

| MERSEYSIDE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY | | | |
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| MEETING OF THE: | AUTHORITY | | |
| DATE: | 29 JANUARY 2015 | REPORT NO: | CFO/001/15 |
| PRESENTING OFFICER | CHIEF FIRE OFFICER | | |
| RESPONSIBLE OFFICER: | PHIL GARRIGAN | REPORT AUTHOR: | DEB APPLETON |
| OFFICERS CONSULTED: | STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT GROUP | | |
| TITLE OF REPORT: | WIRRAL FIRE COVER CONSULTATION OUTCOMES | | |

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| APPENDICES: | APPENDIX A: | CONSULTATION NEWSLETTER |
| | APPENDIX B: | 2ND CONSULTATION DOCUMENT |
| | APPENDIX C: | QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS REPORT |
| | APPENDIX D: | FOCUS GROUPS/FORUM REPORT |
| | APPENDIX E: | QUESTIONS FROM MEETINGS |
| | APPENDIX F: | EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT |

Purpose of Report

1. To inform Members of the outcomes of the twelve week public consultation process regarding the draft proposal to merge Upton and West Kirby fire stations at a new station on Frankby Road, Greasby as an alternative to an outright closure of West Kirby fire station.

Recommendation

2. That Members:
 - a) Note the outcomes of the comprehensive and informative Wirral public consultation
 - b) take full and carefully considered account of those outcomes when considering report CFO/00315 relating to the possible future options for fire cover in Wirral

Introduction and Background

3. On 2nd October 2014 the Authority approved

“...a proposal to merge Upton and West Kirby fire stations at a new station on Frankby Road, Greasby as an alternative to an outright closure of West Kirby fire station... subject to a 12 week period of public consultation to commence with effect from 3rd October 2014.”

4. The Authority also approved a detailed consultation plan. The plan included an online questionnaire, three externally facilitated deliberative focus groups and one forum, three open public meetings, a stakeholder meeting and several staff consultation meetings. In the event, four public meetings were held (an additional meeting was arranged in Greasby). A summary of the outcomes of the consultation are set out at paragraphs 6 – 12 below.
5. Members will be aware that the Frankby Road, Greasby site was withdrawn from consideration by Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC) part way through the consultation period as a result of opposition from residents and local politicians. This is reflected in the consultation outcomes that are detailed below.

Summary of outcomes

6. The deliberative focus groups and forum all agreed that the principle of merger was reasonable given the financial challenges facing the Authority.
7. The Stakeholder (public/private sector) meeting was broadly supportive of the merger proposal.
8. There was considerable opposition to the merger, particularly the proposed Frankby Road site, at the two public meetings in Greasby and in responses to the online questionnaire, almost exclusively by people from Greasby. The majority of those objecting wanted the FRA to close West Kirby fire station and maintain the station at Upton, as an alternative to building a new station on the Greasby library site. Some respondents could see the benefits of a new station, but not at that location. The site was subsequently withdrawn by Wirral Borough Council.
9. It is the view of Officers that the Greasby residents attending meetings and those responding to the questionnaire were so focussed on the (then) proposed site for the new fire station that this may have adversely impacted on their ability to comment objectively on the principle of merging two stations as a way of making necessary savings, whilst maintaining the best operational response provision in the circumstances.
10. Once the Greasby Library site had been withdrawn, all the responses to the questionnaire supported the principle of merger.
11. There was no significant opposition at the public meeting in Hoylake to the closure of West Kirby fire station.
12. There was no significant opposition at the public meeting in Woodchurch/Upton to the closure of Upton fire station which would be required in order to facilitate the proposed merger.

Promoting and marketing the consultation

13. On 3rd October 2014 an initial consultation newsletter and on-line survey were published on the Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service website (Appendix A). Facebook, Twitter and a press release were used to launch the consultation. The consultation launch was reported on by the Wirral Globe and Liverpool Echo.
14. A second consultation document (Appendix B) was published on 2nd December 2014, specifically to address some of the frequently asked questions arising from the consultation and providing detailed information on the other options considered by the Authority.
15. Consultation documentation was printed and distributed in the areas affected and at MFRA consultation events, published on the MFRA website and promoted via social media and the press. Social media was frequently used during the consultation period to direct people to information and encourage participation in the consultation.
16. The Wirral District Manager and the Wirral District Management Team consulted with uniformed and non-uniformed staff in the Wirral District to explain the proposals within the Chief Fire Officer's consultation presentation and to seek their views. The Wirral District Manager and Wirral District Management Team also distributed information to their respective partnerships including the Wirral Public Service Board, Local Public Service Boards, Health & Wellbeing Board, Community Safety Partnership and the Chamber of Commerce, encouraging attendance at the stakeholder meeting.

