



## Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub Station



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

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# Acknowledgements

Opinion Research Services (ORS) is pleased to have worked with Hereford and Worcester Fire Authority (H&WFA) 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 forums and meetings. The forum participants were especially patient in listening to background information before entering positively into the spirit of open discussions about challenging topics, with some controversial aspects in some cases. 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 Mark Preece and Jean Cole 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 answer participants' questions fully and frankly, 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 usefully to thinking about H&WFRS's development in difficult times. We hope also that ORS has been instrumental in continuing to strengthen H&WFRS's public engagement.

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# Executive Summary and Conclusions

## Introduction

1. On the basis of its previous experience, ORS was commissioned by Hereford and Worcester Fire Authority (H&WFA) to consult the public, stakeholders and Hereford & Worcester Fire & Rescue Service (H&WFRS) staff about a proposal to create a joint Emergency Services Hub Station for the Wyre Forest area by relocating the current Bewdley, Kidderminster and Stourport-on-Severn (henceforth Stourport) Fire Stations into a new hub station at an appropriate location.
2. The consultation programme comprised:
  - Designing, implementing, analysing and reporting an open online and paper questionnaire;
  - Facilitating and reporting: seven forums with wholetime and retained operational staff at Bewdley, Kidderminster and Stourport fire stations; one stakeholder forum; and one forum with members of the public drawn from all three areas of the Wyre Forest;
  - Chairing three public meetings, one each in Bewdley, Kidderminster and Stourport; and
  - Analysing and summarising written submissions and petitions received by H&WFRS during the consultation period.
3. ORS worked in collaboration with H&WFRS to design the questionnaire and consultation document, and to prepare informative stimulus material for the various meetings before facilitating the discussions and preparing this independent report of findings. We have also analysed and summarised the submissions and petitions commenting on H&WFA's draft proposals.

## Open Questionnaire

4. The open questionnaire (with an accompanying Consultation Document) was available online and as a hard copy between 1<sup>st</sup> September and 27<sup>th</sup> November 2015. 192 questionnaires were completed; 172 were submitted online and 20 by post.
5. 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, 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

6. In total, 20 wholetime firefighters from Kidderminster Fire Station took part (in separate forums for each watch), as well as 29 retained firefighters drawn from Bewdley (9), Kidderminster (7) and Stourport (13). Eight stakeholders - from the Severn Area Rescue Association (SARA), Mid Severn Valley RAYNET, West Mercia Search and Rescue (WMSAR), Age UK, the Charity Organisational & Financial Services, the Salvation Army, Emergency Planning, Worcestershire County Council and CJP Safety - attended their respective forum, and 14 randomly selected members of the public met together in the other.
7. The forums began with a concise review of the number and distribution of fire engines and stations in Wyre Forest and current crewing systems, before the proposal for an Emergency Services Hub Station for the Wyre Forest was considered in some detail, particularly with respect to:

The proposed practical arrangements;

The Transformation Fund award of £2.4m from Government;

Reasons why it is possible to combine fire stations (including falling incident levels across Wyre Forest between 2010-11 and 2014-15);

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

The possible impact of the proposal on attendance times; and

Site selection issues.

8. Although, like all other forms of qualitative consultation, forums cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the meetings reported here gave diverse groups of people from across Wyre Forest and H&WFRS staff the opportunity to participate. Because the recruitment was inclusive and participants were diverse, we are satisfied that the outcomes of the meetings (as reported below) are broadly indicative of how informed opinion would incline on the basis of similar discussions.

## Public Meetings

9. The Fire Authority held three public meetings, which were widely publicised by media and using posters in the local areas. The meetings were held in the evenings, as shown on the next page:



Location	Date	Numbers Attending
Stourport-on-Severn (Civic Centre)	15 <sup>th</sup> September 2015	75
Kidderminster (Wyre Forest District Council Chambers)	17 <sup>th</sup> September 2015	16
Bewdley (St George's Hall)	12 <sup>th</sup> October 2015	60

10. Each meeting lasted over two hours and included rigorous discussions of the Fire Authority's proposals. Participants received (and listened attentively and with interest to) a detailed presentation by senior officers of H&WFRS, which covered all of the topics and issues outlined above in paragraph 7.
11. In addition to members of the public, each of the meetings was attended by current and retired firefighters (and in some cases their families and friends), as well as union representatives. For example, in the smallest meeting of 16 at Kidderminster, there were four crew members and two union representatives; and at Stourport it seemed that about 40% or more of the attendees had close connections with the Service. At Bewdley, though, local residents were the great majority of the attendees. At each venue the firefighters and union representatives spoke influentially, in some cases reflecting and in other cases shaping the opinions of the residents present.

## Written Submissions

12. During the formal consultation process, 10 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
Councillors	1
Political Groups	1
H&WFRS Staff	1
Representative Bodies	1
Neighbouring FRS	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>

13. ORS has read all the written submissions and summarised them in the full report, and the main themes are outlined below in this Executive Summary.

## Petition

14. 2,350 people signed a petition (organised by the Stourport-on Severn firefighters) entitled 'Save our Fire Station'.

## Consultation Programme Proportional and Fair

15. 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.

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.

16. 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.
17. 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.
18. 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) 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.

19. 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.
20. 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. Both the scale and nature of the programme compare well with similar consultations undertaken by other fire and rescue services and public bodies.

## Report of Findings

21. 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.
22. This executive summary also includes ORS's conclusions about how to interpret the balance of opinion in the consultation.
23. 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

24. About seven in ten respondents (71%) agreed that H&WFRS should collaborate more closely with other 'bluelight' Emergency Services, with over two-fifths (42%) strongly agreeing. Only 16% disagreed.
25. In the open text comments, most respondents acknowledged the benefits of H&WFRS collaborating closely with other blue light services. The general feeling was that improved collaboration would lead to improved safety and effectiveness of response arising from services (and indeed the voluntary sector) working in a more integrated way. Collaborative working was also considered by many respondents to lead to greater operational efficiencies and cost savings arising from sharing resources.

26. The largest number of negative comments about service collaboration centred on the fact that blue light services are already or should already be working together in spite of not being co-located. Several participants said that modern technologies already facilitate communication and collaboration between services based at a number of sites. Also, several respondents observed that some blue light staff are seldom at their base stations, meaning that the hub would not lead to improved face-to-face communication and collaboration.
27. Over half (52%) of respondents agreed that the establishment of a Wyre Forest Emergency Service Hub that brings together Fire, Police, Ambulance and the voluntary emergency responders is a good idea in principle. Nearly four in ten respondents disagreed (38%), while one in ten (10%) neither agreed nor disagreed. Many people said in their text comments, though, that while they supported the idea of a hub in principle, their actual support would depend on its location.
28. Nearly six in ten (59%) respondents disagreed with the prospect of replacing the existing three fire stations with a Wyre Forest Emergency Service Hub Station (with 51% disagreeing strongly). Only just over a third (35%) of respondents agreed with the proposal. Opposition to the merger is clearly strongest in Stourport and Bewdley: while in Kidderminster a majority supported the proposal (49% for and 41% against), 85% of Bewdley respondents opposed it, and in Stourport 63% opposed it (with 36% in support).
29. By far the highest number of negative open text comments about the hub proposal were around the potential for longer response times - and several respondents complained that the proposal would cut necessary services and believed that it was principally designed to reduce costs.
30. A number of respondents used the open text comments to criticise the consultation process for inadequacies that made it hard for them to give informed opinions on the proposals. In particular, people highlighted: the limited analysis to support the proposal; the fact no costs were outlined; and, importantly, that no location was identified.
31. A few respondents made suggestions for the Fire and Rescue Service to consider in relation to the existing hub proposal, most notably: keep Kidderminster Fire Station and merge Stourport and Bewdley stations into a new building at Blackstone; and introduce three hubs, one in each of the three towns.

## Forums with Firefighters

### RDS Firefighters

32. Overall, the RDS at Bewdley and Stourport opposed the hub station very strongly indeed; but a majority of the RDS at Kidderminster station broadly supported the proposal.

33. The RDS firefighters at Bewdley and Stourport were mainly worried about longer response times from Kidderminster and the dangers of possible multiple incidents occurring. They referred in particular to the severe road congestion and the risks arising from the Safari Park and other developments.
34. In this context, they thought the hub would jeopardise public safety in Bewdley and Stourport without sufficient corresponding benefits. They said that joint working with the police and ambulance service could happen without a hub, and that the other parties were not necessarily committed to sharing a hub station.
35. They also deplored the loss of local services and the involvement of local people in their fire and rescue service. They felt that they would have no chance of serving from a hub station, because their turn-in times would be too slow - so they anticipated that many current Bewdley and Stourport RDS firefighters would leave the Service as a result of attending few incidents and not feeling an attachment to the new hub station. They said this would exacerbate current RDS availability problems and they were sceptical of how successful RDS recruitment would be around the hub station area.
36. The critics of the proposal also thought that, in future, the number of fire engines across Wyre Forest might reduce as a result of the hub. Others, supported rationalising fire cover in the Wyre Forest because it is relatively over-provided for compared to other areas.
37. While acknowledging the benefits of joint-working with other emergency services, the Bewdley and Stourport RDS firefighters were generally sceptical about how successful this might be; and they argued that collaboration can be achieved without a hub station. Closer collaboration with the police was considered desirable, but participants were uncertain as to how this could succeed if only PCSOs were based at the proposed new hub. Some were also worried about lack of 'buy-in' to the hub station from other organisations and the so-called 'flimsy' agreement in place between the services.
38. The Bewdley and Stourport RDS firefighters were convinced that the merger has been proposed for financial reasons and is a fait accompli. They questioned the amount such a development would save and said that escalating costs could easily 'wipe out' any future savings.
39. In the context of these issues, the RDS at Bewdley and Stourport resoundingly opposed the hub station while majority of the RDS at Kidderminster station broadly supported the proposal.
40. A number of firefighters said they needed to know the location of the site in order to make a properly informed final decision.

## Wholetime Firefighters

41. The Kidderminster wholetime firefighters were fully aware of the financial challenges facing H&WFRS and acknowledged that a new hub station for Wyre Forest would assist in meeting these. Several also welcomed the prospect of having a modern, fit-for purpose fire station. Nonetheless, the firefighters raised a number of concerns about the proposed hub station and the proposed closure of the existing Bewdley, Kidderminster and Stourport stations.
42. In fact, the four Kidderminster watches varied considerably in their opinions about the hub:
  - One watch supported the proposal
  - One watch opposed the proposal
  - Two watches were non-committal: they did not oppose the proposal (but nor did they support it explicitly).
43. Overall, the main concern of the wholetime watches was the importance of ensuring effective and timely back-up support for the Kidderminster wholetime appliance in order to ensure firefighter safety and effective firefighting.
44. Those who opposed the hub said that ensuring timely back-up support would be more challenging from a hub because the RDS staff would be de-motivated by attending far fewer incidents (due to losing their current one-pump 'shouts' to the Kidderminster wholetime crew) and by no longer having their 'own' station. The concerns reported above led some of the Kidderminster wholetime firefighters to question the feasibility of RDS crews within Wyre Forest at all. They suggested that two wholetime or Day Crewing Plus (DCP) crews might be preferable to ensure back-up support (though there was also some acknowledgement that this would be too costly to implement).
45. Those in opposition also particularly emphasised that the proposal would:
  - Amount to a reduction in fire cover – from three stations to one;
  - Lengthen response times to Bewdley and Stourport due to distance and congestion; and
  - Lead to the loss of the third and fourth RDS pumps because they would get so few calls once the hub was established.
46. Though H&WFRS has stated that the number of fire engines across Wyre Forest will remain at the same level if the hub is developed, participants expected this number to reduce in future. While this was an important issue for some, others suggested that such a reduction would represent a better match of resources to risk in Wyre Forest, because one wholetime and one RDS appliance would be sufficient for the area.
47. There was some scepticism as to how successful joint working with other blue light services would be in practice, given the 'silo mentality' of the different organisations. Participants

were keen to see efforts being made to 'build bridges' with the Police in particular, but were uncertain how this could succeed with only PCSOs being based at the proposed new hub. Firefighters were more positive about possible opportunities for collaboration and joint working with the Ambulance Service, though.

48. Typically, the Kidderminster wholetime firefighters came to the meetings feeling concerned, sceptical, doubtful and critical about the proposal, which they connected with other (in their eyes) undesirable changes towards crews of four, Day Crewing Plus, and poor RDS availability. They would not have endorsed the proposals spontaneously, but after detailed discussion of the evidence, of the four watches, one watch supported the proposal and two did not disagree with it (the latter were non-committal).
49. Finally (and importantly), many of the staff would have liked more information about where the hub would be sited prior to making a definitive judgement.

### Forum with Members of the Public

50. During the initial part of the forum, participants' questions and comments highlighted their initial concerns about:
- RDS job losses;
  - Response times (especially to Bewdley);
  - Levels of cover during simultaneous incidents;
  - Transport links in the area;
  - 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); and
  - The impact of the proposal on Police and Ambulance Service response times.
51. Overall though, following discussion and clarification, all 14 participants considered the proposal to be both reasonable and acceptable from operational and financial perspectives (and because they trusted H&WFA and H&WFRS to 'do the right thing').
52. They agreed that the data they had seen in relation to falling incident levels supports change in the Wyre Forest area. Furthermore, the fact that the Bewdley RDS is unavailable for a third of the daytime (when it is covered from Kidderminster) led them to conclude that a larger pool of firefighters at the hub would be desirable, even if it means longer response times to some areas.
53. Participants were keen that H&WFA should make public its preferred (or indeed chosen) location for the hub as soon as possible - and they urged the Service to ensure the building is completely future-proof in terms of required resources.

54. There was also some concern about RDS job losses and response times from the proposed hub into Bewdley, but some (including one west Bewdley resident) thought the hub would be better for the whole area, given the poor location of and transport links to and from the current fire stations. Several participants said that the information presented during the forums had allayed their concerns and one person declared:

*I came not wanting any closures at all but I can see that the hub would be a brilliant idea. I was dead against this the last time I came to the meeting but we do need to move forward and accept change.*

However, they acknowledged that it would be difficult to reassure the general public.

## Stakeholder Forum

55. Stakeholders had some initial concerns about the proposal, chiefly around the potential effect of the proposal on response times, cover during simultaneous incidents and H&WFRS's 'valuable' prevention and education work. Despite these concerns, though, the general sense was:

*If you were planning an emergency cover system for Wyre Forest from scratch, you would never have three fire stations here! It's unnecessary – so now you have an opportunity for change.*

56. The eight stakeholders were unanimous that a hub would be desirable for the Wyre Forest insofar as it would:

Increase collaboration between the emergency services and other local partner agencies;

Increase community safety via knowledge and information sharing and joint training initiatives; and

Make financial sense in terms of savings and also income from the government grant.

57. Some stakeholders suggested that H&WFRS should go further than planned, in not only establishing the hub station but by also reducing the number of fire engines based there to reflect the reducing number of incidents.
58. The consensus was that the proposal makes sense in the context of funding reductions, reducing risk, and the benefits of a blue light hub. Overall, the eight stakeholders were extremely positive about the proposal for a three-into-one merger. They were unanimous that the changes are financially necessary and only one person doubted that they are also 'safe and feasible'.



