



Wyre Forest Transformation Funding and Other Issues

**Preliminary Listening and Engagement
Forums with members of the public
and operational staff**

Opinion Research Services
Spin-out company of Swansea University



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We thank Hereford & Worcester Fire & Rescue Service (H&WFRS) for commissioning the project and we particularly thank Mark Preece and Jean Cole who attended the sessions to listen and helpfully answer many questions by the staff and public. Such meetings benefit considerably from the readiness to answer participants' questions fully and frankly, as in this case.

We are grateful to all the Wyre Forest staff and members of the public who took part in the meetings and shared their views readily with us. They were patient in listening to background information before entering positively into the spirit of open discussions about challenging topics, with some controversial aspects in some cases.

At all stages of the project, ORS's status as an independent organisation facilitating the listening and engagement as fairly as possible was recognised and respected. We are grateful for the trust, and we hope this report will contribute usefully to thinking about H&WFRS's development in difficult times. We hope also that ORS has been instrumental in continuing to strengthen H&WFRS's public engagement.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

1. ORS was commissioned by Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service (H&WFRS) to convene and facilitate a programme of eight deliberative forums in the Wyre Forest area in order to review wide-ranging options in connection with the Fire Authority's successful bid for substantial transformation funding from the government. Separate forums were held with wholetime and retained operational staff at Bewdley, Kidderminster and Stourport fire stations, and there was also a forum with members of the public drawn from all three areas of Wyre Forest.
2. This was not formal consultation about draft proposals, but instead a 'pre-consultation' or 'listening and engagement' stage in which staff and members of the public were invited to deliberate about a range of issues in order to contribute to the development of possible operational options for the area.
3. In total, 22 randomly selected members of the public met in one forum, while 19 wholetime firefighters from Kidderminster fire station and 27 retained firefighters drawn from Bewdley (8), Kidderminster (5) and Stourport (14) met in seven other forums.
4. This executive summary report concisely reviews the participants' views about H&WFRA's options for the Wyre Forest area, but cannot do justice to the detail and reasons for people's opinions – so readers are encouraged also to consult the full report following this summary.

Members of the Public

Introduction

5. The 22 randomly selected members of the public were drawn from across the whole Wyre Forest area attended a lengthy forum for a detailed review of the fire and rescue service and its resources and roles.
6. The Wyre Forest forum members were much better informed about their fire and rescue service than many people elsewhere – that is, their 'guesstimates' in relation to some important financial and risk information were always within 'reasonable' limits. Nonetheless, while some were very accurate indeed, most tended to: underestimate the crewing costs of a 24/7 fire engine; over-estimate the budget of their fire and rescue service; have little idea of how much council tax precept a Band D household pays for its H&WFRA; and radically over-estimate the number of fire deaths per year across Hereford and Worcester.
7. However, they were broadly accurate in assuming that H&WFRA's average response times to critical emergency incidents is between 7 and 15 minutes, with most people assuming it is 10 to 15 minutes. They also knew the importance of having working smoke detectors in their homes.

Implications of reduced funding

8. The participants had a range of priorities for how the budget gap should be closed – including ‘fire-fire’ and ‘blue light’ collaboration, increasing council tax and rebalancing emergency cover resources more accurately to match actual current and likely levels of risk.
9. Overall, in the context of the risk and incident information presented to the forum, many participants thought that safe operational changes could probably yield much greater savings than collaboration, at least in the medium term.
10. In this context, the main priorities for making savings were (in order of priority): management and back-office savings; day crewing on appropriate wholetime stations; fire station mergers (including hub stations); and increased use of RDS resources with corresponding reductions in wholetime cover.

Emergency Services Hub Station

11. Opinions in the forum tended to polarise between two options – with a minority favouring a ‘three-into-one centralised hub station’ at Kidderminster, but the majority favouring what they saw as a ‘lesser merger’ of Stourport and Bewdley while keeping the current Kidderminster station as now. Supporters of the Stourport/Bewdley merger outnumbered supporters of the three-into-one hub by two-to-one.
12. Of course, it is hard to judge if the majority of supporters took full account of the importance of the availability of the transformation funding, but they were prepared for at least some change to the existing stations.

Kidderminster wholetime firefighters

Attitudes toward change

13. Most of the four watches were surprised and ‘impressed’ by the service data demonstrating the big reductions in risk (when measured in terms of the number of critical and other incidents) that have taken place over the last decade (as well as previously).
14. In general, participants were reluctant to see changes made to the traditional wholetime duty system, for they felt it has big advantages for them relative to other possible duty systems. They were also reluctant to concede that financial constraints might require adjustments to traditional patterns of emergency cover, or to consider possible reductions in current operational resources.
15. Whereas some accepted that big reductions in community risk could in principle enable some reductions in operational resources, others insisted that no emergency cover resources should be reduced.

Implications of reduced funding

16. Overall, the wholetime firefighters were not very familiar with the financial position of H&WFRS over the next three to five years. Overall, there was a mixture of pessimism and hope that change might yet be avoided.
17. Whereas some wholetime firefighters hoped for council tax increases or additional income in order to avoid operational reductions, they accepted (once it was pointed out) that council tax precept increases are restricted and unable to generate large sums of additional income.
18. The wholetime firefighters were opposed to reductions in H&WFRS's preventative and educational work in the community.
19. They were more prepared to see the retained (RDS) service reduced, particularly at Bewdley, rather than the wholetime service. They also said that Ross and/or Whitchurch and/or Fownhope are very quiet and might not be viable.
20. There was a general feeling that collaboration with other emergency services was a 'good idea' in principle for operational and financial reasons. They were happy with the prospect of greater collaboration with other fire authorities because they believed it would bring savings in support services rather than in operations. They supported more collaboration with Warwickshire and/or Shropshire. In order to make savings, the wholetime firefighters prioritised the following options:
 - Fire-fire collaboration
 - Increasing revenue by a range of more commercial options and charging for some services
 - 'Blue light' collaboration
 - Reducing the number of retained fire engines
 - Introducing day crewing plus at Kidderminster.

