



**Buckinghamshire
Fire and Rescue Service:
Responding to Change
Report of Consultation Outcomes**

**Opinion Research Services
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We are grateful to the members of the public who took part in the focus groups. They were patient in listening to background information before entering positively into the spirit of open discussions. They engaged with the service, with the issues under consideration and with each other in discussing their ideas readily.

We thank BFRS for commissioning the project as part of its programme of consultation. We particularly thank the senior staff and officers who attended the sessions to listen to the public's views and answer questions. Such meetings benefit considerably from the readiness of fire officers to answer participants' questions fully and frankly.

At all stages of the project, ORS' status as an independent organisation engaging with the public as objectively as possible was recognised and respected. We are grateful for the trust, and we hope this report will contribute usefully to thinking about BFRS's future service planning at a time of serious financial constraints. We hope also that ORS has been instrumental in strengthening BFRS's public engagement and consultation through the focus group participants.

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Project Overview

The Commission

1. On the basis of our long-standing experience with the UK fire and rescue service, and our status as the sole approved provider of research and consultation services under the terms of the Fire Services Consultation Association's National Framework Contract, ORS was commissioned by Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service (BFRS) to undertake five focus groups across its service area (in Aylesbury, Buckingham, Chesham, High Wycombe and Milton Keynes).
2. The point or purpose of the deliberative sessions was to allow BFRS to engage with, and listen to, members of the public about some important issues - so that the participants would become more informed about the fire and rescue service and the current constraints upon it; but also so that the discussions around people's perceptions of risk and ideas about their Fire and Rescue Service could contribute to BFRS's planning for the future. BFRS's key priority was that this would be a 'listening and engagement' process at a very early stage in the organisation's thinking – to understand public opinions and to 'test' some very general ideas and principles.
3. This very early stage consultation programme conforms to the Gunning Principles, which require, above all, that consultation should be at a 'formative stage', before authorities make decisions. The same principles also require that people should be given sufficient information and time to consider the issues in an informed manner, and also that their views should be taken conscientiously into account by the authority.
4. In this context, ORS' role was to design, facilitate and report the consultation in November and December 2013. We worked in collaboration with BFRS to prepare informative stimulus material for the meetings before facilitating the discussions and preparing this independent report of findings.

Deliberative Research

Attendance and Representativeness

5. The focus groups were designed to inform and 'engage' the participants both with the issues and with BFRS – by using a 'deliberative' approach to encourage members of the public to reflect in depth about the fire and rescue service, while both receiving and questioning background information and discussing important issues in detail. The meetings lasted for two hours.
6. In total, there were 50 diverse participants at the focus groups. The dates of the meetings and attendance levels by members of the public were as follows:

AREA	TIME AND DATE	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES
High Wycombe	6:30pm – 8:30pm Monday 25 th November 2013	11
Aylesbury	6:30pm – 8:30pm Wednesday 27 th November 2013	9
Chesham	6:30pm – 8:30pm Wednesday 27 th November 2013	10
Buckingham	6:30pm – 8:30pm Wednesday 4 th December 2013	11
Milton Keynes	6:30pm – 8:30pm Wednesday 4 th December 2013	9

7. The attendance target for the focus groups was around eight to 10 people, so the recruitment programme was successful. Participants were recruited by random-digit telephone dialling from ORS' Social Research Call Centre. Such recruitment by telephone is an effective way of ensuring that the participants are independent and broadly representative of the wider community. Overall (as shown in the table below), participants were a broad cross-section of residents from the local areas and, as standard good practice, were recompensed for their time and efforts in travelling and taking part.

CRITERIA	FOCUS GROUPS
Gender	Male: 24 Female: 26
Age	16-34: 6 35-54: 23 55+: 21
Social Grade	AB: 20 C1: 20 C2: 5 DE: 5
Ethnicity	4 BME
Limiting Long-term Illness	6

8. ORS typically over-recruits for focus groups to compensate for last minute 'no shows': on this occasion 12 people were recruited to achieve eight to 10 participants. While the overall drop-out rate was low, six of the 10 'no-shows' were in the 16-34 age bracket which explains the lower overall numbers of younger people at the sessions.

9. In recruitment, care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by disabilities or any other factors, and the venues at which the focus groups met were readily accessible. People's special needs were taken into account in the recruitment and venues.
10. Although, like all other forms of qualitative consultation, focus groups cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the meetings reported here gave diverse groups of people from Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes the opportunity to participate. Because the recruitment was inclusive and participants were diverse, we are satisfied that the outcomes of the meeting (as reported below) are broadly indicative of how informed opinion would incline on the basis of similar discussions. In summary then, the outcomes reported here are reliable as examples of the needs and wants of diverse informed people reacting to the possible challenges facing BFRS.

Discussion Agenda

11. ORS worked in collaboration with BFRS to agree a suitable agenda and informative stimulus material for the meeting, which covered all of the following topics:

People's perceptions of risk and how they manage it

Sources of worry and concern

Perceptions of and attitudes towards fire risk

Fire risk in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, the BFRS budget and future funding

BFRS's governance

Integrated Risk Management and the importance of prevention in the context of protection and response services

Attitudes to response times

The issues and challenges facing BFRS and possible future strategies to meet them

What members of the public typically want from their Fire and Rescue Service.

