

PROPOSAL TO MERGE EAST AND WEST SUSSEX FIRE & RESCUE SERVICES

The following Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) have been written to inform debate on the proposed merger of East and West Sussex Fire & Rescue Services under a new Fire Authority covering East and West Sussex and the City of Brighton & Hove.

Final decisions on merging will only be taken after a full twelve-week public consultation, and the answers provided here are only to provide guidance on some of the key points if the merger goes ahead.

Questions have been sub-divided into:

1. General
2. Service Delivery
3. Organisational Change
4. Finance
5. Governance and Accountability
6. Consultation
7. Decision process

1. GENERAL

Q. Why are we proposing a merger?

A. We have a duty to provide the best possible service to our local community and believe merging is the best way to achieve this. Putting it simply, we want to maximise the operational and organisational benefits of a larger, combined Service whilst at the same time doing our best to preserve services to local communities in the wake of the cuts to public spending.

If we opt not to merge, and still have to make the scale of savings required from within existing services and budgets, it will almost certainly result in cuts to fire stations and other community services.

Q. What are the benefits of merging? Is it just about saving money?

A. It is not just about saving money although that is certainly a factor, and merging will deliver significant savings especially in the medium to long term.

Merging is the best way to protect fire stations and other services to local communities in the current economic climate. Streamlining our operational support functions and senior management will improve the ratio of support staff to frontline staff and therefore make frontline services more cost effective.

Merging will give us more resilience to cope with major incidents, or staff absences from pandemic flu, etc. It means we can share expertise and avoid duplication of specialist teams or functions and it will give us a strategic voice across Sussex in line with other emergency services. The overriding reason is to deliver the best service possible to our local communities and people across Sussex and the City of Brighton & Hove.

Q. Why just East and West Sussex and not other FRSs?

A. The business case to support merging has to satisfy three factors: operational service, finance and governance (accountability to the local community).

This is a good 'strategic fit' for Sussex which may not be the case if we were to merge with other neighbouring services. Both existing Services are similar in terms of geography, resources, fire stations, people and budgets. We obviously share a border, but we have similar community profiles and respond to the same type of risks. Merging keeps a local identity for the fire & rescue service and we feel this is important in order to best respond to local concerns and be readily accountable to local people.

Q. When will the merger take place?

A. If a merger is supported after the public consultation it will take effect on 1st April 2013. The consultation runs from 14th July to 6th October and the decision on whether to proceed is expected to be made in December 2011.

2. SERVICE DELIVERY

Q. Will a merger mean fewer fire stations or other services to local communities?

A. Merging should mean we can preserve fire stations and there are no plans to close any stations. Other services like community safety schemes for the vulnerable or educating young people will be co-ordinated and streamlined with fewer managers and some savings on administrative roles where there is unnecessary duplication, but with the same levels of service being delivered.

Q. Will a merger increase emergency response times?

A. No. We will work together to achieve a common standard by which to assess our performance but, by keeping existing fire stations, emergency response times should remain as they are now.

3. ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

Q. What will be the name of the Authority and Service if we combine?

A. The Authority is likely to be named Sussex Fire Authority and its service as Sussex Fire & Rescue Service, although this still has to be confirmed.

Q. Who will be Chief Fire Officer & Chief Executive of the newly combined Service?

A. There will be an open and transparent appointment process for the appointment of a new Chief Fire Officer & Chief Executive, and we aim to have the new CFO&CE designate in place by autumn 2012. This will be one of the first decisions taken following the creation of a shadow fire authority to oversee the transition of services, and to develop priorities and business plans for the new organisation from April 2013 onwards.

Q. Where will the HQ be located?

A. The headquarters of East Sussex FRS is in Eastbourne and for West Sussex it is in Chichester. The building or location of a HQ for the combined Service still has to be decided, but it is very unlikely to change in the foreseeable future and arrangements will be made to continue to work out of both locations.

Q. Where will the Control Room be located?

A. Options for providing a command and mobilising function, including how and where this will be located, are still being examined and will be discussed with staff and representative bodies.

Q. What will the new organisational structure be?

A. As we go to consultation, no decisions have been taken on organisational structures, functions or teams as these will be determined during the planning for implementation stage. At this stage, it has only been agreed that there will be a single management team. This will be led by a Chief Fire Officer who will also be the Chief Executive.

