



Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub Station Site



Report of Consultation with Operational Staff, Stakeholders and Members of the Public



As with all our studies, findings from this research are subject to Opinion Research Services' Standard Terms and Conditions of Contract.

Any press release or publication of the findings of this research requires the advance approval of ORS. Such approval will only be refused on the grounds of inaccuracy or misrepresentation.

© Copyright September 2016

Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Acknowledgements | 4 |
| Executive Summary and Conclusions..... | 6 |
| The Commission and its Context | 6 |
| Report of Findings..... | 6 |
| Open Questionnaire..... | 7 |
| Deliberative Forums and Public Meetings | 8 |
| Written Submissions..... | 15 |
| Consultation Programme Proportional and Fair | 16 |
| Overall Conclusions..... | 17 |
| Project Overview | 20 |
| Opinion Research Services..... | 20 |
| The Commission and its Context | 20 |
| Open Questionnaire..... | 21 |
| Deliberative Forums and Public Meetings | 21 |
| The Programme..... | 21 |
| Forum with Members of Staff | 21 |
| Forum with Members of the Public | 21 |
| Public Meetings..... | 23 |
| Written Submissions..... | 24 |
| Consultation Programme Proportional and Fair | 24 |
| Open Questionnaire | 26 |
| Forum with Members of the Public | 40 |
| Meetings with Staff | 45 |
| Public Meetings..... | 50 |
| Written Submissions..... | 54 |
| Overall Conclusions..... | 60 |

Acknowledgements

Opinion Research Services (ORS) is pleased to have worked with Hereford and Worcester Fire Authority (H&WFRA) on the consultation programme reported here.

We are grateful to all of those who completed the questionnaire or submitted a written submission - and to the operational staff, stakeholders and members of the public who took part in the forum and public meetings. The forum participants were patient in listening to background information before entering positively into the spirit of open discussions about potential sites for the hub station. They engaged with the service, with the issues under consideration and with each other in discussing their ideas readily.

We thank H&WFA for commissioning the project and we particularly thank Nathan Travis (Chief Fire Officer), Mark Preece (Area Commander) and Jean Cole (Head of Corporate Services) from Hereford & Worcester Fire & Rescue Service (H&WFRS) for their collaboration and for attending the sessions to answer many questions by the staff, stakeholders and public. Such meetings benefit considerably from such readiness to respond fully to participants' questions, as in this case.

At all stages of the project, ORS's status as an independent organisation facilitating the consultation as fairly as possible was recognised and respected. We are grateful for the trust, and we hope this report will contribute to H&WFRS's development. We hope also that ORS has been instrumental in continuing to strengthen H&WFRS's public engagement.

The ORS Project Team

Project Design and Management

Dale Hall

Kelly Lock

Fieldwork Management

Robyn Griffiths

James Greenwood

Amy Bone

Forum Facilitators

Dale Hall

Kelly Lock

Report Authors

Dale Hall

Kelly Lock

Christopher Doel

Executive Summary and Conclusions

The Commission and its Context

1. Early in 2015, the Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Authority (H&WFRA) undertook two consultation programmes which led the Authority to propose an emergency services hub station for the Wyre Forest. The first programme was an extensive 'pre-consultation' or 'listening and engagement' process to understand people's opinions and to 'test' principles and possible operational options for the area. Later in 2015, having taken account of the initial findings and other available evidence, H&WFRA consulted very extensively on the principle of closing the three existing Wyre Forest fire stations in order to combine their resources at a single hub station.
2. Following the two extensive consultations, both carried out by ORS, the Authority approved a further phase of public consultation to be undertaken to determine public support for a Hub Station sited at either Silverwoods Park or Stourpoint 5, both of which are about 800 metres apart on Stourport Road.
3. The consultation period lasted ten weeks, from 4th July to 9th September 2016, and ORS's role in the programme comprised:
 - Drafting the consultation document;
 - Designing, implementing, analysing and reporting an open online and paper questionnaire;
 - Facilitating and reporting two public meetings; two forums with wholetime and retained operational staff; and one forum with members of the public drawn from all three areas of the Wyre Forest;
 - Analysing and summarising any written submissions received by H&WFRS during the consultation period; and
 - Providing an independent interpretive report of findings.

Executive Summary Report of Findings

4. While this Executive Summary seeks to give a balanced assessment of the discussion outcomes, readers are referred to the detail of the full reports following for a more comprehensive account of the views expressed, in particular, for an account of people's priorities, assumptions and reasons for these views. It also includes ORS's conclusions about how to interpret the balance of opinion in the consultation.

5. It is important to note that the views reported are those expressed by consultation respondents. In some cases, these views will not be supported by the available evidence - and while ORS has not sought to highlight or correct those that make incorrect statements or assumptions, this should be borne in mind when considering the findings below.

Open Questionnaire

Introduction

6. The open questionnaire (with an accompanying Consultation Document) was available online and as a hard copy between 4th July and 9th September 2016. 127 questionnaires were completed; 115 were submitted online and 12 by post.
7. Although the open questionnaire is an important consultation route that is open to all, due to its very nature it cannot be distributed to or completed by a representative sample of Wyre Forest residents. As such, because the respondent profile is an imperfect reflection of the area's population, its results must be interpreted carefully. Crucially though, this does not mean that the open questionnaire findings should be discounted: they are analysed in detail in this report and must be taken into account as a demonstration of the strength of feeling of residents who were motivated to put forward their views (and in many cases concerns) about the proposed change.

Main Findings

Silverwoods Park

8. Nearly a third (32%) of individual respondents agreed that Silverwoods Park is an appropriate location for the new hub station. However, 6 in 10 (61%) respondents disagreed, and around half (48%) strongly disagreed. The main reasons respondents gave for their agreement or disagreement can be seen below:

| |
|---|
| Hub station will lead to increased risk to life/property |
| Disagree with proposed location due to traffic congestion in the area |
| Silverwoods Park is ideally/centrally located |
| Silverwoods Park is too far from Bewdley |
| Hub station will lead to increased response times |
| Generally disagree with proposed closures/ hub station |
| Disagree with closure of Bewdley Fire Station |
| Silverwoods Park is accessible/benefits from good access routes |
| Silverwoods Park results in the least disruption to response times |
| Silverwoods Park is too far from North Kidderminster |
| Hub station will have a negative impact on rural areas |
| Silverwoods Park is too far from Stourport |
| Disagree with closure of Stourport Fire Station |
| Silverwoods Park is too far from Far Forest |

9. Of the three organisations that responded to the open consultation questionnaire, two agreed that Silverwoods Park is an appropriate location for the new hub station. This was on the grounds that the proposed site is in *a central location with good access routes to risk areas* (Staffordshire FRS Corporate Safety Plan) and that it *will not affect response times dramatically* (Salvation Army – West Midlands Emergency Response Team). Bewdley Town Council strongly disagreed that Silverwoods Park is an appropriate location for the new hub station insofar as the town has many timber-framed houses and that *it can and will take up to 10 minutes to travel from Kidderminster to Bewdley*.

Stourpoint 5

10. Almost three quarters (72%) of individual respondents disagreed that Stourpoint 5 is an appropriate location for the new hub station; almost half (46%) strongly disagreed. Only 13% of all respondents agreed. The main reasons respondents gave for their agreement or disagreement can be seen below.

| |
|---|
| Stourpoint 5 is too far from Bewdley |
| Hub station will lead to increased response times |
| Generally disagree with proposed closures/ hub station |
| Hub station will lead to increased risk to life/property |
| Disagree with proposed location due to traffic congestion in the area |
| Stourpoint 5 is accessible/benefits from good access routes |
| Stourpoint 5 is too far from North Kidderminster |
| Disagree with closure of Bewdley Fire Station |
| Stourpoint 5 is ideally/centrally located |
| Stourpoint 5 is in an Enterprise Zone/land should be used for business and employment |
| Stourpoint 5 is closer to Stourport/Bewdley |

11. All three organisations disagreed that Stourpoint 5 is an appropriate location for a new hub station because it is not sufficiently central. There was concern that a hub station at Stourpoint 5 *may affect response times into the area of greater risk and demand* (Staffordshire FRS Corporate Safety Plan).

Deliberative Forums and Public Meetings

Introduction

The Programme

12. Important deliberative forums were held: one with 32 randomly selected members of the public and two with 26 members of staff who volunteered to attend. Although, like all other forms of qualitative consultation, deliberative forums cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the meetings reported here gave the relevant staff and diverse members of the public the opportunity to participate actively - so the

outcomes (as reported below) are broadly indicative of how informed opinion would incline on the basis of similar discussions.

13. The Fire Authority also held two public meetings, which were publicised by H&WFRS officers who undertook three public awareness raisings sessions, one in each town centre, prior to the events. Furthermore, each event was extensively publicised on Twitter and via leaflets; the Service handed out nearly 700 of the latter.
14. The meetings were held in the evenings, but attracted only 22 attendees, as shown below:

| Location | Date | Numbers Attending |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|
| Wyre Forest District Council Chamber | 13 th July 2016 | 7 |
| Wyre Forest District Council Chamber | 18 th July 2016 | 15 |

However, all participants were well-informed - mainly town or district councillors, union representatives, current or ex-firefighters and relatives of firefighters. Each meeting lasted over two hours and included rigorous discussions of the Fire Authority's proposals.

15. All the meetings began by reviewing the Fire Authority's reasons for agreeing in principle that, providing a suitable location can be found, the three current fire stations should be closed and an emergency services hub station created. The main issues summarised in the review were:

Why it is possible to close the three current fire stations and to combine their resources at a single hub station (based on decreasing risk and incident levels across Wyre Forest between 2010-11 and 2014-15);

Key benefits of a hub Station (including better joint-working between the emergency services; matching resources more closely to risk; improved on-call availability; and cost-effectiveness);

Financial challenges;

Transformation Fund award of £2.4m from Government;

Need to balance emergency cover equitably across the two counties; and

The impact of the change on attendance times.

16. Each meeting also discussed the specific site issues in detail - including all the following:

Numbers of sites investigated and criteria for site evaluations;

Reasons for selecting two 'short-listed' sites;

Site plans and general layout; and

Increases in average response times across the Wyre Forest area based on (a) comparing performance for all incidents over the last five years against

projected response times from both of the selected sites; and (b) timed fire engine runs at three of the busiest times of the day.

Main Findings – Forums with Members of Staff

First Forum Discussion

17. There were many questions about the hub proposal, covering: how the two sites were chosen and whether others were available; the extent of the influence of government on the proposal and whether it would have been pursued otherwise; the value of the Kidderminster site for redevelopment and the possibility of getting full value from a sale; and whether SARA will pay for the space it occupies in the hub.
18. There was a general feeling that once a hub is established it would not be necessary or sustainable to maintain four pumps at the hub station, partly because *half the RDS crews will never get a call!* Even so, one retained firefighter said: *I'm not against this!*
19. The forum was puzzled as to why response times from the two sites apparently differ so markedly when they are really rather close.
20. There was a popular suggestion that H&WFRS should measure its response times as many/most other FRSs do - by 'starting the clock' when the first fire engine is despatched by the Control Centre rather than when the Control Centre first receives an emergency call (which makes H&WFRS's response times longer than would be the case if the point of timing matched that of other FRSs). This may be something the Fire Authority may wish to consider in terms of reporting its performance targets and standards in a more comparative manner.
21. There were many other questions around job security, shift patterns, the size of the hub and its station ground - though these did not amount to objections to either of the proposed sites.
22. The forum felt that the distribution of risk across Wyre Forest implies that the hub station should 'move into Kidderminster', but overall the five participants readily accepted the principle of the hub and also accepted that both sites are reasonable and feasible - though there was some concern about the impact on residents around Silverwoods Park if it is sited there.

Second Forum Discussion

23. It was clear in the second discussion (with Bewdley and Stourport on-call staff) that many firefighters remain opposed to the issue of principle in relation to whether H&WFRA should establish an emergency services hub for the Wyre Forest. Participants strongly reiterated the same concerns as expressed during both the first and second stage consultations, for example:

The potential for longer response times to certain areas in future and, especially, back-up support for the Kidderminster wholetime appliance to ensure firefighter safety;

Response times being further compromised by longer turn-in times for on-call firefighters - which in themselves may lead to people being forced to leave the Service;

The possibility of reducing the number of resources at the hub in future as it is 'easier' to remove resources from a central hub than it is from smaller, individual fire stations;

On-call de-motivation: many current Bewdley and Stourport firefighters would leave the Service as a result of attending fewer incidents - exacerbating current Retained Duty System (RDS) availability problems and resulting in a loss of skill and experience;

Competencies would be difficult to maintain as a result of fewer incident attendances;

Some firefighters would have the additional expense of having to purchase and run a car to turn-in (as they can get to their current station on foot)'; and

More and better joint-working will only really be feasible between wholetime firefighters and staff from other organisations due to the infrequency with which on-call firefighters are on-station.

