

FOR FEEDBACK TO RESPONDENTS



THAMES VALLEY FIRE CONTROL SERVICE CONSULTATION RESPONSE REPORT



Proposed Thames Valley Fire Control Service

Summary of Responses

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1. Summary

On the 5th April 2012 the Thames Valley Fire Control Service Programme Sponsoring Group approved the consultation document for issue for Public and Staff consultation. The consultation programme ran for twelve weeks from the 6th April to 6th July 2012. The consultation document, as published, is attached as Annex C.

In accordance with the Memorandum of Understanding and Programme ethos the Programme Board were keen to hear the views of all stakeholders and accordingly full attention has been given to all responses. The Consultation document was produced to provide information about the proposals and to seek views about how we can provide the most effective, enhanced service to the communities we serve.

To publicise and assist with the consultation process, the Programme Board initially circulated 200 copies of the document to staff and published the document on both Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service and Oxfordshire County Council websites.

Two public engagement forums hosted by Opinion Research Services (ORS) were held on the 1st May 2012 in Reading Town Hall and the 2nd May 2012 in Oxford County Hall.

A total of 45 Members of the public from both Oxfordshire and Royal Berkshire attended the forums. The overwhelming view was that the proposal represented the best available option and it should continue to fruition, with 93% of attendees having no preference as to the location other than to use the best identified premises from the two available. The ORS combined report is attached as Annex A.

Two staff engagement forums, also facilitated by ORS, were held on Monday 18 June and Tuesday 19 June at the Shillingford Bridge Hotel in Wallingford. Control staff from both Fire and Rescue Services (FRSs) were invited to take part in the events, with 26 staff electing to attend, out of a total of 54 currently eligible. The ORS combined report is attached as Annex B.

Press releases were issued simultaneously to Berkshire and Oxfordshire media, plus Fire and Rescue Service specialist media, to highlight the launch of the consultation period and this generated some but limited coverage in the local media. Further press releases were issued to mark the mid-way point of the consultation programme to remind members of the public that there was still time to take part. The consultation programme was also publicised internally in both FRSs.

The consultation process concluded on the 6th July 2012. 111 responses have been received with 50 of the responses received through the Oxfordshire County Council 'E-Portal'. It is not feasible to identify all the respondents using this mechanism as it allows anonymous replies.

The Programme Board are grateful to all respondents and confirm that all responses have been brought to the attention of the Programme Sponsoring Group. Both Oxfordshire County Council and Royal Berkshire Fire Authority will be made aware, via this report, of the outcome of the consultation process to ensure the views of the respondents are considered when making decisions.

2. Background

The Control room is the primary 24-hour point of contact for all emergency calls and for internal administrative functions. Along with many other fire and rescue services, OFRS and RBFRS currently each have their own separate Control functions. Both are staffed by highly trained Control Operators who answer 999 calls, mobilise fire engines to all kinds of emergencies (including road traffic collisions, chemical spillages, large animal rescues, as well as fires) and managing our resources to ensure we provide a highly effective service.

The Government had intended to replace all local fire and rescue service Control functions with nine Regional Control Centres, but this project (called FiReControl) was terminated in December 2010.

While the FiReControl project was in progress, Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service (OFRS) and Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS) ensured that their individual Control functions remained resilient with essential maintenance and selective upgrading of systems. However, a decision was taken not to invest public money in medium and long-term developments, owing to the planned move to a South East Regional Control Centre in Fareham, Hampshire.

Since the Government terminated the FiReControl project, OFRS and RBFRS have been working in partnership to investigate options for delivering an improved service. Through community safety education programmes and fire safety enforcement, both services have seen a substantial reduction in the numbers of emergency incidents attended and the number of calls received, from a peak in 2007/08. These falling call numbers and the consequential increase in cost per call handled means that individual Control rooms are becoming increasingly unviable.

OFRS and RBFRS have therefore been working in collaboration on proposals for a new, single joint Control function, provisionally called the Thames Valley Fire Control Service (TVFCS).

