



Fire Station Options for St Helens

Report of Deliberative Consultation with Members of the Public

September-October 2015

Opinion Research Services
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Acknowledgements

Opinion Research Services (ORS) is pleased to have worked once more with Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority (MFRA) on the public consultation programme reported here. In the deliberative consultation through focus groups and a forum in St Helens the participants engaged with the issues under consideration and discussed their ideas readily; so we trust that this report of findings will contribute to service planning by MFRA at a time of serious financial constraints.

We thank MFRA for commissioning the project as part of its on-going programme of public and stakeholder engagement and consultation about its risk management and budget 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.

We are grateful to all the members of the public who took part in the four meetings to share their views with us. They were patient in listening to background information before entering positively into the spirit of open discussions about challenging topics, with some controversial aspects.

At all stages of the project, ORS's status as an independent organisation consulting 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 MFRA's development in difficult times. We hope also that ORS has been instrumental in continuing to strengthen MFRA's public engagement.

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Executive Summary

Commission and Background

1. ORS was commissioned by Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority (MFRA) to conduct deliberative consultation with residents' about draft options for two of the three St Helens fire stations. The main consultation issues were:

MFRA's Draft Fire Station Options

Whether to close the Eccleston and St Helens (Parrstocks Road) fire stations while building a new one in Canal Street **or** whether to centralise the emergency cover for both station areas at St Helens. The former option may be called a 'merger' while the latter option would simply be a closure of the Eccleston fire station.

MFRA's Draft Fire Engine Proposal

To reduce the wholetime fire engines by making one of the current two pumps a 'reserve' or 'resilience back-up' vehicle for periods of exceptional demand.

2. Because locating emergency cover at St Helens fire station only would lengthen average response times to Eccleston significantly (compared with providing a new station at Canal Street), MFRA prefers the 'merger' option.

Deliberative Research

3. The four consultation meetings reported here all lasted for at least two-and-a-half hours and in total there were 37 diverse participants. The participants were recruited by random-digit telephone dialling from the ORS Social Research Call Centre. Care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by disabilities or any other factors, and the venues at which the forums met were readily accessible. People's special needs were all taken into account in the recruitment and at the venues.
4. Although, like all other forms of qualitative consultation, deliberative forums cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the four meetings reported here gave diverse groups of local residents the opportunity to comment in detail on MFRA's draft options. Because the participants were diverse, the outcomes of the meeting (as reported below) are broadly indicative of how informed St Helens opinion would incline on the basis of similar discussions.
5. The meetings began with a short review of the background issues and the range of options considered by MFRA in order to reduce its expenditure. The introduction also showed how

risk, measured in terms of the number of critical and other incidents, has reduced by more than half in nine years. Based on its population of about 1.4 million people, MFRA has more wholtime fire stations than any other area of the country, including London, and so each of its 25 stations (following the closure of Allerton station on April 1st 2015) covers a relatively small area.

6. The participants were also told that both draft options, when combined with the proposed crewing changes would save about £864,000 per annum by allowing up to 22 fire-fighter posts to be phased out, probably without the need for compulsory redundancies.
7. The meetings were informed explicitly about the impact on response times of closing two stations and covering their areas primarily with one full-time engine, either from the proposed Canal Street site or from St Helens (if the Eccleston station were closed without a merger).

Summary of Deliberative Findings

All-St Helens Forum

8. After lengthy discussions, the forum of 16 was almost unanimous that the merger of two fire stations on the new Canal Street site would be the best of the options. Only one person abstained when the balance of the meeting was taken.
9. Almost three-quarters of the participants also thought the merger proposal was reasonable in all the circumstances, with only one person objecting and four recorded as 'don't knows.'
10. Everyone agreed that Canal Street was an appropriate and suitable site for the proposed new station.
11. Finally, the forum of 16 was also almost unanimous that it was reasonable to re-classify the second fire engine as a reserve or resilience vehicle. Only one person was recorded as a 'don't know' on this issue.

Three Focus Groups (Eccleston, St Helens and Canal Street)

12. The three focus groups were overwhelmingly of the opinion that a merger of two fire stations on the new Canal Street site would be the best of the options.
13. They also thought that the merger proposal is definitely reasonable in all the circumstances.
14. A big majority thought that Canal Street is an appropriate and suitable site for the proposed new station.

15. Finally, a large majority thought that, given the levels of risk, it was reasonable to re-classify the second fire engine as a reserve or resilience vehicle; but about a third of participants would prefer to keep the second vehicle deployed as normal.

Overall Conclusions

16. Clearly, the proposals for a merger of the two fire stations at Canal Street and the designation of the second fire engine as a reserve vehicle were approved in the consultation.

Important Note

17. This executive summary cannot do justice to the arguments and reasons of the 37 participants in the deliberative forum and focus groups, so readers are encouraged to refer to the full report (in the following chapters) for further information about people's opinions.