24. On-call recruitment was also raised as a significant issue once more. As aforementioned, it was predicted that many of the existing Bewdley and Stourport RDS firefighters would leave the Service following the closure of their local stations, and there was significant concern that the recruitment of new on-call firefighters would be challenging in light of existing difficulties. As such, it was suggested that H&WFRA must be open to new, innovative and creative recruitment strategies to ensure the on-call role is as attractive as possible to a wide range of people.
25. The need for a sufficiently large pool of on-call firefighters was stressed, with some suggesting that current numbers will need to be maintained to crew all four fire engines plus special appliances - again based on experience both within and outside Wyre Forest.
26. The group generally felt unable to make a judgement on the relative merits and drawbacks of the two proposed sites, citing the need for more information and answers to questions prior to doing so. As such, few comments were made on either Silverwoods Park or Stourpoint 5, though participants noted: the congestion on Stourport Road; the lack of recruitment opportunities in the area; and, with specific reference to Silverwoods, that its residential nature may not be conducive to the siting of a noisy fire station there.
27. One alternative suggestion was made whereby H&WFRA would: *put a staff rider out there to plug the gaps at different retained stations as opposed to bringing everyone together in one location. Retained with full-time jobs are expected to drop those jobs to attend a fire, why can't officers do the same?*

28. Finally, the firefighters commented on the consultation - and particularly on: H&WFRA's decision not to hold public meetings in either Bewdley or Stourport; the lack of information in the consultation document on, for example, the 'pros and cons' of and rationale for choosing the two sites and the financial implications of the development for H&WFRA; and the 'misleading' figures used to justify the proposal.

Overall Summary

29. The first and smaller staff forum felt able to accept all the proposals, though the FBU representative who was present emphasised the union's anxieties that longer response times would endanger the public and firefighters and that on-call staff would be unable to sustain their jobs. Following their discussion, the first forum agreed with the principle of a single hub site and accepted that both sites under consideration were feasible.
30. The second staff forum was far more negative than the first. Participants remained firmly opposed to the principle of an emergency hub services station for the Wyre Forest (and reiterated many of the concerns and issues they had raised at previous meetings) – and felt unable to make a judgement on the site options without further information and answers to their operational questions.

Main Findings – Forum with Members of the Public

31. During the initial part of the forum (when participants were given a presentation outlining H&WFRA's hub concept and proposed locations), participants' questions and comments highlighted their initial concerns. These were mainly focused around:

The importance of response times and the implications of lengthening them for both first and support appliances;

How predicted response times from the new hub have been determined and the 'dangers' of relying on projections;

Whether Bewdley and Stourport firefighters will be able to reach a new hub within the required turn-out time (and the impact of not being able to do this on their ability to continue in their roles);

The (potentially underestimated) cost of the hub and the feasibility of using earmarked finances to refurbish the three current stations;

The possibility that the number of vehicles at the hub may be reduced in future (resulting in a less resilient service for the Wyre Forest);

Levels of cover during simultaneous incidents;

Other locations considered;

How the transition period will work; and

The extent to which fire engines will be able to negotiate heavy traffic in the area.

32. Furthermore, a few participants were concerned that H&WFRA has discarded the objections raised, especially by Bewdley residents, during the first two consultations in taking its decision to pursue an emergency services hub station in principle.
33. Ultimately though, most participants recognised and accepted the case for a hub station, even several from Bewdley who commented that in the event of future closures (which, they felt, would be inevitable in the light of financial constraints) their local station would likely be most at-risk - and that the hub might at least mitigate against the loss of the fire engine.
34. In terms of the two proposed locations, the vast majority of participants opted for Silverwoods Park over Stourpoint 5 on the grounds that: predicted response times are better; it is nearer Kidderminster, which has the highest call volume of the three areas; it is closer to hard-to-reach and deprived areas such as Hagley; and it is not as isolated, which was considered important in terms of both staff welfare and community interaction. Furthermore, several said that they could see little to differentiate the two locations but that they had opted for Silverwoods because they trusted the judgement of H&WFRS's officers in designating it as their preferred option.
35. The minority that preferred Stourpoint 5 did so because it: has better road links than Silverwoods; is less residential and thus less disruptive; and is not as congested traffic-wise.
36. Finally, a very small number of participants felt they could not make a definitive judgement before knowing the relative cost of the two sites.

Main Findings – Public Meetings

First Meeting

37. Although it was a public meeting, the FBU was relatively prominent in the questioning and discussions. As in the staff forums and the FBU's written submission, the Union's main concerns were that:

A single hub would lengthen response times dangerously and unacceptably - with longer attendance times for the first and support fire engines;

Current on-call staff would be disadvantaged because they could not meet required turn-out times to the hub;

Lengthening turn-out times would dangerously delay the mobilisation of support fire engines;

There is no certainty that a single hub base would improve on-call recruitment and retention; and

Creating the hub will mean that the fourth fire engine currently available will soon be lost because it will be so little used when the wholetime crews attend more incidents from the new base.

38. Many of these points were taken up in discussion, during which several questions were raised. For example, the meeting was confused about why response times from the two sites apparently differ so markedly when they are quite close - and questioned why Stourpoint 5 is even being considered given that attendances are likely to be lengthier than they would be from Silverwoods Park. On the other hand, it was also asked: *how will Silverwoods residents feel about having a fire station close by?*
39. Other questions were around: crewing numbers at the proposed hub; H&WFRS's strategies for recruiting on-call firefighters; and the meaning and implications of response time targets. Indeed, those seeking clarity on the meaning of, and risks associated with, response times suggested that H&WFRS should measure its response times as many/most other FRSs do - from when the first fire engine is despatched by the Control Centre rather than from when the Control Centre first receives an emergency call (which makes H&WFRS's response times seem longer than if its timings matched that of other FRSs). As such, and as we have said in relation to the staff forums, the reporting of response times is something the Fire Authority may wish to consider in terms of reporting its performance targets and standards in a more comparative manner.
40. Finally, some other constructive suggestions were made as follows:
- You could use smaller fire engines? Would the FBU be happy with that?*
- You could use 'staff riders' to increase the availability of the on-call fire engines when they are short.*

Second Meeting

41. The second public meeting was less critical than the first, though again there were questions, comments and concerns around: the effect of traffic and roadworks on turn-out and response times; the possibility that the number of vehicles at the hub may be reduced in future (resulting in a less resilient service for the Wyre Forest); the lack of Ambulance Service involvement currently; the differing types of incidents experienced within Wyre Forest; and, in participants' view, the 'misleading' figures used in the consultation document.
42. Other issues raised were around: the relative cost of the two sites; the possible unviability of both locations in future; implementation timescales; and the possibility of making financial savings through resource reductions rather than station closures.
43. Overall, there was some recognition that, in reality, response times to Bewdley, Stourport and other outlying areas may not be too dissimilar from the hub than they are from the

three existing stations currently given the significant role the Kidderminster wholetime appliance plays in attending incidents elsewhere. Furthermore, while not going as far as to wholeheartedly support the proposed hub, others could see the logic in accepting the Government grant on offer to develop it in light of the significant refurbishment costs that would be required otherwise - possibly necessitating the closure of one or both of Bewdley and Stourport.

Overall Summary

44. The first meeting was opposed to or sceptical about the proposals. The main concerns expressed echoed those of the FBU: the impact of longer response times and consequential increased risks.
45. The second meeting was less negative than the first. While there were concerns about H&WFRS 'putting all of its eggs in one basket', there was also recognition that the transformational grant on offer from Government represents an opportunity to mitigate against future significant refurbishment costs at the three current fire stations – and possible closures.

Written Submissions

Introduction

46. During the formal consultation process, six written submissions were received. The table below shows the breakdown of contributors by type.

| Type of Correspondent | Number of respondents/signatories |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| District/Town/Parish Councils | 3 |
| Wyre Forest Residents | 2 |
| Representative Bodies | 1 |
| Total | 6 |

Main Findings

47. Detailed written submissions do not lend themselves to easy summary and so readers are encouraged to consult ORS's full report for a more detailed account of the views expressed. However, this summary would be incomplete without reporting at least an overview.
48. Of the six submissions, the FBU and one resident strongly oppose the proposal for a hub station and reject both sites as unsuitable operationally - and, in addition, because Silverwoods is in a sensitive residential area. The FBU believes the longer response times would be unsafe in endangering both the public and firefighters and in jeopardising the

roles of existing on-call staff. The Union also feels a hub is unnecessary for joint emergency services working and will not improve services to the public.

49. In contrast, four submissions either strongly support or accept the hub as a good thing overall - and two of them prefer Stourport 5 as more suitable than Silverwoods. The Corporate Team at Wyre Forest District Council supports all the proposals and considers Stourport 5 to be a more appropriate site in planning terms. Rock Parish Council also supports the hub as an important opportunity and prefers Stourport 5 as a better location from which to cover Stourport and Bewdley. Kidderminster Town Council and one resident accept the hub proposal as reasonable, but (ideally) the resident would prefer two wholetime pumps or the use of larger crews on the wholetime engine.

Consultation Programme Proportional and Fair

50. H&WFRS's consultation programme was conscientious: that is, it was open, accessible and fair to members of the public, stakeholders and staff in Wyre Forest. The consultation was also proportional to the importance of the issues and conforms with good practice, both in its scale and the balance of elements included, and also in the way in which it built upon earlier listening and engagement and consultation exercises undertaken by the Service. The key good practice requirements for proper consultation programmes are that they should:

Be conducted at a formative stage, before decisions are taken;

Allow sufficient time for people to participate and respond;

Provide the public and stakeholders with enough background information to allow them to consider the issues and any proposals intelligently and critically;
and

Be properly taken into consideration before decisions are finally taken.

51. Taken together, these four elements do much to ensure the 'accountability' of public authorities, particularly the fourth; but this does not mean that consultations are referenda. Properly understood, accountability means that public authorities should give an account of their plans and take into account public views: they should conduct fair and accessible consultation while reporting the outcomes openly and considering them fully. This does not mean that the majority views should automatically decide public policy, for consultations are not referenda, and the popularity or unpopularity of draft proposals should not displace professional and political judgement about what is the right or best decision in the circumstances. The levels of, and reasons for, public support or opposition are very important, but as considerations to be taken into account, not as factors that necessarily determine authorities' decisions.
52. For the public bodies considering the outcomes of consultation, the key question is not *Which proposal has most support?* but, *Are the reasons for the popularity or unpopularity of the proposals cogent?* In this context, both H&WFRS and ORS were clear that this important

consultation programme should include both 'open' and deliberative elements in order to both: provide many people with the opportunity to take part via the open questionnaire and public meeting routes; and promote informed engagement via the deliberative forums.

53. Given people's general unawareness of how their fire and rescue services operate and manage their resources and costs, consultation with informed audiences (who have the opportunity to question and test the evidence for particular proposals – as in the deliberative forum) is especially valuable. All consultation elements are important and none should be disregarded, but the deliberative forums with the public, stakeholders and staff, and the written submissions, are particularly worthy of consideration because they explore the arguments and the reasons for people's opinions. H&WFA's consultation programme conforms to good practice by including both quantitative and qualitative methods through which people could participate and as a means for the Authority to understand the reasons for people's opinions.
54. Finally, as well as providing the public, stakeholders and staff with sufficient information to consider the proposals intelligently, H&WFRA has also conducted its consultation in a timely manner and is taking account of the outcomes before making a decision. Overall, the three-stage engagement and consultation process compare well with similar consultations undertaken by other fire and rescue services and public bodies and certainly meets the best good practice standards.

Overall Conclusions

55. Overall, the views expressed through the consultation varied between different groups. Largely opposed to the hub and both site options were the: open consultation questionnaire respondents; some of the submissions; some in the staff forums; and one public meeting. But the following were broadly supportive or could at least accept the proposals: deliberative forum (with randomly selected members of the public); some in the staff forums; most of the written submissions; and the second public meeting (which was non-committal but did not express opposition). Those supporting the proposal varied somewhat on which site is preferable.
56. The reasons for the respective support and opposition have been documented previously and are not repeated in detail here. Many of the concerns raised in the questionnaires and public meetings were reviewed in the deliberative forums, where most people's concerns were allayed through questioning and discussion. However, the open questionnaire respondents, one of the two staff forum and one of the public meeting were critical of the proposal and site options.
57. In any case, influencing public policy through consultation is not simply a 'numbers game' or 'popularity contest' in which the loudest voices or the greatest numbers automatically win the argument. Instead, consultation is to inform authorities of issues, arguments,

implications they might have overlooked; to contribute to the re-evaluation of matters already known; or to reassess priorities and principles critically. However popular proposals might be, that does not itself mean they are feasible, safe, sustainable, reasonable and value-for-money; and unpopularity does not mean the reverse.

