

MERSEYSIDE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

Public Consultation on INTEGRATED RISK MANAGEMENT PLAN, 2010-1013



Opinion Research Services

Spin-out Company of the University of Wales Swansea

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Acknowledgements

Opinion Research Services (ORS) is pleased to have worked with Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service (MFRS) on the consultation reported here. The Forum participants engaged with the issues under consideration and discussed their ideas readily, so we trust the report will contribute to the continued development of MFRS.

We thank MFRS for commissioning the project as part of an ongoing programme of consultations. We particularly thank the senior officers and Fire Authority members who attended the sessions to listen to the public's views. Such meetings benefit considerably from the readiness of MFRS' fire officers and other staff to answer participants' questions fully and frankly. Their input was essential in achieving an informed debate.

We are grateful to all the members of the public who took part in the meeting and shared their views readily with us. They were patient in listening to background information before entering positively into the spirit of open discussions.

At all stages of the project, ORS' 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 MFRS' development. We hope also that ORS has been instrumental in continuing to strengthen MFRS's public engagement through the Forum participants.

THE COMMISSION

1. On the basis of its long-standing experience with the UK fire and rescue service, and its status as the sole approved provider of research and consultation services under the terms of the Fire Services Consultation Association's National Framework Contract, ORS was commissioned by Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service (MFRS) to convene a Forum consisting of a cross-section of Merseyside people about the MFRS' Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) for 2010 to 2013. ORS' role was to design, recruit, facilitate and report the Forum; and we worked in collaboration with MFRS to prepare informative stimulus material for the meeting.
2. In a previous cycle of consultation for MFRS, in the early summer of 2009, five representative Forums (commonly referred to as the five Forums) were convened by ORS, with one in each local authority area. For the current study, randomly selected members of each of those earlier Forums were invited by ORS to attend a further central Forum at MFRS Headquarters (MFRS HQ). ORS recruited the participants in order to achieve a diverse and inclusive cross-section of opinions from a wide range of people (who already had some familiarity with MFRS and IRMP issues from their earlier meetings).
3. The Forum was designed to be qualitative and deliberative in order to encourage members of the public to reflect in depth about their priorities for MFRS while both receiving and questioning background information and discussing service delivery issues in detail.

INCLUSIVENESS AND REPRESENTATIVENESS

4. A total of 83 members of the public took part in the original five Forums in the early summer, but for this exercise a randomly selected cross section of 25 of them were invited to the Forum at MFRS HQ – and 21 attended, with nearly equal numbers from each area of Merseyside, as shown below:

Locations	Participants
Liverpool	5
Wirral	4
Sefton	4
St Helens	4
Knowlsey	4

5. As before, the participants were recruited by random-digit telephone dialling from the ORS Social Research Call Centre. Having been initially contacted by phone, they were then written to – to confirm the invitation and the arrangements; and those who agreed to come then received telephone or written reminders shortly before each meeting. Such recruitment by telephone is the most effective way of ensuring that all the participants are independently recruited.

6. Care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by disabilities or any other factor – and people’s dietary, language and special needs were all taken into account in the recruitment and arrangements. The recruitment process was also carefully monitored to ensure that Forum members were diverse in terms of a wide range of criteria – including, for example:
 - Area of residence
 - Gender
 - Age
 - Ethnicity
 - Social class
 - Housing tenure
 - Economic activity
 - Disabilities.
7. All members of the Forum were sent a draft copy of MFRS’ IRMP in advance of the meeting – for them to read and consider in advance.
8. Although, like all other forms of qualitative consultation, Forum meetings cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the recruitment process gave a diverse range of people (from right across Merseyside) the opportunity to comment in detail on MFRS’ current and future direction of travel. Because the recruitment was inclusive and participants were diverse, we are satisfied that the outcomes of the meetings (as reported below) are broadly indicative of how informed opinion in Merseyside would incline on the basis of similar discussions. In summary, then, the meetings are reliable and authoritative guides to informed public opinion on these issues.

