

<b>MERSEYSIDE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY</b>			
<b>MEETING OF THE:</b>	<b>AUTHORITY</b>		
<b>DATE:</b>	<b>17 DECEMBER 2015</b>	<b>REPORT NO:</b>	<b>CFO/059/15</b>
<b>PRESENTING OFFICER</b>	<b>CHIEF FIRE OFFICER</b>		
<b>RESPONSIBLE OFFICER:</b>	<b>DEPUTY CHIEF FIRE OFFICER</b>	<b>REPORT AUTHOR:</b>	<b>DEB APPLETON</b>
<b>OFFICERS CONSULTED:</b>	<b>STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT GROUP</b>		
<b>TITLE OF REPORT:</b>	<b>ST HELENS CONSULTATION OUTCOMES</b>		

<b>APPENDICES:</b>	<b>APPENDIX 1: CONSULTATION DOCUMENT</b> <b>APPENDIX 2: STAFF AND STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION</b> <b>APPENDIX 3: PRESS ARTICLES</b> <b>APPENDIX 4: ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE OUTCOMES</b> <b>APPENDIX 5: FOCUS GROUPS/FORUM OUTCOMES</b> <b>APPENDIX 6: PUBLIC MEETING OUTCOMES</b> <b>APPENDIX 7: CORRESPONDENCE – PUBLIC</b> <b>APPENDIX 8: CORRESPONDENCE –COUNCILLORS</b> <b>APPENDIX 9: EIA FOR MERGERS AND CLOSURES</b>
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### **Purpose of Report**

1. To inform Members of the outcomes of the twelve week public consultation regarding the draft proposals to either merge St Helens and Eccleston fire stations at a new station on Canal Street, St Helens, or close Eccleston fire station outright and respond from St Helens. With both options it is proposed to re-designate one of the two existing wholetime appliances as "wholetime retained", available on a 30 minute recall.

### **Recommendation**

2. That Members;
  - a) note the outcomes of the comprehensive and informative St Helens public consultation
  - b) take full and carefully considered account of those outcomes when considering report CFO/094/15 relating to the possible future options for fire cover in St Helens

## **Introduction and Background**

3. The 12 week public consultation process commenced on 3<sup>rd</sup> August and concluded on 25<sup>th</sup> October. The consultation process was held in order for the Authority to gain an understanding of the views of the residents of St Helens over the proposal to merge St Helens and Eccleston fire stations at a new site at Canal St, St Helens or close Eccleston station outright. The details of the options considered are below:

The proposed merger of Eccleston and St Helens fire stations at a new station to be built on Canal Street, St Helens.

The re-designation of one of the two existing wholetime fire engines as “wholetime retained” (with a 30-minute recall) whilst;

Inviting suggestions for other suitable alternative options to deliver savings required as a result of further cuts to the Authority budget.

**OR:**

The outright closure of Eccleston fire station as the alternative to the merger.

The re-designation of one of the two existing wholetime appliances as “wholetime retained” (with a 30-minute recall) whilst;

Inviting suggestions for other suitable alternative options to deliver savings as a result of further cuts to the Authority budget.

4. The consultation included an online questionnaire, three externally facilitated deliberative focus groups (St Helens town centre and the St Helens and Eccleston station areas) and one forum (all-St Helens), three open public meetings (St Helens town centre, St Helens station area and Eccleston station area), a joint stakeholder meeting and several staff and individual stakeholder meetings. A summary of the outcomes of the consultation are set out below.

### **Summary of outcomes**

- **The vast majority of participants at the deliberative focus groups and forum agreed that the principle of merger was reasonable given the financial challenges facing the Authority (and was preferred to the outright closure of Eccleston).**
- **The Stakeholder (public/private sector) meeting was supportive of the merger proposal.**
- **Where an opinion was expressed on the proposed site for the new station (Canal St), there was general support for the location and some comments made in the questionnaire responses regarding potential design features.**
- **There was no significant opposition at the public meetings to the merger although attendees did express concern that the Authority had been placed**

**in the position of having to close any stations due to budget cuts and the reduced levels of service that would result from the cuts. The merger option was universally preferred over the option to close Eccleston outright.**