Introduction

Commission and background

18. ORS was commissioned by Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority (MFRA) to conduct deliberative consultation about draft options for two of the three St Helens fire stations. ORS's role was to recruit and facilitate the deliberative meetings and to report the findings to MFRA. The main consultation issues were:

MFRA's Draft Fire Station Options

Option 1

Whether to close the current Eccleston and St Helens fire stations while building a new one at Canal Street in St Helens

Or

Option 2

Whether to centralise the emergency cover for the two current stations at the current St Helens station while closing the Eccleston station.

19. Option 1 may be called a 'merger' while the latter option would simply be a closure of the Eccleston fire station.

MFRA's Draft Fire Engine Proposal

Regardless of which of the two options is adopted, MFRA also proposes to reduce its wholtime fire engines by making one of the two current pumps (one at each of the two stations) a 'reserve' or 'resilience back-up' vehicle for periods of exceptional demand. The reserve fire engine would be based alongside the fully operational vehicle, at either the new Canal Street station or at the existing St Helens station.

20. MFRA has conducted extensive engagement and consultation with residents for a number of years and, in this context, ORS has facilitated both district-based and all-Merseyside forums regularly. Within this on-going framework, MFRA has conducted both 'listening and engagement' and 'formal consultation' meetings on a regular cycle. Hence, the consultation programme reported here followed an earlier all-Merseyside 'listening and engagement' process that considered hypothetically a wide range of policies and options for MFRA in the context of its reduced budget due to public expenditure reductions.

MFRA's preferred option

21. Because option 2 (not developing a new station at Canal Street but centralising emergency cover at St Helens station) would lengthen average response times to Eccleston significantly, MFRA prefers option 1. In other words, the Fire Authority's preferred option is to 'merge' the two fire stations rather than just close the Eccleston station.

Deliberative Research

22. The four consultation meetings reported here all used 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 the draft options in detail. The meetings lasted for at least two-and-a-half hours and in total there were 37 diverse participants. The dates of the meetings and attendance levels by members of the public at each forum are as shown in the table immediately below.

| Area of St Helens | Time and Date (2015) | Type of meeting and number of attendees |
|------------------------|---|---|
| Eccleston station area | 18.00 – 20.45 Tuesday 22 nd September | Focus Group 7 |
| Canal Street area | 18:00 – 20.45 Wednesday 23 rd September | Focus Group 8 |
| St Helens station area | 18.00 – 20.45 Thursday 24 th September | Focus Group 6 |
| All-St Helens | 18.00 – 20.45 Tuesday 13 th October | Forum 16 |

23. The attendance target for each of the focus group meeting was between 7 and 9 people, and for the forums it was 15 – so the total of 37 participants was within the planned range.
24. As usual, the participants were recruited by random-digit telephone dialling from the ORS Social Research Call Centre. Having been initially contacted by phone, they were written to – to confirm the arrangements; and those who agreed to come then received telephone or written reminders shortly before each meeting. Such recruitment by telephone is normally the most effective way of ensuring that all the participants are independently recruited.

25. In recruitment, care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by disabilities or any other factors, and the venues at which the forums met were readily accessible. People's special needs were all taken into account in the recruitment and at the venues. The random telephone recruitment process was monitored to ensure social diversity in terms of a wide range of criteria – including, for example: local authority area of residence; gender; age; ethnicity; social grade; and disability/long-term limiting illness (LLTI).
26. Consequently, there was a diverse range of participants from the local areas and, as standard good practice, they were recompensed for their time and efforts in travelling and taking part.

| Criteria | Eccleston FG | Canal Street FG | St Helens FG | All-St Helens Forum | Overall |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|--|--|---|
| Gender | Male: 3 Female: 4 | Male: 4 Female: 2 | Male: 4 Female: 4 | Male: 9 Female: 7 | Male: 20 Female: 17 |
| Age | 16-34: 2 35-54: 2 55+: 3 | 16-34: 1 35-54: 4 55+: 1 | 16-34: 3 35-54: 3 55+: 2 | 16-34: 2 35-54: 6 55+: 8 | 16-34: 8 35-54: 15 55+: 14 |
| Social Grade | AB: 3 C1: 1 C2: 1 DE: 2 | AB: 1 C1: 1 C2: 1 DE: 3 | AB: 1 C1: 2 C2: 1 DE: 4 | AB: 3 C1: 5 C2: 2 DE: 6 | AB: 8 C1: 9 C2: 5 DE: 15 |
| Limiting Long-term Illness | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 7 |