DISCUSSION AGENDA

9. The meeting discussed a range of inter-connected issues:
 - Feedback of opinions from first five Forums
 - Meaning and implications of integrated risk management planning
 - Financial constraints on MFRS
 - Matching resources to risk.
10. Following an introductory review of the findings of the five previous Forums, the meeting addressed the IRMP issues in sequence. Each part of the meeting began with a short presentation devised by ORS to stimulate discussion of the issues.

THE REPORT

11. This report reviews the sentiments and judgements of participants about MFRS’ IRMP. 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.
12. 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. The next section of this report has been structured so as to address each of the areas of discussion in some detail.

Consultation Findings

PART ONE: MEANING AND IMPLICATIONS OF IRMP

13. The opening ORS presentation covered the following aspects:

Feedback of opinions from first five Forums, including:

Generally positive impressions of MFRS

Importance of community fire safety work

Role of home fire safety checks in raising issues about:

Lifestyle and health

Home security

Carbon footprint / home insulation

Meaning and implications of IRMP, including:

Monitoring varying risk levels

Targeting resources to manage risk

Flexibility in the use and allocation of resources

Value for money

Community consultation.

14. The Forum members were pleased to receive a detailed summary of the findings from the previous meetings – and particularly pleased to learn that the Fire and Rescue Authority had received a full report of the outcomes from the meetings. People were also pleased to learn how MFRS has taken the Forums' views into account in continuing to develop its strategic thinking and IRMP.
15. In discussing the wider IRMP strategy in the context of MFRS' approach to *Making Merseyside Safer, Stronger, Healthier* some participants questioned whether MFRS should raise lifestyle, diet and exercise issues during its routine home fire safety checks. For example, one person said:

How has the vision moved to stronger and healthier communities from just fire safety? Are all agencies taking this wider perspective? Do the agencies duplicate each other once they decide to go outside their core business? I wonder if the FRS might lose some community trust if it focuses more on lifestyle issues? Does the working pattern allow the FRS to do this work?

16. Others wanted to ensure that core fire safety issues were not minimised within the context of a wider lifestyle agenda – for example:

I was impressed with the home fire safety check I had – which gave a lot of general advice – but it should have dealt with fire extinguishers as well!

17. On the other hand, many supported MFRS' positive role in giving advice in people's homes, and felt that it is well established:

MFRS is more effective in going into people's homes than the police or some other agencies – because we trust the fire service...the principle of going into people's homes is not a new idea – it has been happening for 10 years

NICE and other agencies have their agendas to promote via the fire service in terms of the public health agenda.

18. Following a short but earnest discussion, it became clear that a significant minority of 8 out of 21 participants had reservations about the potential implications of MFRS' *Safer, Stronger, Healthier* approach – mainly because they felt it is potentially too intrusive into people's privacy, a manifestation of the nanny state, and not a core duty of the fire and rescue service.
19. Overall, though, there was substantial support for MFRS's strategic approach to a safer, stronger, healthier Merseyside, with a clear majority in support.
20. Regarding the core ideas of IRMP, no one at all had any reservations about the important principle approved in the first five Forums – namely, that MFRS should be flexible in targeting its fire cover and other resources in order to manage risk in the community. This principle was unanimously endorsed again, just as it was in the first five Forums.
21. In passing, a particular incident was mentioned by one participant – who observed that:

In practice, a local LLAR station might not be called out to some incidents – so [where this happens] it would be a good idea to write to local community papers to explain how any controversial incidents have been handled

PART TWO: IMPLICATIONS OF FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS

Council Tax Increase

22. For the second part of the meeting ORS had prepared some financial data showing the UK's real GDP, net borrowing requirement and net public debt levels over the last three years – in order to indicate the financial pressures under which public services are likely to have to function in the coming years. In this national context, it was stressed that MFRS will seek to

Minimise impact of financial pressures on front-line service delivery

Minimise Council Tax rises

Minimise impact on employees

Be creative in reducing and responding to risk in the community.

