



**Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes  
Fire and Rescue Service:  
*Continuing the Journey:  
Public Safety Plan 2015-20***

**Report of Consultation Outcomes**

**Opinion Research Services  
October 2014**





As with all our studies, findings from this research are subject to Opinion Research Services' Standard Terms and Conditions of Contract

Any press release or publication of the findings of this research requires the advance approval of ORS. Such approval will only be refused on the grounds of inaccuracy or misrepresentation

# Contents

Acknowledgements.....	4
The ORS Project Team.....	5
Executive Summary.....	6
The Commission.....	6
Discussion Agenda.....	6
Attendance and Representativeness.....	6
Executive Summary.....	7
Main Findings.....	7
Overall Comments.....	10
Project Overview.....	11
The Commission.....	11
Attendance and Representativeness.....	11
Discussion Agenda.....	13
The Report.....	14
Consultation Findings.....	15
Introduction.....	15
Main Findings.....	15
Crewing Models (the On-call Duty System).....	15
Response Capacity.....	18
Using Resources Differently.....	21
Delivering Services Differently.....	22
Fire Stations.....	25
Overall Comments.....	27

# Acknowledgements

Opinion Research Services (ORS) is pleased to have worked with Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire & Rescue Service (B&MKFRS) on the consultation reported here.

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 B&MKFRS for commissioning the project as part of its ongoing 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 B&MKFRS's future service planning. We hope also that ORS has been instrumental in strengthening B&MKFRS's public engagement and consultation through the focus group participants.

# The ORS Project Team

## Project Design and Management

Dale Hall

Kelly Lock

Ciara Small

## Fieldwork Management

Leanne Hurlow

Joanne McCarley

Bethany Dickens

## Focus Group Facilitators

Dale Hall

Kelly Lock

## Report Author

Kelly Lock

# Executive Summary

## The Commission

1. ORS was commissioned by Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire and Rescue Service (B&MKFRS) to design, facilitate and report five public focus groups (in Aylesbury, Buckingham, Chesham, High Wycombe and Milton Keynes) to discuss its *Public Safety Plan 2015-20*. We worked in collaboration with B&MKFRS to prepare informative stimulus material for the meetings before facilitating the discussions and preparing this independent report of findings.

## Discussion Agenda

2. The meeting agenda covered all of the following topics:

- Staff and financial resources

- Distribution of emergency cover resources

- Incident profile and numbers

- Reality of reducing risk

- Role of prevention, protection and response

- B&MKFRS'S *Public Safety Plan 2015-20*, especially in relation to...

  - Crewing models - particularly the on-call duty system

  - Response capacity and the need to balance the resources needed for low-level day-to-day demand and infrequent high risk

  - Using resources differently through the extension of co-responding

  - Ways of delivering services differently, for example through privatisation or mutualisation

  - The potential need to reconfigure fire stations to match demand.

## Attendance and Representativeness

3. In total, there were 49 diverse participants at the focus groups – 12 at Aylesbury, 10 at Buckingham, 11 at Chesham, eight at High Wycombe and eight at Milton Keynes. 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

meetings (as reported below) are broadly indicative of how informed opinion would incline on the basis of similar discussions.

## Executive Summary

4. While this Executive Summary seeks to give a balanced assessment of the discussion outcomes, readers are referred to the detail of the full report for a more comprehensive account of the views expressed – in particular, for an account of people’s priorities, assumptions and reasons for these views.

## Main Findings

### Crewing Models (improving the resilience of the On-call Duty System)

#### Encourage sprinklers in more remote areas

5. Although participants supported the idea of sprinkler systems in principle, they were sceptical about the degree to which people might be persuaded to install them given the cost of doing so – particularly retrospectively. Also, some misconceptions remain about sprinkler systems (for example that they are large and unsightly and ‘soak everything’ when activated) that must be addressed.

#### Prioritise prevention work in more remote communities

6. There was no objection to B&MKFRS prioritising prevention work in more remote communities, with participants at Buckingham suggesting that the Service should capitalise on the ‘close-knit’ nature of Buckingham in enlisting community volunteers to promote its safety messages in rural areas.

#### More use of smaller ‘rapid intervention’ appliances

7. Making more use of smaller ‘rapid intervention’ appliances was encouraged insofar as they could: offer flexibility; be used to assess an incident and establish the need for a full fire engine; and be deployed to manage and control incidents and prevent escalation. Further, at High Wycombe it was said that utilising smaller vehicles more frequently would *motivate the firefighters who will go out more often*. (High Wycombe)

#### Move full-time crew around to support on-call stations when RDS cover is low

8. Using full-time firefighters to support on-call stations when RDS cover is low was considered sensible.

#### ‘Simplify’ training for on-call firefighters

9. This was the proposal that caused participants the most concern insofar as, if RDS firefighters are trained to tackle only the more ‘routine’ incidents, they may be somewhat skill deficient if called upon to attend anything more ‘complex’ (or indeed something that seems routine at the outset but escalates into something that requires specialist skills).

