Authority' for Dorset, Wiltshire and Swindon

- Governed by elected councillors from ...
 - Bournemouth Borough Council
 - Dorset County Council
 - The Borough of Poole
 - Swindon Borough Council
 - Wiltshire Council
- Proportionate representation on new fire authority board

Five constituent authorities

- But own authority

New Employer

32. 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 will a merger save money?



Single Chief Fire Officer

Single senior management team

Rationalise support services

- Avoid duplication

Single Control Centre

- Will happen in any case

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

33. 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 happen...

34. The review of some attempted and actual mergers 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.
35. 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 Dorset



- Independence
 - Continue as separate organisations
- Governed by Dorset Fire Authority as now
- Collaboration with local authorities – Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole
- Some back office or corporate functions could be joined up – but savings limited
- Potential savings of £930K for Dorset, leaving deficit of £1.4m to £2.3m

Option 2 for Dorset



- Independence
 - Both remain separate organisations and governed by two fire authorities as now
- Collaboration with Wilts & Swindon Fire Authority
 - Many organisations share some support services
 - Complicated financial accounting – based on complex legal agreements
 - Difficult to share operational-critical resources
- Potential savings of £930K for Dorset – released more quickly – but leave deficit of £1.4m - £2.3m

Option 3 for Dorset



- Two fire authorities merge (combine)
- Single combined authority of elected councillors
- One Chief Fire Officer and single team of officers and support staff
- Savings would be made more quickly
- Improved resilience and economies of scale
- Savings would be in region of £4m per year
- A combined funding gap of £1.4m to £3.1m would still exist – but further savings in crewing would be possible

36. 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.
37. 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 DFA and Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority were invited to attend one forum each to confirm they were content with the process.
38. 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.
39. But when participants asked, *What do the officers think about this?* the facilitator intervened to explain that the officers' role was technical, not 'political'.
40. 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 DFA.

Round Table Discussions

41. 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.

42. 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 pressures* – a simplifying polarity that invited respondents to consider their deeper, underlying views on the issues facing the DFA.

Reporting the Forums

43. 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 DFA.
44. 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

Summary

45. After reviewing the evidence and issues associated with each of the options in detailed discussions in small groups, the participants were asked to award '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 group scores were totalled to generate an overall score and ranking for the meeting as a whole.
46. Option 3 (a merger of the two Fire Authorities) was the most popular choice by an overwhelming margin. For example:
- In terms of the points awarded, option 3 was more than 13 times more popular than option 1, and almost five-and-a-half times more popular than option 2
 - In terms of 'first choices', option 3 was almost 30 times more popular than option 1, and almost 17 times more popular than option 2
47. In terms of the numbers of people across all the forums selecting options 1 and 2 as their 'first choices', option 2 was 1.75 times more popular than option 1, with seven first choices for option 2 and four first choices for option 1. The points scores also show option 2 as significantly more popular than option 1 (almost two-and-a-half times more popular on points).
48. Therefore, the overall hierarchy of support is:
- Option 3 – overwhelmingly the most popular choice, by a very large margin
 - Option 2 – more popular than option 1 on first choices and with a superior points score, but a long way behind option 3
 - Option 1 – a very distant third in comparison with options 3 and 2.
49. There were no significant area variations insofar as option 3 was overwhelmingly the most popular choice across all the forums – a remarkable degree of consensus. 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 11 times more likely to believe that DFRS has greater affinity with Wiltshire FRS than with their local authorities.

Most participants also valued the specialisation and the synergy of two fire and rescue services working together rather than DFRS 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.

50. 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.
51. Option 3 was not seen as simply a financial necessity, for many 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.

Ranking the Options

52. As well as awarding 'scores' for each option in small groups, the participants registered 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'.

53. 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 scores' 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	Gillingham Public (18)	35 (0)	30 (1)	235 (17)
2	Wimborne Public (18)	40 (0)	55 (1)	205 (17)
3	Christchurch Public (16)	10 (0)	25 (0)	265 (16)
4	Weymouth Public (11)	0 (0)	45 (0)	255 (11)
5	Bridport Public (16)	12.5 (1)	32.5 (0)	255 (15)
6	Wareham Public (17)	15 (0)	55 (0)	230 (17)
7	Bournemouth Public (14)	10 (0)	38 (0)	252 (14)
8	Poole Public (14)	40 (3)	120 (3)	140 (8)
9	Dorset Business (2)	10 (0)	25 (2)	165 (0)
10	Dorset Voluntary (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	300 (3)
	Total scores (and 'first choices')	172.5 (4)	425.5 (7)	2,302 (118)