## Public Meetings

59. In each meeting, the questions and comments from the firefighters and union representatives concentrated on the following issues and observations (please note that any reference to station area data relates to that for 2014-15):

The Fire Authority's 'local risk' data about incidents within fire station areas does not reflect the full number of mobilisations of the four Wyre Forest fire engines;

The response time data are based on the attendance of only the first pump, but one fire engine cannot deal safely with all incidents;

The longer response times are dangerous and will have a '*massive effect on life risk in the area*'. In particular, it will be very difficult to provide a second support fire engine to Bewdley in a reasonable time;

Because the current on-call crews in Stourport and Bewdley will be unable to attend a central hub fire station within the time allowed, they will be excluded from their current roles - and when current on-call crews are lost, it will be difficult to replace them with sufficient new recruits from Kidderminster;

The data on the reductions in total incidents does not imply that emergency cover resources can safely be adjusted, but instead means that the '*current system is working well and should not be changed*';

Despite the long-term downward trend in incidents, in Quarter 1-3 of 2016 the numbers of fires, small fires and road traffic collisions have all increased - and it should not be assumed that risk over the next five years will follow the same pattern as the last five years;

It is desirable to co-operate with the Police, but only community safety officers will be based at the proposed hub station, and services do not have to be co-located in order to improve communications;

The fourth fire engine at the new hub station would be very quiet, which would lead to it being withdrawn altogether in the medium-term future; and

The proposal still means that up to six vehicles would be crewed by on-call firefighters, which is too many and weakens local resilience.

60. The overall judgement of the firefighters and union representatives present was that: "*the cuts are putting lives at risk in order to save money!*"
61. The members of the public present at the meetings also raised a range of issues and asked many questions – for example:

If the Kidderminster wholetime crew is committed to an incident elsewhere, then Bewdley would be covered by an on-call crew based at the Kidderminster hub

station - which would slow response times significantly beyond three minutes; so Bewdley is better served by its own on-call fire engine being on stand-by whenever the Kidderminster wholetime crew is attending an incident;

Bewdley is the only fire station on the western side of the river so the Service would be losing a strategic station if it were closed;

It is unacceptable to increase response times by three minutes, or longer in the case of the second attending fire engine;

The Safari Park increases local risks due to the number of its visitors and associated traffic flows;

There could be a loss of experienced staff if the existing on-call firefighters are unable to serve at a new hub station;

Bewdley and Stourport are being '*sacrificed for the sake of a hub station*';

Would all the current resources be transferred to the new hub station from the three existing stations?

A hub station would lead eventually to the loss of the second and third RDS pumps;

Would it be possible to recruit sufficient on-call crews in the Kidderminster area?

A hub station is unnecessary for the multi-agency delivery of effective community safety programmes: '*the local authority can tell you who's at risk; you don't need a hub to do that!*'

The creation of a hub station will save little money on an on-going basis – savings of only £250K per annum are not really significant – so '*why fix what is not broken?*'

How would the construction of the new hub station be financed? In particular, will the police pay a fair share of the costs?

Why cannot the Service just spend about £1 million refurbishing the existing three stations - in order to retain the status quo?

Would the site sales benefit the fire and rescue service or would the money be returned to the government? and

How much extra council tax would we need to pay to keep all the existing services in place?

62. There was an important comment from a member of the public in Stourport, who was sympathetic to the proposals but stressed the importance of knowing the location of any hub in order to make a properly informed assessment:

*Risk is clearly the key issue and we know that fire risk is over-estimated; but we do need to know where the hub station would be located in order to assess the risks properly. And we need further consultation once the site has been chosen!*

63. Despite the largely critical responses to the proposals, there were some supportive comments at the public meetings - for example:

*You will have on-call firefighters in the Kidderminster hub, which is reasonable*

*It seems like the Bromsgrove Fire Station initiative has worked well; that's encouraging*

*There are financial issues; we have to recognise that and take it into account*

*What would be the alternative, if there is no Hub? What future would Stourport and Bewdley stations have? and*

*Kidderminster station is very old.*

64. Nonetheless, the overall tone of the three public meetings was very critical of the proposal.

### Contrast between the Forums and Public Meetings

65. The public, stakeholder and staff forums all differed very much in their tone and/or their conclusions from the three public meetings. Whereas the latter were hostile to the proposals, the forums were understanding and in many cases favourable. To clarify the contrast, many of the staff were asked for their views on why their discussions differed so markedly from the public meetings.

66. In response, some wholtime firefighters who supported the hub said that the importance of response times is often exaggerated and that the public meetings were unduly influenced by emotive 'union rhetoric' and 'misleading' information in the public domain. For example, one watch said:

*As wholtime firefighters, we know that there're going to be big changes, and these are critical times; but the RDS are less understanding of the challenges facing the service and they want to protect their local stations*

*This is a fairly educated debate here, but elsewhere there is a lot of "union rhetoric" about "costs versus lives" which is highly emotive – so the public meeting...was less "educated" than the discussion we've had. There can be a lot of misleading and negative misinformation on social media – but this is an educated debate*

67. Another watch, one that opposed the proposal, nonetheless said:

*We've been getting used to the issues and we're more aware of the facts*

*There were retired firefighters at the meetings who don't know the current issues*

*The public just think we're fantastic, but they don't know how we're run.*

68. All the wholtime watches, even those opposing the proposal, said that the public meetings were not well informed about the challenges facing H&WFRS.

## Written Submissions

69. 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.
70. Two of the submissions (from Chaddeley Corbett Parish Council and the Corporate Leadership Team at Wyre Forest District Council) supported the proposed establishment of a hub station for Wyre Forest.
71. Of the remaining eight submissions:

Six (from Councillor Nigel Knowles, Stourport-on-Severn Town Council, the Fire Brigades Union, the Bewdley Branch Labour Party and two local residents) either outright objected to or had reservations about the proposal - mainly on the grounds that respondents do not wish to see the closure of existing fire stations to enable the hub's development;

One, from the Stourport-on-Severn Fire Station staff, proposed an alternative location for the hub (at Blackstone) and outlined the reasons why this may be feasible. This proposal was supported by the Bewdley Branch Labour Party; and

One, from the West Midlands Fire Service, comments on the information (or lack thereof) provided within H&WFRS's consultation communication materials - and on the need for prevention and protection activities within the areas where stations would be closed if the proposal is implemented. It also suggests that H&WFRS follow its lead in implementing a *"blended fleet with crewing levels of three"*.

## Petitions

72. 2,350 people signed a petition (organised by the Stourport-on Severn firefighters) entitled 'Save our Fire Station'. An accompanying document stated that the signatures were collected in Stourport Town Centre - where the firefighters were assisted by local shops and members of the public in collecting them. Most of the signatures are from Stourport residents, with a small number from visitors and people with holiday homes around the town. The petition organisers believe that 10% of the town's population has taken the trouble to object to the proposal via this petition.

## Alternative suggestions

73. During the various meetings several alternative proposals were made that the Fire Authority will wish to consider. For example, firefighters at Bewdley and Stourport suggested that the Fire Authority should consider:

A 'two-into-one' rather than 'three-into-one' – that is, retaining the current Kidderminster Fire Station while combining Bewdley and Stourport into a new,

smaller hub site between the two towns (also supported by several questionnaire respondents);

Money-saving changes to the wholetime service – for example, through the introduction of Day Crewing Plus (or even day crewing) at Kidderminster;

Stationing fire engines at strategic locations within communities (much like the ambulance service does); and

Closing some wholetime stations and making better use of the more cost-efficient RDS crews.

74. Some members of the public suggested that the Authority might consider:

Having two wholetime fire engines operating from the hub;

Using ‘surplus’ wholetime crew members to cover any future gaps in the on-call service;

Using on-call staff in different ways to safeguard their positions; and

Mitigating concerns about response times to Bewdley by siting the existing Bewdley landrover at the Severn Valley Railway Station to respond to incidents in the town

75. One submission, from the Stourport-on-Severn Fire Station staff (and supported by the Bewdley Branch Labour Party) proposed an alternative location for the hub at Blackstone and outlined the reasons why this may be feasible.

## Overall Conclusions

### Introduction

76. Overall, the views expressed through the open consultation questionnaire, public meetings and some staff forums differed considerably from those expressed in the deliberative forums with stakeholders, randomly selected members of the public, and the others with staff. The former were largely opposed to the hub and the proposed closure of three stations, whereas the latter were broadly supportive. The reasons for the respective support and opposition have been documented in this summary, and more fully later in the report, and so are not repeated in detail here; but it is interesting that many of the concerns raised in the questionnaires and public meetings were reviewed in the deliberative forums. In the forums, most people’s concerns were allayed through questioning and discussion, but in the questionnaire and public meetings they were not.
77. 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

78. In this case, though, the outcome of the consultation process are in relative equipoise, with some support and about the same level of opposition, as the following summary of outcomes shows, in terms of who was favourable or unfavourable to the proposals.

#### QUESTIONNAIRE

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

Most Kidderminster wholetime and RDS crews were favourable or did not object

Bewdley and Stourport RDS and one Kidderminster wholetime crew were unfavourable

#### PUBLIC FORUM

Overwhelmingly favourable

#### STAKEHOLDER FORUM

Overwhelmingly favourable

#### PUBLIC MEETINGS

Overwhelmingly unfavourable

#### PETITION (gathered by Stourport RDS crew members)

Unfavourable (with 2,350 signatures)

#### SUBMISSIONS

Six unfavourable – including the FBU

Two favourable – including the Corporate Leadership Team, Wyre Forest District Council

One alternative suggestion

One making more general comments.

79. Of course, the opposition by the questionnaire respondents, attendees at public meetings, petition signatories and some staff members numerically outweighs the public, stakeholder and other staff forum participants; but 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.

### Need for Interpretation

80. 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 staff, public and stakeholder forums for being deliberative and thoughtful, and because they included a diverse range of affected staff and members of the public. This does not mean that the findings of the questionnaire, public meetings and petition 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 results are not necessarily representative of the whole population.
81. 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.

### Further Consultation

82. The Fire Authority will be well aware that the current consultation was about the principle of establishing a hub station while closing the current fire stations, and respondents were clearly told this in all the meetings and literature. As a consequence, many said that they cannot form a definitive or final judgement without knowing the proposed location of any hub; and in any case the issue of principle is distinct from considering a specific location in practice.
83. Therefore, if the Fire Authority decides to progress the creation of a hub station through a three-into-one merger of the existing stations, then ORS recommends that it should consult further once a suitable site has been chosen – and prior to making a final decision.

# Project Overview

## Opinion Research Services

84. 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.
85. 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

86. On the basis of its previous experience, ORS was commissioned by Hereford and Worcester Fire Authority (H&WFA) to consult the public, stakeholders and Hereford & Worcester Fire & Rescue Service (H&WFRS) staff about a proposal to create a joint Emergency Services Hub Station for Wyre Forest by relocating the current Bewdley, Kidderminster and Stourport Fire Stations into a new hub station at an appropriate location.
87. The consultation programme comprised:
- Designing, implementing, analysing and reporting an open online and paper questionnaire (which was also available on paper on request);
  - Recruiting, facilitating and reporting: seven forums with wholetime and retained operational staff at Bewdley, Kidderminster and Stourport fire stations; one stakeholder forum; and one forum with members of the public drawn from all three areas of the Wyre Forest;
  - Chairing three public meetings, one each in Bewdley, Kidderminster and Stourport; and
  - Analysing and summarising written submissions and petitions received by H&WFRS during the consultation period.



88. As well as giving general advice, ORS's primary role was to design, implement/facilitate, analyse and report the open questionnaire and the deliberative forums and chair the public meetings between September and December 2015. We worked in collaboration with H&WFRS to design the questionnaire (and accompanying consultation document) and prepare informative stimulus material for the various meetings before facilitating the discussions and preparing this independent report of findings. We have also analysed and summarised the submissions and petitions commenting on H&WFA's draft proposals.

## **H&WFRS Consultation: Listening & Engagement**

89. Earlier in 2015, H&WFRS and ORS undertook a 'pre-consultation' or 'listening and engagement' process to understand people's opinions and also 'test' some general principles before bringing forward this draft proposal for formal statutory consultation. During this process, staff and members of the public were invited to deliberate about a range of issues in order to contribute to the development of possible operational options for the area. Having taken account of these meetings and all the other available evidence, H&WFA has brought forward the draft proposal consulted on here.
90. This staged approach to consultation conforms to the Gunning Principles (1985), which require that meaningful consultation should be at a 'formative stage', before authorities make decisions. The same principles also require that people should be given sufficient information and time to consider the issues in an informed manner, and also that their views should be taken conscientiously into account by the authority - in this case even before draft proposals are formulated for formal consultation.

## **Consultation Methods**

### **Open Questionnaire**

91. The open questionnaire (with the accompanying Consultation Document) was available online between 1<sup>st</sup> September 2015 and 27<sup>th</sup> November 2015. 192 questionnaires were completed; 172 were submitted online and 20 by post. Please see pages 31 and 32 in the following chapter for a full respondent profile.

### **Deliberative Forums**

#### **The Forums**

92. The consultation meetings reported here used a 'deliberative' approach to encourage operational staff, stakeholders and members of the public to reflect in depth about the fire and rescue service, while both receiving and questioning background information and discussing their ideas in detail. All the meetings lasted for two-and-a-half hours and in total there were 49 staff, eight stakeholder and 14 public participants. The programme of forum meetings is shown below.

MEETING	TIME AND DATE	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES
Stakeholder Forum	8:00am – 10:00am Wednesday 16 <sup>th</sup> September 2015	8
Kidderminster Wholetime (White Watch)	6:30pm – 9:00pm Monday 2 <sup>nd</sup> November 2015	5
Kidderminster Wholetime (Red Watch)	2:30pm – 5:00pm Tuesday 3 <sup>rd</sup> November 2015	6
Bewdley RDS	6:30pm – 9:00pm Tuesday 3 <sup>rd</sup> November 2015	9
Kidderminster Wholetime (Green Watch)	2:30pm – 5:00pm Wednesday 4 <sup>th</sup> November 2015	5
Stourport RDS	6:30pm – 9:00pm Wednesday 4 <sup>th</sup> November 2015	13
Kidderminster RDS	6:30pm – 9:00pm Thursday 5 <sup>th</sup> November 2015	7
Kidderminster Wholetime (Blue Watch)	10:00am – 12:30pm Friday 6 <sup>th</sup> November 2015	4
Forum with Members of the Public	10:00am – 1:00pm Saturday 7 <sup>th</sup> November 2015	14

93. Staff and stakeholders were invited to participate by H&WFRS, whereas members of the public were recruited by ORS (some of the latter had attended the 'listening and engagement' session in May 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 or written 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 wider community.
94. Overall (as shown in the table below), 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: local authority area of residence; gender; age; ethnicity; social grade; and disability/limiting long-term illness (LLTI).

CRITERIA	FORUMS
Gender	Male: 7 Female: 7
Age	16-34: 3 35-54: 4 55+: 7
Social Grade	AB: 5 C1: 6 C2: 1 DE: 2
Ethnicity	2 non-White British
Limiting Long-term Illness	2

95. 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, stakeholders and diverse members of the public the opportunity to participate actively. Because the meetings were inclusive, the outcomes (as reported below) are broadly indicative of how informed opinion would incline on the basis of similar discussions.

