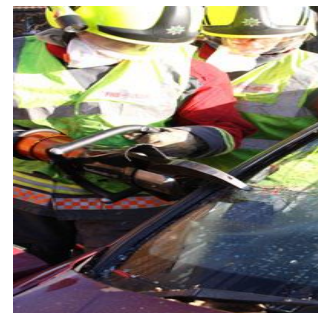




Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority

A Merger of Bletchley and Great Holm Fire Stations?

Report of Consultation Outcomes



Opinion Research Services
November 2015



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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

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We are grateful to all of those who completed the questionnaire and to the members of the public who took part in the forums. The latter 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 officers who attended the forums 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 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 forum participants.

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Executive Summary

The Commission

1. On the basis of its previous experience, ORS was commissioned by Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire and Rescue Service (B&MKFRS) to undertake a consultation on the proposed merger of Bletchley and Great Holm Fire Stations into a Blue Light Emergency Services Hub. The consultation programme consisted of:
 - Designing, implementing, analysing and reporting an open online questionnaire (which was also available on paper on request); and
 - Recruiting, facilitating and reporting three deliberative forums in Milton Keynes (one for residents within the Bletchley Fire Station area, one for residents within the Great Holm Fire Station area and one for residents across Milton Keynes).
2. As well as giving general advice, ORS's primary role was to design, implement/facilitate, analyse and report both the open questionnaire and the deliberative forums between September and November 2015. We worked in collaboration with B&MKFRS to design the questionnaire and prepare informative stimulus material for the meetings before facilitating the discussions and preparing this independent report of findings.

Open Questionnaire

3. The open questionnaire (with the accompanying Consultation Document) was available online between 14th September and 9th November 2015. 782 questionnaires were completed; 675 were complete and 107 incomplete. Though none were submitted by post, paper copies of the questionnaire were available on request.
4. Although the open questionnaire is an important and accessible consultation route that is, by its very nature, open to all, it was not distributed systematically. As such, and because the respondent profile is an imperfect reflection of the Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes population, its results must be interpreted carefully. Crucially though, this does not mean that the open questionnaire findings should be discounted: they are analysed in detail in this report and must be taken into account as a demonstration of the strength of feeling of residents who were motivated to put forward their views (and in many cases concerns) about the proposed changes.

Deliberative Forums

5. In total, there were 46 diverse participants at the forums - 12 at Bletchley, 19 at Great Holm, and 15 at that for Milton Keynes-wide residents. 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 and the role of prevention, protection and response

B&MKFRS's proposal to merge of Bletchley and Great Holm Fire Stations into a Blue Light Emergency Services Hub, especially in relation to:

The desirability of collaboration between 'blue light' services in principle;

The desirability of a new Hub station to co-locate Fire and Police services on a single site - both in principle and to replace Bletchley and Great Holm Fire Stations;

The suitability of the proposed location at West Ashland; and

The feasibility of including community facilities and resources at the proposed new Hub station.

6. Although, like all other forms of qualitative consultation, forums cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the meetings reported here gave diverse groups of people from across 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.

Consultation Programme Proportional and Fair

7. B&MKFRS's consultation programme was conscientious, in the sense of being open, accessible and fair to members of the public and stakeholders across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes: the consultation was proportional to the importance of the issues and conforms with good practice - both in its scale and the balance of elements included, and also in the way in which it built upon earlier engagement and consultation exercises undertaken by the Service.
8. The key good practice requirements for proper consultation programmes are that they should:
- Be conducted at a formative stage, before decisions are taken;
 - Allow sufficient time for people to participate and respond;
 - Provide the public and stakeholders with enough background information to allow them to consider the issues and any proposals intelligently and critically; and

Be properly taken into consideration before decisions are finally taken.

Taken together, these four elements do much to ensure the ‘accountability’ of public authorities, particularly the fourth; but this does not mean that consultations are referenda.

9. **Properly understood, accountability means that public authorities should give an account of their plans and take into account public views: they should conduct fair and accessible consultation while reporting the outcomes openly and considering them fully.** This does not mean that the majority views expressed in consultations should automatically decide public policy, for consultations are not referenda, and the popularity or unpopularity of draft proposals should not displace professional and political judgement about what is the right or best decision in the circumstances. The levels of, and reasons for, public support or opposition are very important, but as considerations to be taken into account, not as decisive factors that necessarily determine authorities’ decisions.
10. For the public bodies considering the outcomes of consultation, the key question is not *Which proposal has most support?* but, *Are the reasons for the popularity or unpopularity of the proposals cogent?* In this context, both B&MKFRS and ORS were clear that this important consultation programme should include both quantitative and deliberative elements in order to both: provide many people with the opportunity to take part via the open questionnaire routes; and promote informed engagement via the deliberative forums with members of the public.
11. Given people’s general unawareness of how their fire and rescue services operate and manage their resources and costs, consultation with informed audiences - who have the opportunity to question and test the evidence for particular proposals - is especially valuable. All consultation elements are important and none should be disregarded, but the deliberative forums are particularly worthy of consideration because they explore the arguments and the reasons for people’s opinions. There is no doubt that B&MKFRS’s consultation programme conforms to good practice by including both quantitative and qualitative methods through which people could participate and as a means for the Authority to understand the reasons for people’s opinions.
12. As well as providing the public and stakeholders with sufficient information to consider the proposals intelligently, B&MKFRS has also conducted its consultation in a timely manner and is taking account of the outcomes before making a decision. Both the scale and nature of the programme compare well with similar consultations undertaken by other fire and rescue services and public bodies.

Executive Summary

13. 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

Blue Light Collaboration in Principle

Open Questionnaire

14. Similar proportions of respondents agreed (41%) and disagreed (43%) that collaboration with other 'blue light' (i.e. emergency) services is a good idea in principle.

Deliberative Forums

15. Most forum participants were very positive about the principle of collaboration between the three emergency services: they felt this would yield improved, more effective working relationships as a result of easier communication and sharing of knowledge and best practice.

A 'Blue Light Emergency Services Hub'?

Open Questionnaire

16. More than two thirds (68%) of respondents disagreed that a new Hub station to co-locate Fire and Police services on a single site is a good idea in principle. Less than a quarter (22%) of respondents agreed.
17. Almost 9 in 10 respondents (89%) disagreed with the proposal to replace the fire stations at Bletchley and Great Holm with a new Hub station; only 8% agreed. The main reasons given for opposing the suggested change were that: the proposed new location at West Ashland will mean reduced fire cover (in the form of longer response times) for the West and North of Milton Keynes; the proposed location is problematic for traffic access given its close proximity to Stadium MK and a busy shopping area; and that the area's increasing population warrants at least the retention of the status quo.
18. Some alternative proposals were suggested, namely: retaining the status quo; the introduction of a Blue Light Emergency Services Hub plus the retention of the Bletchley and Great Holm Fire Stations; the retention of Great Holm Station (while Bletchley Fire Station is relocated to the proposed Hub); the retention of Great Holm as an on-call 'satellite' fire station if the Hub Station is introduced; and the relocation of (or reduction of fire cover at) Newport Pagnell Fire Station.

Deliberative Forums

19. In contrast to the open questionnaire respondents, the idea of a Blue Light Emergency Services Hub was generally welcomed in principle - and indeed in practice when considering the proposal to develop such a facility to replace Bletchley and Great Holm Fire Stations.
20. Indeed, it was clear that informed opinion (expressed after the presentation and the question and answer session) inclined significantly in favour of the proposal on the grounds that it would enable the aforementioned collaboration between emergency services and that: a joint, modern facility would ensure reduced overheads and increased efficiencies; it is based on sound risk analysis and will improve response times overall; it is forward-thinking and logical from a financial perspective (and any savings will be re-invested into the Service); there would be no firefighter redundancies;

it would prove safer from a road user perspective; and it would ultimately 'safeguard the future of the fire service in Milton Keynes'.

21. This is not to say there were no concerns about the proposed change - for example, some participants at Great Holm were initially concerned that a station merger could be used as a means to justify further reductions to emergency service budgets, and several others approved the proposal only on the proviso that any savings are re-invested into the Fire and Rescue Service.
22. A few people highlighted other concerns and disadvantages, including that: co-locating vital services on one site could leave them all vulnerable in the event of power cuts or other service disruptions; the working practices of the different organisations may not be entirely compatible; and that co-location could result in the sometimes negative perception members of the public have of the Police detrimentally impacting upon the well-regarded Fire and Ambulance Services.
23. Importantly also, even after discussion and clarification, there were lingering concerns at Great Holm around response times to the West of Milton Keynes and at Bletchley around the perception of 'reducing' services at a time of population increases.
24. Furthermore, some participants at the Milton Keynes Wide Forum, while accepting the reasoning behind the proposal themselves, acknowledged that there may be 'another side of the story'; that is, that the views of firefighters may be somewhat different. This was not necessarily an issue, more an expression of interest in what the 'boots on the ground' feel about the possible changes.

Location

Open Questionnaire

25. More than three quarters (78%) of respondents disagreed that the proposed location at West Ashland is a suitable location for the proposed new Hub station; only 9% agreed. As aforementioned, the primary reason for such opposition was that locating the station here would not allow B&MKFRS to sufficiently cover areas in the North and West of Milton Keynes (particularly Stony Stratford and Wolverton).

