



Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service: 2020-2025 Public Safety Plan

Report of Engagement Phase Focus Groups

Opinion Research Services
January 2019



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Acknowledgements

Opinion Research Services (ORS) is pleased to have worked with Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service (BFRS) on the consultation reported here.

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

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

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

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Project Overview

The Commission

1. On the basis of our long-standing experience with the UK fire and rescue service, ORS was commissioned by Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service (BFRS) to undertake five focus groups across its service area (in Aylesbury, Buckingham, Chesham, High Wycombe and Milton Keynes).
2. The point or purpose of the deliberative sessions was to allow BFRS to engage with, and listen to, members of the public about some important issues - so that the participants would become more informed about the fire and rescue service and the current constraints upon it; but also so that the discussions around people's perceptions of risk and ideas about their Fire and Rescue Service could contribute to BFRS's planning for the future. BFRS's key priority was that this would be a 'listening and engagement' process at a very early stage in the organisation's thinking – to understand public opinions and to 'test' some very general ideas and principles.
3. This very early stage consultation programme conforms to the Gunning Principles, which require, above all, that consultation should be at a 'formative stage', before authorities make decisions. The same principles also require that people should be given sufficient information and time to consider the issues in an informed manner, and also that their views should be taken conscientiously into account by the authority.
4. In this context, ORS' role was to design, facilitate and report the consultation in November and December 2018. We worked in collaboration with BFRS to prepare informative stimulus material for the meetings before facilitating the discussions and preparing this independent report of findings.

Deliberative Research

Attendance and Representativeness

5. The focus groups were designed to inform and 'engage' the participants both with the issues and with BFRS – by using a 'deliberative' approach to encourage members of the public to reflect in depth about the fire and rescue service, while both receiving and questioning background information and discussing important issues in detail. The meetings lasted for two hours.
6. In total, there were 58 diverse participants at the focus groups. The dates of the meetings and attendance levels by members of the public were as overleaf:

AREA	TIME AND DATE	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES
Buckingham	6:30pm – 8:30pm Wednesday 21 st November 2018	12
Milton Keynes	6:30pm – 8:30pm Wednesday 21 st November 2018	9
High Wycombe	6:30pm – 8:30pm Thursday 22 nd November 2018	11
Chesham	6:30pm – 8:30pm Thursday 22 nd November 2018	13
Aylesbury	6:30pm – 8:30pm Wednesday 5 th December 2018	13

7. The attendance target for the focus groups was around eight to 10 people, so the recruitment programme was successful. Participants were recruited by post and follow-up 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. As standard good practice, people were recompensed for their time and efforts in travelling and taking part.
8. Overall, participants were a broad cross-section of residents from the local areas: for example, across the five groups there were 30 males and 28 females; the age range was fairly evenly split (16 x 16-34; 17 x 35-54 and 25 x 55+); and there were six people in attendance from a Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) background.
9. In recruitment, care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by disabilities or any other factors, and the venues at which the focus groups met were readily accessible. People's needs were taken into account in the recruitment and venue selection.
10. Although, like all other forms of qualitative consultation, focus groups cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the meetings reported here gave diverse groups of people from Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes the opportunity to participate. Because the recruitment was inclusive and participants were diverse, we are satisfied that the outcomes of the meeting (as reported below) are broadly indicative of how informed opinion would incline on the basis of similar discussions. In summary then, the outcomes reported here are reliable as examples of the needs and wants of diverse informed people reacting to the possible challenges facing BFRS.

Discussion Agenda

11. ORS worked in collaboration with BFRS to agree a suitable agenda and informative stimulus material for the meeting, which covered all of the following topics:
 - Sources of worry and concern;
 - People's perceptions of risk and how they manage it;
 - Fire and other risk in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes;
 - The BFRS budget and future funding – and whether the Service represents value for money;
 - BFRS's governance;
 - Attitudes to response times; and
 - The issues and challenges facing BFRS and possible future strategies to meet them.
12. The questions were accompanied by a presentation devised by ORS and BFRS to inform and stimulate discussion of the issues - and participants were encouraged to ask any questions they wished throughout the discussions.

