

WILTSHIRE & SWINDON FIRE AUTHORITY

MINUTES of a MEETING of the WILTSHIRE & SWINDON FIRE AUTHORITY held at the WILTSHIRE FRS TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT CENTRE, DEVIZES on THURSDAY 10 JULY 2014

Present : Cllrs C Devine, G Perkins, A Bennett, Mrs M Groom, R Jones MBE, J Knight, H Marshall, C Newbury, G Payne, J Tray and Mrs B Wayman.

24 Minutes of the Last Meeting

The Minutes of the Meeting of 12 June 2014 were approved and signed.

25 Apologies

Apologies were received from Cllr Clark and Cllr Martin.

26 Members' Interests

The Chairman reminded members of the need to declare any interests which the Authority's Code of Conduct required to be disclosed, or dispensations granted by the Clerk to the Authority or by the Ethics Committee. None were received.

27 Chairman's Announcements

- a) Members were asked to submit dates for visits to their local station to the Clerk.
- b) The Chairman updated members on his activities in his capacity as Chairman of the CFA.

28 Questions from the Public

Two questions were asked by Cllr Peter Edge, Wiltshire Council:

- a. *"Can the members of the CFA assure me and the residents of Wiltshire that the outcome of whether to proceed or not with the combination programme will be taken with the best interests of the Fire Authority and not be influenced by their potential masters in Wiltshire and Swindon Unitary Councils?"*

The Chairman responded that he could assure Cllr Edge that the integrity of the CFA was based on the best outcome for the people of Wiltshire and Swindon and that politics would not play a part, although the Authority would listen to the Constituent Authorities who represented the people.

- b. *"It is my belief that Combination is the only way to save the £3.8m per annum and I am confident that the residents of Wiltshire and Swindon, as well as the FBU and RFU, wish to see no closures of stations that will affect response times in our communities, especially rural areas. I would like some reassurances from this Authority to this effect."*

The Chairman responded that, whilst it would be wrong to "never say never", the Authority was working to ensure that front line services were protected despite cuts to Central Government grants.

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29 Public Consultation.

Mr James, the strategic Principal Officer for the programme, outlined the decisions previously made by Members at the meeting in December 2013. At that meeting (which was preceded by a seminar where strategic options were discussed), it was unanimously agreed by both authorities 'that subject to a full business case and due diligence process to work towards the goal of establishing a new Combined Authority in 2016'.

Since then Members and senior officers from both authorities had worked through a Combination Oversight Board (COB), the terms of reference of which were agreed at the February Authority meeting. A draft business case, supporting documentation and a joint grant bid was produced and submitted in line with the recommendations agreed by the Fire Authority in December 2013.

Following the production of this documentation, a Members' seminar was held to consider these documents which were intended to support the consultation process. Questions were raised at this seminar about the authority of COB to approve the consultation process. At their June meeting, Members agreed that they would convene a special CFA to consider the public consultation process and supporting material.

Subsequently, and in consultation with the Chairman, it was agreed that a leaflet would be produced to consult the public and key stakeholders on three options. It was pointed out by Mr James that whilst this had been complied with, it was not in line with the decisions made and since communicated in December 2013

Mr James highlighted the risks of delaying the consultation:

- a) If the Combination Order was not submitted by the end of 2014, it could be delayed due to the General Election, thus putting at risk the decision made in December 2013 to work towards a potential Combined Fire Authority in 2016. This risk was highlighted by DCLG officials. Dorset Fire Authority required strategic clarity on the future governance arrangements between the two authorities to set its financial strategy and any further delay would increase risks in terms of financial planning and its associated change programme.
- b) In line with the decision in December 2013, a joint bid for £5.6 million of government funding had been submitted on 4 June 2014. This bid was to support the transition should the combination be approved; the ICT harmonisation costs; and the establishment of an educational safety centre in Salisbury that could be integrated within the campus philosophy and also act as a central multi-agency hub with facilities to support the hosting of meetings and accommodation for officers. The outcome of this bid would be known in September but was dependent on a potential combination decision. Delays to consultation and subsequent decisions associated to a combination would create a major risk to the allocation of this grant.
- c) Dorset Fire Authority's decision to establish a Joint Command and Control Centre (JCCC) at Potterne was predicated on combination of authorities in 2016. Any delay to the consultation process might mean that this decision may be reconsidered by the Dorset CFA as it needed to be clear what is strategic direction would be in relation to the wider combination proposals

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The third risk was contended by Cllr Bennett as incorrect. CFO Simon Routh-Jones stated that the papers and associated recommendations for combination and JCCC were linked. If there was no agreement for business case development for combination then the JCCC may not be progressed dependent upon a further perspective from Dorset CFA.

