

Consultation response from Herefordshire Council to the Police and Crime Commissioner's proposals on fire governance in the West Mercia area

Consultation question 1: The Police and Crime Commissioner is proposing to take on governance of local fire services in Herefordshire, Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin and Worcestershire. This would result in:

- Estimated £4 million annual savings through improved efficiencies.
- Closer collaboration between police and fire services.
- Improved resilience for ensuring public services.
- No changes to frontline officers or services
- A system of a directly elected Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner.

Do you support these proposals?

No. Not in their current form.

Consultation question 2: What are the main reasons for your answer to question 1?

Financial considerations

Response 1: Herefordshire Council is entirely supportive of enabling public services to work more efficiently and effectively together where there is a sound business case for doing so and the impacts on service provision are clear. However, the projected financial savings estimated by the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) of £4M per year through improved efficiencies appear to be somewhat misleading in their presentation. The PCC provided clarification during the presentation of evidence to Herefordshire Council's General Scrutiny Committee that the projected savings were not wholly additional but included those identified in the efficiency plans, which run through to 2020, for both Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service and Herefordshire and Worcestershire Fire and Rescue Service¹.

Response 2: The PCC has noted that under current proposals there may be an impact on some roles from across the four organisations affected (including Warwickshire Police through the alliance). The outline business case identifies that some 628 employees, 11% of the combined total, are employed in these areas which cover Chief Officers and their Deputies, Transformation, Alliance Working, Business Support and Estates, HR, Training, Transport, ICT, Strategic and Operational Planning, Legal, and Internal Audit. The PCC asserts that through consolidation of structures, integration, transformational process redesign and more effective use of information, this number can be reduced by around 25% to about 474 (or 8.5% of the combined total) over three years. By our calculation, this equates to 154 jobs in total.

There is no detail of what it would cost to reduce the workforce numbers in the PCC's initial business case. It is not possible, therefore, to know whether these costs have been taken into account in the projected £4M savings outlined by the PCC. The independent report commissioned by Shropshire and Wrekin and Herefordshire and Worcestershire Fire Authorities draws a similar observation. It notes that there is a lack of clear evidence to reconcile the declared savings with the options proposed without significant headcount reductions. They go further to note that any transition of this scale has transition costs, none of which have been stated in this business case.

¹ Herefordshire and Worcestershire Fire Authority efficiency Plan can be viewed [here](#) and Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority efficiency plan can be found [here](#)

Response 3: The independent report compiled on behalf of Shropshire and Wrekin and Hereford and Worcester Fire Authorities asserts that an area omitted from the PCC's initial business case is consideration of tax receipts and precepting. A concern had been raised about the 'normalisation' of precepts which would lead to an increase in the Herefordshire precept of around 10% with no identifiable increase in service level. In reply to a direct question in this regard, the PCC stated that there would be no change to the Herefordshire precepts as a result of this proposed change. Herefordshire Council welcomes this commitment; but recognises the potential for such an increase inherent in the proposal.

Service resilience.

Response 4: Herefordshire Council does not have full confidence in the PCC's initial business case. Concerns have been raised in the independent report for the fire authorities, that some of the staff identified by the PCC as potentially reducing by 25% may also have dual roles as frontline fire and rescue officers. Until further information is presented on this proposal in the more detailed business case, which the PCC will need to set out after the initial consultation period has ended, it is not clear as to the impacts on service resilience. Herefordshire Council notes with some concern that the more detailed business case is outside of the scope of this consultation.

Response 5: The proposed changes to governance represent a shift in representation from 42 locally based ward councillors on the two fire authorities, to the single PCC. Herefordshire Council questions whether service resilience across three large rural counties is best served by one individual as opposed to the current arrangements where local councillors, who have intrinsic knowledge of their local wards, can represent local community concerns very effectively. Herefordshire Council would also draw attention to the very low voter turn-out (20.7%) for the PCC election in 2016². Of the votes cast, the current PCC received 83,619 votes, equating to 60% of the total votes cast.

The PCC appears to acknowledge this weakness in his proposal in suggesting *"the adoption of advisory support to the PCC to ensure understanding of those things which matter to individuals and local communities."* He has invited leaders of the four top tier authorities to put forward suggestions to him of how this support might be provided; but as they remain unidentified the costs of any such arrangements remain unquantifiable.

Response 6: The PCC argues that abolishing Herefordshire and Worcestershire and Shropshire and Wrekin fire authorities would generate savings of £570k. Those savings, while acknowledged to be modest, would allow for more wide ranging reform and efficiencies to be made. These in turn would allow for greater prioritisation to front line services. The PCC asserts that this would strengthen resilience in ensuring Public Safety by all three organisations, principally through shared governance and maximizing joint working and collaboration. In addition, that new technology would offer potential for extending collaboration and many of the initiatives already in course of delivery will create potential for Police and Fire to function more flexibly and cohesively.

The PCC contests that he is better placed, as a directly elected individual, to drive through change, arguing more rapid progress could be made by focussing on the rationalisation of 'back office' staff while safeguarding the frontline services that the public value so highly. The fire authorities contend that the proposed rate of change would be damaging, the change of governance would be disruptive, un-costed and the collaborative working practices that are described as working well, placed under threat.

² Please see: <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7595/CBP-7595.pdf>

In hearing witness statements made by the PCC and the fire authorities, we have found a lack of compelling evidence to suggest that current collaborative efforts are a material barrier to maintaining transformative change. It seems to be an un-necessary risk to service resilience to make these changes now and with such haste.

Levels of collaboration

Response 7: Herefordshire Council would argue, from a neutral perspective, that a healthy relationship between the PCC and the fire authorities exists. This was asserted by both the PCC and the fire authorities to the general scrutiny committee. It appears to be a relationship where challenge and cooperation work constructively toward making the necessary reforms required to our frontline services.