Balance of Opinion

58. In this case, though, the outcome of the consultation process is in relative equipoise, with some support and about the same level of opposition, as the following summary of outcomes shows. Those who opposed one or other of the sites were opposed to the hub as a matter of principle (implicitly urging the Fire Authority to reverse its earlier decision in principle). In terms of the site options, there was only marginally more support for Silverwoods Park than Stourpoint 5 – and some important parties favoured Stourport 5 as the best site overall. In this context, where to site a new hub station will be a decision for the Fire Authority.

59. The balance of opinion was:

QUESTIONNAIRE

Unfavourable on siting a new emergency services hub station at either Silverwoods Park or Stourpoint 5 (marginally more support for the former)

The open text comments suggest continued resistance to the hub concept among many respondents

STAFF FORUMS

The first (smaller) forum accepted the principle of a single hub site and accepted the feasibility of both sites

The second staff forum was firmly opposed to the principle of single hub site - and was unable to make a judgement on site options

PUBLIC FORUM

Generally favourable to the principle of a single hub site

General preference for Silverwoods Park

PUBLIC MEETINGS

The first meeting was unfavourable to the principle of a single hub site and made no comment on the two site options

The second meeting was non-committal on the hub principle and site options

SUBMISSIONS

Two were unfavourable - including the FBU

Four were favourable - including the Corporate Team at Wyre Forest District Council, Kidderminster Town Council and Rock Parish Council

There was most support for Stourpoint 5.

Need for Interpretation

60. The Fire Authority should assess this balance of opinion alongside all the evidence, for (as we have said) consultation is not a 'numbers game' in which the biggest 'side' always wins. In this context, ORS attaches particular importance to the forums and written submissions for being deliberative and thoughtful. This does not mean that the other findings should be disregarded, for they show the opinions of important groups of people who were motivated to participate; but it must be borne in mind that the open questionnaire results are not necessarily representative of the whole population, and the staff meetings were very small.
61. While ORS makes the above judgements, there is no single 'right interpretation' of the consultation elements, for professional and political judgement is needed. Ultimately, the Fire Authority will consider all the consultation elements alongside all the other evidence in order best to determine the future direction of its Fire and Rescue Service.

Project Overview

Opinion Research Services

62. Opinion Research Services (ORS) is a generic social research company that works mainly for the public sector to conduct important applied research in health, housing, local government, police and fire and rescue services across the UK. The company was established in 1988 and has worked extensively with fire and rescue services (FRSs) across the UK since 1998. In 2004 it was appointed by the Fire Services Consultation Association (FSCA) as the sole approved provider of research and consultation services, under the terms of a National Framework Agreement. The same framework contract was retendered in 2009 and ORS was reappointed once more as the sole approved provider. While working with FRSs across the UK, ORS has specialised in designing, implementing and reporting employee, stakeholder and public consultation programmes for a wide range of integrated risk management plans (IRMPs), in many cases covering controversial and sensitive issues. In addition, ORS has extensive experience of statutory consultations about education, health and housing, and many other issues, including budgetary consultations.

The Commission and its Context

63. Early in 2015, the Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Authority (H&WFRA) undertook two consultation programmes which led the Authority to propose an emergency services hub station for the Wyre Forest. The first programme was an extensive 'pre-consultation' or 'listening and engagement' process to understand people's opinions and to 'test' principles and possible operational options for the area. Later in 2015, having taken account of the initial findings and other available evidence, H&WFRA consulted very extensively on the principle of closing the three existing Wyre Forest fire stations in order to combine their resources at a single hub station.
64. Following the two extensive consultations, both carried out by ORS, the Authority approved a further phase of public consultation to be undertaken to determine public support for a Hub Station sited at either Silverwoods Park or Stourpoint 5, both of which are about 800 metres apart on Stourport Road.
65. The consultation period lasted ten weeks, from 4th July to 9th September 2016, and ORS's role in the programme comprised:
- Drafting the consultation document;
 - Designing, implementing, analysing and reporting an open online and paper questionnaire;

Facilitating and reporting two public meetings; two forums with wholetime and retained operational staff; and one forum with members of the public drawn from all three areas of the Wyre Forest;

Analysing and summarising any written submissions received by H&WFRS during the consultation period; and

Providing an independent interpretive report of findings.

Open Questionnaire

66. The open questionnaire (with an accompanying Consultation Document) was available online and as a hard copy between 4th July and 9th September 2016. 127 questionnaires were completed; 115 were submitted online and 12 by post.
67. Although the open questionnaire is an important consultation route that is open to all, due to its very nature it cannot be distributed to or completed by a representative sample of Wyre Forest residents. As such, because the respondent profile is an imperfect reflection of the area's population, its results must be interpreted carefully. Crucially though, this does not mean that the open questionnaire findings should be discounted: they are analysed in detail in this report and must be taken into account as a demonstration of the strength of feeling of residents who were motivated to put forward their views (and in many cases concerns) about the proposed change.

Deliberative Forums and Public Meetings

The Programme

68. Important deliberative forums were held: one with 32 randomly selected members of the public and two with 26 members of staff who volunteered to attend. Although, like all other forms of qualitative consultation, deliberative forums cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the meetings reported here gave the relevant staff and diverse members of the public the opportunity to participate actively.

Forum with Members of Staff

69. Members of staff were invited to participate by H&WFRS in open staff meetings held at Kidderminster Fire Station and 26 attended - five at Kidderminster Fire Station on July 14th and then 21 at the same venue on July 19th. The latter session primarily comprised Bewdley and Stourport-on-Severn on-call firefighters.

Forum with Members of the Public

70. ORS convened a deliberative forum of 32 randomly selected and diverse participants at Wyre Forest District Council offices on July 20th. Members of the public were recruited by ORS (some had attended the 'listening and engagement' sessions in 2015, and the remainder were new attendees). Those who had not attended previously were recruited by

random-digit telephone dialling from ORS's Social Research Call Centre. Having been initially contacted by phone, all participants were then written to - to confirm the invitation and the arrangements; and those who agreed to come then received telephone reminders shortly before each meeting. Such recruitment by telephone is an effective way of ensuring that the participants are independent and broadly representative of the community.

71. Overall (as shown in the table below), the 32 public forum participants were a broad cross-section of residents from the local areas and, as standard good practice, were recompensed for their time and efforts in travelling and taking part. In recruitment, care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by disabilities or any other factors, and the venues at which the forums met were readily accessible. People's special needs were taken into account in the recruitment and at the venues. The random telephone recruitment process was monitored to ensure social diversity in terms of a wide range of criteria – including, for example: area of residence; gender; age; ethnicity; social grade; and disability/limiting long-term illness (LLTI).

| CRITERIA | PUBLIC FORUM |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Gender | Male: 17 Female: 15 |
| Age | 16-34: 7 35-54: 10 55+: 15 |
| Social Grade | AB: 10 C1: 10 C2: 5 DE: 7 |
| Ethnicity | 1 not White British |
| Limiting Illness or Disability | 5 |
| Area of Residence | Bewdley Area: 12 Stourport Area: 11 Kidderminster Area: 9 |

72. All the meetings began by reviewing the Fire Authority's reasons for agreeing in principle that, providing a suitable location can be found, the three current fire stations should be closed and an emergency services hub station created. The main issues summarised in the review were:

Why it is possible to close the three current fire stations and to combine their resources at a single hub station (based on decreasing risk and incident levels across Wyre Forest between 2010-11 and 2014-15);

Key benefits of a hub Station (including better joint-working between the emergency services; matching resources more closely to risk; improved on-call availability; and cost-effectiveness);

Financial challenges;

Transformation Fund award of £2.4m from Government;

Need to balance emergency cover equitably across the two counties; and

The impact of the change on attendance times.

73. Each meeting also discussed the specific site issues in detail - including all the following:

Numbers of sites investigated and criteria for site evaluations;

Reasons for selecting two 'short-listed' sites;

Site plans and general layout; and

Increases in average response times across the Wyre Forest area based on (a) comparing performance for all incidents over the last five years against projected response times from both of the selected sites; and (b) timed fire engine runs at three of the busiest times of the day.

74. Although, like all other forms of qualitative consultation, deliberative forums cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the public forum reported here gave diverse members of the public the opportunity to participate actively - so the outcomes (as reported below) are broadly indicative of how informed opinion would incline on the basis of similar discussions.

Public Meetings

75. The Fire Authority held two public meetings, which were publicised by media and using posters in the local areas. The meetings were held in the evenings, but attracted only 22 attendees, as shown below:

| Location | Date | Numbers Attending |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|
| Wyre Forest District Council Chamber | 13 th July 2016 | 7 |
| Wyre Forest District Council Chamber | 18 th July 2016 | 15 |

76. While the public meetings were attended by only 22 people, they were all well-informed participants - mainly town or district councillors, union representatives, current or ex-firefighters and relatives of firefighters. Each meeting lasted over two hours and included rigorous discussions of the Fire Authority's proposals.
77. It should be noted that the low attendance levels at the public meetings were not due to a lack of publicity on the part of H&WFRS, whose officers undertook three public awareness raisings sessions, one in each town centre, prior to the events. Furthermore, each event was extensively publicised on Twitter and via leaflets; the Service handed out nearly 700 of the latter.

Written Submissions

78. During the formal consultation process, six written submissions were received. The table below shows the breakdown of contributors by type.

| Type of Correspondent | Number of respondents/signatories |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| District/Town/Parish Councils | 3 |
| Wyre Forest Residents | 2 |
| Representative Bodies | 1 |
| Total | 6 |

79. ORS has read all the written submissions and summarised them in the full report, and the main themes have been outlined in the Executive Summary.

Consultation Programme Proportional and Fair

80. H&WFRS's consultation programme was conscientious: that is, it was open, accessible and fair to members of the public, stakeholders and staff in Wyre Forest. The consultation was also proportional to the importance of the issues and conforms with good practice, both in its scale and the balance of elements included, and also in the way in which it built upon earlier listening and engagement and consultation exercises undertaken by the Service. The key good practice requirements for proper consultation programmes are that they should:

Be conducted at a formative stage, before decisions are taken;

Allow sufficient time for people to participate and respond;

Provide the public and stakeholders with enough background information to allow them to consider the issues and any proposals intelligently and critically;
and

Be properly taken into consideration before decisions are finally taken.

81. Taken together, these four elements do much to ensure the 'accountability' of public authorities, particularly the fourth; but this does not mean that consultations are referenda. Properly understood, accountability means that public authorities should give an account of their plans and take into account public views: they should conduct fair and accessible consultation while reporting the outcomes openly and considering them fully. This does not mean that the majority views should automatically decide public policy, for consultations are not referenda, and the popularity or unpopularity of draft proposals should not displace professional and political judgement about what is the right or best decision in the circumstances. The levels of, and reasons for, public support or opposition are very important, but as considerations to be taken into account, not as factors that necessarily determine authorities' decisions.

82. For the public bodies considering the outcomes of consultation, the key question is not *Which proposal has most support?* but, *Are the reasons for the popularity or unpopularity of the proposals cogent?* In this context, both H&WFRS and ORS were clear that this important consultation programme should include both ‘open’ and deliberative elements in order to both: provide many people with the opportunity to take part via the open questionnaire and public meeting routes; and promote informed engagement via the deliberative forums.
83. Given people’s general unawareness of how their fire and rescue services operate and manage their resources and costs, consultation with informed audiences (who have the opportunity to question and test the evidence for particular proposals – as in the deliberative forum) is especially valuable. All consultation elements are important and none should be disregarded, but the deliberative forums with the public, stakeholders and staff, and the written submissions, are particularly worthy of consideration because they explore the arguments and the reasons for people’s opinions. H&WFA’s consultation programme conforms to good practice by including both quantitative and qualitative methods through which people could participate and as a means for the Authority to understand the reasons for people’s opinions.
84. Finally, as well as providing the public, stakeholders and staff with sufficient information to consider the proposals intelligently, H&WFRA has also conducted its consultation in a timely manner and is taking account of the outcomes before making a decision. Overall, the three-stage engagement and consultation process compare well with similar consultations undertaken by other fire and rescue services and public bodies and certainly meets the best good practice standards.