### Background Information

96. The forums began, for the sake of context, with a concise review of the number and distribution of fire engines and stations in Wyre Forest and current crewing systems, before the proposal for an Emergency Services Hub Station for the Wyre Forest was considered in some detail - particularly with respect to:

The proposed practical arrangements;

The Transformation Fund award of £2.4m from Government;

Reasons why it is possible to safely combine fire stations (including falling incident levels across Wyre Forest);

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

The possible impact of the proposal on attendance times; and

Site selection.

97. Discussion was stimulated via a presentation devised by ORS and H&WFRS to inform and encourage discussion of the issues - and participants were encouraged to ask any questions they wished throughout the discussions.

## Public Meetings

98. The Fire Authority held three public meetings, which were publicised by media and using posters in the local areas. The meetings were held in the evenings, as follows:

Location	Date	Numbers Attending
Stourport-on-Severn (Civic Centre)	15 <sup>th</sup> September 2015	75
Kidderminster (Wyre Forest District Council Chamber)	17 <sup>th</sup> September 2015	16
Bewdley (St George's Hall)	12 <sup>th</sup> October 2015	60

99. Each meeting lasted over two hours and included rigorous discussions of the Fire Authority's proposals. Participants received (and listened attentively and with interest to) a detailed presentation by senior officers of H&WFRS, which covered all of the topics and issues outlined above in paragraph 97.
100. In addition to members of the public, each of the meetings was attended by current H&WFRS frontline staff (and in some cases their families and friends), retired firefighters and union representatives. For example, even in the smallest meeting of 16 at Kidderminster, there were four crew members and two union representatives; at Stourport it seemed that about 40% or more of the attendees had close connections with the Service; and at the Bewdley meeting, around a quarter. Despite the meetings being 'public meetings', at each venue the firefighters and union representatives spoke prominently and influentially, in some cases reflecting and in other cases shaping the opinions of the residents present.

## Written Submissions

101. During the formal consultation process, 10 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
Councillors	1
Political Groups	1
H&WFRS Staff	1
Representative Bodies	1
Neighbouring FRS	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>

102. ORS has read all the written submissions and summarised them in the full report.

## Petition

103. 2,350 people signed a petition (organised by the Stourport-on Severn firefighters) entitled 'Save our Fire Station'.

## Consultation Programme Proportional and Fair

104. H&WFRS's consultation programme was conscientious, in the sense of being open, accessible and fair to members of the public, stakeholders and staff across the two counties (and of course primarily within Wyre Forest): the consultation was 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 engagement and consultation exercises undertaken by the Service.

105. 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.

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.

106. 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 expressed in consultations 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 decisive factors that necessarily determine authorities' decisions.
107. 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.

108. 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 - is especially valuable. All consultation elements are important and none should be disregarded, but the deliberative forums are particularly worthy of consideration because they explore the arguments and the reasons for people's opinions. There is no doubt that H&WFRS'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.
109. As well as providing the public, stakeholders and staff with sufficient information to consider the proposals intelligently, H&WFRS has also conducted its consultation in a timely manner and is taking account of the outcomes before making a decision. Both the scale and nature of the programme compare well with similar consultations undertaken by other fire and rescue services and public bodies.

## The Report

110. This report concisely reviews the sentiments and judgements of respondents and participants about the aforementioned proposal. Verbatim quotations are used, in indented italics, not because we agree or disagree with them – but for their vividness in capturing recurrent points of view. ORS does not endorse the opinions in question, but seeks only to portray them accurately and clearly. The report is an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants.

# Report of Open Questionnaire

## Introduction

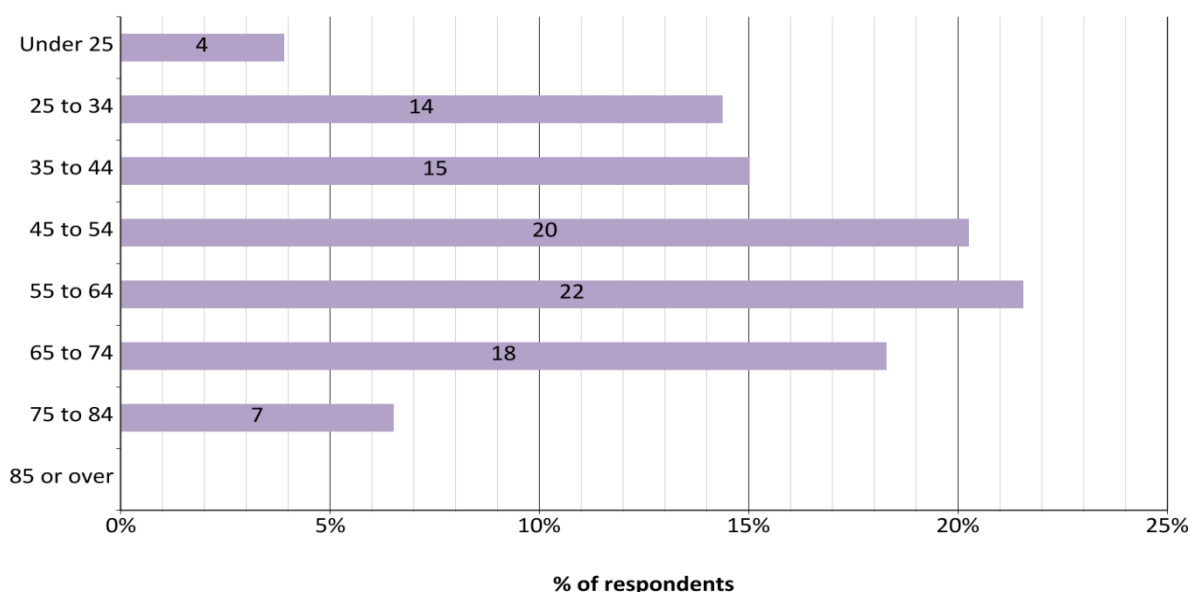
111. The open questionnaire (with an accompanying Consultation Document) was available online and as a hard copy between 1<sup>st</sup> September and 27<sup>th</sup> November 2015. 192 questionnaires were completed; 172 were submitted online and 20 by post.
112. H&WFRS printed and then distributed the 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

113. 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.
114. 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.
115. 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

116. 97% of the 164 respondents who answered the question said they were submitting their own personal response, whereas the other 3% said they were responding on behalf of an organisation (though none noted what organisation this was). Only 4% of respondents said they work for H&WFRS (base 148 respondents).
117. 58% of respondents were male and 42% female (base 150 respondents) - and their age profile is overleaf.

**Table 1: Age****Base: 150 Respondents**

118. Only 6% of respondents considered themselves to be disabled (base 148 respondents) and the overwhelming majority were White (98% of 146 base respondents).

### Interpretation of the Data

119. Where percentages do not sum to 100, this may be due to computer rounding, the exclusion of “don’t know” categories, or multiple answers.
120. 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



## Views on the Proposal – Closed Questions

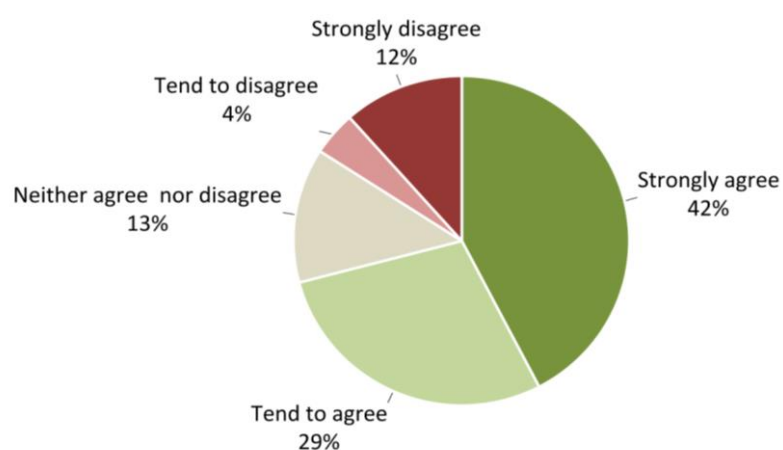
### Collaboration in Principle

121. Over 7 in 10 respondents (71%) agreed that **H&WFRS should collaborate more closely with other 'bluelight' Emergency Services**, with over two fifths (42%) strongly agreeing. Less than one fifth (16%) disagreed.

**Figure 1: Extent to which respondents agree/disagree that Hereford & Worcester Fire and Rescue Service should collaborate more closely with other 'blue light' Emergency Services.**

*Agree/disagree that H&WFRS should collaborate more closely with other 'blue light' Emergency Services?*

**Base: All Respondents (189)**



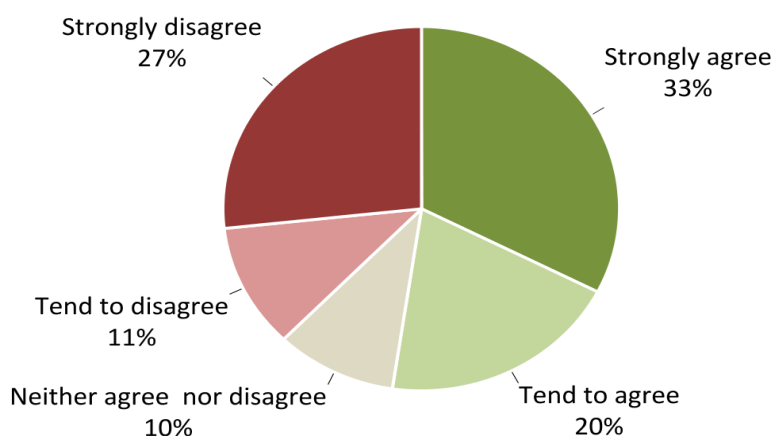
### A Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub in Principle

122. Over half (52%) of respondents agreed that **the establishment of a Wyre Forest Emergency Service Hub that brings together Fire, Police, Ambulance and the voluntary emergency responders is a good idea in principle**. Over a third of respondents disagreed (38%), while 1 in 10 (10%) neither agreed nor disagreed.

**Figure 2: Extent to which respondents agree/disagree that the establishment of a Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub is a good idea in Principle.**

*Agree/disagree that a Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub that brings together Fire, Police, Ambulance and the voluntary emergency responders is a good idea in principle?*

**Base: All Respondents (172)**

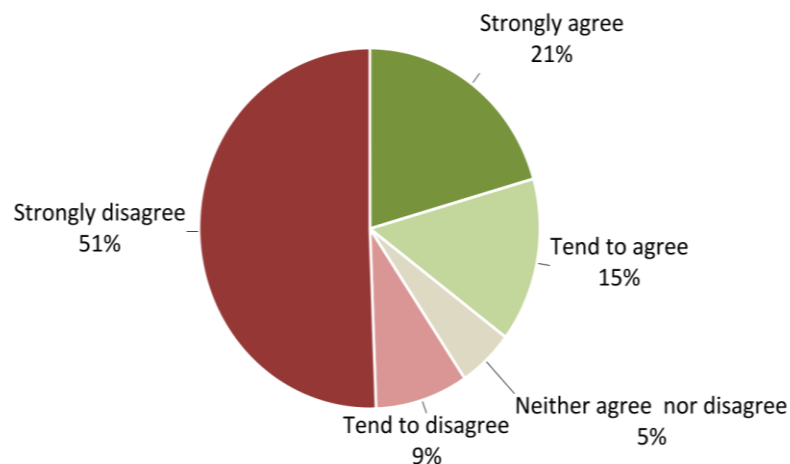


123. Over a third (35%) of respondents agreed that **replacing the existing three fire stations with a Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub in a suitable location is a good idea in principle**. However, just under three fifths (59%) disagreed; 51% strongly.

**Figure 3: Extent to which respondents agree/disagree that replacing the existing three fire stations with a Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub in a suitable location is a good idea in principle.**

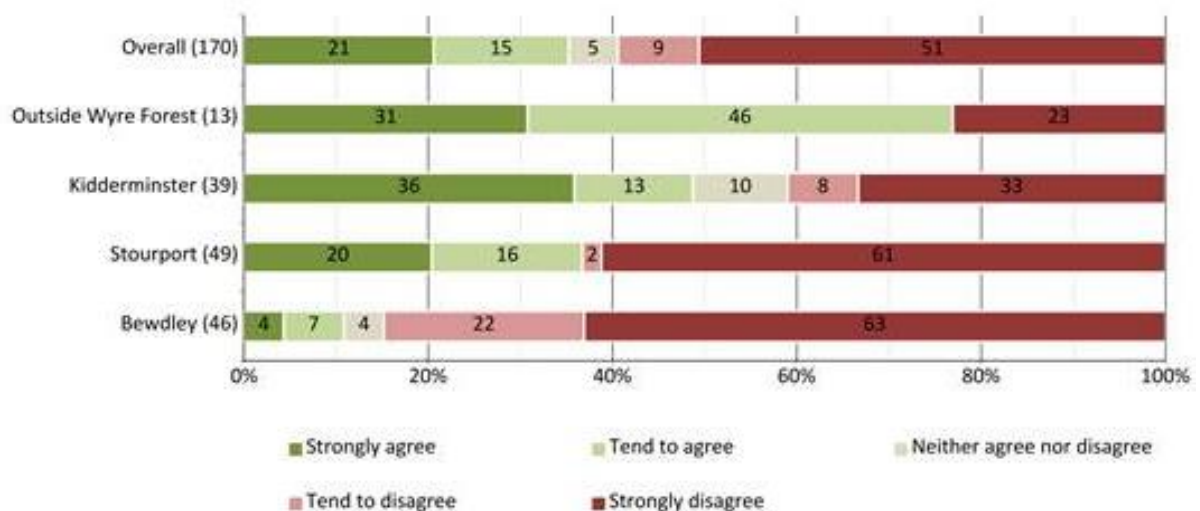
*Agree/Disagree that replacing the existing three fire stations with a Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub in a suitable location is a good idea in principle?*

Base: All Respondents (170)



124. When analysing this question by area, it is clear that opposition to the proposal is strongest in Stourport and Bewdley. While in Kidderminster support for the proposal outweighs opposition (49% agreed whereas 41% disagreed), the reverse is true in the other two areas: 85% of Bewdley respondents opposed the proposal while only 11% supported it; and in Stourport the figures were 63% and 36% respectively.

**Figure 4: Breakdown by area**



## Equalities Impact

125. Just over two fifths (41%) of respondents think that there are positive and negative impacts that need to be taken into account in considering this proposal.

**Figure 5: Any positive or negative impacts to be taken into account?**

*As a public body, H&WFRS 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 Respondents (165)



## Views on the Proposal – Open Text Comments

### Introduction

126. Respondents were asked to give their reasons for assigning their agreement scores to the following statements:

- Q1 Hereford & Worcester Fire and Rescue Service should collaborate more closely with other 'blue light' Emergency Services.
- Q2 The establishment of a Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub that brings together Fire, Police, Ambulance and the voluntary emergency responders is a good idea in principle.
- Q3 The replacement of the existing three fire stations with a Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub in a suitable location is a good idea in principle.

The written responses overlapped across the questions and so are combined in the commentary that follows.

