



Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service

Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 2025-2030: Public Engagement

Report of findings

July 2023



Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service

Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 2025 – 2030: Public Engagement

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Opinion Research Services (ORS) is pleased to have worked with Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service (BFRS) on the five engagement focus groups reported here. The diverse participants engaged with the issues and discussed their ideas readily, so we trust that this report of findings will help to inform service planning.

We thank BFRS for commissioning the project as part of its on-going regular programme of public engagement and consultation about its risk management planning. We particularly thank the senior officers and staff who attended the sessions to listen to the public's views and answer questions. Such meetings benefit considerably from the readiness to answer participants' questions fully and frankly, as in this case.

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.

1. Key Findings

Key engagement findings

Overview of the engagement

- 1.1 Below are the key findings from a series of five focus groups (convened and facilitated by Opinion Research Services) with 40 members of the public from across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. The focus groups were designed to help Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service (BFRS) develop its Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) for 2025 – 2030. 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.

Awareness and perceptions

Perception of risk

- 1.2 Participants were initially asked for their thoughts on the biggest issues and risks facing them and their communities. The key concerns raised across the groups were the cost-of-living crisis and a lack of affordable housing; climate change; crime and anti-social behaviour; access to public services like healthcare; and the potential consequences of national and global political uncertainty and division.
- 1.3 Few people spontaneously raised fire risk as a concern, though it was widely discussed in the context of increasing wildfires and the risks posed by 'cheap imports'. In relation to the latter, when informed about the increasing prevalence of e-bike and e-scooter fires and asked to consider other emerging risks facing fire and rescue services, it was agreed that anything containing a lithium-ion battery could pose a risk, though vapes and electric cars were most mentioned. It was widely recognised, however, that it is not necessarily the batteries that are the issue, but the preponderance of devices using counterfeit or cheap imports that have not undergone the relevant safety checks.

Infrastructure changes

- 1.4 There was generally good awareness of major infrastructure developments such as HS2, which is clearly still contentious in some areas of Buckinghamshire. Residents remain concerned about the disruption and a loss of countryside and wildlife habitat for what they see as little benefit, and about the impact of such large-scale construction on Buckinghamshire's roads.
- 1.5 Participants in all groups commented on 'excessive' housing development across the county currently, as well as the apparent lack of corresponding infrastructure development in the form of roads and transport, schools, healthcare etc. In the context of BFRS, a particular issue raised was that of inconsiderate parking on new developments, and the impact of this on emergency service access and response times.

Awareness of BFRS

- 1.6 Participants were asked how much they knew about BFRS and what it does. Knowledge was mixed, but people were typically aware that the Service attends a range of incidents in addition to fires - as well as undertaking preventative and educational outreach work, inspecting and advising commercial premises, fire investigation, offering national resilience for civil emergencies, and assisting other emergency services.

- 1.7 When asked whether they knew where their nearest fire station is and how it is crewed, most participants were aware of the former, but not of the latter.
- 1.8 There was very little awareness of BFRS's response times. In terms of expectation, most of those living in urban areas said they would expect a response in under ten minutes, whereas those in more rural areas were aware that they would likely wait longer. Indeed, there was general recognition that response times would be influenced by several factors like location and time of day.
- 1.9 It should be noted that people's general unawareness of crewing systems can lead to unrealistic expectations of response times. For example, some of those living close to an on-call station assumed that they would receive a response in around five minutes, not knowing that on-call firefighters are not on station and must travel there before attending an incident. Moreover, in most groups there was a perception that incidents are triaged or 'graded' by fire control according to severity.
- 1.10 When asked if they knew how BFRS is funded and how much they pay towards it, most participants were aware that the two main sources of income are council tax and central Government funding. However, few knew how much the Service costs to run, or how much they pay for it via council tax. When informed that the 2023/24 Band D charge is £77.16, this was universally considered to be value for money.

Perceptions of BFRS

- 1.11 When asked for their general impressions of BFRS and the fire and rescue service nationally, participants were typically positive, though few had specific experience of the Service to influence this view. In the absence of direct contact, people were asked why they felt so well-disposed toward BFRS. The comments made suggest a positive view of those who work in the emergency services more generally, though the 'danger' aspect of firefighting was thought to command particular respect.
- 1.12 Following the general conversation around perceptions, participants were asked about their awareness of recent negative media coverage of bullying, harassment, and discrimination (including racism and misogyny) within fire and rescue services. None were aware of the reports and articles shown, which many attributed to them being overshadowed by constant articles about police misconduct.
- 1.13 When asked whether these stories might influence their perceptions of the fire and rescue service, opinions were mixed. Some felt that they are clearly damaging to the service's reputation, and that more needs to be done to address the underlying reasons for unacceptable behaviour. For example, a few female participants felt that a degree of misogyny is bound to arise within male-dominated professions like fire and rescue, and within the 'groups' that tend to form in large, homogeneous organisations.
- 1.14 Others, however, seemed to misunderstand the 'institutional' aspect of some of the reviews and allegations mentioned, describing those being complained against as a few "*bad apples*". One possible explanation for this is the perception that is instilled in people from a very early age of firefighters as 'heroes.' It was said to be much more difficult to accept poor behaviour among those we have put on a pedestal, meaning negative reports of fire and rescue service cultures can be more readily dismissed.
- 1.15 In terms of what might be done to address issues of concern, some participants suggested more thorough recruitment processes using psychometric testing and examinations of social media to determine a person's values for example. And despite some participants' dismissal of such behaviour as 'banter', many others recognised the need to take a zero-tolerance approach to any form of discrimination (either in person or within WhatsApp groups).