Deliberative Forums

26. Opinions on the proposed location for the Blue Light Hub were mixed in the forums. A majority of participants were in favour - and some highly positive - about the West Ashland site, primarily given its proximity to local road networks and the accessibility this would afford. Furthermore, explanations of B&MKFRS's Automatic Vehicle Location System (which is now used to identify the nearest fire engine to an incident for the quickest response) was reassuring for many, who understood that fire station locations are no longer as important as they once were - especially given the frequency with which firefighters are out in the community undertaking prevention and education work.
27. However, many participants expressed concern about the proposed location - particularly those from Great Holm, who felt siting the Hub in West Ashland might adversely affect coverage for the

(expanding) North and especially West of Milton Keynes. Indeed, even participants in the other two forums questioned whether the town's forthcoming westward expansion has been fully considered by the Fire and Rescue Service in developing a future-proofed proposal.

28. The fact the proposed location is near to Stadium MK and a busy shopping area was also thought to be potentially problematic owing to congestion during rush hour and on match days (which has apparently been exacerbated by nearby housing developments). In order to mitigate against these issues, one participant questioned: *could there be an alternative emergency services exit onto the A5 roundabout or maybe put traffic lights to stop traffic when an emergency vehicle needs to leave?* (Great Holm)

Community Facilities

Open Questionnaire

29. Just under half (49%) of respondents disagreed with including community facilities and resources at the proposed new Hub station; only 21% agreed with this. It is also worth noting that 3 in 10 respondents (30%) neither agreed nor disagreed with this.
30. For the 21% of respondents who agreed with including community facilities and resources at the proposed new Hub station, the most sought after facility at the new Hub station was a community meeting room(s), with residents, members of B&MKFRS and other organisations stating that is something they would like to see provided.

Deliberative Forums

31. A majority of forum participants was in favour of including community facilities on the Hub site, primarily as this would assist in: increasing the provision of educational prevention programmes offered; widening the availability of community meeting space across Milton Keynes; and improving relations between the emergency services and the public.
32. Despite the general positivity though, a few participants at the Milton Keynes Wide Forum were concerned about increasing traffic congestion by encouraging high public access to the site; and that the Hub could prove to be competition for existing community facilities.
33. A few participants said that the location of the proposed Hub is some distance from Milton Keynes's main communities and, thereby, relatively inconvenient for community use. Others, though, disagreed and felt West Ashland is accessible enough to enable people from across the town to use the facility.
34. Finally, some others questioned whether co-locating police stations and community facilities could present a security risk for members of the public insofar as: *I'm not sure how this would work with the security aspect of the Police part of the station if it was in the same building.* (Milton Keynes Wide)

Getting the Message Across?

35. Several participants said that the information presented during the forums had been reassuring in allaying the concerns and dispelling the preconceptions they had about the proposal prior to coming along.
36. However, they acknowledged that only relatively small groups of people have had the benefit of receiving these detailed explanations of the proposal and its reasoning, and that it will be somewhat more difficult to reassure those amongst the general public with similar concerns and preconceptions. In order to have the best chance of doing this, participants suggested the following ways and avenues of disseminating information within communities: using local media, social media, newspapers and billboards around Milton Keynes; direct mailing; fire station open days and exhibitions; information and exhibitions at locations such as libraries, shopping centres, train stations and Middleton Hall; visiting Resident's Associations; and visiting schools to give talks (or asking them to distribute newsletters that young people can either digest themselves or take home for their parents).

Overall Conclusions

37. Overall, the views expressed through the open consultation questionnaire differ considerably from those expressed in the deliberative forums with randomly selected members of the public: the former were largely opposed to the proposed merger of Bletchley and Great Holm Fire Stations into a Blue Light Emergency Services Hub, whereas the latter were broadly supportive. The reasons for the respective support and opposition have been documented earlier in this report, and so are not repeated in detail here; but it is interesting that many of the concerns noted by questionnaire respondents (longer response times to the West and North of Milton Keynes, traffic and congestion issues at the proposed West Ashland location, and new housing and population increases) were reviewed in the deliberative forums - but, there, people's concerns were allayed through questioning and discussion. For example, participants were reassured that:

Areas with potentially lengthier response times would be prioritised by B&MKFRS for prevention activity;

Appliances would be stationed away from the Hub on match days (much in the same way as the Ambulance Service operates currently); and

New housing represents very little additional risk insofar as it is built to a very safe standard.

As a result, following full discussion, some participants - particularly at the Great Holm session - said that although they had initially been opposed to the proposal (on the basis of what they had seen and heard prior to coming to the meeting) they had revised their views considerably.

38. More generally also, questionnaire responses differ from those in deliberative forums partly because:

Questions in questionnaires necessarily have to be simplified

It is impossible to offer the same level of information and explanation in consultation documents as in lengthy, thoughtful meetings

Compared with surveys of randomly selected people, open consultation questionnaires typically provide less representative results because they tend to be completed by more motivated respondents and are not distributed evenly across the whole population. For example, analysis of the 613 postcodes provided by respondents (a further 169 people declined to give this information) shows that almost a third of these responses (202) were received from the MK8 area around Great Holm Fire Station, which is likely to explain the strong support for retaining it. To put this into context, the next largest number of responses from a particular postcode area - MK4 - was 55.

39. Of course, none of the above points means that the findings of the open consultation questionnaire should be disregarded - for they show the opinions of important groups of people who were motivated to participate. But it must be borne in mind that the results are not necessarily representative of the whole population.
40. In any case, influencing public policy through consultation is not simply a 'numbers game' or 'popularity contest' in which the loudest voices or the greatest numbers automatically win the argument. Instead, consultation is to inform authorities of issues, arguments, implications they might have overlooked; to contribute to the re-evaluation of matters already known; or to reassess priorities and principles critically. However popular proposals might be, that does not itself mean they are feasible, safe, sustainable, reasonable and value-for-money; and unpopularity does not mean the reverse.
41. All of this means that interpreting the overall meaning of the consultation outcomes is neither straightforward nor just 'numerical', for the different consultation methods have not only to be respected and recognised, but also evaluated or assessed: they cannot be simply summated. In this context, ORS attaches particular weight to findings that are deliberative (based upon thoughtful reflective discussion in non-emotive forums for example); but, of course, as aforementioned the open questionnaire is also very important and should be recognised and taken into account as a reflection of strength of feeling in certain areas against this particular proposal.
42. While ORS makes the above assessments, there is no single 'right interpretation' of the consultation elements, for professional and political judgement is needed. Ultimately, an overall interpretation of the consultation will depend upon the Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority: they will consider all elements and determine which seem the most telling - above all, by considering the relative merits of the various opinions as the basis for the future of their Fire and Rescue Service.

Project Overview

Opinion Research Services

43. Opinion Research Services (ORS) is a generic social research company that works mainly for the public sector to conduct important applied research in health, housing, local government, police and fire and rescue services across the UK. The company was established in 1988 and has worked extensively with fire and rescue services (FRSs) across the UK since 1998. In 2004 it was appointed by the Fire Services Consultation Association (FSCA) as the sole approved provider of research and consultation services, under the terms of a National Framework Agreement. The same framework contract was retendered in 2009 and ORS was reappointed once more as the sole approved provider.
44. While working with FRSs across the UK, ORS has specialised in designing, implementing and reporting employee, stakeholder and public consultation programmes for a wide range of integrated risk management plans (IRMPs) - in many cases covering controversial and sensitive issues. In addition, ORS has extensive experience of statutory consultations about education, health and housing, and many other issues, including budgetary consultations.

The Commission

45. On the basis of its experience of numerous IRMP consultations, ORS was commissioned by Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire and Rescue Service (B&MKFRS) to undertake a consultation on the proposed merger of Bletchley and Great Holm Fire Stations into a Blue Light Emergency Services Hub. The consultation programme consisted of:
 - Designing, implementing, analysing and reporting an open online questionnaire (which was also available on paper on request); and
 - Recruiting, facilitating and reporting three forums in Milton Keynes (one for residents within the Bletchley Fire Station area, one for residents within the Great Holm Fire Station area and one for residents across Milton Keynes).
46. As well as giving general advice, ORS's primary role was to design, implement/facilitate, analyse and report both the open questionnaire and the various deliberative forums held in September 2015. We worked in collaboration with B&MKFRS to design the questionnaire and prepare informative stimulus material for the meetings before facilitating the discussions and preparing this independent report of findings.

B&MKFRS Consultation: Listening & Engagement

47. In 2013 and 2014, B&MKFRS and ORS undertook a 'pre-consultation' or 'listening and engagement' process to understand people's opinions and also 'test' some general principles before bringing forward this draft proposal for formal statutory consultation.
48. This staged approach to consultation conforms to the Gunning Principles (1985), which require that meaningful 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 - in this case even before draft proposals are formulated for formal consultation.

Consultation Methods

Open Questionnaire

49. The open questionnaire (with the accompanying Consultation Document) was available online between 14th September and 9th November 2015. 782 questionnaires were completed; 675 were complete and 107 incomplete. Though none were submitted by post, paper copies of the questionnaire were available on request. Please see Pages 19 and 20 in the following chapter for a full respondent profile.

