

## Report of the Chief Fire Officer

### 8. Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub – Preferred Sites Consultation Responses

#### Purpose of report

1. To receive the outcome of the public consultation on suitable sites for the proposed Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub.

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#### Recommendations

##### *It is recommended that:*

- i) the report from Opinion Research Services, which sets out the feedback from formal public consultation exercises in respect of two suitable sites for the proposed Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub, be noted;*
- ii) subject to land acquisition and approval of building costs, it be agreed in principle to relocate the existing fire appliances, resources and crews of Kidderminster, Stourport-on-Severn and Bewdley fire stations into the proposed Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub.*

#### Introduction and Background

2. In May 2015, the Authority received an award grant of £2.38 million from the Government's Transformation Fund to develop a proposal to create a new purpose-built, multi-agency Emergency Services Hub to serve the Wyre Forest area and replace the three current fire stations at Bewdley, Kidderminster and Stourport. In addition to the Fire and Rescue Service, the Hub would accommodate West Mercia Police Community Support Officers and provide facilities for the Severn Area Rescue Association, St. John Ambulance and the British Red Cross.
3. The proposal recognised that maintaining the status quo was not sustainable or financially viable over the longer term for a number of reasons:
  - risk levels and incident numbers have seen substantial reductions in the Wyre Forest area and generally across the two counties, which means having three fire stations in very close proximity compared to other areas of the Service is no longer an effective and efficient way to provide fire cover,

- the potential to relocate and combine resources in a single Hub should improve the availability of on-call crews and their appliances by creating a larger pool of on-call firefighters,
- facilities at the existing three fire stations are limited and confined by the available space,
- the existing fire stations will need expensive maintenance and refurbishment work, which will be a drain on reducing financial resources,
- the £2.38 million Government funding towards the overall proposal cost of £5.8 million (as at the date of the bid) is not available for any other purposes or proposals.

### **Summary of Decisions Taken by the Fire Authority to date**

4. Following consultation with the Authority's political Group Leaders and formal sign-off by the Chairman and Treasurer a bid was submitted to the Fire Transformation Fund in June 2014 seeking funding to support the creation of an Emergency Services Hub in the Wyre Forest. It was subsequently announced by the Government in October 2014 the bid had been successful.
5. In anticipation of the Service needing to conduct a period of formal consultation on the proposal to create a Hub in the Wyre Forest, independent social research specialists, Opinion Research Services (ORS), were commissioned to facilitate a programme of 'Listening and Engagement'. In accordance with best practice guidance, this acted as pre-consultation with a small representative sample of residents from Kidderminster, Stourport and Bewdley and the affected crews from the Wyre Forest to contribute to the development of possible operational options to inform future consultations on the area.
6. The Policy and Resources Committee on the 19<sup>th</sup> November 2014 authorised officers to carry out the necessary preparatory work to develop a detailed scheme and proposal to implement the project, including the provision to incur professional fees where necessary. This Committee also directed that a further report should be submitted to the Fire Authority prior to undertaking formal public consultation or entering into any contractual arrangements to purchase land.
7. On the 17<sup>th</sup> June 2015, the Authority authorised formal public consultation on the principle of the proposal. The consultation process was facilitated by ORS, who undertook an extensive 12-week programme between 1<sup>st</sup> September and 27<sup>th</sup> November 2015 of public meetings and stakeholder forums in Bewdley, Kidderminster and Stourport, as well as a public consultation document and questionnaire.
8. The outcome of the consultation was reported to the Authority on the 17<sup>th</sup> February 2016, and the Authority requested a detailed investigation of potential sites be carried out and reported back for determination of a preferred location, prior to a second period of public consultation.

9. The results of the site investigations were reported to the Authority on the 16<sup>th</sup> June 2016, and the Authority authorised the second period of public consultation on two suitable sites. The consultation process was facilitated again by ORS and their findings are reported in the following sections.

