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

Report of Consultation Findings

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

Report of Consultation Findings

Report
by Opinion Research Services

Opinion Research Services

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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 would also like to thank the 58 people who took part in the survey, without whose valuable input the research would not have been possible.

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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1. Executive Summary

Introduction

1.1 In 2019, Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service (BFRS) launched its Public Safety Plan 2020-2025 (PSP), which sets out how it will provide a fire and rescue service in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes for the five-year period from 2020-2025. Opinion Research Services (ORS) was commissioned by BFRS to offer independent advice on the design and conduct of the consultation programme, undertake a programme of key consultation activities, and provide an interpretative report of the findings.

Summary of main findings

1.2 The following paragraphs summarise the main findings from 58 responses to BFRS' online consultation questionnaire and five focus groups with members of the public across Buckinghamshire. However, readers are referred to the detailed chapters that follow for the full report. The suite of ORS reports also includes full cross-tabulations.

Infrastructure

1.3 Focus group participants were satisfied with BFRS' strategic proposals for responding to infrastructure challenges: they were described as '**sensible', 'flexible' and 'responsive'**. It is not to say, though, that there were no concerns and reassurances sought - and just under half (46%) of questionnaire respondents reported that there are specific aspects and risks associated with infrastructure projects that they think BFRS should consider in its planning.

1.4 Feedback across both research strands around these specific concerns mainly related to **new housing developments**, which are reportedly causing **access issues** for emergency and other large vehicles due to narrow roads and many parked cars. It was also argued that **new buildings are not being constructed as safely as they could be,** and that developers and commissioning authorities should be held more accountable. Furthermore, focus group participants suggested that more **collaboration between BFRS, housing developers and local authorities** is needed so the Service has ample opportunity to ensure safety regulations are being met.

1.5 More generally, there were concerns about **high housing density**, **population growth** and the resulting increases in safety risks caused by **congestion** throughout the area.

1.6 Additional worries were around the alleged **number of collisions within roadwork stretches** (on the M1 for example), as well as whether there is sufficient resourcing to respond to challenges relating to **large-scale projects such as HS2.**

Population

Helping the most vulnerable

1.7 BFRS was **praised for the work undertaken** to date in the community and specifically with vulnerable people. Moreover, there was widespread **agreement** with the proposal for BFRS **to continue to collaborate** with partner organisations in order to engage with those at higher risk from fire and other emergencies.

1.8 Suggestions as to how BFRS could further improve its engagement were as follows:

- Doing more to **bring health and social care together** in offering a joined-up approach – for example via more collaboration with charities and healthcare trusts
- Using **best practice to share information** about vulnerable populations within partnerships and with other services
- **Increasing its presence in the community** by 'patrolling' local areas and regularly visiting care homes, sheltered housing schemes and schools
- Increasing its presence and awareness more generally through **media campaigning** such as radio broadcasting
- Investing in the roll out of **fire safety 'advocates' or 'champions'**
- Running community workshops and seminars to **educate people** with vulnerable relatives, carers and volunteers on **how to undertake 'basic safety checks'**
- Undertaking **early intervention and prevention activities**, such as: actively identifying and offering vulnerable people a home safety visit; and educating the next generation in schools and social clubs
- Encouraging the use of **assistive technology devices** like 'Alexa' to help maintain safety and wellbeing without putting added pressure on the FRS or adult social care
- Ensuring those with **learning or physical disabilities** are also a focus, as well as the elderly

The automatic fire alarms (AFAs) attendance policy

1.9 Changes to AFA attendance are not included as part of the 2020-25 Public Safety Plan, and therefore did not feature in the questionnaire. However, as this is a policy BFRS may consult on in future, views on it were explored in the focus groups.

1.10 Overall **reviewing the policy was considered sensible**, although the majority of participants would <u>not</u> necessarily agree with BFRS ceasing to attend AFAs altogether. Instead, there was reasonable support for BFRS **only attending an AFA if evidence is provided to indicate a real fire**; for example, via a phone call from an employee/member of the public or via technology such as drones and 'smart smoke alarms.'

1.11 In addition, consensus among the groups was that **businesses should take more responsibility** in improving equipment and training for staff to reduce the number of false AFA alarms. It was also suggested that **businesses should be fined** if the FRS attends three or more false alarm call outs.

1.12 A few questionnaire respondents also raised concerns about the impact of responses to false alarms in the free-text comments, and felt that **BFRS should take action** to decrease the number of these call-outs.

Technology, information and systems

1.13 Focus group participants were **very positive about the proposals** for responding to technological advancements: they were especially keen to discuss the **use of drones** and whether **autonomous vehicles** could respond to specific incidents such as pumping flood water or minor RTCs.

1.14 Just under two fifths (38%) of questionnaire respondents and a reasonable proportion of focus group participants felt there were additional specific aspects, opportunities or risks associated with technological change that need to be considered. Specific safety concerns were raised in relation to: fire risks associated with the **rechargeable batteries used in electric vehicles**; the number of **accidents on 'smart' motorways**; **cyber-attacks** and **terrorism**; and whether firefighters will be adequately **trained to respond to advancing technological risks**. More generally, whether or not BFRS should be **investing more money into frontline services rather than technology** was discussed among focus group participants.

1.15 It was suggested that BFRS could mitigate these risks through being **more involved at the implementation stage** of new technology development to fully understand any impacts on the Service and society.

Civil emergencies

1.16 BFRS's plans for mitigating risks associated with civil emergencies were also **well received** among the focus groups. However, around four fifths (41%) of questionnaire respondents reportedly had additional concerns - mainly around tackling carbon emissions and climate change and **whether BFRS has the resources in place** to deliver the proposals. Specifically, there were doubts about how well **the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum** (TVLRF) is being utilised in practice, along with worries around the Service's overall **lack of funding**.

1.17 Suggestions as to how BFRS could do more to mitigate risk were around better **educating the public** on how to prepare for and what to do during a civil emergency; partnership work with **companies specialising in security**; and ensuring that the service has the **correct appliances** to respond to incidents that are more likely to affect Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, such as emergencies within **heavily forested areas.**

1.18 In terms of reducing its **carbon footprint**, it was acknowledged that this may be difficult for BFRS to do, especially with appliances travelling greater distances to cover areas that are struggling with resourcing. However, it was recommended that BFRS follows an official recycling regime.

Workforce

1.19 Focus group participants felt that **BFRS is taking the correct approach** to responding to challenges around workforce: they particularly supported **flexible working hours, apprenticeships** and **targeted recruitment** for a more diverse workforce.

1.20 Moreover, questionnaire respondents were presented with a list of factors and asked what they thought were most important when considering BFRS as an employer. The top three were as: **engaging with and listening to staff** (53%); **offering opportunities to develop skills** (40%); and offering **enhanced employee benefits** (such as local weighting allowances) (38%).

Funding

1.21 In response to being asked whether they would support an increase in the part of council tax that funds BFRS during 2020-21, the largest proportion of both focus group participants and questionnaire respondents (47%) said they would be **willing to pay a one-off £10 increase** to the current annual charge for a Band D property. Indeed, BFRS was considered a 'worthy cause' to pay more towards. Moreover, it was deemed sensible to increase funding so that rates are closer in line with the national average. Only 15% of questionnaire respondents indicated a preference for no increase at all.

1.22 However, there were concerns that this would be the **'thin edge of the wedge'** insofar as other services may also increase their portion of council tax rates. **Alternative suggestions** put forward across both research strands were **charging for false alarm call outs** as well as the provision of **safety advice and training**. Moreover, some queried whether BFRS would be able to generate more future funding as a result of the **large number of housing developments** being built across the county.