Deliberative Forums

The Forums

50. The consultation forums - each of which lasted for 2.5 hours - took place in September 2015 and were intended to provide insights into public views about the aforementioned proposal to merge Bletchley and Great Holm Fire Stations into a Blue Light Emergency Services Hub. The point of these deliberative sessions was to allow B&MKFRS to engage with, and listen to, members of the public about some very important issues - so that the participants would become more informed about the fire and rescue service and be able to reflect in depth about its plans; but also so that discussions around people's views could inform the Service's future planning.
51. ORS's role was to recruit, design, facilitate and report the forums. 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.

Attendance and Representativeness

52. In total, there were 46 diverse participants at the forums. The dates of the meetings and attendance levels by members of the public were as follows:

AREA	TIME AND DATE	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES
Bletchley	6:30pm – 9:00pm Tuesday 15 th September 2015	12
Great Holm	6:30pm – 9:00pm Wednesday 16 th September 2015	19
Milton Keynes Wide	6:30pm – 9:00pm Thursday 17 th September 2014	15

53. The attendance target for the forums was to achieve at least 12 participants, 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	FORUMS
Gender	Male: 24 Female: 22
Age	16-34: 9 35-54: 16 55+: 21
Social Grade	AB: 11 C1: 19 C2: 7 DE: 9
Ethnicity	4 BME
Limiting Long-term Illness	6

54. ORS typically over-recruits for forums to compensate for last minute 'no shows': on this occasion 20 people were recruited to achieve upwards of 12 participants. While the overall drop-out rate was low, eight of the 14 'no-shows' were in the 16-34 age bracket which explains the lower overall numbers of younger people at the sessions. Furthermore, it should be noted that while only 12 of 20 recruits attended at Bletchley, the weather conditions on that evening were particularly poor, which may have deterred at least some of them.
55. 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 forums met were

readily accessible. People's special needs were taken into account in the recruitment and venue selection.

56. Although, like all other forms of qualitative consultation, forums cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the meetings reported here gave diverse groups of people from 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 proposal to merge of Bletchley and Great Holm Fire Stations into a Blue Light Emergency Services Hub.

Discussion Agenda

57. 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 and the role of prevention, protection and response

B&MKFRS's proposal to merge of Bletchley and Great Holm Fire Stations into a Blue Light Emergency Services Hub , especially in relation to:

The desirability of collaboration between 'blue light' services in principle;

The desirability of a new Hub station to co-locate Fire and Police services on a single site - both in principle and to replace Bletchley and Great Holm Fire Stations;

The suitability of the proposed location at West Ashland; and

The feasibility of including community facilities and resources at the proposed new Hub station.

58. 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.

Consultation Programme Proportional and Fair

59. B&MKFRS's consultation programme was conscientious, in the sense of being open, accessible and fair to members of the public and stakeholders across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes: the consultation was proportional to the importance of the issues and conforms with good practice - both in its scale and the balance of elements included, and also in the way in which it built upon earlier engagement and consultation exercises undertaken by the Service.

60. The key good practice requirements for proper consultation programmes are that they should:

Be conducted at a formative stage, before decisions are taken;

Allow sufficient time for people to participate and respond;

Provide the public and stakeholders with sufficient background information to allow them intelligently to consider the issues and any proposals intelligently and critically;
and

Be properly taken into consideration before decisions are finally taken.

Taken together, these four elements do much to ensure the 'accountability' of public authorities, particularly the fourth; but this does not mean that consultations are referenda.

61. **Properly understood, accountability means that public authorities should give an account of their plans and take into account public views: they should conduct fair and accessible consultation while reporting the outcomes openly and considering them fully.** This does not mean that the majority views expressed in consultations should automatically decide public policy, for consultations are not referenda, and the popularity or unpopularity of draft proposals should not displace professional and political judgement about what is the right or best decision in the circumstances. The levels of, and reasons for, public support or opposition are very important, but as considerations to be taken into account, not as decisive factors that necessarily determine authorities' decisions.

62. For the public bodies considering the outcomes of consultation, the key question is not *Which proposal has most support?* but, *Are the reasons for the popularity or unpopularity of the proposals cogent?* In this context, both B&MKFRS and ORS were clear that this important consultation programme should include both quantitative and deliberative elements in order to both:

Provide many people with the opportunity to take part via the open questionnaire routes; and

Promote informed engagement via the deliberative forums with members of the public.

63. Given people's general unawareness of how their fire and rescue services operate and manage their resources and costs, consultation with informed audiences - who have the opportunity to question and test the evidence for particular proposals - is especially valuable. All consultation elements are important and none should be disregarded, but the deliberative forums are particularly worthy of consideration because they explore the arguments and the reasons for people's opinions. There is no doubt that B&MKFRS's consultation programme conforms to good practice by including both quantitative and qualitative methods through which people could participate and as a means for the Authority to understand the reasons for people's opinions.

64. As well as providing the public and stakeholders with sufficient information to consider the proposals intelligently, B&MKFRS has also conducted its consultation in a timely manner and is

taking account of the outcomes before making a decision. Both the scale and nature of the programme compare well with similar consultations undertaken by other fire and rescue services and public bodies.

The Report

65. This report concisely reviews the sentiments and judgements of focus group participants about the aforementioned proposal. 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: Open Questionnaire

Introduction

66. The open questionnaire (with the accompanying Consultation Document) was available online between 14th September and 9th November 2015. 782 questionnaires were completed; 675 were complete and 107 incomplete. Though none were submitted by post, paper copies of the questionnaire were available on request.

Need for Interpretation

67. Although the open questionnaire is an important and accessible consultation route that is, by its very nature, open to all, it was not distributed systematically. As such, and because the respondent profile is an imperfect reflection of the Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes population, the following results have to be interpreted carefully.
68. Crucially, this does not mean that the open questionnaire findings should be discounted: they are analysed in detail in this report and must be taken into account as a demonstration of the strength of feeling of residents who were motivated to put forward their views (and in many cases concerns) about the proposed changes.

Respondent Profiles

69. The tables below and overleaf show the profile characteristics of respondents to the survey.

Table 1: Are you completing this form as...?

Are you completing this form as...?	Number of respondents (unweighted count)	% of respondents (unweighted valid)
A resident of Milton Keynes	578	85
A resident of Buckinghamshire	46	7
A resident from outside of Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes	13	2
A member of Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire & Rescue Service	15	2
A member of a partner organisation	2	*
A representative of a business	5	1
A representative of a public sector organisation	7	1
A representative of a community or voluntary organisation	6	1
Other	12	2
Not Known	98	-
Total	782	100

Table 2: Gender

Gender	Number of respondents (unweighted count)	% of respondents (unweighted valid)
Male	295	44
Female	378	56
Not Known	109	-
Total	782	100

Table 3: Age

Age	Number of respondents (unweighted count)	% of respondents (unweighted valid)
16-34	161	24
35-44	221	33
45-54	127	19
55 or over	157	24
Not Known	116	-
Total	782	100

Table 4: Health Problem/Disability

Health Problem/Disability	Number of respondents (unweighted count)	% of respondents (unweighted valid)
Yes	80	12
No	572	88
Not Known	130	-
Total	782	100

Table 5: Ethnic Group

Ethnic Group	Number of respondents (unweighted count)	% of respondents (unweighted valid)
White - British	591	97
Not White - British	18	3
Not Known	173	-
Total	782	100

Responses from organisations

70. Of the 684 responses to the 'Are you completing this form as...?' question, a total of 32 respondents said they were representing the views of organisations (though some of these organisations were repeated and some were actually local councillors) or 'other'. Figures 1 and 2 below detail those organisations.

Figure 1: Summary of organisations responding to the questionnaire (who gave their details) – 17 responses

Big Local Conniburrow.
 Dim 2 Dazzling window cleaning services.
 Gilbey's restaurant.
 Milton Keynes Councillor, responsible for Shenley Lodge, Shenley Brook End, Furzton and Emerson Valley.
 Milton Keynes Councillor.
 Leon Residents' Association and COBRA (Consortium of Bletchley Residents' Associations).
 Loughton and Great Holm Parish Council.
 Milton Keynes Council and Stony Stratford Town Council.
 Milton Keynes Pest Control.

New Bradwell Parish Council.
OC Cleaning Services.
Shenley Brook End and Tattenhoe Parish Council.
SVC Creative Ltd.
Thames Valley Police (2 responses).
Ward Councillor for Bletchley Park, Milton Keynes Council.
Ward Councillor for Milton Keynes Bletchley East.

Figure 2: Summary of 'other' respondents responding to the questionnaire (who gave their details) – 10 responses

A concerned neighbouring resident.
A previous member of Buckinghamshire FRS.
A resident who lived in Bletchley for many years but has just moved to an adjoining village.
As someone who has family in Milton Keynes.
Daughter of a retired station officer.
Firefighter in neighbouring county.
Former fireman.
Former resident of Milton Keynes.
Someone who works in Milton Keynes.
Very concerned citizen.