3. Consultation responses

At the time of writing, a total of 111 responses have been received from a variety of individuals as identified in the table below:

| Group of Respondents | No of Responses |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------|
| RBFRS Control staff | 18 |
| OFRS Control staff | 4 |
| RBFRS employees | 33 |
| OFRS employees | 0 |
| Other (Royal Berkshire non-employees) | 6 |
| Unknown (OCC 'E-Portal') | 50 |
| Total Responses | 111 |

In addition to the above direct consultation responses, a small number of letters and email correspondence have been received from Elected Members or Members of Parliament. These are generally making enquiries following the receipt of correspondence from staff members who were raising the issue and their concerns.

In each case the Senior Responsible Owner for the Programme has provided information to the enquiry to ensure that any response made by the original recipient is provided with factual information.

The original Consultation document focussed on five primary areas to inform the Programme Board considerations and recommendations. These areas and a summary of the responses received, including those received via the Councillor or Member of Parliament route, are summarised below.

The Programme Board response addressing the comments received is then provided.

Enhanced Resilience (Our ability to offer an uninterrupted service)

One of the key aims of the project is to enhance our resilience and ensure we are able to provide an effective service at all times. The financial constraints of remaining as two 'stand-alone' Control rooms would prevent us from adopting the latest technologies to enhance resilience and improve our current standards of service.

As a joint partnership, the proposed TVFCS will enable us to enhance our capabilities and also provide new opportunities for information sharing amongst all the emergency services by the introduction of new technology.

Another geographically remote fire and rescue service ('remote buddy') will be used to ensure resilience in the event of system problems or unusually high levels of calls. Wherever the TVFCS primary Control is located, a secondary Control room will also be provided in the alternate county to further enhance resilience, guaranteeing a seamless, uninterrupted service in the extremely unlikely event that the TVFCS primary control becomes unusable for a lengthier period of time. The secondary control will also allow for any planned maintenance to be undertaken without any degradation of service to the public.

We will improve security arrangements in accordance with central Government guidance, which will also enhance resilience. By introducing more resilient technology, we will increase system reliability, leading to improved business continuity arrangements.

As a single Control room we are able to adopt common regional policies and procedures more quickly to ensure we can work more effectively with our partners (e.g. local authorities, other emergency services) and other fire and rescue services. This will also enable us to share our own and others' resources more effectively.

Responses:

It fails in this regard **(E-Portal)**

Two Control Rooms are more resilient than one **(OFRS employee)**

The enhancement to resilience.....should be welcomed **(E-Portal)**

Proposals do not go far enough **(E-Portal)**

An excellent proposal **(E-Portal)**

Support this proposal **(E-Portal)**

Project should finish at Stage 2 **(OFRS employee)**

Remote buddy likely to be another "merged" Control room and therefore it will not have sufficient capacity **(OFRS employee via Councillor and OFRS employee via MP)**

In the event of a system failure, staff would have to travel from Theale [Calcot nr Reading] to Kidlington (or vice versa) to the 'back up Control room', this would take up to an hour under normal road conditions **(OFRS employee via MP)**

Programme Board commentary / response:

The Board are of the opinion that through the following measures, amongst others, resilience will be improved:

Improved Security arrangements through audited compliance with HMG Security Policy framework (V7).

Adoption of more resilient technologies including voice and data connections to the Airwave network.

Universal access to updated Mobile Data Terminals.

Adoption of a geographically remote buddy for system overflow and 'fallback' procedures that will allow direct 'live' mobilising of resources.

The remote buddy will be chosen following a comprehensive assessment of their

mobilising systems, workload and staffing arrangements ensuring there is sufficient capacity to accept both periodic overflow calls during periods of high demand and for any more prolonged spate conditions.

The provision of a fully equipped secondary Control room at an alternative location will ensure full business continuity for any extended periods in which the primary Control is unavailable for any reason, including planned interruptions.

The adoption of common ways of working for operational incidents through the Operational Policies and Procedures group will allow more effective cross border mobilising (dispatching the nearest resources irrespective of geographic boundaries).

The programme will replace ageing legacy systems with modern more resilient systems. The potential for systems failure is therefore reduced. The integration with a remote geographic 'buddy' reduces the need for immediate transfer to the secondary Control, rendering the travel time issue less relevant. In this case the remote buddy provides an interim service whilst, depending on the circumstances prevailing, the staff from the primary control, if necessary relocate to the secondary control. Due to the relative proximity of Kidlington to Calcot this arrangement is considered effective.