2. Project Overview

The commission

2.1   In 2019, Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service (BFRS) launched its Public Safety Plan 2020-2025 (PSP), which sets out how it will provide a fire and rescue service in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes for the five-year period from 2020-2025. The plan builds on BFRS' Public Safety Plan 2015-20 and considers changes to risks and how it plans to change its services to keep residents, communities and businesses safe from fire and other emergencies.

2.2   In this context, on the basis of our experience of the fire and rescue service and many statutory consultations, Opinion Research Services (ORS) was commissioned by BFRS to offer independent advice on the design and conduct of the consultation programme, undertake a programme of key consultation activities, and provide an interpretative report of the findings.

Extensive consultation

2.3   BFRS' consultation period ran from 23rd September to 18th November 2019, and included elements conducted by ORS as an independent organisation - for example, providing feedback on the consultation document; designing presentation material for focus groups; recruiting, facilitating and reporting five deliberative focus groups; designing and analysing responses to an online and paper version of an Open Consultation Questionnaire; and writing interim and final reports.

Consultation proportionate and fair

2.4   The key legal and good practice requirements for proper consultation are based on the so-called Gunning Principles, which state that consultation 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 to consider the issues and any proposals intelligently and critically; and be properly taken into consideration before decisions are finally taken.

2.5   In this case, the formal consultation for BFRS' PSP followed an earlier engagement programme - also undertaken by ORS - which was carried out in 2018. It involved five focus groups across its service area (in Aylesbury, Buckingham, Chesham, High Wycombe and Milton Keynes), with BFRS's key priority being to understand public opinions and to 'test' some very general ideas and principles at a very early stage.

2.6   The eight-week formal consultation period gave the public and stakeholders sufficient time to participate, and through its consultation documents and website information the Fire Authority sought to provide sufficient information for staff, stakeholders and residents to understand the proposals and to make informed judgements about them and the supporting evidence.

2.7 The final Gunning principle listed above is that consultation outcomes should be properly taken into consideration before authorities take their decisions. In this case, regular formal and informal briefings allowed the progressive reporting of people's opinions.

2.8 Properly understood, accountability means that public authorities should give an account of their plans and consider public and stakeholder views: they should conduct fair and accessible consultation while reporting the outcomes openly and considering them fully. Consultations are not referenda, and the popularity or unpopularity of draft proposals should not displace professional and political judgement about what are the right or best decisions in the circumstances. The levels of, and reasons for, public support or opposition are important, but as considerations to be taken into account, not as decisive factors that necessarily determine authorities' decisions.

Summary of consultation strands

Open Questionnaire

2.9 The open consultation questionnaire (with an accompanying Consultation Document) was available online and as a hard copy between 23rd September to 18th November 2019. The survey was available to residents, representatives from business, public and voluntary organisations and BFRS employees.

2.10 In total, 58 questionnaires were completed, all of which were submitted online.

2.11 It should be noted that while open questionnaires are important consultation routes that are accessible to almost everyone, they are not 'surveys' of the public. Whereas surveys require proper sampling of a given population, open questionnaires are distributed unsystematically or adventitiously, and are more likely to be completed by motivated people while also being subject to influence by local campaigns. As such, because the respondent profile (as outlined in the full report) is an imperfect reflection of the Buckinghamshire population, its results must be interpreted carefully. 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 about the proposals.

Respondent Profiles

2.12 The tables below show the profile characteristics of respondents to the questionnaire.

Table 1: Gender – All Respondents

Gender	Number of respondents (unweighted count)	% of respondents (unweighted valid)
Male	27	69
Female	12	31
Not Known	19	-
Total	**58**	**100**

Table 2: Age – All Respondents

Age	Number of respondents (unweighted count)	% of respondents (unweighted valid)
16 to 34	6	15
35 to 54	12	31
55 to 64	13	33
65 or over	8	21
Not Known	19	-
Total	**58**	**100**

Table 3: Disability – All Respondents

Disability	Number of respondents (unweighted count)	% of respondents (unweighted valid)
Yes	4	10
No	38	90
Not Known	16	-
Total	**58**	**100**

Table 4: Ethnicity – All Respondents

Ethnicity	Number of respondents (unweighted count)	% of respondents (unweighted valid)
White British	38	100
Not Known	20	-
Total	**58**	**100**

Table 5: Respondent Type – All Respondents

Respondent Type	Number of respondents (unweighted count)	% of respondents (unweighted valid)
Own personal response	48	86
On behalf of an organisation	8	14
Not Known	2	-
Total	**58**	**100**

Responses from organisations

2.13 Most responses to the consultation questionnaire were personal responses (86%; 48 respondents), which included just under a fifth (18%; 7 respondents) who work for Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire & Rescue Service. More than one eighth (14%; 8 respondents) were from local organisations or business respondents.

2.14 Of the eight respondents who stated that they were responding on behalf of an organisation, seven gave the name of the organisation they were representing. These were:

- Broughton and Milton Keynes Parish Council

- Central Milton Keynes Town Council

- Camphill Milton Keynes Communities

- Hambledon Parish Council

- Hertfordshire Partnership Foundation Trust Community – Learning Disability Team

- Padbury Parish Council

- Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service

Duplicate and co-ordinated responses

2.15 Online questionnaires must be open and accessible to all while minimising the possibility of multiple completions (by the same people) that distort the analysis. Therefore, while making it easy to complete the survey online, ORS monitors the IP addresses through which surveys are completed. On this occasion, the monitoring showed that there were no duplicates generated.

Interpretation of the Data

2.16 Where percentages do not sum to 100, this may be due to computer rounding, the exclusion of "don't know" categories, or multiple answers.

2.17 The example comments shown throughout the report have been selected as being typical of those received in relation to each proposal.

2.18 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 respondents making relevant responses. Where possible, the colours of the charts have been standardised with:

- Purple/blue shades to represent neutral responses (neither positive nor negative)

- Grey shades to represent 'other' responses

Focus groups with members of the public

2.19 BFRS commissioned a programme of five deliberative focus groups with members of the public across Buckinghamshire (in Aylesbury, Buckingham, Chesham, High Wycombe and Milton Keynes) in order to involve a diverse and broadly representative cross-section of residents. ORS worked in collaboration with BFRS to prepare informative stimulus material for the groups before facilitating the discussions and preparing an independent report of findings.

Attendance and representativeness

2.20 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 and proposals in detail. The meetings lasted for two hours.

2.21 In total, there were 55 diverse participants at the focus groups. The dates of the meetings and attendance levels by members of the public can be found in Table 6.

Table 6: Focus groups (Area, Time and Date and Number of attendees)

Area	Time and Date	Number of Attendees
Aylesbury	6:30pm – 8:30pm Tuesday 8th October 2019	11
Milton Keynes	6:30pm – 8:30pm Wednesday 9th October 2019	10
Buckingham	6:30pm – 8:30pm Wednesday 9th October 2019	11
High Wycombe	6:30pm – 8:30pm Thursday 10th October 2019	13
Chesham	6:30pm – 8:30pm Thursday 10th October 2019	10

2.22 The attendance target for the focus groups was between eight to 10 people, so the recruitment programme was successful. Participants were recruited by random-digit telephone dialling from ORS' Social Research Call Centre. Such recruitment by telephone is an effective way of ensuring that the participants are independent and broadly representative of the wider community. Participants who took part in focus groups as part of BFRS' engagement process were also invited to take part. As standard good practice, people were recompensed for their time and efforts in travelling and taking part.