21. They probably assumed that savings could be generated through collaboration more quickly than might be the case; and they probably under-estimated the obstacles to radical collaboration or mergers; but their vision of future options was quite radical:
22. The list above should not be taken to imply that the day crewing plus (DCP) system is 'popular' at Kidderminster, but it was deemed by at least some firefighters as more acceptable than some more unpalatable options (such as reducing wholetime fire engines or converting from 24/7 to day crewing).

Emergency Services Hub Station

23. The prospect of an 'emergency services hub station' on a new site in Kidderminster prompted considerable interest – because it could potentially: increase the role of the wholetime firefighters in responding to more emergencies across the Wyre Forest area; reduce the role of the retained fire service; allow collaboration with the police and ambulance services; and defray costs.

24. Across the four watches there was no consensus on the best fire stations model – but there was most support for a ‘single hub station at Kidderminster,’ with less support for ‘a merger of Kidderminster and Stourport with some form of satellite facility at Bewdley’ and for the ‘status quo with day crewing plus at Kidderminster.’

Retained Firefighters at Three Stations

Introduction

25. Separate forums were held with the RDS firefighters at Bewdley, Kidderminster and Stourport. All the meetings were constructive, but feelings about the prospect of an emergency services hub station at Kidderminster were strongest in the largest meeting in Stourport.

Attitudes towards change

26. In general, the RDS firefighters were not surprised by the service data demonstrating the significant reductions in risk (when measured in terms of the number of critical and other incidents) that have taken place over the last decade.
27. Compared with the wholetime firefighters, the RDS at Kidderminster and Bewdley, were more accepting of the need to make changes in the fire and rescue service on the basis of reducing risk and financial challenges. At Stourport, general attitudes were strongly influenced by their critical views on a possible Kidderminster hub station.
28. Like their wholetime colleagues, the RDS said that the best way to make savings would be through council tax increases and ‘fire-fire’ and ‘blue light’ collaboration, but they were more prepared than the wholetime staff to consider reducing some operational resources.

Implications of reduced funding

29. The Kidderminster RDS accepted that Bewdley is a quiet station and that in general RDS availability is an important issue.
30. To make savings, the Bewdley RDS felt that there is scope to introduce some day crewing plus and also to increase the use of RDS firefighters while making some reductions in the wholetime establishment. They did not want to reduce the emphasis on prevention and protection, but they said there may be scope to close some quiet RDS stations:
31. At Bewdley, the RDS were realistic about the position of their station and showed considerable flexibility. They felt the transformation funding is a major opportunity to reduce some costs while improving the overall service to Wyre Forest.

Emergency Services Hub Station

32. At Kidderminster, there was considerable support for the ‘full hub option’ which would combine the three stations into one central site at Kidderminster. There was no support at all for the ‘intermediate options’ of combining two stations and keeping the third in its current or a reduced format.

33. In Bewdley, the RDS wanted to preserve at least some level of local cover in the town. They unanimously favoured a merger of Kidderminster and Stourport at a new site, with the retention of a 'satellite' base and fire engine at Bewdley. It was recognised that such a base might not be the current Bewdley fire station, or anything like it: for example, it might be a secure 'lock-up and parking facility' for the fire engine (with training done at Kidderminster).
34. At Stourport, however, none of the RDS firefighters could see any merit in a combined emergency services hub station. They said a single base is not required in order to collaborate with other emergency services and that the current system is efficient and cost effective.
35. A major concern at Stourport was that a hub station would lengthen response times, particularly for the second appliance, and worsen the overall Wyre Forest service. They were also concerned that a hub would mean that they would attend far fewer incidents, thus reducing their incomes and competencies, and also lessening their commitment to the service. To mitigate such effects, it was suggested that a salary scheme for RDS firefighters would be appropriate.
36. Participants very much disliked the idea of an 'RDS rota system' for the three stations, primarily on the grounds of a loss of flexibility and a sense of local connection.

Introduction

Commission

37. ORS was commissioned by Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service (H&WFRS) to convene and facilitate a programme of deliberative forums in the Wyre Forest area in order to review wide-ranging options in connection with the Fire Authority's successful bid for substantial transformation funding from the government. Separate forums were held with operational staff at Bewdley, Kidderminster and Stourport fire stations, and there was also a forum with members of the public drawn from all three areas of Wyre Forest. ORS worked with H&WFRS to prepare informative stimulus material for the meetings while also recruiting members of the public, facilitating the discussions and preparing this independent report of findings.
38. Although H&WFRA has received 'transformation funding' from the government for the development of an integrated 'emergency services hub' for the Wyre Forest area, no decisions have yet been taken by the Fire Authority, and at this early stage there are no draft proposals for consultation. In other words, the listening and engagement programme reported here was not formal consultation about draft proposals, but instead a 'pre-consultation stage' in which staff and members of the public were invited to deliberate about a range of issues in order to contribute to the development of possible operational options for the area. Having taken account of these meetings and all the other available evidence, H&WFRA might bring forward draft proposals for formal consultation, but that is by no means certain.

Deliberative research through forums

39. The consultation meetings reported here used a 'deliberative' approach to encourage operational staff and members of the public to reflect in depth about the fire and rescue service, while both receiving and questioning background information and discussing their ideas in detail. All the meetings lasted for two-and-a-half hours and in total there were 46 staff and 22 public participants. The programme of forum meetings is shown below.

KIDDERMINSTER WHOLETIME

RED WATCH	11-05-2015	5 participants
WHITE WATCH	11-05-2015	5 participants
GREEN WATCH	12-05-2015	5 participants
BLUE WATCH	14-05-2015	4 participants
KIDDERMINSTER RETAINED	14-05-2015	5 participants
STOURPORT RETAINED	13-05-2015	14 participants
BEWDLEY RETAINED	20-05-2015	8 participants

WYRE FOREST MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC 18-05-2015 22 participants

40. The members of the public 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.
41. In recruitment, care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by disabilities or any other factors, and the venue was readily accessible. People's special needs were taken into account in the recruitment and at the venue. The random telephone recruitment process was monitored to ensure social diversity in terms of a wide range of criteria – including, for example: local authority area of residence; gender; age; ethnicity; social grade; and disability/long-term limiting illness (LLTI). There was a diverse range of participants and, as standard good practice, they were recompensed for their time and effort in travelling and taking part.
42. Although, like all other forms of qualitative consultation, deliberative forums cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the meetings reported here gave the relevant staff and diverse members of the public the opportunity to participate actively. Because the meetings were inclusive, the outcomes (as reported below) are broadly indicative of how informed opinion would incline on the basis of similar discussions.