Improved Efficiency

Individual Control rooms are becoming increasingly unviable owing to falling emergency call numbers and the consequential increase in cost per call handled. The proposed TVFCS will enable both OFRS and RBFRS to make significant efficiency improvements by rationalising the resources required, compared to the potential cost of separately upgrading both current Control rooms. It is anticipated that combined gross savings of 29% of current expenditure or £10M over the 15 year programme will be realised.

The TVFCS will also create the potential for further collaborative arrangements with other fire and rescue services in the future, as well as the ability to offer non-critical out of hours call handling to local authorities (e.g. Oxfordshire County Council and Berkshire unitary authorities).

Responses:

Combined Control Rooms cannot provide efficiency **(E-Portal)**

The figures support the need for a merger **(E-Portal)**

This is purely a cost cutting exercise **(E-Portal)**

Agree with document **(E-Portal)**

Less people handling more calls – how does this improve efficiency? **(E-Portal)**

Programme Board commentary / response:

The Board note the responses supportive to the proposal. The Board are of the opinion that through the following measures, amongst others, efficiency will be improved:

The deployment of the full functionality of the digital radio system allows technical advancement, especially when replacing the core mobilising systems. This includes the move of day to day radio traffic from voice to data transmissions which significantly reduces the burden on staff in answering routine voice messages which can be automated.

The use of location based systems in a single Control room will reduce mobilising times and ensure dispatch of the nearest resource without delays.

Rationalisation of premises costs by the adoption of a single primary site and the dual use of the secondary site.

Rationalisation of technology as a combined upgrade rather than full upgrades to both sites.

Full interlinking with a remote geographic 'buddy' FRS which will allow immediate access to further professional control staff with the full ability to take calls and if necessary mobilise on a reciprocal basis. The remote buddy will have visibility of the current disposition and commitments of both the OFRS and RBFS.

Reduced staffing costs, subject to full evaluation and modelling of staff numbers.

Capacity planning is built into the programme to allow for opportunities to attract other agencies and therefore derive an income to contribute to the overheads for provision of the TVFCS.

New Operational Benefits

Although we already provide an effective service to our firefighters and the public, there is scope for significant improvement. A new fire engine mobilising system will be introduced to enable our Control Operators to identify the location of both the caller and our fire engines using map based systems. Caller location will be provided from both fixed and mobile telephones. Whilst it is recognised that this is not always the location of the incident, the assistance of such systems, supplemented by professional staff will optimise our response times to emergencies and allow for accurate identification of the location of the emergency.

We will increase public and firefighter safety by providing our staff with the most up to date risk information and enhanced caller identification technology. This will assist professional control operators to determine the most appropriate response to emergencies.

Fire engines will be upgraded or fitted with the latest on-board computers which will provide mapping data and risk information such as individual building design and

special or unusual processes or manufacturing. These on-board computers will enhance public and firefighter safety whilst providing information for the Thames Valley area which will improve safety, both within Oxfordshire and Berkshire and the immediately surrounding areas.

We will introduce an improved method of information gathering from callers, to ensure we send the most appropriate fire engines. We will also enhance our systems for providing fire survival guidance during incidents allowing our Control Operators to give more detailed advice and reassurance to callers trapped in dangerous situations.

Responses:

There are no operational benefits **(E-Portal)**

Loss of local knowledge **(E-Portal)**

None at all – Will make things worse **(E-Portal)**

Required and needed **(E-Portal)**

Will improve levels of safety to Firefighters and public **(E-Portal)**

Should also merge policies to standardise attendances **(E-Portal)**

New location finding technology not applicable universally as 40% of calls emanate from other emergency services or alarm receiver centres **(OFRS employee via Councillor)**

Concern over a single control providing differing mobilising policies dependent on incident location and potential for delay or errors in mobilising **(OFRS employee via Councillor and OFRS employee via MP)**

Concern over the loss of local knowledge **(OFRS employee via MP)**

Programme Board commentary / response:

The Board note the responses stating a belief in improvements in safety and the standardisation of attendances.

In addressing the areas of concern raised the Board are of the opinion that through the following measures, amongst others, operational benefits will be delivered:

The introduction of Automatic Vehicle Location will ensure rapid identification of the nearest appropriate resource to mobilise to an incident.