23. It was also stressed that the Fire and Rescue Authority's current Financial Plan includes challenging efficiency targets in order to achieve savings necessary to balance the budget while avoiding undue increases in Council Tax. In this realistic context, participants were then asked to discuss the possible implications for the future, while also considering whether an appropriate level of Council Tax increase in the short term should be "around 4%" or "nearer to zero"?

24. A wide range of questions were raised by participants in the face of these issues – for example including:

Is MFRS protected from inflation?

Is there anything more MFRS wants to do that it is unable to do?

When did you last do a staffing level review?

What percentage of your budget do you spend on fuel?

What percentage of funding does the Council Tax deliver?

25. People were very interested in the answers to these questions and, as a result, they certainly understood the potential 'gearing' implications of reduced government funding on Council Tax levels, if authorities seek to make up shortfalls that way.

26. One question in particular seemed to focus many people's mind in drawing together a number of strands from the other questions:

I am confused! If inflation is running at zero percent, why is a zero percent Council Tax increase a hardship?

27. People were certainly protective of MFRS, and they wished to see its resources protected as far as possible – in any reasonable ways – but not necessarily at all costs and in all respects, as the following comments indicate:

The FRS is an essential service, but we need to prioritise by relative importance

We need to see the full picture of all its services?

28. A number of practical suggestions were made for possible savings:

Is the IRMP an essential annual planning function? Administration is always capable of being reduced!

You could cut out some of the non-essential 'extra' services

There are lots of inessentials that can be cut – like the free fruit scheme in Toxteth and other issues where you seem to be spending money

29. Overall, people recognised that some cuts might well be inevitable, but they wanted to protect fire cover:

The financial situation is appalling – the medicine is going to be hard regardless of the government – so we have to "do the same for less" but without reducing cover!

30. Having reviewed all these issues, the meeting was invited to reach an overall conclusion about the level of Council Tax increase that should be set for next year. The question of whether an appropriate level of Council Tax increase in the short term should be "around 4%" or "nearer to zero"? was repeated.

31. In this context, the overwhelming feeling of the meeting was that because inflation has been so low, and because we are in the midst of a recession, there should be a "near zero" increase in the Council Tax.

32. Only two people out of 21 disagreed with the view that MFRS's precept should not be increased significantly.

Redundancy Issues

33. People's views were further tested by raising a very sensitive issue for consideration as a matter of principle. Participants were asked to consider whether MFRS might reasonably consider using compulsory redundancy measures – on the assumption that staffing reductions are both necessary and safe.
34. It was stressed that such a policy has never been pursued before by MFRS and that the service will do all it can to protect staff; but Forum members were asked about their opinions on whether compulsory redundancy is permissible in principle for MFRS.
35. Much of the subsequent discussion centred on whether the public sector in general and the fire and rescue service in particular should be the *last bastion of protected employment* – in which people have a guaranteed *job for life*? In this context, some people felt that the private sector should not be expected to absorb all the pain of the recession, while others were reluctant to countenance any compulsory redundancies within MFRS.
36. The outcome of the discussion, though, was that two-thirds of those present supported the use of compulsory redundancy as a necessary management measure in the event that the budget could not be balanced otherwise.
37. Indeed, only four out of 21 (less than a quarter) opposed this view, while three were undecided on the issue. However, one of those who was undecided on the question recognised the need potentially to save money, and so asked:

Could there be a general lowering of salary instead?