Current and future challenges

Workforce diversity

- 1.16 Participants were informed that BFRS was inspected by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) in 2021, who identified that it, *'Hasn't made enough progress since the last inspection to improve equality, diversity and inclusion'*. When asked whether this is important, opinion was mixed.
- 1.17 Several participants made comments like, 'What does skin colour or gender matter for putting out a fire?', highlighting that operational response continues to dominate people's thought processes when considering the role of the fire and rescue service. This suggests that better explanations are needed as to why diversifying the workforce is important, not least in improving the effectiveness of prevention and education work within certain communities.
- 1.18 It was recognised that several factors may have influenced the lack of diversity within BFRS, not least the long-term recruitment freeze, and the fact that many staff are 'long-termers'. Taken together, these two issues were thought to contribute to BFRS's workforce not keeping pace with societal changes.
- 1.19 In terms of what more BFRS could do to encourage a more representative workforce, visits to schools, colleges and local cultural events were suggested, to explain that fire and rescue services can offer a variety of different roles, not just firefighting. Indeed, it was suggested that the Service follow the Army's lead in developing a campaign that highlights the various careers it can offer.
- 1.20 This is especially important considering the issues raised by a couple of participants in Milton Keynes, who said that they and others from Black and Asian backgrounds would typically not consider operational firefighting for cultural reasons. They were of the view that while attracting Black and Asian recruits will continue to be challenging, highlighting the non-operational roles available would help.
- 1.21 On a related note, it was said that the fire and rescue service is simply not seen as a desirable career option within some cultures, nor is it yet considered a viable one by many females. Regarding the gender issue, one female participant working in the technology industry said she was recruited into tech via a targeted campaign and suggested that BFRS look at what is being done elsewhere to recruit women into traditionally male-dominated industries.
- 1.22 Finally, and crucially, addressing any issues with racism and misogyny was considered essential if fire and rescue services are to stand any chance of diversifying their workforces. However, there is something of a 'catch-22' situation in that there is a reluctance among minority ethnic groups to join the Service for fear of experiencing racism within a largely White workforce; but only by diversifying that workforce will it be viewed as a more inclusive environment that can nurture and develop role models for future recruits.

The future of the on-call service

- 1.23 Participants were informed that the traditional on-call model used in rural areas is increasingly difficult to maintain due to a decline in occupations from which on-call staff were traditionally recruited; fewer working age people being available during the day in villages and small towns; and changing lifestyles. To address this, BFRS has developed a series of four options, with participants asked for their views on whether the Service should consider their inclusion in its forthcoming CRMP.
- 1.24 The first two options are 1) instead of on-call staff being attached to a specific local fire engine, consolidate them into a larger pool to improve the overall number of engines available for 'resilience' and/or provide relief crews for extended or multiple incidents; and 2) replace 'difficult to crew' on-call fire engines in

more remote rural locations with smaller four-wheel drive vehicles for first response to, for example, outdoor fires. These options were most favoured.

- 1.25 There was less but still some support for Option 3 (re-locate ‘difficult to crew’ on-call appliances to urban areas where they would be held in reserve for ‘resilience’), and mixed views on Option 4 (rebalance resources in favour of more wholetime and/or day crew provision). Some felt the latter should be considered even if it would mean a smaller fleet overall, whereas others rejected it due to cost.

Automatic Fire Alarms (AFAs)

- 1.26 HMICFRS has suggested (in its 2021 inspection of BFRS), that the Service should review its response to AFAs, which it currently responds to as an emergency ‘on blue lights’. In light of this, the Service has developed a series of five options, which participants were asked to comment on.
- 1.27 Participants were divided on whether BFRS should consider making changes to its AFA procedures. Those who felt it should continue to respond to all AFAs as an emergency (Option 5) considered it too risky to do otherwise, both operationally and reputationally.
- 1.28 If the Service does wish to make changes, although there was some support for Option 1 (only attend an AFA if an actual fire is reported or the owner/occupiers of the building cannot be contacted), Option 2 (attend all AFAs in high-risk premises and AFAs in lower-risk premises when an actual fire is reported, or the owner/occupier of the building cannot be contacted) was most favoured. Options 3 (attend all AFAs in high-risk premises and AFAs in lower-risk premises when an actual fire is reported) and 4 (respond to AFAs at normal road speed [i.e., on ‘non-blue lights’]) received least support.

BFRS’s Vision

- 1.29 BFRS’ Vision is ‘To make Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes the safest areas in England in which to live, work and travel’. The vast majority of participants agreed that it is still appropriate.

A name change?

- 1.30 As Milton Keynes has achieved city status, participants were asked whether Buckinghamshire FRS should change its name to, say, Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes FRS. While some agreed that doing so would demonstrate inclusivity, more were opposed to a name change on the grounds of cost.

Information provision

- 1.31 Finally, participants were asked what information about or from BFRS would most interest them. The most common preferences were for live incident updates, safety advice, job opportunities, and performance statistics.

2. The Engagement Process

Overview of the engagement

Background to the engagement

- 2.1 'Community Risk Management Planning' is the development of a balanced approach by Fire and Rescue Services to reducing risk within the community. This is achieved by combining Prevention, Protection and Emergency Response, on a risk-assessed basis, in order to improve community safety and create a safer working environment for firefighters.
- 2.2 Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service (BFRS) is beginning to develop its Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) for 2025 – 2030 and is seeking input from a range of stakeholders, including members of the public, on how it might provide fire and rescue services during this period. The purpose of the focus groups reported here was to allow BFRS to engage with, and listen to, members of the public about some important issues - so that participants would become more informed about the Service and its current and future challenges; but also so that discussions around people's perceptions of risk and ideas about their fire and rescue service could inform its planning for the future.
- 2.3 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. This very early-stage consultation programme conforms to the Gunning Principles, which require, above all, that engagement and consultation should be at a 'formative stage', before authorities make decisions.

The commission

- 2.4 Opinion Research Services (ORS) - a spin-out company from Swansea University with a UK-wide reputation for social research - was appointed to convene, facilitate and report five focus groups with members of the public: two face-to-face (in Aylesbury and Milton Keynes); and three online (covering the North, East/West and South of the county). Pre-consultation listening and engagement and formal consultation meetings have been undertaken with residents across Buckinghamshire on a regular cycle; and in this context ORS has facilitated similar focus groups for the Service for many years.

Deliberative engagement

Focus groups

- 2.5 The focus group meetings reported here used a 'deliberative' approach that encouraged members of the public to reflect in depth about the discussion issues while both receiving and questioning extensive background information. The fact that the groups were part of an 'early stage engagement' rather than 'formal consultation' process was stressed: participants were told they would be discussing some generic issues and 'testing' BFRS's ideas for how it might provide services over the lifetime of its next CRMP, rather than discussing any firm proposals.

- 2.6 The meetings lasted for around two hours and in total there were 40 diverse participants. The dates of the meetings and attendance levels by members of the public at each focus group are as shown in the table below.