Open Questionnaire

Introduction

85. The open questionnaire (with an accompanying Consultation Document) was available online and as a hard copy between 4th July and 9th September 2016. 127 questionnaires were completed; 115 were submitted online and 12 by post.
86. H&WFRS printed and then distributed the consultation documents (with questionnaires, freepost envelopes and posters) to libraries, public buildings, fire stations, businesses, voluntary groups, partners and all emergency services. Copies were also available on request and an online version was available on the H&WFRS website.

Need for Interpretation

87. Although the open questionnaire is an important consultation route that is open to all, due to its very nature it cannot be distributed and completed systematically to a representative sample of Wyre Forest residents. As such, and because the respondent profile is an imperfect reflection of the area's population, the following results have to be interpreted carefully.
88. Crucially, this does not mean that the open questionnaire findings should be discounted: they are analysed in detail in this report and must be taken into account as a demonstration of the strength of feeling of residents who were motivated to put forward their views (and in many cases concerns) about the proposed changes.
89. It is also important to note that the views reported below are those expressed by open questionnaire respondents. In some cases, these views will not be supported by the available evidence - and while ORS has not sought to highlight or correct those that make incorrect statements or assumptions, this should be borne in mind when considering the findings below.

Respondent Profiles

90. Table 1 overleaf provides a breakdown of all 124 *individual* respondents to the online or postal consultation questionnaire. Three responses to the questionnaire indicated that they were from an organisation and are reported separately.

Table 1: Profile table for individual respondents to the consultation questionnaire
(Note: Percentages may not sum due to rounding)

| Characteristic | | All Responses | |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| | | Number of Responses | % of Valid Responses |
| AGE | Under 25 | 5 | 4.9% |
| | 25 to 34 | 10 | 9.8% |
| | 35 to 44 | 22 | 21.6% |
| | 45 to 54 | 21 | 20.6% |
| | 55 to 64 | 18 | 17.6% |
| | 65 to 74 | 18 | 17.6% |
| | 75 to 84 | 8 | 7.8% |
| | Total valid responses | 102 | 100.0% |
| | <i>Not known</i> | <i>22</i> | <i>-</i> |
| GENDER | Male | 48 | 48.0% |
| | Female | 52 | 52.0% |
| | Total valid responses | 100 | 100.0% |
| | <i>Not known</i> | <i>24</i> | <i>-</i> |
| ETHNICITY | White | 88 | 93.6% |
| | Mixed or multiple ethnic groups | 3 | 3.2% |
| | Asian or Asian British | 1 | 1.1% |
| | Any other ethnic group | 2 | 2.1% |
| | Total valid responses | 94 | 100% |
| | <i>Not known</i> | <i>30</i> | <i>-</i> |
| DISABILITY | With disability | 10 | 10.2% |
| | No disability | 88 | 89.8% |
| | Total valid responses | 98 | 100.0% |
| | <i>Not known</i> | <i>26</i> | <i>-</i> |
| EMPLOYED BY H&WFRS? | Yes | 3 | 2.9% |
| | No | 101 | 97.1% |
| | Total valid responses | 104 | 100.0% |
| | <i>Not known</i> | <i>20</i> | <i>-</i> |

Interpretation of the Data

91. Where percentages do not sum to 100, this may be due to computer rounding, the exclusion of “don’t know” categories, or multiple answers.
92. Graphics are used in this report to make it as user friendly as possible. The pie charts show the proportions (percentages) of residents making relevant responses. Where possible, the colours of the charts have been standardised with a ‘traffic light’ system in which:

Green shades represent positive responses

Beige and purple/blue shades represent neither positive nor negative responses

Red shades represent negative responses

The bolder shades are used to highlight responses at the 'extremes', for example, very satisfied or very dissatisfied

Main Findings

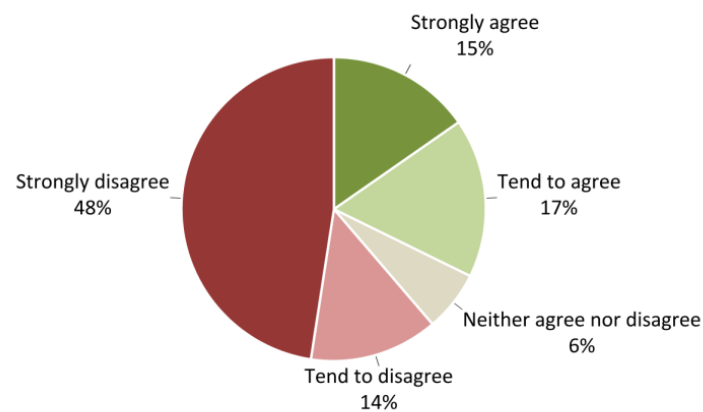
Silverwoods Park

93. Nearly a third (32%) of individual respondents agreed that Silverwoods Park is an appropriate location for the new hub station. However, 6 in 10 (61%) respondents disagreed, and around half (48%) strongly disagreed.

Figure 1: Extent to which respondents agree/disagree that Silverwoods Parks is an appropriate location for the new hub station.

Agree/disagree that Silverwoods Park is an appropriate location for the new hub station?

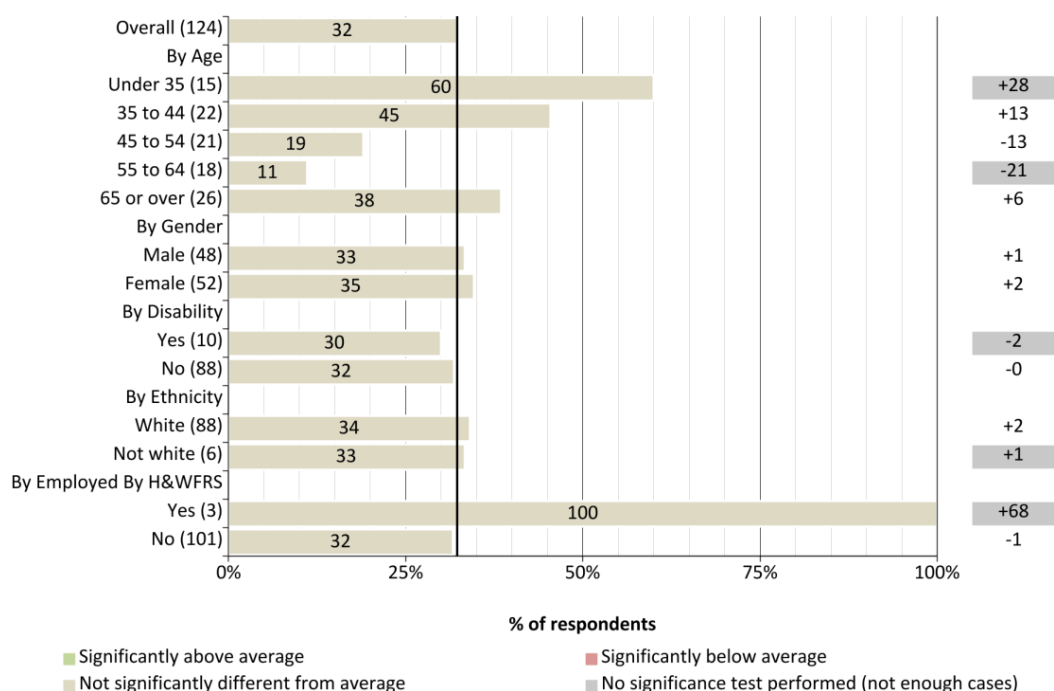
Base: All Individuals (124)



94. A demographic break down of responses to this question is presented overleaf (Figure 2). This shows that respondents under the age of 35 are particularly likely to agree that Silverwoods Park is an appropriate location for the new hub station, while those aged 55 -64 are particularly less likely to agree.

Figure 2: Extent to which respondents agree/disagree that Silverwoods Parks is an appropriate location for the new hub station: Demographic breakdown

Base: All Individuals (124)



95. Respondents were asked to explain why they agreed or disagreed that Silverwoods Park is an appropriate location for the new hub station. All responses to this question have been read in full and classified (coded) using a standardised code-frame. This approach allows us to present themes that were repeatedly mentioned in a quantifiable manner. Each respondent may present a number of different points or arguments and thus in many cases the overall number of coded comments exceeds the total number of respondents. In this instance, there are 218 coded comments from 107 responses from individuals.

Figure 3: Reasons for support or opposition to Silverwoods Park as a proposed location for the new hub station

Please tell us your reasons.

| Coded comment | No. of comments | Percent of individuals |
|---|-----------------|------------------------|
| Hub station will lead to increased risk to life/property | 25 | 23% |
| Disagree with proposed location due to traffic congestion in the area | 25 | 23% |
| Silverwoods Park is ideally/centrally located | 23 | 21% |
| Silverwoods Park is too far from Bewdley | 21 | 20% |
| Hub station will lead to increased response times | 19 | 18% |
| Generally disagree with proposed closures/ hub station | 17 | 16% |
| Disagree with closure of Bewdley Fire Station | 17 | 16% |
| Silverwoods Park is accessible/benefits from good access routes | 16 | 15% |
| Silverwoods Park results in the least disruption to response times | 10 | 9% |
| Silverwoods Park is too far from North Kidderminster | 6 | 6% |

| | | |
|--|----|-----|
| Hub station will have a negative impact on rural areas | 6 | 6% |
| Silverwoods Park is too far from Stourport | 3 | 3% |
| Disagree with closure of Stourport Fire Station | 2 | 2% |
| Silverwoods Park is too far from Far Forest | 2 | 2% |
| Other | 26 | 24% |

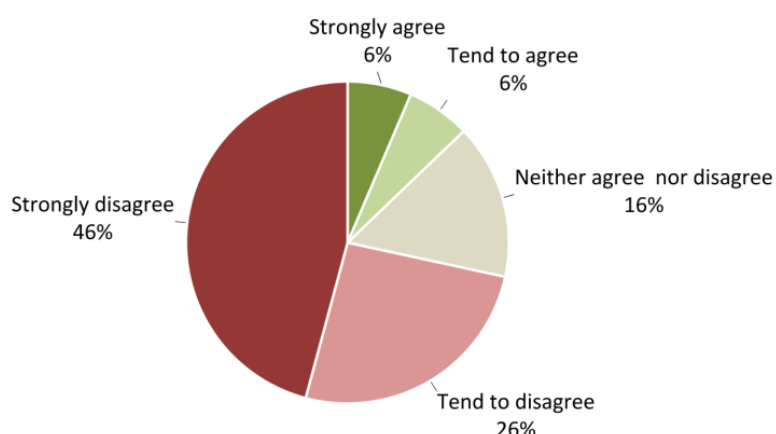
Stourpoint 5

96. Almost three quarters (72%) of respondents disagreed that Stourpoint 5 is an appropriate location for the new hub station; almost half (46%) strongly disagreed. Only 13% of all respondents agreed.

Figure 4: Extent to which respondents agree/disagree that Stourpoint 5 is an appropriate location for the new hub station.

Agree/disagree that Stourpoint 5 is an appropriate location for the new hub station?

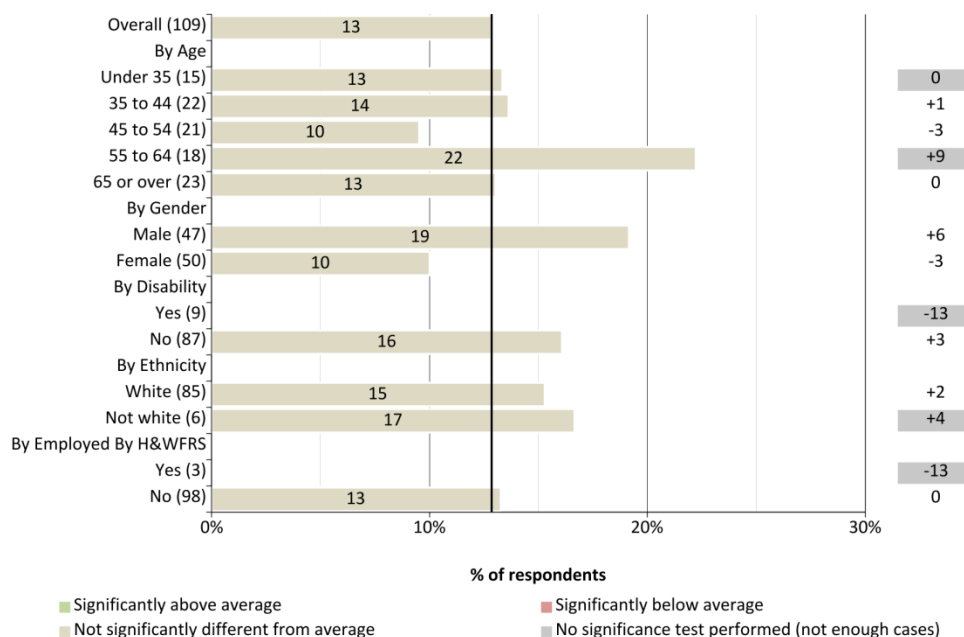
Base: All Individuals (109)



97. A demographic break down of responses to this question is presented overleaf (Figure 5). This shows that respondents aged 55 to 64 are particularly likely to agree that Stourpoint 5 is an appropriate location for the new hub station, as are male respondents. Disabled respondents are particularly less likely to agree.