### **Summary of Preferred Sites Consultation Responses**

10. The public consultation was carried out over 10-weeks from 4<sup>th</sup> July to 9<sup>th</sup> September 2016 and again included a consultation document and questionnaire, meetings with staff and stakeholders and two public meetings. The consultation focused on finding out local views on the Hub proposal if it was located at either of the identified sites. Both sites are on the Stourport Road, south of Kidderminster; namely Silverwoods Park (the former site of Romwire) and Stourpoint 5 (the former site of British Sugar).
11. In respect of the potential impact upon response times, the consultation document reported that whilst both sites were considered as being suitable, overall the Silverwoods Park site showed better results. However, the Authority will also need to consider a number of other key factors in determining the Hub's preferred location, such as its proximity and potential impact upon residential and commercial properties adjacent to each site, overall comparative land costs and the respective ability to incorporate a strategic training facility. The results of this further research, which contains commercially sensitive information, will be presented in a separate exempt report on the Authority's agenda.
12. The consultation returned 127 completed questionnaires. While not a representative sample of Wyre Forest residents, the response does demonstrate the strength of feeling of those residents who were motivated to put forward their views. There were also three deliberative forums, one group being drawn randomly from a representative sample of members of the public and two meetings with members of HWFRS staff who volunteered to attend. Two public meetings were also held, but only attracted 22 attendees despite extensive publicity involving adverts in the local free newspaper, radio adverts, awareness events in the affected towns and social media coverage. However, all participants were well informed, and were mainly town or district councillors, union representatives, current and ex-firefighters and relatives of firefighters. Six written submissions were also received.
13. The ORS report (attached as Appendix 1) provides a detailed analysis of all views and comments received during the consultation, and the key points are summarised in the following table.

Consultation Method	Balance of Opinion
<b>Questionnaire</b> 127 completed questionnaires were returned.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>unfavourable on siting a new emergency services hub at either Silverwoods Park or Stourpoint 5 (marginally more support for the former)</li> <li>open text comments suggest continued resistance to the hub concept among many respondents</li> </ul>
<b>Staff Forums</b> The first forum was attended by 5 members of staff and the second had 21 members of staff.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the first forum accepted the principle of a single hub site and accepted the feasibility of both sites</li> <li>the second staff forum was firmly opposed to the principle of a single hub site – and was unable to make a judgement on site options</li> </ul>
<b>Public Forum</b> The forum was attended by 32 randomly selected members of the public.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>generally favourable to the principle of a single hub site</li> <li>general preference for Silverwoods Park</li> </ul>
<b>Public Meetings</b> Seven people attended the first meeting and 15 attended the second.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the first meeting was unfavourable to the principle of a single hub site and made no comment on the two site options</li> <li>the second meeting was non-committal on the hub principle and site options</li> </ul>
<b>Submissions</b> Six written submissions were received.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>two were unfavourable – including a submission from the Fire Brigades Union</li> <li>four were favourable – including the Corporate Team at Wyre Forest District Council, Kidderminster Town Council and Rock Parish Council</li> <li>of the two sites, there was most support for Stourpoint 5</li> </ul>

14. The table above shows similar levels of support for and against the Hub project. Those who opposed one or other of the two sites were generally opposed to the Hub as a matter of principle. In terms of site options, there was only marginally more support for Silverwoods Park than Stourpoint 5.
15. The ORS report concludes that the Fire Authority will need to assess the balance of opinion in the consultation elements alongside all the evidence and

with the benefit of professional and political judgement in order to determine the future direction. It notes that “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.”

### **Viability of the Preferred Sites**

16. As reported at paragraph 11 above, further research on the viability of the two sites has been undertaken. This work was carried out by Place Partnership Limited (PPL), who assessed each site having regard to land acquisition and implementation costs and key factors such as access to infrastructure, operational requirements and planning matters. The details of that assessment along with updated project costs are commercially sensitive and are set out in a separate report on the Authority’s agenda, to be considered in private as it relates to the financial and business affairs of the Fire Authority.

### **Financial Considerations**

17. The estimated cost of the project is to be partly met by the Transformation Fund grant and partly by the anticipated proceeds of selling the three existing sites, with the remaining balance being met by funding from capital borrowing. The additional financing costs will largely be covered by savings in running one modern building instead of three older ones and the potential reductions in on-call crew turnouts as the new location makes more effective use of the wholetime crewed appliance.
18. To put these costs into context, if the new Hub is not built the existing three buildings will need maintenance and refurbishment works in the next few years. Indicative costs prepared by PPL suggest that some £650,000 would be needed over the next five years, but this may only extend the life of the buildings by 10-15 years, at which time replacement would be required anyway. These future costs are unlikely to generate savings and would add approximately £0.075m of capital financing costs to the annual revenue budget.