12. The questions were accompanied by a presentation devised by ORS and BFRS to inform and stimulate discussion of the issues – and participants were encouraged to ask any questions they wished throughout the discussions.

The Report

13. This report concisely reviews the sentiments and judgements of focus group participants about BFRS and what they expect and desire of it. Verbatim quotations are used, in indented italics, not because we agree or disagree with them – but for their vividness in capturing recurrent points of view. ORS does not endorse the opinions in question, but seeks only to portray them accurately and clearly. The report is an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants.

Consultation Findings

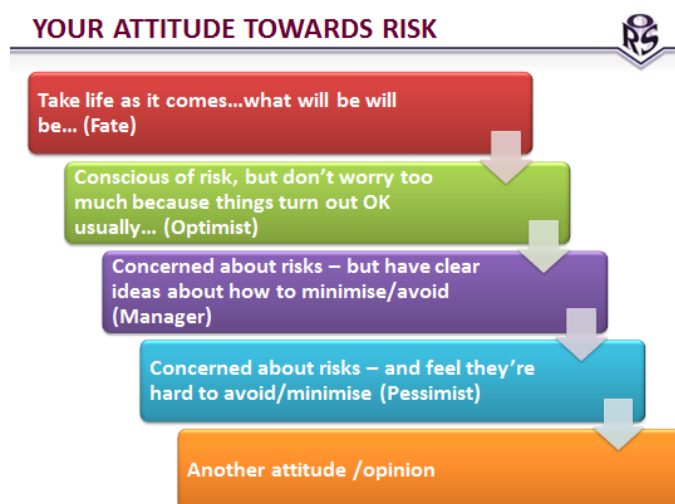
Introduction

- Overall, the five focus group sessions considered a wide range of important issues that are reported fully below. The report has been structured to address each of the areas of discussion in some detail. The views of the five meetings have been merged to give an overall report of findings, rather than five separate and rather repetitive mini-reports – but significant differences in views have been drawn out where appropriate.
- The report of findings is in two main sections – the first deals with people’s general awareness and understanding of the FRS (without being given any significant background information), while the second deals with their judgements and expectations after being more informed and asked some challenging questions about policy. Both parts of the report are, of course, relevant to a fuller understanding of public views. It should also be borne in mind that these participants’ views were not influenced by any imminent local decisions: they had the luxury of thinking about important public policy issues without the constraint of worrying about changes in their immediate local services.

Main Findings: Awareness and Perceptions

People’s Attitudes

- As an introductory exercise, participants were shown the following chart and asked to determine which of the following statements best describes their attitude towards risk:



- Most people across all groups considered themselves to be Managers; that is, they are concerned about risks, but also have clear ideas about how to minimise and/or avoid it – and certainly do not let it rule their lives:

I'm aware and conscious of it but I don't let it rule me

Life is about risk and it has to be managed. Sometimes there's nothing you can do about it and sometimes you can; you just have to know the difference

It's understanding and being aware of it but not necessarily worrying about it. Recognising that there are things you can adjust to minimise it

You do what you can do minimise and manage risk but you have to get on with life. What's the point in worrying and stressing yourself out about it? If you think about it there's a risk involved with everything. You can be concerned about it but I don't let it affect my life or me doing what I want to do.

18. In fact, people said that having regard to and worrying about risk can help with its management insofar as it helps concentrate the mind to find means of mitigation:

When you worry and it's flagged up in your head as an issue you can prepare and think 'there's something I need to do about that'.

19. Few people considered themselves to be Fatalists, Optimists or Pessimists – though several felt they fall between two categories depending on the situation. For example, some Managers said they tend to lean towards pessimism when new, less understood risks are introduced into their lives. A few parents cited their children taking up what they see as 'dangerous' activities as a catalyst to change from Manager to Pessimist – and said they need to better understand the risks to revert from the latter to the former:

If you don't understand the risk then you become more of a Pessimist

My youngest son has just announced that he's going to travel the world and I'm worried about that

When there are new risks I tend to turn into a Pessimist. My youngest has started playing rugby and I don't know enough about it to manage it. I need to learn about it so I can shift from pessimism to management by understanding it a bit better. If you understand the risk you can manage it, but if you don't understand it you can choose to worry or not. I don't understand the risk of an asteroid hitting the earth, but I'm just going to ignore that one – but I also don't understand the risk of rugby and find it a bit worrying.

I'm very much a Manager but if it involves the children I can be a Pessimist because I'm worried about their situations. I worry about my son playing rugby...I absolutely hate the idea of him doing it.

20. Further, others said they can be a Manager in certain situations, but an Optimist or Fatalist in others:

Different situations bring out a different personality. At work I have to be a Manager as I have to do risk assessments, but personally I'm more of an Optimist. It's a different frame of mind

It depends on the situation; where I am, who's involved and what I can and can't do about it. Like if you're driving down the road, you know there are risks from other drivers but there's nothing you can do about it. The most you can do is be aware of other drivers and hope to avoid it. But with risks around the home and in work for example, you can do something about those in terms of managing them.

21. A couple of people at High Wycombe and Buckingham suggested that today's culture is too risk averse and that the benefits of taking risks can often outweigh the danger of doing so – though they also said that this is not incompatible with recognising, assessing and managing potential threats:

I think without taking risks sometimes you can't push the boundaries and risk is part of life

My granddaughter is doing acrobatic trampolining which is very risky but the amount of good she gets out of it compared to the risk she is taking is positive...life is a balance isn't it?