The Report

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

Main Findings


Introduction

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

Main Findings: Awareness and Perceptions

Perception of risk

- As an introductory exercise, participants were shown the following slide and asked for their thoughts on: the biggest issues and risks facing them and their communities; whether they worry about these issues and risks; and if they do, what (if anything) they do to mitigate against them:

Concerns and worries 

What are the biggest issues/risks facing ... ?

You **Your Community**

**Do you worry about these issues/risks?
Why/why not?**

**If you do worry about them, what (if anything)
do you do mitigate against them?**

- Many of the concerns raised across the groups related to political and financial uncertainty. For example, people said they were worried about: affordable housing shortages; job shortages; personal job security and unemployment; finances (including around personal pensions and the

money available for social care more generally); global political uncertainty; and Brexit. Cuts to local public services were also a concern for some.

Cuts to public service. We are worried about police, anti-social behaviour, just cuts generally in public services. I think as a table we feel public services are dropping and it's a bit of a worry for the future. (Buckingham)

18. Though there were concerns about affordable housing shortages, the actual impact of addressing this via significant housing growth was another worry across all groups - particularly in relation to safety fears and an apparent lack of corresponding infrastructure development in the form of traffic and transport, schools, medical services etc.

Huge expansion. Milton Keynes is getting way too big in some areas. We're the biggest city, that doesn't have that status (Milton Keynes)

We used to feel safe in rows of houses where you could leave the door unlocked but that's certainly not the case anymore (Milton Keynes)

I think in greater Buckingham in general, a lot of the new housing estates have gone in on the fringes and there's the impact that has on wider infrastructure. The roads in and out of the area have been tricky, schools being able to cope with the uptake in the number of pupils and then things like the NHS, particularly doctors surgeries...just whether the town generally can really cope with the number of people that have been coming in. (Buckingham)

19. Other common concerns and issues that are perhaps more relevant to the discussion were around: traffic congestion, roadworks and inconsiderate parking (and the impact of these on emergency services' response times); the increasing number of road traffic collisions and their consequences for emergency services; and the lack of infrastructure planning within new estates - again leading to inconsiderate parking and difficult access for emergency vehicles. Some of the many typical comments were:

Traffic, council planning around roadworks and how that affects emergency vehicles response times and their ability to respond (Aylesbury)

How are response times going to pan out in the future with more and more traffic? (Milton Keynes)

Around where we are it's relating to parking...being in a village location with small roads and awful parking where fire engines and other emergency vehicles can't get through. It is not addressed in any way shape or form... (High Wycombe)

Congestion caused by extra houses in the area...the roads are getting all snarled up all the time...getting from A to B took twice as long as it did ten years ago (Chesham)

Roads are getting busier so there isn't the space for traffic to go. Accidents happen every day of the week somewhere. So the rescue aspect is as much of a consideration now as individual fire problems (Aylesbury)

I'm scared of the amount of road accidents that there are; they happen every day... (High Wycombe)

There must be more risks with car accidents and things like that rather than fire...as the population is growing is it a big element of resources? For me personally because I travel quite a lot that's quite a big thing.... (Buckingham)

New build estates are problematic for emergency vehicles getting down narrow roads...you have to squeeze past and that's during the day, in a small car (Aylesbury)

We didn't know if the FRS are involved in the planning of the new estates that are being built. Is access for emergency services taken into consideration? (Aylesbury)

20. Few participants spontaneously raised fire risk as a concern, though one Milton Keynes participant had experienced a house fire and so had a heightened sense of awareness of the need to take precautions in the form of smoke alarms and escape routes - and one Chesham group member felt that having small children is another reason why a fear of fire may be more acute:

House fires because of age and my mobility and comparably the escape routes compared with the security of the house... I was caught in a fire down in London and I'm very aware of it (Milton Keynes)

There is a worry about fire in the home; when I had young children and my husband is very careful we had a fire alarm on every wall, he was quite obsessed with it. We had a fire ladder which was under the stairs. But I haven't had small children in the home in a long time, so I don't really worry anymore. (Chesham)

