



Dorset Fire Authority

MEETING	Dorset Fire Authority
DATE OF MEETING	4 November 2014
OFFICER	Chief Fire Officer
SUBJECT OF THE REPORT	Consultation in respect of 'Strengthening our Fire and Rescue Service'
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	On 5 December 2013, Members agreed that, subject to due diligence and the creation of a full business case, Dorset Fire Authority would work with Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority towards the goal of a combined Authority in April 2016 whilst maintaining local identity. A full public consultation was undertaken between 21 July and 20 October on three scenarios to help inform a final decision and this paper explains the results of that consultation.
RISK ASSESSMENT	The risks arising from this extensive consultation have been considerably mitigated due to the engagement of a chartered professionally acknowledged consultation company who has a sound track record and by validation by the Consultation Institute against their Compliance Assessment Scheme.
COMMUNITY IMPACT <i>Note: If the matrix indicates negative impacts on the community or staff, an inclusivity impact assessment (IIA) will need to be completed.</i>	An Inclusive Impact Assessment has been completed, the results of which were used in the design and delivery of the consultation process.
BUDGET IMPLICATIONS	There are no financial implications arising from this report.

<p>RECOMMENDATIONS</p>	<p>It is recommended that Members note the:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Findings of the report from Opinion Research Services on the Qualitative Forums. 2. Findings contained in a presentation from Opinion Research Services regarding the postal and on-line questionnaires delivered as part of this meeting. 3. Note the assurance provided by the Consultation Institute that the consultation to date complies with good practice under the Compliance Assessment Scheme. 4. Consider all of the above in their determination of the future strategic direction of the Dorset Fire Authority.
<p>BACKGROUND PAPERS</p>	<p>Fire and Rescue Authority Voluntary Combinations - A guide - Fire Research Series 5/2011 - Communities and Local Government</p>
<p>APPENDICES</p>	<p>A: Three Options for the Dorset Fire Authority - An Executive Summary of an independent Report of the consultation Forums - Opinion Research Services B: Details on the consultation undertaken</p>
<p>REPORT ORIGINATOR AND CONTACT</p>	<p>Robert Ford Head of Corporate Planning Tel: (01305) 252615</p>

1. Background

- 1.1 On 5 December 2013, Members agreed that, subject to due diligence and a full business case, Dorset Fire Authority would work with Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority towards the goal of a combined Authority in April 2016 whilst maintaining local identity.
- 1.2 Between December 2013 and July 2014, officers undertook work leading to the approval by the Combined Oversight Board of a strategy which has led to a formal consultation exercise being conducted from 21 July to 20 October 2014 on three scenarios which would help inform the final decision.
- 1.3 Opinion Research Services (ORS) were commissioned to independently facilitate the consultation and the Consultation Institute to validate the exercise. This paper contains their 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 include the results from the quantitative (on-line and postal questionnaires) element of the consultation.

2. The Consultation Approach

- 2.1 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 undertaken as part of the planning and delivery process and information on this is given later in the report.
- 2.2 The key elements included:
 - ◆ A range of documents being made available including:
 - Public consultation leaflets, questionnaires 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').
 - 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, including two meetings with MPs and there were meetings with officers of constituent authorities and other public bodies.
- ◆ A number of reminder letters, emails and press releases were sent including a general notice on all press releases advising the consultation period.
- ◆ Social Media, Twitter and Facebook were used to promote the consultation process, along with CFO blogs and pod casts.
- ◆ A consultation telephone and email helpline was provided.
- ◆ Staff meetings took place with station based, control and support staff and a number of consultation information, notices and reminders were sent by e-mail, internal newsletters and through wage slips. Discussions or meetings, both formal and informal, took place with representative bodies on a number of occasions.

2.3 More detailed information on the breadth and depth of the consultation undertaken is given in Appendix B.

2.4 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.
- ◆ Provide as many people as possible with opportunities to take part using a freely available consultation document and questionnaire.

2.5 Given the understandable limited awareness that most residents have in how their Fire and Rescue Service operates 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.

2.6 The consultation also used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative techniques:

2.6.1 Qualitative

This was provided in a number of ways through forums - for residents, voluntary groups and businesses. 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. Eight Forums were held throughout Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole as follows

Location of Residents Forum	Date of Meeting
Gillingham	18 September
Wimborne	22 September
Christchurch	23 September
Weymouth	1 October
Bridport	2 October
Wareham	6 October
Bournemouth	7 October
Poole	8 October

Business and voluntary sector forums: There were two 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
Bournemouth Voluntary Sector Forum	7 October
Bournemouth Business Forum	7 October

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

2.6.2 Quantitative

This comprised on-line and postal elements, namely:

- ◆ *On-line questionnaire.* 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 within Dorset Fire & Rescue Service using a third party supplier, with ORS reviewing the approach and ensuring data quality.
- ◆ *Residents' survey (postal questionnaire).* Given the large area covered by both Authorities, it is recognised that it is important that all residents have the opportunity to give their views on the proposal. 5,000 written questionnaires, with freepost return envelopes, were made available through libraries and other public buildings which

contained information about the proposed combination, together with a self-completion questionnaire. Postal questionnaire to a representative cross-section of 6,000 residents were also issued. These residents were selected by ORS to receive the postal questionnaire.