### Main Findings

#### Positive Comments

127. Most respondents acknowledged the benefits of the H&WFRS collaborating closely with other blue light services. Indeed, many felt that improved collaboration would lead to

improved safety and effectiveness of response arising from the services working in an integrated way, operational effectiveness and better responses. Typical comments were as follows:

*Close collaboration between emergency services should enable better integrated responses to incidents*

*I believe closer liaison should lead to ... a joined up approach to safety and security*

*I would think that working more closely with other blue light services would be a benefit, and give us a better service*

*Inter-agency working is useful, and a better understanding of each service's goals and procedures can only be good*

*Good communications can only lead to better emergency services for the area*

*Multi agency partnerships work and shared intelligence is necessary today for a more efficient service*

*To ensure appropriate multi agency responses to a variety of community and citizen needs, such as RTC, house fires and so on*

*You're going to be working with other services on call outs. So it's only logical you work closer together and understand the limits and expectations of each other's services.*

128. Many respondents who agreed that the idea of a blue light hub was good in principle felt that the hub would facilitate easier collaboration and more efficient, integrated operational responses:

*A central hub for such services lends itself to providing the best platform for coordinated actions*

*All members in close contact to make and discuss incidents immediately and make better use of employees*

*The sharing of information, face-to-face is beneficial*

*It will enable all resources to pull together and effect a better all-round service*

*It would ... facilitate closer working relationships at the operational level and create opportunities to build better combined responses to critical incidents*

*There is so much inter-working between the blue light service; physically bringing them together makes sense*

*When the public call on the emergency services they don't always know which service is most appropriate, so having a hub will be better for cross communication between the services*

*Flexibility in crewing (covering deficiencies), strategic location, RDS cover for specials.*

129. A few respondents stated that current response times would not be adversely affected by implementing the proposals whilst a few others felt that having a blue light hub would actually reduce response times:

*A central base would provide similar response times to those at present - potentially quicker if the lack of available fire fighters is also considered*

*The scenario for staffing would provide resilience which should outweigh any time difference when comparing response times from the present three locations*

*It should make for a speedy response*

*Better response times for all involved and it should be more economical to run*

*Would be a great advantage ... for improved operational and response times.*

130. Some suggested that voluntary staff would become more involved and be able to establish a higher profile within a hub facility:

*As a volunteer I personally have seen how difficult it can be to turn up to an incident and the emergency services not have any idea who we are or what capabilities we have. By merging Kidderminster fire crews, volunteer organisation, police and ambulance ensures that we all work together and train together*

*Increasingly voluntary organisations provide essential services. A central hub would provide a stable platform for them to work from*

*... For voluntary groups to see what the full time services do.*

131. Collaborative working was considered by many respondents to lead to greater operational efficiencies and cost savings arising from sharing resources. Many felt that locating all the services in one building would increase the potential for sharing back office operations and facility costs. One respondent also highlighted the potential to raise income through venue hire at the hub:

*Economies arising from shared resources, meaning that the combined service would provide greater value for money. Similar combination of resources in other geographical areas has been met with a positive response*

*Probably improves resource usage of all services involved. Having resources waiting for other resources to arrive is not effective use*

*Economic savings of ground staff and buildings freeing more money for frontline services*

*In the longer term (it would) be cheaper to maintain and run. One purpose built site would be more efficient than each organisation maintaining two or three buildings each within the catchment area*

*Bringing all blue light services together will have a massive impact on running costs ... some back office duties could be shared and further savings could be made*

*Building and training facility construction and maintenance costs would be reduced by splitting them multiple ways. Community spaces could also generate income through room hire...*

132. Cost savings from working in a modern building were also mentioned by some respondents and highlighted as a benefit of the 'hub' concept:

*Buildings are now inadequate and old for the modern service required these days. Efficiency would be increased and training coordinated in one place to suit all, thus being a financial advantage*

*Modern fit for purpose facilities for the crews is a must*

*Seems a more sensible use of blue light resources, especially as our fire stations in Wyre Forest are ageing and need upgrading for training etc.*

*A well-resourced fire service is vitally important. If adequate cover can be provided from one station, then this will save money and be more sustainable in the long term*

*None of the present buildings are suitable for a 'working together with other services' option.*

133. Another frequently mentioned benefit was that being based together on a hub site would increase mutual learning and understanding between services and build a mutual appreciation of operational practices. The increased potential for joint and more effective training was also mentioned:

*Working closer with fellow emergency services builds greater understanding of each other's procedures*

*Cross skilling*

*Better training together will improve incidents*

*It encourages the use of all strengths and skills, knowledge and experience*

*Advantages of having modern facilities where teams that respond together can train and prepare together*

*Increased learning and skills by all working together where possible.*

134. Other comments in support of the proposals that were raised by relatively few respondents can be summarised as:

The size of the area does not justify having three fire stations  
 The positive impact on staff morale of working in a modern building  
 The inadequacies of the current fire service set up  
 The potential to have a building that is environmentally sustainable.

135. A high number of respondents said that whilst, in principle, they supported the idea of a 'hub', their actual support would depend on its location, which should minimise travel times to locations throughout the area:

*As long as it is in a centralised area, with good access*  
*Depends on final positioning of the hub and development of a more efficient road network into outlying areas!*  
*It would depend on the location and the access times to the outskirts of the district. If location was correctly chosen then economies of scale would come into play*  
*The hub needs to be located in a place that doesn't have access problems, especially for the on call fire fighters and volunteer responders who need to get there safely but quickly*  
*The principle is fine; the challenge is the location - if it is on the road between Stourport and Kidderminster, then there are known bottlenecks at each end.*

### Negative Comments

136. The highest number of negative comments about service collaboration concerned the fact that the blue light services are already working together or should already be working together in spite of not being co-located. Several participants said that modern technologies already facilitate communication and collaboration between services based at a number of sites:

*I don't think there has to be a central hub ... you just have to have good communications which can be done via email, radio, phone, video call etc.*  
*The fire service already works with the rest of the emergency services*  
*In the age of 'always on, always connected' physical co-location is becoming completely irrelevant*  
*I feel that closer collaboration at strategic and tactical level would enhance services, but three services simply responding out of the same building will be of no benefit*



*Do you have to all live on the same site to do this? Can you not talk to each other anyway?*

*I would have expected you already did this*

*They already work together well when they need to*

*With modern communications it is possible to collaborate without shouting down the corridor. This idea has been mooted on previous occasions and has always been stoutly resisted by the populace. I suppose the 'powers that be' are merely using the idea that if you hit a nail often and long enough it will, eventually, penetrate the hardest wood.*

137. Several respondents observed that some blue light staff are seldom at their base stations, meaning that the hub - an expensive facility - would not lead to improved face-to-face communication and collaboration:

*At the end of day, police and ambulance will be out most of the time, voluntary sector would be there say 3 hours a week and the same for retained staff, so it is misleading to say spending all this money will make a difference; in reality it won't*

*Most of the services would not be there 95 percent of the time anyway, so what a waste of money. £5.9 million is almost 25 percent of the HWFRS budget. Any joint working benefits can be achieved now, without a new building.*

138. By far the highest number of negative comments about the hub proposal concerned people's belief that response times to fires and road traffic collisions would lengthen. Many supported this claim by highlighting the often adverse traffic conditions in the area and increased distances involved. Typical comments included the following:

*Fire appliances by their very nature, are heavier vehicles and, therefore, will take longer to reach their objective than all of the other blue light services. Fire brigades need to stay local to the area they serve*

*I am more concerned at the time it will take a fire engine to get to my house if they are all stationed in Kidderminster*

*I believe lives will be lost. There have been two major traffic accidents in Wyre Forest this weekend. Response times were excellent, because the engines were where they needed to be. However good crews are, they cannot respond as quickly if they are not based in the local area*

*Response time is key. Taking into consideration the traffic situation in the area, it makes sense to have separate HQs for the towns; thus giving first responders*

*more time to work the emergency rather than battle the traffic ... it makes no sense at all to close the existing stations*

*A blue light hub will potentially increase the response times for, not only the first appliance but, more importantly, additional resources at larger incidents*

*Attendance times to many areas will increase. Appliances from a single hub would have to cover a ridiculously large area*

*Wherever the hub is sited will leave two of the three towns less protected in my view. Travel times, due to the awful road infrastructure in the Wyre Forest is likely to make emergency travel more complicated from just one site*

*Each of the three areas of Wyre Forest have outlying areas which can be a long way from Kidderminster. I live in Arley, and emergency vehicles from Kidderminster can take an age to reach this area*

*I tend to agree with the principle but have reservations about fire cover on the west side of the River Severn, particularly for Bewdley during times of flooding etc.*

*Probable delays in reaching calls at the opposite end of the service area from one base, especially in view of the current facts that nearly every road into/out of Kidderminster is blocked by roadworks/traffic signals/road humps etc.*

*This will mean death to many people involved in fires and accidents because of increased attendance times for incidents.*

139. Several respondents complained that the proposal would cut necessary services and believed that it was principally designed to reduce costs:

*I cannot be anything other than cynical about developments like this one. They rarely deliver the efficiency claimed at the time of 'rationalization'. I'm sure the vast majority of people who have experienced such changes since the 1980s ... would agree that their experience of cuts like this are almost invariably damaging to public services*

*You must not put money saving above saving lives. This should be your core value!*

*This is clearly a cut not an improvement plan. Prices and bills go up yet we get less of service? How is that justifiable?*

*Utter nonsense. Very cleverly worded way of closing stations. You cannot possibly cover our area by cutting services and yet you seem determined to do so!*

*I believe this is an attempt by the government to merge services in order to cut costs further. Cuts to merged services can be more easily disguised*

*Why close Bewdley and Stourport stations to achieve it? Maybe you are trying to hide cuts in services by using this hub idea as a smoke screen?*

140. A few respondents complained that the proposal, by 'putting all the eggs into one basket' would contribute to the ongoing depletion of community-based services. There were particular concerns for residents of Bewdley and Stourport in this regard:

*Again, we're back to the 'eggs in one basket', centralisation and ripping the heart and services out of communities aren't we, not a good idea, a \*\*\*\*\* awful one*

*Because the local fire stations do a fantastic service in the community and closing these stations is so wrong*

*Bewdley should retain its own fire and rescue service in order to answer emergencies within the shortest possible time*

*Local services are being directly snatched away from communities that are gradually becoming more and more vulnerable*

*Stourport will have no services left so we will not have any reason to pay council tax*

*The question pretends there is only a gain from this, but it is not a good idea, even in principle, because what it really means is that communities will lose their fire stations, police stations, etc.*

*All three towns need their own separate fire station, and police stations fully manned*

141. Several respondents criticised the consultation process for inadequacies which made it hard for them to make informed opinions on the proposals. In particular, people highlighted: the limited analysis to support the proposal; the fact no costs were outlined; and, importantly, that no location was identified.

142. Other negative comments, mentioned by relatively fewer respondents, concerned the following:

A belief that the blue light services would prefer the status quo and that the proposals would be worrying for service personnel;

A belief that the blue light services work to different procedures, protocols and service targets that make an operational merger non-viable;

A fear that the proposed changes would result in staff cutbacks;

Concern that it will be even harder to recruit retained staff in one area than from three areas;

Concern that travel times would increase for retained staff; that existing staff would lose their jobs; and new staff would have to be recruited at a time when recruitment is already a challenge for the area;

That public money would be wasted on an unnecessary and expensive new building; and

That this proposal would result in a downgrade of services.

### Alternative Suggestions

143. A few respondents made suggestions for the Fire and Rescue Service to consider in relation to the existing hub proposal:

Keep Kidderminster Fire Station and merge Stourport and Bewdley stations into a new building at Blackstone;

When considering the location for the hub take into account the archived data of each of the three stations;

Introduce three hubs – one in each of the three towns;

Designate a green way as in Worcester to ensure speedy access to incidents; and

Minimise duplication and waste of resources before considering changes of this significance.

### Equalities Impact

144. Respondents were asked to provide evidence and suggest ways in which H&WFA could reduce or remove potential negative impacts and increase positive impacts for people with protected characteristics. Most of the comments in this section did not answer the question, but noted that implementation of the proposals would increase risk for all local residents. Some typical comments were:

*The proposed hub could discriminate against vulnerable people, such as the aged and disabled, who would face longer waits for help to arrive which could be more life threatening compared to those who are able to climb out of windows or find other ways out of a burning building. I certainly do not feel that any of those groups are disadvantaged by the current arrangements*

*This will put all people at risk from fires and car crashes*

*People who live in rural areas will see higher response times, probably when the River Severn has flooded.*

145. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the main suggestion was to keep the existing fire stations open:

*Keep fire stations at Stourport and Bewdley, so that response times can be kept low*

*Leave things as they are*

*Keep stations open.*

146. A relatively high number of respondents also suggested improved response times to incidents for all residents, including vulnerable people:

*Age, disability, pregnancy and maternity, all pose problems for people in emergencies. Speed of response is particularly important in such cases*

*As long as the arrival time of a fire engine is the same in Stourport as it is in Bewdley and the other side of Kidderminster, then everyone is being treated the same*

*Just treat everyone the same within their communities and provide the local services that are needed by the people in the area, regardless of their 'characteristics'. We're all people and basically all the same.*

147. Several suggested that the hub building should have full access – for disabled people and women, in particular:

*An accessible hub will make provision for disability access to training areas as well as operational areas. Working with other organisations requires that accessibility*

*From reading the report, it states that the current stations do not have any disabled facilities and by building a new station can only improve the facilities for disabled members of the community*

*The lack of female changing facilities at some fire stations is always going to have a negative impact on efforts to recruit on call firefighters.*

148. The following suggestions were also made, but by relatively fewer respondents:

Retain the three existing operations as retained stations;

Encourage local people to become retained fire service staff;

Communicate and engage directly with local communities including people with protected characteristics. Ensure that plain language is used;

Use educational facilities and community training to reduce the risk to more vulnerable members of the community;

Carefully choose the location of the hub site, taking a number of factors into account;

Take care to ensure that any changes take account of equality monitoring, *which is something that is easily achieved in the close team orientated culture at smaller community based stations;*

Ensure complete coordination of management teams;

Improve the road network to increase response times;

Recruit employees who are fully able to fulfil their roles; and

Carefully manage any changes to reduce any negative impacts on staff.

# Report of Meetings with Staff

## Introduction

149. This chapter is divided into two sections, to highlight and compare the opinions of wholetime firefighters at Kidderminster and retained firefighters at Bewdley, Kidderminster and Stourport. The views of the former are reported first, followed by the latter. It is important to note that the views reported below are those expressed by staff participants. 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.

## Main Findings: Kidderminster Wholetime Firefighters

150. The Kidderminster wholetime firefighters were fully aware of the financial challenges facing H&WFRS and acknowledged that a new hub station for Wyre Forest would assist in meeting these. Several also recognised that the sometime emotive arguments put forward by firefighters in defence of local services are unlikely to 'make sense' in the financial context and that H&WFA would be sensible to proceed with its proposal in order to secure the Transformational Fund award of £2.4m:

*Firefighters in Wyre Forest fully understand the financial savings that have to be made and a Hub would significantly assist. We understand that!*

*From the brigade point of view it is a no-brainer and our views won't make financial sense in the wider context*

*From the brigade point of view, we should grab the money and start building...but we don't necessarily feel like that*

*We should secure the £2.4million Government funding.*

151. Furthermore, a few comments were made in support of having a modern, fit-for purpose facility (providing the building design is carefully considered to ensure a suitable working environment for staff):

*This is a chance to have a brand new sparkling fire station that would lift morale in a positive way!*

*A hub building could be good if they get the planning of the building right. I've heard of some complaints where there is too little daylight and too much artificial light in a sterile environment.*

152. Nonetheless, despite some positivity, the firefighters raised a number of concerns about the proposed Emergency Services Hub Station for Wyre Forest - and the associated closure of the existing Bewdley, Kidderminster and Stourport Fire Stations. These are outlined below.