### Modernise the on-call working contract

10. Participants supported B&MKFRS's proposal to modernise the on-call working contract by allowing RDS firefighters to 'book on' for fewer hours a week when cover is needed rather than the current 120 hours a week. This, it was felt, would make the role inherently more attractive.

### Incentivise by paying a premium for on-call cover during working hours

11. Incentivising, while considered sensible in principle, was considered unworkable by some who asked: *are the people actually there in the area to incentivise?* (High Wycombe). Further, others were concerned that such a scheme could attract the 'wrong' people to the Service – and also questioned how incentive payments could be afforded and would be viewed by the Service as a whole.

### Other suggestions

12. Participants across the five groups made a number of additional suggestions to overcome B&MKFRS's on-call crewing difficulties, namely: widening the five minute catchment area; incentivising local employers to release staff for on-call duties; relaxing the on-call recruitment criteria where possible; and targeting home workers, the self-employed and early retirees to a greater degree.

### Overall

13. Overall, it was generally agreed that B&MKFRS should attempt to improve daytime on-call availability by at least trialling most of the proposed measures discussed above. However, several cautioned against simplifying on-call training for the reasons specified earlier.

### Response Capacity (balancing the resources needed for low-level, day-to-day demand and rare, large-scale or multiple incidents)

14. The discussions highlighted some initial concern about the proposal to consider more economical ways to deal with rare and high risk, most notably around B&MKFRS's ongoing ability to respond to infrequent high risk with fewer resources and relying on support from neighbouring FRSs who may themselves be 'in the same boat'. Other worries were around: potential response delays if relying on 'over-the-border' cover; and the cost of mutual aid.
15. Ultimately though, most participants understood the need to examine and possibly rationalise response capacity, even if they worried about the implications of doing so. Indeed, those at Buckingham unanimously considered it reasonable for B&MKFRS to review (and possibly reduce) the level of resourcing needed to deal with large or multiple incidents if there is resilience from nearby areas, as did majorities at the other groups – on the condition though that any potential reductions are made to a sensible level that offers a degree of flexibility.
16. There was also a sense that this would simply be a case of formalising existing cross-border (and indeed wider) co-operation – and that it may even be a positive change in the context of reducing incidents insofar as a smaller pool of firefighters would be mobilised more frequently and would more easily maintain their skills and competencies.



17. The few who objected to B&MKFRS even considering reducing its resource capacity typically made comments along the following lines: *fire is a big risk to life and you can't really put a value on a life that could have been saved had the facilities be available. So to try and economise too much is too big a risk.* (Milton Keynes)

### Using Resources Differently (Co-responding)

18. Initially, some participants could not understand how Co-responding benefits the Fire and Rescue Service, and there was concern that it could result in conflicting priorities; that is, that fire engines could be taken 'off the run' to fulfil duties to the Ambulance Service.
19. Participants at Buckingham and especially Milton Keynes also questioned how compatible Co-responding is with B&MKFRS's RDS availability issues. As one participant commented: *I'm trying to get my head around the fact that on the one hand you are lacking in staff and on the other hand you are donating staff to another service* (Milton Keynes)
20. Overall, most people agreed that Co-responding is a positive initiative that should be rolled-out as widely as possible, providing it is cost-effective for B&MKFRS and that it does not negatively impact on the Service fulfilling its core responsibilities. In addition to its obvious benefits, there was recognition that Co-responder activity could improve the resilience of some quieter rural stations – and that the reduction in incident levels increases the feasibility of firefighters being able to do 'other things'.
21. It was, however, said at Buckingham that explanations must be offered to the public as to exactly how the Co-responder scheme works in practice – as people may be somewhat nervous about being attended to by a firefighter in a medical emergency (though others at Milton Keynes disagreed and said that *when you're having an asthma attack and can't breathe you don't care who's holding that oxygen mask*).

### Delivering Services Differently (Privatisation and Mutualisation)

22. The overwhelming majority of participants were firmly opposed to privatising B&MKFRS both in principle and for fear that the quality of service would suffer in the pursuit of profit and from a lack of accountability – and it should be noted here that people's typically negative views of privatisation seem to have been strongly influenced by previous experiences.
23. Participants were certainly very keen to see B&MKFRS exploring other avenues for efficiency savings (such as station mergers and fire engine rationalisation) rather than privatisation – and there was a definite feeling that the emergency services should be protected as far as possible from the threat of it.
24. Despite the general antipathy towards privatisation, some were keen to see it being explored in relation to specific specialist functions (or even part-privatisation of the whole service) – and one participant at High Wycombe, who was against privatisation in principle, was of the view that it should be pursued as an option if the Service does not address what they saw as its over-resourcing.