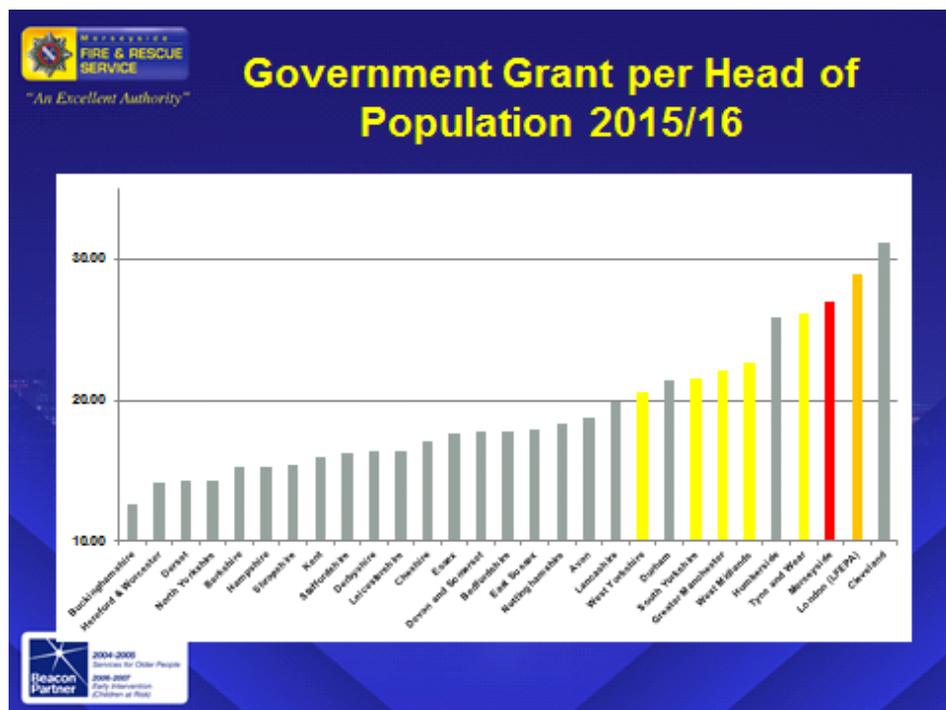
27. To conduct the deliberative meetings based on the fullest possible information for participants, ORS worked with MFRA to prepare informative stimulus material for the meetings before facilitating the discussions and preparing this independent report of findings.
28. Although, like all other forms of qualitative consultation, deliberative forums cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the four meetings reported here gave diverse groups of St Helens residents the opportunity to comment in detail on MFRA's draft options. Because the participants were diverse, the outcomes of the meeting (as reported below) are broadly indicative of how informed opinion would incline on the basis of similar discussions.