The organisational structure of other functions and the precise make up of teams will be considered once more detailed preparations commence. Any outcomes will be published once they have been agreed following a period of staff consultation.

Q. How will we decide which teams to combine?

A. The new organisational structure will streamline the management of all operational and support posts. Over the next few months we will be reviewing all these functions in detail to examine the similarities of roles in each Service and try to possibly identify more efficient ways of working. This will include control rooms, senior operational managers on rota and specialist support teams.

When potential savings have been identified, in sufficient detail, they will be consulted upon and discussed with staff and the representative bodies before being made public.

4. FINANCE

Q. How much money does each Service have to save?

A. Both Services have identified the need to achieve additional savings of at least £3.8m over the next four years in addition to any savings already approved. West Sussex has to save £2.5m, in addition to the £1.5m it has already saved through its Fire Redesign programme in 2010/11. East Sussex has to save a further £1.3m on top of £5m savings already identified through its Rural Review and service prioritisation programme.

Q. Are there other options to save £3.8m?

A. Both Services have assessed different options and they will continue to drive out efficiency savings where they can be identified, but merging is considered the only way to achieve the scope and scale of savings required without adversely affecting levels of service to the public.

Q. Where would the savings come from?

A. The focus will be savings in management costs and streamlining operational support functions.

Q. Will there be some transitional costs before money can be saved?

A. Yes, in the short term, but these will be heavily outweighed by savings in the longer term. We will try to offset some of the transitional costs by applying for support from the coalition government. A local and voluntary merger like this supports their political agenda and was an option put forward by the Fire Minister after the Comprehensive Spending Review.

Q. How will the newly combined Service be funded?

A. Fire & Rescue Service funding is a combination of a 'formula grant' from central government plus a proportion of locally raised council tax.

In a combined fire authority like East Sussex the formula grant is paid direct and the remainder is raised through council tax. The amount is shown as a precept on your local council tax bill, similar to the precept charge for the police.

In a county council run fire service like West Sussex the formula grant and council tax is paid directly to the County Council and they allocate an annual budget to the Fire & Rescue Service as part of the county's overall budget plan. There is no additional precept charge shown on local council tax bills, but the cost of the Fire & Rescue Service is shown in breakdown of County Council spending.

If a merger takes place it will mean a Combined Fire Authority for Sussex so it will be financed like the current East Sussex model.

Q. Will a combined Service mean changes to council tax?

A. Council tax is set locally by East and West Sussex County Councils, and Brighton & Hove City Council or the relevant district and borough council for the particular area. Added to these are the precepts from other bodies such as Sussex Police and Town and Parish councils.

Creating a new Sussex Fire Authority should mean that roughly the same amounts will be paid by council tax payers in East Sussex and the City of Brighton and Hove as currently planned.

For West Sussex council tax payers the expectation is that the reduction in the West Sussex County Council council tax bill due to the transfer of its fire & rescue service to the new Fire Authority should equate to the precept of the new Fire Authority.

There are strict rules set out by DCLG on this issue, called 'council tax equalisation', in order to ensure local council taxpayers are not adversely affected by such structural changes. As such, significant increases to the overall amount of council tax paid are not allowed, although changes to bring about one precept figure being applied across the whole of the area may be phased over a period of up to five years, subject to Government approval.

The exact amounts will not be known until budgets are set and formula grant for 2013/14 is known. The precise amount of precept paid will be shown on your council tax bill from April 2013.

5. GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Q. How does a Combined Fire Authority (CFA) work and how is it governed?

A. Combined Fire Authorities have a statutory responsibility to provide the functions of a fire & rescue service under the terms of the Fire & Rescue Service Act 2004. The CFA is made up of elected members from all the County Councils or Unitary Authorities in its designated area. In a Sussex Combined Fire Authority these Elected Members will come from Brighton & Hove City Council, East Sussex County Council and West Sussex County Council.

East Sussex Fire & Rescue Service is already governed by the East Sussex Combined Fire Authority, which comprises eighteen elected members - twelve from East Sussex and six from the City of Brighton & Hove.