Media Interest

17. The consultation process attracted media interest with the Wirral Globe and Liverpool Echo reporting on developments and carrying readers' letters on the subject (examples available for Members to view at the meeting). The Chief Fire Officer was interviewed on Radio Merseyside to promote the consultation process and the public meetings in particular.

The consultation events

18. The consultation events that took place are detailed below. The focus groups and public meetings took place in the evening.
 - 27th October – Public Meeting – Greasby Methodist Church (first Greasby meeting).
 - 28th October – Public Meeting – Woodchurch High School (Upton meeting).
 - 30th October – Public Meeting - Hoylake Community Centre (West Kirby meeting).

- 10th November – Public Meeting- Greasby Methodist Church (second Greasby meeting).
 - 17th November – Focus Group – Woodchurch High School (Upton).
 - 19th November – Focus Group – Westbourne Community Centre (West Kirby)
 - 2nd December – Stakeholder meeting – Holiday Inn Hoylake (West Kirby)
 - 2nd December – Wirral Forum – Birkenhead fire station
19. The focus groups and forum were deliberative meetings, facilitated by Opinion Research Services (ORS), the contractor for MFRA's IRMP Forums. Participants were randomly selected from the West Wirral area and invited to attend.
20. The stakeholders' breakfast meeting was promoted amongst public and private sector partners in Wirral.
21. The public meetings were open meetings which anyone could attend. No one was recruited or specifically invited. They were however widely publicised as detailed above. The public meetings were listening events where people could offer their views. No vote was taken on whether or not people agreed with the proposals, because public meetings cannot be guaranteed as statistically representative of the population.
22. The breakfast meeting and open public meetings were organised, promoted and delivered by MFRA staff. MFRA staff were also heavily involved in the organisation of the ORS facilitated focus groups and several uniformed and non-uniformed staff attended each meeting to provide advice and organisational support.
23. In addition, the Chief Fire Officer and other Officers met with the local MP and councillors during the consultation period.
24. Meetings were also held with the Wirral Older People's Parliament, Wirral Heartbeat, The Friends of Greasby Library and Greasby Community Centre.

Outcomes from the consultation

On line survey

25. Full analysis of the online questionnaire results can be found at Appendix C. The following paragraphs provide an overview:

26. Most respondents (89.7% or 876 from 977) felt that it was not reasonable for Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority to merge the stations at Upton and West Kirby at the proposed site on Frankby Road, Greasby.
27. Post code analysis shows that the vast majority of respondents live in the CH49 post code area (which includes Greasby). The majority of respondents from that location - 92.5% (658 from 711) felt that a merger was not reasonable.
28. Once the survey had been revised (following the withdrawal of the Frankby Road site) the majority of respondents felt that it was reasonable to merge the station areas of Upton and West Kirby at a centralised location. Though it is a much smaller sample size (12) when compared to the original questionnaire, it does appear that there is support for the principle of merger once the specific location has been removed.
29. As the Frankby Road site has now been withdrawn, the responses to the first questionnaire are no longer relevant in any future decision making.

Focus groups and forum

30. Full information about the focus groups and forums can be found at Appendix D. The following paragraphs provide an overview:
31. As Members will recall, the four consultation meetings reported here followed an earlier all-Merseyside 'listening and engagement' process held in January 2014 that considered a wide range of options for MFRA in the context of significant cuts to its budget over the course of this Parliament. Having taken account of those earlier meetings and all the other available evidence, MFRA formulated the current draft proposals for Wirral.
32. The four consultation meetings used a 'deliberative' approach to encourage members of the public to reflect in depth about the Fire and Rescue Service, while receiving and questioning background information and discussing the proposals in detail. Each of the meetings lasted for at least two-and-a-half hours and in total there were 32 diverse participants.
33. The attendance at the focus groups and forum was not as high as that seen in Knowsley with fewer people attending than expected.
34. Within the on-going programme of consultation by MFRA this is unusual, since attendance expectations are normally exceeded and there seems no single or simple explanation of why numbers were lower in this particular programme. As usual, the participants were recruited by random-digit telephone dialling from the ORS Social Research Call Centre. Having been initially contacted by phone, they were written to – to confirm the arrangements; and those who agreed to come then received telephone or written reminders shortly before each meeting. Such recruitment by telephone is normally the most effective way of ensuring that all the participants are independently recruited.

35. Despite the lower than normal attendance, there was a diverse range of participants from the local areas.

| Location (station area) | Type of meeting and number attending |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Upton | Focus Group - 4 |
| Greasby | Focus Group - 8 |
| West Kirby | Focus Group - 9 |
| All Wirral | Forum - 11 |

36. Although, like all other forms of qualitative consultation, deliberative forums cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the four meetings that took place gave diverse groups of people from Wirral, the opportunity to comment in detail on MFRA's proposals for the District's fire stations. As a result, ORS are satisfied that the outcomes of the meeting (as summarised below) are broadly indicative of how informed opinion would incline on the basis of similar discussions.