Head for the risk. I do bike sports, climbing, paragliding etc. It doesn't mean you don't assess the risk, but you have to weigh up whether it is worth it. And I do wear safety gear so that's recognising and managing the risk.

Kinds of Risk

22. Only a minority of participants said that they worry more about big, rare events than every day, more minor occurrences. In this context, they mentioned large scale incidents, such as terrorist attacks and weather-related events that are difficult to predict and thus avoid (and are often heavily reported in the media, which fuels people's fear of them, particularly in the short-term):

I do worry about things like terrorism attacks because there's nothing I can do about them whereas I've got a good awareness of the everyday, minor things and I can risk assess them. There's nothing I can do about the big events so I'd say I worry more about those

Big but rare...like going on the Tube and thinking 'is it ok...what's in that bag?'

I do worry about the response to larger scale incidents like train crashes, terrorism incidents etc.

Major events like the recent typhoon; I worry more about things like that and the effect it has on people

When everything is thrown in your face by the media about the big, rare events it makes me worry. But you tend to worry about them for a week or two and forget about it

23. Most others, however, said they try not to worry about such events for that very reason; there is often nothing that can be done to avoid them and one simply has to get on with life in the hope that 'it will not happen to me':

I'm pretty logical about the big, rare events. Like an asteroid hitting the earth, it could be anytime but you can't control it so what's the point in worrying about it

I don't think you can do anything about it so what's the point worrying about it?

The big but rare events are the ones you know have happened but you've got to tread the same path; like getting on the Tube after a terrorist attack. You still have to do it and get on with life...what you have to do is try not to worry.

24. Overall, many more people said they worried about “everyday issues” rather than big catastrophes – for example, their finances, work, job security, neighbourhood anti-social behaviour, car accidents, health and routine safety issues; that is, about more minor things that are statistically far more likely to occur. A common theme was worrying about the safety and well-being of one's family – for example:

I know that the chance of my children being abducted or attacked by a stranger are incredibly small, but I know a lot of people who will worry about that whereas they don't think anything of sticking them in the back of the car and driving them somewhere without a seatbelt on which is statistically much more likely to result in something bad.

25. Indeed, participants' most commonly expressed ‘everyday’ fears were those concerning their families. Some typical comments were:

The health of your family; that's what you worry about

Children; I don't want to see them hurt or in danger

Older children when you let them do things for themselves and you get a phone call in the middle of the night

Grandchildren...you know there's something going to be happening around children all the time but you can't quantify it

You almost worry more for your grandchildren because the world has changed so much; it's so different for them now.

26. Other sources of worry were pets; the logistics of life; and the day-to-day cost of living:

I have two cats and I worry about them being run over

I worry about things like trying to get home from work in time to make sure the kids are fed before they go to Scouts. Logistical things rather than dangers... running my life

The day-to-day cost of living; the financial side of things is a worry.

27. Perhaps strikingly, none of the participants mentioned “fires” as an ‘everyday risk’ – though they were obviously interested when the risk of fire was raised by the facilitator. Interestingly, one respondent explained their omission of fire on the grounds that:

Fire is not really an ‘everyday’ risk nowadays – due to improved safety measures!

28. All of the above concerns and worries outlined above were raised unprompted, but the following slide was shown to establish whether participants also fear anything other than what was mentioned spontaneously:

YOUR PERCEPTIONS OF RISK

What, if anything, do you worry about?
Some examples...

Driving a car or being a passenger	Being mugged
Travelling by rail	Being burgled
Travelling by air	Drowning
Cycling on public roads	Fires at work
Crossing busy roads	Fire in the home
Accident in the home	Major illness (heart attack/stroke/cancer etc.)

29. Some participants referred to their concerns about possibly burglary, neighbourhood crime, traffic offences and drink driving. Major illness was also stated as an additional concern at this stage, mainly in the context of participants becoming ill themselves, and the health of their children and elderly parents:

Major illness; the older you get the more you have to face that

Being a parent as well, if you were to get a major illness there's the thought of having to leave your children

Illness is one...my parents are now in their seventies and they've had a lot of ill-health and if I stop to think about it, it does scare me. When your parents are in their seventies you know it's going to happen relatively soon. And young people, I had a friend who lost his daughter when she was 15 and my son is now 15 and again if I stopped and thought about that for too long I'd get in a state but you've just got to try not to think about it.

30. Again, it was said that what a person worries about can be heavily influenced by their personal circumstances, as the following examples illustrate:

If someone said to you 'there's a good chance you're going to have a heart attack' then you're going to worry about it aren't you?

In my family someone very young (26 years old) unexpectedly had a heart attack. It wasn't something you could prepare for and of course it's a concern because they didn't really know why it had happened. It's another thing at the back of your mind...a worry that 'will this re-occur?'

It depends where you live. I used to live in East Anglia and when Sizewell was being built the people who lived there were worried about big, rare events like Sizewell going critical. But you have to be living there to be worried about that.

Fire Safety and the Responsibilities of the FRS

31. As we have said, no-one was routinely or particularly worried about fires at work or in the home; the general sense was that these fall into the 'manage category' and that workplaces and dwellings are now safer than they have ever been:

I think it's in the manage category isn't it? We've got working smoke detectors and homes generally are a lot safer than they used to be. There's less smoking, fewer open fires.