2.23 Overall (as shown in the table below), participants were a broad cross-section of residents from the local areas:

Table 7: Focus groups criteria

Criteria	Focus Group Count
Gender	
Male	26
Female	29
Age	
16-34	21
35-54	21
55+	22
Ethnicity	
BME	11
Disability	
Limiting Long-term Illness	2

2.24 In the recruitment process, 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.

2.25 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 based on similar discussions. In summary, 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

2.26 The focus group agenda covered all of the following topics:

Background information in relation to:

- Incident profile and numbers
- BFRS' Public Safety Plan 2015-20 achievements and performance

Future challenges in relation to six key areas:

- Technological changes and advancements
- Civil emergencies

- Infrastructure projects

- Population changes

- Workforce and funding pressures

What BFRS is already doing and will continue to do to mitigate risks associated with these challenges

BFRS' Public Safety Plan proposals around how to mitigate these risks and challenges, which include:

- Temporarily relocating appliances & other resources to reduce impact of infrastructure projects

- Reviewing current capacity, capabilities and approaches to meet emerging civil emergency risks

- Improving preventative engagement with vulnerable groups

- Possibly reviewing automated fire alarm (AFA) attendance policy

- Improving recruitment and retention via flexible employment opportunities and developing the roll on the on-call firefighter

- Increasing Council Tax by more than 3% in order to avoid reductions to service provision.

2.27 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.

Reporting

2.28 The qualitative research chapter 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.

3. Open Consultation Questionnaire

Introduction

3.1 The open consultation questionnaire (with an accompanying Consultation Document) was available online and as a hard copy between 23rd September and 18th November 2019. 58 questionnaires were completed, all of which were submitted online.

Infrastructure projects

The Public Safety Plan identifies a range of major infrastructure projects, along with plans for new housing development - particularly in the Aylesbury Vale and Milton Keynes - that have implications for future fire and rescue service provision.

Some of these projects have the potential to cause, or have already, caused disruption to local transport networks. Consequently, they may have an impact on BFRS service provision, particularly emergency response times.

Its nearest-appliance mobilisation system will help BFRS mitigate this risk. It will also consider temporarily relocating appliances and other resources to avoid excessive impacts on its ability to respond to emergencies or deliver other services during construction. In addition, BFRS will continually review risk, and identify any additional training, equipment and vehicle requirements needed.

Are there any other specific aspects or risks associated with these projects that you think BFRS should consider in its planning?

If yes, what are these risks and how should BFRS mitigate them?

3.2 Figure 1 shows that 46% of respondents think there are other specific aspects or risks associated with the infrastructure projects in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes that BFRS should consider in its planning, whilst more than half (54%) do not.

Figure 1: Are there any other specific aspects or risks associated with these projects that you think BFRS should consider in its planning?
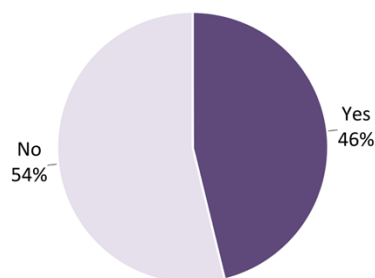
Base: All Respondents (52)

3.3 Some of these concerns were related to construction and the impact of new housing developments.

> *"New buildings are not being constructed as well as the architects who design them… compartmentation design means fires that should be contained can spread. BFRS need to try and talk to local authorities, to ensure inspections, to make sure the buildings have been constructed as specified, and corners haven't been cut by builders, who don't understand why they need to build in the specified way, and not the way they've always done it."*
>
> *"Pursuant to the Grenfell fire, the Parish Council felt that the fire service should lobby for developers and commissioning authorities to continue to be held accountable for their deployment of materials and building designs which are found to be intrinsically unsafe for both occupiers and emergency services."* (Broughton and Milton Keynes Parish Council)
>
> *"Ensure that the right plans are considered, especially [relating to] cladding"* (HPFT Community Learning Disability Team)

3.4 Other areas of risk that respondents expressed concern about were related to insufficient and inconsiderate parking and the obstructions this can cause.

> *"Planning authorities are allowing what feels like quite dense concentrations of housing with a woefully insufficient number of parking spaces, causing residents and their visitors to park all over the place and obstruct larger vehicles such as fire engines, delivery lorries, and refuse, and recycling lorries. Can more pressure be brought to bear on these planning authorities to ensure that they provide sufficient parking?"*

Population: helping the most vulnerable

> BFRS continually seeks to improve its ability to engage with people who are at higher risk from fire and other emergencies, such as the 80+ age group.
>
> It uses a number of data sources and works very closely with partner organisations to achieve this, for example carrying out visits to homes and participating in education programmes.
>
> Through its Fire and Wellness programme BFRS has broadened its home visits to look at other issues which are often linked to fire safety, while also assisting key partners in helping people to be safer and healthier in their homes.
>
> **BFRS welcomes feedback on how it can improve its engagement with those at higher risk from fire and other emergencies. In what ways, if any, do you think it could do this better?**

3.5 In terms of how BFRS can improve its engagement with those who are at higher risk from fire, suggestions included: engagement through local radio broadcasts; working closely with charities and care agencies; and running seminars for those who care for vulnerable people.

"Perhaps using the local community radio stations to talk about fire risks, and work with parish councils to run events for the same reasons."

"Work closer with charities, to try to reach those people that are maybe not on any service radar. Also, work closer with businesses that supply equipment to vulnerable persons; […] not every older or vulnerable person who needs assistance is registered with the authorities."

"Work with agencies that provide daily care to vulnerable people. Train their staff to recognise hazards and the risks they present, and how to assess and mitigate those risks."

"[…] run seminars for carers, volunteers, and people with older relatives, so that they could carry out some of the basic safety checks for vulnerable people. For example, checking their smoke alarms every month, checking they are warm during cold weather, and encouraging them to eat healthily. It's about time more people stepped up to the plate and took more responsibility for older members of their families."

Technology, information and systems

The growth in both the number and complexity of cyber-attacks means that BFRS must be constantly vigilant and work with partners and suppliers to mitigate these threats. BFRS is also aware of the way that new information technologies are being increasingly embedded into infrastructure, industrial plant, public buildings, homes, transportation networks and urban environments.

BFRS currently uses a range of capabilities to mitigate the risk of cyber-attacks, it is diligent in its selection of partners and suppliers, and has disaster recovery systems in place.

During the period of this Public Safety Plan, BFRS expects that progress will be made with the Government's Emergency Services Mobile Communications Programme (ESMCP). This will provide more secure and resilient communication capabilities to deliver more real-time information to improve incident management and other services.

BFRS will also monitor the evolution and implementation of a range of new technologies and systems such as 5G cellular network technology, autonomous vehicles, artificial intelligence, robotics, the development of 'Smart Cities' and 'Smart' transportation networks.

Are there any other specific aspects, opportunities or risks associated with technological change that you think BFRS should consider in its planning?

If yes, what are these and how should BFRS mitigate them?

3.6   Figure 2 shows that more than one third (38%) of respondents felt that there are other specific aspects or risks associated with technological change that BFRS should consider in its planning, whilst more than three fifths (62%) did not.

Figure 2: Are there any other specific aspects, opportunities or risks associated with technological change that you think BFRS should consider in its planning?