FOCUS GROUP	DATE	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES
Buckinghamshire South (online)	12th June 2023	8
Milton Keynes (face-to-face)	13th June 2023	10
Buckinghamshire Central (face-to-face)	14th June 2023	7
Buckinghamshire North (online)	21st June 2023	8
Buckinghamshire East/West (online)	21st June 2023	7

- 2.7 The attendance target for each of the focus groups was 8 people – so the total of 40 participants was on-target.
- 2.8 Participants were recruited by Acumen Field, a specialist recruitment agency, who initially sent out a screening questionnaire as an online survey to a database of contacts and, more widely, on social media platforms. They then collated the responses to establish a pool of potential recruits, which was ‘sifted’ to establish a contact list. People were then contacted by telephone, asked to complete a more detailed screening questionnaire and either recruited or not to match the required quotas. Those recruited were sent all the necessary details in a confirmation email and telephoned a day or two before the events to confirm their attendance.
- 2.9 In recruitment, care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by disabilities or any other factors. The recruitment process was monitored to ensure social diversity in terms of a wide range of criteria including, for example: gender; age; working status; and disability/limiting long-term illness (LLTI). Overall, as demonstrated in the table below, participants represented a broad cross-section of residents – and as standard good practice, people were recompensed for their time and efforts in and taking part.

GENDER	AGE	LIMITING ILLNESS OR DISABILITY	ETHNIC GROUP
Male: 18 Female: 22	16 - 24: 4 25 - 39: 14 40 – 54: 12 55+: 10	8	White British: 27 Asian/Asian British: 6 Black/Black British: 3 White Irish: 2 White European: 2

- 2.10 Although, like all other forms of qualitative engagement, deliberative focus groups cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the meetings reported here gave diverse members of the public the opportunity to participate actively. Because the meetings were inclusive, the outcomes are broadly indicative of how informed opinion would incline on the basis of similar discussions.

The agenda

- 2.11 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 risks in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes;

BFRS' new and emerging risks;

People's awareness and perceptions of BFRS and the fire and rescue service nationally;

BFRS' staffing and resources, activity, response times, and funding – and whether the Service represents value for money; and

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

- 2.12 Participants were encouraged to ask questions throughout, and the meetings were thorough and truly deliberative in listening to and responding openly to a wide range of evidence and issues.

The report

- 2.13 This report reviews the sentiments and judgements of respondents and participants on how BFRS might deliver its services in future. 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 any opinions but seeks only to portray them accurately and clearly. The report is an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants.

3. Focus Group Findings

Detailed engagement findings

Introduction

- 3.1 This chapter reports the views from five deliberative focus groups with members of the public across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, which were independently facilitated by ORS. The meeting format followed a pre-determined topic guide which allowed space for a general discussion of the key questions under consideration. A series of information slides were shared at set points during the sessions, which ensured that participants had sufficient background information to actively deliberate on the issues.
- 3.2 This is not a verbatim transcript of the five sessions, but an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants in free-ranging discussions - and as the focus groups did not differ materially in their views, this report combines the findings from all the meetings in a single account.
- 3.3 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

- 3.4 As an introductory exercise, participants were 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.
- 3.5 The key concerns raised across the groups related to financial uncertainty, with people mainly worrying about the cost-of-living crisis and a lack of affordable housing, especially for young people.

“The cost-of-living crisis ... People having to prioritise food over heating or vice versa. There are a lot of old people in my area, and I worry about their health especially” (Buckinghamshire South)

“Cost-of-living but more about house prices. They are increasing so much. If I want to move out, I would have to start saving now” (Aylesbury)
- 3.6 The other main concern highlighted in all groups was climate change and, in the context of the discussion, the implications of this for the fire and rescue service in the form of more frequent and severe wildfires. Worry about the environment was particularly acute among parents, who said that they often worry about the world in which their children and grandchildren will be living in. Some of the many typical comments can be seen overleaf.

“The environment, the planet, and fires ... it’s a big concern for me that humankind is not taking it seriously enough. We need to start dealing with it” (Aylesbury)

“Climate change is a concern for me. I think we’ve all seen more extreme weather. Yesterday we had blazing sun then five minutes later we had the most amazing storm with hailstones ... That obviously impacts the fire and rescue services. Last year we saw the wildfires where houses were burning down, for the first time in the UK I can remember. That seems to be an increasing threat to our society and a risk” (Buckinghamshire South)

“I think the biggest risk is climate change, particularly if you’re thinking of 2025-30 ... Last year we already saw temperatures of over 40 degrees and spontaneous fires breaking out ... In terms of flooding, we’ve had thunderstorms over the last week. I have a sewage tank and that was the first time the tank was full ... in more than 20 years” (Buckinghamshire East/West)

- 3.7 It should be noted, though, that concern about environmental issues is not a day-to-day concern for most. That is, rather than actively worrying about it, participants described more of an awareness of it as a significant global issue that must be tackled. In fact, only one person said they were taking steps above and beyond the day-to-day (i.e., recycling) to try and mitigate against the risks.

“We’re taking active steps to rewild the garden, installing a heat pump, solar panels, looking into installing batteries and making changes to the way we spend money on goods and services, trying to make sure we’re not contributing to the problem” (Buckinghamshire East/West)

- 3.8 The impact of crime and antisocial behaviour was raised in each group: participants highlighted incidents like drug dealing, theft and burglary, and arson in their local areas. Many felt that such activity is on the rise, heightening their worry about it; worry that was again particularly acute for those with children (teenagers wanting more independence especially).

“... You’re seeing safe areas starting to change. I’ve got a young son ... It’s on top of me as he starts to get older and wants more independence” (Buckinghamshire East/West)

“The thing I think about the most is crime and safety in the area we live in. It’s a nice area but it’s changed over the years. I worry about my two teenagers and their safety. You hear a lot of things going on ... Things have changed recently” (Buckinghamshire South)

- 3.9 Coupled with this was an alleged drop in levels of respect for the authorities (and indeed fellow citizens) over recent years. It was said that this *“brings standards down, and when standards start to drop, it’s very hard to pick them up again. It’s a slippery slope.”* (Buckinghamshire South)

- 3.10 The potential consequences of current political uncertainty and division (nationally and globally) was a concern for some, as was the impact of public spending reductions on access to public services like healthcare.

“I do worry about the uncertainty and instability in the political landscape ... and what that could lead to. There’s so much division; where does it end? In civil unrest?” (Milton Keynes)

“I worry about it the government’s reluctance to invest in our services across all public sectors. That’s what worries me most. We’re slowly privatising services” (Buckinghamshire East/West)

- 3.11 Of particular worry was the lack of support for mental health and wellbeing issues, which were thought to have been exacerbated among adults and especially children by the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns.

- 3.12 Few participants spontaneously raised fire risk as a concern, though one Milton Keynes participant is a fire warden at work and so has a heightened sense of awareness of the need to take precautions in the form of smoke alarms and escape routes; another felt that having small children is another reason why a fear of fire may be more acute; and another couple said it is something people only really think about as a result of personal experience.