32. In this context, there were many positive opinions about the importance of preventing fires through good public education and a proactive role by the BFRS. People referred approvingly to BFRS's safety talks in schools, Safe Drive/Stay Alive campaigns and home fire safety checks. There was evident support for BFRS's proactive role and an expectation that it would continue to highlight its safety messages in one way or another.
33. In relation to people's personal responsibilities, some agreed that *we should all take more responsibility for our own safety* and that *we cannot expect the FRS to be able to rescue everyone who endangers their own safety* – but a big majority felt that (while the first statement should certainly apply in principle), in practice, in the event of an incident, the Fire and Rescue Service must also *treat everyone equally regardless of how they live and however expensive the service*.
34. There was a clear expectation that the FRS should not penalise people for their carelessness or bad practices, but should be committed to rescuing them from the consequences of their actions wherever possible – for example, even if someone *stores petrol in their kitchen and causes a bad fire!*
35. The idea that everyone should be treated equally (that is, equally protected in this context) led some to wonder if response times might be fairer if they were somehow 'equalised' - and while several participants at most groups were realistic in their acknowledgment that choosing to live in a rural area brings an inherent additional risk, in some cases it took quite a lot of reflection to convince them that such equalisation is not feasible in practice, due to the realities of rural living.
36. A primary argument for the being committed to rescue whatever the circumstances was that BFRS cannot know what they will be faced with at an incident until they arrive, and equally will often have no idea as to what caused it until it has been investigated. Some typical comments were:

Everyone should take responsibility for their actions as much as possible but the Fire Service has to be there to respond to every incident

There can be no differentiation at the point of requirement but there must be some education so that everyone takes as much responsibility as they can

For an emergency service it's impossible to do anything but. What are you going to do, turn up to a car and say 'you were driving dangerously so we're not cutting you out'?

It's not for them to receive a call and have a degree of discernment about which they attend; they shouldn't have to shoulder that responsibility

How do you make that judgement? The first two sound right in an easy world; we should all be responsible and we shouldn't expect them to do everything but at the point at which you get a call how do you know whether a person had a smoke detector or not? How can we possibly expect the Fire Service to be involved in making decisions about who to respond to

How can they not respond to everything? What are they going to say, 'no just die, it's your fault for jumping out a plane'?

37. One participant suggested that:

The time to make those decisions is not at the time of the fire. The point of the Regulatory Reform Order is to make sure companies do their fire risk assessment and if they don't then they can be prosecuted. That's the time to say to people 'you're not taking enough responsibility'. So the question is could you do something similar in domestic situations and possibly fine people?

38. The possibility of charging those found to have caused an incident by their own irresponsibility was also raised by others:

They should take into account what people are doing. If someone goes abseiling and they get stuck up a mountain, should they perhaps be charged for that because it's something they're doing for fun but they've ended up having to call of the Fire and Rescue Service?

Risk in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes and BFRS Finances

39. In order to investigate their background perception of fire risk in the community, participants were asked to 'guesstimate' the annual total death rate from fires across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes and also certain key facts about the finances of the service. Overall, the respondents across the five groups were noticeably well informed, compared with respondents elsewhere in the UK.
40. In the context of 'general risks' some of the groups were asked by the researchers whether death by drowning is more or less likely than death by fire. Interestingly, a significant number thought that death by fire was more common than drowning; but the majority conjectured rightly that drowning must be the bigger danger.
41. It was generally agreed that the risk of death or injury by fire across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes is either *fairly* or *very* (or in one case *exceedingly*) low – and that this risk is decreasing. When asked why they thought this was the case, most cited BFRS's prevention and education work and the role it has played in raising awareness of fire risk among the general public:

Awareness, engagement, better equipment in terms of smoke alarms etc

42. Nevertheless, many people over-estimated the actual number of fire deaths in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes each year. Many guesses were above 15, though it should be noted that participants' estimates were, on the whole, far more accurate than those typically given elsewhere in the country, with a significant number in the BFRS area suggesting annual deaths are only in single figures or at least less than 20. People were pleased to know that the actual number is very low, with an average of three accidental dwelling fire deaths per year over the last five years.
43. In general, people felt that fire risks are reducing, due to the reduction in coal fires, better building materials and designs and public safety education.
44. Nonetheless, most people (sometimes radically) under-estimated how much it costs to crew one 24/7 wholetime fire engine per year. There were some guesses as low as £25,000 at Buckingham; but overall most people estimated between £350,000 and £700,000. A small minority thought the cost was higher at between three-quarters of a million and one million pounds. The latter is a reasonable estimate, in fact.
45. A few participants guessed relatively accurately that BFRS's annual budget is in the region of £30 million (the actual figure is £29 million), but most estimates were much higher (up to £150 million) and a few were much lower (just £5 million).
46. Almost all participants recognised that the County Council receives the largest proportion of Council Tax revenue, and that BFRS gets the least amount:
- I would say Local Authority, then Police, then Fire*
- They are the poor relation.*
47. However, when asked exactly how much each band D household pays per year for BFRS services there were widely varying estimates: a small number guessed quite accurately, but most estimates were higher (at £200 to £400 per year) and people were pleasantly surprised to learn that the actual figure is currently £59.
48. Overall, then, many people tended to overestimate both risk (expressed as the number of fire deaths) and the costs of running the Fire and Rescue Service. These trends are not unique to Buckinghamshire and, indeed, the estimates given in these groups were no less accurate (and were sometimes far more accurate) than those typically made elsewhere.

