

**WEST MIDLANDS FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY**

**25<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER 2006**

1. **CONSULTATION RESPONSE TO THE DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT ON THE REVOCATION OF THE DEVON FRA COMBINATION SCHEME TO ALLOW FOR THE COMBINATION OF DEVON AND SOMERSET FRAs**

Report of the Chief Fire Officer.

RECOMMENDED

THAT the Authority approve the proposed consultation response to the above, attached as Appendix 2 to this report.

2. **PURPOSE OF REPORT**

This report is submitted to give a response by the Authority to the Department for Communities and Local Government in respect of consultation about the revocation of the Devon FRA combination scheme to allow for the combination of Devon and Somerset FRAs.

3. **BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 Fire and Rescue Service Circular 43/2006 invites FRAs to respond to consultation on the revocation of the Devon FRA combination scheme to allow for the combination of Devon and Somerset FRAs by the consultation deadline of 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2006.
- 3.2 In June 2006, Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Authorities submitted a business case to the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and a draft proposal for a voluntary merger between the two Authorities. Any orders to revoke the combination scheme for Devon FRA and create a new combined FRA would be subject to parliamentary approval.
- 3.3 As part of the DCLG's consideration of that business case and draft proposals, they are consulting all relevant parties in accordance with Section 4(5) of the Fire and Rescue Services' Act 2004 (the 2004 Act) on the revocation of the Devon FRA combination scheme.

3.4 Comments on the revocation of the Devon FRA combination scheme are invited, to be received by the DCLG no later than 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2006. In particular, the DCLG would welcome any thoughts and comments FRAs may have on:

- any operational/public safety implications;
- the financial implications;
- the strategic implications; and
- the governance arrangements proposed.

3.5 Attached as a Appendix 1 to this report are the consultation details provided by the DCLG, whilst attached at Appendix 2 is a draft response that it is proposed that this Authority send back to the DCLG by 2<sup>nd</sup> October deadline.

#### 4. **EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

In preparing this report an initial Equality Impact Assessment is not required and has not been carried out. This is because the impact of the proposals in this report affect neither the function nor policies of this Authority or any of the communities served by this Authority.

#### 5. **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

The course of action recommended in this report does not raise issues which should be drawn to the attention of the Authority's Monitoring Officer.

#### 6. **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no direct financial implications for this Authority arising from this consultation exercise.

### **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Fire and Rescue Services' Circular 43/2006

F. J. E. SHEEHAN  
CHIEF FIRE OFFICER

**PROPOSED RESPONSE OF**  
**THE WEST MIDLANDS FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY (WMFRA)**  
**TO THE PROPOSAL REGARDING THE COMBINATION OF**  
**DEVON FRA AND SOMERSET FRA**

**Operational/Safety Implications**

It is difficult to comment in detail regarding the convergence of integrated risk management proposals but any combination is likely to identify a better use of resources, by eliminating boundary overlaps of resources. The increased resource capabilities give a greater opportunity for prevention and protection work which should be at the forefront of risk reduction.

Initially, the WMFRA would expect that the transitional phase would concentrate on support services and enabling governance. This would give more time for a fully reflective and consultative integrated risk management process, which should help to minimise the risk associated with operational assurance.

Maintaining the existing control rooms until their replacement by the regional control centre would also seem sensible in terms of reducing operational risk.

Because of the changes already implemented by the WMFRA, this Authority is supportive of the areas proposed for joint working arising from any such merger, as set out in paragraph 74 of the consultation document. Station location and rostering all need to be reviewed as part of the modernising agenda as well as the emphasis being placed on prevention and protection work with intervention (response) being the last resort.

**Financial Implications**

The WMFRA supports the idea that within the business case is the key benefit of increasing organisational capacity. Not only would capacity be likely to increase but so would resilience and potentially the ability to attract and retain staff.

Obviously there would be some change and set up costs but the fact that the financial analysis shows there would be a net benefit of £3 M in under five years, with self-funding from the first year of combination, would appear to make good business sense.

Clearly there needs to be more work on the impact on council tax implications for banded properties, however, given the net saving of £3 M in five years, this at least gives some scope for precept reductions.

The local government settlement proposals appear to be logical in terms of their timing and phasing being dependent on the timing of any merger.

**Strategic Implementation**

The combined use of resourcing across a range of support functions should lead to a greater use of expertise and better utilisation of training facilities, property and improvements in procurement.

The only caveat the WMFRA would make is that the change should be undertaken using a recognised project management methodology, e.g. PRINCE2, to minimise the two major change risks of the project, namely overrun and increasing project cost or the reduced deliverable of a reduction in costs.

Paragraph 61 provides a reasoned and logical case for the strategic change. Again the WMFRA's only concern is the need to ensure deliverance of the proposed benefits.

### **Governance Arrangements Proposed**

Clearly the issue of capacity was revealed in Somerset's CPA ranking of "fair" with the main weaknesses of governance and management where resources are stretched.

Although Devon received a "good" rating, the CPA process identified improvements needed in respect of increasing the pace of change and the development of project management skills. The WMFRA would acknowledge the need for a larger structure in the first year to manage the change and would support the efficiencies being achieved over time via natural wastage and there being a "no compulsory redundancy" policy.

The constitutional arrangements appear proportionate to the electoral role and whilst 25 Elected Members might appear high to represent a population of 1.2 million, the viability in respect of the smaller councils is noted.

In the structure chart it is noted that there are three area commands. Having been through a number of organisational changes, the WMFRA would support the need for some form of area command structure in a combined FRA of the size proposed.

### **Conclusions**

It is the view of the WMFRA that any decision regarding the combination of one or more FRAs should be based on a business need supported by a sound business case. A one-size fits all approach rarely works in organisational terms and the optimum for a structure for an FRA is probably best determined on practical and functional issues arising from the Best Value philosophy of "what matters is what works". Manageability concepts, such as spans of control, are key to the performance of all organisations. Organisations that are too large, covering too many diverse areas, tend to be difficult to manage. Good communication is stressed by so many people as being vital to all organisations. It is difficult to consistently achieve this, even with the latest technologies; face to face communication and clear signs of ownership by management are sought after not only by employees but those who inspect the service.

The CPA evidence showed that, overall, better resourced FRAs were found to perform more strongly, with smaller authorities suffering from capacity restraints.

In summary, the WMFRA is supportive of this combination of Devon FRA and Somerset FRA, as it believes that the capacity and resilience issues that it addresses are appropriate to the circumstances of the existing FRAs.