

The Fire Brigades Union



# Wiltshire Fire Brigades Union

Response to Wiltshire Fire Authority consultation  
"Strengthening our Fire and Rescue Service"  
2014





# Introduction

This document has been researched, developed and written by the local Fire Brigades Union and its Officials within Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service. They have done this by attending meetings at local Fire Stations and seeking the views of the firefighters that work within the service. This document therefore represents the real voice of the professionals within the service, and the views contained within it must not only be listened to within that context, but also **acted upon**.

It is the firefighters and emergency fire control staff in Wiltshire that make up the front line of our service. They serve the public of Wiltshire by responding to every type of emergency imaginable and display a level of commitment and professionalism that is recognised and relied upon by every community across the County.

It is firefighters and emergency fire control staff that the public turn to in times of desperate need. It is our emergency fire control staff that take the calls from people in life threatening situations and give them support, guidance and often life saving advice; all while mobilising and organising fire appliances and fire crews to the incident.

It is firefighters who crawl through the smoke, heat and flames to rescue people trapped in fires or who deal with the carnage of road collisions, chemical incidents or any of the other myriad of incidents that today's Fire & Rescue Service is required to attend. In short, it is firefighters and fire control staff that ***are*** Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service and they should be treated with respect.

However, the operational commitment and dedication of firefighters is in stark contrast to the political leadership of the Fire and Rescue Service who, in recent times have imposed unprecedented cuts to central and local funding. These political cuts have placed financial savings ahead of service delivery, operational effectiveness and safety.

It is a shocking, and disgraceful, truth that the purpose of this consultation is not based on enhancing emergency cover or improving community safety – rather it is about the survival of the Fire & Rescue Service itself.

Dangerous cuts to central funding by Government have been compounded locally by council tax freezes, which further reduce local revenue, with resultant cuts impacting on frontline services. Wiltshire Fire Authority are especially culpable in this regard, having voted in council tax freezes in 3 consecutive years – contrary to the advice of the professionals within the service.

Funding cuts have now pushed the service to the brink of survival, with senior officers briefing that if a merger does not go through, the service is in threat of "***going bust***" – an indictment that should bring shame on politicians who have, **for political reasons**, deliberately starved a vital frontline emergency service of the basic funding necessary for its function.

This exposes a fundamental fault line that has run throughout the consultation process – how can a consultation be meaningful when the only alternative to the suggested proposal is openly described as "insolvency" or "going bust"?

Trying to achieve a pre determined outcome by holding a financial gun to the heads of those you are asking does not make for a meaningful consultation.

Against this background, the view of the FBU and our members is clear: We demand investment, not cuts to the service going forward. We will not allow the safety of the public, or our members, to be compromised in order to make cuts.



**Tam McFarlane**  
*Executive Council Member, South West FBU*

The cuts suffered by Wiltshire firefighters in recent years have already affected our service and created a huge reliance on the goodwill of firefighters. Our members are increasingly expected to work in their own time, and on low pay rates, in order to keep fire engines on the run and support community safety events. But enough is enough: no matter the outcome of the "consultation" – we demand a long term strategy aimed at protecting and enhancing emergency cover and community safety: all within a properly financed, locally accountable Fire & Rescue Service – no matter which name it bears.

The firefighters and crews of Wiltshire Fire Brigades Union have spoken. Their views are made plain within this document and, if consultation is genuine and meaningful, their professional viewpoint will be treated with the respect it demands.

**Tam McFarlane**  
**Executive Council Member**  
**South West FBU**



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# Wiltshire Brigade Committee

This document has been developed and written by the Fire Brigades Union in Wiltshire and represents our response to Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service's consultation document entitled "**Strengthening our Fire and Rescue Service**" which opened on 21 July 2014.

The primary concerns of the FBU are;

- **The safety of the people of Wiltshire and surrounding areas;**
- **Ensuring the service delivers a swift, effective and professional emergency response whenever called upon;**
- **Ensuring the service develops and delivers an effective and professional community safety strategy;**
- **To provide a safe and competent workforce who are well trained, well equipped and provided with the proper pay and conditions appropriate to their role and employment.**

The purpose of the FBU is clear, to represent collectively the best interests of our members and ensure that the public is served and protected by a highly effective Fire & Rescue Service.

These are desperate times for Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service. Politically driven cuts have created a financial crisis in our service so dangerous that in a recent TV interview the Chief Fire Officer told a reporter that the Brigade was in danger of "**going bust**".

The FBU believes that this consultation is not an open and transparent process which allows a genuine choice regarding the future of the service. The 3 scenarios put forward are all about continuing financial cuts and further detrimental changes to fire cover. Despite claims that there is no "preferred option" the process has been so weighted towards a merger that senior managers delivering the consultation have been telling firefighters that Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service is a "**sinking ship**" facing "**insolvency**" unless a merger goes ahead. Against this background, the FBU have every reason to regard the entire consultation process to be fundamentally flawed.

The title of the consultation, "Strengthening our Fire & Rescue Service", is misleading. The three scenarios put forward are all about making savings due to Government cuts. All the options will still carry a financial deficit if implemented and funding for the Combined Fire Authority continues to reduce with capped increases in precepts. If there was a genuine will to "strengthen our Fire & Rescue Service" an option would have been included to increase Council Tax and provide sustainable funding. It has not.