21. It was, however, widely discussed within the context of the focus group - with participants raising issues around: the dangers of 'cheap imports'; and intensified feelings of risk around, say, bonfire night and Christmas - and following a high-profile tragedy such as Grenfell:

I think one of the risks from a fire perspective is the cheap imports, like phone chargers. Really understanding that they can be a real risk... (Chesham)

I think at certain times of the year it comes more to the forefront, like Halloween, bonfire night, Christmas. With Christmas lights I always think 'do I leave them on or turn them off' (Chesham)

With fire I don't think it's a risk you think about every day...you need something like Grenfell then everybody then starts thinking 'that could have been me' and you start thinking about some of the materials that were used that weren't certified or approved, and you think about it... (Buckingham)

I've just moved from one of the tallest buildings in London...I lived there when Grenfell happened. It's such a huge building, there was just one exit and so many people. It makes you realise how many people below you could affect our life.... (Aylesbury)

22. On that note, while Grenfell was discussed at all groups, when asked whether they worried about something similar happening locally most agreed that it was unlikely given the relative lack of high-rise buildings across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes (though it did apparently prompt some even in a low-rise property to be more safety-conscious) - and there was a sense that any fear that may have been felt immediately after the incident has, for most people, abated with time:

Probably would be if you were in a high rise flat but there aren't many of them in the Buckingham area (Buckingham)

It's a bit of a worry but I don't think when you look at Chesham that there are enough large buildings to have that worry (Chesham)

I think it's made me more pro-active; check the fire alarms are working; that I've got a carbon monoxide detector. I'm more mindful at home and at work (High Wycombe)

For me, when the news said from one domestic appliance, that's how Grenfell happened, that made me think. But my worry has gone down again now. (Aylesbury)

23. Similarly, terror attacks are typically a significant worry in the immediate aftermath of an incident, but less so in the long-term - except, understandably in the context of travelling into London. Even so, most people would not be deterred from visiting the city due to a perception that the risk of being caught up in an attack is actually very small, and through a sense of 'not letting the terrorists win':

Because I commute to London every day, it is something that plays on my mind (Milton Keynes)

I'm worried about terrorism when traveling to London maybe... (Chesham)

It definitely worries me...but at the end of the day I don't want them to take over... (High Wycombe)

I feel more insulated and at less of a risk more than perhaps when I go to London. I want to support my local city but there are people who will say 'oh you're not going to London' and I think you can't have that attitude. You have to stand by not only your capital city, but the people who have to go there, who work there, who live there. So perhaps it is naive, but I feel we're not so much of a risk and it doesn't feel so immediate. (Buckingham)

24. Indeed, many of the quotations above reinforce the point made in the High Wycombe group that what a person worries about is ultimately very much influenced not only by their personal circumstances, but also what happens to be in the public eye (and thus consciousness) at any given time:

It depends on if it affects you personally. If it doesn't affect you, you're not going to worry about it. But if it's looming up in the future or it's affecting you at the moment then yes, you do worry about it. (High Wycombe)

25. Furthermore, it was widely acknowledged that health and safety improvements mean that today's homes and public places are generally much safer than they used to be:

It's not as bad as it used to be. Safety in houses, fuse boxes etc. is better... The risk isn't as great as what it used to be (Aylesbury)

In my father's day...he had sixteen plugs on the socket and the wiring was really old. But now most houses have got more up-to-date wiring and appliances have to be PAT tested, which make homes generally safer (High Wycombe)

I think health and safety generally has improved incredibly because if you go out to a function in the community, it's a public place and you get your five minutes of 'these are the exits and fire safety'. Twenty years ago you didn't get that...and nobody was actually aware of this. The facilities of public places are now much better and regulated better as well, which means people are safer. (Milton Keynes)

Working for BFRS

26. Participants were asked whether they had ever thought about working for the fire and rescue service. None had personally, but some mentioned family members or friends who are either now firefighters (one of whom had begun their career via the BFRS apprentice scheme) - or who had wished to join but had been unable due to blocks on recruitment or stringent entry requirements:

When I was younger I worked in the leisure industry and when people get fed up of that they seem to think of the ambulance or fire...about seven of my friends have done it and they've stuck with it because they love it (Aylesbury)

