



Department for
Communities and
Local Government

Local merger of Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Authorities

Government response to consultation



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Department for Communities and Local Government
Fry Building
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF
Telephone: 030 3444 0000

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Summary

1. The Secretary of State has consulted on the locally-led proposals to combine Dorset and Wiltshire and Swindon fire and rescue authorities. The consultation began 17 December 2014 and closed on 28 January 2015. This followed the result of the two authorities' own consultation on these proposals which took place between 21st July and 20th October 2014. This report sets out the Secretary of State's response and next steps.

Introduction

2. On 17 December 2014, the Department for Communities and Local Government published the consultation paper 'Combined fire and rescue authority for Dorset and Wiltshire'. The consultation can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/combined-fire-and-rescue-authority-for-dorset-and-wiltshire>
3. The consultation was initiated by a joint formal application from Dorset and Wiltshire and Swindon fire and rescue authorities to the Secretary of State requesting an order to be made under sections 2 and 4 of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 to:
 - revoke the Dorset Fire Services (Combination Scheme) Order 1996, and
 - revoke the Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Services (Combination Scheme) Order 1996, in order that
 - a single fire and rescue authority be created for the combined area of the Dorset Fire Authority and the Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority on 1 April 2016.
4. Dorset Fire Authority and Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Authority presented the Secretary of State with a draft scheme and business case for combination together with a summary of the responses to a consultation with key stakeholders run by the authorities between 24 July and 20 October 2014; these can be found at:

<http://www.dorsetfire.gov.uk/working-with-us/about-us/dorset-fire-authority/dfa-archive-meetings/2014-archived-dfa-papers/>

<http://www.wiltshirefire.gov.uk/strengtheningourfrs>

5. The authorities are seeking a voluntary merger on the grounds that:
 - It will deliver savings and improve resilience. The authorities estimate they can save £4.5million a year by merging
 - It will strengthen local accountability
 - It will create a safe, strong and sustainable fire and rescue service for the counties of Dorset and Wiltshire
 - The new combined authority will work better with police, ambulance and partners at a local level, with greater resources to offer.
6. On the basis of Dorset and Wiltshire and Swindon fire and rescue authorities' business case and having regard to the consultation undertaken by the two authorities, the Secretary of State was content to hold a consultation in accordance with The Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004.

Our Policy

7. There are many ways that local authorities can work together to save money and improve services, but there is equally no one-size-fits-all model either. This Government does not believe in top-down restructuring. Nor does it agree with the current proposals floated by some to force more mergers.
8. The failed FireControl programme is a prime example of how such restructuring is expensive and distracting. Rather, we will support locally-led partnerships, where there is genuine support from all members of the local community, and the consultation tested this local support.

Overview of Responses

9. A total of 21 responses were received to the proposals set out in the consultation document. The majority were from local authorities but a number of key representative bodies and individuals also submitted their views. 19 out of the 21 responses supported the merger proposals with 1 against. 1 respondent did not specifically comment on the proposals but took the opportunity to express more general concern about funding reductions to the fire service.

10. Of the 21 representations:

- 4 were from borough councils
- 1 from a unitary council
- 1 from a parish council
- 1 from a county council
- 2 were from district councils
- 5 from representative bodies
- 1 from a fire and rescue authority
- 3 from local MPs
- 1 from a Police and Crime Commissioner
- 1 from the Ambulance Service
- 1 from an individual

11. The consultation asked three questions. The first two questions invited comments on the revocation of Dorset and Wiltshire and Swindon fire and rescue services. The third question sought views about merging the two authorities.

Question 1. Do you agree that the proposed revocation of the Dorset Fire Services (Combination Scheme) Order 1996, is in the interests of

- **Economy;**
- **Efficiency and effectiveness**
- **and Public Safety**

12. The three main constituent authorities in Dorset (Bournemouth Borough Council, Borough of Poole, Dorset County Council) who are required to agree to the proposed merger under the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, were satisfied that Dorset fire and rescue authority had undertaken due diligence with regard to the assessment of options and the fire authority's preferred option of combination with Wiltshire and Swindon fire and rescue authority. The majority of other respondents also agreed to the fire authority's proposals.

13. Question 2: Do you agree that the proposed revocation of the Wiltshire and Swindon Fire Services (Combination Scheme) Order 1996, is in the interests of

- **Economy;**
- **Efficiency and effectiveness**

- **and Public Safety**

14. The two main constituent authorities (Swindon Borough Council and Wiltshire Council) initially had concerns about the merger. However, following assurances received from the fire authorities, Swindon Borough Council and Wiltshire Council both subsequently supported the fire authority's proposals.

15. **Question 3: Do you agree that the proposed merger of Dorset and Wiltshire and Swindon fire authorities is in the interests of:**

- **Economy;**
- **Efficiency and effectiveness**
- **and Public Safety?**

16. All local authorities who responded supported the merger of the two authorities. Of the three local MPs who responded, two supported the proposals and one did not.

Government Response

17. The Secretary of State has carefully considered all the responses received to the proposals and recognises that the overwhelming majority of responses are in favour of the proposed merger. The merger proposals are a good example of collaboration at the local level which will protect and strengthen frontline services - the merger will save the authorities £4.5million a year.

18. The Secretary of State supports voluntary mergers between fire and rescue authorities where it is in the interests of economy, efficiency and effectiveness and public safety.

19. Taking all matters into account, the Secretary of State is satisfied that the revocation of the two authorities has satisfied the statutory tests and is in the interests of economy, efficiency and effectiveness and public safety. The Secretary of State, therefore, has agreed to Dorset and Wiltshire and Swindon fire and rescue authorities' request to combine their two authorities.

20. The Fire Minister, Penny Mordaunt MP, signed the Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Authority (Combination Order) 2015 on 2 March 2015 and the

Order (Statutory Instrument 2015/435) was laid in Parliament on 4 March 2015. The Order will come into force on 1 April 2015 for certain purposes and the two fire and rescue authorities will formally combine on 1 April 2016.