However the FBU is putting a marker down: Politicians are responsible for introducing these cuts and they can also reverse them. We will not pay for their cuts with our jobs, our service and the safety of firefighters and the public; either now or in the future.

Within this document, Wiltshire FBU makes clear that it is only the goodwill and commitment of our firefighters that keeps our service running. Despite years of being let down and undervalued we have always gone the extra mile to deliver a service to the public – But we will not be taken for granted.

It is time for Politicians to lay down a proper, safe and secure future for the Fire & Rescue Service. The professional firefighters that make up and deliver our service now demand reassurances for the future of our service: and it is time for the Politicians to deliver.

**Wiltshire FBU Brigade Committee**



**Brent Thorley**



**Tony Littler**

# Executive Summary

- 1) The options within this consultation are being proposed entirely as a result of the failure of politicians, at all levels, to finance our Fire & Rescue Service to a level where it can function as an effective, safe and locally accountable emergency service.
- 2) The funding crisis has now resulted in a consultation which is clearly designed to achieve only one outcome: a combination of Wiltshire and Dorset Fire Services.
- 3) Recent polls and consultation forums have shown that the public do not support cuts in the frontline service and would support an increase in the level of fire precept in order to protect frontline service delivery.
- 4) There is no option being put forward to provide for the proper funding needed for the ongoing provision of Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service. On this basis it is a flawed consultation.
- 5) The loss of meaningful democratic accountability is one of the central risks of a potential merger and it must be addressed properly, fully and effectively.
- 6) The public and firefighters of Wiltshire require assurances that any combination will not adversely affect emergency cover. Should the Fire Authority decide to pursue this option, assurances must be given that there will be ***no reduction in the number of fire stations, fire appliances or uniformed station based posts arising out of any proposed combination.***
- 7) Staff require assurances that they will not be made to pay with their jobs and conditions for political failure. On that basis they require assurances that:
  - **Terms and conditions of staff (Grey Book) including pension arrangements would be protected;**
  - **There will be no compulsory redundancies as a result of combination.**
- 8) There is a lack of adequate staffing in Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service due to funding cuts. There are significant establishment shortfalls in both the Wholetime and Retained Duty Systems.
- 9) As a consequence, in September 2014, the service only realised optimum crewing of front line appliances (as defined by its IRMP) 57% of the time.
- 10) There is an over reliance on firefighters within the Retained Duty System (RDS) which has created unrealistic and unachievable expectations on their availability.
- 11) Current policies have failed in their expectations to increase RDS cover and have served only to increase cost to the service with no benefit.
- 12) The delivery of proper, safe and resilient crewing arrangements for fire cover must be a priority no matter the outcome of the consultation. This will require investment and proper, ongoing funding for the future.
- 13) There is an over reliance on the goodwill of firefighters to fill gaps created by staff shortfalls by working longer hours and using their own time to provide cover for operational and community services.
- 14) Goodwill is increasingly becoming a one way street and there is a growing trend within the service to offer flat rate payment to firefighters who voluntarily give up their own time to provide additional services. This is outside of the nationally agreed Grey Book conditions.
- 15) The decision to close the Emergency Fire Control Room in Dorset and set up a Joint Command and Control Centre (JCCC) in Wiltshire has the potential to compromise operational effectiveness and the safety of the public and firefighters.
- 16) The Fire Authority should immediately open up a negotiating process with the FBU to agree appropriate crewing levels, training packages and operating systems within a JCCC.



- 17) Should a merger be agreed the FBU and the public will demand to be assured that lessons have been learned from previous mistakes in other areas and that proper, meaningful assurances are given for the future. Not least, we will expect employers and managers to engage properly and constructively with our elected representatives at local level and through agreed collective bargaining arrangements.
- 18) Funding cuts are threatening not only emergency response, but also prevention and community safety work. The FBU believes cuts cost lives and ruin communities. The union wants long-term, strategic investment in the service, not cuts – and a fairer funding formula that better reflects the wider contribution made by the fire and rescue service to society.





# 1) The Financial Background – A Failure of Funding

The options within this consultation are being proposed entirely as a result of the failure of politicians, at all levels, to finance our Fire & Rescue Service to a level where it can function as an effective, safe and locally accountable emergency service.

Our service has suffered unprecedented and dangerous cuts to central funding in the last decade.

Nationally, central funding to the Fire and Rescue Service has been cut by more than a fifth during this parliament and further cuts of 7.5% are planned for 2015-16, an unprecedented reduction. These cuts will ultimately cost lives, destroy homes and businesses, drive up insurance premiums and damage the environment.

However, central cuts are only one part of the story. Locally driven cuts to funding, compounded by council tax freezes, have further reduced local revenue and exacerbated the decisions of central Government.

Although the majority of the funding cuts have been driven by central Government, the Fire Authority must also take responsibility for the role they have played locally in this funding crisis. For the years 2011/2012, 2012/2013 and 2013/2014 the Wiltshire & Swindon Fire Authority voted in line with their political masters and took the unsustainable option of accepting a council tax freeze grant. This decision was taken against the professional advice and recommendation to the contrary of the Finance Director, the Chief Fire Officer and the Fire Brigades Union. Had the Authority taken this advice, instead of pandering to Government, the situation would, while still dire, have seen a potential base budget increase of approximately 3.5%.