Interpretation of the Data

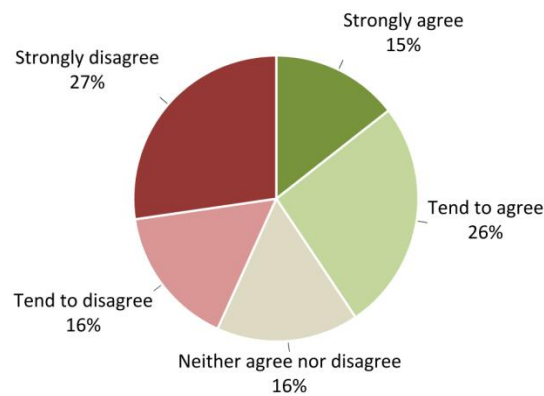
71. Where differences between demographic groups have been highlighted as significant there is a 95% probability that the difference is significant and not due to chance. Differences that are not said to be 'significant' or 'statistically significant' are indicative only. When comparing results between demographic sub-groups, on the whole, only results which are significantly different are highlighted in the text.
72. Graphics are used extensively in this report to make it as user friendly as possible. The pie charts and other graphics show the proportions (percentages) of residents making relevant responses. Where possible, the colours of the charts have been standardised with a 'traffic light' system in which:
 - Green shades represent positive responses;
 - Beige and purple/blue shades represent neither positive nor negative responses;
 - Red shades represent negative responses; and
 - The bolder shades are used to highlight responses at the 'extremes', for example, very satisfied or very dissatisfied.
73. Where percentages do not sum to 100, this may be due to computer rounding, the exclusion of "don't know" categories, or multiple answers.

Views on the Proposal

Do you agree or disagree that collaboration with other 'blue light' (i.e. emergency) services is a good idea in principle?

74. Similar proportions of respondents agreed (41%) and disagreed (43%) that collaboration with other 'blue light' (i.e. emergency) services is a good idea in principle.

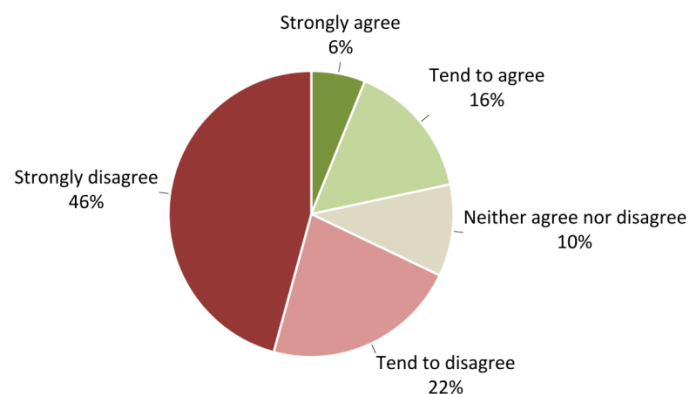
Figure 3: Do you agree or disagree that collaboration with other 'blue light' (i.e. emergency) services is a good idea in principle?
Base: All Respondents (779)



Do you agree or disagree that a new Hub station to co-locate Fire and Police services on a single site is a good idea in principle?

75. More than two thirds (68%) of respondents disagreed that a new Hub station to co-locate Fire and Police services on a single site is a good idea in principle. Less than a quarter (22%) of respondents agreed.

Figure 4: Do you agree or disagree that a new hub station to co-locate Fire and Police services on a single site is a good idea in principle?
Base: All Respondents (760)

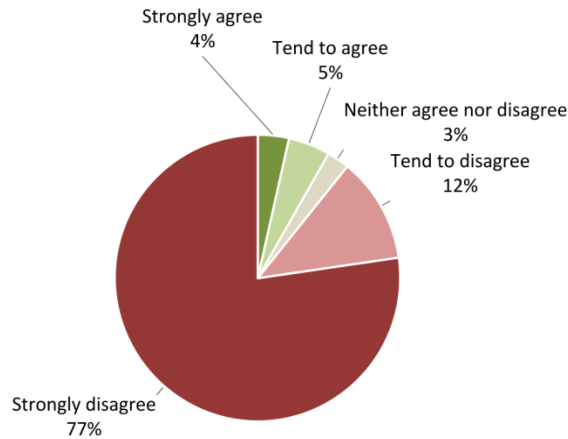


Do you agree or disagree with the proposal to replace the fire stations at Bletchley and Great Holm with a new Hub station?

- 76. Almost 9 in 10 respondents (89%) disagreed with the proposal to replace the fire stations at Bletchley and Great Holm with a new Hub station; only 8% agreed with this.

Figure 5: Do you agree or disagree with the proposal to replace the fire stations at Bletchley and Great Holm with a new Hub station?

Base: All Respondents (757)

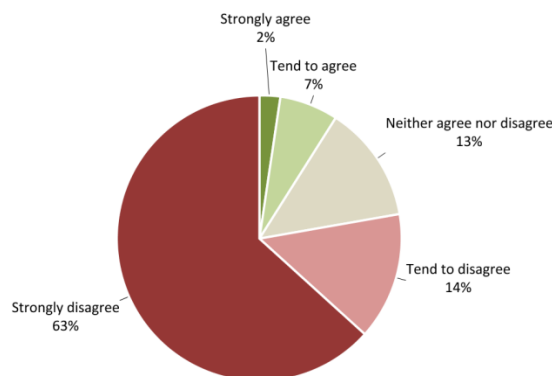


Do you agree or disagree that the proposed location at West Ashland is a suitable location for the proposed new Hub station?

- 77. More than three quarters (78%) of respondents disagreed that the proposed location at West Ashland is a suitable location for the proposed new Hub station; only 9% agreed with this.

Figure 6: Do you agree or disagree that the proposed location at West Ashland is a suitable location for the proposed new Hub station?

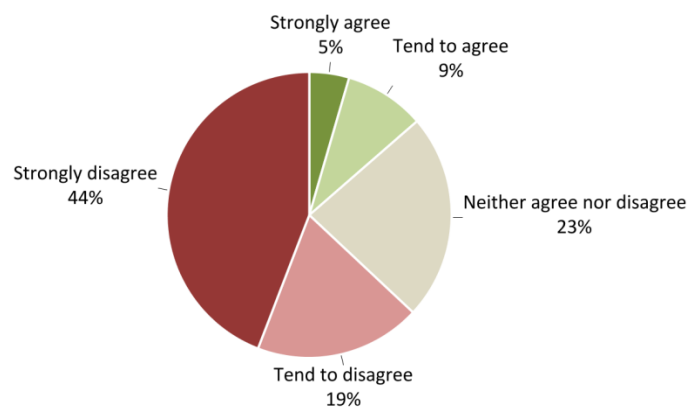
Base: All Respondents (750)



Do you agree or disagree that the proposal would help support redevelopment opportunities in the Bletchley/Sherwood Drive area by relocating the existing fire and police stations?

78. Just over three fifths (63%) of respondents disagreed that the proposal would help support redevelopment opportunities in the Bletchley/Sherwood Drive area by relocating the existing fire and police stations; only 14% agreed with this. Almost a quarter of respondents (23%) neither agreed nor disagreed.

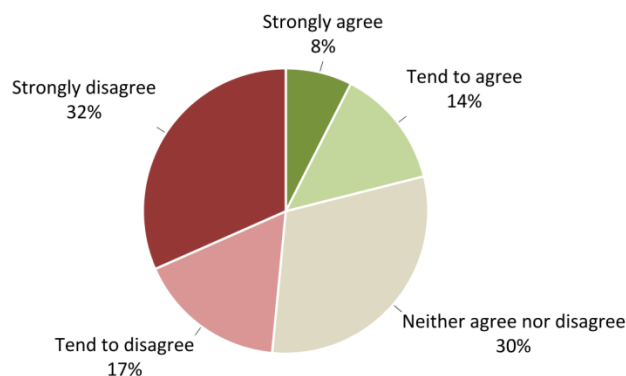
Figure 7: Do you agree or disagree that the proposal would help support redevelopment opportunities in the Bletchley/Sherwood Drive area by relocating the existing fire and police stations?
Base: All Respondents (747)



Do you agree or disagree with including community facilities and resources at the proposed new Hub station?

79. Just under half (49%) of respondents disagreed with including community facilities and resources at the proposed new Hub station; only 21% agreed with this. It is also worth noting that 3 in 10 respondents (30%) neither agreed nor disagreed with this.

Figure 8: Do you agree or disagree with including community facilities and resources at the proposed new Hub station?
Base: All Respondents (740)



If you agree, what types of public facilities should be included at the proposed Hub station?

80. The 21% of respondents who agreed with including community facilities and resources at the proposed new Hub station were asked what they would specifically want to have included at the site.
81. The most sought after facility at the new hub station was a community meeting room(s), with residents, members of B&MKFRS and other organisations stating that is something they would like to see provided. The provision of the following amenities were also of interest to respondents: information points such as Citizens Advice, drop-ins, an education centre and general fire safety advice; facilities for children such as a play area, crèche and learning centre; first aid training; library services; a café; and sports facilities.