Background information

43. Following the initial questions, the public and staff forums began, for the sake of context, with a concise review of H&WFRS's resources, strategic roles and current financial challenges – including, for example:

Number and distribution of fire engines and stations

Current crewing systems

H&WFRA's response targets and current performance against those targets

Distribution of risk in the community (risk mapping)

Importance of prevention and risk-management policies – particularly via home fire safety checks

Trend showing a reduction in risk when measured in terms of the number of critical and other incidents per year

Sources of H&WFRA's funding – from the government and from council tax

Trends in public spending and current financial constraints across the public sector

H&WFRA's likely budget gap up to 2017 and 2020

The availability of 'Transformation Funding' from the government towards the development of a possible 'emergency services hub' for the Wyre Forest area.

44. The financial challenges facing fire and rescue services were explained neutrally as challenges to be managed constructively; but, in order to encourage free discussion, the financial position was not used as a justification for any particular option(s). Participants were invited to assess ideas and wide-ranging options on their merits. For example, the meetings were told that the range of options *potentially* available *in principle* to make financial savings, including for example:

Increasing H&WFRA's council tax precept

Collaboration or a merger with (an)other fire and rescue authority

Collaboration with the police and/or ambulance emergency services

Reducing current prevention and protection activity

Reviewing current operational resources in the context of reducing risk levels – in order to consider reducing costs by, for example:

Extending 'day crewing plus' to more wholetime fire engines

Converting some 24/7 fire engines to day crewing

Converting day crewed fire engines to the retained duty system

Centralising some fire stations by creating a Wyre Forest 'Emergency Services Hub' station at a new site in Kidderminster

Closing some fire stations.

The Report

45. This report concisely reviews the sentiments and judgements of participants about H&WFRA's options for the Wyre Forest area. Some verbatim quotations are used, in indented italics, not because we agree or disagree with them – but for their vividness in capturing recurrent points of views. ORS does not endorse the opinions in question, but seeks only to portray them accurately and clearly. While quotations are used, the report is obviously not a verbatim transcript of the sessions, but a concise interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants in free-ranging discussions.

Consultation Findings

Introduction

46. This chapter is divided into three deliberately concise sections, to highlight and compare the opinions of:

Members of the public from Wyre Forest

Wholetime firefighters at Kidderminster

Retained firefighters at Bewdley, Kidderminster and Stourport.

47. In broad terms, each section considers participants':

General attitudes towards change in the fire and rescue service

Opinions on the relative merits of:

Increasing H&WFRA's council tax precept

Collaborating/merging with (an)other fire and rescue service(s)

Greater collaboration with the police and/or ambulance emergency services

Reducing current prevention and protection activity

Reviewing current operational resources in the context of reducing risk levels

More specific opinions on:

Extending 'day crewing plus' to more wholetime fire engines

Converting some 24/7 fire engines to day crewing

Converting day crewed fire engines to the retained duty system

Merging some fire stations

Closing some fire stations

Views on the desirability and feasibility of 'hub station' options for the Wyre Forest area.

Members of the Public

Introduction

48. A total of 22 randomly selected members of the public from across the whole Wyre Forest area attended a forum that considered all the evidence presented to the firefighters while having a more detailed review of the fire and rescue service and its resources and roles. The meeting was thorough and truly deliberative in listening to and responding openly to a wide range of evidence and issues.

Awareness of the fire and rescue service

49. The Wyre Forest forum members were much better informed about their fire and rescue service than many people elsewhere – that is, their ‘guesstimates’ in relation to some important financial and risk information were always within ‘reasonable’ limits. Nonetheless, while some were very accurate indeed, most tended to

Underestimate the crewing costs of a 24/7 fire engine

Over-estimate the budget of their fire and rescue service

Have little idea of how much council tax precept a Band D household pays for its H&WFRA

Radically over-estimate the number of fire deaths per year across Hereford and Worcester.

50. However, they were broadly accurate in assuming that H&WFRA’s average response times to critical emergency incidents was between 7 and 15 minutes, with most people assuming it was 10 to 15 minutes. They also knew the importance of having working smoke detectors in their homes.

Balancing the Budget

51. After many questions about funding issues, the forum made some general points:

You need to consider management and back-office savings in order to make the employee reductions – you need to protect the jobs and resources of those who do the real dangerous work

You need to do risk assessments to determine how many appliances you need – that has to be the key.

52. The participants had a range of priorities for how the budget gap should be closed – including ‘fire-fire’ and ‘blue light’ collaboration, increasing council tax and rebalancing emergency cover resources more accurately to match actual current and likely levels of risk. Overall, in the context of the risk and incident information presented to the forum, many participants thought that safe operational changes could probably yield much greater savings than collaboration, at least in the medium term.

53. In this context, three main priorities emerged for making savings, in the following order of priority:

Day crewing on appropriate wholetime stations

Fire station mergers (including hub stations)

Increased RDS resources with corresponding reductions in wholetime cover.

Balancing the Budget

54. After many questions about funding issues, the forum made some general points:

You need to consider management and back-office savings in order to make the employee reductions – you need to protect the jobs and resources of those who do the real dangerous work

You need to do risk assessments to determine how many appliances you need – that has to be the key.

Reorganisation of emergency cover for Wyre Forest

55. In the context of the above, the forum reviewed options for Wyre Forest in some depth. There were many questions and a wide range of different points raised – for example:

This is a fait accompli – the decision is made!