Warnings regarding the unsustainable nature of council tax freeze grants have been made time and time again, on a cross party basis. The freeze grant is an offer made by Government to authorities who freeze their council tax and in 2012 was only available for a single year.



It was therefore not an appropriate mechanism to protect the long term financial position; a point made to the Authority in the build up to their decisions and at the meetings themselves. At the 2012 budget meeting this point was made clear and in writing: **"accepting the Council Tax Freeze Grant for 2012/13 is that for each year after this is a inherent funding gap of £0.474m which will need to be covered, either by reductions, savings or additional income in the base budget. This will be in addition to the original savings/reductions required."** (Wiltshire & Swindon Fire Authority meeting paper dated 14 Feb 2012).

Despite this clear and unequivocal warning, and despite recommendations to the contrary, the Fire Authority chose this unsustainable route.

The professional advice was explicit and clear. The Authority knew that by making the decision to implement the Council Tax Freeze Grant there would be a significant and adverse impact on frontline emergency cover: **"The risks associated mean that service provision may be adversely affected, and station closures may need to be considered in addition to there being a greater potential for redundancies."** (Wiltshire & Swindon Fire Authority meeting paper dated 14 Feb 2012).

The Fire Authority ignored this clear advice and instead, for purely political reasons, voted for a decision which could only compromise the long term financial position of the Fire & Rescue Service and create cuts in frontline emergency cover.

Such decisions clearly illustrate that the current lack of adequate funding to our service, and the frontline cuts which result, are not due to external forces outside of anybody's control: They are a deliberate consequence of decisions taken by politicians who put political ideology ahead of professional advice and cuts ahead of life saving emergency cover.

The Fire & Rescue Service is a life saving emergency service which requires a budget sufficient to ensure we can provide effective and safe fire & emergency cover, as well as providing and building on our vital community safety work. This purpose has been forgotten in the drive for financial cuts year after year.

Instead of developing our service and community safety, principle managers have been expected to focus on budget cuts. The Fire Authority is keen to praise itself as **"one of the lowest "spending per capita" Combined Fire Authorities in England"** but their focus on making the precept as cheap as possible has blinded them to the consequential impact on the frontline emergency service so relied upon by the people of Wiltshire and Swindon: a service that is now on the verge of **"going bust"** according to their most senior Firefighter.

This is not just a damning indictment on the failure of politicians to discharge their responsibilities; it is also unacceptable and dangerous.

## 2) Public Opinion and Perceptions of the Fire and Rescue Service

Firefighters rightly receive plaudits for the invaluable work we do. The public expects firefighters to respond in an emergency and deliver unparalleled assistance in the most dreadful circumstances imaginable. Public support for firefighters is exceptionally high. A YouGov survey commissioned by the FBU in 2010 found that more than nine out of ten believed the Fire and Rescue service was providing a good service, with only 1% describing it as "fairly bad". Two out of three thought the service was very good – a glowing tribute to the work firefighters do on a daily basis. Four out of five members of the public were satisfied with their local fire and rescue service, while only 2% were dissatisfied.

There was no mandate for cutting the service in 2010. Some 95% said they favoured maintaining the current level of staffing across the UK, with a third demanding more firefighters. Some 85% said they opposed plans to cut funding to the Fire and Rescue Service as a whole, with the same percentage opposed to local cuts in funding. Nine out of ten people said the Fire and Rescue Service was good value for money. An overwhelming majority of people (95%) said that rapid response to an emergency call is a priority for them as householders and for local businesses. The same percentage believe that attendance times should be a high priority for Fire and Rescue Services – exploding the myth that response times don't matter. A swift response with adequate resources remains crucial to providing a first-class service.

No politician can claim there is a mandate to put cuts ahead of frontline emergency services – there is not.

The results of this national pole are replicated in public consultation forums undertaken on behalf of the Fire Authority within Dorset – the Authority that it is proposed we combine with. During one of these when the public was asked if they would support an increase in precept levels to protect the frontline they answered **yes:**

***"The Authority has conducted a series of public consultation forums with local residents across Dorset. The outcome of these forums shows that there is substantial support for increasing the level of fire precept in order to protect frontline service delivery".*** (Dorset Fire Authority budget paper February 2013).

This same question is a glaring omission from the current consultation which, if it had been asked within Wiltshire and Swindon, would have given the Fire Authority the ability to press the case for proper and adequate funding of Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service without the need for a merger even arising. It is telling that it has not even been considered.

Funding cuts are threatening not only emergency response, but also prevention and enforcement work, and overall national resilience to a wide range of emergencies. The FBU believes cuts cost lives and ruin communities. The union wants long-term, strategic investment in the service, not cuts – and a fairer funding formula that better reflects the wider contribution made by the Fire and Rescue Service to society.





### 3) Ongoing Impact of the Financial Crisis on Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service

Funding cuts are having a severe and ongoing impact on the services of Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service and the working arrangements of the staff within it. The service is running dangerously low on establishment levels with an expectation, and over reliance, on the goodwill of firefighters to fill gaps created by deliberate under staffing. Firefighters are working longer hours and using their own time, on a voluntary basis, to provide cover for operational and community services.

#### Establishment Shortfalls

The last whole time recruitment process within Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service was in March 2008.

After lowering the front-line wholetime Firefighter establishment from 170 to 149 as part of the 2012 Transformation Process we have seen a rise in the number of Fire Appliances and Specialist Emergency Appliances which have become unavailable due to crewing shortfalls.

