

STAFFORDSHIRE & WEST MIDLANDS FIRE CONTROL

A case study in collaborative working



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The Shared Fire Control Project was formed to provide a collaborative approach to fire control services across Staffordshire and the West Midlands Fire Services.

Our aim was to combine the provision of fire control services, sharing one common call handling and mobilising system within a single location along with the provision of a single secondary control providing local resilience.

We wanted the opportunity for enhanced resilience and more effective and efficient ways of working. The new shared facility “Staffordshire & West Midlands Fire Control” (S&WMFC) commenced operations in March 2014 and delivered immediate savings of £1.5m across the two organisations.

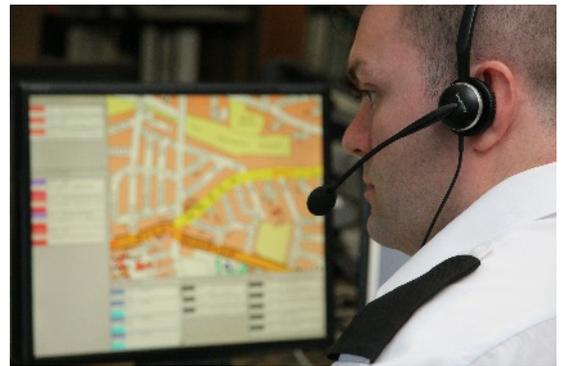
The collaboration also provided the opportunity for the services to look across the full range of their activities with a view to further efficiencies. Our experience of this collaborative working project has produced some key learning points as follows:

Agree clear governance arrangements before you start and on an ongoing basis

The governance structures for the project were defined and agreed at the start of the process. This provided a clear and organised route for decision-making.

We made sure that Authority members, officers and representative bodies were included at decision-making levels, which resulted in issues being raised and dealt with quickly, with the ability to adapt and evolve during the process.

We now have a Service Level Agreement for the operation of the joint facility, with an operations board that meets once a month and a shared governance board that meets quarterly.



Ensure you resource appropriately

We have found that having a dedicated project team and recruiting an independent, experienced project manager were invaluable to the achievement of our project milestones.

The project manager’s role gave us a realistic understanding of the amount and scope of work and the co-ordination of the work required to reach “go live”.

Identifying and assigning resources amongst our existing control staff was a difficulty as both services had shortfalls in their control establishments. Solutions and attractors for staff involvement had to be creative, relevant and cost effective.

The right technical and legal advice needed to be in place at the start of the project, to be drawn upon as needed, for example expertise around the impact of TUPE legislation.

Ensure appropriate support for your staff

A key challenge was to ensure that appropriate support was given to staff facing change and to involve the representative bodies in discussions about this support.

For example, we provided career support to staff affected by the merger in order to provide staff with as many employment options as possible. Representative bodies were involved in this as an automatic part of the decision-making.

What was underestimated was the range and amount of low level change that staff would have to contend with and how this would impact on business as usual.

The support from the representative bodies assisted in staff feeling comfortable in using this service. The outcomes of this process meant that staff, who were not happy to transfer to the shared control, were supported towards redeploying within the service or choosing an alternative career option.

Consider the impact of differences in culture

Significant lessons have been learned from the project work around the impact of the differences in organisational culture in the two services. Whilst the differences did not impact on the project milestones, specifically the go live date in March 2014, it is recognized that more focus on aligning these may have been beneficial.

For staff working in the new shared control, it is recognised that the differences in terminology, procedures, custom and practice have created a barrier. During the project phases, decisions were made to address these areas with agreement on the terminology that would be used.

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Focus on the people and build relationships

Because of staffing numbers in both services during the project phases, staff were not able to interact and form relationships across the two control rooms.

The staff delivering the project work met at regular intervals; however, staff working in the control rooms did not. It is recognised that this would have been beneficial to the individuals, and the Fire Control team as a whole, and so may have provided an improvement to the overall service delivery.

More focus on the people may have reduced the time needed for the new teams to normalize.

Collaborative Leadership

We have found it important for the leaders of both organisations to provide joint messages. This included the less popular or palatable messages such as staff reductions as well as the popular ones like savings to the public purse.

An important factor in the success of this project was clear understanding and shared vision between the leaders of the two organisations and a consistent approach to communications.

Lessons Learned

If we were to do the same exercise again, we would probably be asking these eight questions very early on in the journey.

Key Questions

1. Have you an effective governance structure for the project?
2. How will your governance work on an ongoing basis?
3. Have you included the relevant parties in your decision-making, ie trade unions, authority members and officers?
4. Have you adequate resources in project management and legal expertise?
5. What support have you put in place for staff affected by change?
6. What are the differences in culture between the organisations?
7. Have you built in time and actions to build personal relationships?
8. How do you ensure that leaders from both organisations give the same messages at the same time?