The travel times would be worsened to Bewdley with a single station

There could be an effect on people's lives – that's what matters

There are 87 incidents a year in Bewdley and a low probability of them being serious – so you have to be realistic and balance costs against risk

I'd rather pay for a proper service that can be run from a good new building – we're very well off for resources here

We might want the service we can't afford – we have to consider what we can sensibly fund

The FRS does not want to put anyone at risk – they are cautious in their approach – and the response could be effective from another base

Bewdley fire station is not well located – it is a difficult road infrastructure there – but Kidderminster is not the right place either

Bewdley would yield a lot of money from the sale of the site

RDS crews have to live or work within 5 minutes of the station – so the current Bewdley RDS could not turn out in time [to a Kidderminster hub]

The death rate is very low – and we have to avoid an emotive response to ideas – we have to make sensible changes to achieve savings

There has been a reduction in risk.

56. During the wide-ranging and detailed discussion, opinions in the forum tended to polarise between two options – with a minority favouring a three-into-one centralised hub station at Kidderminster, but the majority favouring a ‘lesser merger’ of Stourport and Bewdley while keeping the current Kidderminster station as now. Supporters of the Stourport/Bewdley merger outnumbered supporters of the three-into-one hub by two-to-one.
57. Of course, it is hard to judge if the majority of supporters took full account of the importance of the availability of the transformation funding, but they were they were prepared for at least some change to the existing stations.

Kidderminster wholetime firefighters

Introduction

58. We were pleased that the four wholetime watches at Kidderminster were all constructive participants who felt able to speak openly. They were by no means all alike in their opinions, but some important general trends emerged from talking to each watch in detail in their own lengthy forums.

Attitudes toward change (matching resource to risks)

59. It is fair to say that the participants were understandably reluctant to see changes made to the traditional **wholetime duty system**. They were keen to protect the position of wholetime firefighters and, above all, most of them wanted to protect their traditional 2-2-4 shift system, for they felt it has big advantages for them relative to other possible duty systems.
60. They were also reluctant to concede that financial constraints might require adjustments to traditional patterns of **emergency cover**, or to consider possible reductions in current operational resources. Their reluctance was not based on any hostility towards management, or rejection of the evidence presented, but on sense of traditional caution about changes to fire cover.
61. However, most (if not all) of the four watches were surprised and in a sense some were 'impressed' by the service data demonstrating the **big reductions in risk** (when measured in terms of the number of critical and other incidents) that have taken place over the last decade (as well as previously). Interestingly, they were not familiar with the incident data prior to these forums – and many acknowledged that they had assumed that they and other stations were actually dealing with a much higher number of incidents. Some typical comments were:

I'm really surprised at these [incident] figures!

We did have a quiet year last year – but I didn't know it was so low as that!

The figures are very surprising indeed!

It's good but it's a shame because it could lead to a reduction in resources – you could start to use different resources in different ways

The figures are really shocking (the reduction) and members of the public won't know how to interpret them...

The figures show a massive drop in RDS activity in the Wyre Forest – the incidents have come down hugely all over.

62. Whereas most accepted that in principle the big reductions in community risk could license some reductions in operational resources, some wholetime firefighters insisted that, because the well-established trends might be reversed, no emergency cover resource should be reduced. For example, the more conservative firefighters said:

You need as much resources as you can afford – any reduction is a bad thing in principle – we are an insurance policy! Trends in incident reductions can be reversed – we always seem to be reducing but not putting them back.

63. Some firefighters seemed to believe that their focus on public safety meant that almost any level of expenditure could in principle be justified, if only it was available – for example:

All this is driven by reductions in funding – if we had a £40M budget we would spend that!

64. Other firefighters distinguished between calls arising on home station grounds and other support roles elsewhere in order to suggest that the data about incident levels did not reflect the true position. In response, it was pointed out that the number of calls on particular station grounds indicated local risk accurately.
65. Overall, then, some firefighters were reluctant to embrace the idea that expenditure should be proportionate against demonstrated need or risk; they were not concerned with any cost-benefit analysis or value-for-money; and their primary focus was that the fire service (by definition) deserves to spend as much money as can be made available.

Reduced funding

66. Overall, the wholetime firefighters were not very familiar with the financial position of H&WFRS over the next three to five years. They knew about reductions in public finances, of course, but not the detailed savings required recently or in the near future. There was also some sense that the fire and rescue service is being treated worse than other services. Overall, there was a mixture of pessimism and hope that change might yet be avoided

The savings have to be year on year – but will they ever level out? There is less and less funding...

The actual reductions could be even more in practice [than those currently projected by H&WFRS]!

Why don't we get the same funding as the Police? It should be equal funding!

The Ambulance calls are going up a lot and there's talk of us doing some para-medical work with them – so will that increase our funding a lot?

67. Perhaps without appreciating the scale of savings to be made, some firefighters proposed to introduce charges:

We should cease doing what is not our statutory duty (Like the water capability). We should aim for cost recovery, especially for mopping up operations after the emergency has 'stopped.'

68. Whereas some wholetime firefighters tended to seek for savings or additional income in order to avoid operational reductions, they readily accepted that council tax precept increases were restricted and unable to generate large sums of additional income.

Prevention

69. However, the wholetime firefighters were certainly opposed to reductions in H&WFRS's preventative and educational work in the community.

It would be completely wrong to stop prevention! We have a moral duty to continue that!

We should maintain prevention work – though we do much less educational work in schools nowadays – this is a worrying trend if children don't absorb the early lessons in fire safety.

Views of the RDS service

70. In the context of making savings, the wholetime firefighters were more prepared to see the RDS service reduced, particularly at Bewdley, than the wholetime service – for example:

Bewdley does not provide real value for money for the costs it has.

71. The discussions did not include a systematic review of RDS issues, but various comments were made about the possible lack of resilience in the current retained service:

I fought for Bewdley but it's difficult to defend it now, after seeing the figures

Bewdley has no one being trained and they have to do many hours to cover the service

You can't have more RDS because recruitment is difficult and there is a lot of attrition as people leave the courses and get other jobs

The loss of a small number of RDS can reduce the fire engine availability a lot – it has happened here [Kidderminster] as we have lost RDS firefighters

The big issue is RDS crewing (which is getting harder all the time).