Data mobilising will improve response times and reduce the potential for error whilst providing 'live' routing information to get resources to incidents quicker.

The introduction of caller identification technologies will reduce call handling times.

The introduction of data based Direct Electronic Incident Transfer (DEIT) to and from

other emergency services will reduce the reliance on voice based communication. This will allow location based information provided to other emergency service Control rooms to be passed directly to the TVFCS mobilising system.

The introduction of a common 'Gazetteer' will make risk information available to attending personnel for the whole of the Thames Valley area.

The provision of upgraded Mobile Data Terminals will provide more information to attending personnel thereby maintaining and improving safety for personnel and the Communities we serve.

A dedicated Operational Alignment workstream has been established to address operational alignment issues and develop joint arrangements that meet both organisations' needs. This work stream will also address areas of concern, often put forward by some stakeholders, relating to potential loss of local knowledge of current control staff. There are two issues.

Potential loss of local geographic knowledge in the control room. This proposition fails to recognise that whilst local knowledge in control rooms may occasionally be fortuitously beneficial, it is the local crews attending incidents that hold and benefit directly from local knowledge. This aspect will not change under this programme. Other authorities such as London and Strathclyde successfully provide services on a much larger geographic scale, demonstrating that local geographic knowledge is not essential to control room operations. In addition the programme will provide control room staff with additional technology to assist in identifying caller location. Whilst this is not always the location of the incident, the assistance of such systems, supplemented by professional staff, will address this issue.

The second issue relates to the need to ensure that control staff are fully aware of both organisations' policies and procedures relevant to mobilising, incident management and support arrangements. The operational alignment workstream will develop a single common set of policies adopt the standardised products being created within the Operational Policies and Procedures programme. Where this approach is not possible, a single joint policy between OFRS and RBFRS will whenever possible be developed. On the rare occasions that the aforementioned is not possible, the systems will allow for individual service arrangements and staff will be provided specific training in these areas. The programme goal is to minimise differing procedures where possible but also allow for individual variation where necessary.

Staffing Numbers

The authorised "establishment" (measured in full time equivalents) staffing numbers for Royal Berkshire and Oxfordshire are 30 and 22 respectively. However, over the last few years both fire and rescue services have had, from time to time, additional staff members employed. This has been due to number of reasons including increased staffing to support the previous FiReControl Project. The maximum figures were 34 and 26 in Royal Berkshire and Oxfordshire respectively although not all of these were dedicated to emergency call handling, mobilising of resources and

resource management within the control rooms at any one time. By moving to the Thames Valley Fire Control Service we can offer significant efficiency improvements in terms of the numbers of staff employed and the associated employment costs, whilst at the same time improving overall performance.

The following table gives an indication of current and anticipated call numbers, in comparison with other fire and rescue services.

| Comparative Efficiency Table | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|--|--|
| Service | Incidents p.a | Ctrl Staffing | Avg. Incidents Operator/p.a. | Avg. Incidents Operator/Shift | Staffing Cost/ Incident |
| London | 120,692 | 115 | 1049 | 6.36 | £52.45 |
| TVFCS * | 13217 | 30 | 440 | 2.6 | £77.99 |
| Lancashire | 21158 | 42 | 503 | 3.0 | £78.64 |
| Kent | 17653 | 36 | 490 | 2.9 | £90.15 |
| Humberside | 11543 | 33 | 349 | 2.1 | £130.08 |
| RBFRS | 7674 | 34 | 225 | 1.36 | £146.58 |
| OFRS | 5543 | 26 | 213 | 1.29 | £169.81 |

* Indicative figures – At this stage no specific numbers have been decided for the TVFCS.