My best friend went into an apprenticeship when she left school and she's now moved up to be a firefighter and she loves it (Aylesbury)

My son mentioned it for a few years but at the time he wanted to do it they weren't recruiting... (Chesham)

My son did think about it but at time they weren't taking any applications – this was a couple of years ago (Aylesbury)

My grandson in Kent wanted to become a retained firefighter but they weren't recruiting in that category, so he didn't get any further (Aylesbury)

There's a lad I know who wanted to join Bucks but they wouldn't let him in because of his eyesight; he was colour-blind. He reckoned he could join the London one because they weren't so stringent. He was desperate to join. (Chesham)

Awareness of risk

27. In order to investigate their background perception of fire risk in the community, participants were asked to 'guesstimate' the annual total death rate from fire related incidents across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. Not surprisingly, many over-estimated the number – with

many estimates ranging between 2 and 400, and two people even putting the figure at 1,000! However, there were a few more accurate guesses of 'single figures'. People were pleased to know that the actual number is very low, with an average of less than four accidental dwelling fire deaths per year over the last five years.

28. When asked about the annual total death rate from road traffic collisions (RTC's) across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes again, many over-estimated the number – with many estimates ranging between 50 and 500, and two people again putting the figure in the thousands! The Chesham group was the only one in which a couple of participants guessed figures that were less than 100 (50 and 70; the actual figure is 29).
29. Participants were asked whether they considered the aforementioned figures to be acceptable and tolerable. Most said that while no death could ever be considered acceptable, life is inherently risky - and so some degree of tolerance is required inasmuch as it would be unrealistic to drive the already very low figures down even further, especially given the dangerous activity engaged in by some people:

No death is acceptable is it, whether it's a fire or an accident. Obviously, we would all want them to be zero wouldn't we. But we don't live in society where everyone drives around wearing a seat belt or doesn't use a phone while driving (Chesham)

The lives we lead quite frankly that's the way it is. Surely you won't get it any lower? But I'm not saying that any death is acceptable cos it's not (Aylesbury)

It's not something that you could really ever totally prevent (High Wycombe)

To get those two to six fire related deaths how many rescues do you go to in that time? And for those 29 RTC deaths how many car accidents do you go to? It seems a lot but if you're going to a couple of thousand incidents... (Buckingham)

Awareness/perceptions of BFRS

30. When asked for their general impressions of BFRS, participants were universally positive. With respect to how these were formed, several participants in the Aylesbury group commented that they had seen the Service at local events; another had found them very 'approachable' during a home safety visit; and one said they attend the frequent road traffic collisions near their home 'very rapidly'. Some typical comments were:

I think we see them in the community at different events and they reach out to try and join in (Aylesbury)

I filled in a survey at an event I went to and they came and fitted a smoke alarm and they looked at access points... It was very useful and they're very approachable (Aylesbury)

I live near a dangerous road there have been a couple of high-profile accidents. They are on site very rapidly; so a good impression. (Aylesbury)

31. In the absence of direct contact, people were asked why they felt so well-disposed toward BFRS. The comments below suggest that they have a positive view of those who work in the emergency services more generally:

I certainly have a blanket perception of people who work in public services...policemen, firemen... when I meet them I would shake their hand because there's something very noble about what they're doing in my mind... (Buckingham)

My impression is not particularly about Bucks but about fire services in general. My experience is you see the fire engines going, you see the guys in there. You think 'oh my god, the skill that they have to go do this thing that is really specialised'. It's not very deep or very knowledgeable but I just see the fire engines going down the road. I think they might have to deal with really horrific stuff. So it's a thumbs up, but I don't really know more. (Chesham)

32. Participants were then asked how much they knew about BFRS and what it does. Knowledge was generally good: participants were aware that Service now attends a wide range of incidents in addition to fires - as well preventative and educational outreach work and inspecting commercial premises. Nonetheless, some at Buckingham felt the fire and rescue service has a lower public profile in comparison to the other emergency services (that is, the ambulance service and the police). Some typical comments were:

When you get something like Grenfell, everybody recognises what a great job the fire service did, but then afterwards you don't because it's not quite so visual as the ambulance service or the police service. I don't think its quite as high profile as the other services (Buckingham)

I don't think they're as high profile as some of the other services. The ambulance service seems to be around a bit more and the police doing things like security marking. Perhaps it's because I don't go to enough of the big public events where they are. (Buckingham)

33. It was suggested that BFRS should raise its profile through more public engagement events and/or a targeted social media campaign. The latter, it was felt, could prove more successful than more traditional methods (such as the leaflet distribution) in this day and age:

I get the idea that there needs to be some kind of public engagement...but in other respects we don't want to have anything to do with you do we?! (Buckingham)

I would hazard to say you could spend the equivalent budget on a targeted social media campaign than on leaflets and you'd probably get a higher hit rate. (Milton Keynes)

34. Perhaps unsurprisingly, when asked which aspects of the service were most and least important to them, 'saving lives' and the front-line response for which the FRS is known were most frequently mentioned as being important, whereas incidents such as lock-ins/lock-outs, lift rescues and 'rescuing cats from trees' were noted as less important.

35. When asked whether they knew where their nearest station was and how it was crewed, responses were mixed. Some were fully aware, whereas others were not. Interestingly, after the facilitator at

the Aylesbury group explained the on-call system, one person said *'we don't have those'* when there is, in fact, one on-call appliance at the station. Another in the group said that, in some respects, where they live is irrelevant as *'I know they'll come when I call them. I don't need to know where they're based'*.

36. The location of their local station was important to others, though. For example, one participant at Buckingham said that: *I don't lose sleep over it but it's comforting to know there is one at hand nearby.*

BFRS Finances

37. When asked if they knew how BFRS is funded and how much they pay towards it, most participants across all groups knew that the two main sources of income are council tax and central Government.
38. In estimating how much each band D household pays per year for BFRS, participants' guesses varied widely from a relatively accurate £50-£60 - to £10 at the bottom end and £186 at the top (and many other figures in between!). The actual Band D charge of £62.70 a year was universally considered to be exceptional value for money:

All you have to do is save me from a burning building...of course it's value for money
(Buckingham)

As an insurance policy [it] isn't bad at all. (Buckingham)

39. A couple of people commented at this stage that the fire and rescue service delivers a better level of service and value for money than some other public services:

You don't hear the negative stories about the FRS. Hospitals; we're waiting four hours in A&E and a month to get an appointment with a GP (Aylesbury)

I think if you phone 999 and requested a fire engine it would turn up fairly swiftly. If you ring the police they do turn up, but the fire engine does turn up a lot quicker. (Buckingham)

Future challenges

40. In thinking about the current and future challenges facing the fire and rescue service at a local and national level, 'funding reductions' was the most frequent response. Some typical comments were:

Politically, there is now this belief that services can provide the same, or a better service, with less money. It's done through the camouflage of tax cuts but it can't keep being chipped away at like this (Buckingham)

Central government is a challenge facing the fire and rescue service...it seems bonkers that they can keep cutting and cutting and cutting and stick their heads in the sand and think it will be fine and do more with less; that doesn't work forever (Milton Keynes).

41. Participants were then given information outlining the other main challenges faced by the Service, namely: Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes' ageing, diversifying and growing population; proposed infrastructure changes; and workforce issues. In response to this information, the following issues were raised.

Demographic changes

42. Participants acknowledged that a growing and ageing population will place pressures on the fire and rescue service, and create additional risk:

There are more people in the area which means more people possibly starting a fire, more traffic, more risk (Buckingham)

I think population growth is a key issue... How long do you continue to run a single pump before you hit a threshold? At some point that service will really be squeezed as the population expands. And that seems to be a theme across all emergency services. I think particularly with the fire and rescue service there will be a big threshold moment where they need new kit and stations. (Aylesbury)

Infrastructure

43. Participants shared concerns that major developments (such as HS2, the east-west rail and expressway links and the Cambridge to Oxford corridor) will increase stress on existing infrastructure and, together with the significant increase in housing stock, will have a negative impact on BFRS's response times:

If this area keeps moving in the direction of being a major suburb of Milton Keynes, there needs to be more of a service because it will serve more people (Buckingham)

There's construction but no infrastructure in terms of roads. Where I live behind me there's sort of, housing and houses and you just think to yourself; how's another two thousand cars going to go on the London road? (High Wycombe)

How are fire and rescue going to get through rush hour traffic to get anywhere? (High Wycombe)

With all these new builds, for example, is there a radius where there has to be a fire station? I'm sure you've got targets where you've got to respond. (Aylesbury)

Workforce

44. When shown information on BFRS's workforce challenges, participants' instinctive reaction was that salaries should be increased to retain staff – but it was also said that BFRS should increase workforce diversity by targeting young people with fewer academic qualifications:

If you want maintain a good quality of staff you have to increase salaries in line with inflation
(Buckingham)

Are there things you or everyone can do to target children like my son who is not an academic child. He is going to struggle when he starts secondary school and he will fall into the background...I think you guys could do more to help and target those kind of children.
(Chesham)

Attendance times

45. Participants were impressed with BFRS's urban area response time of a first appliance in attendance in under 10 minutes on over 90% of occasions - and were largely pleased with the fact this standard is met on 79% of occasions in rural areas. Though it was suggested that the latter figure could be improved, the cost-benefit of doing so was questioned:

Given how rural and spread out Bucks is, I think the attendance time figures are very impressive; I think it's really good. (Buckingham)

It depends on what the cost would be it get the rural area response time up from 79% to 90%.
(Buckingham)

46. Most people had a fairly pragmatic approach to urban/rural attendance times, suggesting that those living in rural areas should naturally expect a lower response times than those in urban areas given their geographical location and relatively lower demand and risk levels. Some typical comments were:

I think they have to be realistic (High Wycombe)

think If you buy a property in a rural area you expect it. It comes with living in a more desirable, quiet area (Aylesbury)

It would be impractical to expect the same level of response in a rural as an urban area and it wouldn't be an appropriate use of funding to have a fire engine in a rural area all the time when it's not going to be used very much (Aylesbury)

It has to be acceptable. The engines have further to travel and they have to find the place, which might be quite remote. And getting down farm tracks etc. (Milton Keynes)

47. Ultimately it was suggested that: *if you can demonstrate the situation clearly...people will understand and accept the difference. Just looking at the numbers it looks like a big difference but if you can lay out the reality of the situation in terms of crewing systems, distance travelled, budget constraints then it'll make sense to them.* (Milton Keynes)

Possible future strategies

48. Some possible strategies to meet future challenges were outlined to participants, using the following simplified options (which, it should be noted, were based on the assumption that BFRS would have done everything possible to make savings from 'back office' functions and that it would receive no additional money with which to provide services):

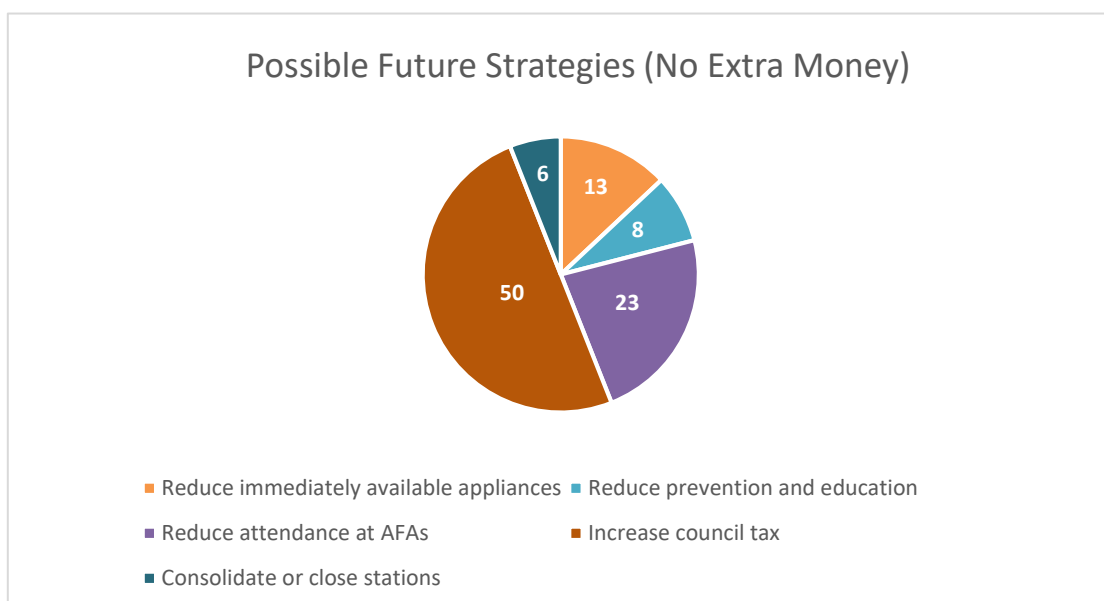
- Reduce the number of immediately available appliances;
- Reduce prevention and education activity;
- Reduce attendance at or cease to attend automatic fire alarms;
- Increase Council Tax beyond capped levels; and
- Consolidate and/or close fire stations.