- **There were 64 responses to the online questionnaire (although not all respondents completed every question) and 82% of respondents agreed with the proposal to close St Helens and Eccleston and build a new station at Canal Street. 66% of respondents agreed with the proposal to make the second appliance wholetime retained, 82% supported community facilities at a new station and almost 92% felt a new station should be shared with other blue light services.**
- **Respondents made some suggestions for alternative means of making the savings which are included within this report and dealt with more fully in the operational response report also on this agenda.**
- **Consultation with staff showed a broad understanding of the need to make cuts but also resulted in comments and questions regarding operational and other matters that are responded to in the operational response report also on this agenda.**
- **Consultation with partner organisations currently using St Helens fire station showed that some would like to move to a new station should it be built.**
- **Rainford Parish Council and politicians were supportive of the proposal to build the new station as the least worst option for the area.**
- **There was some activity on social media that referred to not wanting Eccleston to close but also an understanding that budget cuts are out of the Authority's control.**

### **Promoting and marketing the consultation**

5. On 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2015 an initial consultation document and on-line survey were published on the Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority website (Appendix 1). Facebook, Twitter and a press release were used to launch the consultation. The consultation launch was reported by the St Helens Star and Liverpool Echo.
6. Consultation documentation was printed and distributed widely across the St Helens and Eccleston areas, at all consultation events, published on the Authority website and promoted via social media and the press. This included delivery, by hand, to 633 households in the Canal Street area. Consultation documents were placed in public buildings, local shops and businesses across the two station areas, (approx. 29 including libraries and shops).
7. Social media was frequently used by the Authority during the consultation period to direct people to information and encourage participation in the consultation

process. MFRS Twitter and Facebook accounts were extensively used.

8. The Station Manager for the affected stations consulted with staff in the area to explain the proposals and to seek their views. (Appendix 2)
9. The Station Manager also consulted with the partner organisations that currently occupy offices in St Helens fire station. (Appendix 2)

### **Media Interest**

10. The consultation process attracted media interest with the St Helens Star and Liverpool Echo reporting on developments. The Chief Fire Officer was interviewed on Radio Merseyside and Wish FM to promote the consultation process and the public meetings in particular. Examples of press articles can be found at Appendix 3.

### **The consultation events**

11. The consultation events that took place are detailed below. All the focus groups and public meetings took place in the evening.
  - **Eccleston station area focus group meeting** - Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> September - Cowley International College
  - **St Helens town centre focus group meeting** - Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup> September - St Helens Town Hall
  - **St Helens station area focus group meeting** - Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> September - St Augustine of Canterbury school
  - **Eccleston station area public meeting** - Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> September - Cowley International College
  - **St Helens station area public meeting** - Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> October - St Augustine of Canterbury
  - **St Helens town centre public meeting** - Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> October - St Helens Town Hall
  - **St Helens stakeholder meeting** - Friday 9<sup>th</sup> October - Chalon Court Hotel
  - **St Helens joint forum meeting** - Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> October - Newton-le-Willows Community Fire Station
12. The focus groups and forum were deliberative meetings, facilitated by Opinion Research Services (ORS) who are the contractor for the Authority's Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) Forums. Participants were randomly selected from the relevant areas and invited to attend.
13. The stakeholders' breakfast meeting was promoted amongst public and private

sector partners in St Helens.

14. The public meetings were open events 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. Questionnaires were available for completion at the meetings.
15. The stakeholder meeting and open public meetings were organised, promoted and delivered by Authority staff. Authority 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.
16. In addition, the Chief Fire Officer and other officers met with the local MPs and councillors during the consultation period.