### Response Times and Back-up Support

153. Participants' chief worries centred on 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 (which could, it was felt, be compromised by longer turn-in times for supporting RDS firefighters). Some typical comments were:

*I just want to make sure we have the right resources in the right place; that's what matters! I have some reservations about one station with longer response times. We are struggling to meet our response responsibilities now!*

*Bewdley is likely to suffer longer response times to a greater or lesser degree*

*The guarantee of a second pump is what really matters; we need to avoid delays in the second pump getting there*

*The main issue is firefighter safety not just the first response time. We have to be cautious until the back-up support arrives so it's not the first pump attendance time that matters but the time it takes to get two pumps there. A hub station could delay the turn-in time for the RDS crews for the support pumps.*

*Would the second RDS pump support be guaranteed?*

*I know that the attendance times don't make much difference in practice but it is crucial to have the back-up pump support. As wholetime we need to be absolutely sure that we can get a second RDS truck there to support us as guaranteed!*

154. However, there was a sense that ensuring timely back-up support may be even more challenging in future as RDS staff become de-motivated by attending far fewer incidents (insofar as they would lose all of their current one-pump 'shouts' to the Kidderminster wholetime crew) and less committed to providing cover at a hub station than they are at their local one:

*If the wholetime takes the first shout the RDS will take fewer calls, which will make it harder to keep pumps on the run*

*At night we only have four wholetime pumps on the run so Kidderminster is having to cover outside its area, which leaves only three RDS pumps here for the whole of Wyre Forest at night. So that system has to work. People feel more motivated working on their own local stations but that commitment*



*would be missing on a hub station. And we'd have to ensure that the RDS have enough calls to motivate them properly.*

155. Indeed, the matter of RDS motivation was raised frequently: it was anticipated that many current Bewdley and Stourport firefighters would leave the Service as a result of attending fewer incidents and not feeling any attachment or loyalty to the new hub station - exacerbating current RDS availability problems (though one firefighter did feel that 'it will work if we monitor their availability and require proper standards'):

*Most RDS want to ride fire engines to fires so checking equipment and doing HFSCs would not be worthwhile enough for them*

*RDS feel they have their 'own station' but they would feel different if they were required to go to Kidderminster*

*RDS cover is shocking, worse than it has ever been, but there is a local sense of responsibility there which keeps them on-call. If there is a central hub there will not be the same commitment to keeping every fire engine on the run.*

156. On the issue of RDS availability, the wholetime firefighters were particularly critical of the extent to which this has deteriorated and the lower levels of cover now offered by RDS staff - and explained how they themselves are often sent to Bewdley and Stourport to ensure the appliances there are kept on the run:

*The reliability of the RDS back-up has diminished considerably now*

*The RDS crews need to commit to the proper availability levels in order to make the system work*

*We are having to support the RDS crew at Kidderminster with wholetime firefighters to ensure the fire engine's availability...*

*The RDS availability figures for Kidderminster don't take account of the way we provide wholetime firefighters to give resilience cover to ensure the availability of the RDS pump.*

They thus saw the need for a more robust monitoring system for RDS firefighters (to ensure they are providing the requisite levels of cover), or even a 'waiting list' that can fill any gaps when needed:

*We need a better system to monitor the RDS crews...we have plenty of them but they are not on duty in practice during the working days! Why is that still happening?!*

*We should have reserves of people who are 'on a waiting list' to take over from those who won't or can't be available?*

157. Given the predicted RDS 'exodus' from Bewdley and Stourport, the issue of future RDS recruitment was inevitably raised. Firefighters anticipated a need for selective recruitment within the required radius of the proposed hub station, but some were sceptical as to how successful this might be:

*I assume there would be selective recruitment in the future, as current RDS in Bewdley and Stourport leave...?*

*In future you would have to recruit to the new base and use them accordingly*

*Recruitment and retention are big issues but the Hub won't be a panacea to keep three RDS appliances on the run*

*We are struggling to crew our fire engines and to recruit RDS crews in Kidderminster now. Why should it improve with a hub station?*

158. The concerns reported above led some of the Kidderminster wholetime firefighters to question the feasibility of RDS crews within Wyre Forest at all. They suggested that two wholetime or Day Crewing Plus (DCP) crews - or a combination of these - might be preferable to ensure back-up support (though there was also some acknowledgement that this would be too costly to implement):

*If we combined in one station with two wholetime pumps that would be much better than three RDS pumps but it's too costly*

*There could be an option for two DCP crews at Kidderminster in order to guarantee the back up*

*We need to be able to guarantee proper wholetime cover and an effective RDS back-up so we need two wholetime or one wholetime and 1 DCP.*

159. On a related note, the anticipated longer response times for back-up RDS appliances led the wholetime firefighters to request that crews of five be maintained at Kidderminster to ensure that incident intervention can be commenced as safely as possible:

*Can we ensure that Kidderminster continues to with crews of five rather than four if we accept this proposal because there is a current proposal to reduce from five to four?*

*We need a minimum of five per wholetime crew in order to cover incidents safely in the context of a longer response time that would result from the hub.*

## Future Reductions

160. Though H&WFRS has stated that the number of fire engines across Wyre Forest will remain at the same level if the hub is developed, participants expected this number to reduce in future as it is 'easier' to remove resources from a central hub than it is from smaller, individual fire stations:

*A Hub will raise the issue of how many we should have and can crew in the medium term*

*There could be a natural evolution towards one wholetime and one RDS pump at the hub; that's inevitable. And it's easier to lose those resources from a hub than from three separate stations which will always want to keep their resources*

*The hub is bound to be a more flexible centre than three separate stations*

161. While this was an issue of concern for some, others suggested that such a reduction would represent a better match of resources to risk in Wyre Forest; that is, one wholetime and one RDS appliance would be sufficient for the area:

*In the short term there would be four pumps, but we don't really need that number; we could manage with just two. Are you keeping four just to appease the RDS crews? We could apply the Worcester or Redditch approach*

*We need to save money ultimately so while we want to keep the RDS involved, we don't want to spend too much extra money.*

Indeed, the following quotation illustrates that the above may actually be feasible:

*We could actually attend more incidents in Bewdley and Stourport than we do but we don't in order to protect the RDS crews who want to serve their communities and secure their incomes. We can get there as quickly as they can turn out.*

## Joint-working

162. One of the stated benefits of the proposed hub station is that it would improve joint-working and collaboration opportunities between the emergency services. While this was considered desirable in principle, there was some scepticism as to how successful it would be in practice, with participants reflecting on poor previous experiences of attempting to do so and the current somewhat 'silo mentality' of the different organisations:

*Joint working is not workable. We've tried to do joint training before, but it's not possible due to each service getting call-outs and being unable to work together*

*Will there really be co-operation at the hub? Because right now we don't share data or information so how will this improve?*

163. In terms of specifics, relations between the Police and H&WFRS were said to have deteriorated somewhat in recent years (it was said that impersonal bureaucratic procedures have contributed to this and that data protection has become a significant barrier to the interchange of information). Participants were keen to see efforts being made to 'build

bridges', but were uncertain as to how this could succeed with only PCSOs being based at the proposed new hub:

*It would be good to return to previous better relations without data protection being such a barrier to interchange*

*There are a lot of bridges to be rebuilt, with the Police, especially*

*What's the benefit of having 20-odd PCSOs working from the base? How would that help us?*

164. Firefighters were more positive about possible opportunities for collaboration and joint working with the Ambulance Service though, particularly if this would aid the development of well-regarded co-responding schemes:

*Training with the Ambulance could be good, but they are so busy. Some training we've done with Ambulance students has been really good*

*If co-responding was a future development - and that would be a good thing - it could help to work with the Ambulance Service at a base.*

### Day Crewing Plus

165. Day Crewing Plus (DCP) has been referenced above and has apparently been intended for implementation at Kidderminster Fire Station. It is not a popular crewing system among the wholetime firefighters there, who sought reassurances that moving to a hub station would negate the need for it:

*Would the new hub centre be a way of protecting the current shift system and avoid Day Crew Plus?*

*We don't want to change shifts and have DCP as part of this.*

This is not to say the firefighters were wholly against reviewing shift systems though, only that they objected to the introduction of DCP at their station (or indeed at a new hub):

*We could revise the duty systems to save money by other means. It's not just 2-2-4 or DCP; there are other options.*

### Other Issues

166. The wholetime firefighters spoke briefly of public opinion (which, in Bewdley especially, is apparently very much in favour of retaining local stations) and suggested that H&WFRS needs to carefully explain the realities of its financial situation to as many people as possible so they are aware of the need for change:

*You have to convince the public it's going to be better to lose their 'fire station'*

*The people in Bewdley certainly want to keep their station, but one needs to explain the realities to them*

Encouragingly for H&WFRS, one participant said that: *'having seen what's happened elsewhere, I think the public can accept the position'*.

167. Other reported issues were around: the potentially problematic safety and security at a *'mixed site with community facilities'*; and the inaccuracy of the incident figures being used to justify the proposed merger:

*What about the attendances of second and third trucks; do they affect the incident numbers? Is it just one incident even if three or four trucks attend?*

*The data about reductions in incidents does not match what's on the website; we do more mobilisations.*

## Overall Comments

168. Typically, the Kidderminster wholetime firefighters came to the meetings feeling concerned, sceptical, doubtful and critical about the proposal, which they connected with other (in their eyes) undesirable changes towards crews of four, DCP and poor RDS availability. They certainly would not have endorsed the proposals spontaneously.

169. However, after a concise presentation and detailed discussion of the evidence, one watch in particular found nothing really to disagree with in terms of the merger, except that it could lengthen response times to some areas, would hasten the already established trend towards one wholetime and one RDS fire engine for the Wyre Forest and that *'it will mean Kidderminster will go to DCP, which is a dreadful shift'*. They also remained concerned about the need to ensure proper prompt support pumps and sufficient RDS availability when they are called to serious incidents:

*We definitely need robust back-up pumps for when we go into a fire; we really need to ensure RDS availability improves.*

170. Another watch, though, remained unconvinced about the merger at the end of its session: only one of the five attendees considered the proposal to be acceptable and reasonable (they said that *'listening to the discussion and if the procedures are looked at properly it's OK'*). The others objected on the many grounds outlined above, though there was some recognition that the change may be necessary on financial grounds:

*We're still against the proposal because it does nothing to improve the current weaknesses of Wyre Forest emergency cover and it would worsen response times*

*The proposal would reduce fire cover but we have to save money. I'm against the principle so it's a necessary at best.*

171. Majorities in the other two watch-based forums were unsure as to whether they could endorse the proposed merger or not insofar as while they could understand the logic and

rationale underpinning it, they still had concerns around response times, back-up support and working environments. Importantly also, they strongly desired more information about where the hub would be sited prior to making a definitive judgement. Some of their typical comments were:

*It's a mainly financial basis for the decision so it's reasonable but not necessarily acceptable*

*A hub is better than just two closures of stations*

*There is no way of predicting the effect of the response times*

*I understand the arguments, which are good, but we have to consider the service we give to the public*

*I'm happy with the concept but we're concerned about the working environment and the certainty of support pumps when we're a busier station*

*I can see the logic, but need to know where it would be; and we could work with the Police without a hub*

*The location is critical; it has to support good turn-in and response times*

*We need to know where the site would be in order to judge properly*

*Response times really matter so it's important to know the location of the station in order to make up our mind*

*We need more information about the response times and the bigger picture in order to make judgments about these issues; more information might calm people's fears.*

## Comparisons with Public Meetings

172. Wholetime staff were asked for their views on why their meetings differed so markedly in tone to the public meetings reported below - and the general feeling among one watch was that the importance of response times is often exaggerated and that the public meetings were unduly influenced by emotive 'union rhetoric' and 'misleading' information in the public domain:

*This is a fairly educated debate here, but elsewhere there is a lot of union rhetoric about 'costs versus lives' which is highly emotive. So the public meeting is the exception (rather than this meeting) because it was less 'educated' than the discussion we've had*

*There can also be a lot of misleading and negative misinformation on social media but this is an educated debate.*

173. All watches also suggested that the RDS firefighters (and associates) attending the public meetings to 'have their say' are perhaps not as informed as wholetime firefighters about the

challenges facing H&WFRS - meaning the deliberative forums with the latter were conducted on a more informed basis:

*This is a better informed meeting; we understand the financial position and what is happening elsewhere strategically*

*We've been getting used to the issues and are more aware of the facts*

*There were retired firefighters at the meetings who don't know the current issues*

*As wholetime firefighters we know that there are going to be big changes and these are critical times, but the RDS are less understanding of the challenges facing the service and they want to protect their local stations.*

174. There was, though, sympathy for the motivations of RDS firefighters in attending and speaking up at the public meetings:

*The RDS are protesting their own situation*

*The RDS are facing a serious reduction in incomes so they feel strongly...and they want to protect their local services.*

## Main Findings: RDS Firefighters at Three Stations

### Response Times and Back-up Support

175. The RDS firefighters echoed the concerns of the Kidderminster wholetime staff around 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. Some typical comments were:

*I'm worried about response times after an incident we had in Kidderminster last year when a delay in the second support vehicle getting there would have had a serious effect (Kidderminster)*

*The second and third appliance turn-out times will be much slower than now, which will mean a poorer back-up service for residents. The second pump is bound to be slower than now (Stourport)*

*We need to give the public the best service we can and we need to feel safe as firefighters. The second pump response time is important for that to be achieved (Stourport)*

*The effect on response times could be even worse depending on where the station is located...which will be dangerous for three or four pump incidents (Bewdley)*

*Response times change the seriousness of incidents, where a minute can make a huge difference (Bewdley)*

*My neighbours are concerned about response times going up by three minutes but it could be 15 or 20 minutes (Bewdley)*

*We get peak periods where the Safari Park causes a lot of congestion and slows down travel to Bewdley (Kidderminster)*

*The hub will be a worse form of emergency cover. (Stourport)*

176. The adverse effect of longer turn-in times for supporting RDS firefighters was again frequently raised, with participants questioning whether H&WFRS has examined where those serving Bewdley and Stourport actually live and whether they would be able to attend the hub within the requisite time (which was generally considered unlikely, especially at Stourport):

*Have you looked at where the RDS firefighters actually live? (Stourport)*

*We can get to this station in five minutes without the traffic affecting us. The turn-in time would be much longer to the hub station, mainly due to morning and evening congestion (Stourport)*

*We can all get to the station and have bought houses here to be near the station...but a hub would be more difficult and awkward to get to (Stourport)*

*It is not feasible to bring a split crew from three different locations to the central hub; it will take too long. (Stourport)*

## Future Reductions

177. The Kidderminster RDS firefighters agreed with their wholetime colleagues that the number of fire engines across Wyre Forest is likely to reduce in future as it is 'easier' to remove resources from a central hub than it is from smaller, individual fire stations. Again, though, most were not overly concerned about this and felt that one wholetime and one RDS appliance would be sufficient for the area:

*I can't see that the Hub would really need four fire engines in the long run... (Kidderminster)*

In fact, several comments were made in support of rationalising fire cover in the Wyre Forest which, it was felt, is overprovided for compared to other areas:

*As a taxpayer it is hard to justify the duplication at the three stations (Kidderminster)*

*We have been saying for years that it is hard to justify all the fire stations. It's hard to justify mobilising Bewdley to some incidents when our wholetime crew could have got there more quickly than the Bewdley RDS. (Kidderminster)*