'Blue light' collaboration in principle

72. There was a general feeling that collaboration with other emergency services was a 'good idea' in principle for operational and financial reasons:

It would enable us to work at many more RTCs than is done now – because the Police would know more about our capacities

There is a lot of valuable collaboration already – in terms of community risk monitoring and sharing data – and that's very valuable.

A shared location can make savings in terms of running the site. Co-location is common in Europe

We have a good relationship with the Ambulance service, but the relationship with the Police is not very good...sometimes they won't talk to us at incidents...But that could be due to us not engaging with them enough

Another area for improvement is the CIST meetings with the Police

You can be together and separate at the same time on the same site – and you can share common facilities and get a better understanding of what the two services do

Sharing locations and back-office functions does not worry me

We should also explore co-responding as an important option

Would we charge for co-responding services? The NHS should pay for it.

'Fire-Fire' collaboration or mergers in principle

73. The wholetime firefighters knew that H&WFRA has had discussions with neighbouring fire authorities about greater collaboration or mergers, but they were unaware of recent developments elsewhere – for example, the impending merger of Dorset and Wiltshire & Swindon fire authorities.

74. Overall, the firefighters were entirely happy with greater collaboration with other fire authorities because they believed it would bring savings in support services rather than in operations. They supported more collaboration with Warwickshire and/or Shropshire.

This could be worthwhile if it's really cheaper and we continue to have the right [operational] resources in the right places.

75. They probably assumed that savings could be generated through collaboration more quickly than might be the case; and they probably under-estimated the obstacles to radical collaboration or mergers. But their vision of future options was quite radical:

Collaboration is worth pursuing – it's not a dead end. You could have an all-Midlands Fire and Rescue Service!

Best ways to make savings in principle

76. The wholetime firefighters were asked how savings might be made in H&WFRA – and a number of general and specific options were offered by the facilitator for their discussion, including:

Extending 'day crewing plus' to more wholetime fire engines

Converting some 24/7 fire engines to day crewing

Converting day crewed fire engines to the retained duty system

Reducing the number of retained fire engines

Merging some fire stations

Closing some fire stations.

77. In the context of these options and the earlier discussions, the wholetime firefighters prioritised the following options:

Fire-fire collaboration

Increasing revenue by a range of more commercial options and charging for some services

‘Blue light’ collaboration

Reducing the number of retained fire engines

Introducing day crewing plus at Kidderminster.

78. Of course, not all the crews gave the same emphasis to the same options, but in general they preferred collaboration and back-office options to operational revisions. The list above should not be taken to imply that the day crewing plus (DCP) system is ‘popular’ at Kidderminster, but it was deemed by at least some firefighters as more acceptable than some more unpalatable options (such as reducing wholetime fire engines or converting from 24/7 to day crewing). Some typical comments about day crewing plus were:

DCP is not the preferred system! It would mean reducing the number of people employed here!

*We have all got the impression that DCP is definitely going to be introduced here!
That’s the impression we have.*

79. Significantly, though, the other options presented above were not taken up: that is, the firefighters were understandably protective of traditional operational arrangements.

Reorganisation of emergency cover for Wyre Forest

80. As we have seen, the firefighters were fairly cautious about proposing ways to make substantial cost savings within H&WFRA: the only operational area on which they focused spontaneously was the retained duty system, particularly at Bewdley. Therefore, in order to encourage consideration of more specific operational options, they were reminded that H&WFRS has been successful in bidding for substantial government funding to spend, if it wishes, on the reorganisation of emergency cover in Wyre Forest. Detailed discussion of this possibility led to the formulation of some key options for consideration.

81. With this background, there was considerable interest in the prospect of some form of ‘emergency services hub station’ on a new site in Kidderminster – because it would potentially:

Increase the role of the wholetime firefighters in responding to more emergencies over the whole of the Wyre Forest area

Reduce overall dependency on the retained fire service

Allow for collaboration with the police and ambulance services

Defray costs insofar as the other blue light services would pay a share of the costs of the site.

82. Much of the discussion centred on how ‘centralised’ the Wyre Forest fire and rescue service should be – that is, should there be just a single station at Kidderminster, or should at least one other ‘satellite’ base be kept (in either Bewdley or Stourport), or should both stations kept as satellite locations? In summary, the main options considered by the wholetime firefighters were:

Option 1

A single 'emergency service hub station' at Kidderminster, with wholetime and retained fire engines (the same level of resources as now) – in effect this would be a relocation of three current stations into a single new community fire station on a new Kidderminster site

Option 2

An 'emergency service hub station' at Kidderminster, with wholetime and retained fire engines (the same level of resources as now) – but with a small or minimal satellite base of some kind in Bewdley

Option 3

A smaller 'emergency service hub station' at Kidderminster with a 'satellite' fire station at Stourport (which would have one or two retained fire engines) – in effect this would be a relocation of Bewdley and Kidderminster stations on a new Kidderminster site

Option 4

A smaller 'emergency service hub station' at Kidderminster with a residual 'satellite' at Bewdley – in effect this would be a relocation of Stourport and Kidderminster stations on a new Kidderminster site. The Bewdley 'satellite' could take various forms: the current station or a lesser 'lock-up base' for the fire engine or the current fire engine to be replaced with a 'first responder van' instead.

Option 5

The status quo with three current stations, but with the introduction of day crewing plus for the wholetime firefighters at Kidderminster.

83. The firefighters could see pros and cons associated with each of these options; and they recognised that the specification of options 2 and 4 could be varied depending on the level of any provision at Bewdley.
84. They recognised that the key issue in such an 'emergency service hub model' would be the degree centralisation or dispersal for the four fire engines. In this context, the following comments were typical of the discussion:

It can be a good idea to have fire engines spread out – but it's more expensive

You could have a central hub with some 'spokes' around the wider area – but would this save much money?