## **Outcomes from the consultation**

### **On line questionnaire**

17. Full analysis of the online questionnaire results can be found at Appendix 4. The following paragraphs provide an overview:
  18. There were 64 responses to the online survey (not all respondents answered every question).
  19. A significant majority (82% or 51 out of 62) agreed with the proposal to close Eccleston and St Helens fire stations and build a new station at Canal St, St Helens. 81% (48 out of 59) disagreed with the proposal to close Eccleston station outright.
  20. When asked whether they agreed with the proposal to change the crewing of one of the two whole time appliances to whole time retained (available on a 30 minute recall to duty), 66%, or 37 out of 56 respondents agreed. 82% supported including community facilities at the station and almost 92% supported the possibility of sharing the proposed new station with other blue light services.
  21. When asked to suggest alternatives to the proposals, the following responses (reported verbatim) were received. These will be addressed in the St Helens operational response report also on this agenda:
    - Close Newton and 2 wholetime pumps at Parr Stock Road Fire Station
    - Continued reduction in back office costs/ review of approach to none "active" firefighters and their allocation of different roles for the future
    - Look at other revenue growth by taking on additional work that compliments the skills of your firefighters.
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- Consider renting / leasing the land where the current / old stations sit - would provide an income to MFRS. Reduce spend / don't prioritise "community facilities". Concentrate on your core competency of preventing and fighting fires
  - Make young people more an advertising priority in schools. Free fire alarms, therefore less emergencies, less money spent. Make half fire fighters "day time" only half full time
  - Ambulances using the site
  - Centralise all admin support services (i.e. finance, HR, purchasing, training) Outsource non-core activities
  - Reduce the amount of publicity and marketing. Remove cars and car allowances for senior officers. Flatten the command structure. Thumb your nose at the Chancellor.
22. Post code analysis shows that the vast majority of respondents (48 out of 62) live in the WA9 and WA10 post code areas. The majority of respondents live in the areas affected by the proposed changes.

### **Focus groups and forum**

23. Full information about the focus groups and forums can be found at Appendix 5. The following paragraphs provide an overview:
24. As Members will recall, the four public 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 the Authority in the context of significant cuts to its budget over the course of the last Parliament. This was followed by a full 12 week consultation in St. Helens from August to October 2015.
25. The four meetings (three focus groups and one forum) 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 37 diverse participants.
26. 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.
27. There was a diverse range of participants from the local areas.
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<b>Location (station area)</b>	<b>Type of meeting and number attending</b>
Eccleston Station Area	Focus Group - 7
Canal St area	Focus Group - 8
St Helens Station Area	Focus Group - 6
All St Helens	Forum - 16

28. 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 St Helens the opportunity to comment in detail on the Authority'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.
29. The meetings began with a short review of the background issues and the range of options considered by MFRA in order to reduce its expenditure. The introduction also showed how risk, measured in terms of the number of critical and other incidents, has reduced by more than half in nine years. Based on its population of about 1.4 million people, MFRA has more wholtime fire stations than any other area of the country, including London, and so each of its 25 stations (following the closure of Allerton station on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2015) covers a relatively small area.
30. The participants were also told that both options, when combined with the proposed crewing changes would save about £864,000 per annum by allowing up to 22 firefighter posts to be phased out, probably without the need for compulsory redundancies.
31. The meetings were informed explicitly about the potential impact on response times of closing two stations and covering their areas primarily with one full-time engine, either from the proposed Canal Street site or from St Helens (if Eccleston was closed without a merger).

### **All-St Helens Forum**

- After lengthy discussions, the forum of 16 was almost unanimous that the merger of two fire stations on the new Canal Street site would be the best of the options.
  - Only one person abstained when the balance of the meeting was taken.
  - Almost three-quarters of the participants also thought the merger proposal was reasonable in all the circumstances, with only one person objecting and four recorded as 'don't knows.'
  - Everyone agreed that Canal Street was an appropriate and suitable site for the proposed new station.
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- Finally, the forum of 16 was also almost unanimous that it was reasonable to re-classify the second fire engine as a reserve or resilience vehicle. Only one person was recorded as a 'don't know' on this issue.

### **Three Focus Groups (Eccleston, St Helens and Canal Street)**

- The three focus groups were overwhelmingly of the opinion that a merger of two fire stations on the new Canal Street site would be the best of the options.
- They also thought that the merger proposal is definitely reasonable in all the circumstances.
- A big majority thought that Canal Street is an appropriate and suitable site for the proposed new station.
- Finally, a large majority thought that, given the levels of risk, it was reasonable to re-classify the second fire engine as a reserve or resilience vehicle; but about a third of participants would prefer to keep the second vehicle deployed as normal.