In an attempt to meet its Integrated Risk Management Planning (IRMP) obligations the service has had to rely on voluntary overtime to keep appliances available. This is a high risk strategy which lacks resilience as it relies on paid volunteers to keep front-line appliances available to serve the public at emergency incidents. There is only one proper way to guarantee the availability of whole time appliances: provide the appropriate establishment levels needed to staff stations properly and safely. This in turn requires the correct and necessary level of funding.

Recently FBU Members withdrew from voluntary paid overtime as part of national industrial action against Government pension cuts. This action gave an accurate picture of the problem facing WFRS with regards to the lack of proper establishment levels and the knock on effect this is having on resilience, emergency cover and crewing of whole time appliances. It also served to highlight the very real dangers that further cuts to front-line posts would create.

***As a consequence, in September 2014, the service only realised optimum crewing of front line appliances (as defined by its IRMP) 57% of the time.***

A very worrying figure particularly as the consultation will give no guarantees that there will not be further front-line job losses.

It should also be noted that the use of pre-arranged overtime in this way is expressly outside of nationally agreed terms and conditions (the Grey Book). This agreement, made between the FBU and local government employers states that overtime will not be used to make up any planned shortfall in staffing levels.

In 2010 the Chief Fire Officer warned in an article in the Wiltshire Times that ***"there could be redundancies in the service because of spending cuts"***. He then went on to say ***"The whole objective is to give a better service for less, if feasible."*** This article created a great deal of anger and concern amongst the firefighters and staff of Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service. It shows that the CFO is not averse to the idea of redundancies to help balance the books and also that he appeared unsure as to whether it would be possible to achieve a "better service".

This was said at a time when the true extent of the cuts was not yet known, when the service had greater financial muscle and more firefighters with which to crew appliances. Since that time there have been further financial cuts to the service and further subsequent front-line job losses. This is an unsustainable and dangerous situation which is compromising emergency cover and the safety of firefighters and the public in Wiltshire & Swindon.

#### Retained Duty System

Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service has a programme of continuous recruitment for RDS firefighters and yet, despite this, continuously struggles to recruit to the required establishment level.

There are various reasons for this; Less people now work in the Town that they live, employers are more reluctant to allow the release of employees at a moments notice and when recruited the retention rate is poor due to the



expectations and pressure placed on them. These high expectations and pressure are not only in relation to the maintenance of skills and providing cover but also the responsibilities to their families and striking the correct, and reasonable, work/life balance.

There is now a move by Government, outlined in the discredited Knight report, to try and use firefighters on the Retained Duty System to replace the decreasing Wholetime Firefighter establishment. A decrease being forced through in an attempt to introduce financial cuts within the service.

To expect firefighters who give cover on the Retained Duty System to also cover up shortfalls in the Wholetime service is not just unrealistic: it is also dangerous, unsustainable and compromises resilience.

The FBU has seen examples in other Brigades where RDS appliances are being placed off the run and emergency cover in these areas compromised due to RDS firefighters being taken from these Stations and used to cover up gaps in the wholetime establishment. It has also placed special appliances at wholetime stations (which require specialized and time consuming training) off the run as the firefighters who are standing in on the station are not trained in their use.

The whole "robbing Peter to pay Paul" approach has simply served to move gaps in cover from one area to the next and has been unable to achieve what was intended. There has to be a reasonable and honest expectation by the service of what is achievable through the Retained Duty System and the right balance has to be struck between Wholetime Firefighters and Retained Firefighters.

## **Retained Duty System Management Failings**

In February 2012, as part of the services "Transformation Process", a "new" Retained Duty System (RDS) was proposed, with the aim being of achieving better recruitment, better retention and ultimately better fire cover within the Retained Duty System.

The service proposed to introduce, with immediate effect, a system of working called 'The Salary Scheme'. In basic terms this would mean paying an increased salary to Retained Firefighters, starting at £10,200 for full cover (120 hours per week) pro rata. There would also be no additional payment when required to attend incidents.

In an attempt to reward firefighters working at busier RDS Fire Stations further additional payments would be made if an operational attendance threshold was reached.

In return for these payments the service expected greater cover would be provided by Retained Firefighters who, in signing up to the salary scheme, would have "sold off" the flexibility provided for within the previous system.

The FBU argued that there was no proof the system would work and proposed that it was trialed for 12 months in order to test for resilience and introduce appropriate safeguards if necessary. The service agreed.

The original Salary Scheme proposals were designed to make sure that Retained appliances were crewed more of the time by only allowing a minimum number of Retained Firefighters to make themselves available at any one time. Therefore, in theory, it would mean that to provide the cover they were being paid for a Retained Firefighter would also have to make themselves available at times that were unpopular, unsocial and, ultimately, unrealistic.

At the outset it became obvious that this lack of flexibility would be an issue for those on the scheme. The service, in the face of opposition and concern from staff, relented and subsequently allowed greater flexibility. In accepting this necessary move, problems were then identified which were very similar in nature to the problems that the scheme was originally designed to resolve: i.e. there would be times when there were more Retained Firefighters available than were needed to crew the appliances and at other times not enough availability meant the appliances were "off the run". Despite the increased financial outlay.