Figure 5: Extent to which respondents agree/disagree that Stourpoint 5 is an appropriate location for the new hub station: Demographic breakdown

Base: All Individuals (109)



98. Respondents were asked why they agreed or disagreed that Stourpoint 5 is an appropriate location for the new hub station. 133 comments have been coded from 81 responses and are presented below.

Figure 6: Reasons for support or opposition to Stourpoint 5 as a proposed location for the new hub station

Please tell us your reasons.

| Coded comment | No. of comments | Percent of individuals |
|---|-----------------|------------------------|
| Stourpoint 5 is too far from Bewdley | 19 | 23% |
| Hub station will lead to increased response times | 15 | 19% |
| Generally disagree with proposed closures/ hub station | 12 | 15% |
| Hub station will lead to increased risk to life/property | 9 | 11% |
| Disagree with proposed location due to traffic congestion in the area | 9 | 11% |
| Stourpoint 5 is accessible/benefits from good access routes | 9 | 11% |
| Stourpoint 5 is too far from North Kidderminster | 8 | 10% |
| Disagree with closure of Bewdley Fire Station | 8 | 10% |
| Stourpoint 5 is ideally/centrally located | 7 | 9% |
| Stourpoint 5 is in an Enterprise Zone/land should be used for business and employment | 4 | 5% |
| Stourpoint 5 is closer to Stourport/Bewdley | 3 | 4% |
| Other | 30 | 37% |

Further Comments

99. Respondents were finally asked if there were any further comments that they would like to make about the proposals. 96 comments have been coded from 57 responses and are presented below.

Figure 7: Are there any further comments you would like to make?

Are there any further comments you would like to make?

| Coded comment | No. of comments | Percent of individuals |
|---|-----------------|------------------------|
| Hub station will lead to increased risk to life/property | 19 | 33% |
| Disagree with closure of Bewdley Fire Station | 12 | 21% |
| Generally disagree with proposed closures/ hub station | 8 | 14% |
| Proposals are financially motivated | 6 | 11% |
| Public opinion has been disregarded | 6 | 11% |
| Hub station will lead to increased response times | 5 | 9% |
| Generally agree with hub station | 5 | 9% |
| Suggestion: proposals should include training facilities/capabilities i.e. for the younger generation | 3 | 5% |
| Hub station will have a negative impact on rural areas | 1 | 2% |
| Other | 31 | 54% |

Commentary - Open Text Responses

100. Many respondents explicitly expressed their opposition to the idea of an emergency services hub for Wyre Forest regardless of where it is sited, mainly on the grounds that response times will lengthen (in some cases because of longer turn-out times for on-call firefighters:

I am worried that response times to incidents will increase...

Leaves much of the Wyre Forest with an increased time to get emergency help

Assuming that the Fire and Rescue Service is going, in part, to be reliant upon "retained" Firefighters, the time taken for them to be on station is going to be far too long. We believe that centralising the main full-time services at this point whilst still keeping the retained stations and crews within easy reach of their station in both Bewdley and Stourport is by far the best alternative to provide safe cover...

Do you really believe that firefighters from Bewdley and Stourport can arrive at the new hub fire station in five minutes as required?

101. Other issues were that: public and firefighter safety would be compromised; retaining three fire stations would also retain local firefighter knowledge; and that the three stations are needed to cater for population increases locally:

Why risk people's lives just trying to save a few quid? Keep our fire stations where they are and stop messing with this service

I do not feel that is a very good idea to close down our existing fire stations in favour of one hub. I feel that this will massively be putting lives at risk and firmly believe that all three towns...should retain their own individual fire stations

Fire and Safety should be based in each of the three towns of the Wyre Forest. In this way, we can keep our retained firefighters who know our area intimately

There is currently a body of retained firefighters in Bewdley who live within 5 minutes of the station and have built up expertise in local issues such as forest fires, river rescue and agricultural related incidents. The 5 minutes rule will mean that only those who live within 5 minutes of the new fire station will be eligible to be kept on. This is a waste of valuable resources, as I would anticipate that most will fail to meet the 5 minute criteria, given the travel distances involved and the need to observe speed limits on their way...

With proposed increases in housing in the Wyre Forest it makes no sense at all to reduce overall coverage. Money would be better spent upgrading existing facilities in order to adequately provide for increasing populations in all towns...

102. Bewdley-specific concerns were raised by many respondents, who were particularly worried about longer response times and their potential impact in the event of an incident in one of the many timber framed properties in the town. Some of the many typical comments were:

If the average attendance time for central Bewdley is currently assumed to be 8 minutes, then this can only be met from the proposed new site if full-time, on-station fire-crews are available and can travel at an average of 40mph to the fire... In reality this is unlikely to be achieved in under 10 minutes and should there be a need for retained fire-crews to attend this will be 15 minutes, nearly double the time it would take retained local firefighters in Bewdley to attend. If the case of a pub kitchen fire at, say, Pound Green or Arley is considered, then the journey time from Bewdley [would be] 13 minutes. But for a full-time fire-crew from Silverwoods or Stourpoint 5 this would take nearly 20 minutes, or 25 minutes with a retained fire-crew... I suggest that after 25 minutes the level of destruction caused by fire to most premises would be fairly catastrophic and if there were persons trapped this could lead to loss of life

As a resident of Bewdley I think that moving the Fire Station away from its present location will lead to longer response times particularly with the building of the large hotel and the water slides at the Safari Park. It already takes a long time to get into Bewdley from Kiddy at times and that is only going to get worse

If you live in Bewdley...I think you might as well say your home will be gone in the event of a fire, especially if the wholetime crew is already on a shout and retained is required...

Bewdley is an historic town with nearly 300 listed buildings... Most of these structures have little or no fire-resistance nor safe means of escape in the event of a fire... With such a high number of these buildings there is a real danger that once a fire takes hold it will spread to adjacent properties... I ask the Fire Service to consider the safety implications of the proposals and to consider that Bewdley and its area in particular is a special case requiring a higher degree of fire-fighting cover due to the historic nature of the majority of the buildings within the town. A major fire, even if accompanied by no loss of life, could prove catastrophic for Bewdley in terms of loss of its heritage value which largely forms the basis for tourism and the local economy

Everyone living in Bewdley knows that this historic Georgian town is a tinderbox. Buildings are close together, many with wooden beams and framework. A major fire would spread in seconds.

103. Indeed, only two comments were made in support of removing the current fire station at Bewdley (in order to assist the re-development of the town):

As a Bewdley resident it seems we would be better served by a hub than by the existing situation. From a town plan perspective Bewdley would benefit from the removal or re-siting of its Fire Station

As a Bewdley resident, Bewdley Fire Station is old and has seen its best; it needs replacing as part of the redevelopment of Bewdley project.

104. Wherever a new hub station is located, there was also worry (though to a lesser degree than in relation to Bewdley) about longer response times to Stourport, Far Forest and Northern Kidderminster. Furthermore, both sites were thought be too far from the specific risks associated with the Severn Valley Railway:

Delayed time to Stourport-on-Severn and outlying areas such as Rock Button, Oak Button Bridge, Far Forest

Too far from Stourport to get to for our fire people to then have to get back to save lives...could be already on scene if only have to get fire engine from current location in Stourport Fire station

It is true that it is central and can provide cover for the three towns but it is not well placed for the northern half of Kidderminster

Emergency calls to outlying areas such as Far Forest would seriously delayed, and lives could be at risk

The Hub proposal does not appear to take into account the specific risk to life and property posed by the Severn Valley Railway. If it was taken into account the hub site would be somewhere else

It's too far away from the Severn Valley Railway which is a cause of fires in the summer dry season. There is a significant risk to life and property if a brush fire were to spread to the predominantly wood buildings in the Hill Farm development...

105. In contrast to the above, though, there was some support for the hub concept, with several respondents commenting that: it is a practical approach financially (and could be replicated elsewhere in the Service); centralisation is sensible, as is the utilisation of the Transitional Grant on offer from Government; and that more joint-working between emergency services within a community facility would be of great benefit to the area:

The only way to save money is to put 3 stations into 1...if you were to start to plan a fire plan for Worcestershire and Herefordshire you would not put fire stations where they are today. This needs to be looked at to reduce future costs

Makes complete sense to centralise the services and utilise government grant that would not otherwise be available

As there is no proposal to reduce staffing levels this is an opportunity the CFA cannot and should not miss

Promoting as one service gives a stronger image of a positive force to uphold safety in Wyre Forest. [It would be a] community facility which people can feel part of.

106. As for the sites themselves, 39 comments were made explicitly in support of Silverwoods Park - chiefly because it is centrally located, accessible and has the least effect on response times. Some typical comments were:

Good access and will not affect response times dramatically

Very little disruption to response times

Response times from Silverwoods are quicker than from Stourport 5. This is crucial to ensure that all fires are responded to as immediately as possible

The site appears to be in a good location for easy access to and from the station for the retained staff turning in and for the responding appliances...

Position appears that bit more central and seems to offer better choice of route alternatives should they be needed

Ideally located by the new link road to reach the north of the town as well as close to Stourport and Sutton Park Road for Bewdley. Best location to cover all towns

Silverwoods...is an appropriate location for such use. There could be a junction off the island for emergency services access only whereas staff and visitors use the back service road. The island currently only has three junctions and the position of the fourth one could be onto plot 'L'... The suburb site allows for easy access to surrounding areas in contrast to the town sited stations

As two thirds of the incidents they attend are in the Kidderminster area it makes sense to choose the site that is slightly closer to Kidderminster.

107. On the more negative side, a couple of respondents were concerned that Silverwoods Park is located in a residential area, meaning a new fire station could be disruptive to many people:

Silverwoods is a residential area. The hub and training facility will become noisy and will be unwelcome by the residents of Silverwoods...you should look to build it between the three towns in a commercial area which has better access onto roads. This will not attract complaints from residents.

108. Stourpoint 5 tended to be preferred by many of those in Stourport and Bewdley because of its closer proximity to those towns and the better road infrastructure around it - and, regarding the point made above in relation to Silverwoods Park being in a residential area, because it is further away from domestic premises:

If you HAVE to close the three existing stations...this is the ideal location as it provides the best access to the arterial route from Kidderminster to Stourport and Bewdley

It is closer to both Stourport and Bewdley and the road infrastructure is far better

Stourpoint 5 is further removed from dwellings and will be less disruptive to residential areas. Also the likelihood of children in an area of response vehicles should be considered.

109. A few people also commented on the increased visibility of Stourpoint 5 compared to Silverwoods Park; this was considered important if H&WFRS intends the proposed hub to be a community facility:

While [Silverwoods Park] provides good access to most areas of Wyre Forest it will be somewhat 'tucked away' and out of sight for much of the community. Stourpoint 5 is a much more visible location to the passing community...

A much more visible location providing the best turn out and turn in capability for all services. This location will ensure many people in the community will see what should be a facility for the community to be proud of

Prominent position where the public will know where it is.

110. On the flip side, respondents noted that: the land may be better used for business and commercial enterprise; predicted response times from Stourpoint 5 are worse than those from Silverwoods Park; and that the lack of population in the immediate vicinity may make it difficult to recruit on-call firefighters:

The site is needed in the Enterprise Zone for further employment development

The site is currently being redeveloped for manufacturing and distribution use. The whole site has got future plans in place for Specsavers to expand. I would not like to see this central location in the South Kidderminster Enterprise Zone not used for business...

Stourport 5 has less of a modular response time, which means it can't respond to fires as quick as Silverwoods

This is the worst location; too long response times to Bewdley and Kidderminster

Nobody lives near the station, so on-call recruitment will be a massive issue.

