

Wiltshire Council's Response to DCLG

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the proposal to merge Dorset and Wiltshire and Swindon fire authorities.

Wiltshire Council debated the proposal at its Council meeting in October. Our response is based on the debate.

Wiltshire Council understands the financial challenges that the Wiltshire and 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 business case.

By way of a summation of the debate, the council continues to have concerns about the gap in funding, uncertainty around the equalisation of precepts and the governance arrangements which could disadvantage Wiltshire. The council continues to seek assurance in these matters before it is in a position to provide a view on either the revocation of the existing Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority or the proposed merger.

The full span of savings to meet the shortfall would need to be identified should there be a combined fire authority. At this point in time, it is not clear that these have been wholly identified or worked through.

Wiltshire Council has already identified positive scope to make savings from both greater sharing of back office functions such as finance and depot / workshop space and facilities. However, the exact balance of how these savings would fall between the fire authority and the council would need to be identified through more detailed work. Wiltshire Council believes these opportunities should be progressed regardless of the outcome of the consultation as both the fire authority and the council would benefit. However, it is noted that not all of the savings could be possible under a combined fire authority.

The size of any funding gap for a combined fire authority would be dependent on precept levels. With a 1.99% increase on top of equalisation there would be a smaller shortfall, but with no increase in precept other than equalisation it would leave a £1.6 million shortfall.

The shortfall in precept is within Swindon & Wiltshire Fire Authority. Any merger proposals will have to address equalisation and if the increase in precept is over 2% under current legislation a referenda would have to be held. If this occurred this additional cost would need to be addressed in either any transitional arrangements between the two fire authorities or by way of the order. Wiltshire Council considered that it would be inappropriate that it funds any such referenda.

We note that at this stage it is unclear if the fire authorities will make a submission to ministers to agree an Alternative Notional Amount – or if one will be granted. The council notes however that failure to secure such an agreement would reduce the level of funds available to a combined fire authority by around £1m, thus increasing the size of the gap. Should the combined Fire Authority be established we would not want to be disadvantaged in our ability to raise council tax in future years through any incremental increases agreed by this new authority.

It is unclear how a combined fire authority will make decisions on future savings and service delivery. Should membership of a combined fire authority be based on population, then at present

this will give a majority of 2 members for Dorset county. There continues to be uncertainty around how this might affect local decisions although we welcome Dorset Fire Authority's approval in principle to ensuring equal membership between the 2 fire authorities.

As set out in their business case, we hope that you would encourage a new combined fire authority to continue to work closely with Wiltshire Council to develop its proposals on how it might integrate the provision of its services with public service providers more generally. By way of some background Wiltshire Council is currently working with a range of statutory and VCS partners in the development of our campus programme across the county. This includes both police and health who are looking to rationalise their estate across the county and the South Western Ambulance Service which is currently looking at ambulance basing options across Wiltshire. These partners have recognised the enormous benefits that a community campus can offer to local people and how it allows the consolidation of often expensive and outdated premises.

We are particularly keen for your support in encouraging the Fire Authority to progress their proposal to invest circa £5.5m in the development of a Safety Centre Campus in the south of the county. A new fit for purpose community campus is currently being built in Salisbury, which would provide the right location and opportunity to incorporate a Safety Centre. In light of the financial challenges facing public sector services the possibility of consolidation and improving the offer to local people has to be a more sustainable and cost effective approach.

Irrespective of the outcome of the Secretary of State's decision on the potential merger between Dorset and Swindon and Wiltshire Fire Authorities, Wiltshire Council welcomes closer cooperation to continue to reduce costs in both organisations for the benefit of Wiltshire's residents and would welcome the opportunity to progress these discussions.