

**POTENTIAL MERGER BETWEEN CAMBRIDGESHIRE AND SUFFOLK FIRE AND
RESCUE SERVICES: CONSULTATION RESPONSE
(Report by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services)**

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 At its meeting on 6th November 2012, the Panel was acquainted with details of the consultation being undertaken by Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service on the proposals for further collaboration up to a full merger between Cambridgeshire and Suffolk Fire and Rescue Services. Councillor Fred Brown, Chairman of the Fire Authority and Mr Matthew Warren, Director of Resources and Treasurer to the Fire Authority, delivered a presentation to Members at the meeting on the background to the proposals, which included an outline of the Fire Authority's current financial position.
- 1.2 All Members of the Council were invited to attend the meeting to partake in the Panel's discussions. Councillor P J Downes was in attendance and contributed to discussions accordingly.
- 1.3 Given that the consultation period closes on 14th January 2013, it was agreed that a draft response to the consultation would be submitted back to the Panel outlining Members' preliminary views on the proposals. A copy of the consultation document is attached as an Appendix.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Councillor Fred Brown and Mr Matthew Warren reported that the proposals emerged following anticipated reductions in the level of Government grant awarded to both Fire and Rescue Services in future years. On the basis of the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review, the Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service has predicted it needs to save a minimum of £4.2 million over the next four years and it is confident it can do this without affecting the delivery of front line services. It is expected that the spending formula for allocating Fire Service funding will change and be less favourable for Cambridgeshire in 2013/14 and 2014/15. As a result further savings of up to £2 million are likely to be required. These financial pressures have led the Fire Authority to consider the options of further collaboration, up to a full merger, with Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service.

3. DRAFT RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION

- 3.1 This section of the report is structured around the consultation statements/questions posed within the consultation document. Members' views have been incorporated into the relevant sections.
 - (a) **All viable options for making savings, from collaboration through to a voluntary merger, should be explored in order to protect front line Fire Services from being cut.**

3.2 Members “strongly agree” with this statement. Wherever possible, front line services should be protected, provided that it is the most viable option and in the best interests of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough to do so.

(b) I understand why Cambridgeshire and Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service are looking to work closer together and are considering the option of a full merger.

3.3 The Panel “strongly agree” with this statement. Members are sympathetic of Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service’s financial position and understand the need to identify savings and create efficiencies.

(c) In principle, I believe there is a strong case for merging Cambridgeshire and Suffolk Fire and Rescue Services if this will produce significant savings and benefits that will minimise the impact on the front line from future budget cuts.

3.4 Members “neither agree nor disagree” with this statement. As no final business plan exists for the proposed merger, it is difficult for Members to agree that there is a strong case for it. Members do however agree with the principle of this option being favourable if significant savings can be identified to help protect and maintain front line services, whilst having the best interests of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough at heart. The Panel is supportive of the principle of working with other Fire and Rescue Services but feels that there should be a long term vision. It is suggested that work should be undertaken to ascertain the optimal size for a modern Fire and Rescue Service. This should take account of management structure, geographical location and operational efficiency.

How does a merger with Suffolk fit in with the long term vision? Would such a merger provide short term gains, but compromise future possibilities? If a merger with Suffolk does prove a sensible stepping stone towards a longer term vision, are you engaging with others who could also be a part of that vision?

(d) Is there anything that concerns you about the proposed merger, or anything else you feel we should consider in our decision-making?

3.5 In the absence of a full business case to assist Members with taking an informed view of the consultation, Members queried whether there will be a further opportunity to comment on the proposals once the business plan is available. The Panel is keen to ensure that the proposals demonstrate the best use of tax payers’ money. Although having been informed that the exercise is being undertaken to meet central government deadlines, views were expressed that the consultation was being undertaken too early given that no specific information can be presented at this point in time. The validity of undertaking the consultation exercise has therefore been questioned by Members. It is suggested that a further public consultation should be undertaken when the full business plan is available.

3.6 Some concerns exist over the property and fleet arrangements of the Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service. Members have been advised of the potential liability for assets held by Suffolk, which were reported as being in a poor condition. Historically, Cambridgeshire has invested heavily into all of its assets and Members are concerned that the proposals for a merger, if agreed, might be to the detriment of the area that it currently serves. Members wish to preserve front-line services that best serve the residents of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough and will of course take particular interest in the effect of any changes upon residents and businesses in Huntingdonshire. Whilst Suffolk may be willing partners, they do however have

significant differences in their governance, property and information technology arrangements.

- 3.7 The Panel has reservations over the future service provision and the ability for calls for service to be responded to in a timely manner and in particular the possible negative impact upon the current performance levels achieved by the Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service - both from an operational and financial perspective. These concerns also exist within the Cambridgeshire Fire Authority. This is further exacerbated by the indication given by Suffolk that they run their service at one third of the cost of the Cambridgeshire service. Clarification is required of how these conclusions have been reached.
- 3.8 Extensive investigations should continue to be undertaken by the Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service, with a view to ensuring that any decisions made in the future are for the benefit of Cambridgeshire residents. Members have strong views that a sound business plan, which demonstrates financial and operational resilience, is required before any final decisions are made. Whilst preliminary enquiries with other neighbouring Fire Authority areas have not progressed, Members are of the view that this option should further be explored by the Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service.
- 3.9 Finally, the Panel questions who would have overall responsibility for the merged service? Shared responsibility has been shown to be problematic in other areas in the past. Clarity of responsibility and accountability is required.

4. OTHER COMMENTS

- 4.1 A copy of the draft consultation response was submitted to the Head of Environmental and Community Health Services (and Chairman of the Huntingdonshire Community Safety Partnership) for prior review. Whilst there are no comments to note from the Partnership, she has drawn attention to one possible issue relating to Cambridgeshire Constabulary, stating that "if and when Cambridgeshire Constabulary ever do merge with Bedfordshire Police and Hertfordshire Police, then the Police service in Cambridgeshire would not be co-terminus with Fire as another emergency service." This is a point that the Panel may wish to also include within their consultation response.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1 As requested by the Panel, this report sets out the preliminary views expressed at the last meeting on the consultation currently being undertaken by Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service. A number of comments have been made and each of the consultation statements/questions have been responded to. The Panel is

RECOMMENDED

- (a) to consider and endorse Sections 3 and 4 of the report as the basis for the Council's response to the consultation on the proposals for further collaboration up to a full merger between Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service and Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service; and
- (b) to authorise Officers to submit the response directly to the Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service.

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Minutes and Reports of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) held on 6th November 2012.