'Reasonable' Response Times

49. In order to gauge their perceptions of 'reasonable' response times, participants were asked what they would expect a standard town-based attendance time target should be. For most, the general consensus was around ten minutes (a few even said up to 15 minutes), but some thought a response time of four to five minutes should be required as a target (on the assumption of immediate response from wholetime fire stations). There was, however, some recognition that the time of day may have a bearing on this:

You have to think about traffic in towns, especially at certain times of day

It depends on what time of day it is.

50. When the same question was asked for very rural areas many participants thought 15 to 20 minutes to be reasonable, while some thought 10 to 15 minutes. Significantly, many increased their ideas of reasonable response time standards when reminded of the inherent five-minute delay from RDS fire stations in rural areas:

Logically we have to accept they're going to be longer in rural areas

So if they're retained you have the five minutes too. If they've got five minutes to get to the station then that's five minutes of our ten minutes isn't it?

It would take at least five minutes to get to me. If it takes them five minutes to get to the station and it's around about 11 minutes to get to me then we're talking around the 15-17 minute mark.

51. It was also agreed at that attendance standards should include the call handling time: they should be recorded from either the time of call or from when the Control Room despatches fire engines:

If it's a life critical call the response time should start when the call is made

We would expect the clock to start ticking from when you send the engine and put the phone down

It would be bonkers to measure it from the time the fire engine pulls out of the fire station!

Awareness of BFRS Governance

52. While it was understood that BFRS is managed locally, no-one at any of the five groups was aware of its exact governance arrangements. In fact, many people (especially at Buckingham) thought it is a department of Buckinghamshire County Council:

I would have though there were national guidelines that have to be followed and then implemented locally

It's run by the County Council isn't it?

53. There was little or no understanding of the composition and role of the Fire Authority.

Awareness of Issues and Challenges Facing BFRS

54. Although participants did not spontaneously mention the recent industrial action in the context of the issues and challenges facing BFRS, the majority indicated their awareness after prompting. However, they had no clear idea of the exact issues and retirement dates for different staff:

It was concern about the whole picture and not just their terms and conditions. It was about their ability to do their jobs, how long they can do them for in terms of their age etc.

The age business...having to work until they're 60

The pension issue generally. They've been striking about it haven't they?

Main Findings: Opinions on Policy Issues

BFRS Finances

55. When asked what they feel their £59 annual Band D council tax charge for BFRS actually pays for, most participants said something along the lines of 'peace of mind' or 'insurance':

Peace of mind...knowing someone is there when you need them and you never know when you will.

56. It was also said that the £59 is paying for the important prevention work undertaken by the Service (and that this is a good reason not to consider drastically reducing the number of firefighters to reflect the significant drop in incident levels):

Hopefully you're paying for the preventative work as well, not just for people sitting around waiting for a fire. A few months ago there was a news story saying 'fires have gone down so we can cut the Fire Service'. That's like saying that a health and safety manager at a factory had managed to cut the number of accidents so they don't need that manager anymore. It's just missing the point...that there is that educational aspect to it.

57. A few participants highlighted the co-responding role undertaken by BFRS firefighters in their area. The group as a whole considered this an excellent use of resources that should be extended to other areas where appropriate – and also went on to suggest that further integration between the emergency services would be beneficial in improving efficiency:

I didn't realise that they come out as first response for the Ambulance Service too. We rang for an ambulance as a lady had come to our meeting and had chest pains and I was surprised when a firefighter rolled up really quickly. I thought it was a really good use of resources

That's a good example of added value...it should be extended if it works

Someone somewhere should be looking at how to better integrate the three different services. Why shouldn't every police officer be trained to use a defibrillator for example? I think there's a lot more scope for integration between the services to make some efficiencies.

Value for money

58. The Band D charge of £59 a year for BFRS's services was universally considered to be exceptional value for money. In fact, the majority of participants would be prepared to pay more:

£59 is not enough!

I was surprised when I read it; I thought 'is that all?'

Would I be prepared to pay more? Yes I would!

It's really good value compared to other insurances.

59. Those with (typically positive) personal experience of BFRS were particularly keen to support a Council Tax precept increase – and it was suggested that a rise would also be more palatable to people if BFRS could demonstrate the added value it offers through schemes like co-responding:

We had a house fire...they were there within five to six minutes once the call was made and were brilliant. I also had to call them recently because I had visitors and a little girl had locked herself inside my living room. She and her mother were very distressed and although she wasn't in any danger, we just couldn't get her out. It seemed excessive to call the Fire Service but we didn't know who else to call. And again they were with us in five minutes. I've had very positive experiences and I'd be happy to pay another £20 or £30 because of them

I think people would be if they knew it was going to include co-responding...if they could raise the profile of that people would be more than happy to pay more.

60. However, a lack of understanding of the precepting process led some people to express concern that any additional revenue would not be received by the FRS – and they sought reassurance that this would be the case before they consented to paying more:

If we agree with them putting Council Tax up will it go to the Fire Service?

If the general population thought the extra £20 or £30 was definitely going to protect or even in some small way enhance the Fire Service I don't think many people would say no to that.