54. Clearly, the table above shows the widespread overwhelming popularity of option 3 (a full merger between the two fire authorities) when compared with options 1 and 2.
55. In terms of the points awarded, option 3 was more than 13 times more popular than option 1 and almost five-and-a-half times more popular than option 2.
56. On 'first choices', option 3 was almost 30 times more popular than option 1 and almost 17 times more popular than option 2.
57. The numbers of people across all the forums selecting options 1 or 2 as their 'first choices' show that option 2 was 1.75 times more popular than option 1 (with seven first choices for option 2 and four first choices for option 1).

58. The respective points scores for options 1 and 2 also show the latter as significantly more popular overall than option 1 (on points, it is almost two-and-half times more popular than option 1).
59. 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 – more popular than option 1 on first choices, along with a superior points score
 - Option 1 – a very distant third in comparison with options 3 and 2.

Variations by Area

60. In a statutory consultation about options of such fundamental importance, it is striking that there were no clear area variations in the findings reported in the table above.
61. An apparent exception was the Poole forum, where the points for options 2 and 3 are relatively balanced (120 and 140 respectively); but the exception is only apparent – for option 3 had an absolute majority of ‘first choices’ (8, compared with 3 each for options 1 and 2. There is, then, no reason to consider Poole as a real exception to the pattern of overwhelming support for option 3.

Organisations’ ‘Affinity’

62. 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, most of the public forums were asked whether they considered the DFRS to have more ‘affinity’ or ‘more in common’ with their Bournemouth, Dorset or Poole Councils or with the Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service (Wiltshire FRS).
63. It is striking that 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 table on the next page shows.

**Relative affinity between DFRS and (a) its local councils
and (b) Wiltshire FRS**

	Forum (and number of participants)	Greater affinity with local council	Greater affinity with DFRS	Don't know
1	Gillingham Public (18)	Not asked	Not asked	Not asked
2	Wimborne Public (18)	4	14	0
3	Christchurch Public (16)	0	16	0
4	Weymouth Public (11)	0	11	0
5	Bridport Public (16)	1	15	0
6	Wareham Public (17)	0	9	8
7	Bournemouth Public (14)	0	14	0
8	Poole Public (14)	3	11	0
	Totals	8	90	8

⁶⁴. Overall, participants were over 11 times more likely to believe that DFRS has greater affinity with Wiltshire FRS 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 Wareham (where there were eight 'don't knows') there was no significant variation in the pattern of views.

‘Specialisation’ rather than ‘Localism’

65. There were some participants who valued services that are more local and smaller in scale:

The principle of bigger organisations is not necessarily desirable – but I don’t mean that “small is always beautiful” for there are financial reasons to consider – but we want to protect this area and its services (Wareham public)

66. However, the emphasis on local identity and services was not a dominant theme of the meeting and, overall, people preferred the ‘specialisation’ of an effective fire and rescue service:

We have looked at the greater public good – independence would not work and we have a shared border (not like the Isle of Wight (Wimborne public)

I’ve more faith in Fire-Fire collaboration than with local authorities (Wimborne public)

It makes more sense to have two specialist organisations collaborating or merging rather than working with the non-specialist local authorities (Bournemouth public)

As long as you get a fire engine when needed, it’s ok! (Christchurch public)

We just want an effective fire engine to come! That’s what matters (Poole public)

I’m told that the Scottish merger of police forces has not had any adverse impact – the officers feel they are in a better organisation with better equipment – and this is the same kind of model (Dorset voluntary sector)

I arrived adamant that they should stay as they are, separate, but now I believe they should definitely merge! We just want an effective emergency service – it doesn’t matter where it come from (Dorset voluntary sector).

This should not be about local accountability. It should be about the effectiveness and resilience of the service delivered – that’s the point for all the emergency services. Localism doesn’t really matter in this case – that’s just hogwash! (Dorset business)

67. Overall, then, most people heavily favoured specialisation and the synergy of two fire and rescue services working together rather than DFRS co-operating primarily with its local authorities.