You could have a special response van at Bewdley and crewed by RDS from there – that would be 'just a political gesture' though

It is easier to move an appliance without closing the Bewdley station down – the vehicle could be based in a lock-up and they could train here rather than on station

A 'hub station' would need a proper training facilities – but it could be much better than here [Kidderminster]

There could be facilities for the police and ambulance and some voluntary sector organisations

It will make sense for the wholetime crews to respond to more incidents more often from a central 'hub station'

There will be delays in RDS attendance to the new hub, but the wholetime pump will be able to respond more often from there

You would have to manage RDS mobilisations carefully if all the fire engines were in the one hub – to stop all the retained responding at once

You would lose your Bewdly RDS because they'd have too few calls– you would have to recruit RDS from this area to crew the fire engine

If you had one wholetime and three RDS fire engines in one hub then one pump will hardly ever go out – so you might lose it or not be able to crew it

You could have Kidderminster as a hub with a Lock-up in Bewdley

A hub between Stourport and Kidderminster would leave Bewdley out on a limb

There's a good main road connecting the two places

You could have a community First Response vehicle with a 'man in a van' system locally

If you had a single hub that saved money then that could be OK if we could still cover the Wyre Forest area effectively

But you have to convince the public in Bewdley – they'll see a loss of their fire station – and there are very strong political pressures there

Changing locations affects attendance times – and Bewdley is out on a limb from the site of the possible new station

We have potential funding for a new station which will save lots of site costs

The police and ambulance would contribute to the running costs of the hub

With a single hub you'd get a better fire station with better facilities and better training – and the fire engine will still be coming to you!

This would mean the wholetime pump would be busier – and it might then be outside the range of day crewing plus

Our bid for funding is based on keeping all the four current pumps – but in practice the RDS would have much less to do – and some RDS crews could not get to the new station in time

A single 'hub station' is safe and feasible in comparison with the rest of the county – but it will be a small increase in Bewdley's attendance times.

85. Across the four wholetime watches there was no single consensus on the best of the four options – but there was most support for a “single ‘hub station’ at Kidderminster”, with lesser degrees of support for the “a merger of Kidderminster and Stourport with some form of satellite facility at Bewdley” and the “status quo with day crewing plus at Kidderminster.”

Other options

86. The wholetime firefighters also suggested that money may be saved by recognising that some RDS stations are very quiet and might not be viable. For example, they mentioned that Ross or Whitchurch or Fownhope could be closed.

Retained Firefighters at Three Stations

Introduction

87. As at all the other sessions, the discussion with the RDS firefighters were constructive and all participants felt able to speak openly. At Stourport there were some strong feelings about the options for a hub station and discussions there focused more narrowly than elsewhere on the option for a Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub. This section reports Kidderminster first, followed by Bewdley and then Stourport RDS.

Kidderminster RDS Firefighters

Balancing the Budget

88. Compared with the wholetime firefighters, the RDS Kidderminster were more understanding of the need to make financial savings. While their first thoughts were for a referendum to raise council tax, or making charges for cross-border cover, or further reducing management and back office functions, their more considered views were for some rationalisation of emergency cover resources – for example, Kidderminster RDS said:

We have to avoid both reducing near-border stations without joint planning! But could you reduce some near-border stations by having more systematic cross-border reciprocation? We need to avoid begging our neighbours or being begged!

Improving the service by working/merging with others – in order to work together more effectively to the same standards – I have been surprised by how individualistic FRSs are! We should have shared standardised training – as a basis for many efficiency savings

We need to match resources to risk more actively – I notice that my shouts have reduced considerably since I started 3 years ago

The public sector needs more accountability and efficiency – like in the private sector (but without privatisation)

We need to review crewing numbers and alternative forms of rapid response vehicles – and there is scope for crewing some vehicles with two or three people – based on good Call Centre intelligence

We need to tailor training delivery to the risks they will face in this area – to simplify the competencies required.

Best ways to make savings in principle

89. Like their wholetime colleagues, the Kidderminster RDS also said that the best way to make savings would be through council tax increases and ‘fire-fire’ and ‘blue light’ collaboration, but they were more prepared than the wholetime staff to consider reducing some operational resources. They stressed that “everyone deserves a certain level of fire cover – it’s like an insurance for them” – but they also said that:

In general we need to match resources to risks – and something has to give – we should go for the closures with the least strategic impact without being distracted by emotion

90. In this context, they thought the following options could be considered seriously:

Reducing the resilience cover (and payments) on wholetime stations

Some fire station mergers

Some shift changes from wholetime to day crewing plus or even day crewing

Increasing the number of RDS crews

Closure of very quiet RDS stations – like Leominster and Kingsland (as a “consequence of the objective evidence in the community safety report.”

Reorganisation of emergency cover for Wyre Forest

91. In the context of the above, it may not be surprising that the Kidderminster RDS were prepared to consider Bewdley in a frank manner:

The last CRMP proved that a fire station is not necessary at Bewdley – we need to take the emotion out of the debate

The big issue is recruitment – Bewdley really struggles to get people – and we’re quite often off the run at Kidderminster

92. They also felt that the Transformation Funding is a major opportunity to reduce some costs while improving the overall service to Wyre Forest:

The transformation funding is a good route to get a proper fire station without recurring big maintenance costs

Fire Control could call in the RDS to crew a station if the W/T fire engine was committed elsewhere – that would be sustainable

The link road is going to become a proper ring road in the medium term future

Bewdley has only 87 incidents in a year and the W/T crew can get there quite rapidly in any case

The single integrated hub is a really good idea to bring the services together in a more effective way.

93. Overall, while there was some support for keeping the three current stations and introducing day crewing plus at Kidderminster, there was much more support for the ‘full hub option’ which would combine the three stations into one central site at Kidderminster. There was no support at all for the ‘intermediate options’ of combining two stations and keeping the third in its current or a reduced format.

Bewdley RDS Firefighters

Risk Levels

94. In relation to the statistics about reducing risk, the Bewdley RDS stressed that: small fires are more common in good summers; the Kidderminster pump has been sent to Rock even though Bewdley RDS are closer and could respond more quickly; and the introduction of the new Control system has affected the number of mobilisations by Bewdley. They asked if boundaries of Bewdley and its station's fire ground affect the incident and risk figures.