Yes
38%

No
62%
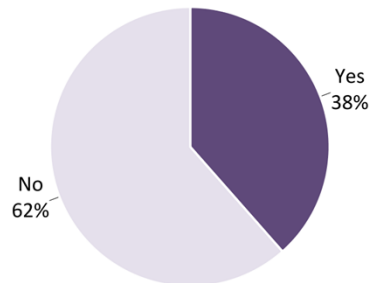
Base: All Respondents (39)

3.7   Of the respondents who thought there were specific aspects, opportunities or risks to consider, common themes were related to cyber-attacks and terrorism:

> *"The risks of cyber-attacks can be mitigated by setting up a closed intranet for operations and communications."*
>
> *"In response to a cyber-attack, we might well find cellular networks out of action. We might well anticipate our power supply grid disabled. We might find our landline phone system out of action. There could even be widespread disruption of water supplies including hydrants. A cyber-attack might well be timed to coincide with a spell of extreme weather, such as a prolonged period of snow, which could disrupt road traffic. You are already well equipped with radio comms. Those systems may be more than just a way of enabling you to respond to calls from the public. You may well be an essential link in communications in the event of civil unrest in such a concerted attack."*

3.8   Others had reservations about new technological systems and the potential issues they may cause:

> *"Need to consider whether the use of 'smart' technology, including the motorways, increases the risk to some individuals, for example, the number of deaths on smart motorways in what was the hard shoulder. Was this risk identified in the planning? Does 'smart' technology enable the service to reach some of the older population, will they be able to understand the technology, will it help support and reassure? If smart technology is used, backup systems need to be available and immediate to counter loss in network, for example, if smart technology is to be used to manage incidents. There is a risk - relying on technology."*

Civil emergencies

As well as evaluating current and emerging local risks, BFRS contributes to national preparedness for a range of civil emergencies. These include risks such as flooding, wildfires, terrorist related incidents and other emergencies that might have local, regional or national dimensions.

There is a statutory requirement for BFRS to be prepared for civil emergencies and, as Category One responder, it is an active member of the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum (TVLRF). This is where the police, fire, ambulance, local authorities and other key agencies come together to plan, exercise and work together to prepare and respond. BFRS will continue to review its current capacity and capabilities to meet emerging risks in collaboration with TVLRF.

BFRS will also continue to identify and act to reduce its own 'carbon footprint', for example, utilising solar panels and introducing electric vehicles.

Are there any other specific aspects or risks associated with this area of work that you think BFRS should consider in its planning?

If yes, what are these and how should BFRS mitigate them?

Figure 3: Are there any other specific aspects or risks associated with this area of work that you think BFRS should consider in its planning?

Yes
41%

No
59%
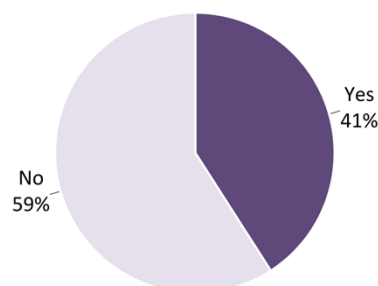
Base: All Respondents (44)

3.9 In Figure 3 shows that more than two fifths (41%) of respondents felt that there are other specific aspects or risks associated with civil emergencies that BFRS should consider in its planning, whilst almost three fifths (59%) did not.

3.10 Of the respondents who thought that BFRS should consider additional risks in relation to civil emergencies, most of the concerns were related to tackling carbon emissions and climate change.

"Carbon footprint - stations have to adopt their own recycling regime, as there are no facilities, or guidance documents provided to carry out this task."

"The carbon footprint will always be a problem when appliances have to travel greater distances due to the lack of resources – i.e. wholetime pumps covering, unmanned station grounds and incidents. Moving personnel from their designated station to cover gaps in the manning levels will also be difficult for your 'footprint.'"

> *"Climate change would appear to be having a big impact upon emergency services not just in the UK, but across the globe. BFRS must consider all eventualities when planning for the future."*

3.11 It was also said that there should be collaboration with other organisations (both private and public) to help tackle security threats.

> *"Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service, as a neighbouring service, welcomes the ongoing collaborative activity in this area to combat security threats."* (Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service)
>
> *"[BFRS should] work with the security of companies like BT Security who are excellent at identifying security threats to its assets."*

3.12 Further concerns were around BFRS' ability to deal with local wildfires, with one respondent suggesting the Service should review its fleet to ensure it has appropriate vehicles (4x4s for example). A few respondents also raised doubts as to whether BFRS has the funds or resources to respond to civil emergencies, for example to be able to fully support the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum (TVLRF).

> *"With the increase in wildfires both nationally and globally, and the fact that, Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes sits within an area of outstanding natural beauty, with a heavily forested area, should you not consider whether you really have the correct type of fire appliances to deal with this type of incident. Looking at the current range of fire engines on your website, it would appear that you don't - only three 4x4 fire engines!"*
>
> *"Do you have the resources to support TVLRF in practice, i.e., in an event of an emergency, will there be sufficient staff to manage national issues, as well as remaining available for local response? Will this work include spread of viruses? Do you have the capability, knowledge, and resources, to manage the risks?"*

Workforce pressures

There are a range of issues that affect the ability of BFRS to retain, recruit and develop its workforce - especially frontline operational firefighters. Particular challenges include:
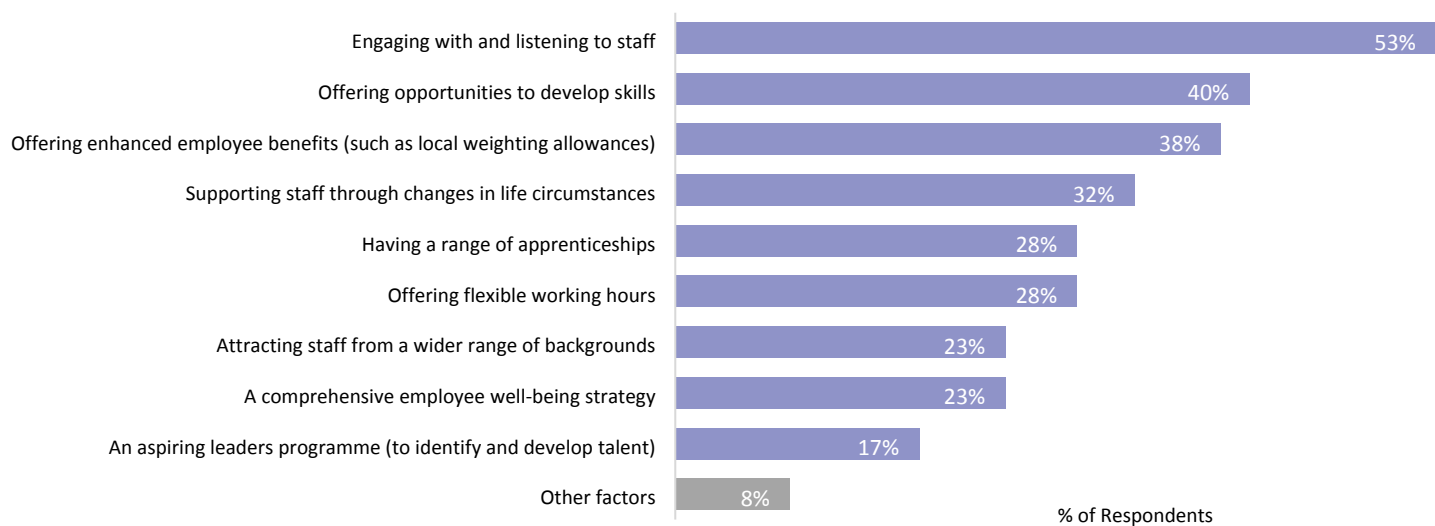
» An ageing workforce and retirement 'bulge' due to legacy recruitment patterns from the 1980s and 1990s.

» Loss of staff to neighbouring fire and rescue services (for example London Fire Brigade which pays weighting allowances).

» Changes in society and the way people live and work which have affected the ability of BFRS to recruit On-Call firefighters.

BFRS regularly engages with and listens to its staff in a variety of ways. It also actively reviews and develops employment opportunities to include flexible contracts, employee benefits and opportunities for staff to develop and earn more. BFRS also aims to explore new and additional ways to reduce workforce pressures over the course of this Public Safety Plan.