111. Finally in terms of location, it should be noted that an issue frequently raised in relation to both sites was that the area in which they are located is often congested and thus difficult to navigate. Some of the many typical comments were:

The location is situated on a notorious busy road where traffic frequently queues. What will happen when our retained firefighters need to get there and then get the pump out?

I remain concerned that the road both potential sites are on is subject to significant congestion

Certain times of the day it will be very difficult for people to drive to the station to get on the fire engine; it takes me 30 minutes to get through Kidderminster to Stourport some days

Traffic on the Stourport Road is bad all the time. Hopefully this will be improved when the new road opens but we do not know that for sure

Response time could be compromised because of the busy route from that location

It is a very busy road and it could delay the fire engines from reaching the emergencies.

112. As for other issues, a few people raised issues around the consultation, most notably that it is a 'fait accompli' and that public concerns - especially in Bewdley - have not been heeded:

I know that many, many people in Bewdley feel the decision has already been made

This decision has already been made so the consultation is a farce just like the previous round. The people making these decisions don't care what residents think...

The consultation has been guided by the fire service and what they want. No one is listening to us the public and local Councillors...

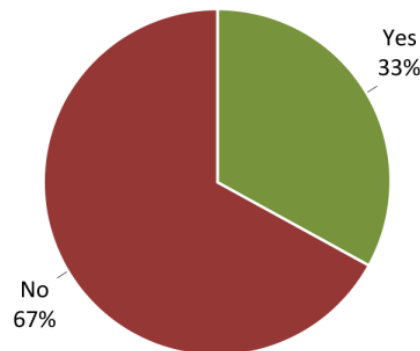
Equalities Impact

113. A third (33%) of respondents believe that there are positive or negative impacts relating to Human Rights or equalities that need to be taken into account when considering the location of the new hub station.

Figure 7: Are there any positive or negative impacts that you believe we should take into account?

As a public body, Hereford & Worcester Fire Authority has a duty to take into account human rights and also the impact of its decisions on people with protected characteristics, which under the Equality Act 2010 are age, disability, gender, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, and sexual orientation. Are there any positive or negative impacts that you believe we should take into account?

Base: All Individuals (106)



114. Most of those who commented on equalities issues again took the opportunity to lobby for the status quo - though there were a handful of comments around the implications for pregnant women, the elderly and infirm, H&WFRS firefighters and those living near to the Severn Valley Railway:

Elderly and infirm residents already vulnerable due to location of properties and existing access. Increased response time heightens vulnerability

With a lower response rate, some vulnerable people may suffer the consequences, such as pregnant women

Rejecting this unnecessary proposal will remove the unfair bias against the retained firemen/firewomen of Bewdley who will inevitably lose their jobs if it were to proceed

The right to life of those people who live in close vicinity to the Severn Valley Railway.

Organisation Responses

115. Responses from organisations typically represent the views of many individuals and are presented separately in this report. ORS received three questionnaires that indicated they were from the following organisations:

Staffordshire FRS, Corporate Safety Plan;

Salvation Army – West Midlands Emergency Response Team; and

Bewdley Town Council.

Overview

116. Organisations were informed on the questionnaire that their views may be published and were asked to provide further details about their organisation, including what the organisation represents, the specific group or department, the area the organisation covers and how the views of members were gathered. Not all organisations supplied this information, but the names of organisations are included.
117. Results for all questions have been presented below to provide a contrast between views from organisations and individuals. As it is not appropriate to report percentages where the sample size is so small, responses from organisations have been summarised to provide an outline of their views.

Silverwoods Park

118. Of the three organisations that responded to the open consultation questionnaire, two agreed that Silverwoods Park is an appropriate location for the new hub station. This was on the grounds that the proposed site is in *a central location with good access routes to risk areas* (Staffordshire FRS Corporate Safety Plan) and that it *will not affect response times dramatically* (Salvation Army – West Midlands Emergency Response Team).
119. Bewdley Town Council strongly disagreed that Silverwoods Park is an appropriate location for the new hub station insofar as its town has many timber-framed houses and that *it can and will take up to 10 minutes to travel from Kidderminster to Bewdley*.

Stourpoint 5

120. All three organisations disagreed that Stourpoint 5 is an appropriate location for a new hub station because it is not sufficiently central. There was concern that a hub station at Stourpoint 5 *may affect response times into the area of greater risk and demand* (Staffordshire FRS Corporate Safety Plan).

Equalities Impact

121. No organisations believed that there to be any positive or negative impacts relating to Human Rights or equalities.

Further Comments

122. Bewdley Town Council suggested that H&WFRS should engage in *more consultation with the public in each town and surrounding areas*.

Forum with Members of the Public

Introduction

123. A total of 32 randomly selected members of the public from across the whole Wyre Forest area attended a 2.5 hour forum that considered all the evidence relating to the two proposed hub locations while also having a more detailed review of the fire and rescue service and its resources and roles.
124. The meeting was thorough and truly deliberative in listening to and responding openly to a wide range of evidence and issues. Participants were initially given a presentation of the issues prior to group discussions during which they debated the merits and disadvantages of the two proposed hub locations. Some photographs of these discussions can be seen below.





The Discussion

125. During the initial part of the forum (when participants were given a presentation outlining H&WFRA's hub concept and proposed locations), residents' questions and comments highlighted their initial concerns. These were mainly focused around:

The importance of response times and the implications of lengthening them for both first and support appliances

What is the significance of the ten minute response time standard?

Will the longer response time increase risks in these areas? Will the incident trends start to go up again?

If there's a house fire would the first crew be able to start a rescue before the second crew arrives?

How predicted response times from the new hub have been determined and the 'dangers' of relying on projections

The traffic from Stourport into Kidderminster is worse than the other way around. Have the timed runs been done both ways?

At the moment we know what the response times are from the three stations but from the new one they are only projections aren't they?

Whether Bewdley and Stourport firefighters will be able to reach a new hub within the required turn-in time (and the impact of not being able to do this on their ability to continue in their roles)

I can't see the Bewdley crew getting into Kidderminster in six minutes...how will they ever get there in time to get on the machine?

Will the Stourport and Bewdley firefighters be able to continue in their roles?

The (potentially underestimated) cost of the hub and the feasibility of using the earmarked finances to refurbish the three current stations

We thought the cost would be a lot higher than you have anticipated

Where is the rest of the money for the hub coming from?

Have you looked at how long you might be able to maintain the other three stations for if you spend the £5.9m doing that?

The possibility that the number of vehicles at the hub may be reduced in future (resulting in a less resilient service for the Wyre Forest)

My main concern would be that you are guaranteed three fire engines at the three sites currently. If it moved to the one site couldn't the powers that be just say 'we only need two'?

We are concerned about the retention of all four fire appliances. There may be no plans at present but that does not preclude plans in future. If all four appliances are used so infrequently at the same time there could be a strong argument made to remove one

Levels of cover during simultaneous incidents

If you have a major fire I guess you have to send all your local resources to it? What happens if there's a fire in Bewdley at the same time?

Other locations considered

Has Kidderminster's existing site been considered as a location?

How the transition period will work

How will the switch over to the new location work? Will it be seamless for members of the public?

The extent to which fire engines will be able to negotiate heavy traffic in the area

Is there enough capability for the fire engines to get through the traffic around here?

126. Furthermore, a few participants were concerned that H&WFRA has discarded the objections raised, especially by Bewdley residents, during the first two consultations in taking its decision to pursue an emergency services hub station in principle - describing the situation as a 'stitch-up' that has been in the pipeline for a considerable time:

You've pushed all the petitions and objections from the previous consultations away and you're not giving the people in Bewdley what they want which is to keep their fire station...or at least a satellite station

The closure of Bewdley has been planned for a long time, as has the amalgamation of the site...it is what it is but we feel, for Bewdley, it's a stitch up.

127. Ultimately though, most participants recognised and accepted the case for a hub station, even several from Bewdley who commented that in the event of future closures (which, they felt, would be inevitable in the light of financial constraints) their local station would likely be most at-risk - and that the hub might at least mitigate against the loss of the fire engine:

We think the hub is a good idea based on the figures and response times, which won't be much affected

We recognise the case for the hub and that the role of the Fire Service has changed dramatically

In future, Bewdley Fire Station would be most likely to close of all of them and we would lose the fire engine. Although the hub is further away, it's probably got more longevity than Bewdley and will allow the fire engine to be kept.

128. In terms of the two proposed locations, the vast majority of participants opted for Silverwoods Park over Stourpoint 5 on the grounds that: predicted response times are better; it is nearer Kidderminster, which has the highest call volume of the three areas; it is closer to hard-to-reach and deprived areas such as Hagley; and it is not as isolated, which was considered important in terms of both staff welfare and community interaction:

There is little difference in response times as the sites are close together but Silverwoods is closer to Kidderminster. Hagley...it would be sensible to have the site slightly closer to there

Most incidents are in Kidderminster so it would be sensible to have the closest one to there

Silverwoods would have better access to hard-to-reach areas in Kidderminster and around. Also, Stourpoint 5 might isolate it from community; the community would have more opportunity to make use of the facility in Silverwoods

Between the two sites there's not a great deal of difference as they are very close to each other. From the point of view of the staff it would probably better to have more facilities around so that would be Silverwoods.

129. Furthermore, several said that they could see little to differentiate the two locations but that they had opted for Silverwoods because they trusted the judgement of H&WFRS's officers in designating it as their preferred option:

We thought both sites are suitable but we would go for Silverwoods

It looks like Silverwoods is the best option and we trust the Service to make the proper judgement on that.

130. The minority that preferred Stourpoint 5 did so because it: has better road links than Silverwoods; is less residential and thus less disruptive; and is not as congested traffic-wise:

Why is Silverwoods the better option when it seems like there are better road links around Stourpoint 5?

The area around Silverwoods is always clogged up with traffic which will probably get worse because it's a growing residential area

Silverwoods is a residential area as well as industrial. Are the people living there going to want a great big fire station there with all the noise etc.? Here it's always going to be industrial so it seems more suitable for that reason...

131. Finally, a very small number of participants felt they could not make a definitive judgement before knowing the relative cost of the two sites:

There's great concern about cost...we can't access sensitive information about this and we are concerned that we are not being told whole story about the relative expense of the two sites.

Meetings with Staff

Forums with Firefighters

Introduction

132. Members of staff were invited to participate by H&WFRS in open staff meetings held at Kidderminster Fire Station and 26 attended - five at Kidderminster Fire Station on July 14th and then 21 at the same venue on July 19th. The latter session primarily comprised Bewdley and Stourport-on-Severn on-call firefighters.

First Forum Discussion

133. There were many questions about the hub proposal, covering: how the two sites were chosen and whether others were available; the extent of the influence of Government on the proposal and whether it would have been pursued otherwise; the value of the Kidderminster site for redevelopment and the possibility of getting full value from a sale; and whether SARA will pay for the space it occupies in the hub.

134. There was a general feeling that once a hub is established it would not be necessary or sustainable to maintain four pumps at the hub station, partly because:

There is little need for four pumps and half the RDS crews will never get a call!

Even so, one retained firefighter said:

I'm not against this!

135. The forum was puzzled as to why response times from Silverwoods Park and Stourpoint 5 apparently differ so markedly when they are really rather close.

136. There was a popular suggestion that H&WFRS should measure its response times as many/most other FRSs do - by 'starting the clock' when the first fire engine is despatched by the Control Centre rather than when the Control Centre first receives an emergency call (which makes H&WFRS's response times longer than would be the case if the point of timing matched that of other FRSs). This may be something the Fire Authority may wish to consider in terms of reporting its performance targets and standards in a more comparative manner.

137. There were many other questions, though these did not amount to objections to either of the proposed sites - for example:

Will this secure jobs in the long run?

What will the shift patterns be?

Could the hub accommodate an ambulance as well?

Will the hub have six bays?

Will the total response area be the same as now?

How will the Silverwoods Park residents feel about having a fire station near them?

138. The forum felt that the distribution of risk across Wyre Forest implies that the hub station should 'move into Kidderminster', but overall the five participants readily accepted the principle of the hub and also accepted that both sites are reasonable and feasible.

Second Forum Discussion

139. It was clear in the second discussion (with Bewdley and Stourport on-call staff) that many firefighters remain opposed to the issue of principle in relation to whether H&WFRA should establish an emergency services hub for the Wyre Forest. Participants strongly reiterated the same concerns as expressed during both the first and second stage consultations, for example:

The potential for longer response times to certain areas in future and, especially, back-up support for the Kidderminster wholetime appliance to ensure firefighter safety

Are the response time differences deemed safe? Is it acceptable from the Service and Fire Authority point of view?