“... I have put a washing basket with clothes in it on a hot electric hob and just left it and then the whole house was in smoke ... Once you make a mistake you are thinking about it but prior to it you are not aware of the situation ...” (Milton Keynes)

“I’ve never actually personally been affected and needed ... the fire service. Until it happens to me, I don’t think I’ll be scared because I feel like I’m in good hands...” (Buckinghamshire South)

- 3.13 Fire risk was, however, widely discussed within the context of the focus group - with participants raising issues around wildfires; the dangers of ‘cheap imports’ (reported in more detail below); and intensified feelings of risk following high-profile tragedies like Grenfell. Similarly, terror attacks are typically a significant worry in the immediate aftermath of an incident, as underlined by the fact that the Aylesbury and Milton Keynes focus groups happened at the time of the attacks in Nottingham City, meaning these were raised at both sessions.

“You look at the news and you just don’t know who you might come across ... It frightens the life out of me” (Aylesbury)

- 3.14 This highlights that what a person worries about is ultimately influenced not only by their personal circumstances, but also what happens to be in the public eye (and thus consciousness) at any given time.

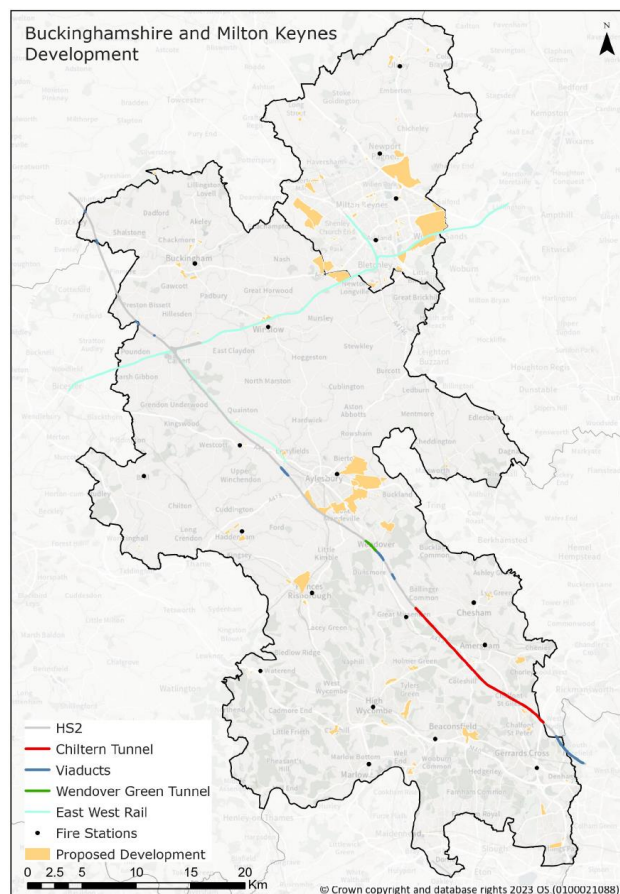
Infrastructure changes

- 3.15 There was generally good awareness of major infrastructure developments such as HS2, which is clearly still contentious in some areas of Buckinghamshire. Residents remain concerned about the disruption and a loss of countryside and wildlife habitat for what they see as little benefit.

“... It’s just not fair that it’s tearing up all of our countryside and it’s not even stopping here; it’s not going to benefit us in any way, and we’ve got to go through all these problems” (Buckinghamshire North)

- 3.16 Moreover, a few participants complained about the impact of developments like HS2 on Buckinghamshire’s roads, which were considered worse than those in many other parts of the country as a result.

“Two of the biggest infrastructure projects in the country are just down the road and the state of the roads is horrendous ... I drive 50 to 60,000 miles a year ... and the roads locally are significantly worse than roads around other parts of the country ...” (Buckinghamshire North)



- 3.17 Participants in all groups commented on what they saw as the excessive amount of housing development across the county currently. Indeed, while there were concerns about affordable housing shortages (as reported above), the impact of addressing these via significant housing growth was a worry - particularly in relation to an apparent lack of corresponding infrastructure development in the form of roads and transport, schools, healthcare etc.

“There is lots of building work ... It has many areas of impact with traffic infrastructure, places at schools and a whole manner of different things” (Aylesbury)

“There’s so much development and no infrastructure alongside it, like doctors, schools, hospitals, dentists” (Buckinghamshire North)

- 3.18 It should be noted, though, that a few people said they would feel more well-disposed toward new developments if they were to offer affordable options, allowing local people (young people especially) the opportunity to start laying down their roots in Buckinghamshire.

“... If the developments were affordable housing, particularly for professionals like me, I’d be easy about it. It frustrated me when [they] were proposed; there doesn’t seem to be any affordable housing. It makes me feel transient in terms of my relationship with Buckinghamshire. I can’t afford to buy a house here so I’m not investing in the whole county” (Buckinghamshire East/West)

- 3.19 In the context of BFRS, a particular issue raised was that of inconsiderate parking within new developments, and the impact of this on emergency service access and response times.

“Parking is an issue. You cannot get emergency vehicles down the road where I am because on a daily basis, people park on both sides of the road ... When there was a garage fire it was a nightmare because you were knocking on every door trying to move people’s cars and there was no hope whatsoever” (Milton Keynes)

Emerging risks

- 3.20 Participants were informed about the increasing prevalence of e-bike and e-scooter fires in the UK as a result of overheating lithium-ion batteries. They were then asked to discuss any other emerging risks facing fire and rescue services.



- 3.21 It was agreed that anything containing a lithium-ion battery could pose a risk, though vapes and electric cars were most commonly raised by participants. It was widely recognised, however, that it is not necessarily the batteries that are the issue, but the preponderance of devices using cheap and/or counterfeit parts that have not undergone the relevant safety checks.

“...I would say any product like chargers, that you can access quick and easy from online websites that cost £5 rather than £20 that people go for. That’s a big risk, when you leave things plugged in and go out” (Buckinghamshire East/West)

“The amount of counterfeit parts you get coming from China on Amazon and eBay and they are not vetted. They are not compliant or tested and approved parts under regulations ...” (Milton Keynes)

- 3.22 Another specified risk was socket overload given the number of electronic devices the typical person now owns. In particular, it was said that many young people do not recognise the dangers of this, or the risks of leaving devices on charge for very long periods.

“I have older kids and ... you see their plugs and you think, ‘For God’s sake, these could heat up’ and they are not aware of the risk ... Kids now have no clue. They plug as many gadgets as possible into one single plug ... The amount of times I have to say to my daughter about her mobile, ‘Stop leaving it on your bed ...’” (Milton Keynes)

- 3.23 One Milton Keynes participant discussed the ongoing cladding risks on some high-rise buildings at this point. They were very concerned that this has not yet been properly addressed.