BFRS will continue to develop and roll out more flexible employment opportunities; use innovative marketing to attract staff from a wider range of diverse backgrounds; further develop the roll of the On-Call firefighter; and align training strategies and priorities to meet future needs.

Which three factors do you think are most important when considering BFRS as an employer?

Figure 4: Which three factors do you think are most important when considering BFRS as an employer?

Engaging with and listening to staff — 53%
Offering opportunities to develop skills — 40%
Offering enhanced employee benefits (such as local weighting allowances) — 38%
Supporting staff through changes in life circumstances — 32%
Having a range of apprenticeships — 28%
Offering flexible working hours — 28%
Attracting staff from a wider range of backgrounds — 23%
A comprehensive employee well-being strategy — 23%
An aspiring leaders programme (to identify and develop talent) — 17%
Other factors — 8%

% of Respondents

Base: All respondents (53)

3.13 shows that, when considering BFRS as an employer, more than half (53%) of respondents thought that engaging with and listening to staff is the most important factor. This was followed by offering opportunities to develop skills (40%) and enhanced employee benefits (e.g. local weighting allowances) (38%).

3.14 8% of respondents mentioned 'other' factors, which included: recruitment from local communities; evidence that BFRS is open, honest and consistent; and for BFRS to open negotiations around new pay scales for experienced staff.

Funding pressures

Despite the success of efficiency measures already taken during the period 2015-2020, BFRS faces a range of financial pressures.
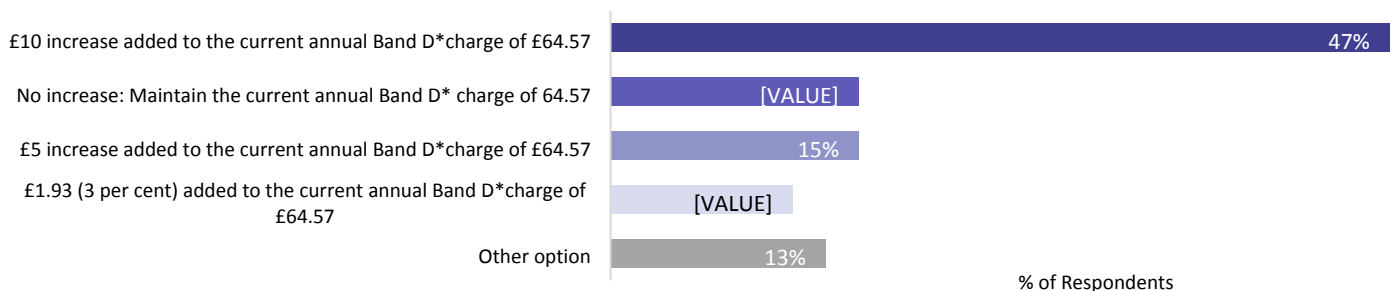
For example:

» Significant Government funding reductions for fire services since 2010.

» The lowest council tax rates of any Combined Fire Authority (CFA) in the country (fire authorities that currently charge a higher rate of council tax than BFRS, get a correspondingly larger increase in their funding).

» Any proposal to increase fire and rescue service council tax rates by more than three per cent currently requires approval from local residents by means of a referendum. A referendum on this in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes could cost BFRS up to £600,000 - potentially leaving it in a worse financial position if a proposed increase were rejected.

These may affect its ability to maintain current levels of service provision to the public in the future. Given the financial challenges, BFRS believes that a council tax increase by more than the current limit of three per cent will be necessary to help it deliver fire and rescue services in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes.

» **An increase of £10 per household** (for a Band D property*) would provide **£3 million** which would provide more money to invest in the Service.

» **An increase of £5 per household** (for a Band D property*) would provide **£1.5 million** which would cover the projected funding shortfall for 2020/21.

» **An increase of three per cent per household** in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes (the most currently allowed by Government without a referendum) would provide **£600,000** and would cost an extra **£1.93 per year** for Band D property*. This would require BFRS to use its reserves to help cover the funding shortfall for 2020/21 and, depending on longer term funding settlements, could mean future reductions to frontline services.

» **No increase** in council tax would present a greater risk of BFRS having to make reductions to front-line services in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes.

Figure 5: Based on the information above, which of the following options would you prefer for the part of your council tax that funds BFRS during 2020-21?

£10 increase added to the current annual Band D*charge of £64.57	47%
No increase: Maintain the current annual Band D* charge of 64.57	[VALUE]
£5 increase added to the current annual Band D*charge of £64.57	15%
£1.93 (3 per cent) added to the current annual Band D*charge of £64.57	[VALUE]
Other option	13%

% of Respondents

Base: All Respondents (55)

3.15 Figure 5 (on the previous page) shows that nearly half (47%) of respondents would prefer a £10 increase for part of their council tax to fund BFRS during 2020-21. More than one eighth (15%) of respondents would prefer no increase, with the same (15%) proportion preferring a £5 increase. Less than one eighth (11%) of respondents would prefer a £1.93 increase, with 13% of respondents preferring another option.

3.16 Other options put forward were around raising funds through charging for false alarms and safety advice and training.

> *"Charge for special service calls and false alarms. If not in good intent, people have insurance claims of their insurance."*
>
> *"Have you considered potential income generation activities, diversifying the fire service – e.g. charging companies for fire safety advice, or training when the fire officers are not dealing with incidents, charging for the use of fire attendance at events, charging for continuing fault alarms? All public sector bodies are now having to find ways to plug the gaps and maximise resources, how is BFRS responding to this?"*

3.17 Some respondents did not give specific suggestions for how BFRS could raise funds, but simply wanted to see a general increase in funding from central government for the Fire and Rescue Service. Others raised concerns about other services also deciding to increase their council tax rates, which they argued some would not be able to afford.

> *"As much as I would like to pay the additional £10 per year for a great service to become even better, it's a question of 'will the police and council also be asking for a significant increase?' Which, if yes and it's granted, will mean some households falling below the poverty line and becoming vulnerable, therefore putting additional strains on all services and it becomes false economy."*

Other areas of interest

Figure 6: Have you identified any positive or negative impacts on human rights or any of the protected characteristics within the Public Safety Plan, that you believe should be taken into consideration?

3.18 In the four responses identifying impacts on human rights or protected characteristics within the Public Safety Plan, a concern was raised about the aging workforce of BFRS:

> *"Ageing workforce and the very demanding physical role that active firefighting plays. When determining budgets, the impact of such a job on the individual should be taken into account to ensure active fire fighters are not forced to continue working past the time that they feel is right for them."*

3.19 One respondent felt that there should be more focus on Buckinghamshire's disabled residents.

"I think BFRS could potentially pre-visit some properties, such as [the] block of flats at Buckingham View, which has a higher proportion of disabled residents."

3.20 There was also some concern about the lack of representation and diversity within BFRS:

"Yes, you have/are working with older people, but what about everyone else? What are you doing to break barriers and squash negative perceptions about the fire service being white male dominant?"

"The service should be inclusive to all regardless of protected characteristics, inclusivity and valuing diversity are key."

4. Focus Group Findings

Introduction

4.1 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 potentially repetitive mini-reports – but significant differences in views have been drawn out where appropriate.

Infrastructure

Overview of proposals

> **BFRS WILL…**
>
> **Consider temporarily relocating appliances/other resources during construction**
>
> **Continue to work with local authorities to understand the potential impact of development plans**
>
> **Ensure resources are in the right place**
>
> **Keep the current number of immediately/rapidly available appliances to maintain attendance times and capacity to deal with simultaneous larger incidents**

There was strong support for and confidence in BFRS' proposals

4.2 The proposals for mitigating against the risks associated with the infrastructure projects affecting Buckinghamshire were well received by participants, who described them as '*sensible*', '*flexible'* and '*responsive*'. Indeed, participants were confident that these strategies will effectively help in responding to BFRS' challenges.