Conduct of the discussions

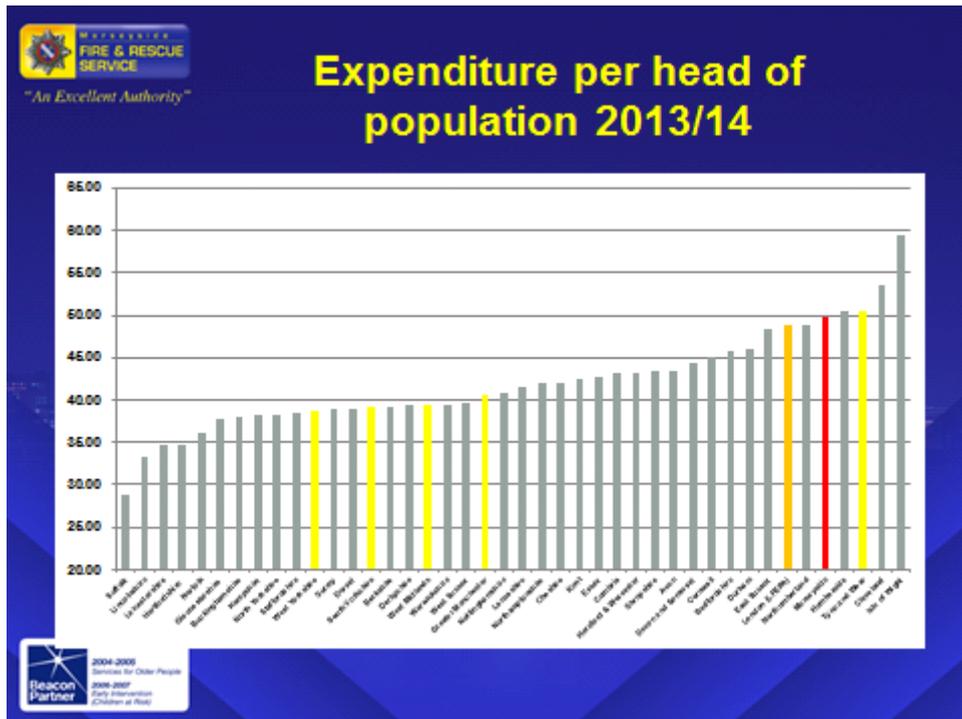
Background information

29. The first part of each meeting began, for the sake of context, with a short review of the background issues, including the:
- Importance of prevention and risk-management policies – particularly via home fire safety checks
 - Established trends showing a reduction in risk when measured in terms of the number of critical and other incidents per year
 - Sources of funding for MFRA – from the government and from council tax
 - Impact of public spending reductions on MFRA – including the previous reduction of fire engines from 42 to 28, and the corresponding reduction of 180 fire fighter and 90 support staff posts
 - MFRA's current financial constraints in the context of public spending reductions.
30. The four meetings were also informed of the wide range of options considered by MFRA in order to reduce its expenditure, including:
- More low-level-activity-and-risk (LLAR) fire stations
 - Some day-crewed fire stations
 - Some community retained (RDS) fire stations
 - Closing some fire stations
 - Merging some fire stations.
31. In passing, it is worth noting that wide-ranging 'listening and engagement' meetings in January 2014 demonstrated that, when faced with a broad choice between *either* keeping all stations and changing to cheaper duty systems *or* reducing stations while protecting current wholetime duty systems, the participants clearly favoured the latter option. That is, they made at least an implicit choice in favour of reducing stations rather than changing the way Merseyside is crewed. These 'conclusions' of the earlier meetings were not repeated to participants in the meetings reported here, but it is interesting to note them as general background.
32. Following the short review of the wider general range of options considered, the second part of each meeting briefly reviewed the implications of funding reductions that MFRA faces, including the:
- Projected budget deficit of £6.3 million by the end of 2015/16, based on current expenditure levels and known financial information, but not taking account of current proposals

33. These financial challenges were explained neutrally as constraints requiring reductions in spending to be made on a progressive basis. In order to encourage free discussion, the financial position was not used as a repeated justification of the draft proposed options: participants were invited to assess the options on their general merits, albeit within a generally constrained position.
34. In fact, in order to present a balanced picture, the ORS introduction to each meeting tried to ‘take stock’ of MFRA in terms of its funding and much reduced risk levels when measured in terms of the number of critical and other incidents, strategic roles and allocation of resources. Participants were shown comparative data on the (still relatively high) levels of government funding and the emergency cover resources that MFRA (and the other metropolitan fire and rescue services) continue to enjoy relative to other combined fire authorities or county council fire and rescue services.
35. For example, the chart below shows that, relative to most other fire authorities, Merseyside still receives high funding relative to its population size.

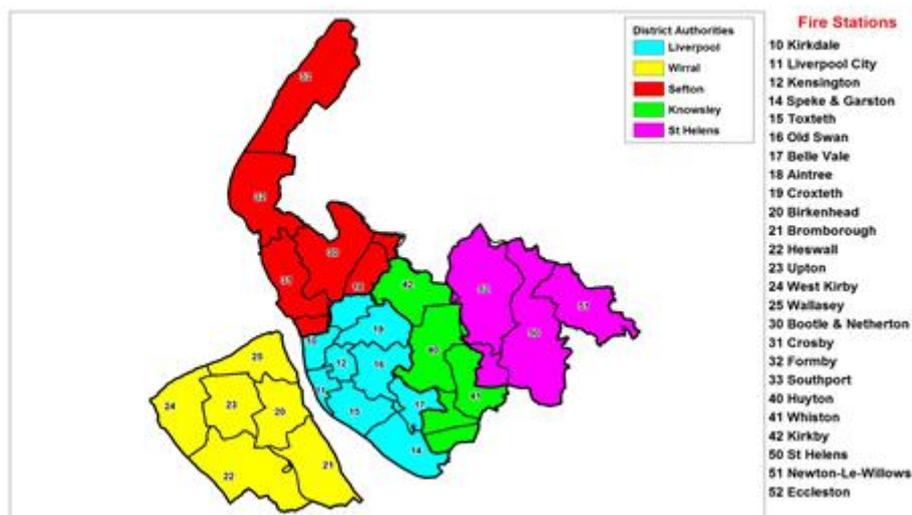


36. Therefore, even in recent years, MFRA has been able to maintain a relatively high level of expenditure per head of population – as the chart on the next page shows.



37. Due to its funding, and due to historical assessments of risk deriving from intensive bombing in World War 2, Merseyside has many closely located fire stations (especially in Liverpool and the Wirral) in order to meet the statutory response time standards that prevailed from the 1950s to 2004 – as the map and two charts below illustrate.