### **Overall Conclusions**

- Clearly, the proposals for a merger of the two fire stations at Canal Street and the designation of the second fire engine as a reserve vehicle were approved in the consultation.
- Members are encouraged to read the full report at Appendix 5 for further detail on the outcomes.

### **Stakeholder meeting and open public meetings**

32. The format for the public and stakeholder meetings was a formal presentation by the Chief Fire Officer giving the reasons for the changes being proposed and details of the actual merger or closure process and its likely impact on the Authority's operational activities.
  33. This was followed by an invitation for people to ask questions of the Chief Fire Office. Appendix 6 details the questions raised at the meetings and the responses given.
  34. The Authority's two St Helens Councillors attended all three public meetings to hear the views of the attendees.
  35. The stakeholders meeting was attended by three people and generated a number of questions (see Appendix 6 for details).
  36. The public meetings were not particularly well attended with fewer than 10 members of the public attending at the Eccleston and St Helens Town Hall (town centre) meetings and only one person attending the St Helens station area meeting.
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37. In general, those attending the public meetings understood why the Authority was having to make changes and they were supportive of the proposal to close both stations and open a new station at Canal Street, but made it clear that they would prefer to maintain the current level of operational response in St Helens. Several of the attendees pointed out that Liverpool was much better provided for in terms of fire stations and asked why stations in Liverpool were not being closed before those in St Helens. Following discussions, they understood that the decision was based on the current availability of a grant to contribute to the building of a new station and that the Authority would have to return to Liverpool for further closures in the years to come.

### **Other meetings with staff and interested stakeholders, groups and individuals**

38. The Chief Fire Officer and other officers held meetings with the local politicians 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.
39. The St Helens Station Manager met with stakeholders who currently use the station at St Helens. A discussion was held with a representative of partner organisations using the station and the intent of the consultation was explained. A copy of the consultation document was provided for each partner, and they provided some feedback/comments. It was explained that if the move to Canal St was made the Authority could make no firm guarantees that each partner would be able to transfer with the current provision that they had at St Helens.
40. Partners had differing views on whether they would want to continue the relationship with MFRA at a new location and all their views will be considered further should the Authority decide to proceed with the option to build at Canal Street. The full details of the consultation can be found at Appendix 2.

### **Correspondence and requests for information**

41. The Service received far less requests for information and/or objections and complaints during this consultation compared to previous consultations elsewhere on Merseyside. These requests were each responded to personally and there were no related Freedom of Information (FoI) requests. The correspondence dealt with such matters as the impact on operational response and road conditions in the Canal Street area (the latter being a planning matter).
42. Rainford Parish Council responded to the consultation, supporting the option of merger at Canal St and Conor McGinn MP also responded to the consultation supportively, but declared some concerns:

*“Whilst unhappy with the closure of any station, I welcome the proposal for a new build station in St Helens. However, I share concerns that the second fire engine will be crewed by whole-time retained firefighters and the potential impact this will have on response times, especially at periods of high demand. I am also concerned at the impact on community safety services and potential consequences in terms of heightening the risk of fire, I therefore welcome the targeting of*

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*resources towards those at greatest risk.”*

43. There was also some correspondence with councillors which can be found at Appendices 7 and 8.

### **Staff consultation**

44. The St Helens Station Manager consulted with staff in the area during the consultation period. Staff engaged well with the process and were generally positive. They accepted that change was necessary but brought up some areas of concern that often mirrored those raised at public consultations and responded to by the Chief Fire Officer at those meetings. Details are contained in Appendix 2; the following are summary examples:
- What will happen to the personnel at Eccleston?
  - Why would both Eccleston and Whiston close immediately while Prescott and Canal St had not been built?
  - Some commented that the language in the documents felt disingenuous (it is not a merger but a closure)
  - The cuts appear to hit the St Helens and Knowsley areas more than elsewhere
  - There was concern by a few about the 2<sup>nd</sup> pump attendance times to any significant incident in the area.
  - There were questions about the size of the site, facilities on a new station and possible timescales
  - A few people thought that cuts to St Helens and station movement would likely impact upon the most deprived areas of St Helens.
  - Why had Rainford not been given specific consultation venues/dates, given they would likely be affected by the proposal. Note - the consultation meetings were based in the two existing station areas and the proposed area, Rainford is in the Eccleston station area.