> *"The four bullet points under infrastructure are a sensible approach to mitigating the risks."* (Chesham)
>
> *"Within financial constraints, the FRS appears to be working smart."* (Aylesbury)
>
> *"The plan appears flexible and responsive."* (Buckingham)
>
> "*The proposals seem sensible.*" (High Wycombe)
>
> *"We agree with the infrastructure proposals."* (Chesham)
>
> *"*[The proposals] *seem to be mitigating the challenges well by using flexible locations and flexible resourcing for firefighters."* (Chesham)

4.3 The High Wycombe group considered the temporary relocation of appliances and other resources to be particularly important, and sought reassurance that all areas of the town will be considered when BFRS implements its plans so that '*no one is disadvantaged'*.

> *"Having appliances in strategic locations and reviewing appropriateness would mitigate risks/challenges."* (High Wycombe)
>
> *"Relocating appliances in peak times will provide a quicker response and be very useful, especially in places like Handy Cross, so we agree with that."* (High Wycombe)

There were concerns around safety due to narrow roads, housing increases and roadworks

4.4 When asked if they had any specific concerns in relation to current and planned infrastructure changes, a reasonable proportion of participants identified narrow roads and often inconsiderate parking as issues that can result in difficult access for emergency vehicles.

> *"The roads are very narrow on the new developments - they're like a single track by the time people have parked their cars along the roads."* (Chesham)
>
> *"Narrow roads are a concern."* (Aylesbury)
>
> *"Single track roads caused by parking."* (Chesham)

4.5 There were also discussions around the increase in new housing across the county and how this may impact on road congestion and access, as well as concern about a growing number of HMOs. Moreover, a few participants were concerned that recent roadworks, for example on the M1, have caused collisions: they asked whether BFRS is involved with road change planning or offered opportunities to raise potential safety concerns.

> *"Increased population, road congestion, access issues, the lack of ring roads."* (Aylesbury)
>
> *"HMOs are increasing."* (Aylesbury)
>
> *"I go on the M1 every day and about a year ago it was closed about once a week because they were putting in the smart motorways. To me it seemed that the way they were doing the work was badly designed because accidents were happening frequently and in the same place - around J13 - which I'm sure you would have been called out to. Are you guys involved when they do road changes? Do you check what's going to make sure what they are doing is not more dangerous?"* (Milton Keynes)

There were concerns around population growth

4.6 There was also worry around whether current infrastructure can keep pace with population increases across the county.

> *"We are concerned that infrastructure is not going to keep up with the growth of population in the area. Therefore, response times will inevitably increase."* (High Wycombe)

There were concerns around cost and resourcing

4.7 Some participants questioned BFRS' ability to afford and resource its planned response to infrastructure risks and challenges. Indeed, it was deemed 'unfair' that the Service is required to fund mitigations when it has little say in development decisions, especially against the backdrop of austerity.

> *"Within the financial constraints they appear to be working quite smartly. But going forward, things like access issues, more HMOs, roadworks, congestion – then you can only see it getting harder for people to manage. I'm worried they don't have the resources to deal with it going forward."* (Aylesbury)
>
> *"A lot of our discussions kept coming back to finance and the unfairness of BFRS being expected to fund their projects. Funding cuts would be a significant risk!"* (Buckingham)
>
> *"Concern that infrastructure is not going to keep up with the growth of population in the area. Therefore, response times will inevitably increase."* (High Wycombe)

The importance of collaboration between BFRS, housing developers and local authorities was stressed

4.8 The High Wycombe group was particularly keen to suggest additional ways in which risk associated with infrastructure developments could be reduced. Many comments involved the need for BFRS to collaborate with housing developers and local authorities from an early stage so the Service is able to: raise any general safety concerns; ensure the usage of inflammable building materials and install fire safety devices; keep up-to-date with building legislation; help improve road access; and advise the public of changes and risks. Indeed, it was felt that BFRS should be continually 'part of the process' and able to have a say around planned infrastructure changes.

> *"Engage with new housing developments about making streets more accessible in the early stages."* (Milton Keynes)
>
> *"Building regulations are changing all the time; it's about making sure you* [BFRS] *are part of that process."* (High Wycombe)
>
> *"Working with the local authority…early communication with the fire brigade is essential to get our resources in the right place. Must all work together."* (High Wycombe)
>
> *"More consultation with housing developers about building materials etc."* (High Wycombe)

4.9 Other suggestions included more cross-border collaboration and working with other fire and rescue services to ensure response times are not affected by access issues, and BFRS having access to CCTV footage of motorways.

> *"More cross-border collaboration on procurement, technology etc. and with firefighters e.g. people across the border of Bucks may be closer to another fire/station."* (Chesham)

Population

Overview of proposals

> **BFRS WILL…**
>
> **Review station duty systems in high growth areas**
>
> **Continue to improve its ability to target/engage with vulnerable groups**
>
> **Possibly review its current response to automatic fire alarms (AFAs)**

Greater BFRS presence in the community, 'fire safety champions', advice lines and technology could further engagement with vulnerable groups

4.10 The consensus was that BFRS' engagement with people who are at higher risk from fire and other emergencies is positive, and the Service was praised for the work it puts into prevention. In response to being asked how the Service can further improve the way it targets and engages with vulnerable people, several suggestions were made. Interestingly, as the table below shows, the ideas ranged from BFRS having a greater community presence through regular visits and workshops, and encouraging others in the community to take more responsibility for the safety of vulnerable people or using technology such as smart speakers and advice helplines.

> Doing more to **bring health and social care together** by offering a joined-up approach - for example via more collaboration with charities and healthcare trusts
>
> Using best practice to **share information about vulnerable populations** within partnerships and with other services
>
> **Increasing its presence in the community** by 'patrolling' local areas and regularly visiting care homes, sheltered housing schemes and schools
>
> **Increasing its presence and awareness** more generally through media campaigning such as radio broadcasting
>
> Investing in the roll out of fire safety **'advocates' or 'champions'**
>
> Running community workshops and seminars to **educate people with vulnerable relatives, carers and volunteer**s on how to undertake 'basic safety checks'
>
> Undertaking **early intervention and prevention activities**, such as: actively identifying and offering vulnerable people a home safety visit; and educating the next generation in schools and social clubs
>
> **Encouraging the use of assistive technology** devices like 'Alexa' to help maintain safety and wellbeing without putting added pressure on the FRS or adult social care
>
> **Ensuring those with learning or physical disabilities are also a focus**, as well as the elderly

4.11 However, there was some concern that the combination of an ageing population and BFRS's lack of funding will place increasing pressure on the Service in continuing with its prevention work.

> *"We kept coming back to the issue of funding, and funding cuts would be a big risk."* (Buckingham)

> *"It's probably increasingly harder to engage and access all these people when even more care homes and extra care housing are being built."* (Chesham)

The attendance policy for automatic fire alarms (AFAs) should be reviewed

4.12 Although possible changes to AFA attendance are not included in the current Public Safety Plan, it may be a policy that BFRS consults on in future, so views around it were explored in the focus groups.

4.13 Participants recognised and understood the benefits of BFRS attending all AFAs, but agreed that the Service should at least review its current policy in order to fully assess its advantages and disadvantages.