At the end of the 12 month trial, the service admitted that there had not been any significant increase in recruitment, retention or fire cover. The only thing that had been achieved was to increase the financial burden on the service.

It was then suggested by the service that a **further** 12 month trial was necessary to allow them to properly implement the Salary Scheme Proposals and to give the opportunity to properly assess the schemes worth. This suggestion was in May of this year (2014). However it has subsequently been decided to hold a review into the feasibility of the Salary Scheme and whilst this happens the Scheme would carry on running as it did in the first 12 months of the trial. – Without achieving any of the stated goals.

The service also utilises RDS firefighters, working on the salary scheme but who are surplus to their stations requirements, to be deployed elsewhere to provide crewing at other Retained Duty System Stations.

These individuals are then granted extra payment, in effect being paid twice for the same cover. There have also been occasions when firefighters on the RDS have been accepted as being available despite being on paid leave and who thus receive additional payment, again in effect being paid twice.

Such examples show the desperate measures that are continually being attempted by service managers to alter, amend and bend duty systems in an attempt to provide cover in desperate circumstances. Not only does this waste an enormous amount of time, money and resources, it also creates change fatigue and cynicism amongst usually committed staff. Most of all, however, it is always self defeating because it fails to deal with the fundamental problem at the heart of the service: Frontline staff shortages due to funding cuts.

**The delivery of proper, safe and resilient crewing arrangements for fire cover must be a priority no matter the outcome of the consultation. This will require investment and proper, ongoing funding for the future.**



## 4) Local Examples of Goodwill and Voluntary Working

Firefighters are proud of our jobs and the services we provide to our communities. We want to see a highly effective and efficient Fire and Rescue Service. This commitment often sees firefighters going the extra mile and giving of their own time to provide the public with effective and proper services.

However there is now real concern that the goodwill of firefighters is being abused in order to cover up gaps caused by a lack of funding.

There is a growing trend within the service to only offer flat rate payment to firefighters who voluntarily give up their own time to provide additional services. This is outside of the nationally agreed Grey Book conditions and is an abuse of the goodwill of firefighters who are committed to making the service all that it can be. We demand that the Fire Authority addresses the issue and adhere to their side of the contractual agreement.

There are numerous examples of events and activities which rely on the goodwill of firefighters to deliver and we list some below:

**Training activities** – The service currently expects firefighters who are trained as instructors to provide training to staff outside their normal contracted hours. This is obviously purely voluntary and these highly skilled and valuable employees are not obliged to do it. However the training regime has now become so reliant on extra hours working that, without this goodwill, the service would not be able to maintain the basic skills of all firefighters. If firefighters are not correctly trained and don't have necessary skills and competencies refreshed within laid down timescales, then they would have to be removed from operational (firefighting) duties, putting further strain on an already stretched and under established workforce. This would ultimately lead to even more frontline appliances being unavailable to attend emergency incidents.

There are also many initiatives carried out by WFRS that are only possible through the goodwill of staff. Below we list two prime examples, often cited as "flagship" initiatives:

**'Safe Drive Stay Alive'** – This is a Wiltshire and Swindon road safety initiative coordinated by Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service on behalf of a partnership including Wiltshire Police, Wiltshire Council, Swindon Borough Council, SWIFT Medics and Swindon-based fleet management company Arval. "Safe Drive Stay Alive" seeks to provide an educational experience that teaches young people not only the dangers but also the consequences of poor and dangerous driving.

A video reconstruction of a road traffic collision links with on-stage personal testimonies to leave the audience fully aware of both their vulnerability and accountability as new drivers.

Serving members of the police, fire and medical services give real life accounts of local incidents they have witnessed. They are followed by the victims of road traffic collisions – people whose lives have been changed irrevocably. This is why the initiative is successful: it is delivered by real people with real stories to tell and, as such, it's a highly emotional experience. The service is rightly proud of the positive effect this has on individuals and the benefit to the local community.

**'Salamander Scheme'** – Since 2006 Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service has been facilitating the Salamander scheme which provides an opportunity for young people to work with the Fire and Rescue Service and take part in a variety of challenges that help to build self-esteem, develop leadership, improve communication skills and increase their motivation as a stepping stone to future success.

The service has provided this course over the past 5 years to assist in the rehabilitation of young people who are on the cusp of law breaking and or display unacceptable behaviours towards society in general but providing a positive life experience in a disciplined uniform environment.

The Salamander project is widely recognised as being a most effective tool by numerous organisations (course sponsors) in changing habits, behaviours and reducing recidivism. Recently the scheme has been extended to include a collaboration with Job Centre Plus. It has the same focus, but it is also hoped that those doing the course will see their motivation to find work increased. Salamander is intended as a stepping stone to future success and employment, whilst also educating the young people on their own safety and the safety of others.



The scheme provides the opportunity to train like a Firefighter culminating in a passing out parade and presentation ceremony hosted by the CFO.

Both these flagship initiatives are only possible because firefighters volunteer to work extra hours on their days off. Without this voluntary paid work both of these schemes would not be possible. Further, the firefighters who instruct on these courses not only give up their own time, but are also expected to accept flat rate pay – outside of national conditions and agreements.

All of the examples above illustrate the extraordinary amount of voluntary goodwill given by firefighters in the delivery of the service. However, all of this is being carried out against a background of funding cuts and an increasing over reliance, even expectation, that firefighters will continue to be willing and able to give of their own time in order to deliver services and provide cover.