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### **Equality and Diversity Implications**

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45. The updated Equality Impact Assessment has been completed and is attached at Appendix 9.

In summary: attendees at consultation meetings were 46% Female and 54% Male attendees- this closely reflects the Gender breakdown for the St Helens as a whole. 22% were under 34's, 40% were 35-54 and 38% were over 55+ - this reflected the broad range of age groups across the area. 19% of attendees had a limiting long term illness /disability – this is slightly lower than the average for St Helens (22%). No attendees identified themselves as being from Non White backgrounds, the breakdown for St Helens for Non White residents is 3%, therefore had we been able to select ethnicity specifically for our forums to match the local population of St Helens it would have equated to 1 person attending from a Non White British back ground.

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46. The figures above reflect the average profile of residents across St Helens and this allows us to feel comfortable that the views of different groups of people have been considered when using the consultation for decision making purposes.
47. While considering the draft proposals, participants in all the meetings were encouraged to consider whether proposals have any adverse implications for any vulnerable people and in particular groups with “protected characteristics”: in other words, this question was not just a ‘footnote’ to the main discussion but an intrinsic part of the scrutiny of the proposals. There were no issues raised by any of the 37 participants about any particular group being more or less disadvantaged by the proposals.
48. A total of 64 responses to the consultation questionnaire were received, the questionnaires were treated as an information gathering exercise, in the same way as the views expressed at the public meetings, the questionnaires have been analysed in terms of Equality Monitoring (61 completed) and shows:
- 61% were Male and 39% Female respondents which shows a slightly lower proportion of Female when compared to the gender breakdown of the Census 2011.
  - There were a wide range of ages responding to the survey, the largest group of respondents - 29%, were from the 50 to 59 age group , The age groups to submit the fewest questionnaires were the extremes of the age spectrum with 19 year or younger having 3 respondents and over 80 age group having 2 respondents
  - 16.9% ( 10 ) identified themselves as disabled ,which is a little lower than the average for St Helens 22.5%
  - 94.8 % identified their ethnicity as white, one respondent identified themselves as from a BME background, this equates to 1.6 %. When benchmarked against ethnicity data taken from the 2011 Census , 96.6% of St Helens population was recorded as white , therefore the % of valid responses to the survey are in line with the demographics of St Helens as a whole.
  - There were no obvious comments made in relation to Equality and Diversity in the free text comments made or to any particular protected group being affected positively or disproportionately with any of the proposals.
  - There were no comments referring to specific equality impacts or issues for the 9 protected groups, with the exception of feedback through the staff consultation. Staff raised concerns about the moving the station from Parr which is significantly deprived area of St Helens and the impact that may have on the local community.
49. Stakeholders were also consulted through individual meetings, specifically those who utilise St Helens station regularly for community group activity. The feedback did not identify any particular negative issues in relation to protected groups. It did highlight some positive feedback in relation to the possibility of a new station being
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more inclusive and accessible for disabled users, a problem for St Helens currently due to the age and layout of the building.

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### **Staff Implications**

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50. St Helens and Headquarters staff have been engaged throughout the process. They contributed to the planning and delivery of the consultation and were instrumental in engaging with the public, distributing information, attending public meetings and answering questions.

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### **Legal Implications**

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51. 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.

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### **Financial Implications & Value for Money**

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

Room hire and refreshments - £882.40  
British Sign Language interpreters - £305.00  
Focus group and forum facilitation – £10,870.00  
Total – £12,057.40

53. All costs were met from existing budgets and there was no additional (direct) cost arising from staff attendance at evening meetings.
54. As detailed in the report, it is considered that the deliberative forums offer value for money as it is considered that relying solely on open public meetings would not have provided Members with sufficient information about the views of the public to enable them to make an informed decision about how to proceed.

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### **Risk Management, Health & Safety, and Environmental Implications**

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55. It is considered that MFRA has reduced corporate risk by carrying out extensive meaningful 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.

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

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56. Entering into a period of twelve weeks meaningful consultation in St Helens 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.

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### **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

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## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

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