178. Nevertheless, a couple of people supported the retention of at least some fire cover at Bewdley and Stourport to protect the public and ensure resilience across Wyre Forest - and



the firefighters from those two stations foresaw a greater need for their services in future as the Kidderminster wholetime appliance is more frequently committed over a wider area:

*If there is a fire in Bewdley, then that can affect the public morale...and there is some point in keeping the skills base there (Kidderminster)*

*If the wholetime pump is out and there is a two-pump shout could we crew the two pumps effectively without the Bewdley and Stourport RDS? (Kidderminster)*

*We should be talking about the fact that the wholetime fire engine will be less available in future than it is now because it will be dealing with incidents over a wider area. (Bewdley)*

### RDS Recruitment

179. 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 so the issue of future recruitment was inevitably raised. Participants anticipated a need for selective recruitment within the required radius of the proposed hub station, but some were again sceptical as to how successful this might be:

*We have only recruited one person in three years so how will you recruit RDS people to the new station? Last time you only had two people from Kidderminster (Bewdley)*

*You can recruit from three towns if we have three stations, so that's better than recruiting from just Kidderminster in future. (Bewdley)*

*It will make it harder to get RDS crews recruited because it would be a smaller total area for recruitment and people would not want to travel so far to the Hub. (Stourport)*

It was thus suggested that: 'we could lengthen the turn-in time somewhat for the RDS to allow for a wider recruitment area'. (Bewdley)

### Joint-working

180. While acknowledging the potential benefits of joint-working with other emergency services (such as 'helping us do more first aid and paramedic work in future?'), the Bewdley and Stourport RDS firefighters were generally sceptical about how successful this would prove to be in future - and argued strongly that such collaboration can be achieved without the need for a hub station:

*How easy would it be to do joint training exercises? Would there really be joint training? (Stourport)*

*The other services won't spend much time at the hub in practice (Stourport)*

*The community think they're getting the whole package, but they're not. They're not getting a system where everyone works under the same roof!* (Bewdley)

*We could get more involved with other agencies even without a hub. It is misleading to treat the hub as more than it really is. The Fire Authority thinks it's a big community initiative but it won't make much difference in practice* (Stourport)

*You can have collaboration without creating a hub base. We are collaborating with the Police here already.* (Bewdley)

181. In terms of specifics, closer collaboration with the Police was considered desirable from an operational perspective, though again participants were uncertain as to how this could succeed with only PCSOs being based at the proposed new hub:

*It will be PCSOs not police officers, but that won't be so beneficial to us as if it were Police officers. We need to be closer to Police officers who we'd meet at incidents, not the PCSOs.* (Stourport)

182. It was also said that: *'the wholetime could work in partnership on the hub, but that wouldn't be the case for the RDS. It won't affect us much'.* (Stourport)

183. Furthermore, allegations were made at Kidderminster about the lack of buy-in to the hub station from other organisations – and the Bewdley firefighters commented on what they saw as the 'flimsy' agreement currently in place between the various services that, they felt, could easily be broken:

*I've heard on Facebook and social media that the Ambulance Service and Police don't want to do it really* (Kidderminster)

*The chief constable was talking about this on the radio but the local Police officers were sceptical about it. It seems like a good idea, though some see drawbacks* (Kidderminster)

*What commitment have the other services actually made to the project? The agreement is very flimsy; they might or might not come on board!* (Bewdley)

## Financial Issues

184. The Bewdley and Stourport RDS firefighters seemed convinced that the merger is being proposed mainly for financial reasons and that it is something of a fait accompli for this reason:

*It seems like the decision is made...it's all about costs and cuts* (Stourport)

*It seems like a fait accompli anyway if the Fire Authority made the bid for the Government funding and now has to decide whether to spend it.* (Bewdley)

185. In the context of this viewpoint, Bewdley participants questioned the amount such a development would save - and also felt that the possibility of escalating costs could effectively 'wipe out' any future savings:

*How much will we save over 10 years with the hub? There doesn't seem to be a firm figure (Bewdley)*

*There's no guarantee that the new hub will save money (Bewdley)*

*The costs can't be calculated properly for the proposed hub! How much is land, and how much is buildings? There are no precise costs defined (Bewdley)*

*The £5.9 million could turn out to be a lot more! (Bewdley)*

## Alternatives

186. Firefighters at Bewdley and Stourport suggested that H&WFA consider the option of 'two into one' rather than 'three into one'; that is, retaining the current Kidderminster Fire Station and combining Bewdley and Stourport onto a new, smaller hub site between the two towns. This, it was felt, would significantly mitigate against lengthier response times:

*Have you considered having two fire stations instead of three? That would have many advantages in terms of response times (Stourport)*

*Was the Fire Authority given the option of a two into one rather than a three into one? Was that considered properly? It would still be a hub on a smaller scale (Stourport)*

*A satellite station; say midway between Stourport and Bewdley (Bewdley)*

*Have two stations in the Wyre Forest...would that still meet the requirements for the Government grant funding? You could go back to the DCLG to get their permission for varying the use of the grant for a genuine merger of Stourport and Bewdley fire stations to a new site on the borders of each. (Stourport)*

187. Other alternative suggestions involved changes to the wholetime service - and more specifically: the introduction of DCP (or even day crewing) at stations such as Kidderminster; stationing fire engines at strategic locations within communities (much like the Ambulance Services currently does); or even closing some wholetime stations and making better use of the more cost-efficient RDS:

*We could have day crewing stations or we could base wholetime fire engines in the community (like ambulances) without them staying at their stations overnight. (Bewdley)*

*It would save much more money to close the Kidderminster wholetime crew and to run this Fire and Rescue Service through the RDS crews (Bewdley)*

*I hope we could convince the Fire Authority that there could never be any sense in closing RDS stations compared with wholetime. (Bewdley)*

188. Finally, it was said that: *‘the Service has to change and smaller fire engines could be a way forward like Hampshire’.* (Bewdley)

### Other Issues

189. Other reported issues were around: the geography of Wyre Forest and the need to retain sufficient fire cover for such a large area; and the inaccuracy of the incident figures being used to justify the proposed merger:

*Wyre Forest is massive in relation to the other towns (Stourport)*

*We talk about incidents which are minor in the figures, but some of them could be much more serious if they were not dealt with properly (Bewdley)*

*How do you calculate a life-threatening incident if you say most of them are in Kidderminster? The problem is we don’t classify housing estates as risks (Bewdley)*

*Facts and figures infuriate me; we could have 10 house fires tonight. (Bewdley)*

### Overall Comments

190. Overall, four of the seven Kidderminster RDS firefighters considered the proposed merger to be both reasonable and acceptable from the ‘point of view of public policy’ - while the other three remained unsure about it at the end of their forum, mainly because they felt they required more information about site selection prior to making a firm judgement:

*From the point of view of public policy it is definitely reasonable (Kidderminster)*

*Until we know where it’s going to be we can’t really judge (Kidderminster)*

*We need a good site; that is crucial (Kidderminster).*

191. In contrast to the relative positivity at Kidderminster, there was universal negativity towards the proposed hub station at both Bewdley and Stourport (although one firefighter at the former said *‘I have to agree with the proposal in principle’*). The main reasons for this opposition have been outlined above, but the need to consider other means of saving money within the wholetime service (for the RDS firefighters were of the view that this is primarily a financial exercise) was reiterated at the end of the session at Bewdley:

*A hub will not save much money and there are bigger savings to be achieved in the wholetime service through DCP or day crewing and etc. And it is important to protect local services, the RDS and response times above all. It’s about looking after our communities (Bewdley)*

# Report of Meeting with Members of the Public

## Introduction

192. A total of 14 randomly selected members of the public from across the whole Wyre Forest area attended a 2.5 hour forum that considered all the evidence presented to the firefighters while having a more detailed review of the fire and rescue service and its resources and roles. The meeting was thorough and truly deliberative in listening to and responding openly to a wide range of evidence and issues.
193. The meeting was very different in tone to the public meetings reported below, mainly because public meetings understandably tend to be attended primarily by opponents of the proposals being discussed (including fire and rescue service staff and union representatives), whereas forum participants were initially neutral and had attended primarily due to their interest in the Fire and Rescue Service and hearing more about the proposal.
194. It is important to note that the views reported below are those expressed by public participants. 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.

## Main Findings

195. During the initial part of the forum (when participants were given a presentation outlining H&WFRA's proposal), participants' questions and comments highlighted their initial concerns. These were mainly focused around: RDS job losses; response times (especially to Bewdley, though some comments were made that these are currently better than expected); levels of cover during simultaneous incidents; transport links in the area; 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); and the impact of the proposal on Police and Ambulance Service response times:

*How many RDS crew do you have at the moment and how many would you have on the Hub station?*

*Is it likely that the RDS crews could be made redundant?*

*Does Bewdley Fire Station get to incidents more quickly than Kidderminster?*

*The response time is more equal than one would expect into Bewdley*

*How often do you have simultaneous fires in different parts of the Wyre Forest?*

*Would there be any road improvements around here?*

*Will one hub mean that the total number of vehicles will be reduced and so our capacity to deal with bigger incidents could be reduced?*

*How will the Police and Ambulance Services be affected in terms of their response times?*

196. Overall though, following discussion and clarification, all 14 participants considered the proposal to be both reasonable and acceptable from an operational and financial perspective (and because they trusted H&WFA and H&WFRS to 'do the right thing') - and agreed that the data they had seen in relation to falling incident levels supports change in the Wyre Forest area:

*Multi-agency is a positive approach*

*Don't pour money into old buildings if you are then going to have to close them down shortly...get on with the project*

*The Fire Service would not want to endanger people*

*The data is very clear; it helps compared with a knee-jerk reaction*

Indeed, one participant foresaw further reductions in future given the incident reductions across the whole area:

*There will be a reduction in fire engines at Kidderminster in any case, even if we have a hub; we shouldn't pretend that we can keep all four engines.*

197. Furthermore, the fact that Bewdley was unavailable during 2014/15, on average, for a third of the time during the day was alarming to participants, who were thus keen to see a larger, more robust pool of firefighters centred at one location - even if this means longer response times to some areas:

*It is better to wait an extra five minutes for a full crew rather than get nothing at all.*

198. Despite their general positivity, participants were keen that H&WFA should make public its preferred (or indeed chosen) location for the hub as soon as possible - and they urged the Service to ensure the building is completely future-proof in terms of required resources:

*I like the hub in essence but need to know the location*

*The hub is a good idea in principle but location is important*

*The position of the hub is critical and it needs to be properly designed to have all the resources you intend to put there*

*The site needs to be large enough to accommodate all the resources you need to have there. It needs to be future proof for specialised equipment and etc.*

199. There was also some lingering concern about RDS job losses and response times from the proposed hub into Bewdley (though one person with such concerns thought the hub would be better for the whole area overall given the poor location of and transport links to and from the current fire stations):

*My only reservation is that I live in West Bewdley, but overall it is better for the whole area because Bewdley might close anyway and the current stations are blocked-in by their positions; so a better site might have better traffic links*

*People are very concerned about job losses*

*I'm worried about losing the skills of the RDS.*

200. Some alternatives or 'tweaks' to the proposal were suggested by a few participants, namely: two wholetime fire engines operating from the hub; using surplus wholetime crew to cover any future gaps in the on-call service; using on-call staff in different ways to safeguard their positions; and, to mitigate against the aforementioned concerns about response times to Bewdley, siting the existing Bewdley land rover at the Severn Valley Railway Station to respond to incidents in the town:

*With a hub could you afford to have two wholetime fire engines rather than just one with RDS support?*

*Could you put any excess wholetime crew on the retained fire engines to support them?*

*Could the RDS be part-time on the site or keep their positions in other ways?*

*Could you put the Bewdley land rover at the Severn Valley Railway Station? It could work from there effectively and do what it does now.*

201. Several participants said that the information presented during the forums had been reassuring in allaying the concerns and dispelling the preconceptions they had about the proposal prior to coming along. Indeed, one person had attended the Listening and Engagement session earlier this year and said they had reconsidered their position since being very negative about the proposal then:

*I came not wanting any closures at all but I can see that the hub would be a brilliant idea. I was dead against this the last time I came to the meeting but we do need to move forward and accept change.*

However, they acknowledged that only a relatively small group of people has had the benefit of receiving these detailed explanations of the proposal and its reasoning, and that it will be somewhat more difficult to reassure those amongst the general public with such

concerns and preconceptions. In order to have the best chance of doing this, participants suggested:

*You could put a broadsheet informative document in the local paper to publicise the real situation in very clear terms so people know that you know what you're talking about...*



# Report of Stakeholders' Meeting

## Introduction

202. The Fire Authority commissioned ORS to facilitate and report a Stakeholders' Forum for which H&WFRS sent invitations to a wide variety of statutory, business and voluntary sector organisations. Many invitations were issued and eight participants - from the Severn Area Rescue Association (SARA), Mid Severn Valley RAYNET, West Mercia Search and Rescue (WMSAR), Age UK, the Charity Organisational & Financial Services, the Salvation Army, Emergency Planning, Worcestershire County Council and CJP Safety - attended the forum on September 16<sup>th</sup> 2015.
203. The meeting lasted two hours and included a presentation of the Fire Authority's proposals by ORS, followed by discussion of the issues arising. The meeting was again very different in tone to the public meetings reported below, mainly because public meetings understandably tend to be attended primarily by opponents of the proposals being discussed (including fire and rescue service staff and union representatives). At the stakeholder forum, though, the participants were initially neutral and had attended primarily due to their interest in the Fire and Rescue Service.
204. It is important to note that the views reported below are those expressed by stakeholders. 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.

## Main Findings

205. Stakeholders raised some initial concerns about the proposal for a Blue Light Emergency Services Hub for the Wyre Forest, chiefly around the potential effect of the proposal on response times, cover during simultaneous incidents and H&WFRS's 'valuable' prevention and education work:

*How much would response times be affected by the proposals? How do you cover multiple incidents?*

*You need to maintain your valuable prevention work...not just prioritise fire stations and fire engines: keep up your prevention work, too!*

206. Despite these concerns, though, the general sense was:

*If you were planning an emergency cover system for Wyre Forest from scratch, you would never have three fire stations here - it's unnecessary - so now you have an opportunity for change!*

207. The eight stakeholders thus agreed that a Blue Light Emergency Services Hub would be desirable for the Wyre Forest insofar as it: could help increase collaboration between the emergency services (and indeed other local partner agencies), leading to a decrease in community risk via knowledge and information sharing and joint training initiatives; and that it makes financial sense in terms of both savings and income via the Government grant. Some typical comments were:

*Multi-agency working is a real opportunity and it could help social care. It's a good basis for extending co-operative working... There is an opportunity to think more widely*

*Co-location of services is operationally a good thing because risks in the community can be reduced that way*

*The proposals look very sensible to me. The three stations are not really viable for training, management and communications and it would be a good idea to centralise resources to improve facilities for training and inter-service co-operation*

*The proposals make financial sense. You avoid refurbishing the existing stations and you benefit from a government grant which would have to be returned if you do not go ahead.*

208. Indeed, it was suggested that H&WFRS go further than planned in not only establishing the hub station, but also reducing the number of fire engines based there to reflect the reducing number of incidents:

*Have the numbers of pumps and crews been reduced to match the reductions in risk? It would seem reasonable to reduce them somewhat.*

209. It was, though, acknowledged that people are typically very attached to their local fire stations and that they worry about response times - but the general sense was that, in the current economic climate, this must be considered in the context of funding reductions and falling incident numbers, and indeed the perceived benefits of a Blue Light Hub:

*People are very attached to fire stations and response times, but money is short and there have to be priorities*

*There is a risk [in change], but risks have to be balanced against the benefits.*

210. Few comments were made on a possible location for the hub station, though one stakeholder commented that:

*Regarding any location, there will always be politics and unpopularity.*

## Overall Comments

211. Overall, then, the eight stakeholders were extremely positive about the proposals for a three-into-one merger. They were unanimous that the changes are financially 'necessary' and only one person doubted that they are also 'safe and feasible'. The latter participant agreed readily that Wyre Forest would not have three separate fire stations if its emergency cover was being planned 'from scratch'; but they still felt that, ideally, the existing stations should be retained.