> *"BFRS should review its policy and look at other counties who don't attend AFAs. Have their response rates been any worse? Is it a luxury Bucks can afford?"* (Chesham)
>
> *"Review the AFA response strategy."* (Milton Keynes)
>
> *"BFRS should definitely review."* (Aylesbury)
>
> *"We think it's great that you are reviewing the AFA strategy. Hopefully you will consider the size of the building and how that determines what your response should be. I do think the point about the benefits of going to the calls is also very important, but you would need to look at the cost-benefit ratio."* (Milton Keynes)
>
> *"There are social benefits of attending - advice, information etc. The cost/benefit impact needs to be thought about."* (Milton Keynes)

There was no overall commitment to ceasing attendance to AFAs, but support for only attending AFAs that have been confirmed as a real incident

4.14 Views on whether the policy should change, and in what way, varied. A few participants felt that BFRS should not attend AFAs at all, while others argued that three or more call-outs due to false alarms should result in a warning that the Service will no longer attend.

> *"There was general agreement in our group that we don't think they should be attending an automatic alarm."* (Buckingham)
>
> *"I don't think they should be attending an unconfirmed automatic alarm."* (Buckingham)
>
> *"After three times of being called out by a business, don't attend anymore. Give them a warning."* (High Wycombe)
>
> *"BFRS must attend AFAs - there could be serious damage or loss of life. After multiple call outs they should be given a warning."* (High Wycombe)

4.15 However, the majority reasoned that attendance should continue, but only if evidence is provided to indicate a real fire - for example via a confirmation phone call from a dedicated member of staff or a member of the public. The Buckingham group also discussed using technology to confirm whether or not there is a real incident via 'smart smoke alarms' and drones.

> *"Propose calling the sites where automatic alarms are raised to get positive feedback of whether fire service is required."* (High Wycombe)

> *"Agree with AFAs requiring a property owner becoming responsible to have a dedicated call-out personnel to verify alarm to assist."* (Buckingham)
>
> *"I think there should be a call for it to be backed up, otherwise I'm happy for the FRS to not attend."* (Aylesbury)

Businesses need to take more responsibility and improve their equipment and training

4.16 It was suggested that businesses should take more responsibly - and that those who repeatedly call out BFRS to AFA false alarms should be fined or disciplined. Moreover, some felt that non-domestic properties should be compelled to ensure they have the most up-to-date smoke alarms and other safety devices, while others felt that staff should be trained to prevent and deal with AFAs caused by false alarms to avoid BFRS being alerted.

> *"Charge for the service (if false alarm)."* (Aylesbury)
>
> *"Fine repeat offenders."* (Aylesbury)
>
> *"Discipline users by removing the service."* (Aylesbury)
>
> *"If they keep calling out you out and using your resources, fine them. It their* (businesses) *responsibility."* (High Wycombe)
>
> *"It just sounds like there needs to be better alarm systems."* (High Wycombe)
>
> *"Could you have better equipment in places like hospitals so that you don't have to be called out for things like a toaster? And also train staff to deal with it."* (Milton Keynes)

Technology and civil emergencies

Overview of proposals

> **Technology**
>
> **BFRS WILL…**
>
> **Continue to improve security and resilience of information/communication systems**
>
> **Identify and resolve gaps to keep pace with new/emerging risks**
>
> **Monitor new technologies/systems for opportunities e.g. 5G cellular network, artificial intelligence, robotics etc.**
>
> **Civil emergencies**
>
> **BFRS WILL…**
>
> **Review its current capacity/capability to meet emerging risks (with partners, including other FRSs)**
>
> **Review its approach to responding to terrorist attacks involving improvised weapons and/or firearms**
>
> **Continue to reduce its carbon footprint**
>
> **Utilise solar panels at HQ**
>
> **Ensure the new Blue Light Hub will be 'environmentally-efficient'**
>
> **Potentially introduce electric support vehicles**

There was widespread agreement with the proposals and discussions around opportunities

4.17 There was widespread agreement across all five groups that the proposals for technology and civil emergencies are sensible and that it is important for the service to *'move with the times'* in terms of monitoring and responding to risks.

> *"You've got to embrace to new technologies like social media – use the more day-to-day type of things."* (High Wycombe)
>
> *"I think the prevention stuff with tech is great, particularly as there's so much social media."* (High Wycombe)
>
> *"It's essential to invest in mitigating against the risks. Hybrid cars are using 48 volts, which are extremely dangerous – especially when you put water in them."* (Milton Keynes)

4.18 Participants were particularly interested to hear about how specific technologies such as drones and autonomous vehicles are being developed and utilised within Buckinghamshire and by BFRS. For example, it was reasoned that the increased use of autonomous vehicles could potentially safeguard BFRS resources by being used for, say, pumping flood water (rather than a crewed appliance). It was also questioned whether BFRS would be required to attend incidents involving driverless vehicles.

> *"I've only had experience with the FRS once and that was during a flood. I thought that might be where autonomous vehicles come in useful. People could book like they do with those little robots we have in Milton Keynes, where you can order your own pumping. It might mean you can get the water pumped out quicker, but it would also be less expensive because it doesn't have to be manned."* (Milton Keynes)
>
> *"I'd be interested to know that, in the future, whether the FRS would go to a traffic accident if it were a driverless vehicle?"* (Aylesbury)

4.19 Others discussed drone technology and whether it could be used to capture aerial view images of incidents such as large-scale fires or to deliver defibrillators. In addition, a participant from Milton Keynes was keen to know how technology could be used to improve and develop the communication network among emergency services during civil emergencies.

> *"Could use some sort of aerial platform to an* [observation] *of a fire incident, like a drone?"* (High Wycombe)
>
> *"Drones dropping defibrillators is popular in the Netherlands – is this something* [BFRS] *would consider?"* (High Wycombe)
>
> *"What about things like fire service drones with cameras? Do you have those?"* (Milton Keynes)
>
> *"I have a question around technology and communication network in a civil emergency. From an army and an air force perspective, soldiers on the ground are now able to talk to planes in the sky. Something like that would be useful – having some way of talking to each other."* (Milton Keynes)

4.20 It was also suggested that information and advice could be better communicated to the public around ways in which they can help prevent civil emergencies, as well as what to do if one happens.

There were concerns around the complexities of implementing the proposals and the safety of smart motorways

4.21 It was acknowledged - especially by the Milton Keynes group - that responding to these challenges and opportunities may not be straightforward for BFRS. Indeed, there was some concern around cost, and a few comments were made around whether money spent on things such as electric vehicles and solar panels should instead be invested in frontline services. It was also questioned whether the increasing need to respond to new technological risks would change the traditional skill sets required of firefighters, with more complex specifications.

> *"Investing in all these new technologies must be a challenge for BFRS because the introduction of new technology means you've got change transformation which is difficult to handle…"* (Milton Keynes)
>
> *"Sounds expensive replacing vehicles and equipment with electric stuff."* (Chesham)
>
> *"To me, solar panels feel like a 'nice to have' versus …do you need more fire engines? I'm just thinking of the balance between being green and saving lives."* (Chesham)
>
> *"I was also thinking in terms of your workforce and the impacts on that. Will all this new technology mean the skill sets required will need to be different? A generic fireman might not be able to be a generic fireman anymore? It's becoming more complicated."* (Milton Keynes)

4.22 The Chesham group expressed particular safety concerns around the use of the hard shoulder as an extra lane during busy periods on smart motorways, and the lack of access for both emergency vehicles and for members of the public needing to pull over in the event of issues.