### **Fire Stations (examining optimal size and location requirements)**

25. The need to examine the location of fire stations was raised spontaneously at Buckingham, Chesham and High Wycombe – not only in the context of BMKFRS’s stations generally, but especially in relation to possibly merging those near the borders with other FRSs. Indeed, several participants were surprised that such monitoring is not an ongoing process.
26. Despite this, although participants understood B&MKFRS’s need to examine fire station locations and sizes in principle, there was significant concern (especially at Chesham and Milton Keynes) about the possible implications of this in practice. People are very ‘attached’ to their local stations and it was said that, as a result, there would be strong public opposition to any proposed changes to them. As such, given that any future proposals in relation to fire stations are likely to be controversial, it was said that the reasoning behind them must be carefully and widely explained to ensure that as many people as possible understand their rationale.
27. Finally, participants at Milton Keynes demonstrated a great deal of trust in B&MKFRS, commenting that anything it decides to propose in future would be done in the public interest – and that it would certainly not jeopardise the safety of the people of Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes in any way.

### **Overall Comments**

28. Participants were generally very tolerant of B&MKFRS’s intentions as set out in its Public Safety Plan 2015-2020, even if there was some concern about the future implications of certain proposals as outlined above. Indeed, on the whole it was accepted that the Service must evolve and modernise in accordance with changing risk levels and the proposals under discussion were considered to be sensible and positive in enabling it to do so.

# Project Overview

## The Commission

29. On the basis of our long-standing experience with the UK fire and rescue service, ORS was commissioned by Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire and Rescue Service (B&MKFRS) to undertake five focus groups across its service area (in Aylesbury, Buckingham, Chesham, High Wycombe and Milton Keynes). The groups were part of the second stage in an ongoing consultation process, with B&MKFRS having undertaken a very early-stage 'listening and engagement' process in November/December 2013 to understand public opinions and to 'test' some very general ideas and principles.
30. The point or purpose of these (and the earlier) deliberative sessions was to allow B&MKFRS 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 B&MKFRS's planning for the future.
31. The 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.
32. In this context, ORS' role was to design, facilitate and report the consultation in September and October 2014. We worked in collaboration with B&MKFRS to prepare informative stimulus material for the meetings before facilitating the discussions and preparing this independent report of findings.

## Deliberative Research

### Attendance and Representativeness

33. The focus groups were designed to inform and 'engage' the participants both with the issues and with B&MKFRS – 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.
34. In total, there were 49 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 Tuesday 9 <sup>th</sup> September 2014	8
Aylesbury	6:30pm – 8:30pm Wednesday 10 <sup>th</sup> September 2014	12
Chesham	6:30pm – 8:30pm Wednesday 10 <sup>th</sup> September 2014	11
Buckingham	6:30pm – 8:30pm Thursday 11 <sup>th</sup> September 2014	10
Milton Keynes	6:30pm – 8:30pm Thursday 11 <sup>th</sup> September 2014	8

35. 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: 25 Female: 24
Age	16-34: 9 35-54: 22 55+: 18
Social Grade	AB: 17 C1: 15 C2: 6 DE: 11
Ethnicity	4 BME
Limiting Long-term Illness	7

36. 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 11 'no-shows' were in the 16-34 age bracket which explains the lower overall numbers of younger people at the sessions.

37. 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.
38. 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 diverse informed people reacting to B&MKFRS's *Public Safety Plan 2015-20*.

## Discussion Agenda

39. ORS worked in collaboration with B&MKFRS to agree a suitable agenda and informative stimulus material for the meeting, which covered all of the following topics:
- Staff and financial resources
  - Distribution of emergency cover resources
  - Incident profile and numbers
  - Reality of reducing risk
  - Role of prevention, protection and response
  - B&MKFRS'S *Public Safety Plan 2015-20*, especially in relation to...
    - Crewing models - particularly the on-call duty system
    - Response capacity and the need to balance the resources needed for low-level day-to-day demand and infrequent high risk
    - Using resources differently through the extension of co-responding
    - Ways of delivering services differently, for example through privatisation or mutualisation
    - The potential need to reconfigure fire stations to match demand.
40. The questions were accompanied by a presentation devised by ORS and B&MKFRS to inform and stimulate discussion of the issues – and participants were encouraged to ask any questions they wished throughout the discussions.

## The Report

41. This report concisely reviews the sentiments and judgements of focus group participants about B&MKFRS's *Public Safety Plan 2015-20*. 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

42. 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.

## Main Findings

### Crewing Models (the On-call Duty System)

43. B&MKFRS is experiencing significant on-call crewing difficulties, particularly in relation to maintaining availability during the daytime when incident demand is at its highest. The Service is suggesting a number of measures to try and overcome these difficulties – and participants' views on these are reported below.