61. There was some suggestion that while a BFRS Council Tax precept increase would be acceptable in isolation, it would likely be one of several rises faced by residents. It was recognised that all public bodies are under pressure financially, and that people may not be as tolerant if, say, the Local Authority and Police also raised their charges:

It also depends on what other increases we are looking at from the Council and Police. It all adds up doesn't it?

If they put the Fire Service bit up they'll probably put all the others up as well. The problem is that if you look at all the services in this country, they could all do with more money. There's got to be a limit hasn't there? So I'd like to pay the least providing it gives me the level of protection I have at the moment.

62. The final sentence of the second quotation above highlights an important consideration for BFRS. Prior to an explanation of the likely financial challenges facing the Service, participants demonstrated little understanding of the difficult decisions that will have to be made in future. As such (and as the quotation above suggests) some people assumed that additional Council Tax revenue would be used to enhance the service, rather than to lessen the impact of future funding reductions – and they thus suggested that unless demonstrable improvements are put in place, the public at large may be reluctant to endorse a rise:

Is the level of resources we have in Buckingham based on an assessment of the needs of the town or is it financial? If the assessment has been done and what we have is adequate, why pay more when the figures show we don't really need extra resources? I'd only be prepared to pay more if what we have now isn't adequate

Response times are what matters to people. People will want to know, if I give them more money how much quicker will they get to me?

Generally, if you're asking people to part with more money, they want to know what they're getting. So if they could say 'we're asking you to pay £70 a year but these are the things we'll put in place' then yes fantastic but I think if nothing is going to change, what would we be paying more money for? People might be a bit reluctant.

63. A few people wanted explicitly to be convinced that, in the context of reducing risk, an increase in the precept really was necessary. For example, some in Milton Keynes said:

An increase would be reasonable [only] if the fire service was under real pressure

But is it necessary? There is a lot of waste! Are you really short of money? Is there a need?

We'd pay if you were short of manpower, but we might not need so many fire-fighters nowadays.

64. Despite this, however, after they had been informed of BFRS' forthcoming financial challenges, and understood that any Council Tax rise would be used to maintain the Service as close to current levels as possible, many agreed that:

Because the funding's going to be cut, it's not about what more they can provide but about how they can provide what they're already providing. If it was another £20 or £30 I'd be happy to pay that because of the experience I've had.

65. Nonetheless, the idea of rebalancing resources rather than Council Tax increases remained for some:

The question shouldn't be 'should we pay more?' – the question should we rebalance the resources of Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service?

Are we at risk – do we need to pay more? I don't feel at risk!

I can't afford to pay more!

BFRS Governance and Consultation

66. After being informed that BFRS is locally run by the Combined Fire Authority, participants were asked to comment on whether such governance is important. Most felt that it is, insofar as local fire authority and managers are more aware of the area's needs than a remote department in, say, London:

Local services have a better feel for what local requirements are. If you're running something nationally and you're dealing with appliances available across population densities and so forth, if you're living in Wandsworth the picture probably looks very different to what it is in North Wales.

It's better that it's local. The people running it locally should have more of an idea about what we need here. Someone running it in London isn't going to have a clue what we need in Buckingham.

67. There was, however, some minority preference for national governance in the interest of fairness and to prevent parochialism:

Local people are just going to want the best for their area whereas nationally they'll know how to allocate things fairly

The trouble with local decisions is you can get bogged down in small issues.

68. No participant had been consulted by BFRS previously, and few felt the need to be asked to comment on its internal workings in a general sense due to their positive view of the Service – especially compared to other public bodies:

We've never been asked; this is the first time

We feel the Fire Service is adequate and efficient; we'd much rather talk about the Police which we don't feel that about

I was surprised that they felt the need to ask me what I thought to be honest because I suppose I thought 'they know what they doing'. The NHS is in a much bigger state and needs a lot more help through consultation than the Fire Service does

I have never felt I haven't been adequately consulted by the Fire Service because I've never felt that there's a need to be. I have faith that if my house was on fire that they would be there reasonable promptly.

69. Despite their inherent trust in the Service however, the vast majority of people would want to be consulted on any major changes to it. While they had a good deal of faith in BFRS's officers to make decisions in the public interest, they felt strongly about the need to be informed and given the opportunity to engage on important issues:

If there were major changes then I'd want to be consulted

I'd want to know if they were going to cut the number of fire engines or change from full-time to part-time for example. They could be saying 'we're going to cut the number of firefighters or engines etc. and the net result of that is we won't be getting to fires as quickly' and I'd want to know about that

Or Council Tax rises...I'd want to be consulted on that

To a certain extent you have to have faith in organisational leaders that they're doing their best to provide the best service...they've worked their way up and know what

they're talking about. But I think it's important to have a level of engagement on service changes.

70. Only a small minority did not consider it appropriate for BFRS to consult members of the public on any changes it seeks to make, simply because the latter do not have sufficient knowledge to make an informed judgement:

I don't feel that I know enough about the Fire Service or their role to be consulted

It's impossible for the lay person to make the kind of judgements needed.

Response Times

71. As demonstrated by the following quotations, people's natural reaction to the question 'how important are response times?' is that they are 'extremely' or 'very' important:

They're critical. It's the difference between life and death isn't it?