> *"I've heard that as part of the smart motorways, the hard shoulder is being got rid of... It seems terribly unsafe... I've heard about people being killed on the 'smart' bit. Where are cars going to go if they have a problem?! And there is no room for emergency services."* (Chesham)
>
> *"Do the smart motorways understand when there is an emergency vehicle needing the hard shoulder?"* (Chesham)

Workforce and funding

Overview of proposals

> **Workforce**
>
> **BFRS WILL CONTINUE TO…**
>
> **Develop/roll-out more flexible and innovative employment and apprenticeship opportunities**
>
> **Use more innovative marketing to attract staff from wider range of backgrounds**
>
> **Continue to explore ways of supporting/enhancing health and wellbeing of staff as life circumstances change**
>
> **Further develop the role of the on-call firefighter**
>
> **Funding**
>
> **BFRS will continue to lobby for greater council tax setting flexibility**

There was agreement with the workforce proposals and the importance of using social media for recruitment

4.23 Participants felt that BFRS is taking the correct approach in responding to workforce. They particularly supported flexible working hours, apprenticeships and targeted recruitment for a more diverse workforce. Additional suggestions as to how the service could improve retention and recruitment included: allowing career breaks; networking with universities and schools; and attending employment fairs. Using social media to garner interest in the fire and rescue service in order to reach a wider demographic of people was also a popular recommendation.

There was agreement with increasing council tax rates by more than 3% and particular support for a one-off increase of £10 per household (for a Band D property)

4.24 Participants were given information about BFRS' current and future financial challenges, which mainly focused on (but was not limited to): the significant reductions in government funding; the fact BFRS has the lowest council tax rates of any Combined Fire Authority (CFA) in the country; and the government's current council tax rate cap of 3%. A summary of how BFRS has responded to these challenges thus far was also provided.

4.25 The groups were then asked whether they agreed or disagreed that BFRS should be able to increase council tax by more than 3% to maintain or improve its services. In response, the largest proportion said they would not only support this, but also that they would be willing to pay a one-off £10 increase to raise the council tax base. Moreover, a few said they agreed with paying enough to ensure BFRS' council tax rates are in line with the national average.

Current council tax levels were considered too low compared to other combined fire authorities

4.26 In general, current council tax rates were considered too low. Indeed, many participants were shocked to see how much money BFRS yields from council tax compared to other combined fire authorities and rationalised that it makes sense to bring the charge closer in line with the national average. BFRS was also considered a 'worthy' cause to be spending money on, and many participants said they would 'gladly' pay more towards the Service. Some of the many typical comments were:

> *"Council Tax is too low in Bucks in general for such a wealthy county."* (Chesham)
>
> *"Because you've done so well to keep costs down, you're almost being penalised for it?! Really the one-time increase is just to get you to more of an even level/in line with others."* (Chesham)
>
> *"Yes, I agree! It is surprising and shocking how low it is."* (Buckingham)
>
> *"Happy to give £10 as a one-off." (*Chesham)
>
> *"We agree to a one off £10 increase."* (Aylesbury)
>
> *"Agree with increase to national average."* (Buckingham)
>
> *"General consensus is a yes to paying £5 or £10 one-off payment to keep current services/improve funding."* (Milton Keynes)
>
> *"£10 one off payment – would gladly pay."* (Milton Keynes)

> *"We would pay £10 as a one off because we think it's worth supporting."* (Aylesbury)
>
> *"We thought an increase to national average – pretty unanimously."* (Buckingham)
>
> *"It doesn't seem right that there's such a discrepancy between our fire service and another."* (Buckingham)

4.27   There was also concern about the possible reduction or removal of non-statutory services, with one participant asking: *'if you (BFRS) don't provide these services, who will?'*

There were caveats and questions around the additional money generated from housing growth and possible increases to council tax for other services

4.28   Some of the support for a council tax increase was accompanied by caveats, questions and concerns. A main query was around the amount of housing development across the county, and whether the increase in households paying council tax would significantly help in providing more funding for BFRS, thus resulting in less need to increase rates.

> *"Isn't some of the concern around council tax offset by all the building work going on?"* (Chesham)
>
> *"What about the increase in population/households?"* (Aylesbury)
>
> *"Agree with increasing council tax by more than 3%, but it must be related/limited by the increase in house building."* (Chesham)

4.29   There was also concern that an increase to the BFRS portion of council tax may be the 'thin edge of the wedge' insofar as it may encourage other services to increase their precept too. Moreover, a few participants from Milton Keynes acknowledged that although they could afford to pay an extra £10, others may not.

> *"Personally, I'd be happy to give you a tenner, but I do accept the fact I can afford to do that. Not everyone is fortunate to be able to do that."* (Milton Keynes)
>
> *"I worry that the 3% uplift…every other service will want to do the same. As councils are strapped for cash at the moment, you can see that it wouldn't play well. But I think if you could sell it that in fact we are paying the least for our fire service in the whole country and it is under threat because we are paying so little for it…"* (Chesham)

4.30   In light of these concerns, the Chesham group considered it important that BFRS thinks carefully about how it 'sells' the proposal to increase council tax to the public, particularly in terms of explaining its disproportionally low rates compared to other combined authorities.

> *"I agree, as long as you sold it as it is disproportionately disadvantaging you because of it (paying less than other combined authorities)."* (Chesham)

Introducing a one-off council tax increase payment is a short-term fix. It is also too complex an issue to deliver a view on in a short space of time

4.31   Some participants at Aylesbury and High Wycombe said they probably would not support a council tax increase of more than 3% because of the points noted above: more money will be collected

through the rise in housing developments; and salaries are not keeping pace with council tax rates (a particular issue if multiple services all decide to increase their precepts). BFRS was also urged to *'live within its means'* - and there was a feeling that a one-off council tax payment increase would not solve funding issues in the long-term.

> *"We all have to live within our allocated budget – if we have to do it, BFRS should too."* (Aylesbury)
>
> *"I don't agree on more than 3% - with rising population you have more people to contribute anyway. We think it should increase to the cap – no more."* (Aylesbury)
>
> *"This year you could be that service asking for an extra £10, but next year it could be the ambulance service, then the police …when does it stop. I think this is a bigger issue that needs to be taken higher up."* (High Wycombe)
>
> *"A one-off payment may help for a couple of years but it won't solve the problems."* (High Wycombe)

4.32 A few at Aylesbury felt that the question around council tax was too complex to decide upon in such a short space of time and without more information.

> *"I think you're asking hugely important questions without enough info. It's all very rushed. I also think you're asking leading questions. Maybe focus on this issue in greater depth and more briefings."* (Aylesbury)

4.33 Moreover, a few participants argued that it is not as simple as agreeing or disagreeing to a council tax increase, and that their decision would be largely based on how the additional funding would be invested.

> *"I will only pay if I see some clear accountability of where the money is going."* (High Wycombe)
>
> *"I would pay £10 but only if it went towards supporting vulnerable people, but not businesses (i.e. response to businesses in terms of false alarms)."* (Milton Keynes)
>
> *"This is the cart before the horse. We don't know what you'd spend this money on? Would it be staff or other things? It just feels meaningless when we don't know the facts."* (Aylesbury)

Additional and alternative suggestions were offered

4.34 Some alternative or additional ways in which BFRS could increase its funding were suggested by a minority of participants, which included:

> Seeking funding from HS2 contractors (Chesham)
>
> Cutting back on non-statutory services (Aylesbury)
>
> Attending fewer false alarm calls (Milton Keynes)
>
> Introducing increased charges for businesses (Milton Keynes)
>
> Charging for services that are over and above statutory provision (Buckingham)

> Restructuring BFRS and merging with others to create a 'Thames Valley Fire Service'
> (Chesham)

Other comments

4.35 In terms of the information provided to the groups around funding challenges, a participant in Buckingham praised the material as *'intelligent and informative'*, although another in Milton Keynes felt that the information demonstrating that BFRS receives less funding from council tax than other combined fire authorities is 'misleading' as the chart did not include demographic populations or the relative number of properties other than 'D'.

5.   Table of Figures

Tables

Figures