ORS will be presenting the results of the quantitative consultation through a presentation during the fire authority meeting on 4 November and the headline information made available through the Members seminar on 31 August and subsequently on-line. This will support Members to make an informed judgment.

2.7 A summary of some of the core stakeholder responses to support this business case is provided below:

2.7.1 Local political opinion

Bournemouth Borough Council - The Council are in support of scenario 3 in that it could yield greater potential budgetary savings, increased resilience and greater opportunities to provide new and improved ways of working. They also comment on the greater opportunities for engagement with a wider and more diverse community and stakeholder group. They did seek an assurance for a firm commitment by the new authority to have specific and regular discussions on the provision of service in Bournemouth.

Dorset County Council - The Cabinet of Dorset County Council passed a resolution on the 22 October that agreed and supported scenario 3.

Members of Parliament for Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole - 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. There have been four formal responses and these are shown in Appendix B

For the information of Members, the following are the findings from Wiltshire:

Wiltshire Council - The political debate has been particularly active in Wiltshire. Formally Wiltshire Council passed a resolution on the 21 October that 'This Council understands the financial challenges that the 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, 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 and 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 (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, one MP has been particularly outspoken in support of the fire and rescue service remaining within the current governance arrangements.

2.7.2 Residents

There is overwhelming support for scenario 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.

2.7.3 Business and voluntary sector

In much the same way as the public, both the business and voluntary sectors shared the same views. Despite a great deal of effort by ORS with support from DFRS, 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 Wiltshire and Swindon show a clear majority in favour of scenario 3 and the presentation from ORS will contain more information on this.

2.7.4 Staff

An extensive programme of staff engagement was undertaken with senior managers holding 36 briefing sessions for the four staff groups (ie wholtime firefighters, on-call firefighters, Fire Control and support 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.

2.7.5 Representative bodies

Fire Brigades' Union (FBU) - 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 fire authority 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 fire authority 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 - UNISON has responded that it acknowledges that a merger with Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority, to create a single combined fire authority, while also collaborating with other local authorities is the preferred option for support staff and that a fire to fire merger is the only way that significant savings can be made without implementing drastic cuts to both support staff and front line service delivery. They identified a significant concern about travel distances involved and that senior managers must have a realistic expectation of staff workloads. Unison opposes any compulsory redundancies amongst support staff as well as any erosion of current terms and conditions.

Fire Officers' Association (FOA) - The view of the FOA is that option 3 is the preferred of the three options. They agreed with the vision of a safe, string and sustainable fire and rescuer service, making our communities safe in the future, while protecting and strengthening front-line services. They recognised the detailed planning undertaken that had put the service in a good position to move forward. They expressed concern with regard to the pressure and workloads that delivering a new fire and rescue service would create while continuing to deliver everything that is currently expected. They raised concerns over the possibility of considerable opportunities for savings within flexible duty officers regarding uncertainty around a joint flexible duty rota and the contractual changes that this may require.

2.7.6 Police and Crime Commissioner

The Dorset Police and Crime Commissioner has responded to say that it is clear that option 3 appears to be the most practical option for maintaining services and making the required savings over the years ahead. He did raise the following issues:

- ◆ It was not clear what potential mergers with other fire authorities were considered and why they were potentially ruled out and if potential partnerships such as the H3 Partnership in Hampshire were considered.
- ◆ He was unsure what the impact of the merger would mean in real terms? (structure, staff numbers, impact on estate). He was also concerned over the potential make-up of the combined fire authority.
- ◆ He requested reassurance that the proposed merger would not hinder further collaborative work with Dorset Police.

Appendix B also 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 which form part of the presentation by ORS have been made available to Members prior to this meeting.

2.7.7 Key findings from ORS on the Qualitative Forums

- ◆ 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

Forum Findings

- ◆ 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.
- ◆ 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
- ◆ 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 show option 2 as significantly more popular than option 1 (almost two-and-half times more popular).

- ◆ Therefore, the overall hierarchy of support is:

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.

- ◆ 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.

- ◆ 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 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.

2.7.8 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) showed a clear absolute majority of respondents expressing a first preference.

In the household survey, option 3 has the majority of first preferences and ties with option 1 on a fuller analysis.

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 and this shows an overwhelming support for scenario 3.

3. Quality Assurance

- 3.1 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.
- 3.2 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 and Inclusion Manager from Dorset were fully engaged with the creation of the Inclusive Impact Assessment, which will be signed off by both advisers 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 Advisers 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.

4. Conclusion

- 4.1 It is clear that there is overwhelming support from the Residents, Voluntary Groups and Business Forums for Option 3. Members will also hear that there is also very strong majority support for Option 3 from the written questionnaires and it is recommended that Members note these views when considering the business case for merger with Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority.

DARRAN GUNTER

Chief Fire Officer

27 October 2014