The first pump will get there but they won't be able to do anything...and people will be waiting far longer for the second pump

When you look at the second pump response time that's when it seriously drops.

Response times being further compromised by longer turn-in times for on-call firefighters - which in themselves may lead to people being forced to leave the Service

The larger pool of firefighters is all well and good but it doesn't say anything about longer turn-in times

None of us live within five minutes of the new hub...and there's even a lot of retained firefighters in Kidderminster who would struggle

Response times to the station are going to be longer because we'll have to drive and will be stuck in traffic. At the moment we are able to run to the station

If I move house and it increases my turn-in time to the hub, that would mean I'm finished as a retained firefighter wouldn't it?

The possibility of reducing the number of resources at the hub in future as it is 'easier' to remove resources from a central hub than it is from smaller, individual fire stations

So in the next five years you can't see a pump going from the Wyre Forest? What if the fourth pump only goes out five times a year?

On-call de-motivation: it was anticipated that many current Bewdley and Stourport firefighters would leave the Service as a result of attending fewer incidents - exacerbating current RDS availability problems and resulting in a loss of skill and experience

Our biggest concern is that firefighters from Bewdley and Stourport won't get there in time and it will always be too late for them. They will be demotivated and will leave...

If you recruit a person close to the hub, that's an existing staff member who lives further out being pushed out of the service

How is it beneficial for us if we only get on a truck three or four times a year?!

No-one wants to leave...in this room there's over 100 years of service and experience and that shouldn't have to be lost.

Competencies would be difficult to maintain as a result of fewer incident attendances

It could mean people can't maintain their competencies and skills as they're not going out on the truck often enough because they live too far away from the hub. How can you ensure people keep these competencies?

Some firefighters would have the additional expense of having to purchase and run a car to turn-in (as they can get to their current station on foot)

Transport to the station; some are one car families. What if the wife has the car, what happens then?

Will there be any resources available for people who currently haven't got a second car? It could be an expense that some people can't afford.

More and better joint-working will only really be feasible between wholetime firefighters and staff from other organisations due to the infrequency with which on-call staff are on station

It's the wholetime crews that tend to build the relationships with the PCSOs in places where this is happening already...it would be a lot more difficult for the retained to do that because they'll be in the stations so infrequently.

140. On-call recruitment was also raised as a significant issue once more. As aforementioned, it was predicted that many of the existing Bewdley and Stourport RDS firefighters would leave the Service following the closure of their local stations, and there was significant concern that the recruitment of new on-call firefighters would be challenging in light of existing difficulties:

You can't recruit now so what makes you confident that you'll be able to do it in future around the two sites? They are struggling to recruit to Kidderminster now...

141. As such, it was suggested that H&WFRA must be open to new, innovative and creative recruitment strategies to ensure the on-call role is as attractive as possible to a wide range of people:

Going forward it has to be about looking at creative, different ways of staffing retained so that it becomes more attractive to existing and future staff. It could even be about making it so attractive that people would be tempted to leave their main jobs to do it...

Increased training opportunities would be a good thing and would be a motivator to keep people in the service.

142. Also, the need for a sufficiently large pool of firefighters was stressed, with some suggesting that current numbers will need to be maintained to crew all four fire engines plus special appliances - again based on experience both within and outside Wyre Forest:

Bromsgrove have about 20 firefighters for one appliance and they still struggle

14 crew seems to be quite comfortable to keep an appliance on the run. Any lower and that puts pressure on us and people start to leave

There's a big pool of engines - including the specials - that need to be crewed, so the current pool of 29 is probably about right. While 'natural wastage' sounds good on paper in terms of getting numbers down to appropriate levels, in reality we will still need that number (and possibly even more) in future.

143. The group generally felt unable to make a judgement on the relative merits and drawbacks of the two proposed sites, citing the need for more information and answers to questions prior to doing so. As such, few comments were made on either Silverwoods Park or Stourpoint 5, though participants noted: the congestion on Stourport Road; the lack of recruitment opportunities in the area; and, with specific reference to Silverwoods, that its residential nature may not be conducive to the siting of a noisy fire station there:

The roads around the two sites are heavily congested...they are busy all day long in my experience which will affect turn-in and response times

You will never be able to recruit enough people from that area. I used to work there; I know what it's like

The training facilities that we will have here - what will they include? This could be a problem for neighbours of the station as they are noisy and make a lot of mess in some cases with smoke etc. And any mitigating features will cost quite a lot to install.

144. Furthermore, several questions were asked around: potential savings; timeframes; the saleability of the three existing sites; and the futureproofing of the hub station:

I thought we needed to make savings in staff not buildings because they're two different budgets so how does this make those savings if we're keeping the same number of firefighters?

What timeframe are we looking at?

Are you confident about selling the existing three sites?

Would the station be future proofed to cover all eventualities in terms of shift systems?

145. One alternative suggestion was made whereby H&WFRA would: *put a staff rider out there to plug the gaps at different retained stations as opposed to bringing everyone together in one location. Retained with full-time jobs are expected to drop those jobs to attend a fire, why can't officers do the same?*

146. Finally, the firefighters commented on the consultation - and particularly on: H&WFRA's decision not to hold public meetings in either Bewdley or Stourport; the lack of information in the consultation document on, for example, the 'pros and cons' of and rationale for choosing the two sites and the financial implications of the development for the Authority; and the 'misleading' figures used to justify the proposal:

Why were there no public meetings in Stourport and Bewdley...and where do people hear about it?

There's nothing much in there about the pros and cons of the site options. Most of the people who respond to the consultation will be seeing this document as opposed to attending a meeting and getting more detail so it could have been more comprehensive

What's the rationale for the two sites? It feels like they have been plucked from anywhere without any justification, and there must be some...

There should be more information in the consultation document about how much the Service will have to contribute to the building of the Hub. At the moment it only mentions the £2.38m transformational grant

If you don't include the out of station ground and over the border incidents then the figures are misleading because they only include those on the station grounds.

Overall Summary

147. The first and smaller staff forum felt able to accept all the proposals, though the FBU representative who was present emphasised the Union's anxieties that longer response times would endanger the public and firefighters and that on-call staff would be unable to sustain their jobs. Following their discussion, the first forum agreed with the principle of a single hub site and accepted that both sites under consideration were feasible.

148. The second staff forum was far more negative than the first. Participants remained firmly opposed to the principle of an emergency hub services station for the Wyre Forest (and reiterated many of the concerns and issues they had raised at previous meetings) - and felt unable to make a judgement on the site options without further information and answers to their operational questions.

Public Meetings

Introduction

149. Although they were open meetings, both the public meetings had relatively few participants: there were only seven in the first (two firefighters, two Bewdley town councillors, two district councillors and a firefighter's spouse) and 15 in the second (a mixture of local residents, councillors and firefighters).

First Meeting

150. Although it was a public meeting, the FBU was relatively prominent in the questioning and discussions. As in the staff forums and the FBU's written submission, the Union's main concerns were that:

A single hub would lengthen response times dangerously and unacceptably - with longer attendance times for the first and support fire engines;

Current on-call staff would be disadvantaged because they could not meet required turn-out times to the hub;

Lengthening turn-out times would dangerously delay the mobilisation of support fire engines;

There is no certainty that a single hub base would improve on-call recruitment and retention; and

Creating the hub will mean that the fourth fire engine currently available will soon be lost because it will be so little used when the wholetime crews attend more incidents from the new base.

151. Many of these points were taken up in discussion, during which various questions were raised. For example, the meeting was confused about why response times from the two sites apparently differ so markedly when they are quite close - and questioned why Stourpoint 5 is even being considered given that attendances are likely to be lengthier than they would be from Silverwoods Park:

Given that the two sites are only about 800 metres apart, why do the response times differ so much?

Why are you considering Stourport 5 if it has longer response times than Silverwoods?

152. On the other hand, it was also asked: *how will Silverwoods residents feel about having a fire station close by?*

153. Other questions were around: crewing numbers at the proposed hub; H&WFRS's strategies for recruiting on-call firefighters; and the implications of response time targets:

Will the wholetime engine have a six-person crew or will it be only four?

How do you plan to recruit retained crews since it's not an attractive role?

What is the real impact of an increased response time on deaths and casualties?

What about the 25% of times you don't achieve your response target? How long do they take and how does that performance compare with other FRSs?

154. Those seeking clarity on the meaning of, and risks associated with, response times suggested (like some in the staff forums) that H&WFRS should measure its response times as many/most other FRSs do - from when the first fire engine is despatched by the Control Centre rather than from when the Control Centre first receives an emergency call (which makes H&WFRS's response times seem longer than if its timings matched that of other FRSs). As one participant said:

There should be a single standardised system for measuring and comparing response times properly!

155. As such, and as we have said in relation to the staff forums, the reporting of response times is something the Fire Authority may wish to consider in terms of reporting its performance targets and standards in a more comparative manner.

156. Finally, some other constructive suggestions were made as follows:

You could use smaller fire engines? Would the FBU be happy with that?

You could use 'staff riders' to increase the availability of the on-call fire engines when they are short.

Second Meeting

157. The second public meeting was less critical than the first, though again there were questions, comments and concerns around:

The effect of traffic and roadworks on turn-out and response times

One of my concerns would be how will the retained firefighters get to the station on time in normal traffic conditions

Worcestershire is riddled with roadworks. Does this have an effect on turnout and response times?

The possibility that the number of vehicles at the hub may be reduced in future (resulting in a less resilient service for the Wyre Forest)

The four fire engines will relocate to the hub but how long do you envisage all four being available at the hub? Five years, ten years, indefinitely?

The lack of Ambulance Service involvement currently, whether a new hub would be 'future proofed' to be able to cater for this in future and whether this might represent a waste of resources if the Service never comes on board

Do you intend to build in room for the ambulance service in future? If you do and they never do come on board won't that be money wasted?

The differing types of incidents experienced within Wyre Forest

We have the river, Severn Valley Railway etc. here in Wyre Forest. What are the statistics for those types of incidents?

The figures used in the consultation document

The figures aren't true. That's not the total number of incidents Bewdley is dealing with. It's the number on its own patch and not the total number...because it goes out to other areas.

158. Other issues raised were around: the relative cost of the two sites; the possible unviability of both locations in future; implementation timescales; and the possibility of making financial savings through resource reductions rather than station closures:

Could there be a scenario whereby neither of the locations are viable in future?

Is there anything else that could be done in future...could some of the savings be made through resourcing levels instead of closing the stations?

159. Overall, there was some recognition that, in reality, response times to Bewdley, Stourport and other outlying areas may not be too dissimilar from the hub than they are from the three existing stations currently given the significant role the Kidderminster wholetime appliance plays in attending incidents elsewhere:

If an appliance didn't turn out from the local station it would be at the higher end of the current response times anyway. So the hub might put up some response times but not others compared with current times because they might be coming from further away anyway

Bewdley and Stourport have only got one fire engine each, so it's obvious that Kidderminster will be attending a lot of incidents in those two areas to make up the response.

Furthermore, while not going as far as to wholeheartedly support the proposed hub, others could see the logic in accepting the Government grant on offer to develop it in light of the significant refurbishment costs that would be required otherwise – possibly necessitating the closure of one or both of Bewdley and Stourport:

We can see the positives and negatives. But if we don't do it, money will have to be found to refurbish the three stations in future. So on the one hand I'm not willing to say 'yes, this is a brilliant idea', but I'm reluctant to reject the money on offer as this could

end up with the Service having to close one or two of Bewdley and Stourport because it has to put all the money available into refurbishing Kidderminster.

Overall Summary

160. The first meeting was opposed to or sceptical about the proposals. The main concerns expressed echoed those of the FBU: the impact of longer response times and consequential increased risks.
161. The second meeting was less negative than the first. While there were concerns about H&WFRS 'putting all of its eggs in one basket', there was also recognition that the transformational grant on offer from Government represents an opportunity to mitigate against future significant refurbishment costs at the three current fire stations and possible closures.

Written Submissions

Written Submissions

162. During the formal consultation process, six written submissions were received, as shown in the table below.

| Type of Correspondent | Number of respondents/signatories |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| District/Town/Parish Councils | 3 |
| Wyre Forest Residents | 2 |
| Representative Bodies | 1 |
| Total | 6 |

163. ORS has read the submissions and summarised them in this chapter; none have been disregarded even if they are not expressed in a 'formal' way.