PART THREE: MATCHING RESOURCES TO RISK

Introduction

38. Early in the meeting, participants unanimously endorsed the conclusion of the first five Forums that MFRS should be flexible in targeting its fire cover and other resources in order to manage risks in the community. However, at the start of the final part of the meeting, participants were reminded that this general principle would not be used to commit them to particular measures – unless they specifically approved those measures in their own right.
39. Therefore, the final part of the meeting was devoted to discussing two example proposals for matching varying levels of fire cover more closely to varying levels of community risk – namely:

Crewing second pumps with Retained Duty System (rather than wholetime) crews by night

Using small(er) 4-wheel drive vehicles to attend secondary fires (rather than sending a full fire engine).

Second Pump Crewing at Night

40. The principle of using Retained Duty System crews for second pumps at night-time was approved, though a number of questions were raised in the discussions:

Are the night-time incidents more serious?

How would the on-call firefighters save MFRS money?

41. One person felt very strongly that replacing wholetime firefighters with night-time Retained Duty System crews was:

Like bringing in minimum wage firefighters to replace full cost firefighters!

Retained Duty System drivers are not desirable if they are tired when they do the job!

42. However, in contrast, the majority of Forum members were happy to take productivity issues into account – saying, for example:

We are looking at resources – where people are doing nothing much overnight and being paid for it!

The sleeping at night does not happen anywhere else [in other professions]!

43. Participants seemed readily to trust that such changes would be made only if it was safe; and they were keen to achieve greater productivity by reducing the number of wholetime firefighters who sleep overnight while on station. Interestingly, they did not challenge the principle of sleeping night shifts per se – but wished to avoid the practice by using Retained Duty System crews where possible.

Flexible Response Vehicles

44. The principle of using small 4-wheel drive vehicles for small secondary fires and some special service calls was also approved, though Forum members raised a number of issues, including:

How would you know how big a fire is?

What are special service calls?

Are they successful vehicles elsewhere?

45. When they considered that such questions had been adequately answered, the participants were happy to accept the use of such vehicles for secondary fires and appropriate special service calls. Indeed, most felt that MFRS is a professional and specialist organisation – so that decisions about which vehicles to use in which circumstances can safely be left to its managers. For example, one person declared:

You are the expert on this! If it seems reasonable to you, it is OK!

46. In this context, the Forum almost unanimously approved the use of such vehicles in principle – with 20 out of 21 favourable and only one person unsure of their views.

PART FOUR: CONCLUSIONS

Main Outcomes

47. By a substantial majority the Forum reaffirmed MFRS' vision that it should contribute actively to making Merseyside *safer, stronger, healthier*. While a significant minority had reservations about the wider lifestyle and health-related role, a big majority was in favour.
48. The Forum unanimously endorsed the principle that MFRS should be flexible in targeting its fire cover and other resources in order to manage risks in the community. In this context, the participants also readily accepted the use of small 4-wheel drive vehicles for small secondary fires and some special service calls and the replacement of some wholetime crews on second support pumps with RDS crews at night.
49. While supporting MFRS wholeheartedly, the Forum members felt that anything more than a zero percent increase in its Council Tax precept would be unjustifiable.
50. Similarly, while being sympathetic to all MFRS personnel, the Forum members felt that in principle it is legitimate and permissible for management to formulate plans for compulsory redundancy, if the service is in extreme financial need.
51. The overall theme of the Forum, then, was that in the years to come MFRS will have to try to maintain its performance eve with less resources at its disposal (do the same or better with less) – so it must use its resources ever more productively.

Caveat

52. These conclusions do not mean that variations in fire cover and staffing levels will automatically recommend themselves to people in the affected areas – for, of course, the Forum members discussed the issues in an informed way and without being directly affected by any local changes.
53. Nonetheless, their views demonstrate that informed members of the public are able and prepared to think creatively about the principles governing the fire and rescue service – in order to enhance productivity and avoid undue increases in Council Tax levels at a time of considerable financial stringency.
54. In this context, although no one wanted to see compulsory redundancies, the Forum members recognised that in principle it is legitimate for management to consider such measures, in appropriate circumstances.

Dale Hall

MD, ORS

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