“Why and how is that allowed? I know it’s more in big cities, but it shocked me that lessons have been acknowledged and ignored” (Milton Keynes)

Awareness of BFRS

General awareness

- 3.24 Following the discussions about risk, participants were asked how much they knew about BFRS and what it does. Knowledge was mixed, but people were typically aware that the Service now attends a range of incidents in addition to fires (though it should be noted that the ‘rescues cats from trees’ perception is still prevalent) - as well undertaking preventative and educational outreach work, inspecting and advising commercial premises, fire investigation, offering national resilience for civil emergencies, and assisting other emergency services.

“I think they do more than on the face of it. Most people would say they put out fires, but they do a lot more ... there’s been flooding, there’s car accidents, there’s cats up trees, there’s safety checks in people’s houses and smoke alarms and that sort of thing...” (Buckinghamshire North)

Awareness of fire station locations and crewing

- 3.25 When asked whether they knew where their nearest station is and how it is crewed, most participants were aware of the former, but not of the latter. Many said they had never really thought about it, and that they, *“Take it on trust that there’s enough people available to deal with an emergency within a reasonable time if and when one happens”* (Buckinghamshire South).

- 3.26 There were certainly some misconceptions though, such as that there are always firefighters present at all fire stations, and that on-call fire stations are crewed by volunteers.

“I just assume there is always a crew there. A band of people always there in the gym. I perceive your life to be how it was on London’s Burning!” (Milton Keynes)

... There is a permanent and a lot of voluntary crew ... I think there are more volunteers than fulltime crew” (Milton Keynes)

- 3.27 It should also be noted that there was some concern at the Buckinghamshire North group about on-call firefighters having other employment, potentially affecting response times. This is, of course, the nature of the on-call service, but this misconception has the potential to affect perception.

"I live very close to a fireman ... He spends most of his week [running] his own builder contractor's company. I think he gets paid for both jobs, but he spends most of his time on the other one whilst simultaneously on-call ... It just seems strange to me because there aren't many jobs in the world where you can get paid for two things by doing both at the same time..." (North Buckinghamshire)

Awareness of response times

- 3.28 There was very little awareness of BFRS's response times. In terms of expectation, most said they would expect a quicker response than from the police and ambulance services, given the operational pressure those two services are currently under.

"... I think you have an impression of the fire service being a quick response time compared to the ambulance service which is constantly in the news having long delays. Also, the police service because you'd imagine that they're constantly being called out" (Buckinghamshire East/West)

- 3.29 Most of those living in urban areas said they would expect a response in under ten minutes, whereas those in more rural areas were aware they would likely wait longer than this. Indeed, there was general recognition that response times would be influenced by several factors like location and time of day.
- 3.30 It should be noted, though, that people's general unawareness of crewing systems can lead to unrealistic expectations of response times. For example, some of those living close to an on-call station assumed that they would receive a response in around five minutes, not knowing that on-call firefighters are not on station and must travel there before attending an incident.

"I've got this perception that it's like a two-minute drive to the fire station from where I live, but that's me thinking they are sat there waiting for me to call. I'm not sure they're there or not, so it's giving me maybe a false sense of security" (Buckinghamshire North)

- 3.31 Moreover, in most groups there was a perception that incidents are triaged or 'graded' by fire control according to severity, and that a house fire would be prioritised over a lock-in for example.

"I think there are tiers depending on how the emergency is ... You have to assess which is the priority. The police [and ambulance] as well; everything is graded" (Milton Keynes)

- 3.32 When shown the average response time figures, all participants were impressed.

"... When you showed the statistics of how well they're doing trying to get to emergencies within 10 minutes, it's really good. Police take a long time to get anywhere to be fair. Ambulances can take a while too depending on how busy it is..." (Buckinghamshire South)

Awareness of funding and costs

- 3.33 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. However, few knew how much the Service costs to run, or how much they pay for it via council tax.

- 3.34 The Band D charge of £77.16 a year was universally considered to be value for money, though there was considerable surprise and no little consternation around the reductions in government funding that have necessitated council tax increases. In this context, one participant (who lives in a thatched property and is thus particularly aware of fire risk) was especially concerned about the impact of funding reductions on BFRS's resources, though they did also note the corresponding reduction in incidents as a result of lifestyle changes, safety improvements and education.

“... It seems to me that there are many fewer house fires than there have been in the past, and I guess that must reflect in the way that the fire services are funded. But what concerns me a little bit is that it will restrict the amount of resources they have to deal with fires when they happen, and at what point do we realise that they’ve gone too far and the resources aren’t enough ...”
(Buckinghamshire North)

Perceptions of BFRS

- 3.35 When asked for their general impressions of BFRS, participants were typically positive, with one particularly praising the professionalism and usefulness of a Home Fire Safety Check they had received.

“... When we moved into our thatched property, we ... contacted the Fire Service to ask them to come and look at our property, appraise it and give us advice ... Amazing. They gave us good advice, pointed out one or two points in the house that would benefit from an additional smoke detector ... They also had a look at some of the existing safety bits and bobs in our chimneys and so on. They were very preventative. We were very grateful” (Buckinghamshire North)

- 3.36 Some said they were ‘neither positive or negative’ having had no contact with the Service in the past or, in one participants’ case, having a poor experience of waiting a significant time for an operational response.

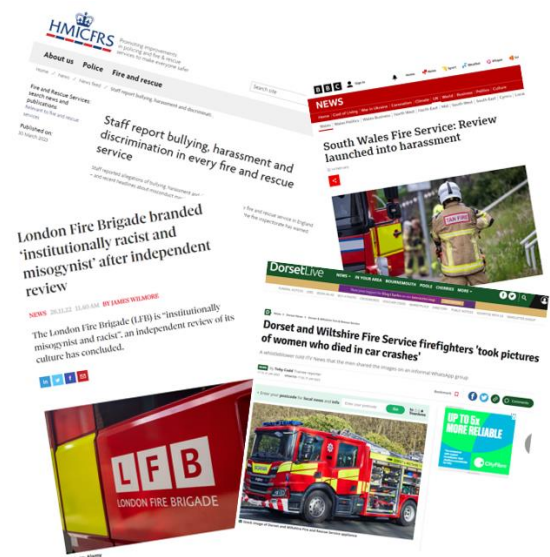
- 3.37 In the absence of direct contact, people were asked why they felt so well-disposed toward BFRS and the fire and rescue service nationally. The comments made suggest a positive view of those who work in the emergency services more generally, though the ‘danger’ aspect of firefighting was thought to command particular respect.

