

Report to	North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority	
Date	16 October 2023	
Lead Officer	Stewart Forshaw, Deputy Chief Fire Officer (Corporate Policy & Planning)	
Contact Officer	Anthony Jones, Head of Planning, Performance and Transformation	
Subject	Summary Report of the Emergency Cover Review Consultation 21 July to 30 September 2023	

PURPOSE OF REPORT

1. To provide Members with an update of the key emerging themes from the programme of consultation involving the public, staff and partner organisations on the North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority's Emergency Cover Review which was conducted between 21st July 2023 and 30th September 2023.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2. This report aims to provide the Authority with information on the key emerging themes identified as part of the consultation on the future of emergency cover in North Wales, to assist Members with decision making prior to setting the budget for 2024/25.
3. On 21 July 2023, the North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority (the Authority) launched a public consultation to gather feedback from those who live, work and travel in the region about the provision of a future emergency cover in North Wales, following agreement at the meeting of the full Fire Authority on 17 July 2023.
4. The public consultation was open from 21 July 2023 to 30 September 2023, having been extended from its original closing date of 22 September 2023. The extension allowed for extra engagement opportunities with young people, equality, diversity and inclusion groups, and for other organisations to respond following their summer recesses.

5. At the close of the consultation on 30 September 2023, 1500 responses were received via the online questionnaire. A further 226 paper questionnaires had also been received. A total of 17 community engagement events had taken place across the region as well as 17 meetings with equality, diversity and inclusion groups in addition to engagement with North Wales Councillors, Chief Executives, Members of the Senedd Cymru and Members of the UK Parliament. A comprehensive programme of staff engagement visits to fire stations and departments had also been delivered across North Wales Fire and Rescue Service (the Service).
6. The consultation clearly shows a clear rejection of options 2 (63% disagreeing) and 3 (93% disagreeing). There is clear public opinion that option 1 is the preferred option (68% agreeing). Whilst there was clear support for option 1 the responses also highlighted other measures that the Authority may need to consider including opportunities for growth. Some responses also sought assurance that costs including corporate management expenditure are reasonable.
7. On the 5 October 2023 the Member led Emergency Cover Review Working Group met and were presented with a recap on the aims of the Emergency Cover Review, the evaluation criteria (paragraph 17 of this report) and the consultation findings.
8. Based on the aim of the Emergency Cover Review, evaluation criteria and the consultation findings, at this meeting, the working group recommend that officers continue to work on variations of option 1 including a refreshed equality impact assessment. The working group also requested further work in relation to the other matters raised in the responses to the consultation and this will be supported through the work of the Budget Scrutiny Working Group.
9. The working group further recommended that the Officers cease working on options 2 and 3 from the Emergency Cover Review based on views received from the public outlined within the consultation report.

RECOMMENDATION

10. That Members are asked to:

- i) Note, the comprehensive range of community and stakeholder engagement activities delivered as part of the public consultation;
- ii) Note, the analysis of the consultation feedback in the report from independent consultant Sarah Barnett Research (Appendix 1;
- iii) Note, additional comments and suggestions received for making improvements to the provision of fair and equitable emergency cover across North Wales.
- iv) Note, the Member led Emergency Cover Review Working Group recommend that officers continue to work on variations of option 1 plus the points raised in the responses to the consultation; and
- v) Agree, the recommendation from the Member ECR working group that the Authority cease working on options 2 and 3 from the ECR based on clear rejection from the public from within the consultation report.

BACKGROUND

11. Following the commissioning of an Emergency Cover Review (ECR) by North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority (the Authority) in September 2021, extensive work was undertaken to determine the current position and scope proposals for improvement. The findings were presented to the Member led Emergency Cover Working Group. The group met on five occasions between March 2023 and June 2023. The focus of the group was to consider options around a future of service delivery model to address the existing challenges and to be able to respond to future operational risks.

12. The development journey to determine which options were presented for consultation is here [PowerPoint Presentation \(gov.wales\)](#)

