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Wolvercote Neighbourhood Forum (WNF) represents all residents of a large area at the northern end of Oxford city, stretching across from the River Thames to Cutteslowe Park – it is the former Oxford City Wolvercote Ward. Its status rests on the Wolvercote Neighbourhood Plan, which is a plan for the area approved overwhelmingly by local referendum in May 2021, and finally made by Oxford City Council.

Comments in response to Oxfordshire County Council's consultation on changes to Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service

The WNF Steering Committee has considered the documents provided by OFRS, and offers the following comments on the proposals for changes to the fire and rescue service, on behalf of the Forum. There are features we agree with, but we also have concerns.

1. One proposed change, in particular, would affect our Wolvercote Neighbourhood Forum area: the move from having fire stations at Rewley Rd and in Kidlington to forming a joint fire station 'toward the north of Oxford'. More detail has not been provided, but in view of the lack of space elsewhere, we assume this means within the WNF area, at Oxford North or nearby at Peartree. Both would provide easy access to main roads A40, A44 and A34, and thereby avoid congestion within Oxford city, unless attending an incident within the city. We recognise there would be some noise nuisance from fire engines' sirens when they are on call at night, but these roads are already blighted by frequent sirens from ambulances, so we expect our residents living near these roads not to be unduly worse affected. At the same time, all parts of our area would benefit from faster responses from fire engines when needed, and obviously we welcome that.
2. Our WNF area contains two waterways, the river Thames and the Oxford canal, with a third (river Cherwell) along its perimeter. Therefore we are most concerned by the lack of assurance in the proposals that there will continue to be adequate resources for rescue from water. The proposals include removal of the specialist rescue vehicle currently based in Kidlington, but with only a vague promise to 'review how we deliver specialist rescue services using other fire engines'. In our view, rescue from water is such a critical necessity not only for our area and Oxford City generally, but for the whole county, that the proposals should have included a concrete plan for how this facility will be retained.
3. At present, large parts of Oxfordshire are clearly less well served than they could be, because so many fire stations are overly dependent on on-call firefighters during the day, when there is a severe shortage of these in some places. It is wasteful of resources to maintain fire engines that are vulnerable to being unable

to be crewed during daytime, because of a shortage of on-call firefighters. For this reason we support the proposal to change the five fire stations spread widely across Oxfordshire at Wallingford (or Crowmarsh), Bicester, Chipping Norton, Witney and Faringdon to full-time crews during daytime.

4. Similarly, we understand the proposal to close fire stations at Eynsham, Henley and Woodstock, which find it difficult to recruit daytime on-call firefighters, but are sufficiently close to other fire stations that their locality, with the other changes being proposed, would actually see an improvement in provision, according to the Response Time maps provided. In fact, we are pleased to see these maps show the changes proposed would cause improvement (i.e. reduction) of response times across almost the entirety of Oxfordshire.
5. The Response Time maps show clearly that the area predicted to suffer worst in the entire county, with the largest increase in response times, is to the south-east of Oxford city centre, in the vicinity of Cowley Road: a densely populated part of Oxford. We find this both concerning and surprising, because it is in the area of the city currently served by Slade Park fire station (according to Figure 2 of the report), which is not proposed to change. It is unsatisfactory that the report fails to explain this consequence of the proposals, and how it will be mitigated.
6. It is very clear from press coverage of the proposals and the response of many firefighters, including the national FBU, that the proposals have not been developed in engagement with, and with support from, many OFRS employees. Another weakness of the report is that it does not explain in any detail the expected impact on staff of the service, in terms of numbers of redundancies and needs to move home etc. There are only vague references to this such as 'some firefighters could face redundancy'. In our view, this is disrespectful of OFRS towards its employees. For Oxfordshire residents reading the report, an important factor in reviewing the proposals will naturally be their expected impact on wellbeing of firefighters themselves, but this seems not to have been considered.

In our opinion, the proposals should be revised, to correct the defects identified in paragraphs 2, 5 and 6 above.

From Wolvercote Neighbourhood Forum Steering Committee

Paul Buckley (Chair), Mary Brown, Elaine Chaston, Tony Dale, Chris Dawkins, Judith Haverty, Katherine Kaye, Richard Lawrence-Wilson, David Stone.

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