Historical analysis of incident numbers identifies the following:-

| Year | OFRS | RBFRS | Total |
|-------------|-------------|--------------|---------------|
| 2001/02 | 10,466 | 14,400 | 24,866 |
| 2002/03 | 9,352 | 13,515 | 22,867 |
| 2003/04 | 7,285 | 14,232 | 21,517 |
| 2004/05 | 6,717 | 12,190 | 18,907 |
| 2005/06 | 7,152 | 12,098 | 19,250 |
| 2006/07 | 6,626 | 11,905 | 18,531 |
| 2007/08 | 6,621 | 11,261 | 17,882 |
| 2008/09 | 6,008 | 10,436 | 16,444 |
| 2009/10 | 5,533 | 9,554 | 15,087 |
| 2010/11 | 5,763 | 8,375 | 14,138 |
| 2011/12 | 5,601 | 7,558 | 13,159 |

Responses:

What if we have 'spate' conditions? **(E-Portal)**

Not enough staff **(E-Portal)**

Every employee must fully contribute and be fully occupied during their shifts **(E-Portal)**

Current productivity is woeful **(E-Portal)**

20 staff should be seen as the maximum **(E-Portal)**

I am hoping you don't go to Phase 3 **(E-Portal)**

Potential for callers and other staff members to experience increased waiting times before connection to a control operator **(OFRS employee via Councillor and OFRS employee via MP)**

Concern over replacement of staff with technology "you cannot replace the personal touch" **(OFRS employee via Councillor)**

Programme Board commentary / response:

Programme Board note the responses indicating agreement with the need to address staff efficiency issues. Board members are continuing to work on a full staffing model. As stated, 30 is an indicative number that has yet to be confirmed. Allowances will be made for training, absences and the wider range of other functions that our staff currently provides. We are committed to the continuation of first class call handling and resource management.

The introduction of a remote buddy FRS with the full ability to take calls and mobilise if necessary for either FRS is a major factor in ensuring that no degradation of service to the public or firefighters occurs due to reduced staffing numbers. This combined with the introduction of data for routine messages allows both organisations to have confidence in the sufficiency of the indicative staffing numbers.

The above table of historic incident numbers also indicates that for many years RBFRS managed similar incident numbers to those currently being experienced. Management believe that incident numbers will continue to fall due to fire prevention activities.

It is recognised that incident numbers do not represent the totality of emergency operational workload in Control rooms. Total call numbers which include repeat or duplicate calls have a bearing on workload. However, the introduction of caller location technology and the availability of the additional call handlers in the remote buddy FRS address this general concern, as duplicates will be easier to identify quickly.

Call modelling algorithms have been run with current OFRS and RBFRS call data. This demonstrates the potential for increased caller or other staff member waiting times to be statistically insignificant. Even if there were to be an increase, the

provision of the remote buddy ensures that effective call receipt and mobilising if necessary can still occur with minimal delay.

Technology does not replace staff. It does however reduce unnecessary voice-based interactions that are more effectively automated. The programme seeks to give professional and experienced operators the very best tools to continue to perform to the highest standards.

Irrespective of the chosen location, a transparent and fair selection system for the staff from both FRSs will be conducted. Staff will be supported through the transition process

Location

The location of the primary and secondary Control rooms will be confirmed by the Oxfordshire County Council and Royal Berkshire Fire Authority Meetings on the 17th July 2012. The options are the current Headquarters building in Kidlington and the proposed new Headquarters location in Calcot near Reading. One of these sites will offer the 'primary' Control room, with the other site providing a 'secondary' Control room for resilience purposes. Rationalisation of estate costs based upon a single primary Control site and a single secondary Control site (which will be put to a dual use) will provide ongoing savings.

Responses:

Clearly within this section responses from staff members have been dependent upon where they are located and the responses are best recorded numerically as the general perception of the public is that it is best placed in the most 'fit for purpose' location. Responses are as follows:

Calcot: 72 support this location

Kidlington: 10 support this location

Status Quo: 9 support this approach

No comment: 20 respondents did not declare a preference

In addition Programme Board recognise that one response stated that "there is no likelihood of Oxfordshire Control staff transferring to Royal Berkshire if that becomes the primary control room" **(OFRS employee via Councillor)**

Programme Board commentary / response:

A full Premises selection process has been undertaken This process involves a number of criteria to determine the most appropriate location for the Primary Control Room.

The results of this process together with comments received during this consultation will be made available to both Authorities for their consideration.

Irrespective of the chosen primary Control location all employees will be in scope for a competitive selection process and will have opportunity to be employed in the joint Control. Both Services wish to see their best control room operators working in this new environment. Staff will be supported through the transition process.

Irrespective of the chosen location, a transparent and fair selection system for the staff from both FRSs will be conducted. Staff will be supported through the transition process.