“... Like the rest of the emergency services, it’s a very professional service under very taxing circumstances ... You can only have the utmost respect for that” (Aylesbury)

“... I work right next to Grenfell, so I was aware of all that when it was going on. For me, it’s the absolute sheer bravery ... The danger they face, and they put all of our lives first; that’s incredible” (Buckinghamshire East/West)

- 3.38 Following the general conversation around perceptions, participants were asked about their awareness of recent media coverage of issues in fire and rescue services such as the report of His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) alleging ‘bullying, harassment, and discrimination in every fire and rescue service’; the independent review of London Fire Brigade that branded it ‘institutionally racist and misogynist’; and allegations of misconduct in South Wales and Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Services.

- 3.39 Very few participants across all five groups were aware of these news stories. Indeed, participants in all groups spontaneously made comments along these lines prior to be shown the articles on the right.



“I think they’re amazing ... There’s all these horror stories at the moment about the police service and what they do to the victims, you never hear anything bad about a firefighter. I think they’re there to protect us, they care, they put their life at risk...” (Buckinghamshire North)

3.40 Many attributed their lack of knowledge to these stories being overshadowed and somewhat ‘drowned out’ by constant articles about police misconduct. Indeed, there was some sense that, *“The media like to go, ‘Who does the public like to villainise’ and that’s not the fire service. ‘What is going to cause outrage and panic?’”* (Milton Keynes)

3.41 When asked whether these stories might influence their perceptions of the fire and rescue service, opinions were mixed. Some felt that they are clearly damaging to the Service’s reputation, and that more needs to be done to address the underlying reasons for unacceptable behaviour. For example, a few female participants felt that a degree of misogyny is bound to arise within male-dominated professions like fire and rescue, and within the ‘groups’ that tend to form in large, homogeneous organisations.

“... Each individual may not be like that, but there is something about groups ... You obviously have more men in the fire service than women, so what is it that makes it a safe space for them? I don’t know the answer but ... it does say ‘institutionally’ and groups with few women can be misogynistic ...” (Aylesbury)

3.42 Moreover, it was highlighted that fire and rescue service culture may still be being influenced (even if subconsciously) by the traditional language used to describe operational staff.

“The institutionally misogynistic part especially, growing up it was always about ‘firemen’ ... I know they have changed the language now, but that is something inbuilt into so many different careers. It will take a long time for that to change ...” (Milton Keynes)

3.43 Others, however, seemed to misunderstand the ‘institutional’ aspect of some of the reviews and allegations mentioned, describing those being complained against as a few *“bad apples”*, similar to those you would find in most professions.

“... It should bother me, but for some reason it doesn’t. I just think it’s only a couple of cases. Every company or workplace is going to have one issue or another” (Buckinghamshire North)

“... I know the one example was the Service as whole, but the others are anecdotal examples. Instead of branding the whole Service as this, they should focus more on who is doing these atrocities and make it about them as opposed to the job they do ... That sounds like it’s a couple of individuals rather than the Service as a whole” (Buckinghamshire East/West)

3.44 One possible explanation for this is the perception that is instilled in people from a very early age of firefighters as lifesaving ‘heroes’, particularly in contrast to police officers, whose role is often to enforce. It was said to be much more difficult to accept poor behaviour among those we have put on a pedestal, meaning negative reports of fire and rescue service cultures are more readily dismissed as ‘just a bit of banter’ or to have been wholly perpetrated by the aforementioned bad apples.

“The fire service is always under a positive light from being a child with Fireman Sam ... and wanting to be a fireman when you were younger ... There has never been a reason to see them in a negative way” (Milton Keynes)

“A lot of people still think of the fire service as heroes, and they are labelled like that ... And these sorts of things may get brushed under the carpet because the fire service are seen as heroes. They put out fires and risk their lives to save yours, and all the police do is give you a fine or arrest your kid for whatever he has been doing. People are looking at the police as bullies, and they have this stigma attached to police, whereas firefighters are the heroes” (Aylesbury)

3.45 This is perhaps reflected in some of the comments made at the sessions, such as:

“I’m surprised to see those headlines. I’m upset to see the institutionally racist and misogynist ones and I’m not sure I quite buy it ...” (Buckinghamshire East/West)

“It’s very much a man’s world there ... They do silly, boyish, men things; they have a bit of fun. In this world, men act like that when they’re in a group with other men ... I don’t think misogyny is that massive. There’s not that many women in the fire service anyway. I don’t think it’s that much of a problem ... I just think they’re amazing” (Buckinghamshire North)

3.46 In terms of what might be done to address issues of concern such as those highlighted above, some participants suggested more thorough recruitment processes using psychometric testing and examinations of social media to determine a person’s values for example. And despite some participants’ dismissal of such behaviour as ‘banter’, many others recognised the need to take a zero-tolerance approach to any form of discrimination (either in person or within WhatsApp groups).

“... It’s important to look at the culture ... within the organisation ... Where colleagues are having group chats with misogynistic or racist conversations, I think more needs to be done to stamp those attitudes out before they lead onto more serious behaviours” (Buckinghamshire East/West)

Current and future challenges

Workforce diversity

3.47 Participants were informed that BFRS was inspected by HMICFRS in 2021, who identified that, ‘*The Service hasn’t made enough progress since the last inspection to improve equality, diversity and inclusion*’. They were shown data to highlight that the Service’s current workforce is not fully representative of the working population, especially in terms of ethnicity and gender. When asked whether this is important, opinion was mixed.

3.48 Several participants made comments like, ‘What does skin colour or gender matter for putting out a fire?’, highlighting that operational response continues to dominate people’s thought processes when considering the role of the fire and rescue service. This suggests that better explanations are needed as to why diversifying the workforce is important, not least in improving the effectiveness of prevention and education work within certain communities. As one participant said:

“Whether or not it matters is a split question. Does it matter who turns up to put the fire out? No ... Does it matter that the Service is representative of the population as a whole? Yeah, of course it does. They don’t have as much engagement with the general public as the police or ambulance staff, but they do still need to be trusted by all of the population” (Buckinghamshire North)

3.49 It was recognised that several factors may have influenced the lack of diversity within the Service, not least the long-term recruitment freeze, and the fact that many staff are ‘long-termers’. Taken together, these two issues were thought to contribute to BFRS’s workforce not keeping pace with societal changes.