37. A significant part of the meetings explored any proposals that the participants might have for alternative ways of making the savings. MFRS's response to these alternatives is captured in the second consultation document (Appendix B).

38. The key overall findings regarding the draft proposals (a) to close two fire stations and to consolidate the emergency cover at one new station (the merger) and (b) to reduce the number of fully-crewed wholetime engines from two to one were as follows:

In Greasby

By a ratio of three-to-one the participants accepted that the closure of the two fire stations and their replacement with a new station (the merger) was reasonable

An absolute majority also agreed that it would be reasonable to designate one of the two current fire engines as a reserve vehicle in the context of the station changes (five in favour, two opposed, and one 'don't know')

A majority of the participants (but not all) were opposed to locating a new fire station at the then proposed Frankby Road site

In terms of other options, almost all members of the group favoured redeveloping Upton fire station and providing supplementary cover to West Kirby from Heswall.

Their discussion of equality and diversity issues focused on this site, because they felt a fire station on the Frankby Road site would be hazardous for children, the elderly and disabled people when crossing the road.

In Upton

The participants all accepted that the proposed merger of two stations was reasonable in principle.

They were also unanimous that the Greasby site was a suitable location for the new fire station.

They all agreed that it was reasonable to designate one of the two current fire engines as a reserve vehicle in the context of the fire station changes.

The group recognised that MFRA is well-provided with fire stations and they felt the Authority should consider their overall distribution, but no specific alternative options were raised.

The group raised no specific equality and diversity issues.

In West Kirby

By a ratio of three-and-a-half-to-one the participants accepted that the closure of the two fire stations and their replacement with a new station (the merger) was reasonable.

However the group was divided on whether it would be reasonable to designate one of the two current fire engines as a reserve vehicle in the context of the station changes (four in favour with five opposed)

Only one of eight participants was opposed to locating a new fire station at the then proposed Frankby Road site

The option (suggested in Greasby) of redeveloping Upton fire station while also providing supplementary cover to West Kirby from Heswall was opposed by all nine participants.

Instead of that option, they proposed that MFRA should lobby the government for more funding and/or increase council tax.

Their discussion of equality and diversity issues stressed the need to consider the number of elderly people in West Kirby, including any in nursing and residential homes.

In the all-Wirral Forum

There was almost unanimous support for the merger proposal (with only one 'don't know')

The forum was unanimous that it was reasonable to designate one of the two current fire engines as a reserve vehicle in the context of the station changes

Given the (by then known) unavailability of the Frankby Road site in Greasby, the forum considered the appropriateness of using a Green Belt site instead: four were in favour (depending upon the site), one was opposed in principle and there were five 'don't knows'

In terms of other options, some suggested that MFRA might make more use of LLAR crewing – with West Kirby then being designated as an LLAR station rather than closed

The discussion of equality and diversity issues stressed the need to consider elderly people (especially in West Kirby) and any disadvantaged residents living in flats.

Overall assessment

The Greasby site was strongly opposed *only in* the Greasby focus group, and then not by all participants.

All the meetings clearly approved the merger proposal as reasonable.

Three of the four meetings clearly approved the changes to the second fire engine – and opinion was about divided on this issue in West Kirby

A limited number of equality and diversity issues were raised, relating to the elderly, disabled and disadvantaged people.”

Stakeholder meeting and open public meetings

39. The format for the public meetings and stakeholder meetings was a formal presentation giving the reasons for the changes being proposed and details of the actual merger process and its likely impact on MFRA operational activities.
40. This was followed by an invitation for people to ask questions of the MFRA managers who attended the event. Appendix E details the questions raised at the meetings and the responses given.
41. The stakeholders meeting was attended by 10 people and generated a significant number of questions (see Appendix E for details)
42. The public meetings were well attended and in the case of Greasby, oversubscribed. 30 to 40 people attended the West Kirby and Upton meetings and in the region of 350-400 attended each of the Greasby meetings. The questions and answers are captured in Appendix E.
43. There was significant opposition expressed at the Greasby meetings to the proposal to build on the Frankby Road site. At each public meeting, the Chief Fire Officer explained the financial challenges, the operational basis for the proposed fire station (including possible alternatives) and that the proposed site was being considered as it was not subject to any obvious planning restrictions. The Chief Fire Officer also made it clear that should a suitable alternative site be identified, where the special circumstances required to achieve planning consent for building on any Green Belt or Urban Green Space land could be met, then he would recommend that the Authority reconsider its draft proposal.