#### Encourage sprinklers in more remote areas

44. Although participants supported the idea of sprinkler systems in principle, they were sceptical about the degree to which people might be persuaded to install them in practice given the cost of doing so (particularly retrospectively):

*We should encourage sprinklers generally but what is the cost? (Buckingham)*

*Sprinklers are brilliant in terms of prevention but once the premises is built there's a horrendous cost to the owner as well as the ongoing maintenance...and that's got to put people off (Milton Keynes)*

*Not a lot of people will put sprinklers in their home will they? Only people who can afford to do it and not everyone can (Milton Keynes)*

*When you encourage sprinklers is that self-funded by the individual? (High Wycombe)*

45. Also, as the following quotations show, some misconceptions remain about sprinkler systems that will need to be addressed if more people are to be persuaded to install them:

*Would you want these big things dangling from your ceiling? (Milton Keynes)*

*What are the statistics on sprinklers going off accidentally? Don't they go off all over the place and soak everything? (Milton Keynes)*

#### Prioritise prevention work in more remote communities

46. There was no objection to B&MKFRS prioritising prevention work in more remote communities, with participants at Buckingham suggesting that the Service should capitalise on the 'close-knit'

nature of Buckingham in enlisting community volunteers to promote its safety messages in rural areas:

*Education and prevention makes sense doesn't it? (Milton Keynes)*

*Bucks is a close-knit community and there are people who will volunteer to promote prevention work in the community. (Buckingham)*

#### **More use of smaller 'rapid intervention' appliances**

47. Making more use of smaller 'rapid intervention' appliances was encouraged insofar as they could: offer flexibility; be used to assess an incident and establish the need for a full fire engine; and be deployed to manage and control incidents and prevent escalation:

*More flexible levels of response are needed... (High Wycombe)*

*That would make sense for the rural areas where they're going up lanes rather than roads (Milton Keynes)*

*You can use the smaller vehicles to go out and assess the incident to see if a full fire engine is needed (Buckingham)*

*The idea of using different pumps is a good idea to get the resources at the incident...two may turn up in their smaller vehicle initially and the response can then be made up from elsewhere (High Wycombe)*

*Having a small vehicle that gets there quicker has got to be good...it may have the potential to control something until back-up comes so that it is less serious in the long-term. (High Wycombe)*

48. Further, at High Wycombe it was said that utilising smaller vehicles more frequently would *motivate the firefighters who will go out more often. (High Wycombe)*

#### **Move full-time crew around to support on-call stations when RDS cover is low**

49. Using full-time firefighters to support on-call stations when RDS cover is low was considered sensible. One participant at Aylesbury also suggested recruiting RDS firefighters in urban areas *to cover for wholetime firefighters who could then be moved out to support the rural areas. (Aylesbury)*

#### **'Simplify' training for on-call firefighters**

50. This was the proposal that caused participants the most concern insofar as, if RDS firefighters are trained to tackle only the more 'routine' incidents, they may be somewhat skill deficient if called upon to attend anything more 'complex' (or indeed something that seems routine at the outset but escalates into something that requires specialist skills). Some typical comments were:

*Don't change training; it is a risk (Aylesbury)*



*Is there a risk of when you have a more complicated job and need them to provide extra resource then you have to contend with mixed skill levels rather than having the same across the board? (High Wycombe)*

*It's fine saying they're only going to do basic stuff but I'd worry about those incidents that look routine at the outset but turn out to be something a lot more complicated...especially if there's only a retained crew there to deal with them (Chesham)*

*I went to Great Missenden station and was really impressed with the knowledge and confidence of the guys there. I'd just be concerned that if they become under-trained and under-experienced, will they know enough to keep themselves safe? (Chesham)*

*Would the on-call crews be called as a secondary 'force' to a larger fire where those specialist skills would come into play? (Chesham)*

*There can be chemical spills even in the very rural areas so the on-call firefighters need to be able to cover it. Risk is very dispersed around small industrial estates and farms (Buckingham)*

#### **Modernise the on-call working contract**

51. Participants supported B&MKFRS's proposal to modernise the on-call working contract by allowing RDS firefighters to 'book on' for fewer hours a week when cover is needed rather than the current 120 hours a week. This, it was felt, would make the role inherently more attractive:

*You need to reduce the time they're available (Aylesbury)*

*120 hours seems like a no-goer (Chesham)*

*Maybe it's the 120 hours that's the real issue and it's about changing the working contract (Milton Keynes)*

*You should definitely negotiate hours with the firefighters to make the job more attractive. (High Wycombe)*

#### **Incentivise by paying a premium for on-call cover during working hours**

52. Incentivising, while considered sensible in principle, was considered unworkable by some who asked:

*Are the people actually there in the area to incentivise? (High Wycombe)*

*This isn't going to work is it because the people aren't there to incentivise? (Chesham)*

53. Further, others were concerned that such a scheme could attract the 'wrong' people to the Service – and also questioned how incentive payments could be afforded and would be viewed by the Service as a whole:

*Would incentivising be feasible within the budget? (Milton Keynes)*

*The risk with incentivising is that you may not get the people who actually want to do it for the good of the job; they're just doing it for the money (High Wycombe)*

*Would incentive salaries be unpopular or popular in the service? (Buckingham)*

### Other suggestions

54. Participants across the five groups made a number of additional suggestions to overcome B&MKFRS's on-call crewing difficulties, namely: widening the five minute catchment area; incentivising local employers to release staff for on-call duties; relaxing the on-call recruitment criteria where possible; and targeting home workers, the self-employed and early retirees to a greater degree:

*You could lengthen the time and distance beyond five minutes to widen the catchment area (Aylesbury)*

*Offer to train some employees to gain different skills in return for RDS availability from employers (Aylesbury)*

*Can you look at your criteria for recruitment to see if there is somewhere where you can be more flexible? Is there any way to relax some of the criteria so it's not so rigid (Milton Keynes)*

*More people work from home now; you should target them (Buckingham)*

*More people are working part-time now and there are increasing numbers of self-employed people these days (Chesham)*

*What is the retirement age for an on-call firefighter? People retire early now so they could be targeted. (Chesham)*

### Overall

55. Overall, it was generally agreed that B&MKFRS should attempt to improve daytime on-call availability by at least trialling most of the proposed measures discussed above. However, several cautioned against simplifying on-call training for the reasons specified earlier.

### Response Capacity

56. One of B&MKFRS's key challenges is to balance the resources needed for low-level, day-to-day demand and rare, large-scale or multiple incidents. As such, it feels it must consider more economical ways to deal with rare and high risk (for example via more collaboration with and support from neighbouring Fire and Rescue Services).
57. The discussions highlighted some initial concern about this proposal, most notably around B&MKFRS's ongoing ability to respond to infrequent high risk with fewer resources and relying on support from neighbouring FRSs who may themselves be 'in the same boat':

*I have big alarm bells ringing at the idea of reducing an emergency service because I think of the 'what ifs' (Aylesbury)*

*What happens if next year we have a ridiculously hot summer and there are fires all over the place and we've got no resources to deal with them? (Chesham)*

*It's impossible to predict how many fires there will be in Buckinghamshire each year so you surely have to model it on the maximum possible (Chesham)*

*The surrounding areas are thinking in the same terms (Aylesbury)*

*How will this work if all the surrounding counties are running down their resources? (Buckingham)*

*They're all in the same boat and are going through the same process so will the resources be available from elsewhere. (High Wycombe)*

58. Other worries were around: potential response delays if relying on 'over-the-border' cover (though there was also some acknowledgement that this may be less critical in the case of large-scale incidents that require significant resources from many areas); and the cost of mutual aid:

*What is the 'community cost' of bringing in resources from a wider area to assist in covering big incidents if that delays an effective response? (Aylesbury)*

*How much of an impact does the additional time taken to deploy across counties have on the quality of the response? Is response going to be adversely affected? Or is it the case that so many resources are needed that a delay in one fire engine or one not being available around the corner is not going to make much of a difference? (High Wycombe)*

*What if Royal Berkshire or whoever have an incident and they need their engines and we're stuck with nothing...and it's the travelling time as well from other areas (Milton Keynes)*

*What would the funding implications of mutual aid be? (High Wycombe)*

59. Ultimately though, most participants understood the need to examine and possibly rationalise response capacity, even if they worried about the implications of doing so. Indeed, those at Buckingham unanimously considered it reasonable for B&MKFRS to review (and possibly reduce) the level of resourcing needed to deal with large or multiple incidents if there is resilience from nearby areas, as did majorities at the other groups – on the condition though that the potential reductions are made to a sensible level that offers a degree of flexibility. Some typical comments were:

*This sounds like a good and feasible idea (Buckingham)*

*It's about risk management (Chesham)*

*Do the research and risk assessment (Aylesbury)*

*The incident curve is going down and down so it probably needs to be looked at; there has to be a cut-off point somewhere (Chesham)*

*There is some movement with the smaller, quieter stations; something could be done (Aylesbury)*

*I think it's ok as long as you can mitigate risk by using resources from outside the area (Chesham)*

*It doesn't make a lot of economic sense to retain the level of resources that they've had from when the risk was a lot higher. They have to be reviewed but you have to have contingencies (Milton Keynes)*

*This idea is ok if it is feasible and reduces costs without increasing risk... (Buckingham)*

*Risk is very low in this county so these situations are manageable; we should not exaggerate risk (Buckingham)*

*You need to retain overall flexibility to cover the incidents where they occur (Aylesbury)*

*If you take it to baseline level there will be people who won't like it, you have to get the balance right. (High Wycombe)*

60. Essentially, the following quotation epitomises the view of most participants on this issue:

*As long as the reduction in service is not more than the reduction in risk then we're always going to be safer day-to-day. But those big incidents are going to defy that kind of thinking entirely and you have to be able to get the resources there when you have them...but ideally in a way that means you don't have to have them in reserve the whole time. (Chesham)*

61. There was also a sense that this would simply be a case of formalising existing cross-border (and indeed wider) co-operation – and that it may even be a positive change in the context of reducing incidents insofar as a smaller pool of firefighters would be mobilised more frequently and would more easily maintain their skills and competencies:

*Surely you do this now already? (Buckingham)*

*If we take Buncefield, all those resources from all over the country were there and the country coped. And the fire at Windsor Castle; there were resources from neighbouring counties there. It's about how we can do that more routinely and effectively in future (High Wycombe)*

*If the firefighters don't go to enough incidents they lose their skills so reductions in numbers can be a positive thing. (High Wycombe)*

62. The few who objected to B&MKFRS even considering reducing its resource capacity typically made comments along the following lines:

*Fire is a big risk to life and you can't really put a value on a life that could have been saved had the facilities be available. So to try and economise too much is too big a risk. (Milton Keynes)*

63. Finally, on a related note, one participant at High Wycombe asked: *what drives keeping the wholetime firefighters around during the early hours when the risk is lower?* (High Wycombe)

## Using Resources Differently

64. B&MKFRS supports other emergency services like the Ambulance Service through, for example, the Co-responder Scheme - whereby the former responds to emergency 999 calls such as heart attacks, strokes and asthma attacks. Such a scheme has been operating with the South Central Ambulance Service from Great Missenden Fire Station since 2011. This trial has been extended to Amersham/Chesham, High Wycombe and Marlow and the Service is looking to develop and expand it into other areas.

65. Initially, some participants could not understand how Co-responding benefits the Fire and Rescue Service, and there was concern that it could result in conflicting priorities; that is, that fire engines could be taken 'off the run' to fulfil duties to the Ambulance Service:

*I can see how this is great for the Ambulance Service and for society but I don't see how it helps the Fire Service (Chesham)*

*If you have a simultaneous call - if a fire call comes in when you're Co-responding - what do you do? (Milton Keynes)*

*Is the fire engine taken out of action when you do Co-responding? (Aylesbury)*

66. More notably though, participants at Buckingham and especially Milton Keynes questioned how compatible Co-responding is with B&MKFRS's RDS availability issues:

*But if you cannot get on-call firefighters how will this work? (Buckingham)*

*In theory I think it's great but I worry that it's taking resources away from the Fire Service, especially if they're struggling for on-call staff. I worry that one person not being available would stop a fire engine going out in those areas that are short-staffed (Milton Keynes)*

*I'm trying to get my head around the fact that on the one hand you are lacking in staff and on the other hand you are donating staff to another service (Milton Keynes)*

*Doesn't it drain your workforce? You're complaining that you don't have enough on-call firefighters... (Milton Keynes)*

67. Overall, however, most people agreed that Co-responding is a positive initiative that should be rolled-out as widely as possible, providing it is cost-effective for B&MKFRS and that it does not negatively impact on the Service fulfilling its core responsibilities:

*There is a lot of free Fire and Rescue time that could be used effectively (Aylesbury)*

*It makes perfect sense! (Aylesbury)*

*If he's a firefighter he's multi-skilled and should be helping out in other areas...doing something else to help lives (Milton Keynes)*

*It would be a local person helping a local person which would be beneficial (High Wycombe)*

*It will depend on the costs but you can make better use of some personnel. (Buckingham)*

68. In addition to its obvious benefits, there was recognition that Co-responder activity could improve the resilience of some quieter rural stations – and that the reduction in incident levels increases the feasibility of firefighters being able to do ‘other things’:

*It will make it more feasible to keep what you have got (Buckingham)*

*I keep thinking about that graph of incidents coming down and thinking about all the time the firefighters aren't being used...it's not really acceptable so I think 'why not?' (Milton Keynes)*

69. It was, however, said at Buckingham that explanations must be offered to the public as to exactly how the Co-responder scheme works in practice – as people may be somewhat nervous about being attended to by a firefighter in a medical emergency (though others at Milton Keynes disagreed and said that *when you're having an asthma attack and can't breathe you don't care who's holding that oxygen mask*):

*Is this a matter of last resort if there is nothing else available? I wouldn't want a firefighter to come to me for a heart attack unless it was a last resort (Buckingham)*

*There will be some concerns about what the Fire and Rescue Service will be called out for. People could question what they can do in medical emergencies (Buckingham)*

*The public need to know what might happen in what cases. (Buckingham)*

### Delivering Services Differently

70. B&MKFRS is looking to explore ways to deliver services more efficiently and for opportunities for revenue generation. Possibilities might include privatisation and employee-owned ‘public service mutuals’. The discussions in all five focus groups centred on the former.
71. Only a very small minority of participants were in favour of privatisation (and a few others were undecided but felt they might be able to support it if done properly):

*I'm in favour. They would be governed and would take over existing expertise (Aylesbury)*

*I know the Surrey example which works well...privatisation is the coming trend in all services if it cuts costs (Buckingham)*

*I think we should look at all the options...look at why it's been successful in Denmark (Chesham)*

*I would need more information but I suppose it could work (Buckingham)*

*I have a divided opinion. A lot of airport functions are privatised and this is smaller scale but it is also a bit scary. (Aylesbury)*

72. The overwhelming majority though was firmly opposed to privatising B&MKFRS both in principle and for fear that the quality of service would suffer in the pursuit of profit and from a lack of accountability. Some of the many typical comments were:

*I dislike the principle (Buckingham)*

*It's not compatible with a quality service (Buckingham)*

*It would have to be profit-making and accountable to shareholders (Milton Keynes)*

*It would cease to be a service...companies are not going to say they will run it at a loss; they will be trying to screw as much as possible out of it (Milton Keynes)*

*It's directly accountable to Government when it's a public service...not to a bank somewhere in London (Milton Keynes)*

*There's a mindset that goes with who you're accountable to. If it's privately owned there is a mindset that's about profit. When it is publicly-owned...the mindset is different as they are accountable to the public (Milton Keynes)*

*Tenders can be good but it is about profit. It will all be about low prices and reducing quality (Aylesbury)*

*Keeping the public sector public is important; you get better quality and accountability (High Wycombe)*

*It would be all about profit and money; we should provide a service (Aylesbury)*

*I don't like privatisation and selling our assets for others' profit. (Aylesbury)*

73. Participants were certainly very keen to see B&MKFRS exploring other avenues for efficiency savings (such as station mergers and fire engine rationalisation) rather than privatisation – and there was a definite feeling that the emergency services should be protected as far as possible from the threat of it:

*I would prefer to see combining stations and measures like that...like Beaconsfield and Gerrard's Cross for example (High Wycombe)*

*I think there are other things to consider first before we look at privatisation...value for money, efficiency and reform (High Wycombe)*

*I would be dead against it. I think our Fire Service is well run and offers value for money. So I want to see them be creative and think differently with the threat of privatisation threatening from behind! Like a Sword of Damocles over their heads to improve and become more efficient (High Wycombe)*

*I think there needs to be a distinction between emergency services being privatised and other services. With rail, there's often a sense that profit is being put above service quality...this is upsetting but wouldn't cause the same kind of moral outrage as if it was done in the emergency services (Chesham)*

*I'm against it for this specialist public service; not for emergencies (Buckingham)*

*There are certain services in our country that should be maintained by the Government and this is one of them (Chesham)*



Indeed, as one participant strikingly commented:

*I would rather have a public fire service and lose an engine at the end of my road than have a private one at the end of my road. (High Wycombe)*

74. There was concern at Chesham that controversial proposals would not be subject to the same rigorous scrutiny as they are currently; for example, one participant questioned whether a private company would undertake consultation sessions to discuss important issues (such as the one in which they were taking part):

*Would a private fire service do the same sort of consultation sessions as this or would it just be 'we're shutting this station'. (Chesham)*

75. It should also be noted that people's typically negative views of privatisation seem to have been strongly influenced by previous experiences, as the following comments show:

*The way privatisation has gone here so far hasn't been great has it? (Chesham)*

*Privatisation through the years has mean losses to services. All these mistakes have already been made so why go down that road? (Milton Keynes)*

*Look at the railways...disaster. Look at the energy providers... (Milton Keynes)*

*I have seen the effects of privatisation and it leads to falling quality at the expense of making a profit (High Wycombe)*

*Something needs to be done but I wouldn't like to see it privatised on the basis of experience elsewhere. (High Wycombe)*

76. Despite the general antipathy towards privatisation, some were keen to see it being explored in relation to specific specialist functions (or even part-privatisation of the whole service) – and one participant at High Wycombe, who was against privatisation in principle, was of the view that it should be pursued as an option if the Service does not address what they saw as its over-resourcing:

*I'm unsure but risk is reducing and it might be feasible for some services (Aylesbury)*

*I am in favour for some specialist roles like rope rescue if it saves money (Aylesbury)*

*It is feasible for specialist functions (Buckingham)*

*I'm not against the idea of individual things being privatised...like fire engine maintenance (Chesham)*

*You could look at individual services. The vehicle leasing is possibly the optimal one to look at as you could have standards and performance indicators (Chesham)*

*Is there an incentive for some big businesses to have their name attached to the Fire Service? So some part of it would be public and some private...it would be overseen by a public body but part-privatised to allow for some extra funding. You could have the 'NatWest fire engine' down the road! (Chesham)*



*It's not surprising that private companies are looking at this and saying 'we could do this cheaper' given the level of over-resourcing at the moment. They must be looking at areas to save and deliver things in a much more cost-effective way. If things are the same in five years' time it should happen. I'm against it but if we are in the same position in terms of over-resourcing then it should be considered. (High Wycombe)*

77. Further, one participant at Chesham commented that:

*I'd rather not see privatisation; I'd rather move towards higher taxes and better services on a national level. But if we're in a situation that we can't control and the country's political climate is moving towards more privatisation and less tax...if the quality of service could be compromised if they don't privatise then I can see that it has to be an option. (Chesham)*