Balancing the Budget

95. Like many of their wholetime and RDS colleagues, the Bewdley RDS firefighters felt that council tax increases, 'fire-fire' and 'blue light' collaboration were the best ways forward. The idea of reducing operational resources came low on their priorities list, but they recognised it was a justifiable means of making important savings. They said there should be

Savings in wages somehow – with a balance between RDS and W/T – to make RDS more attractive.

96. As well as the general priorities listed just above, the Bewdley RDS felt that there is scope to introduce day crewing plus and also to increase the use of RDS firefighters while making some reductions in the wholetime establishment. Like most of their colleagues, they did not want to reduce the emphasis on prevention and protection.
97. In the wider context, they also said that there may be scope to close some RDS stations:

Some are in the middle of nowhere with say 30 calls a year – but closure would have an effect on response times.

Reorganisation of emergency cover for Wyre Forest

98. The participants were in many ways very realistic about their position and showed considerable flexibility in their thinking. For example, they said:

This is not the first time we have been threatened with closure – and the public supported us strongly about 18 years ago.

It would be daft not to spend the available £2.4million – so the station is likely to be built.

99. Without by any means resisting all prospects of change, the Bewdley RDS wanted to preserve at least some level of local cover in the town – because:

We're an isolated station on this side of the river – so it's best not to put all your resources on the other side of the river for all risks

But we would like to keep a fire engine in Bewdley even though we don't have massive industrial risk and we do have times when the trucks need to go out – and we're susceptible to flooding risks in Bewdley

We want to keep our local response times in Bewdley!

The new proposed site is worse than the current site for response times to Bewdley

100. They appreciated the important of the 'free' funding from the government, but asked:

Are the current sites not suitable? Is Kidderminster definitely not suitable? Would the funding cover the cost of redeveloping Kidderminster? That is an option...

Is a three-into-one hub really a significant saving even over 10 years?

101. Overall, the respondents were very realistic:

It's hard to resist some change here given the reduction in the number of incidents and the costs of the stations

We're the three closest stations in the service!

It seems that closures have to happen in order to benefit from the transformation funding – and this funding is a one-off – it will not be repeated in current times.

102. The meeting strongly and unanimously favoured a merger of Kidderminster and Stourport at a new site, with the retention of at least a small satellite 'base' and fire engine at Bewdley. It was recognised that such a satellite base might not be the current Bewdley fire station or anything like it – for example, it might be a secure 'lock-up and parking facility' for the fire engine (with training done at Kidderminster).

Other Options

103. Nearly half of the meeting felt that it would be appropriate to introduce day crewing plus at the new hub station in Kidderminster. Indeed, they said:

At night you would have two retained pumps on duty – which would save money on the DCP (even with a satellite at Bewdley).

Stourport RDS Firefighters

Risk Levels

104. The Stourport RDS firefighters were not surprised by the service data demonstrating the significant reductions in risk (when measured in terms of the number of critical and other incidents) that have taken place over the last decade. They themselves acknowledged that their calls have halved, which they attributed to the loss of an appliance, but also to the prevention and education work undertaken by the Service during that period:

When I first started we were having 500-600 shouts a year. It was basically like a full-time job; I was doing this all the time

We've lost an appliance since then but there's also the prevention. It's been so big and now it's coming to fruition I'd say.

105. There was some worry though that the downward trend may soon bottom out or even begin to rise given the higher frequency of spate conditions (primarily in relation to flooding) and the alleged reduction in the amount of prevention work undertaken by the Service:

They've cut back with the fire safety...retained stations don't seem to do it anymore. So what's going to happen in years to come down the generations?

With the downward trend it doesn't take much to go back the other way. At some point it's bound to bottom out or maybe even go the other way, especially with spate conditions like flooding which we get a lot here.

Reduced funding

106. Overall, there was acknowledgement and recognition of H&WFRS's financial position: as one firefighter stated:

We're basically knackered, aren't we?!

Reorganisation of emergency cover for Wyre Forest

107. As aforementioned, the bulk of the meeting with the Stourport firefighters involved discussions around the possibility of a new Wyre Forest Emergency Services Hub, mainly because no-one at Stourport could see merits to the idea of a combined emergency services Hub.
108. Firefighters argued that: they already work very closely with their partners in the Police, Ambulance Service and voluntary sector (and they expressed an appetite for undertaking more co-responding work in future) and do not require a single base from which to do so; and that the current system is working in an efficient and cost effective way. In effect, the general consensus was 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it':

We work closely with the others anyway so why can't we continue do it from our own bases? Having a blue light Hub won't make it any different apart from us all being in the one location

It costs £100,000 to run a retained station...it's a drop in the ocean so why change?

The system is working at the moment and it's cheap. It seems like a waste of money as you've already got the buildings and the crews and it's a cost effective system.

109. One of the most prevalent concerns was that a Hub would mean lengthier turnout and response times – the latter particularly in relation to the second appliance. There was a strong view that, although the Emergency Services Hub looks like a positive idea on paper, it will in fact mean a lesser service to Wyre Forest residents:

The presentation is very positive but it doesn't say what the implications of a Hub will be. We can pretty much turn out immediately at the moment but going towards Kiddy at eight o'clock in the morning it's impossible in the traffic

People in the Wyre Forest will no longer get four appliances in 20 minutes because the crews won't be able to get to the Hub on time...

We know at the moment that we can get two pumps to a house fire at the same time in this area together with Kiddy but it will be longer under this proposal. We could get two pumps there in the turnout time...

It's disgraceful...it's a great sales idea but it's not a good idea. It's like 'we'll take the Government's money on something the public aren't going to get as good a service from and we're going to wrap it up in 'here's a new fire station'

The public are getting a worse service. They might get the first pump quicker than they do at the moment but the second will take longer...it will adversely affect response times in the Wyre Forest.