13. Consultation Programme

Following a detailed stakeholder mapping exercise, the consultation programme focused on a range of stakeholder tailored engagement activities. These included:

i) General public

- A suite of bilingual information material was developed to communicate the consultation options including an in-depth document, a summary document and easy read versions. These were supplemented with posters and flyers. These were made available at public engagement events, on the Service website, and flyers signposting people to the website were distributed by community-based staff during Safe and Well Checks.
- An online questionnaire was developed to gauge opinion, and bilingual as well as easy read paper copies of the questionnaire were also available.
- A bespoke email address and telephone number were adopted to help people to communicate their views and request any assistance or to request hard copies of the information material or questionnaire which could be returned via a freepost address.
- A total of 17 community engagement events were held across the North Wales region, including two of which were held online, all hosted by a panel comprising an independent chair to facilitate engagement, a Principal Officer, an Area Manager and where possible a Member of the Authority. In response to early feedback, the community engagement event venues, locations and times were updated to include holding meetings in the areas named for possible station closures as part of Option 3.
- In addition, a wide range of stakeholders on the Service database of consultees were sent information via email; posters were displayed to advertise the engagement events and the opportunity to take part in the consultation; advertisements were placed in local print media and their associated digital sites; and a variety of social media platforms were used throughout the consultation period to raise awareness.
- Attendance at local annual events helped to raise further awareness of the consultation and these included the National Eisteddfod in Boduan, Gwynedd; the Anglesey Show at Anglesey Showground; the Denbigh and Flint Show in Denbigh; the Merioneth County Show, Harlech; and the Cerrigydrudion Show.

ii) Consultation with Staff

- Consultation with members of staff was carried out during a programme of visits by senior managers and Principal Officers to fire stations; at seminars held for middle managers seminar and for supervisory managers; via fire station watch briefings by station support officers and middle managers.
- Internal communications channels also helped to raise regular awareness of the consultation amongst staff – including the Chief Fire Officers Update in the Weekly Brief and intranet information.
- Engagement with Staff Representative bodies was carried out via the Joint Consultative Forum.
- Frequently asked questions were collated from station visits and developed and updated throughout, made available via the Service intranet.

iii) Decision Makers

- Engagement opportunities were provided with North Wales Councillors, Members of the Senedd Cymru and Members of the UK Parliament.
- The Chief Fire Officer met with all available politicians and Local Authority Chief Executives as part of the pre-consultation and on request during the consultation.
- Further meetings with Chief Executives and Finance and Scrutiny Committees have also been ongoing throughout the consultation period.

iv) Local media and social media

- Members of the media were invited to the Authority meeting announcing the consultation, and interviews were facilitated with print and broadcast journalists throughout the consultation period.
- A concerted social media campaign was delivered via Service social media accounts, including paid and targeted social media messaging through Facebook as required.

v) Diverse Groups

- Consultation activity was undertaken to provide an opportunity for a range of diverse groups across the community to take part, with further detail on this provided within the consultation feedback report.
- Equality Impact Assessments were also developed to support the consultation. These will be reviewed as the proposals are implemented.

vi) Best Practice

- To ensure best practice, the Service worked with the Consultation Institute (tCI) throughout the process, who provided advice and quality assurance related to key milestones.
- Additional elements and consultation materials introduced to ensure best practice included developing a consultation mandate, producing equality impact assessments and a regularly updated frequently asked questions section on the website.
- Throughout the 10 weeks, the consultation was adapted in response to feedback and a proactive approach to enquiries and requests for support was adopted. For example, community engagement events were increased to include 5 events that were held in the areas identified for potential station closures, with the event in Conwy being rescheduled to an evening meeting; Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity events were expanded; and the consultation closing date was extended.

vii) Representative Bodies

- The Service has engaged with representative bodies throughout the pre-consultation and full consultation phases and 2 alternative options for future emergency cover were received from the Fire Brigades Union (FBU). These will be reviewed against the criteria used to develop the consultation options.

viii) Responses

- At the close of the consultation, 1500 online responses were received via the online questionnaire, as well as 226 completed paper questionnaires, far exceeding any the response from any previous Service consultation process in the past.
- In total 1248 members of the public and 191 staff responded, 288 additional unidentified responses.
- 33 stakeholder or partner organisations responded.
- The report from Sarah Barnett Research in Appendix 1 summarises the responses received from all the stakeholders and the top line findings and key themes.

ix) Emergency Cover Group Meetings

- To adhere to the budget setting process, it will be necessary for further Emergency Cover Group meetings to be held before reporting to the full Authority on 18 December 2023 where a decision can be made on any changes to emergency cover arrangement post April 2024.

- On the 5 October 2023 the Member led Emergency Cover Review Working Group met and were presented with a recap on the Emergency Cover Review aim, the evaluation criteria (paragraph 17 of this report) and the consultation findings.
- Members of the Authority Executive Panel received a mid-point update at their meeting on 18 September 2023.

14. In April 2023, the Service engaged tCI, a not for profit, well-established institute promoting high-quality public and stakeholder consultation in the public, private and voluntary sectors. They have been used by many Fire and Rescue Services in the UK including Mid and West Wales.