## Fire Stations

78. Fire Stations have historically been located in town and village centres to respond to house and commercial fires, but the Fire and Rescue Service now responds to a far wider range of incidents (such as road traffic collisions and animal rescues) which often do not occur in built-up areas. As such, the optimal location and size requirement of fire stations is constantly changing, and B&MKFS suggests a need to examine and possibly reconfigure station locations and sizes to match demand – considering options such as relocating, merging with nearby stations and co-locating with other emergency services.
79. The need to examine the location of fire stations was raised spontaneously at Buckingham, Chesham and High Wycombe – not only in the context of BMKFRS's stations generally, but especially in relation to possibly merging those near the borders with other FRSs:

*Where stations are, is that historical? They may not necessarily be in the right place... (Chesham)*

*You could re-site some of your stations to be better located for risk; you could reduce appliances by strategic station re-sitings (Buckingham)*

*You could have strategic alliances and re-site stations to get better and more economical overall cover (Buckingham)*

*The question is do you really collaborate and do things like shut down two stations across county boundaries and put one in the middle to serve the two counties? (High Wycombe)*

80. Indeed, several participants were surprised that such monitoring is not an ongoing process – and some even suggested specific areas that could potentially be considered for change in future:

*I would have thought you'd be doing that anyway...all organisations and businesses should be looking at them (Chesham)*

*Surely this has been ongoing for years hasn't it? (Milton Keynes)*

*It would be unreasonable not to do this! (Buckingham)*

*Risk is changing...the Buckingham station has been there for a long time but is it in the right place now? (Buckingham)*

*In Milton Keynes it would make a lot of economic sense to merge Great Holm and Bletchley into one bigger station on one of the grid roads. It doesn't seem to make sense having two manned stations so close to each other (Milton Keynes)*

81. Despite this, although participants understood B&MKFRS's need to examine fire station locations and sizes in principle, there was significant concern (especially at Chesham and Milton Keynes) about the possible implications of this in practice. People are very 'attached' to their local stations and it was said that, as a result, there would be strong public opposition to any proposed changes to them. Some typical comments were:

*Objectively I think 'of course they should be looking at whether they're in the right places' but I also think 'don't take Great Missenden away'. That would be a general reaction I think...our hearts will be saying 'yes, relocate' but our heads will be saying 'no, not mine' (Chesham)*

*If you propose to do something with a particular station you are going to have to have rock solid evidence that says 'you won't be any less safe than you are'. Closing stations is going to be your hardest sell out of anything you do so by all means look at it - you have to - but it's going to be a tough one to get approval for (Chesham)*

*If your local fire station has two big, red shiny engines and these are replaced with one engine and one smaller vehicle, we're not really going to notice much difference...whereas if your station disappears, that's going to hurt. And even if your pattern of risk is such that it will make no difference, it's still going to hurt as these buildings (like police stations and libraries) are symbols for people and are more than the sum of their parts...they're talismans and it's more than just about the physical building (Chesham)*

*If you merged, I suppose my feelings on it would all depend on where you were putting the new one (Milton Keynes)*

*I would be very happy for you to move any fire station you want as long as you leave my nearest one where it is! And that would be the way everyone would feel. (Milton Keynes)*

As such, given that any future proposals in relation to fire stations are likely to be controversial – it was said that the reasoning behind them must be carefully and widely explained to ensure that as many people as possible understand their rationale:

*You need to have a good PR person to make it palatable for people. Unless you sit here for two hours listening to this information you are just going to be like 'it's my fire station, don't take it away'. (High Wycombe)*

82. There was some debate at Chesham as to whether communities could contribute to the running of their local fire station via a 'community charge' of sorts. Some endorsed the idea, but most did not for fear of creating a two-tier, undemocratic system whereby those who can afford to pay have a vastly superior service to those who cannot:

*Could communities be persuaded to pay, say, £50 a year for their local fire station? (Chesham)*

*Doesn't that separate communities into those who can pay and can't pay? It would be unfair because you'll have communities like Prestwood who can afford to pay for a community fire station but in another area in somewhere like Aylesbury they won't be able to. It's how the Fire Service started but we don't want to go back to that do we? (Chesham)*

*Anything that creates a two-tier system where 'this fire station is better than that one' is a bad idea for society in general. (Chesham)*

83. Finally, participants at Milton Keynes demonstrated a great deal of trust in B&MKFRS, commenting that anything it decides to propose in future would be done in the public interest – and that it would certainly not jeopardise the safety of the people of Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes in any way:

*If the Fire Service decide to move or merge fire stations they'd be doing it for the benefit of the community not just to save money...the job they do they're not going to put people's lives in danger. Some people overlook that at times (Milton Keynes)*

*I don't think they would put anyone's lives at risk. (Milton Keynes)*

### Overall Comments

Participants across all groups were generally very tolerant of B&MKFRS's intentions as set out in its Public Safety Plan 2015-2020, even if there was some concern about the future implications of certain proposals as outlined above. Indeed, on the whole it was accepted that the Service must evolve and modernise in accordance with changing risk levels (though it was said at Aylesbury that public services *are very entrenched in the way things are and are very reluctant to change*) - and the proposals under discussion were considered to be sensible and positive in enabling it to do so.



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