MFRA Fire Stations (May 2015)



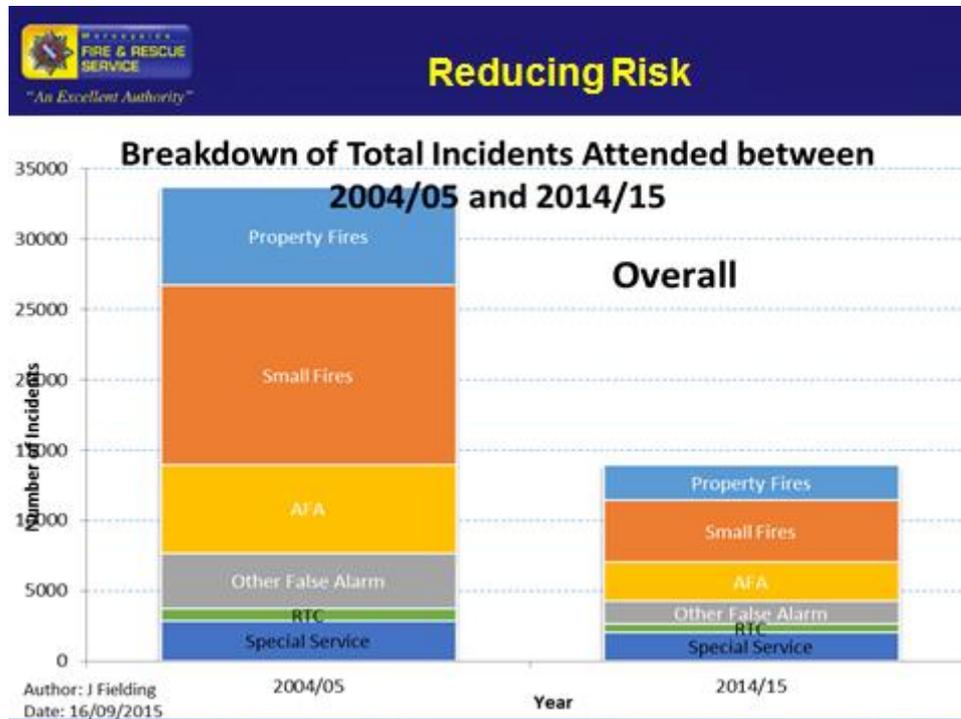
Author: Daniel Burt
Date: 09/04/2015
Produced using MapInfo
Strategy & Performance

Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service
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Reducing risk

39. Partly as a result of MFRA's very active preventative and educational work, all categories of incidents have reduced very significantly in Merseyside over the last ten years, as the chart below shows.



Consultation issues

40. The final and longest part of each meeting was devoted to detailed discussion of the draft options for two of the three St Helens fire stations, which were explained as follows:

Option 1

Building a new community fire station at Canal Street

Closing the one-pump stations at Eccleston and St Helens town

Canal Street fire station then to have a single 24/7 pump, with another as a reserve or back-up resilience vehicle and not normally crewed – but with its crew subject to recall within 30 minutes in the event of exceptional incidents or spate conditions

The back-up crew for the reserve second pump would be wholetime firefighters with supplementary retained contracts to provide the support cover duties when required

The change in status of the second fire engine (to become a reserve vehicle) would be immediate.

Option 2

Closing the one-pump station at Eccleston

Providing emergency cover for the Eccleston and St Helens town areas from the St Helens fire station

St Helens town fire station to have a single 24/7 pump, with another to be a reserve or back-up resilience vehicle – not normally crewed, but with a crew subject to recall within 30 minutes for exceptional incidents or spate conditions

As with Option 1, the back-up crew for the reserve second pump would be wholetime firefighters with supplementary retained contracts to provide the support cover duties when required

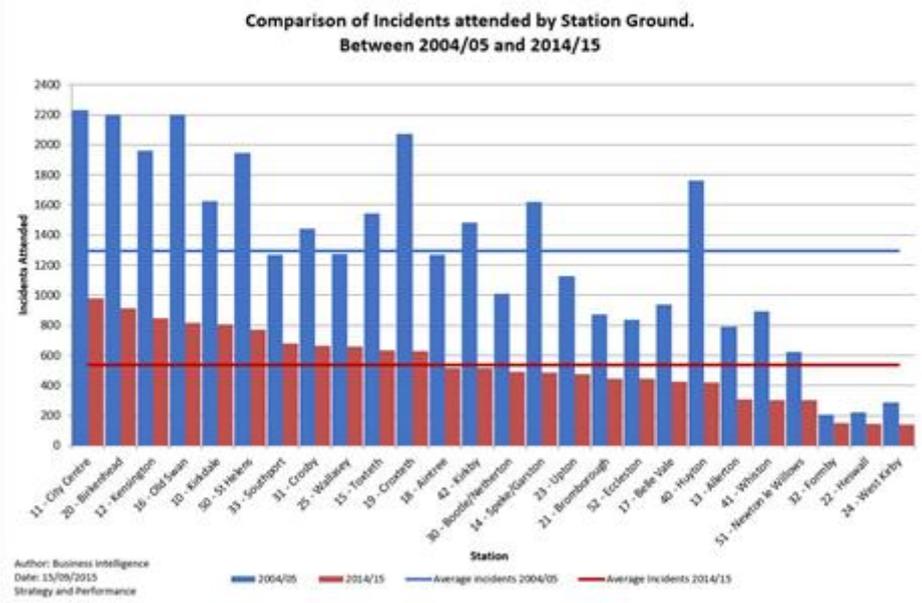
The change in status of the second fire engine (to become a reserve vehicle) would be immediate.