A principal question Herefordshire Council remains un-convinced by is - why such a radical shake up is required? The PCC has stated that *'if any change were to arise from the exploration of this business case then shared development of that change and engagement and collaboration by all parties throughout the process would best support its implementation'*. Further that *'It is important to state that there is no criticism offered of the performance of the existing governance or organisations in their current form. We have not become aware of deficiencies in any dimension of their performance which would cause us to consider that there is a failure or risk of failure to overcome'*.

A further lack of clarity exists in regard to the 'barriers', noted in the PCCs initial business case, to further collaboration and cooperation. References to barriers are generalised in their context and rarely described in clear detail. Through hearing witness statements and responses to questioning, it is clear that significant common ground exists between the PCC and the FRA. The principle of closer working; co-location; joint and national procurement already being in place with fire and rescue authorities; rationalisation where appropriate, and a growing culture of 'blue light services' and 'support services' focused on prevention and public safety are a common and primary aim.

We draw the West Mercia PCC attention to the recent developments made by the Sussex PCC where strengthened collaboration between the police and regional fire services is seen as the most appropriate way forward. The Sussex PCC will maintain current governance structures without seeking to make changes to fire authority arrangements, a position proposed and evidenced by an independent review of current arrangements. The Sussex PCC and the fire authorities set out a [shared, open and honest agenda for transformational change](#).

Importantly, the Sussex PCC, sensibly, in our view, has built in a two year review period to assess how the current arrangement is working. With a new national inspection regime³ and scrutiny measures providing further assurances to the public that their frontline services are working as effectively as possible. We would argue that the arrangement Sussex PCC is developing presents less risk to disrupting and slowing the transformational change that both the fire authorities and the PCC are currently delivering in the West Mercia area.

Replacing the existing Fire and Rescue Authorities.

³ The Government is committed to establishing a rigorous and independent inspection regime for fire and rescue in England. These provisions will strengthen the existing (currently dormant) inspection framework provided for in the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 ("the 2004 Act"). The 2004 Act will be amended to enable fire inspectors to enter premises, obtain information, and undertake joint inspections with HM Inspectors of Constabulary. These provisions will put beyond doubt the powers of inspectors to access the information they need to undertake a robust examination of fire and rescue services including, if necessary, without services' consent.

The independent report compiled on behalf of Shropshire and Wrekin and Herefordshire and Worcestershire Fire Authorities asserts that, *‘capitalising on the limited risk associated with closer fire-to-fire collaboration can bring forward political and professional resources together to focus on a common goal. They suggest that ‘considerable progress can be made in exploiting opportunities without compromising democratic accountability’.*

Response 8: Herefordshire remains unconvinced that there is a strong case made by the PCC about the benefits arising from the replacement of the existing fire authorities. There is acknowledgment by the PCC that neither fire authority is a ‘failing entity’ and that both authorities, under proposed reforms, would retain their current identities. Furthermore, both authorities already work collaboratively and are subject to, for example, the same national standards of procurement to ensure financial efficiencies are realised. The current track record of the fire authorities in reducing fire incidence by 40% in the last decade appears to demonstrate a credible track record of delivering improvement to public safety.

Other – please specify

Response 9: Herefordshire Council is concerned with this consultation process in that, as a statutory consultee, we are being asked to comment on what we know to be incomplete information. The PCC has indicated that should he formally put his proposals forward to Government it will be accompanied by a more detailed business case. The PCC has not yet made a detailed business case available but it is clear that it will be outside of the scope of this consultation. In this regard, Herefordshire Council feels the consultation process is somewhat disingenuous. We believe the PCC is missing an opportunity to meaningfully engage and consult on current proposals. The risk of agreeing to these proposals as they stand is greater, in our view, than remaining with current operational practices.

Response 10: Assessing the strength of the PCCs initial business case against the government’s own tests.

- **Economy:** The PCC has not made a strong economic case for change based on the evidence presented. The claimed financial saving of £4m per annum is misleading – it includes financial savings committed to already by the fire authorities in their plans.
- **Efficiency:** A lack of clarity exists in this regard – we don’t believe a strong case has been presented for a more efficient ‘governance’ arrangement. The PCC has said this will be set out in the more detailed business case which has not been shared with statutory consultees. Without seeing the more detailed case, it is not possible to fully assess the benefits/dis-benefits of the PCCs proposals. Meanwhile, the fire authorities have put forward costed efficiency plans and the promise of continued collaboration on new initiatives coming forward.
- **Effectiveness:** The PCC initial business case suggested a directly elected individual is better placed to drive through change with a focus on rationalisation of ‘back office’ functions. This in turn would focus attention on supporting the frontline services that the public value so highly. The fire authorities contend that the proposed rate of change would be damaging, and the change of governance would be disruptive. It is acknowledge by the PCC that the present governance arrangements of the Fire and Rescue Services are currently effective.

Given these competing perspectives, we would argue that the arrangement the Sussex PCC is developing presents a more coherent way forward. This approach exhibits less risk to disrupting and slowing the transformational change that both the

fire authorities and the PCC are currently delivering in the West Mercia area, while also allowing for review periods to be built in to ongoing arrangements.

- **Public Safety:** On a purely practical level, Herefordshire Council would advocate that changing current governance structures should be secondary to the priority of extending wider collaborative working. For example, with local authorities, the ambulance service (which we appreciate the PCC is also keen to include in more collaborative working), healthcare providers, social care, social housing and other frontline agencies such as the Environment Agency. As a rural county, with an ageing population and with key areas prone to flood risk our health care systems, our flood management responses and housing increasingly need to consider public safety. Currently, the PCCs proposals make no mention of extending collaboration in these areas.