### **Implications of not proceeding with the Hub project**

19. The previous report on 16<sup>th</sup> June 2016 noted a number of implications should the Hub project not proceed. Among these were:
  - the £2.38 million Transformation Fund grant would potentially need to be returned to central government,

- there may be a reputational risk to the Fire Authority and a potentially detrimental impact on future funding applications to central government,
- the three existing fire stations will still need costly modernisation and refurbishment to meet current standards,
- HWFRS still faces a challenging budget situation, which requires ongoing reviews of operational resource deployment,
- partner organisations would need to reassess their accommodation requirements separately, which could affect inter-agency working relationships,
- HWFRS would lose a significant example of how the Service is demonstrating its commitment to collaborating with other emergency services. Collaboration between emergency services is proposed as a statutory duty in the Policing and Crime Bill, which is currently progressing through Parliament.
- circa £110,000 will have been spent on the formal consultation programme, data modelling, site search fees and architect designs to prepare the Hub proposal, which would not be able to be offset against the transformation funding awarded,
- HWFRS would lose opportunities for redevelopment at the three existing fire station sites contributing towards town centre regeneration.

## **Conclusion/Summary**

20. Following completion of the first phase of formal public consultation on the principle of creating a Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub, an investigation of potential sites was carried out and two suitable sites were identified. The second phase of consultation provided a public perspective on the two sites, and the views expressed ranged from opposition to the overall principle to broad support for the proposal.
21. Having taken this into account and acknowledging public concerns and anxieties about issues such as response times, it is the assessment of officers that such matters can be addressed through normal operational procedures and management, and both sites provide suitable locations.
22. Following consideration of the consultation outcomes, Members are asked to consider as part of this report whether, in principle, the Authority should proceed with the development of a Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub and the subsequent closure of the three existing fire stations at Bewdley, Kidderminster and Stourport. If this is agreed in principle then a final decision on progressing the project to fruition, budget allocation and choice of preferred site are the subject of a subsequent report on the Authority's agenda and will be considered in private due to the commercial sensitivity of those decisions.

## Corporate Considerations

<b>Resource Implications</b> (identify any financial, legal, property or human resources issues)	<p>The project will contribute towards the savings required in the period up to 2019-20 as well as forming part of the 2020 Vision Programme aimed at achieving a sustainable future for the Service.</p> <p>Costs incurred to date are circa £110,000. If the project does not proceed, or if the bid funding is withdrawn for any reason, then under the funding terms and conditions the project costs to date would need to be absorbed from other areas of the Fire Authority budget.</p>
<b>Strategic Policy Links</b> (identify how proposals link in with current priorities and policy framework and if they do not, identify any potential implications).	<p>The project is directly linked to delivering 'Our Strategy' (Resourcing the Future and Buildings and Infrastructure).</p>
<b>Risk Management / Health &amp; Safety</b> (identify any risks, the proposed control measures and risk evaluation scores).	<p>A Risk Management log is included within the project documentation.</p>
<b>Consultation</b> (identify any public or other consultation that has been carried out on this matter)	<p>Listening and Engagement forums have been held with key stakeholders and two formal public consultation programmes were carried out between 1<sup>st</sup> September and 27<sup>th</sup> November 2015 and between 4<sup>th</sup> July and 9<sup>th</sup> September 2016. This extensive programme meets the key good practice requirements of being open and accessible, proportionate, fair and ensuring full accountability.</p>
<b>Equalities</b> (has an Equalities Impact Assessment been completed? If not, why not?)	<p>An overall Equalities Impact Assessment was completed in August 2015 prior to the first phase of public consultation. Assessments of the Silverwoods Park and Stourpoint 5 sites have also been completed.</p>

## Supporting Information

Appendix 1 – Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub Station Site, Report of Consultation with Operational Staff, Stakeholders and Members of the Public, Opinion Research Services, © September 2016

## **Background papers**

### Fire Authority Reports:

- 17 June 2015: Item 14, Wyre Forest Blue Light Hub
- 17 February 2016: Item 9, Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub Station – Consultation Responses
- 16 June 2016: Item 12, Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub Station – Preferred Sites Consultation

Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub Station Transformation Fund Application, 4 June 2014

Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub Station Consultation document

Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub Station – Consultation on the choice of location

Wyre Forest Transformation Funding and Other Issues – Preliminary Listening and Engagement Forums with members of the public and operational staff, Opinion Research Services, © June 2015

Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub Station – Report of Consultation with Operational Staff, Stakeholders and Members of the Public, Opinion Research Services, © January 2016

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