41. In other words, there were two options and a further proposal regarding the number of fire engines to be deployed full-time in St Helens. Option 1 may be called a 'merger' while the latter option would simply be a closure of the Eccleston fire station. The further proposal was to reduce the wholetime fire engines by making one of the two engines a reserve or resilience back-up vehicle for periods of exceptional demand.
42. In each meeting great care was taken to ensure that participants understood the two fire station options as well as how the second (reserve) fire engine would be crewed and used.
43. The participants were also told that the merger and proposed crewing arrangements would save about £864,000 per annum by allowing up to 22 fire-fighter posts to be phased out, probably without the need for compulsory redundancies.

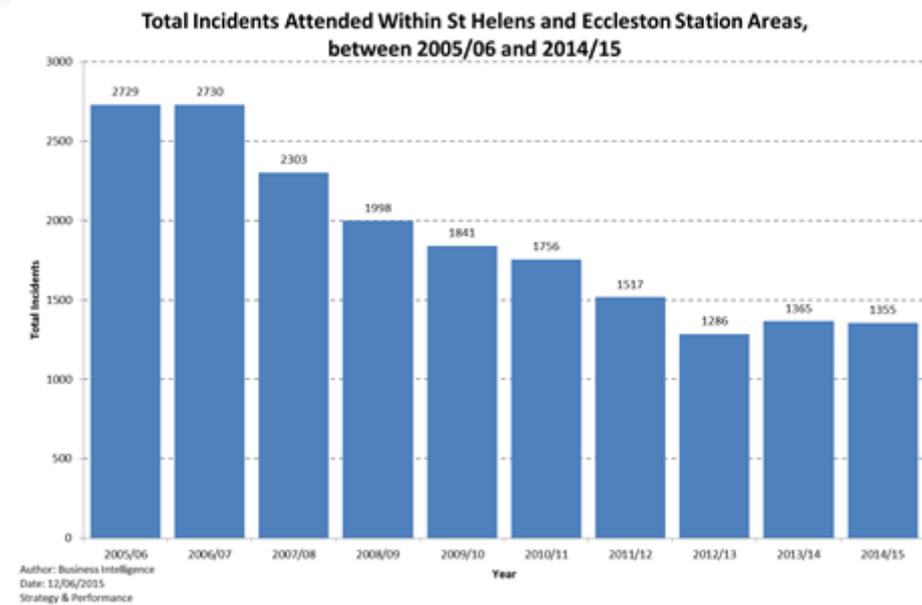
Local risk

44. As well as the financial context, the four meetings considered the relevant evidence about reducing local risk levels and current response times in the three areas under consideration. For example, they reviewed the reduction in risk measured by the number of incidents across all fire stations in the last ten years, and in St Helens in particular – as shown in the next two charts on the following page.

Reducing Risks – Incident Numbers



Incidents in St Helens (incl. Eccleston)



Response times

- In addition, the meetings were informed of MFRA’s response time target (to attend life risk incidents within 10 minutes on at least 90% of occasions) and they also compared the national average response time for domestic fires (7 minutes 24 seconds) with MFRA’s all-Merseyside average time for life-risk incidents (5 minutes 24 seconds).

46. Finally, the meetings were informed about the impact on response times of (a) closing two stations and covering their areas primarily with one full-time engine from Canal Street *and also of* (b) closing Eccleston and providing the same cover from St Helens.
- (a) From the two current stations, the average response times, based on actual incidents in the Eccleston and St Helens town areas, are 5 minutes 40 seconds and 5 minutes 51 seconds respectively. From the proposed Canal Street base, the predicted average response times to the same incidents would decrease to 4 minutes 47 seconds and 5 minutes 2 seconds respectively. The average over the whole area would be 5 minutes 41 seconds.
- (b) If services were located at the current St Helens station (rather than Canal Street), then the predicted average response time to Eccleston would *increase* from 5 minutes 40 seconds to 6 minutes 44 seconds.
47. Overall, the facilitator encouraged participants to consider the options *in principle* – on their merits, in terms of suitability, sustainability, resilience and acceptability for St Helens and Merseyside – rather than to just accept one or other as inevitable. In other words, financial issues were not the primary focus of the discussion: the options were examined carefully and at length. Participants were given extensive time for questions and discussion prior to being invited to make up their minds on each discussion topic. Of course, the improvements to response times achieved by centralising emergency services at Canal Street was influential in the discussions.

