

Wiltshire Council

Full Council

24 February 2015

Proposed Combined Fire and Rescue Authority for Wiltshire and Dorset

Executive Summary

To seek confirmation of the Council's position on the locally led proposed combination of the Dorset and the Wiltshire & Swindon Fire Authorities and creation of a Combined Fire and Rescue Authority for Wiltshire and Dorset.

Attached are 2 reports. The Council report provides an introduction and overview to the Fire Authority report. The Fire Authority report has been written, agreed and approved by that Authority.

Proposal

That the Council supports the report from the Chairman of Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority and instructs Officers to submit a response to the DCLG supporting the locally led proposal to create a combined fire authority covering Dorset and Wiltshire and Swindon. The DCLG response will be made by close of business on 24th February 2015.

Corporate Directors - Dr Carlton Brand; Maggie Rae; Carolyn Godfrey

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Purpose of Report

1. To seek confirmation of the Council's position on the locally led proposed combination of the Dorset and the Wiltshire & Swindon Fire Authorities and creation of a Combined Fire and Rescue Authority for Wiltshire and Dorset.

Background

2. On 21 October 2014 the Council debated the proposal to create a Combined Fire and Rescue Authority merging the current Dorset Fire Authority and the current Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority (W&SFA)
3. Council at its meeting on 29 July 2014, in considering a motion on notice, resolved to adopt the motion as amended as follows:

'This council understands the financial challenges the Wiltshire and Swindon Combined Fire Authority, as with all other public services, needs to address, but urges the Fire Authority to consider all options to address those challenges. To this end this council will consider the matter fully at its next meeting on 21 October 2014 when further information on all the options is available, including the views of the residents of Wiltshire, before formally giving its response to the Fire Authority as part of the consultation process.'

Council at its meeting on 21 October 2014 resolved to add the following wording to the above adopted motion:

'The 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 draft business case.

The 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 upon this council would welcome closer cooperation to reduce costs in both organisations'.

4. This resolution was passed on to Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority as the Council's response to its consultation.
5. In November 2014, following the outcome of the consultation, Dorset and Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authorities jointly submitted a request to the Secretary of State to establish a single fire and rescue authority for the combined area of both fire authorities on 1st April 2016.
6. The authorities are seeking a voluntary merger on the grounds that:
 - it will improve resilience and deliver savings of around £4.5m a year;
 - it will strengthen local accountability;
 - it will create a safe, strong and sustainable fire and rescue service for the counties of Dorset and Wiltshire, and;
 - a combined authority would work better with police, ambulance and partners at a local level, with greater resources to offer.

Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) Consultation

7. The Secretary of State is required to consult on the proposed merger having due regard to whether it is in the interests of economy, efficiency and effectiveness or public safety, or whether the issues need to be further examined at an inquiry. ([Link to consultation document.](#)) Appendix 2
8. Wiltshire Council is explicitly included within a list of consultees of key, public service providers in the affected area.
9. The consultation document asks 3 specific questions:

Do you agree that the proposed revocation of the Dorset Fire Services (Combination Scheme) Order 1996, is in the interests of

- Economy;
- Efficiency and effectiveness
- and Public Safety

Do you agree that the proposed revocation of the Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Services (Combination Scheme) Order 1996, is in the interests of

- Economy;
- Efficiency and effectiveness and
- Public Safety

Do you agree that the proposed merger of Dorset and Wiltshire and Swindon fire authorities is in the interests of:

- Economy;
- Efficiency and effectiveness and
- Public Safety

Main Considerations for the Council

10. The Council submitted a response to the DCLG's consultation referred to in paragraphs 9 – 11 (Appendix 3) within the required timeframe.
11. Since submitting its response to the DCLG, the Council has received a submission (Appendix 1) from the Chairman of Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority (W&SFA) responding to the concerns summarised in the above resolution and seeking the Council's support for the Combination Order.
12. The Chairman of the W&SFA will present the submission at the meeting to enable members to determine whether the issues previously raised have been addressed.
13. The DCLG has confirmed that it will accept a further response from the Council following the Full Council meeting on 24 February, clarifying its position in the light of the additional information recently provided by the Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority.

Safeguarding Implications

14. None arising directly from this report.

Public Health Implications

15. As part of public health and protection, our Emergency Planning team work closely with the Wiltshire & Swindon Fire Authorities. We would be keen to ensure that any final arrangement, from a resilience perspective, support a continued commitment to the Local Resilience Forum and working in partnership to protect the residents of Wiltshire. We also work with Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority on wider health promotion issues, including on the Warm and Safe programme, and health prevention activities around safety in the home. We would hope for these important partnerships to be continued.

Corporate Procurement Implications

16. None arising directly from this report.

Equalities Impact of the Proposal

17. An Equality Impact Assessment has not been undertaken at this stage as this report concerns the DCLG's consultation on the proposals by the Dorset and the Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authorities.

Environmental and Climate Change Considerations

18. None arising directly from this report.

Risk Assessment

19. There is a risk that the proposed merger will not deliver the financial savings required by the two separate Fire Authorities, which has formed a key driver for the need to merge. This will require sound financial management to ensure that the full benefits envisaged of the merger are delivered.

20. The merger and regionalisation of other public services and perception that combined services deliver a less responsive service will need managing. This risk is mitigated by the proposals for maintaining and enhancing the local nature of the services and protecting local stations through the streamlining of training and back office functions. This will enable the combined fire authority to protect the local emergency response elements of the service.

Financial Implications

21. The Council is working with its partners, including the Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority to look at ways to make efficiencies. If a combined fire authority moves ahead the key risk to the Council is the impact on funding opportunities and the precept levels.
22. In seeking combination, there will be no requirement for a referendum, and therefore no financial impact on Wiltshire Council regarding holding a referendum. However, should the combination not proceed, there is the potential for the Fire Authority to seek to increase their precept in future years beyond 2015/16 in excess of the referendum limits. If a referendum is required, then all costs of this will therefore be borne by the Fire Authority. Furthermore, should the combination not proceed, the Wiltshire Fire Authority will lose £5.54m government grant, which it has secured the majority of which will be spent in Wiltshire.

Legal Implications

23. The Secretary of State's powers to revoke the current combination scheme orders and create a new combination scheme order as proposed are contained in sections 2 and 4 of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004. It should be noted that, if the Council resolves not to support the proposed merger the Secretary of State may deem it necessary to hold an enquiry, which will impact on the timetable for combination of the Dorset and Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authorities.

Options Considered

24. The Council has the option whether or not to submit a further response to the DCLG clarifying its position on the proposals for a Combined fire Authority.

Corporate Directors - Dr Carlton Brand; Maggie Rae; Carolyn Godfrey

Report Author: Robin Townsend – Associate Director

11/02/2015

Background Papers - none

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Response to the Secretary of State's consultation on proposals for a Combined Fire and Rescue Authority for Wiltshire and Dorset by the Chairman of Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority.

Appendix 2 - DCLG's Consultation on Locally-led proposals to create a combined fire and rescue authority for Dorset and Wiltshire Council

Appendix 3 – Wiltshire Council's response to DCLG's consultation