Do the proposals have any positive or negative impacts on people with protected characteristics? If so, are you able to provide any evidence and suggest any ways in which B&MKA could reduce or remove potential negative impact and increase any positive impact?

82. Respondents who felt the proposals would impact people with “protected characteristics” were asked to explain which aspects may have a particular positive or negative impact and how they thought any negative impacts could be reduced and positive impacts enhanced.

Negative Impacts

83. Many respondents felt the changes would remove (or at least decrease) vital services such as fire cover and police and firefighter presence for people living in deprived areas - and also those who are vulnerable due to old age and/or disability. This, it was said, would place them at an even greater disadvantage. The comments made were as follows:

Absence of visible policing in a deprived area like Bletchley is asking for trouble. I use a wheelchair and was threatened by a middle-school aged child who demanded money with menace. Modernise the Bletchley facilities and don't reduce police there (Resident)

Great Holm fire station and especially Bletchley fire station are located close to some deprived areas in my opinion; where the stations currently are allows the firefighters to be seen by people in these areas and can be seen as positive role models (Resident)

There are many vulnerable people living in Great Holm who will be further from help if this merger goes ahead, especially MacIntyre residents and some sheltered or adapted housing residents (Resident)

Relocating the Bletchley Fire Station will have an adverse effect on the disabled and those on low incomes, due to the fact that the Bletchley station currently has excellent public transport links and keeps the fire station within access to these people. Moving it to West Ashland increases the distances required to travel from public transport links and therefore

disadvantages these groups from accessing the station. The Great Holm station is currently located on the edge of a housing estate. This gives easy access to people on this estate to the fire station. Relocating it to West Ashland, once again will disadvantage those with disabilities, the young and those on low incomes as they will no longer be able to travel the short distance to the station and would have to find other travel arrangement (Resident)

The fire service will not be able to provide a quick response to the north of Milton Keynes if the station at Great Holm is closed. This will have a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of those with disabilities and those who live in care homes, for example, the extra care village. It is of vital importance that, for the safety of the elderly and those with disabilities that response times are not extended by closing Great Holm and relocation further out towards the already overcrowded roads near the football stadium (Councillor for Shenley Lodge, Shenley Brook End, Furzton and Emerson Valley)

In theory, a person with a disability would take longer to rescue than an able bodied person; moving the station from the north to southern Milton Keynes is going to already potentially slow rescue times for those in the north, this will be exacerbated for those with disabilities in the north (Representative of New Bradwell Parish Council)

Longer response times to deal with old or disabled people in house fires is not acceptable, as appliances will need to travel further to the west of the city such as Stony Stratford & Wolverton. (Resident)

It will take longer for emergency services to get to some parts of the city, which will impact on everyone including people who have disabilities. It will affect how quickly appliances will be able to get to some care homes, which are all over the city, not just in one geographical location, so people in those care homes would be disadvantaged. I'm thinking in particular of those in the north, which would currently be served by Great Holm, it will take longer to reach the north of the city from Ashland than it currently does from Great Holm, putting people in the north at a disadvantage, and I would assume the same could be said of people currently served by the Bletchley station, that it will take longer to reach them from Ashland. (Resident)

Positive Impacts

84. Although most of the comments related to the perceived negative impacts of the proposals on people with protected characteristics, there were a handful of positive observations:

The purpose-built facility will be accessible to all groups (Resident)

Presumably a more modern site would be more accessible for visitors with mobility difficulties (Resident)

Purpose built access to all sections of the community for community areas. (Unspecified)

Are there any other comments you would like to make about the changes we are considering?

85. 429 respondents submitted additional comments in relation to the proposed changes. The table and commentary below thematically summarise these comments.

Table 6: Are there any other comments you would like to make about the changes we are considering?

Theme	Count
Proposed changes will result in longer response times due to the proposed location at West Ashland and the additional distance from many areas	124
Keep the two stations where they are	114
Do not close Great Holm station as it covers a large population and is in a good location	105
Growing population and housing development means provisions should be increased in these areas	95
Proposed changes will mean the lives of people in the area will be at risk	81
Alternative proposal provided	55
Need to retain and upgrade current facilities i.e. invest in existing stations	48
General disagreement with proposals	41
Disagree with location of proposed new station due to perceived traffic problems	37
Proposals are financially motivated	25
Do not close Bletchley station as it covers a large population and is in a good location	24
Agree with collaboration with other 'blue light' services but not at the expense of the two stations	17
Proposed changes leave the North and West of Milton Keynes vulnerable	16
General agreement with proposals	8
Other	141

Opposition to the Proposal

Proposed Location at West Ashland

86. The largest proportion of respondents who made further comments were opposed to the proposal because of the suggested 'southern' location of the Hub at West Ashland. They were of the view that locating the station here would not allow B&MKFRS to sufficiently cover areas in the North and West of Milton Keynes (particularly Stony Stratford, Wolverton and Deanshanger); and that any additional distance will lead to a significant increase in response times and compromised public safety in these areas:

The closing of Great Holm Station will put the people of Stony Stratford and Wolverton at a great risk (Member of B&MKFRS)

I feel that this leaves the North West of Milton Keynes including Stony Stratford and Wolverton very vulnerable, as West Ashland is too far south to cover the area previously covered by Great Holm. Although you state that appliances will be out and about and called by the nearest GPS this wouldn't follow at night (Representative of Shenley Brook End and Tattenhoe Parish Council)

Consolidating the services reduces the cover of major areas of Milton Keynes currently protected, which reduces response times to these areas. The services need to be spread more evenly to provide adequate cover for all areas (Resident)

A fire engine needs to be available for the people of Stony Stratford. All your proposed resources will be miles away. What will happen if Ashlands are on another call and Newport and Broughton are on the M1? Disgusting proposal. People including children will die if you let this happen. Years ago my family (who are blind!) were led out of a house fire by firefighters from Great Holm with seconds to spare. If this was to happen in the future I dread to think the outcome! (Resident)

I live in Deanshanger, which is currently covered by the Great Holm station, and comfortably within the 10 minute response target. With the location of the new station, my home is on the border of the 10 minute response boundary, and much of the village of Deanshanger is outside the 10 minute response boundary. My fellow citizens who live in Wicken are even worse off under the proposals; they are currently also within the 10 minute boundary, but are well outside the 10 minute boundary from the proposed location. I am disappointed to see that the residents to the North and West, and in particular the outlying villages, appear to have been overlooked, as there is no mention at all of any mitigation, nor do these locations appear to have been taken into account when proposing to move the Great Holm station four miles towards the South East. (Resident)

87. Another apparent issue with locating a new Hub at West Ashland is the impact of traffic congestion around the area due to its close proximity to Stadium MK and a busy shopping area. This again raised major concerns about response times and public safety:

I don't feel the proposal takes account of the heavy traffic that can be found around West Ashland and the A5 roundabout when there are events on at Milton Keynes Stadium. I've visited a popular event at the stadium before and been caught at the roundabout alone for 30+ minutes. Although emergency vehicles will likely be able to make better progress than a private car, it is still inevitable that such heavy gridlocked traffic will cause serious problems for emergency vehicles trying to get onto the A5 or into Bletchley. For this reason alone, I don't think the proposed site at West Ashland is suitable for an emergency response base (Resident)

Response times will be slower, especially on match days at the stadium... (Resident)

Do you think it's safe and practical to try and get fire units through Ashlands roundabout in rush hour? These are our homes and our families at risk and shouldn't be a penny pinching exercise, aren't our lives worth more? (Resident)

Locating near a busy shopping and sports facility will increase response times further. (Resident)

Housing Expansion and Population Increases

88. The increasing number of housing developments throughout Milton Keynes, especially in the West, is also a key factor in respondents' opposition to the proposed Hub station. Many suggested that increasing demand from continuing population increases coupled with relocating the two stations would have a negative impact on fire cover, response times and safety:

I am wholly opposed to the closure of Great Holm Fire Station. As a resident in and councillor for Stony Stratford, I believe this will place our community at greater risk. It also ignores the growth in the west of the city (Representative of Milton Keynes Council and Stony Stratford Town Council)

It seems crazy to move the Great Holm Fire Station away just as a major expansion just up the road (the west flank) is about to start. Whatever the reassurances offered the response times for residents in the immediate area are bound to increase (Representative of Loughton and Great Holm Parish Council)

I cannot support the proposals as the proposal to close Great Holm and merge into the Ashland site doesn't stack up. The consultation is not clear if and how it has considered the western expansion area, which has outlined planning permission for 6,000 homes and is (finally) being developed. This is in terms not just of coverage of properties but also the impact that it will have on the surrounding road network. Modelling response times on current traffic levels and patterns is not appropriate for a long-term strategy (Ward Councillor for Bletchley Park, Milton Keynes Council)

As Milton Keynes is expanding these emergency services are even more vital than ever, we should be improving the services, not reducing them! (Resident)

Backward and short-sighted move when Milton Keynes has been rapidly expanding for years, and the Milton Keynes plan identifies tens of thousands of new houses. These could be placed in rural areas such as Hanslope, Stony Stratford, Olney and South of Bletchley (Resident)