West Sussex Fire & Rescue Service is not a CFA and is currently governed by West Sussex County Council, which is the statutory fire authority for West Sussex.

The statutory responsibilities of both the East Sussex Combined Fire Authority and West Sussex County Council will be transferred across to a new CFA for the whole of Sussex in the event of a merger.

The maximum number of members allowed for a CFA is 25. In a Sussex CFA we will need to ensure that there is equal representation from both existing fire authorities. For example, if the new CFA has 24 members, it will have eight members representing East Sussex, four members representing the City of Brighton & Hove and twelve representing West Sussex. Conversely, if there are eighteen Members, the numbers will be six, three and nine respectively.

Combined Fire Authorities must have three appointed officers to advise them. These are the Treasurer, the Monitoring Officer and the Chief Fire Officer.

The Chief Fire Officer (& Chief Executive) is the appointed officer to manage the Fire & Rescue Service and is accountable for all areas of performance including operations and service delivered, budget and resource management and business planning.

The Treasurer has statutory responsibility for the effective management of the Fire Authority's financial arrangements.

The Monitoring Officer also has statutory duties in order to ensure Members meet their statutory responsibilities, maintain standards of public office and keep within the law.

6. CONSULTATION

Q. What are the dates for the public consultation?

A. The public consultation will run from 14th July – 6th October 2011

Q. What consultation opportunities will there be for staff?

A. Each Service will be responsible for its own internal consultation with staff, but there will be some joint consultation with representative bodies.

Precise arrangements and dates are still to be confirmed, but staff consultation will be face-to-face wherever possible in the form of seminars, briefings and team meetings. These will be backed up with written and electronic communications in the form of emails, Service Brief and the intranet.

We will ensure ALL staff have opportunities to discuss the merger, ask questions, and submit feedback.

Q. What consultation opportunities will there be for the public?

A. We will proactively use local media to promote awareness of the merger and consultation period. We will offer to present our proposals at relevant public meetings and there will be consultation opportunities at fire station open days and other public

events (for example, Brighton Pride). The dates of all these events will be sent to local media and published on our websites.

We will hold forums for businesses and voluntary organisations, and focus groups for the public, all facilitated by an independent consultant.

We will write to every organisation or individual registered as an existing consultee for our Integrated Risk Management Plans (IRMPs).

A consultation document will be available online and printed copies will be available in libraries, reception areas of Council offices and on request.

Everyone will have the opportunity to have their response recorded at one of these events, or their feedback can be given by phone, letter or to a dedicated email address.

Q. How will feedback be recorded and evaluated?

A. Feedback from all events will be recorded on a standard form and entered onto a database. Feedback and issues raised will be shared between Services.

We will respond within five working days to all feedback received via email or letter to confirm it has been received and noted. Feedback requiring a more detailed response or further research may take longer, but this will be explained at the time.

All feedback will be weighted and evaluated by Opinion Research Services (ORS), an independent social research organisation with extensive experience of public consultations in the Fire sector. Their report and conclusions will be presented to both organisations before any final decisions are taken. It will also be published on our websites, but without contravening data protection laws or breaking personal confidences.

7. THE DECISION PROCESS

Q. Who makes the final decision and when?

A. Both the East Sussex Fire Authority and West Sussex County Council have to make their own separate decision, and only after considering the feedback from the public consultation.

In East Sussex, the decision will be made by the eighteen members of East Sussex Fire Authority.

In West Sussex the decision will be made after being debated at a meeting of the full County Council, open to all 71 Elected Members.

These decisions are expected to be made in December 2011, but any decision to merge and create a new statutory fire authority for Sussex will be subject to the approval of the Minister of State for Fire on behalf of central government.

Q. What will be the timescale if a merger is agreed?

A. December 2011: Decision made by ESFA and WSCC.
September 2012: Combination Order (statutory instrument to create a new fire authority) laid before Parliament.
April 2013: Statutory responsibility transferred to the new Sussex Fire Authority and creation of Sussex Fire & Rescue Service.

Q. Where can I get further info?

A. Hopefully we have answered many of your questions on the merger in these FAQs, but if you would like further information or have specific questions you can contact Assistant Chief Officer Diana Williams via email - diana.williams@esfrs.org