# Report of Public Meetings

## Introduction

212. As part of its extensive consultation programme, the Fire Authority held three public meetings, which were widely publicised by media and using posters in the local areas. The lengthy meetings were held in the evenings, as follows:

Location	Date	Numbers Attending
Stourport-on-Severn (Civic Centre)	15 <sup>th</sup> September 2015	75
Kidderminster (District Council Chamber)	17 <sup>th</sup> September 2015	16
Bewdley (St George's Hall)	12 <sup>th</sup> October 2015	60

213. Each meeting lasted over two hours and included rigorous discussions of the Fire Authority's proposals, so the issues were scrutinised in detail. Participants listened attentively and with interest to a detailed presentation by senior officers of H&WFRS, but most remained sceptical of the Fire Authority's proposals. Overall, members of the audience highlighted areas on which they required clarification while expressing their opinions freely.
214. In addition to members of the public, each of the meetings was attended by duty-shift and other firefighters (and in some cases their families and friends), as well as union representatives. For example, even in the smallest meeting of 16 at Kidderminster, there were four crew members and two union representatives; at Stourport it seemed that about 40% or more of the attendees had close connections with the Service; and at the Bewdley meeting, around a third. Despite the meetings being 'public meetings', at each venue the firefighters and union representatives spoke prominently and influentially, in some cases reflecting and in other cases shaping the opinions of the residents present.
215. It is important to note that the views reported below are those expressed by public meeting attendees. 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.

## Key Issues Raised

216. In each meeting, the questions and comments from the firefighters and union representatives concentrated on the following issues and observations (please note that any reference to station area data relates to that for 2014-15):

The Fire Authority's 'local risk' data about incidents within fire station areas does not reflect the full number of mobilisations of the four Wyre Forest fire engines;

The longer response times (predicted in the presentation as being 'up to three minutes depending on the location of the new fire station') are dangerous and will have a *'massive effect on life risk in the area'*;

In particular, it will be very difficult to provide a second support fire engine to Bewdley in a reasonable time - it will *'take up to 20 minutes to get a second pump to an incident in some part of Bewdley'*;

Because the current on-call crews in Stourport and Bewdley will be unable to attend a central hub fire station within the time allowed, they will be excluded from their current roles;

When current on-call crews are lost (as above), it will be difficult to replace them with sufficient new recruits from Kidderminster;

The data on the reductions in total incidents does not imply that emergency cover resources can safely be adjusted, but instead means that the *'current system is working well and should not be changed'*;

Despite the long-term downward trend in incidents, in the first quarter of this year the numbers of fires, small fires and road traffic collisions have all increased;

It should not be assumed that risk over the next five years will follow the same pattern as the last five years;

It is desirable to co-operate with the Police, but only community safety officers will be based at the proposed hub station, and services do not have to be co-located in order to improve communications;

The fourth fire engine at the new hub station would be very quiet - which would lead to it being withdrawn altogether in the medium-term future; and

But the proposal still means that up to six vehicles would be crewed by on-call firefighters, which is too many and weakens local resilience.

217. The overall judgement of the firefighters and union representatives present was that:

*The cuts are putting lives at risk in order to save money!*

218. The **members of the public** present in the meetings also raised a range of issues and asked many questions – for example:

If the Kidderminster wholetime crew is committed to an incident elsewhere, then Bewdley would be covered by an on-call crew based at the Kidderminster hub station - which would slow response times significantly beyond three minutes; so Bewdley is better served by its own on-call fire engine being on stand-by whenever the Kidderminster wholetime crew is attending an incident;

Bewdley is the only fire station on the western side of the river so the Service would be losing a strategic station if it were closed;

It is unacceptable to increase response times by three minutes, or longer in the case of the second attending fire engine;

There could be a loss of experienced staff if the existing on-call firefighters are unable to serve at a new hub station;

Bewdley and Stourport are being '*sacrificed for the sake of a hub station*';

Would all the current resources be transferred to the new hub station from the three existing stations?

Would it be possible to recruit sufficient on-call crews in the Kidderminster area?

Would the new hub station be more accessible to the public than the current Kidderminster station?

How well does the shared fire station at Bromsgrove work?

How would the construction of the new hub station be financed? In particular, will the police pay a fair share of the costs?

Why cannot the Service just spend about £1 million refurbishing the existing three stations - in order to retain the status quo?

Would the site sales benefit the fire and rescue service or would the money be returned to the government? and

How much extra council tax would we need to pay to keep all the existing services in place?

219. At Bewdley, in addition to the points above, residents stressed that:

They would be unable to use any community facilities at a Kidderminster hub

A hub station is unnecessary for the multi-agency delivery of effective community safety programmes: '*the local authority can tell you who's at risk; you don't need a hub to do that!*'

Congestion will lengthen attendance times

The Safari Park increases local risks due to the number of its visitors and associated traffic flows

Bewdley firefighters are needed in case of major fires or multiple incidents in Bewdley

The response time data are based on the attendance of only the first pump, but one fire engine cannot deal safely with all incidents

Risk will increase so much that *'I'd leave Bewdley; I wouldn't feel safe in a listed building in Bewdley!'*

Bewdley firefighters would be unable to serve from the new hub - they will be redundant with a consequent loss of experience to the service

A hub station would lead eventually to the loss of the second and third RDS pumps

The creation of a hub station will save little money on an on-going basis – savings of only £250K per annum are not really significant – so *'why fix what is not broken?'*

Financial savings should be made at Headquarters instead

The hub proposal is only a way of making cuts but will lead to more deaths!

220. At Stourport, one local councillor made several points, including for example:

Road congestion is an important consideration that should be taken into account by the Fire Authority;

The Fire Authority should also take into consideration the out-of-area responsibilities of the Wyre Forest fire engines;

Bewdley on-call staff will be unable to service the new hub station; and

The creation of the hub fire station and the transfer of Police staff there might mean that the Kidderminster police station might close as a consequence.

221. Despite the largely critical responses to the proposals, there were some supportive comments - for example:

*You will have on-call firefighters in the Kidderminster hub, which is reasonable*

*It seems like the Bromsgrove Fire Station initiative has worked well; that's encouraging*

*There are financial issues; we have to recognise that and take it into account*

*What would be the alternative, if there is no Hub? What future would Stourport and Bewdley stations have? and*

*Kidderminster station is very old.*

222. Another member of the audience who was sympathetic to the proposals on financial grounds also made an **alternative suggestion** for consideration:

*Funds are not available to maintain three fire stations so something needs to happen! But could the hub station have two full-time crews rather than one?*

## The Consultation Process

223. There were some criticisms of the consultation process. One comment at the smaller Kidderminster meeting was that the Consultation Document had failed to give the times scheduled for the public meetings – which is a ‘*major fault*’ because it was ‘*hard for residents to find out about the meetings.*’
224. At Stourport (where 75 attended), there were complaints that advertisements for the meeting should have been ‘*on the front page of the local papers*’; and there was a complaint that the Town Council had had only seven days’ notice of the meeting.
225. One local councillor in Stourport criticised the Fire Authority Chair for not being present ‘*to hear people’s views*’ directly; but this issue was not widely mentioned. Overall, the audiences seemed to understand that the whole Fire Authority would be receiving an independent report of all the consultation elements.
226. One person said that, because Stourport was not identified as a ‘station at risk’ in the recent Community Risk Management Plan, the proposal to close the fire station should now be subject to a wholly ‘*separate consultation process*’ rather than be considered in the context of a merger.
227. There was an important comment from a member of the public in Stourport, who was sympathetic to the proposals but stressed the importance of knowing the location of any hub in order to make a properly informed assessment:

*Risk is clearly the key issue and we know that fire risk is over-estimated; but we do need to know where the hub station would be located in order to assess the risks properly. And we need further consultation once the site has been chosen!*

## Balance of Opinion

228. The overall tone of the three public meetings was very critical of the proposal.
229. Based on their experience, the firefighters present were confident that they would have general public support in Bewdley and Stourport. For example, on the basis of their experience in collecting petition signatures in Stourport, a firefighter declared that:

*We easily got 350 signatures for our petition within only two hours!*



# Written Submissions

## Written Submissions

230. During the formal consultation process, ten written submissions were received from professional, political, interest, voluntary and community groups as well as from individual residents. 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
Councillors	1
Political Groups	1
H&WFRS Staff	1
Representative Bodies	1
Neighbouring FRS	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>

231. ORS has read all the written submissions and summarised them in this chapter; none have been disregarded even if they are not expressed in a 'formal' way. It is a painstaking but necessary process to identify the main issues raised by respondents.
232. Two of the submissions (from Chaddesley Corbett Parish Council and the Corporate Leadership Team at Wyre Forest District Council) supported the proposed establishment of a hub station for Wyre Forest.
233. Of the remaining eight submissions:
- Six (from Councillor Nigel Knowles, Stourport-on-Severn Town Council, the Fire Brigades Union, the Bewdley Branch Labour Party and two local residents) either outright objected to or had reservations about the proposal - mainly on the grounds that respondents do not wish to see the closure of existing fire stations to enable the hub's development;
- One, from the Stourport-on-Severn Fire Station staff proposed an alternative location for the hub (at Blackstone) and outlined the reasons why this may be feasible. This proposal was supported by the Bewdley Branch Labour Party; and

One, from the West Midlands Fire Service, comments on the information (or lack thereof) provided within H&WFRS's consultation communication materials - as well as on the need for prevention and protection activities within the areas where stations would be closed if the proposal is implemented. It also suggests that H&WFRS follow its lead in implementing a *"blended fleet with crewing levels of three"*.

- <sup>234</sup>. The submissions are summarised below. It is important to note that the following section is a report of the views expressed by submission contributors. 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 submissions.

## Summary of Written Submissions

### Support for Proposal

#### Chaddesley Corbett Parish Council

While Chaddesley Corbett Parish Council realises that the proposed change will adversely affect Stourport and Bewdley, it says that its parish is covered from Kidderminster and Bromsgrove, so it is unlikely to have a detrimental effect there. The Council therefore has no objections to the proposal.

#### Corporate Leadership Team, Wyre Forest District Council

The Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) at Wyre Forest District Council believes there should be greater collaboration between 'blue light' services; and that the proposed hub is a good idea in principle and should replace the existing three fire stations in the district.

The CLT outlines the Council's practical experience of rationalising its estate and services (which, it feels, offers powerful parallels for what is proposed by the Fire & Rescue Authority), the savings and additional income from which has now reached about £750,000 a year. It particularly highlights its rationalisation of leisure centre provision, whereby a new leisure centre is being built on the Silverwoods site between Kidderminster and Stourport, with the leisure centres in the two towns to be shut in summer 2016. The annual savings from this are projected to be over £500,000 a year.

With particular reference to Stourport, the CLT notes that the former Civic Centre there has been successfully transferred to the Town Council, which in turn has worked with Worcestershire County Council to relocate the library and coroner's office to the site. As a consequence the county building site in Stourport is largely vacant, and being adjacent to the fire station, is ripe for redevelopment if the Fire & Rescue Authority proceeds with its plan for an Emergency Services Hub.

The CLT suggests that, because the three main towns in Wyre Forest are each only a few miles from the other and contain well over 80% of the district's population, rationalisation of assets and service provision is more easily contemplated than in other areas. It goes on to say that, in the context of the proposal, so long as a full-time crewed engine continues to form part of the provision, the engine could reach the town centres in Stourport and Bewdley in the vast majority of cases in about the same time as it would take the retained crews in those towns to reach their present fire stations. The CLT is thus sceptical about claims from some quarters that the proposal will reduce fire cover insofar as the full-time appliance will continue to be supported by on-call appliances in Wyre Forest (and by other resources from further afield), just as now.

The CLT notes the 'compelling' evidence in the consultation paper about the significant and ongoing reduction in incident demand - and feels it would be perverse of the Fire & Rescue Authority to continue to maintain current arrangements when a rationalised, modern Emergency Services Hub would offer cost savings and income opportunities, while preserving current levels of capacity to deal with incidents.

Moreover, the CLT says the proposal offers the opportunity to redevelop three prominent town centre sites (which is essential given the pressing need for further housing development on sustainable brownfield sites).

The CLT urges the Fire & Rescue Authority to go further in its partnership working with West Mercia Police - and would encourage the relocation of Kidderminster Police Station to the Emergency Services Hub. It argues that, as the present Police Station is not in the town centre (and does not therefore allow easy public access using public transport or linked trips with shopping etc.), it does not need to be retained at its present location. Furthermore, this is again a valuable site that could be brought into use for residential purposes.

The CLT believes the multi-million pound investment in modern facilities would provide a further boost for the district - and urges the Fire & Rescue Authority not to forego the Government funding that it has fought hard to secure for this 'exciting and innovative' project that would better meet modern requirements in Wyre Forest.

## **Opposition to Proposal (General)**

### **Nigel Knowles (Councillor, Franche and Habberley North)**

Councillor Knowles objects to the closure of Bewdley, Kidderminster and Stourport Fire Stations: they should, he suggests, be retained until 2020 at the least (when the Hub, if agreed, should be open). He also feels that the Hub must be located where it will not cause traffic congestion.

### **Stourport-on-Severn Town Council**

Stourport on Severn Town Council has the following reservations about re-locating the Wyre Forest Fire Stations onto one site:

Not a 'Hub': the concept requires the co-location of the Ambulance Service and the Police, yet the Council understands that the former has recently chosen a dispersed organisational structure (the opposite of a 'hub') and that the Police will not move from Blakebrook;

Response Times: while the 'first response' time is reckoned as being as good as present, the Council argues that the second appliance's arrival would be much slower and that in the event of a major incident there would be less equipment available for several minutes;

Extreme Circumstances: given that firefighters are advised not to enter buildings until the arrival of a second crew, the Council argues that a life-saving operation could be delayed; and

Location of Hub: the Council argues that traffic hold-ups are common at some of the specified locations and are a likely hindrance to a speedy response. It feels that detailed examinations of potential locations is essential - and that the hub should be located as near to Stourport as possible.

## **Fire Brigades Union**

### **General Comments**

The FBU does not object to the concept of a 'Blue Light' Emergency Services Hub station: it welcomes the possibility of economies of scale, training opportunities and closer working partnerships (which may also result in shared intelligence and shared training) and acknowledges that a new building should lessen overheads to all occupants and may provide an improved working environment. However, the union feels this should not be at the expense of fire cover and attendance times and suggests it is perfectly possible to have the hub in Kidderminster without closing neighbouring stations. This, it is said, will ensure the Service has adhered to the Government's agenda of closer working with Blue Light agencies but with no detrimental effect to fire and rescue cover in the Wyre Forest.

