

Report of the Chief Fire Officer

9. Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub Station – Consultation Responses

Purpose of report

1. To receive the outcome of the public consultation undertaken in relation to the proposed Wyre Forest Blue-Light Hub, seek approval to undertake further work to identify a preferred site and recommend further public consultation in relation to that preferred site prior to a final decision on whether to proceed with the development.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- i) the report from ORS, which sets out the feedback from formal public consultation exercises in respect of the proposal to create a Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub, be noted;***
- ii) a further report be brought to the next meeting of the Authority with a recommendation as to the preferred location for a potential Hub having regard to land availability, impact on attendance times, cost and the Hub's impact on local residents, businesses, and the environment;***
- iii) Subject to (ii) above, a further phase of consultation be undertaken on the preferred location prior to a final decision by the Authority on whether to proceed with the Wyre Forest Hub.***

Introduction and Background

2. With the support of a £2.38 million award from the Government's Transformation Fund, officers developed a proposal to create a new purpose-built, multi-agency 'Blue Light' Hub to serve the Wyre Forest area to replace the three current fire stations.
3. On 17 June 2015, the Fire Authority authorised formal public consultation on the principle of the proposal. The consultation process was facilitated by an independent social research specialist, Opinion Research Services (ORS), and included public meetings in Bewdley, Kidderminster and Stourport as well as nine deliberative forums; seven with affected fire station personnel, one stakeholder forum and one forum of randomly-selected members of the local public.

4. A public consultation document with details of the proposal and a questionnaire seeking views on the proposal was prepared and made available online and distributed to public venues in the Wyre Forest area. The consultation ran for 12 weeks between 1 September and 27 November 2015. Responses to the consultation were analysed by ORS; their report is attached as Appendix 1 and they will also be present at the meeting to present their findings.

Summary of Consultation Responses

5. The consultation returned 192 completed questionnaires, 10 written submissions and one petition in addition to the public meetings and forums. The ORS report provides a summary of the outcomes of each method of consultation, including the balance of opinion between support and opposition. This is illustrated in the following table.

Questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Favourable on the principles of closer blue light collaboration and the creation of a single hub site ■ Unfavourable on the proposal to close three fire stations
Staff Forums	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Most Kidderminster wholetime and on-call (RDS) crews were favourable or did not object ■ Bewdley and Stourport RDS crews and one Kidderminster wholetime crew were unfavourable
Public Forum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Overwhelmingly favourable
Stakeholder Forum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Overwhelmingly favourable
Public Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Overwhelmingly unfavourable
Petition (gathered by Stourport RDS crew members)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Unfavourable (with 2,350 signatures)
Submissions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Six unfavourable – including the FBU ■ Two favourable – including the Corporate Leadership Team, Wyre Forest District Council ■ One alternative suggestion and another making more general comments

6. In addition to comments on the proposals, a separate alternative proposal was also submitted. It proposed to retain Kidderminster fire station and replace Bewdley and Stourport fire stations with a new community response station at Blackstone (between Bewdley and Stourport). However, the

proposal would not meet the strict terms of the government's Transformation Fund and nor would it address the long term maintenance issues surrounding Kidderminster Fire Station.

7. The ORS report concludes that overall there was an even balance between the level of support and the level of opposition to the proposals. The report comments that while **“the opposition by questionnaire respondents, attendees at public meetings, petition signatories and some staff members numerically outweigh the public, stakeholder and other staff forum participants” . . . “the questionnaire supported the general principles for a hub station and the forums had the benefit of being in-depth deliberative meetings that could review the evidence.”**
8. The report adds further that **“influencing public policy through consultation is not simply a ‘numbers game’ or ‘popularity contest’ in which the loudest voices or the greatest number 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 opposite.”**
9. In this respect, the report comments that the Fire Authority will need to assess the balance of opinion alongside all the evidence and with the benefit of professional and political judgement in order best to determine the future direction.
10. Finally, the report makes it clear that the consultation was about the principle of establishing a hub station while closing the current fire stations, and notes that many respondents felt unable to form a definitive view without knowing the proposed location of any hub. Therefore, ORS recommend that should the Fire Authority decide to progress the creation of a hub station through a three-into-one merger of the existing stations, a further phase of consultation should be carried out once a suitable site has been chosen, and prior to making a final decision.
11. To ensure the consultation programme conforms to good practice and provides sufficient information to allow the proposal to be considered appropriately by local residents, key stakeholders and affected fire service personnel the project has incurred costs through the engagement of specialist data modelling, opinion research and printing companies, which amount to circa £74,000 to date and are contained in existing budgets.

Proposed action

12. The consultation has been valuable in highlighting the key issues in respect of the proposals and in identifying the relative levels of support for the principles of working more closely with other emergency services and creating a single hub station.

13. The outcomes are not unexpected: it is understandable that the public meetings found a considerable level of concern amongst communities in affected areas, and that the more in-depth consideration of the details of proposals in the forums provided a greater level of assurance and support. It is appreciated, however, that the evidence supporting the creation of a hub station would be better understood once a suitable site location has been chosen.
14. Therefore, officers propose to undertake further analysis to identify the preferred site(s) having regard to response times, the availability of on-call firefighters, impact on the local area, cost and availability. Officers will then report back to the Fire Authority on 16th June 2016 for approval of a preferred site, prior to the second phase of public consultation. Following consultation, the Fire Authority will be recommended to make a final decision on the chosen site.
15. By its nature this is a commercially sensitive process involving contract negotiations, site investigations and other planning matters. Officers would seek to secure an 'exclusivity agreement' with the chosen site's current landowner/s to ensure that the preferred location remains available at an agreed price while the second phase of formal public consultation is conducted.
16. The further costs of undertaking site analysis and undertaking additional consultation are estimated at £23k which would be contained in existing budgets. This would be in addition to the costs incurred to date (paragraph 11 above) and would be incurred 'at risk' if the Authority subsequently decides not to proceed with the Hub proposal. However, it must be remembered the the overall project value is in excess of £5m and with a high degree of sensitivity and therefore it is considered essential to get this phase of the project correct.

Conclusion/Summary

17. Following the completion of the first phase of consultation on the principle of creating a Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub Station, there is a good understanding of opinions for and against the proposal and the reasons underlying these views.
18. It is now proposed that a second phase of consultation should be carried out following identification of a preferred location, which will also aim to address any outstanding issues or concerns raised in the first phase. The results of the second phase of consultation on the preferred location will be reported to the Fire Authority at a future meeting.

Corporate Considerations

Resource Implications (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 £74,000. The cost of undertaking site analysis/selection and further public consultation is estimated at a further £23,000. If the project is found not to be viable and does not proceed, or if the bid funding is withdrawn for any reason, then under the funding terms and conditions would be abortive and would need to be absorbed from other areas of the Fire Authority budget.</p>
Strategic Policy Links (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>
Risk Management / Health & Safety (identify any risks, the proposed control measures and risk evaluation scores).	<p>A Risk Management log is included within the project documentation.</p>
Consultation (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 an extensive formal public consultation programme was carried out between 1 September 2015 and 27 November 2015.</p>
Equalities (has an Equalities Impact Assessment been completed? If not, why not?)	<p>An Equalities Impact Assessment was completed in August 2015 prior to the first phase of public consultation. An updated Assessment will be completed following selection of the preferred site location for the proposed Hub Station.</p>

Supporting Information

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

Appendix 2 – Equality Impact Assessment for the Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub Station

Background papers

Fire Authority Report 17 June 2015: Item 14, Wyre Forest Blue Light Hub

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

Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub Station Consultation document

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

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