

***Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Safer & Stronger
Communities - Monday, 13 February 2012***

Statement of Decision

Present: Cabinet Member for Safer & Stronger Communities, Councillor Mrs J. Heathcoat

Officers: C. Thomas (Oxfordshire Fire & Rescue Service); J. Dean (Chief Executive's Office)

Also in attendance:

Other Members: Councillor John Goddard

**Future Arrangements for Call Receipt, Mobilising &
Incident Management for Oxfordshire County Council Fire
& Rescue Service**

Documentation considered:

Report Future Arrangements for Call Receipt, Mobilising &
Incident Management for Oxfordshire County Council
Fire & Rescue Service

A copy is attached to the signed copy of this decision.

Summary of representations in person

Rachel Dobson, the Fire Brigade's Control Room representative for Oxfordshire and representing the Oxfordshire Fire Brigade Union, spoke out in opposition to a single Joint Control Room for Oxfordshire & Berkshire, urging cancellation of the project, warning that this project was not a viable business option and would not deliver improved resilience or efficiency. She pointed out that Oxfordshire's Control Room handled nearly 12,500 emergency calls alone in 2011; 98% of which were answered in less than 7 seconds and 2% within 15 seconds. Currently Oxfordshire and Berkshire's Control Rooms employed 50 staff between them, a merger would result in a reduction in staffing (28 is currently being discussed in Berkshire) and thus fewer operators would be dealing with twice the workload, resulting in less time dedicated to each call and a possible queue during peak times. This situation, which would resemble a call centre, was totally unacceptable for an emergency service.

She pointed out that Oxfordshire's Control Room offered a host of other services which Berkshire did not, citing in particular Oxfordshire's constant monitoring of resource availability and movement of personnel or appliances around the County, if necessary. She also pointed out that, unlike Berkshire, Oxfordshire's Control Operators were trained in frontline maintenance to troubleshoot call taking and mobilising equipment faults, adding that an out of hours service could be very costly.

Oxfordshire was also responsible for its own database maintenance, which was a job currently undertaken by a separate department in Berkshire. Oxfordshire's Control Room had also provided a coordinated service between other Council departments on various occasions, for example, in the 2011 winter snow, the Control Room assisted coordinated transport arrangements to enable vulnerable people to access their care arrangements.

Another factor that staff felt ought to be considered was that of the staff's own specialist knowledge of the County and certain operational factors which would be lost should Oxfordshire's Control Room close. There was concern that local knowledge between an Operator, a caller and the responding crew could not be replicated by a computer. Using the example of acts of terrorism becoming a real threat at the London Olympics 2012, she asked how would another Brigade realistically take over not one, but two Counties' call volume and incident management?

She concluded by expressing the staff's concern that Oxfordshire may not be treated as an equal partner and senior officers and Members alike would have little or no say over what happens in a joint Control Room, particularly in the event of closure of Oxfordshire's Control Room.

Cabinet Member's Comments

The Cabinet Member thanked Rachel Dobson for the points raised in her address and gave her reassurance that the Cabinet recognised the importance of getting each aspect of the project right. To that end she was working closely with senior officers to ensure that the project was progressing as it should and that it was receiving all due care and attention.

The Cabinet Member noted that the senior officers welcomed a wide audience and would ensure that there would be a wealth of opportunity created in the coming months for views to be heard, weighed and understood. She noted also that a final decision would be made in July 2012, and that the DCLG funding announcement was expected shortly, but that due to complexities with other bids, it had been delayed until the end of this month or later.

With regard to comments made in Rachel Dobson's address she responded as follows:

- It was not the Cabinet's vision that the Control Room, wherever it was located, would become a 'call centre', should the project come to fruition;
- It was envisaged that there would indeed be fewer staff should the project come to fruition, but recognition should be given to the reduction in call numbers over the last ten years;
- If the project was to proceed, Oxfordshire would be looking to replicate the quality of service currently provided and thus to increase the scope of activity on Berkshire's part. It was envisaged that the Oxfordshire/Berkshire Joint Control Room would become a larger entity which would encompass certain operational factors already employed by Oxfordshire;
- Care would be taken, if the project was to go ahead, to ensure that the overall management of the function would not rest with a single fire authority. This would serve to alleviate any concerns that Oxfordshire might not be treated as an equal partner.

Decision

Having regard to the arguments and options set out in the documentation before me, the representations made to me and the further considerations set out above, I confirm my decisions on this matter as follows:

To (amendment in bold and italic type):

- (a) approve continued working with RBFRA on a joint programme to create the Outline Business Case for a single Joint Control which will be subject to final approval by the Cabinet in July 2012;
- (b) note the submission of the DCLG joint Bid;
- (c) approve the creation and membership of the Programme Sponsorship Group ***and set aside a date for the first meeting as soon as possible on the conclusion of this Delegated Decisions meeting;***
- (d) require the Chief Fire Officer to maintain an alternative contingency plan should DCLG funding not be secured or other unknown issues cause the cessation of the joint approach; and
- (e) require the Chief Fire Officer to continue to report back to the Cabinet Member for Safer and Stronger Communities on a regular basis concerning:
 - (i) progress with the joint DCLG bid for the resilience grant funding
 - (ii) creation of the Outline Business Case
 - (iii) progress on the creation of a suitable governance structure.

Signed
Cabinet Member for Safer & Stronger Communities

Date