

**WILTSHIRE COUNCIL**

**COUNCIL**

**28 FEBRUARY 2012**

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**QUESTION FROM CLLR NIGEL CARTER. DEVIZES NORTH DIVISION**

**FOR THE WILTSHIRE FIRE AUTHORITY**

**Question 1**

It is understood that current financial limitations on the Authority's budget are causing problems in funding recruitment and retention of retained fire-fighters - proposed contracts suggest that, in certain circumstances, fire-fighters may be earning less than the minimum wage depending on hours worked - and that full-time fire-fighters are being recruited on contracts of one-year's length only, leading to uncertainty and a loss of morale? It is further understood that many of the fire stations operating with retained fire-fighters are unable to mount full crews when rostered, leaving substantial gaps in cover. A recent incident in the Devizes area is reputed to have drawn in crews from as far afield as Amesbury and Malmesbury to provide cover.

Can the Authority reassure council that stations are being adequately manned by suitably trained and committed fire-fighters and that no area of the county is unreasonable exposed to risk from fire because of inadequate cover?

**Response**

Wiltshire and Swindon Combined Fire Authority is the body corporate responsible for Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service (FRS), with elected members drawn from both Wiltshire Council and Swindon Borough Council. Its role is to ensure that an effective, efficient and resilient Service is provided for the people of Wiltshire and Swindon.

Wiltshire FRS' managers have taken the opportunity to look afresh at how the service could be delivered in future. There is no intention to stand still given the very dynamic environment in which the Service operates. One of the challenges facing Wiltshire FRS is a reduction in Government grant funding allocation, in line with other fire and rescue services. A programme of change has been put in place to enable the organisation to deliver services for the future with reduced funding while still delivering the same or improved levels of response to the people of Wiltshire and Swindon.

This programme has included a detailed review phase to determine how operational services could be delivered differently, whilst achieving the same or better outcomes. A series of proposals have been developed and these have been communicated to all FRS staff at a series of briefings that took place earlier this month. This started a 16 week internal consultation process.

The external consultation on the proposed changes will commence on 5<sup>th</sup> March. This will include presentations at a number of Community Area Board meetings – Devizes Community Area Board will receive this information on 26<sup>th</sup> March.

The detailed review of the Service's operational arrangements has included much work on the retained duty system. This allows firefighters – many of whom have other jobs - to be 'on call' for emergencies from home or work and then respond when mobilised in the event of an incident. Although this system has worked well in the past, it is no longer sustainable in the long term because of the significant demographic and societal changes that have taken place over the years. The system needs to change and a series of proposals have been developed to make improvements.

Levels of fire cover are continually reviewed and arrangements made to address any shortfalls. For incidents of some scale, crews from other stations are routinely brought in to make up the appropriately-sized response. The proposed new system for on call firefighters will not need so much day-to-day management. It involves a salary scheme, which will provide greater certainty for firefighters and the Service in the future.

Given that the Service is going through a period of transition, and to maintain current crewing levels on wholetime stations, a number of retained firefighters (who put themselves forward for this opportunity) have undertaken a 12 month temporary contract to work as wholetime firefighters. This was entirely voluntary and provides them with a great opportunity, with certainty for the period of their contract. This is a very positive step and a responsible action for the organisation to take.

We have already improved our capacity and capability for managing larger scale incidents by changing the working arrangements for our middle and senior level operational managers. Further work within the programme of change will ensure:

- The retention of all existing fire stations across Wiltshire and Swindon.
- The retention of all fire engines and improved levels of availability of those fire engines.
- The provision of five competent firefighters on fire engines.
- The provision of additional capacity to manage risk across Wiltshire and Swindon.

In conclusion, I would like to repeat that the aim of the changes which are now being consulted upon is to enable the organisation to deliver services for the future with reduced funding whilst maintaining or improving the levels of response to the communities we serve. Resources will be more closely linked to risk, the better to help protect life and property in Wiltshire and Swindon; and I hope the Council will be reassured by this.