There is increasing concern amongst firefighters that goodwill is a one way street which is not being reciprocated by the Authority.

Firefighters are proud of the job we do but we will not be used as a tool to deliver cuts or cover up their impact. We have the right to expect high standards of pay and good conditions which reflect the nature of the work we do. We have the right to expect our employers and managers to engage properly and constructively with our elected representatives at local level and through agreed collective bargaining arrangements.

Firefighters and the Fire Brigades Union demand that these points are addressed properly and as a matter of urgency.





## 5) Emergency Fire Control

Emergency Fire Control staff are highly trained, skilled members of the Fire & Rescue Service who perform a vital task in ensuring the safety of the public and operational firefighters before, during and after emergency incidents. In addition they perform an enormous variety of other tasks linked to community safety, administration and the day to day work of the service which is vital to the success of Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service.

It is a source of deep concern to the FBU that the role of our emergency fire control staff is constantly undervalued and under appreciated.

In recent years the fiasco that was the regional fire control project seemed to put down a marker that the role of an Emergency Fire Control operator was expendable and since that point our members undertaking this role have apparently been seen as an "easy option" for cuts.

### **Proposal to Merge the Emergency Fire Controls for Wiltshire and Dorset FRS's**

At present time, Wiltshire and Dorset Fire & Rescue Services maintain an Emergency Fire Control Room each. However, at the Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Authority meeting of 12th December 2013 the Chief Fire Officer presented a paper entitled "Fire Control" with a recommendation to combine Wiltshire Fire Control with Dorset Fire Control and set up a Joint Command and Control Centre (JCCC) in Wiltshire.

Despite this being a subject of the utmost importance for the working lives of the Fire Control Members in Wiltshire and a vital area of operational response for all firefighters within the service, the paper was neither developed nor discussed in an open and transparent manner. Instead, the paper was subjected to a process of confidentiality which deprived the people of Wiltshire and the staff of Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service the ability to have any informed input into the decision making process of either the service or the Fire Authority.

The level of confidentiality and lack of openness and transparency in a process with such serious consequences is unacceptable. The Fire & Rescue Service is a public service which should also be publicly accountable. The development of plans and proposals which would have a profound impact on the organisation and accountability of the service should have been undertaken in an open and transparent manner.

Having read the paper in detail and consulted our members, it is the view of the FBU that the paper was not written with a view to exploring options in order to assist in informed decision making. Rather it was written with the clear purpose of bringing about the closure of Dorset Fire Control with the subsequent risk to the jobs of everyone serving within it. There seems little doubt that this decision was also taken within the context of the proposal to combine the two services. Even though the decision has been more favourable to Wiltshire Control Staff, the secrecy and manner in which these decisions have been made, together with the many unanswered questions regarding impact on operational effectiveness and resilience, has caused unnecessary stress and angst to staff across the two organisations.

### **The Current Arrangements – Resilient and Effective**

Wiltshire Emergency Fire Control Room takes all the emergency fire calls for Wiltshire and Swindon. Fire Control Room Staff utilise 24 stations to meet the requirements for the emergency calls. The current full crewing levels for each control at present are 21 members of staff. This is broken into 4 watches of 5 members of staff and a Station Manager to oversee all the staff and control room issues. A watch should comprise of 1 Watch Manager, 1 Crew Manager and 3 firefighters.

Although the establishment figures for our control room is stated above, at present time the control room is severely under crewed. In addition to maternity leave, sickness and secondments to internal projects causing shortfalls, also several members of staff have recently left. The knock on effects to staff of consistently being severely under crewed is that the control room has an excessively high overtime coverage which, in turn creates a long term problem as the staff become tired and ill as a consequence of constant work.

## **Current Training and Skills Requirements**

Currently the emergency control room staff in Wiltshire undertake a comprehensive training programme, which can last for up to two years. This will include comprehensive training in the use of the command and control mobilising computer system, operation of the radio and other equipment and tools to enable the emergency fire control room staff to provide a professional service to both firefighters and the public.

Gaining a huge, and local, knowledge of the area that each service covers is vital for speed, efficiency and effectiveness when taking fire calls. This will include knowledge of the roads, motorways, rail lines, military sites etc just to name a few.

It is these skills which will be diluted if the planned merger of Wiltshire and Dorset Controls goes ahead.

## **The Potential Impact on Staff of Merging Controls**

The merging of Dorset and Wiltshire Control Rooms will create additional responsibilities, and therefore pressure, on the staff that will crew the control room. There will be additional training for all staff to learn a new mobilising system whilst at the same time learning new areas, procedures all in a vastly bigger area.

The Fire Brigades Union believes that there is a significant risk with regards to the merged Emergency Fire Control Rooms.

Heavy reliance on new IT systems used within the NFCSP are a considerable risk. An example of this type of risk can be seen by the considerable news coverage from the incident in the newly merged North West Fire Control. This is where the fire controls of Cumbria, Lancashire, Greater Manchester and Cheshire merged into one large control. Due to the size of the area now covered by the North West Fire Control it is impossible to expect the staff crewing this control to have the in depth local knowledge which is present in standalone fire controls. Therefore there is a heavy reliance on the computer system used by this control room.