“... There will be a lot of people in the service that joined 20-25 years ago. The ethnic diversity mix of the area was probably very different then ... Looking at the workforce as a whole is distorted by the long servers. It will take a long while to change that ...” (Buckinghamshire South)

- 3.50 In terms of what more BFRS could do to encourage a more representative workforce, visits to schools, colleges and local cultural events were suggested, particularly to explain that fire and rescue services can offer a variety of different roles, not just firefighting.

“It would be good to get more into schools because you have the diversity ... and explain exactly what you do in the fire service, because you think ‘firefighter’ and that’s all they do ...”
(Aylesbury)

- 3.51 Indeed, it was suggested that the fire and rescue service should follow the Army’s lead in developing a campaign that highlights the various careers it can offer.

“...They have their own campaign which says, ‘The Army is not just about shooting but you can do this, and there is this possibility’ ... Something similar to that” (Milton Keynes)

- 3.52 This is especially important in light of the issues raised by a couple of participants in Milton Keynes, who said that they and others from Black and Asian backgrounds would typically not consider operational firefighting for cultural reasons. They were of the view that while attracting Black and Asian recruits will continue to be a challenge, highlighting the non-operational roles available would help.

“Talking from a cultural view ... Black and Asian people don’t go into fires or water ... There are certain things Black people won’t do, certain jobs we won’t accept, and fire is one of them ... It’s a culture thing. It will be a long process to get Blacks and Asians to join the fire service. When I was a kid, I used to look at the fire service and police and it was never in my plans to say, ‘I want to be a fireman’. It is going to be a hard task” (Milton Keynes)

“... I didn’t even know there were other opportunities for minorities ... You have to make people aware of this and that it is open to all, but it will take a lot to convince us. It’s not a job that appeals; we think, ‘Fire is death’ and nothing else” (Milton Keynes)

- 3.53 On a related note, it was said that the fire and rescue service is simply not seen as a desirable career option within some cultures, nor is it yet considered a viable one by many females – again in part due the gender-based attitudes instilled in people from a young age.

“Equality and reflecting the population is really important, but if you speak to families from these backgrounds, they don’t want their sons and daughters to join the fire service” (Buckinghamshire East/West)

“... Even now with all the progress that has been made, girls go to parties dressed as princesses and boys go as firemen and police. It is still very much ingrained, but changing” (Milton Keynes)

- 3.54 The second quotation above acknowledges that attitudes around ‘gender roles’ are changing, but some comments made in one of the online groups suggests that there is still work to be done in relation to changing perceptions of females as operational firefighters. One participant felt that they would be more reassured if a “fire engine of men” were to turn up to an incident from a strength point of view, and another said that:

“It’s a man’s job. I know that’s sexist, but it is. If a fire crew turned up for a fire and they were all women, I’d be concerned. I’d want it to be all men. They’re stronger, they’re not going to panic as much. You feel like you can trust men in that kind of situation. I wouldn’t mind if there was a couple of them, but if it was all women, I’d be like, ‘Are they going to lift things, are they going to cope?’” (Buckinghamshire North)

3.55 In relation to the gender issue, one female participant noted that they now work in the technology industry, despite never considering it as a career when growing up as it was never “*promoted or pushed*” as something for women. She was recruited via a targeted campaign and suggested that BFRS look at what is being done elsewhere to recruit women into traditionally male-dominated industries.

3.56 Finally, and crucially, addressing any issues with racism and misogyny was considered essential if fire and rescue services are to stand any chance of diversifying their workforces.

“... If the headlines say the Service is institutionally racist, you won’t get many applicants from ethnic communities ... It’s very concerning in that way ... Ethnic minorities [are] obviously noticing those headlines and thinking that’s not a job for them ...” (Buckinghamshire North)

“... I don’t think the older generation from black minority groups trust sending kids to the fire service because they have experienced racism, and their kids have experienced racism, and sending someone to a workforce which is mainly White males ...” (Aylesbury)

3.57 Furthermore, the final quote above suggests something of a ‘Catch-22’ situation in that there is a reluctance among minority ethnic groups to join the fire and rescue service for fear of experiencing racism within a largely White workforce; but only by diversifying that workforce will the Service be viewed as a more inclusive environment that can nurture and develop role models for future recruits.

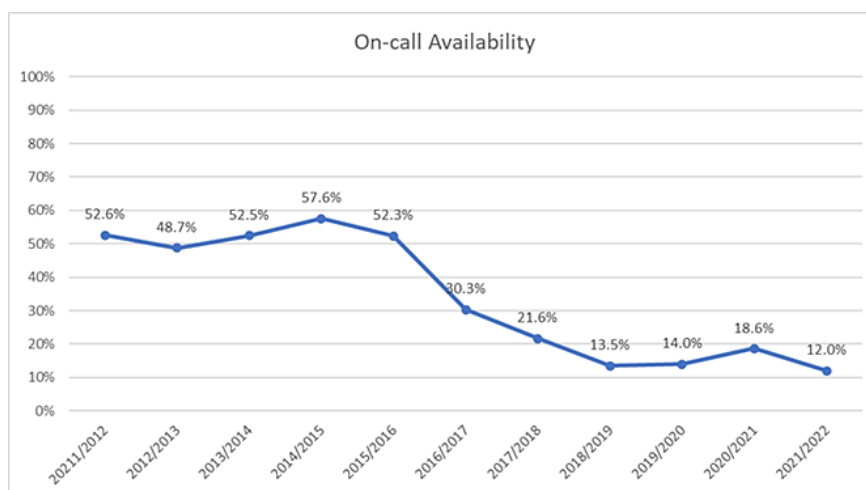
“If you are going to make a difference, you need to see people of different skin colours in those positions so that when younger kids see that, they would be a lot more comfortable to join that workforce ...” (Aylesbury)

“... If a young Asian person doesn’t see an Asian fireman, where is the role model? They need to be seeing themselves in the people who are doing the job in order to be engaged in it ...” (Buckinghamshire North)

The future of the on-call service

3.58 Another issue raised by HMICFRS in 2021 was that ‘*The Service continues to see a reduction in its on-call staff and has no plans to address this trend*’ and that ‘*The service should ... make sure that all of its fire engines can be sufficiently resourced, if required*’.

3.59 Participants were informed that the traditional on-call model used in rural areas is increasingly difficult to maintain locally and nationally due to a decline in occupations from which on-call staff were traditionally recruited; fewer working age people being available during the day in villages and small towns; and changing lifestyles. This has resulted in a fall in on-call appliance availability as follows.



3.60 To address this, BFRS has developed the following series of options, with participants asked for their views on whether it should consider their inclusion in its forthcoming CRMP.