To help mitigate these risks associated with delaying the consultation process, senior officers and Members had met with their counterparts in Wiltshire Council and Swindon. It was proposed that the Authority continue with the consultation process from 21 July-20 October 2014 and that a further costing exercise be undertaken on the financial benefits of working with Wiltshire, Swindon and the Police.

The Authority were informed that at the November CFA, Members would have a full suite of costed options and the feedback from the public consultation exercise, which would enable them to make an informed decision on the way forward including a potential combination.

Mr James stated that it was important that Members had confidence in the proposed consultation process. He introduced Dale Hall from Opinion Research Services who had been engaged to carry out the consultation on behalf of the Fire Authorities and who gave the Members a presentation on the consultation process.

The Members received a paper and supporting documentation on the public consultation.

Cllr Bennett sought reassurance that the difference in population between Swindon and Wiltshire would be reflected in the distribution of the leaflets. Mr Hall stated that an increase in the sample area would not significantly increase the costs and that this would be done.

Cllr Bennett also sought clarification about the use of the results from social media and whether it would be clear about where the responses had originated. Mr Hall stated that the same questionnaire would be used for all consultation methods but it would be clear in the report where responses had come from.

Some Members raised questions with regards to the appropriateness of incentive payment to attendees of the public focus groups. Mr Hall replied that it was to cover travel, subsistence and time and to ensure that a representative attendance could be secured without disadvantaging those on low incomes.

Cllr Wayman asked if it was appropriate and lawful for the Authority to state a preferred option. Mr Hall replied that it was and there were examples elsewhere in the UK where this had been the case.

After further discussion, the following was proposed by Cllr Newbury:

That the public consultation process as outlined in the report proceed in parallel with further analysis on the potential for savings with local authorities, the Police and Dorset except that:

- i. The CFA would be clear that it has no preferred option
- ii. The folder of documents presented to the Members in June was not approved for public consultation purposes and would not be on the consultation website
- iii. Participants in residents' forums would not be paid.

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- iv. There would only be one press briefing on the consultation by the CFO and Chairman of the CFA
- v. There would be no encouragement of petitions as informed responses, comment and submissions were preferred
- vi. The public consultation document would be revised before publication to ensure a level playing field between the options and the Urgency Committee would meet to consider providing supplementary information for consultation.
- vii. The Urgency Committee would finalise instructions to the ORS on its management of the consultation in Wiltshire.
- viii. The CFA wished a report on the opinion in Wiltshire to be separate from the report on opinion in Dorset, although they would like to have sight of the Dorset report.

An amendment was moved by Cllr Jones MBE and seconded by Cllr Marshall. After debate, the amendment was voted upon and the Authority:

RESOLVED:

That participants in residents' forums should receive an incentive payment to attend.

Cllr Newbury voted against and Cllr Bennett abstained: The CFO asked for clarification about the press briefing; it was agreed that a single line to take would be developed by the Chairman and the CFO from the Consultation Document, in order to give a consistent message throughout the consultation period.

The Treasurer was asked to compile a simple template of financial information that could be used in the consultation.

Cllr Wayman asked that the resolution on further costing work be restated to look at potential savings across all services rather than a focus on back-office.

After further debate the Authority

Resolved:

1. *That the public consultation process as outlined in the report proceed in parallel with further analysis to look at potential for savings across all services with local authorities except that:*
 - a. *The CFA makes it clear that it has no preferred option*
 - b. *The folder of documents presented to the Members in June is not approved for public consultation purposes and should not be on the consultation website*
 - c. *There would be a press briefing statement regarding the consultation, prepared by the CFO and Chairman, which could be used in conjunction with the consultation document, throughout the consultation period in order to give a consistent message*
 - d. *There would be no encouragement of petitions as informed responses, comment and submissions were preferred*

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- e. *The public consultation document be revised before publication to ensure a level playing field between the options, and the Urgency Committee would meet to consider providing supplementary information for consultation.*
 - f. *The Urgency Committee would finalise instructions to the ORS on its Management of the Consultation in Wiltshire.*
 - g. *The CFA wished a report on the opinion in Wiltshire to be separate from the report on opinion in Dorset*
2. *The Consultation process would commence on 21 July 2014 and runs for a 13 week period until 20 October 2014.*
 3. *That the Members would consider the consultation responses together with the final business case at the November meeting of the Authority.*
 4. *That Dorset FRA be informed of this resolution.*

30 Urgent Business

The Clerk announced that there was a requirement for the Authority to grant extensions to two contracts, but the Chairman requested that this be dealt with by the Urgency Committee.

(Meeting Closed 12:45)