It was this computer system which advised staff to mobilise a fire engine from Cumbria to an incident located just outside of Bolton. This would have meant a 100 mile trip each way for the appliance to reach the incident.

This example proves the Fire Brigades Union's point that bigger is not always best, effective or efficient. Against a background of failed regionalisation and failed mergers of Control Rooms elsewhere, it is time that the Fire Authority recognised that the skills and experience of our emergency fire control staff cannot be replaced with a micro chip.

## **Merged Control Crewing**

The Fire Brigades Union believe that it is imperative the crewing for the merged Emergency Fire Control should be based on the various risk and service requirement analysis for each service and should be reflective of the full current crewing of both Dorset and Wiltshire Controls. The merging of the two Emergency Fire Control Rooms should not be used by the politicians as an opportunity to cut costs whilst putting the lives of the firefighters and the public we serve at risk.

## 6) Local Accountability and Democracy

The Fire and Rescue Service should be publicly-owned and democratically accountable to local communities.

The public value their Fire and Rescue Service and they have the right to demand genuine local accountability of the politicians charged with running it.

At present, Wiltshire and Swindon Combined Fire Authority (CFA) acts as the overall governing body for the Fire & Rescue Service (FRS) and has 13 Members – nine from Wiltshire Council and four from Swindon Borough Council – who are appointed annually. These members have been assigned by their respective parties in proportion to the overall political composition of the Fire Authority. This is an indirect democratic form of governance, but it does allow for some local accountability.

It is of great concern that, if a combination with Dorset FRS goes ahead, the size and spread of the new Fire Authority would be on such a scale as to render elective democracy too big for any meaningful, organic link to exist between the electors and the elected.

The loss of effective local democratic accountability between the Fire Service and the communities it serves is one of the central risks of a potential merger and it must be addressed properly, fully and effectively.

The FBU has experience regarding the democratic deficit and loss of local accountability which can result as a consequence of merger.

Devon and Somerset Fire & Rescue Services combined in April 2007 creating a Fire Authority of 25 councillors covering the largest non-metropolitan Fire and Rescue Service in the UK.

In July 2013 a package of proposed cuts including job losses and downgrading of local Fire Stations was put to public consultation by the Authority.

The consultation process engaged the public in local communities with overwhelming opposition to the cuts being made via representations to local councillors, local councils etc.

At the subsequent decision making meeting of the Fire Authority, the democratic deficit created by the size and spread of the Authority became the defining impression for members of the public and the firefighters present.

This was demonstrated throughout a meeting where councillors representing one area, for example Plymouth, spoke and voted against cuts to their local Fire Cover whilst councillors in, not just another area but also **another County**, voted for those cuts. The process was then reversed with councillors representing areas such as Taunton in Somerset seeing cuts voted through against their wishes by councillors in Devon. Such conduct carried on throughout the meeting with cuts in each area being voted through by narrow majorities carried by councillors totally distanced from these areas.

The impact on the public and firefighters attending the meeting was profound, which was represented in the subsequent reporting of an "undemocratic" and "shambolic" process by sections of the media.

If a merger is to go ahead between Dorset and Wiltshire safeguards must be implemented to avoid a similar fiasco.

Any Fire Authority which oversees the strategic running of a potential Fire Service covering Dorset & Wiltshire must also ensure that powers are devolved to representatives, within the Authority, representing local areas. These powers must be "real" in order to reassure communities that the service remains democratically accountable and that consultation is meaningful.

## 7) Combination: A False Economy? – Lessons from other Areas

Those who advocate a combination of Dorset and Wiltshire Fire Services do so on the basis that it would achieve financial savings by merging certain services and that these savings could then be used to protect front-line services.

However the FBU has experienced a previous combination between two Fire and Rescue Services that, although had the same aim, actually had what the Union believes to be the opposite outcome.

Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service (DSFRS) is a result of the combination of the two separate Fire Services (in Devon and Somerset) which took place in April 2007.

This particular combined Service has 84 Fire Stations consisting of 121 Fire Appliances, which are crewed by Wholtime, Retained Duty System and Volunteer Fire-fighters.

DSFRS also has an Urban Search and Rescue Service (U.S.A.R) station and a single Emergency Fire Control Room, both of which are based at the Head Quarters. The single Control Room has been operating since 1st April 2012 following the combination of the previous Devon and Somerset control rooms.

The rationale for combination in Devon and Somerset was identical to that which is proposed for Dorset and Wiltshire, i.e. to achieve financial savings by merging certain services in order to protect the front-line service. However, since the combination there have been a series of cuts to the operational frontline of the service. These cuts include a total, so far, of around 200 frontline, full-time Firefighter posts.

The cuts in operational frontline posts since combination are in stark contrast to an increase in the non operational establishment (to date of over 67 posts).

In addition, during a study last year the FBU found that the cost of the service had increased to the public, whilst at the same time seeing a decrease in standards of fire cover.

In a consultation response to a 2013 draft plan (**Devon & Somerset FBU Response to Devon & Somerset Fire and Rescue Service Draft Plan for 2013/14 to 2014/15**), the Devon & Somerset FBU were able to show that since combination there had been increased spending on the following areas, whilst at the same time massive cuts to the frontline operational service were being proposed:

### **Increased spending since combination:**

- Non Uniform: £4,023,000
- Equipment and furniture by £1,080,000
- Communications by £756,000
- Travel and Subsistence by £683,000
- External Consultants/Partners by £432,000

### **Whilst, during the same period there had been decreased spending on;**

- Wholtime Firefighters by £611,000
- Control Operators by £305,000

This clearly shows a contradiction to the stated aims of the combination within Devon and Somerset. The public and staff saw a continual series of cuts to the front-line of the service and the combination of two Emergency Fire Control centres into a single centre with less Emergency Control Operators available.