Protected characteristics

48. Finally, while considering the draft options, participants in all the meetings were encouraged to consider whether they have any adverse implications for any vulnerable people and in particular groups with ‘protected characteristics’: in other words, this question was not just a ‘footnote’ to the main discussion but an intrinsic part of the scrutiny of the draft options.

Report

49. The next chapter concisely reviews the sentiments and judgements of participants about MFRA’s options for the two fire stations and the proposal for changes to one of the fire engines. Verbatim quotations are used, in indented italics, not because we agree or disagree with them – but for their vividness in capturing recurrent points of views. ORS does not endorse the opinions in question, but seeks only to portray them accurately and clearly. While quotations are used, the report is obviously not a verbatim transcript of the sessions, but an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants in free-ranging discussions.

Deliberative Findings

Reasoning about the Draft Options

Introduction

50. People's reasons for their views are obviously important – particularly because consultation is not just a 'numbers game' in which majority support or opposition counts for everything: the key issue is not numbers but the cogency of the arguments for or against the options. Therefore, this section concisely reviews the opinions, reasons, considerations and attitudes of the participants.
51. Because they were so similar in outcome, the three focus group meetings are combined in the following review, while the forum is treated separately.

Questions and Issues

52. The discussions showed that many people were unaware of how the fire and rescue service is run, and so in all the meetings there were many interesting questions about matters of fact and strategic planning issues – for example:

How effective is MFRS's prevention work?

Will prevention work be maintained in the context of reduced funding?

Has a possible increase in the number of deaths as a result of less prevention and resources been taken into account?

How is MFRS working to reduce the false alarms from automatic fire detection systems?

How are fire engines crewed?

How do Low Level Activity and Risk (LLAR) stations work compared with other wholetime fire stations?

How do community retained fire stations operate and how are retained fire fighters paid and trained?

How critical are response times in relation to fatality rates?

How is dynamic emergency cover managed when there are big or multiple incidents?

Have there been times when there were too few fire engines to cope with the level of demand?

Will reduced resources will mean increase community risk?

Will station mergers lead to changes in MFRA's attendance and operational procedures?

Will households continue to get the same level of attendance, with the same number of fire engines?

How will MFRA manage potential redundancies?

What will happen with the service if there are more reductions to be made by 2020? Will the service still be viable?

Is it possible that the worst-case scenario for MFRS would be to have 10 fire engines in operation? That impression has come from inside MFRS!

Influential factors

53. There is no doubt that a very influential consideration in all the discussions was that average response times are predicted to improve from the proposed Canal Street fire station. From the two current stations, the average response times to actual incidents in the Eccleston and St Helens town areas are 5 minutes 40 seconds and 5 minutes 51 seconds respectively; but from Canal Street the predicted average response times to the same incidents would decrease to 4 minutes 47 seconds and 5 minutes 2 seconds respectively; and the average over the whole area would be 5 minutes 41 seconds. Participants understood these issues and took them into account in relation to both the merger and second fire engine proposals.

All-St Helens Forum

Discussions

54. Apart from the issues outlined above, some of the key comments and questions in the all-St Helens forum were:

The new station would be dealing with more incidents (about 1,200 per year) than any other station in Merseyside – the others would be significantly quieter than Canal Street!

The merged station area looks like it's the largest station area compared with all others

What's your worst response time in St Helens?

Do fire stations across the country vary in their resources and organisation?

Does a fire engine have the ability to fight fires in say a second floor flat – does its ladder reach that far?

Have the fire fatalities happened in separate incidents or have several died together in some?

Does the reduction in fire engines mean that your resilience vehicles will be sent all across Merseyside?

How do you decide where the resilience vehicles will be based – does it depend on response times?

Why is the projected increase in the MFRS budget apparently so big, given that the number of firefighters is reducing – are the figures realistic?

Do all the changes mentioned balance the budget this year?

How would the new fire station be financed?

What's the condition of the two current fire stations?

What are the station boundaries in St Helens – how do we know which station serves us?

Will Eccleston close while you are building the new Canal Street station?

What would be the response time across Eccleston while the station was closed and until you had the new station?

Do you anticipate any objections to the Canal Street site?

Have the plans for Canal Street been already approved by St Helens Council?

How long will it take to create the new station at Canal Street?

55. Overall, after considering the responses to their questions, participants were sympathetic to MFRS's challenges, but they also wanted guarantees of good faith in respect of the Canal Street station:

You are between a rock and a hard place!

Can you get it in writing [from the Fire Authority] that the new station will not be abandoned in the light of further reductions?

56. More generally, participants stressed the importance of continuing prevention and education work in the community and of working with other blue light agencies – for example:

The work you do in the community is important, but will you be reducing that due to the financial reductions? I've been a community volunteer and seen how valuable the work you do can be with potential young fire setters?