The Union's main objections to the current proposal are as follows.

### **Response Times**

The FBU says that the current average response times to life risk incidents in the Wyre Forest is within the 10 minute attendance standard because the appliances are correctly situated to meet the needs of the communities they serve. As the standard is being achieved, the FBU challenges the rationale behind changing fire and rescue cover.

The union suggests that, under the proposal, some Wyre Forest residents will suffer a response time increase of three minutes (on top of the almost 11 minutes it currently takes appliances to arrive at life risk emergencies). This, it says, is unacceptable and irresponsible - and will result in larger fires, considerably more damage/loss to property, life at risk longer and increased risk to firefighter safety. It questions whether H&WFRS has data on how

many people may die or be seriously injured by having to wait three minutes longer for a response - and insists that, if not, this work is carried out immediately and shared in the form of consultation prior to any decision-making.

With particular regard to firefighter safety, the FBU argues that firefighters will be facing fires of greater intensity following a delayed response, and that on-call crews will take longer to get to incidents if having to travel to Kidderminster from Stourport and Bewdley. This, it is said, will mean full-time crews will be waiting longer for back-up and be unable to carry out rescues safely (unless they are carried out outside current Service policies).

### **On-Call Response**

It is claimed that no thought has been given to how Stourport and Bewdley firefighters would respond to the new station during both 'normal' and adverse weather conditions. The FBU feels that, as a key element of the hub is the closure of the two fire stations, details around this issue should be stated during the consultation so that the public have possession of the full facts.

Furthermore, the FBU says that Kidderminster station struggles to keep its on-call appliance available during the daytime - and questions what will change regarding the pool of people from which it recruits its on-call firefighters if the hub is built within the town? The union suggests that the flexibility of having three stations (and three communities to supply firefighters) provides resilience, which disappears by consolidating the stations at one location.

### **Blue Light Collaboration**

The FBU argues that members of the public need to know what collaborations H&WFRS currently carry out with other 'Blue Light' emergency services as they may be of the opinion that further collaboration is not appropriate.

Closer working between the Police Service (which upholds the law) and the FRS (which provides humanitarian aid) is not, in the FBU's opinion, wholly helpful for H&WFRS. The union argues that once it is known that H&WFRS is working closely with the Police, its impartiality will be gone and certain parts of society will no longer wish to interact with it - with a detrimental effect on community safety. Working closer with the Ambulance Service is, the Union feels, a much more viable option insofar as both of the services provide humanitarian aid and neither has any law enforcement responsibilities.

Overall it is said that, while closer working with other 'Blue Light' organisations will have some benefits to the residents of the Wyre Forest, these benefits are yet to be fully determined.

### **Financial Considerations**

The FBU believes the FRS should be fully funded by Government and should not be forced into collaboration with other emergency services. The union feels that the Service

Management Team should be speaking with FRS ministers and Government officials in an attempt to have fairer funding for H&WFRS (which is one of the lowest funded Fire and Rescue Services in the country) rather than accepting further cuts in funding.

The FBU argues that H&WFRS would not be considering this proposal were it not for reduced budgets and the Government's 'back door' offer of reclaiming some money through forced collaboration. The Union feels the Service should be honest and admit the main reason for considering the Blue Light Hub is purely financial due to budget constraints.

H&WFRS's claim that it would lose its Government grant if this relocation were not to take place (and that its budgetary constraints could mean one or more of the three Wyre Forest fire stations close in future) is countered by the FBU: it says that the 2014 Community Risk Management Plan considered budgetary pressures and proposed that the three stations are retained and funded until at least 2020.

### **Environmental Considerations**

The FBU argues that the proposal will result in a greater environmental impact as Stourport and Bewdley crews will have to drive to Kidderminster to get on an appliance and then drive back home following incidents.

### **The Consultation**

The Union argues that H&WFRS has not adequately explained during the consultation that Bewdley and Stourport Fire Stations will close to enable the Blue Light Emergency Services Hub and that attendance times to life risk incidents will be three minutes longer in certain areas of the Wyre Forest. It also says that, until the hub's location is decided, it is impossible to decide if it will be suitable or not for the communities it is intended to serve.

Furthermore, the Service has not, in the FBU's opinion, given the public all of the relevant facts and figures on the number of incidents attended by the Wyre Forest FRS appliances. For example, the consultation document states that the total incidents for the Kidderminster area was 597, whereas Kidderminster actually attended a total of 864 incidents (the additional 267 were 'out-of-area').

With particular regard to Stourport-on-Severn, the FBU has asked the Service to undertake a separate public consultation because, as recently as 2014 (in the Community Risk Management Plan), Stourport was not an 'at risk' station for closure.

Overall, the FBU is concerned that there was no consultation prior to making the bid for transformational funding, despite the fact that the success of the bid was dependent on the closure of the two stations. The Union also describes the consultation process itself as a 'sham' based on far too many 'what ifs?' - and says there is no evidence, risk assessments or facts to back up H&WFRS's claims that the proposal represents a cost-saving to provide a better service to the community.

## Opposition to Proposal (Bewdley)

### Bewdley Branch Labour Party

The Bewdley Branch Labour Party (BBLP) is concerned that the proposed central hub will not meet the needs of Bewdley residents as, it feels, response times will be longer and lives will be endangered.

The BBLP is also concerned that local RDS firefighters will not be able to maintain their service as they will not be able to get to the new hub in the required turnout time – sacrificing their commitment, skill, experience, loyalty and training.

The organisation supports the plan proposed by the Bewdley and Stourport firefighters to combine their fire stations into one new station at Blackstone or Burlish (the ‘two into one proposal’). It urges H&WFRS to consider this insofar as it is more suited to the needs of the residents of the three towns and surrounding hinterland and enables current RDS firefighters to continue serving their community.

### Resident 1

The resident is aware of the fire risks inherent in Bewdley’s many old buildings of wooden construction and feels the proximity of the town’s fire station is important to respond quickly to local emergencies.

They note that Bewdley Fire Station is not 100% available, but feel that removing it completely and relying on a hub station will increase response times to Bewdley. They also note that traffic congestion is ever-growing and will only worsen (especially if the recently approved large expansion of the West Midlands Safari Park goes ahead).

The resident feels that, against this background, local concern about the hub Station concept is inevitable and must be properly addressed.

### Resident 2

The resident feels that closing Bewdley Fire Station would be dangerous and wrong because:

- Bewdley has many timber framed buildings;

- When the local police station was closed, residents were told that the Police would still have a base in the town at the Fire Station;

- Bewdley’s on-call firefighters could not reach the new hub station within the required five minutes if they must cross the Severn and travel to Kidderminster (wasting their training and putting lives at risk); and

- Bewdley Fire Station is the only one in the Wyre Forest on the West side of the Severn, which is important as there are few river crossings - and floods, roadworks and accidents can block these.

## Alternative Proposal

### Stourport-on-Severn Station Staff

#### General Comments

Stourport-on-Severn Fire Station staff say that the firefighters at all three stations are very concerned and cannot defend the current proposal. They agree on the need to find a workable solution that the firefighters believe in; one that will save money and benefit the community. One proposed solution is to retain Kidderminster Fire Station in its current location (with its direct access to the town centre and ring road system) while merging those at Bewdley and Stourport into a hub station at Blackstone.

After researching travel times for fire engines travelling to locations within the Wyre Forest (based on road speeds and taking traffic conditions into consideration), Stourport-on-Severn Fire Station staff have concluded that a fire station at Blackstone would offer the best response times to cover Stourport and Bewdley from one central location because it:

- Has direct access to the Bewdley bypass, from where fire engines could access the top estates of Bewdley. The Wribbenhall and Stourport Road areas are also within minutes using main road approaches;

- Has main road access into Stourport town centre and onto the one-way system;

- Could access Kidderminster from several directions depending on incident location and attendance times for most Kidderminster areas would be improved;

- Is centrally located (staff have plotted on call firefighters' home addresses and established that those from Bewdley and Stourport would be able to respond within five minutes); and

- Opens up a whole area from which to recruit new crew members and doubles the current catchment area.

It is also argued that a Hub station located at Blackstone would be better received by the community than the current proposal.

#### Response Times

Station staff suggest that a fire engine from Blackstone would reach Bewdley Centre considerably quicker than one from the Castle Road (Kidderminster) site - and that Blackstone could supply two fire engines together in eight to 10 minutes. They also believe the average response times for the first and second fire engines to incidents within Stourport and Bewdley would be reduced.

Generally in terms of response times, staff argue that, as the Fire Service is currently achieving only 61% of the Government approved attendance time of 10 minutes, to consider a proposal which would reduce this further is unacceptable.



### Partnership Working

Staff feel that H&WFRS should not be closing and moving fire stations to suit other services' location preferences; it needs to find its own location and scale down its plans so it can afford to build its own site. They believe the NHS and Police Service will see the benefits of the Blackstone site and would want to use a facility there.

The Blackstone site would also enable SARA to have direct access to the river and they would be closer to Bewdley and Stourport with their many water related risks. Furthermore, if SARA moved to Blackstone, West Midlands Ambulance Service could operate in Kidderminster town centre by sharing the existing Fire Station site.

Given that H&WFRS is considering co-responding with the Ambulance Service, it was said that the Blackstone site would enable a fast response to the communities of Stourport and Bewdley.

### Financial Considerations

The staff expect that the purchase costs of the land would be reduced at Blackstone and that the footprint would be smaller. They also say that the station could be built discreetly away from the road. They acknowledge that the land is within the Green Belt, but are aware of existing domestic and commercial buildings and a former quarry site in the vicinity.

Staff acknowledge the possibility that this could cost less than the amount granted by Government - but say that by sharing the building it would still be a 999 Hub and would fulfil the Government's conditions. It would also allow the sale of Bewdley and Stourport fire stations for development.

Staff also question why the projected savings from establishing a hub station have not been revealed.

### Geography

Staff argue that, while the Wyre Forest has been compared with Worcester City insofar as the latter has one fire station centrally located to cover the city and has a similar population, the Wyre Forest, is 195.4km<sup>2</sup> whereas Worcester is 33.28km<sup>2</sup>.

### Other Possible Sites?

The staff at Stourport have identified the old MIP factory site and open land near Burlish traffic light junction (adjacent to Ravenhurst nursing home) as other possible locations. In addition to other benefits, they feel that these sites - as well as Blackstone - could allow the creation of a carbonaceous fire house onsite.

## Other Considerations

### West Midlands Fire Service

#### Partnership working

West Midlands Fire Service (WMFS) acknowledges that, in line with the Government's 'blue light agenda', H&WFRS has a wider partnership approach with the police across the whole of its delivery area and that this is not a bespoke partnership for the hub station. WMFS does not feel that this was sufficiently emphasised (or clear) in the communication materials provided on the consultation.

#### Prevention and Protection

In terms of the impact on H&WFRS's proposals on prevention and protection, WMFS suggests that public reassurance activities can be beneficial when closing fire stations and that consideration could be given to delivering prevention and protection activities within areas where stations have been closed, even though risk levels may be low.

#### Crewing levels

WMFS notes that it has benefited greatly from introducing a blended fleet with crewing levels of 3. This system: ensures resources are available when otherwise they would not be; allows more flexibility in resourcing incidents where crewing levels of four would be an over-provision; and allows efficiencies to be achieved. WMFS suggests that H&WFRS may wish to consider this within its planning.

# Petitions

## Overview of Petition Objecting to the Proposals

235. One petition objecting to the proposals was organised during the consultation, which is reported below. We apologise if there have been others of which we have no knowledge, but we have cross-checked our records with those of H&WFRS and the one reviewed in the following paragraphs is the only one known about.

## Summary of Petition

236. 2,350 people signed a petition (organised by the Stourport-on Severn firefighters) entitled 'Save our Fire Station'. The petition was simply worded as follows:

### *Save our Fire Station*

*We the under-signed oppose the proposal to relocate the Wyre Forest Fire Stations.*

237. An accompanying document stated that the signatures were collected in Stourport Town Centre - where the firefighters were assisted by local shops and members of the public in collecting them. Most of the signatures are from Stourport residents, with a small number from visitors and people with holiday homes around the town. The petition organisers believe that 10% of the town's population has taken the trouble to object to the proposal via this petition.

## Petitions: Need for Interpretation

238. The petition summarised above is clearly important in indicating public anxiety about important aspects of H&WFA's proposed changes, and the Authority will wish to treat it seriously. Nonetheless, it should also note that petitions can exaggerate general public sentiment if organised by motivated opponents; and in this case there has been a considerable local campaign by the Stourport RDS firefighters about changes to services in the Wyre Forest. Indeed, during the Stourport Public Meeting, one firefighter stated that '*we easily got 350 signatures for our petition within only two hours!*'
239. So petitions should never be disregarded or discredited, for they clearly show local feelings; but they should be interpreted in context.

# Overall Considerations

## Towards a Conclusion

### Introduction

- <sup>240.</sup> Overall, the views expressed through the open consultation questionnaire, public meetings and some staff forums differed considerably from those expressed in the deliberative forums with stakeholders, randomly selected members of the public, and the others with staff. The former were largely opposed to the hub and the proposed closure of three stations, whereas the latter were broadly supportive. The reasons for the respective support and opposition have been documented in this summary, and more fully later in the report, and so are not repeated in detail here; but it is interesting that many of the concerns raised in the questionnaires and public meetings were reviewed in the deliberative forums. In the forums, most people's concerns were allayed through questioning and discussion, but in the questionnaire and public meetings they were not.
- <sup>241.</sup> 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

- <sup>242.</sup> In this case, though, the outcome of the consultation process are in relative equipoise, with some support and about the same level of opposition, as the following summary of outcomes shows, in terms of who was favourable or unfavourable to the proposals.

#### QUESTIONNAIRE

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

Most Kidderminster wholetime and RDS crews were favourable or did not object

Bewdley and Stourport RDS and one Kidderminster wholetime crew were unfavourable

**PUBLIC FORUM**

Overwhelmingly favourable

**STAKEHOLDER FORUM**

Overwhelmingly favourable

**PUBLIC MEETINGS**

Overwhelmingly unfavourable

**PETITION (gathered by Stourport RDS crew members)**

Unfavourable (with 2,350 signatures)

**SUBMISSIONS**

Six unfavourable – including the FBU

Two favourable – including the Corporate Leadership Team of Wyre Forest District Council

One alternative suggestion

One making more general comments.

243. Of course, the opposition by the questionnaire respondents, attendees at public meetings, petition signatories and some staff members numerically outweighs the public, stakeholder and other staff forum participants; but 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.

**Need for Interpretation**

244. 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 staff, public and stakeholder forums for being deliberative and thoughtful, and because they included a diverse range of affected staff and members of the public. This does not mean that the findings of the questionnaire, public meetings and petition 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 results are not necessarily representative of the whole population.
245. 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.

**Further Consultation**

246. The Fire Authority will be well aware that the current consultation was about the principle of establishing a hub station while closing the current fire stations, and respondents were clearly told this in all the meetings and literature. As a consequence, many said that they cannot form a definitive or final judgement without knowing the proposed location of any hub; and in any case the issue of principle is distinct from considering a specific location in practice.
247. Therefore, if the Fire Authority decides to progress the creation of a hub station through a three-into-one merger of the existing stations, then ORS recommends that it should consult further once a suitable site has been chosen – and prior to making a final decision.



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