In the consultation response, the local FBU stated that, for frontline firefighters, it was hard to come to any other conclusion that, since combination, the "new" DSFRS has had a clear strategy to cut the operational frontline Fire and Rescue Service and has increased and built the non operational side of the service in order to achieve this. This is a clear contradiction to the "Combination Business Case", which stated combination would "provide an opportunity to rationalise Support Services". This has not happened in any meaningful way. Instead the public and the staff has seen a continual series of cuts to the frontline of the service and the "combination" of the previous two Emergency Fire Control rooms into a single centre with less Emergency Fire Control Operators available.



Further lessons can also be learned from the combination of Devon and Somerset. A common theme running throughout the substantial series of meetings we have held with our FBU colleagues in the Brigade is the deep discontent amongst staff that combination has simply led to a ***“race to the bottom”*** in regard to conditions of service, policies, watch strengths, payments, crewing arrangements etc.

Local Officials and members have time and again raised their concern that detrimental change to their working arrangements is simply imposed from the distant centre under the threat of discipline. It is clear that staff feel that this combination has simply been a cost cutting and casualisation exercise at the expense, primarily, of the operational front line.

This should serve as a stark and sobering warning to everyone involved in this process of consultation within Dorset and Wiltshire. Combination is not a panacea or “quick fix”. To the contrary, without proper controls, direction and engagement, it can simply result in centralised empire building, loss of identity and leave staff and the public feeling disenfranchised from the service.

If the Authority do propose to move forward with a combination the FBU and the public will demand to be assured that lessons have been learned from previous mistakes in other areas and that proper, meaningful assurances are given for the future. Not least, we will expect employers and managers to engage properly and constructively with our elected representatives at local level and through agreed collective bargaining arrangements.



## 8) Our Vision for the Fire and Rescue Service

The FBU has a powerful, positive vision for the Fire and Rescue Service. Firefighters are proud of our jobs and the services we provide to our communities. We want to see a highly effective and efficient Fire and Rescue Service.

The FBU wants a Fire and Rescue Service that:

- Professionally assesses the full range of risks facing communities and plans to address these by integrating the various measures of prevention, protection and intervention
- Rapidly responds to a wide range of emergencies facing communities
- Provides a first-class service to the communities we serve
- Is publicly-owned
- Is democratically-controlled, democratically-run and accountable to communities
- Receives sustained investment, not cuts
- Is resourced to manage a wide range of risks, rescues and interventions
- Has consistent, universal and professional standards at its core
- Trains and prepares a highly skilled and professional workforce.

The public have the right to know that their Fire and Rescue Service is planning professionally for the various risks faced by the community. Firefighters have the right to know that the service is planning adequately for incidents rather than deliberately under-resourcing them.

Firefighters are trusted professionals, enthusiastic advocates for our Fire and Rescue service and absolutely committed to serving our communities. Firefighters are confident we have the skills and experience to revitalise our service. Give us the tools and let us get on with doing the job.





## 9) FBU Position Statement

Central Government grant cuts combined with locally decided council tax freezes have created a politically driven budget crisis within Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service. This crisis has now resulted in a consultation which is clearly designed to achieve only one outcome: a combination of Dorset and Wiltshire Fire Services.

There is no option being put forward to provide for the proper funding needed for the ongoing provision of Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service. On this basis it is a flawed consultation.

What the public and firefighters of Wiltshire want is a properly funded, effective and safe Fire & Rescue Service, which is locally accountable. If the combination is to go ahead it must be on this basis.

The public and firefighters of Wiltshire require assurances that the combination will not adversely affect fire cover, i.e:

- ***There will be no reduction in the number of fire stations, fire appliances or uniformed station based posts arising out of any proposed combination;***

In addition, staff require assurances that they are not being made to pay with their jobs and conditions for political failure. On that basis they require assurances that:

- ***Terms and conditions of staff (Grey Book) including pension arrangements would be protected;***
- ***There will be no compulsory redundancies as a result of combination.***

The current funding crisis in Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service has put enormous pressure on staff who have to cover shortfalls which cannot be safely left uncovered. If politicians now expect firefighters to support a combination on the basis of "more of the same" then they can think again.

Should a merger be agreed the FBU and the public will demand to be assured that lessons have been learned from previous mistakes in other areas and that proper, meaningful assurances are given for the future. Not least, ***we will expect employers and managers to engage properly and constructively with our elected representatives at local level and through agreed collective bargaining arrangements.***

Whatever the decision of the Fire Authority, Wiltshire firefighters demand an appropriate, consistent and long term mechanism of funding our service which provides effective and safe fire & emergency cover, as well as providing and building on our vital community safety work

Wiltshire Fire Authority has failed in this task previously, with disastrous results. We demand that they learn the lessons of the past and correct them for the future. On behalf of our members, the firefighters and control members of Wiltshire, we make this point clearly: **We will not pay for cuts with our jobs, our service and the safety of firefighters and the public.**



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