Other feedback not directly able to be categorised

Responses:

I believe that the County Council would have less influence and interaction with the Control room due to the facility being shared by another Fire Authority (**OFRS employee via MP**)

Programme Board commentary / response:

In terms of either Fire Authority having less influence in the running of the joint Control, the proposed governance model will fully address this by the creation of a Member led Joint Committee under Section 102 of the Local Government Act 1972. In addition, clear tactical management arrangements will be instigated supported by a pragmatic change control system ensuring the continual developments and improvements from both FRSs continue to be implemented.

The scope of activities included in the joint control will continue to include those activities that are undertaken by OFRS on behalf of OCC. Therefore this should not adversely affect the level of interaction between the control room and the wider OCC.

4. Feedback from the public and staff engagement forums

The full ORS report for the public engagement forums is attached as Annex A. The conclusion of the report for states:

*Therefore, while the Berkshire and Oxfordshire forums wanted to examine the issues in detail, and raised many matters for discussion, there was overwhelming support for the proposal for a joint Thames Valley Fire Control Centre. The **Berkshire participants were almost unanimously in favour and two-thirds of those in Oxfordshire supported the proposal.** Overall, then, across both forums, **eight in ten participants favoured the proposal** after examining in detail the alternatives. The general conclusion was that the benefits of establishing a combined Thames Valley Fire Control Service greatly outweigh any potential difficulties of doing so – and the great majority supported RBFRS' and OFRS' proposed direction of travel.*

The full ORS report for the staff engagement forums is attached as Annex B. It reflects staff concerns over the ability of the programme to deliver the stated efficiency savings, prove more resilient in operation or that it is desirable to proceed beyond stage 2 resilience to a single joint Control room. The conclusion of the report for states:

In both forums staff, were asked for their overall judgements about whether there would be cost and resilience/efficiency benefits and whether, all things considered, the proposal for a Joint Control is reasonable or not. They were also asked for any comments about the criteria that should influence the choice of location for the new Joint Control.

*In the first forum there was a wide diversity of opinion about whether the Joint Control would achieve significant **cost savings** – with a third saying 'yes', a third saying 'no' and a third who were 'don't knows'. In the second smaller group, the majority were 'don't know' on the question of cost savings (with only one out of eight) saying they would definitely not be achieved. Therefore, most staff were at least open-minded or undecided about whether there would be cost savings, with a third of the larger forum believing savings would be achieved.*

*With respect to whether the Joint Control would deliver **resilience benefits**, the overwhelming majority in the first forum was that it would not: no one was optimistic while 13 felt there were no benefits to be achieved and five said they had no opinion at that stage. In the second forum, half thought there would be no resilience benefits while the other half were 'don't knows'. Overall, then, across both forums, the clear majority view was that resilience would not improve in a Joint Control. In fact, across the two forums, no one was optimistic about greater resilience.*

*In terms of whether the proposal for a Joint Control is **reasonable overall**, all things considered, the first forum was almost equally divided between sceptics and those who did not know – but with no one supporting the*

proposals as reasonable overall. In the second forum, too, no one supported the Joint Control as a reasonable proposal, and most said they were 'don't knows'. Overall, then, the forums were divided between those who thought the project unreasonable and those who did not know.

The forums also raised concerns over the arrangements that will be put in place to communicate the OCC and RBFA decisions on the 17th July 2012. The Programme Board will ensure that, as far as possible, those staff who choose to receive information about the decisions will receive it in a timely, effective and supportive manner.

5. Conclusion

The Programme Sponsoring Group and the Programme Board are committed to effective consultation and, if appropriate, to modifying the proposals in light of the feedback received.

Overall, there have been a small number of responses supporting the proposals. However, employees have provided significant feedback expressing genuine individual concerns that are largely addressed in the programme or will receive further investigation and work as a result. In general, there has been nothing specifically forthcoming from these responses that reduces the confidence of the Programme Board in recommending the programme to the Programme Sponsoring Group, the Oxfordshire County Council and the Royal Berkshire Fire Authority.

The feedback from the public engagement forums is considered to be important in understanding the non-staff based general response. Considerable weight must be given to the fact that overall the feedback was supportive of the proposal.

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