49. They were asked to allocate 100 points between the options, and the overall preference across the five groups was that BFRS should pursue increases in council tax (a one-off payment of £5 to increase the base charge was favoured) and reduce its attendance at or cease to attend automatic fire alarms. In relation to the latter, some comments were:

If businesses know they're going to attend anyway – they won't fix their system (Aylesbury)

If there were something like a three strikes then you have to change to more efficient method of detecting fires...is that something you can enforce? (Chesham)

50. There was also some support for reducing the number of immediately available appliances, but less for reducing prevention and education and consolidating and/or closing fire stations - though one participant at Buckingham did say that "consolidation can be understood on some level, but closures are not at all preferred".



51. There were some differences between areas: for example, there was slightly more support for consolidating and/or closing fire stations and reducing prevention and education activity at Buckingham (and correspondingly less for reducing the number of immediately available appliances); and over twice the level of support for reducing the number of immediately available appliances and far less for reducing attendance at or ceasing to attend automatic fire alarms at Milton Keynes.
52. Across most groups though, the preferred options were the same: that is, increasing council tax and reducing attendance at or ceasing to attend automatic fire alarms. In relation to the former though, there were some concerns at around affordability, especially if other services such as the police and local councils also choose to seek precept increases. Moreover, some said they were reluctant to pay more for a service that may (hopefully!) never use;

Why should I pay for a thing I'll never use; it's not equal for me is it? (Chesham)

There are so many other organizations that want this extra £10 -£15 so where does it stop? £5 itself isn't a lot, but if you add everything else up. (Chesham)

53. Participants were also asked to rank some other possible strategies in the event of BFRS receiving more money from Government or raising additional funds itself through increased council tax levels. The options were to:

Keep existing stations and assets;
 Enhance protection (to be fit for the post-Grenfell environment);
 Upgrade stations;
 Recruit more firefighters;
 Make on-call firefighting more attractive;
 Ensure fairer urban versus rural service provision; and
 Deliver additional services such as co-responding.

54. The overall ranking across all five groups was as follows, with participants expressing a strong preference for making on-call more attractive and retaining existing stations and assets - and least favouring the delivery of additional services such as co-responding and especially ensuring fairer urban versus rural service provision (which is perhaps unsurprising given the widespread acceptance that service levels will be different according to geographical location).

OPTION	RANKING
Make on-call firefighting more attractive	1
Keep existing stations and assets	2
Recruit more firefighters	3

Enhance protection (to be fit for the post-Grenfell environment)	4
Upgrade stations	5
Deliver additional services such as co-responding	6
Ensure fairer urban versus rural service provision	7

- ⁵⁵. Again, though, there were some differences between the groups. For example: there was more support for recruiting more firefighters and less for keeping existing stations and assets at both Chesham and Milton Keynes; there was less support for recruiting more firefighters and more for delivering additional services such as co-responding at Buckingham; and only at Aylesbury was making on-call firefighting more attractive not the preferred option – there they would prefer BFRS to keep its existing stations and assets and recruit more firefighters.