I know that work in schools is important – are you continuing that?

Is there any prospect of co-responding to medical emergencies with the ambulance service, like in Greater Manchester? If this is a potential additional role, then that could mean that we should retain as many sites as possible – as response bases from which fire engines could be deployed.

Balance of Opinion

57. After lengthy discussions, the forum of 16 was almost unanimous that the **merger** of two fire stations on the new Canal Street site would be the **best of the options**. Only one person abstained when the balance of the meeting was taken.
58. Almost three-quarters of the participants also thought the merger proposal was **reasonable** in all the circumstances – with only one person objecting and four recorded as ‘don’t knows.’
59. Everyone agreed that Canal Street was an appropriate and **suitable site** for the proposed new station.
60. Finally, the forum of 16 was also almost unanimous that it was reasonable to re-classify the **second fire engine as a reserve or resilience vehicle**. Only one person was recorded as a ‘don’t know’ on this issue.

Three Focus Groups

Discussions

61. The issues raised in the discussions were not dissimilar to those outlined above in relation to the all-St Helens forum. For example, there were positive comments about the value of prevention work:

It would be a good idea to give people free fire alarms for their houses – that’s a good safety measure that should be advertised widely

My fire alarms were installed by MFRS who just knocked on the door and offered them to us.

62. In terms of the specific proposals and options, attention focused on more local issues and some typical questions and comments were:

How can there be “no crisis” when the resources have reduced so much already? You have reduced fire engines a lot and now there will be even fewer fire stations!

What would happen if there were multiple incidents in the area – could the fire engine(s) cope?

Does your strategic planning take account of new housing developments?

What’s the impact of the reduction of non-uniformed staff on the amount of prevention and education work that you do?

Will the reductions in staff involve compulsory redundancies? Would further cuts lead to compulsory redundancies?

How would you accommodate the 22 firefighters from the reserve vehicle

How many firefighters work on each station now and how many would there be on the new merged station?

*In what way are the two older stations poor? How run down are they?
How can you afford to build a new fire station while you're making savings?
Would Newton station be down-graded now?
When would the new fire station open?*

63. There were some positive comments about the potential impact of a community fire station in Canal Street – for example:

I've heard how good the fire stations are at community relations and out-reach activities

My fire house is on the proposed Canal Street fire station map (near the site)! A fire station merger on Canal Street would be very desirable and sound – I could even imagine a wind turbine on the site if it would help the green agenda

You could use the new station as a hub for the Fire Service and the Ambulance Service

It would be good if the ambulance service could also work from the same site – to share costs and improve cooperation

A fire station exercise and health advice unit near to my house would attract me to use it!

64. Insofar as there were reservations about the proposals they mainly concerned the immediate designation of the second fire engine as a reserve or resilience vehicle subject to 30 minutes recall in exceptional circumstances. Overall, about a third of the participants had reservations about this proposal. Some people said, for example:

I have big reservations about this – it would be better to have more LLAR stations and keep two fire engines here.

You could consider other areas [of Merseyside] to make savings, where there are more fire stations per head of population than in St Helens.

65. However, there were also a few critical comments about the Canal Street site:

I'm concerned about the location of the proposed station – because the traffic congestion around there is very bad – there are lights and a roundabout in a very small area

I live on Fleet Lane very close to the fire station – so the proposal would take away our very close station, which will slow the station down for us

The St Helens station is in an ideal spot for St Helens.

66. There were also some more general critics who felt that St Helens was less appropriate for changes than other parts of Merseyside – for example:

You've made a good case for a merger, but I still feel we are between a rock and a hard place in St Helens – I want to know, "Why St Helens?"

67. Others did not think the proposals for St Helens were unreasonable:

There is more free space for a new fire station in St Helens.

68. Overall, following the detailed discussions in the three focus groups, there were some fatalistic comments, but also some much more positive views about the proposals and consultation – for instance:

Your hands are pretty much tied!

It's forced on us but it has to go ahead

Something needs to be done to meet the budget constraints – so it is best to do it quickly and make the savings effectively – it is the best we can do in the circumstances

The MFRS does brilliant work – and it's good to have such senior officers here – and you must worry a lot about reducing the firefighter posts so much!

The proposals seem sensible and risk-based in the circumstances.

Balance of Opinion

69. Like the all-St Helens forum, the three focus groups were overwhelmingly of the opinion that a **merger** of two fire stations on the new Canal Street site would be the **best of the options**.
70. They also thought that the merger proposal is definitely **reasonable** in all the circumstances.
71. A big majority thought that Canal Street is an appropriate and **suitable site** for the proposed new station.
72. Finally, a large majority thought that, given the levels of risk, it was reasonable to re-classify the **second fire engine as a reserve or resilience vehicle**; but about a third of participants would prefer to keep the second vehicle deployed as normal.