It's the response time that counts...more lives are saved with a faster response time. It's the security of life

I firmly believe that, in my mentality...the quicker the response time the safer I'll be

Seconds count. If someone's trapped upstairs in a house, the smoke alarm's gone off but they haven't been able to get out; if you're not there to get them out they're going to burn. The quicker you're there the more chance there is of getting them out

The quicker they get there the quicker the fire is out and from our point of view that's how we're all going to look at it. We want them to get there as quickly as they can

The response time, as we know, is key in terms of saving lives

Saving lives...more people will be saved. You could be stuck in the house and it could mean the difference between life and death

The fire is more likely to be put out.

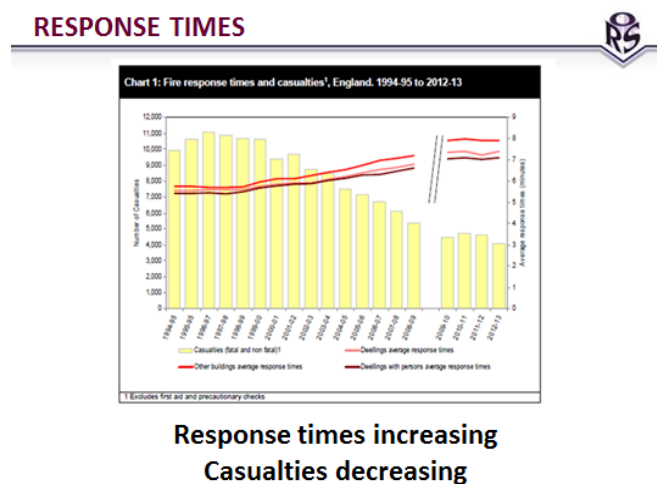
72. People evidently want the Fire and Rescue Service to 'get to them as quickly as possible' in an incident - and the quotations above demonstrate the assumption that doing so will not only save property, but lives as well.

73. Some people knew that response times may not be the main driving factor in reducing deaths and casualties, and that other inputs may be more important in doing so:

If it's about life and you've got a smoke detector you can get out so then it doesn't matter what the response time is. They're going to save your property but they're not going to save your life because you're already out. I don't see that the response time necessarily affects the deaths. It affects the damage to property, but what affects your life risk is whether people get out of the house because they've been notified or not. So response times may not be the key factor on reducing life risk; you have education and smoke detectors for that

If we're saying that our priority is life risk we need to find out how people die in fires and it may be nothing to do with response times. If we want our family photo albums not to be destroyed and our property and possessions to be saved then response times probably do matter. But we have to decide what matters to us; we're saying it's life but if we're focusing on response times we're probably not focusing on what's really going to save lives.

74. However, many participants said that saving property is almost as important as saving lives and preventing serious injuries. In fact, even after being shown the following graph (which illustrates the lack of correlation between attendance times and casualties), most participants still considered response times to be critical due to the importance they attach to their homes:



75. Some typical comments were:

It's a fundamental of life...a roof over your head

I don't think you can separate them because it's a question of levels; it's going to be me and my family, then my property

Lots of people have said it's about life but actually if someone's house is on fire they will want that house to be saved. It's the roof over your head. It did make me smile when people were saying lives need to be saved because when it comes down to it people would also say 'my property'. People wouldn't admit how high they'd put their property in terms of survival; that it's only just a little bit below life

That's why we're focusing on response times because I don't think they have a lot to do with deaths, but they do have a lot to do with saving property. That's why we're saying we don't want them to be slower because we don't want our properties to be burned down; they do mean a lot to us. We have to be honest about what we're placing the emphasis on and I think if we sit here and say 'it's all about life and death' we're not being honest with ourselves about what it really is

Human life is the main thing but you don't want your house to burn down do you? If the fire engine gets there quickly there's a good chance they'll be able to save the majority of your house. If they take ages the whole bloody thing will have burned down.

76. With regard to response times, one participant at High Wycombe suggested that BFRS should be looking more at outcome measures and less at time insofar as:

At the moment if you get there in seven minutes and don't save anything, that's a success whereas if you get there in nine minutes and save everything, that's a failure.

77. Despite all the above comments, the participants' views on response times have also to be considered in the context of their ready recognition that prevention and education are critically important. Indeed, in groups where the idea was tested, most agreed that if BFRS received an marginal additional £1M in funding, then it would be better spent on prevention and education initiatives than on, say, crewing an additional wholetime fire engine.

Possible Future Strategies

78. Some possible strategies to meet future challenges were outlined to participants, using the following simplified options (which, it should be noted, were positioned on the assumption that BFRS would have done everything possible to make savings from 'back office' functions):

FINANCIAL PRESSURES – POSSIBLE STRATEGIES?



1. Savings from ?

- (a) Fewer fire engines/longer response times
- (b) Reducing prevention and education
- (c) Different crewing systems
- (d) Cheaper ways of providing cover e.g. RDS
- (e) More flexible approaches to locating appliances
- (f) Co-locating with other agencies

2. Increasing revenue through BFRS Council Tax increase

79. People expressed two main views on this issue. The majority view was that all possible strategies should be considered apart from fewer fire engines (and longer response times) and reducing prevention and education. Indeed, if it meant the protection of fire engine numbers across the county, participants supported the use of different crewing systems:

I would not be comfortable with longer response times and fewer engines or reducing prevention and education so for me they are off the table. Everything else absolutely yes. If someone could prove to me that shutting the station down the road from me would mean the services could be provided in another, better way then why not?