Milton Keynes is getting bigger and bigger and a new estate is being built between Stony and Crown Hill; closing Great Holm is just plain dangerous! Risking the lives of everyone this side of Milton Keynes (Resident)

There is no mention of the large growth in population in the area to the south-west of Watling Street between Danstead Way and Ridgeway. This area will increase demand and be further from a fire station. (Resident)

Other Options and Suggestions

Retain the Status Quo

89. Many respondents (including members of B&MKFRS) urged B&MKFA to retain the status quo, suggesting that the proposal is simply a cost-cutting exercise that will put people's lives at risk. In fact, some people suggested that the existing stations should be upgraded and invested in instead:

Keep existing sites and invest in them. Make them more energy efficient and more accessible to the public. Bletchley is a big site, invest in training facilities there. Bletchley had a refurb not so many years ago, making it more energy efficient, new heating new windows etc. So why is it now not energy efficient? It has a massive flat roof so why not fit solar panels? Great Holm has a newish training facility, just spent £50k on a new ceiling in bays to make it more energy efficient, invested in new windows, heating etc. There is lots of wasted space. Adapt the site to suit the needs of a growing Milton Keynes (Member of B&MKFRS)

Leave the fire stations where they are and put money into them for refurbishment. That way, morale within the watches would be improved and less disruption to services provided for the area of Milton Keynes. It will cost people their homes and lives if the merger happens. I work in Buckingham and the cover there for both fire and police is low at the moment, with an understanding that it will decrease again for fire if changes are made. Money should be put into the existing stations like Great holm, Bletchley and Buckingham alike (Member of BMKFRS)

You need to admit that you're more interested in Bletchley Station's land value than public safety! My house is in the race courses, our turn out time will be increased by vital precious minutes which is unacceptable. If the result of this merger is that one of my family members was to suffer just for financial reasons then the proposal is poor. You need to be honest with yourselves. It's easy to see Milton Keynes is expanding and a central cheap station isn't the answer. Great Holm has had investment with meeting rooms, offices, smoke chamber, new heating system, etc.! (Resident)

90. It should be noted that there was a great deal of support for Great Holm Fire Station, with many citing its good location and coverage as reasons for maintaining services there. This was also the case for Bletchley (although support was on a smaller scale than that shown for Great Holm):

Great Holm Fire Station is strategically placed for quick access to northern Milton Keynes and the very large development taking place on the western flank of Milton Keynes (Resident)

The Great Holm Fire Station is ideally located to serve the new western flank, Stony Stratford, Colverton & The Centre:MK shopping building offices & railway station (Resident)

I agree Bletchley Station is outdated and needs changing but location-wise it's ideal and I don't see how you can argue this point. It's central to vulnerable areas such as the Lakes Estate, close to West Bletchley, ideal for the new stadium and surrounding network and close enough to Newton Leys and the accident prone bypass. (Resident)

Introduce a 'Blue-Light Hub' and Maintain Current Services at Bletchley and Great Holm Fire Stations

91. Some respondents felt that while collaboration with other 'blue light' (i.e. emergency) services in the form of a new Hub station is a good idea, it should be provided in addition to the two existing fire stations at Bletchley and Great Holm. This, it was said, would ensure the provision of sufficient coverage across Milton Keynes (which is increasing in size):

As a rapidly growing city, would it not make more sense to keep Great Holm open and also build a new station at the proposed site, creating more jobs and more importantly, a safer city as response times would be even better (Resident)

If you want to combine blue light services, do so with the existing fire stations. Do not make my call out time longer than it already is should I require the fire services. I believe the police are now stationed at Broughton fire station... And they do not communicate between the two services; they just exist alongside each other. So it has not benefitted the services in anyway by now being 'next to each other'. (Resident)

Retain Great Holm Fire Station (perhaps on a smaller scale) but relocate Bletchley Fire Station

92. Other responses alternatively suggested that Great Holm Fire Station should be retained at its current location, with only Bletchley being relocated to a Blue Light Hub in West Ashland:

The closing of Great Holm Station will put the people of Stony Stratford and Wolverton at a great risk. Keep Great Holm station where it is and find a better place to relocate Bletchley (Member of B&MKFRS)

A new blue light hub is a good idea but a single fire station for west Milton Keynes would undoubtedly increase travel times for fire appliances. Maybe the blue light hub should be built in Bletchley leaving Great Holm where it is (Member of B&MKFRS)

Close Bletchley which will be well served by Ashland. Keep Great Holm to ensure response times of much of Milton Keynes western flank remain under 5 minutes. This will balance use of Broughton for Milton Keynes eastern flank. (Resident)

93. Furthermore, some B&MKFRS staff members suggested that, if a new Hub Station is to be established at West Ashland, Great Holm Fire Station should be retained as a 'satellite' on-call station to provide coverage to areas in the North and West of Milton Keynes:

If closing Great Holm we should have a small station for a retained pump to be parked at so the retain crew who live in that area can give a rapid response. As having to respond to Ashlands from the Great Holm area and back towards great holm is an unnecessary journey (Member of B&MKFRS)

Keep Great Holm station as an on-call station to give better support and sense of safety to the surrounding residents (Member of B&MKFRS)

Maintain a much smaller site in the vicinity of Great Holm fire station, preferably on a commercial estate, as a joint on-call/satellite station for Great Holm's on-call to respond to. No need for drill yard/tower, just basic facilities for responding to incidents. (Member of B&MKFRS)

Re-locate Newport Pagnell Fire Station

94. A few respondents commented that it would be more sensible to re-locate or reduce services at Newport Pagnell Fire Station due to its low level of call outs and the provision of additional cover from Onley and Broughton:

After looking at the amount of call outs on the week commencing 25 October 2015 it appears that Newport Pagnell Fire Station does the least amount of work; they has 4 actual incident callouts and 4 false alarms. I believe that this area should be seriously looked at and Newport closed rather than Great Holm (Resident)

With the greatest expansion in Milton Keynes why isn't Newport Pagnell reduced to day crewing as Olney and Broughton are still close by? (Resident)

Other Alternative Suggestions

95. Additional alternative suggestions put forward by residents, councillors and B&MKFRS staff members are outlined below:

Retain Great Holm and Bletchley and make Great Holm your proposed 'blue hub'. There is absolutely no need to build a new station at Ashlands (Councillor for Shenley Lodge, Shenley Brook End, Furzton and Emerson Valley)

A better location (for the hub site) might be the land off Portway roundabout bounded by the A5, Portway, the West Coast main line and the redway between Loughton and the train station (Resident)

Redevelop Sherwood Drive and combine the savings between Thames Valley Police and SCAS (South Central Ambulance NHS Trust) into one blue light hub and leave Great Holm alone (Resident)

Make Bletchley and Great Holm blue light hubs at existing locations. (A representative of a public sector organisation)

Support for the Proposal

96. Though minimal, there was some support for at least some elements of the proposed changes, as the following comments demonstrate:

I understand updating Bletchley. God knows it needs it. Moving the police station is a good idea too. I have no problem with that. The way Milton Keynes is growing we need updating over that side of the city. (Representative of Big Local Conniburrow)

As long as a blue light turns up quickly when I need it, when my neighbour needs it and his neighbour etc. then I have to presume that you're doing the right thing. I realise that house fire emergencies seem to be dropping, whilst RTCs are probably increasing, but response times with the correct equipment and personnel, are vital. (Resident)

97. Furthermore, while one respondent was very much in favour of blue light collaboration, they felt that involving the Police may be detrimental in the sense that negative public perceptions of this organisation may impact on the Fire and Rescue Service's ability to engage with certain sectors of the community:

Combining facilities for blue light services sounds great and would certainly work with the ambulance service, providing better training facilities in each other's roles. Including the

police, which will have limited training advantages, would detract from the independence from the legal system that allows the fire service access to people that are sometimes the most vulnerable in our society (Resident)

Other Comments

98. Some 'other' comments referred to: security issues in relation to including community facilities within a Hub station; the lack of evidence underpinning the proposal; the logistics of how Bletchley and Great Holm on-call staff will be able to respond to a new station in West Ashland in the required timeframe; whether the demands of cross-border support (to Northamptonshire for example) has been considered; the possibility of appliance reductions in future; plans for the existing sites; and a lack of evidence that the proposed change represents a significant improvement over the current situation:

As a member of Thames Valley Police, having community facilities at the blue-light hub would pose a huge security issue especially in the current climate... (Member of Partner Organisation)

It is suggested that there is to be a blue light centre but there is no information as to whether either the police or ambulance service support this, and how it would affect their provision of services and their locations. A joined up service is a good idea but this proposal has no evidence to support it and has been added merely to add weight (Resident)

I would like to know how your on call staff at both stations will be able to respond from home within a set time limit without affecting attendance times? (Member of B&MKFRS)

No mention is made of the increased times appliances will be unavailable when assisting Northamptonshire Fire Service in the areas in the south of that county due to greater distances. No mention is made of the loss of on-call firefighters that live near Great Holm or Bletchley Fire Station and will not be able to respond to a new location (Resident)

As firefighters' community fire safety activities continue to reduce the numbers of fires and as government cuts to local authority budgets increase, there will come a time when some people ask why are there five fire appliances at west Ashland (presuming the three at great holm and the two at Bletchley all transfer to the new station). There may be pressure on the FRS to reduce the number of appliances and firefighters (Resident)

For the Great Holm site there doesn't appear to be an 'exit strategy'. A lot of further work would need to be done if it is decided to vacate the site to identify what is to be done next with the site. I urge you to work with the local community on this ward (Councillor for Bletchley Park, Milton Keynes Council)

It is not clear that the proposal represents a good use of valuable public money and will provide a significant advantage over the current situation. The plan also suggests that the new fire station could accommodate fewer engines than the pictures of Bletchley and Great Holm suggests. Whilst there are maps showing the 5 and 10 minute journey areas, there is no indication of the extent of the area currently covered by the services. (Resident)

Consultation Findings: Public Forums

Introduction

99. Overall, the three public forums considered a range of important issues associated with the proposed merger of Bletchley and Great Holm Fire Stations 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 three meetings have been merged to give an overall report of findings, rather than three separate and potentially repetitive mini-reports – but significant differences in views have been drawn out where appropriate.
100. During the presentations of the proposals and throughout the three sessions, participants asked a number of detailed questions for clarification and these were in the main addressed by the fire officers attending. The findings below focus not on these questions but the opinions directly relating to the specific proposal. At the end of each session, participants were asked to present their overall opinion in order to gain an impression of the level of support or opposition to the proposed merger in each area.

