



Talks held over potential police and fire service merger in Norfolk

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Police and fire chiefs have begun talks over the potential merger of Norfolk's blue light services in a bid to reduce 999 costs, it has emerged.

Norfolk's police and crime commissioner said it was a "sensible" idea to amalgamate emergency services after holding initial talks with officials at Norfolk Fire and Rescue Service.

The county's chief fire officer added that another meeting would be held with Norfolk Police officials next month where the two services would discuss ways of sharing resources at a time when public service budgets are being squeezed.

They pledged that any major changes would involve a full staff and public consultation. However, officials from the Norfolk Fire Brigades Union (FBU) have already raised their opposition and expressed fears about potential job losses.

Stephen Bett, Norfolk police and crime commissioner, said he could not rule out a future merger of the county's emergency services after the proposals were mooted by government ministers earlier this summer.

Mr Bett, who was elected as the county's first police and crime commissioner in May, said a merger could help avoid duplication, but depended on which party was in government following the next general election in 2015.

However, the proposals would need new legislation and the situation with ambulance services was more "complex" with the East of England Ambulance Service currently covering six counties.

The crime tsar added that the "halcyon days" were over for the emergency services and whatever party was in power in two years time would need to continue to make public spending cuts.

"There have been talks about it and it seems something the government is determined to bring in, but it will probably be in the next manifesto for the next government. There does not seem to be any aversion from any other parties. We have talked to the fire people and seeing what their feelings are. It is all talk and nothing has been put in motion," he said.

Plans to merge emergency services and place them under the control of elected police and crime commissioners have been mooted by Home Secretary Theresa May as a way of helping to save money.

Mr Bett said: "If it came my way I would do the best I could to make it as efficient as possible. I expect it is a lot of hot air, but something might come of it.

"If you have a road traffic collision, the ambulance, fire and police attend and if there is a fire, the fire, police and an ambulance possibly attends. It is sensible to bring them under one auspices and I can see why the PCCs would be seen as the people to do it.

"The government has said all blue light services, but the issue with the East of England Ambulance Service is that it is

regional and we are a county service. There would have to be quite a lot of change and would need legislation to make those changes. There are all sorts of ramifications and it needs to be looked at very closely.”

One of the options might be to merge control room operations in Norfolk. The county has a police control room in Wymondham, a fire control in nearby Hethersett and ambulance control in Hellesdon, Norwich.

Nigel Williams, chief fire officer of the Norfolk County Council-run Norfolk Fire and Rescue Service, said no changes would be made if it meant a reduction in services for local people. He added that the emergency services could help save money by clubbing together to get a better deal when it comes to buying new vehicles and equipment and bringing control room staff under one roof was also an option.

“With tighter budgets we need to collaborate a lot more and look at where there might be opportunities to merge parts of the service and what that would mean.”

“The police and fire service has a challenge to save money with the government wanting to reduce costs in the public service and we have a responsibility to provide the best service at the best price. We are seeing what we can do to think creatively and innovative about delivering services,” he said.

However, Kevin Game, secretary for the Norfolk FBU, said the union would oppose any merger plans.

“All three emergency services are all trained in specific services and you cannot have a police and crime commissioner running a police service and fire service because the differences are so much. It is no secret that merging emergency services together is a way of forcing through more cuts to front-line services.

“Merging services is going to mean more job losses in a very overstretched service. There are ways of working more closely together without amalgamation,” he said.

Brandon Lewis, Great Yarmouth MP and fire minister for the coalition government, said there were a few police and fire services across the country that were looking to link up. He added that any mergers were a “long way” off because they would require new legislation to happen.

“Technically, a police and crime commissioner cannot legally run a fire service and our fire service in Norfolk is one that gets a lot of cost benefits by being part of a bigger administration structure.

“From a fire minister point of view, I am in favour of services working together and driving efficiencies and delivering a better service for people,” he said.