If the argument is that longer response times don't affect fatalities I would agree with having fewer wholetime and more retained

I lived in a town where we have nothing but retained and we never had any major issues even though I lived right next to a major motorway so they had to deal with that as well

80. People's perceptions and expectations in terms of response times have been reported fully above, but most were equally keen to see BFRS's prevention and protection work maintained. As we have shown, when asked how a hypothetical £1M extra funding should be spent, most recognised that life risk would be most reduced by more investment in prevention and education:

You will probably achieve more for more people investing in education rather than putting one wholetime appliance in one particular area

I would personally say prevention and education though they still need to be consistent with response times as well and be within the guidelines

Deaths will probably occur among people on the lower end of the demographic scale who haven't realised that one of their priorities should be to get a smoke detector. To make more difference, if we've got to spend money on keeping response times static or on getting more people to have smoke detectors, we should be spending money on getting smoke detectors in those very homes.

81. However, some said that it should be determined what prevention work really achieves in practice because it is difficult to quantify:

With a fire engine, you can identify how many lives it's saved. If it has attended an incident and someone has been saved as a result, you know that engine has made a contribution. You can't identify the number of lives saved by education apart from the call rate coming down. Someone may have listened to that, changed what they do and not died as a result. But it's hard to quantify.

82. Overall, the majority view was that to cope with reduced income BFRS should pursue increases in council tax and different crewing systems rather than reductions in fire engines and fire-fighters or its important commitment to education and prevention work in the community. Participants were, however, informed that there are limitations on the Fire Authority's ability to raise revenue through council tax due to Communities and Local Government's capping regime.

83. The minority view was that everything should be 'on the table', particularly in light of the evidence showing the lack of correlation between response times and casualties:

We've just seen that response times are not affecting casualties; they are not as relevant as we would think. So surely we must allow them to have all of those options on the table?

Longer response times and fewer engines is not off the table for me because of the data you showed me earlier on. Response times are not the things affecting lives...there isn't a positive correlation and so I think it's on the table for discussion. I would have it on the

table until we've looked at the data in more detail and worked out what factors actually affect life risk – and if it's not response times then let's look at it. They should look at all the options.

84. Some participants were interested in possible innovations, in the context of reducing risk – commenting, for example, that

There is scope for a wider range of [smaller] vehicles to be used [rather than just traditional fire engines

Fire engines could be more mobile and located more flexibly in strategic locations

You could have a co-agency approach for the emergency services.

Post-incident Aftercare

85. BFRS was interested in exploring the extent to which people would expect the service to help them 'get their lives back to normal' after a major incident. The general consensus was that this is not really the Service's responsibility, and that they would expect to have to do this themselves with the help of their insurance company:

I don't think it's anything to do with the Fire Service; it's an emergency service

We have to put our lives back together ourselves...why is it their responsibility?

I wouldn't have thought that was their responsibility

I don't see that as their job or responsibility. As nice as it would be, I think they've got enough on their plate at the moment.

86. In other words, people were relatively conservative about possibly widening the role of the fire service to take on more 'welfare' aspects. Nonetheless, BFRS was thought to have a role in signposting people to organisations that could help with after-care - and there was strong support for post-incident prevention work with victims to ensure they are aware of why the incident occurred and what they must do in future to prevent it happening again:

They could say 'these are the places you can go to help you put your life back together'

I'd probably expect them to refer rather than deal with it. If you and your kids are standing in your garden homeless, I would hope they wouldn't just drive off and leave you there. I'd hope they would say 'we've phoned another agency and they're going to find you a place to stay for the night' or refer you on to another agency who will look after you

I think it has a role in helping people get their lives back together in the sense of helping them understand why the fire happened in the first place and how things could be done differently. I don't think it's as clear cut as 'ok I've got you out of a fire, that's my job done, goodbye'.

87. People also supported BFRS giving practical information about, for example, electronically scanning and remotely storing documents like passports and house deeds in the wider education it undertakes – by advising people to do this during Home Fire Safety Checks perhaps:

The idea of making sure you scan all your personal documents...that little bit of knowledge could save you a whole heap of pain

You can give information out pre-incident that can help post-incident. Give out information that can be practical and useful about things like copying documents

It's good advice to give as part of the Home Fire Risk Check and wider education

Is there a campaign they could do to make people aware of the importance of scanning documents etc. so you can prove who you are?

88. Participants at High Wycombe were particularly keen to see the production of case study examples (on the BFRS website and on leaflets) whereby those who have suffered losses through fires advice – both on prevention and how people can get their lives back to normal as quickly as possible:

It would demonstrate the real risks...

Unless we have been in that situation it's difficult to know what it would feel like to lose everything in a fire. I'm not sure I agree that it's just our business to deal with it because we have no idea what the trauma of losing everything is. Experiences of other people who have gone through it would be useful

It may not be the Fire Service's duty to help people with that but they might be in the best position to provide information on what you may experience and what other people have said it feels like.

Support for BFRS

89. It is clear from many passages above that the participants had a very positive and favourable opinion of BFRS. This was confirmed explicitly by participants who said they would not like to see alternative providers replace or compete with the current fire and rescue service – for example:

It's a non-starter for anyone else to provide the service

G4 or someone like that would be useless and chaotic!

You should leave things as they are. It's a democratic and local service and it should stay that way.



This project was carried out in compliance with ISO 20252:2012.