110. On a more personal level, the firefighters were very concerned that the development of a Hub would lead to their attendance at far fewer incidents (insofar as they would lose all of their current one-pump 'shouts' to the Kidderminster wholetime crew). This would, it was said, not only impact on them financially but would also lead to reduced competencies which apparently cannot be maintained by simply increasing training time. Some typical comments were:

By the time we get up there the truck will already have gone most of the time anyway...

We know we're not going to be earning as much at the Hub...we would lose all the one-pump shouts in Stourport aren't we?

I won't go there if I'm not earning the money I earn now, and I'm on the minimum now. We're at the line in the sand

If you go to a central Hub, how do you plan to keep up competency levels? If you've got three stations and those firefighters are on the truck every single time, their experience is massive. If they're not going out as often, the likelihood of them keeping that operational experience is going to drop...you're going to start losing experienced, confident firefighters at major incidents. Fire calls have gone down and our competencies are dropping anyway and if you take away every station it's going to drop even more

And you can do all of the training under the sun but guaranteed it won't be the same as going out on a job.

111. Notwithstanding the loss of earnings, this reduction in incident attendances alone would seem to be enough for many affected firefighters to reconsider their future in the role (especially in light of the major commitment it entails) - and it was said that the impact would be even more keenly felt at Bewdley, whose firefighters would be almost certain to leave the Service following the introduction of a Hub:

You're going to build a new fire station but there'll be no retained firefighters there!

We know that if there's a shout in Stourport we'll get turned out to it. If you go to a Hub you'll send the Wholetime crew first so the likelihood of us being sent out to the bigger jobs is going to decrease. So we'll be putting our lives on hold for a retaining fee of £2,000 a year

If your alarm goes off at 2:30am and you know you're not going to get on the truck...a nine minute drive there then a nine minute drive back, why would you keep on doing that?

It's the excitement of the job as well. The more big jobs you get the more exciting it is and the more you want to stay

You jump on the wagon with the blue lights and the buzz you get is awesome. Training doesn't give you that and if you had to do that two or three times a week...we want to earn our money on the job, not training

Getting from Bewdley to the Hub during the day could take 20 minutes. What happens when they say 'I can't keep driving from there to there every time there's a fire call' and they all decide to go?

We keep hearing about the two-stage alerter. The likelihood of the Bewdley lads being on a call would be minimal so are they going to keep on doing it? They will leave...

112. One suggestion to mitigate against the above possibility was to introduce a salary scheme for RDS firefighters – and some did say that they would take the exact location of the Hub into account in their final decision making-process as to whether to continue in their role:

Could you salary the Retained so you know exactly how much you're going to get for this much cover? Rather than this two, three stage alerter and only really getting your retainer fee

For us to make a decision on our future we need to see something definitive on the table that is going to sway us one way or the other...

All the Bewdley lads will go but if it's closer to us there's perhaps half a dozen who might stay...and the same for Kiddy. It's all dependent on the location really...

113. Participants were not keen though on the introduction of a rota system for the 45 firefighters from the three affected stations – primarily on the grounds of a loss of flexibility:

You would lose your flexibility then, which defeats the whole purpose of being Retained

If you put a watch system or core hours in then it's going to restrict us and that's what's going to make people leave

We joined the service for the flexibility and if you don't offer that I don't know how you'll recruit in future.

114. Other concerns around the development of an Emergency Services Hub were that:

It will diminish established relationships and bonds amongst crews

We all know each other and how we work. We can say to each other 'can you pop on call for me?' If you've got 45 people and you're just looking at lists of unknown people you can't do that

We know who we're working with and it takes a long time to develop relationships and feel confident to go into a burning building with them. If there's 45 people in the 'pool' then you don't know who you're going to be working with on that night. It shouldn't make a difference but it does; it's a confidence thing.

Communities will lose valued local resources

They're going to lose what they've got here...it'll be totally different to what they're used to and what's been here for years. The community will miss out and the people here are worried about that

Firefighters will undertake less 'goodwill' work

We give a lot of our time for free because we enjoy the job and we are happy to represent our town. If it's in Kiddy I wouldn't do that...

Employers will be increasingly reluctant to release their staff for firefighting duties – resulting in a loss of 'precious' daytime cover

Getting day cover from crew is so precious. At the moment when they get called out they can be back in work in 15-20 minutes if they miss the truck. If they've got to drive across to the Hub could take them ages there and back...their bosses are not going to be happy with that, especially if they've missed it.

It will result in the loss of firefighters' local knowledge (which could, in turn, lengthen response times)

You could potentially lose all the local knowledge and expertise for shouts in Stourport...and it could increase response times because others won't know the nooks and crannies and which the best roads are.

Some firefighters would have the additional expense of having to purchase and run a car to turn out (as they can get to the current station on foot)

You're making some of us need a car with this proposal which is a cost. We'll be earning less and spending more money on travelling.

Other options

115. The preferred option among the Stourport RDS was to retain the status quo and introduce Day Crewing Plus at Kidderminster – or, more radically, to reduce to Day Crewed (or even wholly Retained) there given the comparatively small number of incidents attended:

If Kiddy are only getting 500 calls a year, we used to do 500 calls a year so why don't they just go Day Crewed rather than Day Crewed Plus?

They're only having 500 calls between the Wholetime and Retained and we used to do that on our own so why can't that change?

Why are you keeping a Wholetime station open? You could still keep four pumps but it could be four Retained...it would cost a lot less and people would be busier so it would be attractive and people would stay.

116. One firefighter also suggested looking at wholetime crewing more systematically across the Service, describing the four-on/four-off system as 'old-fashioned' and 'outdated' and in need of reform. They too were in favour of introducing Day Crewing and Day Crewing Plus where possible:

You have to look at the re-arrangement of crewing. Anyone can see that four on-four off is old-fashioned, outdated and doesn't work anymore. Day Crewing Plus saves so much money and it works and surely some stations could go just to Day Crewed.

117. Finally, the idea of smaller 'satellite' or 'spoke' hubs for Stourport and Bewdley was raised by one participant:

What about smaller community hubs? It doesn't have to have all of the facilities of a full station; it could be a little prefab building.