Views on the Proposal

Blue Light Collaboration in Principle

101. Most participants were very positive about the principle of collaboration between the three emergency services: they felt this would yield improved, more effective working relationships as a result of easier communication and sharing of knowledge and best practice. Some typical comments were:

(A benefit would be) sharing best practice (Bletchley)

It will be easier for them to work together and will enable a more effective and co-ordinated approach. It will also allow the sharing of knowledge and building of relationships (Great Holm)

The experience of the staff from the different organisations will bring about the cross-fertilisation of ideas (Great Holm)

It will be much easier to develop shared learning and knowledge (Great Holm)

We agree with the principle because it will mean better interaction between all the services and a more 'complete' service for the community. (Milton Keynes Wide)

It would consolidate all resources and develop better communication between services.
(Milton Keynes Wide)

A 'Blue Light Hub'?

102. The idea of a Blue Light Emergency Services Hub was generally welcomed in principle - and indeed in practice when considering the proposal to develop such a facility to replace Bletchley and Great Holm Fire Stations. Indeed, it was clear that informed opinion (expressed after the presentation and the question and answer session) inclined significantly in favour of the proposal on the grounds that it would enable the aforementioned collaboration between emergency services; and that:

A joint, modern facility would ensure reduced overheads and increased efficiencies

It would cost less and be more efficient...it's got to be cheaper running one station than two
(Bletchley)

We think it's a good idea because it's cost-effective to provide services from a new building... (Great Holm)

It's a good idea ... there will be cost reductions in terms of overheads and efficiency in terms of shared resources (Great Holm)

There will be the cost-effectiveness of one building for multiple services and more efficient running costs (Milton Keynes Wide)

There would be more shared cost savings with two or more services. (Milton Keynes Wide)

It is based on sound risk analysis and will improve response times overall

I think it's a great idea; I think your response times will be better (Bletchley)

It sounds like the analysis has been very thoroughly done (Bletchley)

It is forward-thinking and logical from a financial perspective (and any savings will be re-invested into the Service)

Strategically it does sound like a financially sensible option...they say they're going to reinvest so I can't see any major negatives at all (Bletchley)

You've got to move forward. the two stations are getting old; they've got to be replaced sometime, so why not now? (Bletchley)

There will be no firefighter redundancies

I'm positive. I think my biggest preconception coming here was that it was a merger of two sites which meant job losses but as this is actually keeping the same levels of staff... And you're actually saving money that's being reinvested again...for the general population I think it's a great idea. (Bletchley)

It will prove safer from a road user perspective

It's got to be safer for fire engine and car drivers and pedestrians if you're in an industrial area that's close to a main trunk road and dual carriageway (Milton Keynes Wide)

It will ultimately 'safeguard the future of the fire service in Milton Keynes'

I think it's a once in a lifetime opportunity to get a plot of that size and location that's not going to cost anything; and it's going to safeguard the future of the fire service of Milton Keynes. (Bletchley)

103. Nevertheless, this is not to say there were no concerns about the proposed change - for example, some participants at Great Holm were initially concerned that a station merger could be used as a means to justify further reductions to emergency service budgets, and several others approved the proposal only on the proviso that any savings are re-invested into the Fire and Rescue Service:

Will it be used as an excuse to reduce budgets because it's on one site rather than multiple sites? (Great Holm)

We are concerned about budgets being further reduced due to co-location (Great Holm)

We agree there should be a Hub station as long as the investment is put towards future fire services for the town (Milton Keynes Wide)

As long as you're reinvesting back into the service and into this area instead of it going back to central Government (Bletchley)

I don't have any problem with what you're planning but if those sites are sold off can we have guarantees that that money will be re-invested in the level of service and the increase in service to cover the new builds? (Milton Keynes Wide)

104. A few people highlighted other concerns and disadvantages, including that: co-locating vital services on one site could leave them all vulnerable in the event of power cuts or other service disruptions; the working practices of the different organisations may not be entirely compatible; and that co-location could result in the sometimes negative perception members of the public have of the Police detrimentally impacting upon the generally well-regarded Fire and Ambulance Services:

If you have all of your eggs in one basket, the risk of service interruption increases (Great Holm)

If something went wrong like power loss etc. it would affect everyone (Milton Keynes Wide)

Individual working procedure differences between organisations may cause barriers. (Milton Keynes Wide)

The perceptions of a joint service may be altered for people who have poor feelings towards the Police. (Milton Keynes Wide)

105. Importantly also, even after discussion and clarification, there were lingering concerns at Great Holm around response times to the West of Milton Keynes (discussed in more detail in paragraph

109 overleaf) and at Bletchley around the perception of ‘reducing’ services at a time of population increases:

I think on an objective basis it's fair to say yes we can see the logic but there are some subjective feelings and some quite strong held ones as well that the North West side of Milton Keynes is being if not abandoned then put into second place (Great Holm)

I'm 50/50. I can understand the financial side of it but I can't understand with the population that's still growing why we're combining the fire stations. (Bletchley)

106. Furthermore, some participants at the Milton Keynes Wide Forum, while accepting the reasoning behind the proposal themselves, acknowledged that there may be ‘another side of the story’; that is, that the views of firefighters may be somewhat different:

We're in agreement because the reasons given made sense. Our only caveat would be that other people might have very different ideas. We're only working on what we've been told... (Milton Keynes Wide)

Are the firefighters on board with the proposals? (Milton Keynes Wide)

This was not necessarily an issue, more an expression of interest in what the ‘boots on the ground’ feel about the possible changes.

Location

107. Opinions on the proposed location for the Blue Light Hub were mixed. A majority of participants (and especially those at Bletchley and in the Milton Keynes Wide Forum) were in favour - and some highly positive - about the West Ashland site, primarily given its proximity to local road networks and the accessibility this would afford:

I think it's better situated for access (Bletchley)

I can't see any objections. I think the response time will be even better... (Bletchley)

I like the way it's near the exits on to the A421 and the A5 - the two main roads through Milton Keynes - and I'm sure the response times will quicken in some respects (Bletchley)

It seems to be a good place to site the station. It has good access to the dual carriageways and less local traffic for the fire engines when on a call (Milton Keynes Wide)

My first reaction is that's brilliant. I think the A5 is an ideal site for access to town and response times. (Milton Keynes Wide)

108. Furthermore, explanations of B&MKFRS's Automatic Vehicle Location System (which is now used to identify the nearest fire engine to an incident for the quickest response) was reassuring for many, who understood that fire station locations are no longer as important as they once were - especially given the frequency with which firefighters are out in the community undertaking prevention and education work:

I am extremely positive about it. This is great and I'm reassured because I thought they were all sitting at the same station but they're not; they're out and about. (Bletchley)

We see a fire station and that is a great part of what the Fire Service is about...but your point quite rightly from your risk modelling is that location is a secondary consideration. It's the technology and having people out on the road all the time... (Great Holm)

However, it was said that this particular point would not be well-understood by the general public, which presents a particular challenge in terms of information dissemination and reassurance.