Consideration of Option 1

68. Out of 124 people in the forums, option 1 had only four 'first choices' and but was clearly behind option 2 on the points score. Overall, then, option 1 was the least popular option, partly for the reasons above, and partly for those below.
69. 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 DFERS 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

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:

Local authorities would be too political, not specialist and professional...They're not efficient but profiligate (Christchurch public)

Local authorities have many other services to look after – there would be competition for the financial resources, especially because councils have to reduce their spending (Christchurch public)

Local authorities would be too bound by health and safety issues in operational situations (Weymouth public)

Option 1 would have political difficulties and complex outsourcing arrangements would lead to reduced services and uncertainty about how it

would work out. [There would be a] drop in morale with a potential for rising costs in the long term – you'd no control over [the outsourcing costs] (Bournemouth public)

I have real doubts about councils' abilities to provide inexpensive and effective outsourcing for support services. Bournemouth has not handled its own outsourcing effectively – it has been ineffective (Bournemouth public)

Local government is an unsuitable partner – it's inefficient and bureaucratic (Poole public)

In the local authority version, you'd be a small part of a big organisation's work – so you could be less important. S option 1 is not the best – it's the worst! (Dorset business)

Overall, then, 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. Hence, option 1 was seen as the worst option.

Consideration of Option 2

70. Out of 124 people in the forums, option 2 had only seven 'first choices' but it was well ahead of option 1 on the points score – so, overall, it was the second most popular option. Some respondents could see some strength 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 this option was seen as weaker than 3. 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 prospect of collaborating with Wiltshire FRS is an unconvincing half-way house that does not go far enough in terms of making savings or achieving greater resilience and efficiency

Option 2 savings are less than with option 3.

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

The financial savings are bigger with option 3 – at least in theory – but it has to be made to work effectively in practice – with harmonious and efficient teams – perhaps it needs to be done in a gradual way to test it along the way (Wimborne public)

[Compared with option 2] Option 3 gives you a reduction in duplication of administration – it is the most substantial way forward and you can share best practice (Christchurch public)

[Compared with option 2] you can make bigger savings in administration with option 3, without affecting front line services (Bridport public)

With options 1 and 2 there would be bigger effects on frontline staff – they will be more adversely affected (Poole public)

Options 1 and 2 give smaller savings (Gillingham public).

72. Overall, then, the dominant theme was that option 2 is less convincing (in terms of making savings) as weaker version of option 3. It seemed to most people a very poor second best to option 3.

Consideration of Option 3

73. It is clear already that option 3 was overwhelmingly popular when compared with options 1 and 2. Participants thought the two Fire and Rescue Services have an ‘affinity’ and are both specialist organisations that provide fast and effective emergency response services. In this context, they felt that making ‘local services’ a key priority was unrealistic for a life-and-death emergency service. 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

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

74. Many forums stressed the scale of the financial savings. Without repeating all those statements, the following comments were typical:

With option 3 there'll be bigger savings, efficiency, transitional funding, simple accounting, and the standardisation of equipment. It'll protect our front line services while having shared knowledge and consistency (Gillingham public)

We'll have a bigger influence at national level (Gillingham public)

The financial savings are bigger with option 3...but it has to be made to work effectively in practice (Wimborne public)

There will be savings from specialist equipment – that could be moved around and duplication removed (Christchurch public)

Option 3 centralises the organisation rather than fragmenting it. Merging the two will make them better equipped for serious incidents (Bridport public)

Economies of scale will be possible. The cost of running is easier and cheaper for larger organisations – and it would be more resilient. They'd be working with similar culture and people – and there'd be more human resources available with more specialisms (Wareham public)

Option 3 is the least negative in terms of other cuts and there are more opportunities for prevention work to be increased (Bournemouth public)

75. 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 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	Gillingham Public (18)	Not asked	Not asked	Not asked
2	Wimborne Public (18)	Not asked	Not asked	Not asked
3	Christchurch Public (16)	Not asked	Not asked	Not asked
4	Weymouth Public (11)	5	5	1
5	Bridport Public (16)	6	10	0
6	Wareham Public (14)	8	6	0
7	Bournemouth Public (14)	1	13	0
8	Poole Public (14)	8	3	3
9	Dorset Business (2)	Not asked	Not asked	Not asked

10	Dorset Voluntary (3)	0	2	1
	Totals	28	39	5

76. Overall, in the six forums where the question was put, participants were more 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.

Some Concerns

77. In connection with fundamental options such as these, people were 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 DFA should take into account in pursuing its chosen policy. The major reservations expressed by some (not a majority) in the ten meetings were that:

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

Mergers 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

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)

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.