15. The Institute provides advice, guidance and qualified peer review to prepare organisations for consultation readiness and adoption of best practice in line with a Consultation Charter. When satisfied that best practice has been achieved, tCI issue a certificate of consultation readiness prior to full public consultation to demonstrate that the consultation is being delivered to the required standard. On 19 July 2023, tCI awarded the Service it's 'Certificate of Consultation Readiness'.

16. Best practice pre-consultation activities include listening to the views of others via focus groups and workshops. This allows for an analysis of who may be impacted and to what extent, to ensure that the right methods of communicating and engaging with all stakeholders is considered prior to full consultation.

17. The Authority Working Group determined which options were viable in terms of meeting criteria for a fair, sustainable and equitable emergency response for everyone in North Wales and used evaluation criteria based on:

- Emergency cover - how our fire appliances respond to emergency calls.
- Protection and prevention services - how we keep your homes and businesses safe.
- Affordability - keeping our services as affordable as possible, providing best value for money.
- Workforce - impact of changes on our teams.
- Fair and equitable service - having our staff at the right place, at the right time and with the right skills.
- Social value - recognising the impact of any changes we make on our communities.

18. This meant that the original Option 1 (which was to do nothing and stay the same) and Option 2 (which involved increasing resources) were not taken forward as options for public consultation as they did not meet the criteria of the review for a fair, sustainable and equitable emergency response.
19. To shape the options that would be presented for full consultation, the Working Group also took the feedback from the pre-consultation stakeholder focus groups into account along with the 166 comments collected from the 21 responses from staff via the bespoke emergency cover review email.
20. The potential closure of fire stations remained within the set of options as the Authority voted unanimously in favour of seeking public feedback on how service reductions could result in a way of reducing costs to householders.
21. The final 3 Options were presented to the Authority Meeting on 17 July 2023 where a unanimous vote was recorded in favour of taking the 3 options to public consultation between 21 July and 22 September 2023.
22. At its meeting on 17 July 2023, the Authority approved to commence public consultation between 21 July and 22 September 2023 on the revised options below:
- **Option 1** This would mean that the 12 rural firefighter posts and 28 wholetime firefighter posts from Rhyl and Deeside station would be reallocated to the 3 new day staffed stations. Cover for Rhyl and Deeside would change to a day crewed model similar to the model which currently operates at Colwyn Bay, Llandudno, Bangor, Caernarfon and Holyhead. This will continue to be in addition to the existing RDS firefighters who crew the second fire engine at all these stations.
 - **Option 2** An alternative model which provides an improved emergency cover by introducing 3 new day staffed stations, but also realises savings of £1.1 million towards the increase in 2024/25 budget, currently estimated at £6 million thus limiting the year on year increase to £4.9m. This option changes the crewing model at Rhyl and Deeside to a day staffed model, which leaves the night time cover to be provided solely by the RDS firefighters and removes the third appliance from Wrexham. In total this sees a reduction in 22 wholetime firefighter posts.

- **Option 3** Changes are in line with option 2, however, only 2 day staffed stations are introduced and the closure of 5 RDS fire stations is included. This is a reduction of 36 wholetime and 38 RDS firefighter posts realises savings of £2.4m thus limiting the year on year cost increase to £3.6m

23. During week 8 of the 9-week consultation, in response to feedback, a decision was taken to extend the consultation period to the 30 September to allow more time for responses.

24. The development of the options for presentation can be found here [PowerPoint Presentation \(gov.wales\)](#)

25. To ensure that all consultation response evidence is accurately analysed and reported, the Service engaged an independent research consultancy, Sarah Barnett Research. The consultant provided weekly updates, a mid-point summary and the full consultation summary analysis report which is included at Appendix 1.

IMPLICATIONS

Well-being Objectives	The consultation must meet the Authority's obligations under the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015
Budget	The consultation budget implications have been publicised in the consultation frequently asked questions and have been presented to the Budget, Monitoring and Procurement Committee.
Legal	Our legislation requires that the Authority must consult the public on changes to our emergency cover. The ECR consultation and the best practices the Service is following as recommended by the Consultation Institute support the Authority in meeting these requirements.
Staffing	The Service has conducted extensive direct consultation with staff and their representative bodies during pre-consultation and this continues during the full public consultation. However, in deciding on options to be consulted on staff will be impacted by the proposed changes within the options
Equalities/Human Rights/Welsh Language	The Service's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Officer has created a timetable of engagement events with ED&I groups throughout the consultation. The best practice the Service is following and the quality assurance of the consultation by the Consultation Institute ensures focus on the Authority's requirements in this area.
Risks	The ECR and its consultation reduces the risks of not being able to set a balanced budget and respond to emergencies effectively and efficiently in the communities of North Wales