109. Despite the positivity reported above, many participants expressed concern about the proposed location - particularly those from Great Holm who felt that siting the Hub in West Ashland might adversely affect coverage for the (expanding) North and West of Milton Keynes:

Great Holm was built to service the North of Milton Keynes. This proposal seems to contradict the initial purpose of Great Holm Fire Station (Great Holm)

What about the impact on Beanhill residents? (Great Holm)

It's Bletchley-centric. What about Stony Stratford and the western expansion? (Great Holm)

We are a bit concerned about response times to the West and North West of Milton Keynes, especially with the western expansion (Great Holm)

There is a thirty or fifty year master plan for Milton Keynes. Has that been built into the model? (Great Holm)

Indeed, even participants in the other two forums questioned whether the town's forthcoming westward expansion has been fully considered by the Fire and Rescue Service in developing a future-proofed proposal:

It's an expanding city. You've got Newton Leys; you've got Stony Stratford ... (Bletchley)

There's a lot of development going on in the West and a lot along the A5 going up from Crown Hill...five, six thousand new homes going up. I see at least two fire engines daily and I'm just a little bit concerned with that area of Milton Keynes being expanded how that's going to impact on your moving (Bletchley)

They're building hundreds of houses north of Great Holm station; they're making complete new estates and it's spreading out West so they're going to be taking longer to cover. It seems to me that you're taking it more to the commercial district; away from the home owners who are more likely to have problems (Milton Keynes Wide)

Does this option provide a future-proofed plan in relation to the changing logistics and plans for Milton Keynes. Does the Council work with the Fire Service? (Milton Keynes Wide)

110. The fact the proposed location is near to Stadium MK and a busy shopping area was also thought to be potentially problematic owing to congestion during rush hour and on match days. In addition, this traffic congestion has been exacerbated, according to some participants, by nearby new housing developments (though the layout of the A5 roundabout has apparently improved the situation somewhat):

We're worried about access during match days and the area is surrounded by busy shops, restaurants and a cinema area. It's a very busy area for traffic. Is there a better location? (Great Holm)

It's an ideal location close to town and response times...the only thing we thought was around shift systems and the football stadium (Milton Keynes Wide)

There is a question over the location of the new site due to congestion and proximity to the stadium...shift changes would be at the time of congestion on match days (Great Holm)

A concern of mine is the Standing Way; at around half past five in the evening it is horrendous. (Bletchley)

111. In order to mitigate against these issues, one participant questioned: *could there be an alternative emergency services exit onto the A5 roundabout or maybe put traffic lights to stop traffic when an emergency vehicle needs to leave?* (Great Holm)

Community Facilities

112. A majority of participants was in favour of including community facilities on the Hub site, primarily as this would assist in: increasing the provision of educational prevention programmes offered; widening the availability of community meeting space across Milton Keynes; and improving relations between the emergency services and the public:

The more education the better. The use of facilities by communities will promote better relationships with younger generations (Great Holm)

As a teacher, we run a public services course at our school. I assume we would be able to come in and I feel that would be a very positive side of things (Bletchley)

It's not that easy to find meeting rooms for occasional use (Milton Keynes Wide)

Community facilities will improve prevention activity and build relationships with the local community (Great Holm)

This would improve community links, especially with the Police. (Milton Keynes Wide)

Indeed, one person at Great Holm said that: *'you should make more of this because I think it's quite a good argument for the proposal'*. (Great Holm)

113. Several people offered suggestions about particular groups that might be interested or on how to manage the site for community use as below:

Any local groups could use it...sports, brownies, guides. St John's Ambulance and first aid courses could be held there as well as Duke of Edinburgh (Great Holm)

It's a great idea...it could be used for scouts, brownies, ATC, cubs, first aid, educational trips for schools (Great Holm)

Education facility, public awareness facility, a hot training facility, an upgrade to the safety centre at Hill Farm (Milton Keynes Wide)

It could be an educational facility, have public awareness facilities and some fitness provision (Milton Keynes Wide)

The car park could be laid out for road safety education for cyclists and learner drivers (Milton Keynes Wide)

You could use the space to potentially raise income through business opportunities. (Bletchley)

114. Despite the general positivity though, a few participants at the Milton Keynes Wide Forum were concerned about: increasing traffic congestion by encouraging high public access to the site; and that the Hub could prove to be competition for existing community facilities. Indeed, in relation to the latter point, one person suggested that savings could be made from not building community provision on-site at all given the already adequate provision across the town (though this was clearly a minority view):

You're going to have to get people to come out to you to use community facilities; you're creating more traffic around an area (Milton Keynes)

Would this add more traffic into the area? (Milton Keynes Wide)

Milton Keynes's development is all based around its communities so would you be creating a facility that's in competition with the infrastructure in communities (e.g. church halls) which people have spent the time and effort to build up? (Milton Keynes Wide)

If they could show a saving by not building community facilities that would be good as facilities are currently adequate. (Milton Keynes Wide)

115. Furthermore, a few participants said that the location of the proposed hub is some distance from Milton Keynes's main communities and, thereby, relatively inconvenient for community use

There aren't any homes. You're going on an industrial area which is not the easiest to get to. (Bletchley)

Others, though, disagreed and felt West Ashland is accessible enough to enable people from across the town to use the facility.

116. Finally, some others questioned whether co-locating police stations and community facilities could present a security risk for members of the public:

Could it be a problem having prisoners in a fire station? (Great Holm)

I'm not sure how this would work with the security aspect of the police part of the station if it was in the same building. (Milton Keynes Wide)

Getting the Message Across

117. Several participants said that the information presented during the forums had been reassuring in allaying the concerns and dispelling the preconceptions they had about the proposal prior to coming along:

There was a couple of us that came along here with some negativity but after listening we think it's a good idea... (Great Holm)

I had mixed thoughts before I came here but now it's been explained I'm totally supportive of it (Bletchley)

I thought it would be a money saving exercise and I'm sure that in certain areas it will be, there's nothing wrong with that, but my view has changed...we're losing Great Holm fire station but looking at this overall it's going to be a better picture. (Great Holm)

However, they acknowledged that only relatively small groups of people have had the benefit of receiving these detailed explanations of the proposal and its reasoning, and that it will be somewhat more difficult to reassure those amongst the general public with such concerns and preconceptions. In order to have the best chance of doing this, participants suggested the following ways and avenues of disseminating information within communities:

Using local media, social media, newspapers and billboards around Milton Keynes;

Direct mailing;

Fire station open days and exhibitions;

Information and exhibitions at locations such as libraries, shopping centre, train stations and Middleton Hall;

Visiting Resident's Associations; and

Visiting schools to give talks (or asking them to distribute newsletters that young people can either digest themselves or take home for their parents).

Overall Considerations

Towards a Conclusion

118. Overall, the views expressed through the open consultation questionnaire differ considerably from those expressed in the deliberative forums with randomly selected members of the public: the former were largely opposed to the proposed merger of Bletchley and Great Holm Fire Stations into a Blue Light Emergency Services Hub, whereas the latter were broadly supportive. The reasons for the respective support and opposition have been documented earlier in this report, and so are not repeated in detail here; but it is interesting that many of the concerns noted by questionnaire respondents (longer response times to the West and North of Milton Keynes, traffic and congestion issues at the proposed West Ashland location, and new housing and population increases) were reviewed in the deliberative forums - but, there, people's concerns were allayed through questioning and discussion. For example, participants were reassured that:

Areas with potentially lengthier response times would be prioritised by B&MKFRS for prevention activity;

Appliances would be stationed away from the Hub on match days (much in the same way as the Ambulance Service operates currently); and

New housing represents very little additional risk insofar as it is built to a very safe standard.

As a result, following full discussion, some participants - particularly at the Great Holm session - said that although they had initially been opposed to the proposal (on the basis of what they had seen and heard prior to coming to the meeting) they had revised their views considerably.

119. More generally also, questionnaire responses differ from those in deliberative forums partly because:

Questions in questionnaires necessarily have to be simplified

It is impossible to offer the same level of information and explanation in consultation documents as in lengthy, thoughtful meetings

Compared with surveys of randomly selected people, open consultation questionnaires typically provide less representative results because they tend to be completed by more motivated respondents and are not distributed evenly across the whole population. For example, analysis of the 613 postcodes provided by respondents (a further 169 people declined to give this information) shows that almost a third of these responses (202) were received from the MK8 area around Great Holm Fire Station, which is likely to explain the strong support for retaining it. To put this into context, the next largest number of responses from a particular postcode area - MK4 - was 55.

120. Of course, none of the above points means that the findings of the open consultation questionnaire should be disregarded - for they show the opinions of important groups of people who were motivated to participate. But it must be borne in mind that the results are not necessarily representative of the whole population.
121. In any case, influencing public policy through consultation is not simply a 'numbers game' or 'popularity contest' in which the loudest voices or the greatest numbers automatically win the argument. Instead, consultation is to inform authorities of issues, arguments, implications they might have overlooked; to contribute to the re-evaluation of matters already known; or to reassess priorities and principles critically. However popular proposals might be, that does not itself mean they are feasible, safe, sustainable, reasonable and value-for-money; and unpopularity does not mean the reverse.
122. All of this means that interpreting the overall meaning of the consultation outcomes is neither straightforward nor just 'numerical', for the different consultation methods have not only to be respected and recognised, but also evaluated or assessed: they cannot be simply summated. In this context, ORS attaches particular weight to findings that are deliberative (based upon thoughtful reflective discussion in non-emotive forums for example); but, of course, as aforementioned the open questionnaire is also very important and should be recognised and taken into account as a reflection of strength of feeling in certain areas against this particular proposal.
123. While ORS makes the above assessments, there is no single 'right interpretation' of the consultation elements, for professional and political judgement is needed. Ultimately, an overall interpretation of the consultation will depend upon the Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority: they will consider all elements and determine which seem the most telling - above all, by considering the relative merits of the various opinions as the basis for the future of their Fire and Rescue Service.



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