44. Many of those opposing the site made it clear that they had little concern for attendance times to West Kirby, preferring to retain the station at Upton to ensure that a new station wasn't built in Greasby. It is very clear that some people were unable to distinguish between the Authority's duty to provide fire cover and Wirral Council's duties in relation to planning and land use, and this will be considered in any future consultation process. Others understood the logic of building a new station in a central location to equalise attendance times between Upton and West Kirby, but objected to the use of the Frankby Road site.
45. In West Kirby, there was some concern about the possible closure of the fire station but also concern about the Greasby site which was expressed by Greasby residents that had attended the meeting. At the Upton and West Kirby meetings there were several Greasby residents present who repeated their concerns about the site.

Other meetings with interested groups and individuals

46. The Chief Fire Officer and other officers held a significant number of meetings with the local MP and councillors before and during the consultation period to ensure they were fully sighted on the proposals and the financial reasons as to why they were necessary. Meetings were also held with the Wirral Older People's Parliament, Heartbeat, Friends of Greasby Library and Greasby Community Centre. The library and community centre representatives opposed the proposal to locate a fire station on the Frankby Road site and were vociferous opponents. Other stakeholders understood the need for change, although not welcoming it.

Correspondence and requests for information

47. Unlike the Knowsley consultation, the Service received numerous individual requests for information and/or objections and complaints that were each responded to personally in detail by the Chief Fire Officer or other senior officers or were handled as Freedom of Information (FoI) requests. The correspondence dealt with such matters as response times, why the Greasby location had been proposed, why the cuts were necessary etc. Each request was different, even when the subject areas were similar and responses were thoroughly researched and considered. The vast majority of correspondence was from people who expressed that they were opposed to the Greasby site. As the site has been withdrawn, there is no benefit in including them as an appendix to this report, but they will be available for Members to view at the Authority meeting if required.

48. There were:

- 35 enquiries from members of the public
- 7 enquiries from local Councillors
- 1 enquiry sent by Cheshire Fire & Rescue Service on behalf of a member of the public who had contacted them regarding Heswall.

49. There were Freedom of Information requests dealing with:

- The exact location of proposed new Fire Station in Greasby
- Fire station closures and costs (Wirral/Greasby)
- Wirral Fire Station merger consultation information
- Response times average for proposed station in Greasby
- Criteria used for building a new station in Greasby
- Copies of correspondence between MFRS and Wirral Council regarding the proposed Fire Station in Greasby (two requests)
- Information on the proposed site for a Fire Station in Greasby
- Information relating to the pre-application planning advice for the proposed Fire Station in Greasby

Staff consultation

50. The Wirral District Management Team consulted with staff in the District during the consultation period. This included setting up a section of the Intranet Portal where relevant documents and information was posted for staff to access. Meetings took place between managers on the District and each watch where the Chief Fire Officer's public meeting presentation was used.

51. This resulted in crews having a full understanding of the proposals when they engaged with the public during the period (they also distributed consultation documentation). In general the staff, although not supportive of station closures themselves, understood the reasons behind the merger proposals. Some staff also attended the public meetings.

Equality and Diversity Implications

52. An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed and is attached at Appendix F.

Staff Implications

53. There are no staff implications arising from this report.

Legal Implications

54. It is considered that in carrying out the extensive twelve week consultation in the manner that it has, MFRA has fully complied with legal requirements and best practice guidelines.

55. There was one threat of Judicial Review regarding this proposal and this was responded to within the timescales required. No further action has ensued from this.

Financial Implications & Value for Money

56. The total costs associated with the consultation were as follows:

Room hire and refreshments - £937.60

British Sign Language interpreters - £418.95

Focus group and forum facilitation – £11,143.75

Architectural feasibility study for two different options & producing plans for the public meetings £6,244.20

Total - £18,744.50

This is much less than 1% of the capital cost of the project overall.

57. All costs were met from existing budgets and there was no additional (direct) cost arising from staff attendance at evening meetings.

58. As detailed above, it is considered that the deliberative forums offer value for money as it is considered that relying solely on open public meetings and the survey would not have provided Members with sufficient information about the views of the public of Wirral to enable them to make an informed decision about how to proceed.

Risk Management, Health & Safety, and Environmental Implications

59. It is considered that MFRA has reduced corporate risk by carrying out extensive consultation and considering the outcomes of that consultation before making any final decisions on the merger proposals. There are no health and safety or environmental implications arising from this report.

Contribution to Our Mission: *Safer Stronger Communities – Safe Effective Firefighters*

60. Entering into a period of twelve weeks meaningful consultation in Wirral has allowed the public and other stakeholders to carefully consider the implications of budget cuts on the Authority and contribute valuable opinions that will be considered by the Authority when it makes its final decision.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

GLOSSARY OF TERMS