Overall Summary

164. Of the six submissions, the FBU and one resident strongly oppose the proposal for a hub station and reject both sites as unsuitable operationally - and, in addition, because Silverwoods Park is in a sensitive residential area. The FBU believes the longer response times would be unsafe in endangering both the public and firefighters and in jeopardising the roles of existing on-call staff. The Union also feels a hub is unnecessary for joint emergency services working and will not improve services to the public.
165. In contrast, four submissions either strongly support or accept the hub as a good thing overall - and two of them prefer Stourport 5 as more suitable than Silverwoods. The Corporate Team at Wyre Forest District Council supports all the proposals and considers Stourport 5 to be a more appropriate site in planning terms. Rock Parish Council also supports the hub as an important opportunity and prefers Stourport 5 as a better location from which to cover Stourport and Bewdley. Kidderminster Town Council and one resident accept the hub proposal as reasonable, but (ideally) the resident would prefer two wholetime pumps or the use of larger crews on the wholetime engine.
166. The submissions are summarised more fully below. It is important to note that the following section is a report of the views expressed by submission contributors. In some cases, the views may not be supported by the available evidence; but it is not ORS's role to highlight or correct them.

Summaries of Written Submissions

DISTRICT, TOWN AND PARISH COUNCILS

Corporate Leadership Team, Wyre Forest District Council

Wyre Forest District Council's Corporate Leadership Team (henceforth the CLT) welcomes H&WFRA's decision in principle to invest in an emergency services hub station for Wyre Forest because:

It would be a multi-million pound investment in rationalising the public sector estate in Wyre Forest;

There is a need for further housing development on sustainable brownfield sites;

It provides an opportunity to redevelop prominent town centre sites in Bewdley, Stourport and Kidderminster; and

The concept is innovative and would better meet modern requirements in Wyre Forest.

Both of the two possible locations are 're-development sites' within the Local Development Order (LDO) for the South Kidderminster Enterprise Park, but planning permission for a station would be required since it is not one of the Order's designated uses.

While average response times might increase, both locations would mean shorter response times for some parts of Kidderminster. But why are modelled response times to Stourport from Stourpoint 5 worse than from Silverwoods Park when Stourpoint 5 is nearly a mile closer to Stourport?

There are two reasons for preferring the Stourport 5 site:

Health and Safety Executive advice for developments near hazardous installations (PADHI) is relevant to the Silverwoods Park site since an incident at the Ashland Chemicals site could put the hub out of action when the first response to any incident would be expected to come from there; and

Completing the redevelopment of Stourpoint 5 would be more advantageous since there is likely to be other market interest for the Silverwoods Park site, which would be preferable in terms of employment opportunities.

Kidderminster Town Council

Kidderminster Town Council notes that development of a Wyre Forest emergency services hub station will authorise a new system of fire cover in Wyre Forest which could result in response times to some incidents being two minutes and 30 seconds more than is now the case. It accepts that changes will be made and that a new hub will be built. It also accepts that Bewdley Fire Station will close and that the building will be demolished as part of the deal that has provided the town with a very large Health and GP Centre.

The Council does have concerns though, mainly around: longer response times (especially at peak periods); turn-in times for on-call firefighters; and traffic congestion around the two proposed sites.

Rock Parish Council

Rock Parish Council (henceforth RPC) believes that decisions should aim to achieve the best possible outcomes for everyone, but especially for those whose well-being and life are threatened. It would be counter-productive to not make the best use of the available government funding and it is untenable to retain the old infrastructure with its high maintenance costs - so the opportunity for a hub station should be seized providing there is real joined-up thinking and organisation of the services under its roof, and it is not just a place for disparate organisations!

H&WFRS's statistics show that incidents are more likely to happen in Kidderminster than in Stourport or Bewdley, but the incident and risk levels should have been calculated per-head-of-population.

The Council says that compared with incidents in Kidderminster, those in Stourport, and especially Bewdley, are more likely to have longer response times from the proposed hub - but that average times data is distorted by the larger number of incidents closer to the hub. Furthermore, Bewdley Fire Station has responded to incidents to the north of the town and the proposed new hub would probably lead to a significant lengthening of this time.

The use of the A451 for an increasing number of facilities has increased congestion and RPC is concerned that further developments mean that emergency response vehicles will be delayed at certain times of day.

Although Stourpoint 5 would have higher average response times than Silverwoods Park, RPC argues that it would be better for Stourport and Bewdley.

RPC complains that the consultation document does not include feedback from the first consultation. It supports the use of new technology, particularly drone equipment to survey and report incidents quickly without jeopardising the safety of firefighters.

REPRESENTATIVE BODIES

Fire Brigades Union

The Hub in Principle

The FBU of Hereford and Worcester (henceforth H&WFBU) believes the fire and rescue service should be fully funded by government and not be forced into 'blue light' collaboration with other emergency services.

H&WFBU does not wholly oppose a 'blue light' hub in Kidderminster, but it rejects the closure of Stourport and Bewdley fire stations because the closures would lengthen response times by 2 minutes and 30 seconds in parts of the Wyre Forest. Since Wyre Forest

fire appliances respond to 'life risk' incidents in roughly 10 minutes, they are in the right locations.

H&WFBU says the public has not been given the full facts about the number of incidents attended by the Wyre Forest appliances - for example, the consultation document states that:

The total number of incidents in the Kidderminster area is 597 per year – but the Kidderminster crews attended 864 incidents, including those outside their area

Bewdley's on-call appliance is unavailable for 33% of time during the day, with Kidderminster on 6% and Stourport on 7% – but the true proportions are 67%, 94% and 93% respectively.

H&WFRS seems to believe that a shiny new fire station and closer working with other 'blue light' organisations is more important than responding to emergencies in a safe and timely manner.

The FBU refutes the 'so-called benefits' of a new hub in the following ways:

Inter-agency collaboration and training does not require new buildings and the closure of three stations;

The hub will not make better use of public service resources, but will weaken the service with longer response times;

It will not achieve greater resilience because response times will increase for the first pump and increase even more for two-pump pre-determined attendances;

There is no evidence that the hub would provide more sustainable on-call (retained) emergency cover than at present - partly because the hub will have only one catchment area (rather than three as now) and existing crews will no longer be able to respond quickly enough from their homes to the new location;

If crew turn-out times are increased then the first appliance to attend could have to wait for 20-30 minutes for support from the second pump; and if the wholetime pump was in Shelsley Beauchamp and an emergency occurred in Kidderminster, then the initial response time could be 20 minutes;

It will not improve the management of community risks because such management takes place already, including inter-agency cooperation and information-sharing;

Providing facilities and space for community and voluntary sector partners is not a core priority for H&WFRS when budgets are being reduced severely; and

Likewise, reducing its carbon footprint and improving environmental efficiency are not key priorities for the fire service.

Hub Location

The FBU says that neither site is appropriate for a Wyre Forest hub station because:

Attendance time increases of 1 minute 37 seconds (Silverwoods) and 2 minutes 30 seconds (Stourpoint 5) will endanger residents (and their properties) and firefighters;

The first appliance will reach fewer property fires within 10 minutes – for example, now the first pump gets to 10 of 22 building fires in Stourport within 10 minutes, but this would fall to 5.4 and 5.3 times respectively from Silverwoods and Stourport 5;

There is no evidence that H&WFRS would be able to recruit enough RDS staff to crew three RDS fire appliances; and

Silverwoods is residential area where people will dislike fire appliance mobilisations.

Overall

The hub would improve links with other services and provide better facilities and work environment with lower running costs, but its negative impacts far outweigh the positives, particularly in relation to increased response times to 'life risk' incidents.

The H&WFRS has no data on the effect of increased response times on fatalities and casualties - and the Union believes that such analysis should be done immediately.

In any case, ensuring firefighter and community safety will be more difficult if members of the public are waiting up to 2 minutes 30 seconds longer for a wholetime appliance; and if on-call crews have longer turn-out times it will mean full-time crews waiting much longer for support; both these factors will increase risks.

LOCAL RESIDENTS

Resident 1

The resident supports the multi-emergency services hub, but it would be of more strategic value if located in Kidderminster - given that most calls are generated there, and that most RTCs happen on main roads leading from Kidderminster towards Birmingham, Bridgnorth, Stourbridge and Wolverhampton. Moving to the 'old sugar beet factory' site will adversely affect response times to the north of the area, though the new relief road will improve attendance times to incidents towards Worcester.

The resident 'can only see the sense of a hub being a centre of excellence in the Wyre Forest'. The only real concern is about having only one wholetime fire engine covering over such a large area and whether sufficient firefighters would be immediately available to safely operate in a hostile environment. The resident proposed either two wholetime fire engines or the use of larger crew on the first responding machine.

Resident 2

The resident objects to the proposed hub and rejects the 'ridiculous' argument that it will impact on response times only two or three times a month. They say that 'anyone who has ever tried to travel from Kidderminster to the top end of Bewdley in the summer or worse still, get round the Gilgal and over the bridge to Arley Kings, knows that those extra minutes mean their house or life is lost'. They also comment on the 'extra danger the firefighters are facing when fighting more established, intense fires'.

Overall Conclusions

Introduction

- ^{167.} Overall, the views expressed through the consultation varied between different groups. Largely opposed to the hub and both site options were the: open consultation questionnaire respondents; some of the submissions; some in the staff forums; and one public meeting. But the following were broadly supportive or could at least accept the proposals: deliberative forum (with randomly selected members of the public); some in the staff forums; most of the written submissions; and the second public meeting (which was non-committal but did not express opposition). Those supporting the proposal varied somewhat on which site is preferable.
- ^{168.} The reasons for the respective support and opposition have been documented previously in this report and are not repeated in detail here. Many of the concerns raised in the questionnaires and public meetings were reviewed in the deliberative forums, where most people's concerns were allayed through questioning and discussion. However, the open questionnaire respondents, one of the two staff forum and one of the public meeting were critical of the proposal and site options.
- ^{169.} In any case, influencing public policy through consultation is not simply a 'numbers game' or 'popularity contest' in which the loudest voices or the greatest numbers automatically win the argument. Instead, consultation is to inform authorities of issues, arguments, implications they might have overlooked; to contribute to the re-evaluation of matters already known; or to reassess priorities and principles critically. However popular proposals might be, that does not itself mean they are feasible, safe, sustainable, reasonable and value-for-money; and unpopularity does not mean the reverse.

Balance of Opinion

- ^{170.} In this case, though, the outcome of the consultation process is in relative equipoise, with some support and about the same level of opposition, as the following summary of outcomes shows. Those who opposed one or other of the sites were opposed to the hub as a matter of principle (implicitly urging the Fire Authority to reverse its earlier decision in principle). In terms of the site options, there was only marginally more support for Silverwoods Park than Stourpoint 5 – and some important parties favoured Stourport 5 as the best site overall. In this context, where to site a new hub station will be a decision for the Fire Authority.

171. The balance of opinion was:

QUESTIONNAIRE

Unfavourable on siting a new emergency services hub station at either Silverwoods Park or Stourpoint 5 (marginally more support for the former)

The open text comments suggest continued resistance to the hub concept among many respondents

STAFF FORUMS

The first (smaller) forum accepted the principle of a single hub site and accepted the feasibility of both sites

The second staff forum was firmly opposed to the principle of single hub site - and was unable to make a judgement on site options

PUBLIC FORUM

Generally favourable to the principle of a single hub site

General preference for Silverwoods Park

PUBLIC MEETINGS

The first meeting was unfavourable to the principle of a single hub site and made no comment on the two site options

The second meeting was non-committal on the hub principle and site options

SUBMISSIONS

Two were unfavourable - including the FBU

Four were favourable - including the Corporate Team at Wyre Forest District Council, Kidderminster Town Council and Rock Parish Council

There was most support for Stourpoint 5.

Need for Interpretation

172. The Fire Authority should assess this balance of opinion alongside all the evidence, for (as we have said) consultation is not a 'numbers game' in which the biggest 'side' always wins. In this context, ORS attaches particular importance to the forums and written submissions for being deliberative and thoughtful. This does not mean that the other findings should be disregarded, for they show the opinions of important groups of people who were motivated to participate; but it must be borne in mind that the open questionnaire results are not necessarily representative of the whole population, and the staff meetings were very small.

173. While ORS makes the above judgements, there is no single 'right interpretation' of the consultation elements, for professional and political judgement is needed. Ultimately, the

Fire Authority will consider all the consultation elements alongside all the other evidence in order best to determine the future direction of its Fire and Rescue Service.



This project was carried out in compliance with ISO 20252:2012.