Option 1: instead of on-call staff being attached to a specific local fire engine, consolidate them into a larger pool to improve the overall number of engines available for ‘resilience’ and/or provide relief crews for extended or multiple incidents;

Option 2: replace ‘difficult to crew’ on-call fire engines in more remote rural locations with smaller four-wheel drive vehicles for first response to, for example, outdoor fires;

Option 3: re-locate ‘difficult to crew’ on-call appliances to urban areas where they would be held in reserve for ‘resilience’, and where it is easier to raise on-call crews from larger day-time populations; and

Option 4: rebalance resources in favour of more wholetime and/or day crew provision.

3.61 Options 1 and 2 were most preferred of the four. The first (consolidating on-call staff into a larger pool for resilience or relief) was described as sensible and suitably strategic, and less restrictive for firefighters themselves, which could aid recruitment and retention.

“I like the first option ... having some in the restricted area so they could be your first responders as you go out and then six or seven in a wider area or radius who can get there as time goes on. It makes a lot of sense not to be, ‘Right, this is our fire station, and we do this fire area’ but for the whole of Bucks to work together. And you would potentially get more people involved as well, especially knowing that they don’t have to stick to such a small area” (Aylesbury)

“The first would be most appealing for staff on call, so they can go and do things with their family and not so limited” (Buckinghamshire North)

3.62 Option 2 (replace ‘difficult to crew’ on-call fire engines in more remote rural locations with smaller four-wheel drive vehicles) was viewed positively on the grounds of efficiency, cost, accessibility, and reassurance.

“I like the idea of the four-wheel drive vehicles. They could attend those incidents in rural areas more quickly and assess the situation and call back to base for more fire engines. There would be less wasted time at false alarms as well as you wouldn’t need to send as many people out at once; they could just check it out and see how it is” (Buckinghamshire South)

“I like the first response That great big truck that they’ve got to get through the streets, that’s always going to take time. At least there’s the reassurance that this person’s going to help you a little bit before the big boys come” (Buckinghamshire North)

3.63 There were some questions about the capacity of a smaller vehicle, however, and what incidents it could realistically deal with.

3.64 There was less but still some support for Option 3 (re-locate ‘difficult to crew’ on-call appliances to urban areas where they would be held in reserve for ‘resilience’), and mixed views on Option 4 (rebalance resources in favour of more wholetime and/or day crew provision). Some felt the latter should be considered even if it would likely result in a smaller fleet overall, whereas others rejected it on the grounds of cost.

3.65 There was also recognition that, *“They are not exclusive options so you can combine more than one, two or possibly three of them...”* (Aylesbury)

- 3.66 Overall, participants trusted senior officers to make sensible decisions in relation to fire cover, though it was said that changing or removing resource provision can be an emotive issue that would need to be properly explained.

Automatic Fire Alarms (AFAs)

- 3.67 The final recommendation from HMICFRS was that *‘The Service should review its response to false alarms ... to ensure operational resources are used effectively’*. BFRS’s current policy is to attend all AFAs as emergencies (i.e., on ‘blue lights’), and while less than 1% turn out to be a real incident, 40% of AFAs attended in 2022/2023 were to high-risk properties, enabling opportunity for engagement with building owners to provide advice and update building risk information.

- 3.68 Nonetheless, in light of HMICFRS’s recommendation, the Service has developed the following options.

Option 1: only attend an AFA if an actual fire is reported or the owner/occupiers of the building cannot be contacted;

Option 2: attend all AFAs in high-risk premises and AFAs in lower-risk premises when an actual fire is reported or the owner/occupier of the building cannot be contacted;

Option 3: Attend all AFAs in high-risk premises and AFAs in lower-risk premises when an actual fire is reported;

Option 4: Respond to AFAs at normal road speed (i.e., on ‘non-blue lights’); and

Option 5: continue to respond to all AFAs as an emergency.

- 3.69 Participants were divided on whether BFRS should consider making changes to its AFA procedures. Those who felt it should continue to respond to all AFAs as an emergency considered it to risky to do otherwise, both operationally and reputationally.

“If you were to adopt something else and something went wrong and resulted in something unfortunate then it could damage your representation and perception with the public”
(Aylesbury)

- 3.70 Furthermore, it was said that *“If attending those false alarms isn’t adding cost to the service, why not keep doing it, because these 1% that they are attending are really important.”* (Buckinghamshire North)

- 3.71 If the Service does want or need to make changes, though there was some support for Option 1 (only attend an AFA if an actual fire is reported or the owner/occupiers of the building cannot be contacted), Option 2 (attend all AFAs in high-risk premises and AFAs in lower-risk premises when an actual fire is reported, or the owner/occupier of the building cannot be contacted) was most favoured as an acceptable compromise.

“I would say two, because if it’s a high risk, definitely. Are we talking if someone sets their fire alarm off then they call and say it was an accident, then they wouldn’t need to come out? That would be more favourable for me ... because that’s not wasting anyone’s time. When they’re going at a high speed to an emergency that there is no emergency, everyone’s life is at risk”
(Buckinghamshire East/West)

“For me it’s number 2 as you just can’t take the risk with the high-risk premises ... There are so many false alarms, that I would want a bit more certainty. So, contact with someone there to say, ‘Look, the alarm has gone off, are you concerned that there is a genuine risk’. And if you

can't get hold of anyone at somewhere like a chemical warehouse or somewhere, you'd have to go to that as it's such a high risk" (Buckinghamshire South)

- 3.72 A few participants felt they could not make a judgement without more detail. One specifically said they would like more information on the number of incidents caused at high speed, as well as how often appliances are unavailable for 'proper incidents' through being at a false alarm prior to determining the appropriateness of making changes to AFA policies.

BFRSs Vision

- 3.73 BFRS' Vision is 'To make Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes the safest areas in England in which to live, work and travel'. An overwhelming majority of participants agreed that it is still appropriate.

A name change?

- 3.74 In light of the fact that Milton Keynes has achieved city status, participants were asked whether Buckinghamshire FRS should change its name to, say, Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes FRS. While some agreed that doing so would demonstrate inclusivity, more were opposed to a name change on the grounds of cost.

"What's the point in changing it? [Milton Keynes] is still in Bucks and it would cost a lot of money to rebrand it" (Aylesbury)

"I think it is a waste. You see this in the NHS all the time where they have to work out how far down this blue line has to be ... Why? Stop being a wally! New uniform and you have to get it embroidered ... no!" (Milton Keynes)

Information provision

- 3.75 Finally, participants were asked what information about or from BFRS would most interest them. The most common preferences were for live incident updates, safety advice, job opportunities, and performance statistics.