

MERSEYSIDE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

Report of Public Engagement Forum on *INTEGRATED RISK MANAGEMENT PLAN* 2011-2014



Opinion Research Services

Spin-out Company of the Swansea University

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Acknowledgements..... | 3 |
| Introduction | 4 |
| THE COMMISSION | 4 |
| DISCUSSION AGENDA..... | 5 |
| THE REPORT | 6 |
| Forum Findings | 7 |
| SMALL FIRES INITIATIVE – FIRE BIKE | 7 |
| COMPREHENSIVE SPENDING REVIEW (CSR)..... | 7 |
| AUTOMATIC FIRE ALARMS | 8 |
| COMMUNITY FIRE SAFETY AND INVOLVEMENT | 11 |

Acknowledgements

Opinion Research Services (ORS) is pleased to have worked once more with Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service (MFRS) on the public engagement Forum reported here. The participants engaged with the issues and discussed their ideas readily, so we trust the report will contribute to the continued development of MFRS' risk management planning.

We thank MFRS for commissioning the project as part of an on-going programme of public engagement across Merseyside. We particularly thank Kieran Timmins, Assistant Chief Executive and Treasurer, and other senior officers who attended the sessions to listen to the public's views. Such meetings benefit considerably from the readiness of MFRS' officers to answer participants' questions fully and frankly. Their input was essential in achieving an informed debate.

We are grateful to the 24 members of the public who took part in the Forum and shared their views; 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 be useful in thinking about the organisation and strengthening MFRS' public engagement.

Introduction

THE COMMISSION

1. On the basis of our long-standing experience with the UK fire and rescue service, and our 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 and facilitate a Public Engagement Forum at MFRS Headquarters on November 24, 2010.
2. ORS' role was to design, recruit, facilitate and report the Forum. We worked in collaboration with MFRS to prepare informative stimulus material for the meeting before facilitating the discussions and preparing this independent report of findings.
3. The Forum was a 'deliberative' meeting 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, in a meeting that lasted for 2.5 hours.
4. ORS recruited 24 diverse participants in order to achieve an inclusive cross-section of opinions from a wide range of people drawn equally from five separate pre-existing Community Forums, covering each of the five local authority districts of Merseyside. The members of the five Community Forums were originally recruited by random-digit telephone dialling from ORS' Social Research Call Centre. Such recruitment by telephone is the most effective way of ensuring that all the participants are independent and representative of the wider community.
5. Care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by disabilities or any other factor – and the venue was chosen to be fully accessible. People's dietary, language and special needs were all taken into account in the recruitment and arrangements for venues. The recruitment process was also carefully monitored to ensure that the Forum was diverse in terms of a wide range of criteria – including, for example:
 - Local authority area of residence
 - Gender
 - Age
 - Ethnicity
 - Social class
 - Housing tenure
 - Economic activity
 - Disabilities.

6. In terms of total numbers, the Forum was 'over-recruited' to take account of unpredictable withdrawals at the last minute. In terms of some key criteria, the profile of the final participants was as follows:

| | |
|------------------------------|----|
| Sex | |
| Men | 15 |
| Women | 9 |
| Age groups | |
| 18-34 | 7 |
| 35-54 | 10 |
| 55+ | 7 |
| Social class | |
| A/B | 4 |
| C1 | 7 |
| C2 | 4 |
| D/E | 8 |
| Ethnicity | |
| White/British | 19 |
| BME | 5 |
| Long term limiting condition | 9 |

7. Although, like all other forms of qualitative consultation, forum-style meetings cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the Forum reported here certainly gave diverse range of people from 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 meeting (as reported below) are broadly indicative of how informed opinion in Merseyside would incline on the basis of similar discussions.
8. In summary, then, the outcomes reported here are reliable and authoritative as examples of the reflections and opinions of diverse informed people reacting to the proposals included within MFRS' *Integrated Risk Management Plan 2011-2014*.

DISCUSSION AGENDA

9. The meetings discussed a range of issues, namely: update on motorbikes pilot for small fires; Comprehensive Spending Review; automatic fire alarms, MFRS' preventive and protective work in the community, the importance of MFRS' community engagement via a wide range of initiatives. Within that context, the programme was:
- Feedback from previous consultation
 - Small fires initiative (fire Bike)
 - Awareness and opinions on the impact of the Comprehensive Spending Review
 - Options for response levels to AFAs

Community fire safety

Community involvement.

10. Each part of the meeting began with a short presentation devised by ORS to stimulate discussion of the issues, following which the above matters were reviewed in sequence.

THE REPORT

11. This report concisely reviews the sentiments and judgements of participants about MFRS and its proposals. 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.

SMALL FIRES INITIATIVE – FIRE BIKE

Enthusiastic support

12. A short discussion of the on-going pilot test of motorbikes for dealing with small fires showed unanimous support from the participants for the continuation and extension of the initiative (if the pilot test is successful in avoiding the deployment of full fire engines and dealing effectively and safely with small fires).
13. During the discussion a number of questions were raised and in each case the participants were happy with the answers they received from MFRS officers. Some of the questions were:
 - Where did the idea come from?
 - Are you the first in Europe?
 - How many times has the bike replaced a full fire engine?
 - How long is the evaluation period?
 - Can you use satellite technology to manage deployments?
 - Is there any hostility or anti-social behaviour towards the motorcyclists?
 - Will this be extended?
14. The participants were pleased with the originality of the pilot test – and were not put-off the initiative by its innovatory character.

COMPREHENSIVE SPENDING REVIEW (CSR)

High levels of awareness

15. In order to assess the participants' awareness of the implications of the government's CSR, participants were asked whether they thought the changes to public expenditure levels would have a large or small impact on MFRS.
16. The responses showed a high level of awareness of the public spending reductions – for two-thirds of the Forum felt that the CSR would have a "big impact" on the MFRS and would affect it a "great deal". A third thought the impact would be "fairly big" and no one thought the impact would be fairly small or small.
17. People were generally unaware that FRSs might have slightly smaller funding reductions than local government. Well over half thought that MFRS will be affected to the same extent as local government, while about a third thought it would be affected more than local government. Only

a small minority (about one in eight) thought MFRS would be less affected than local government.

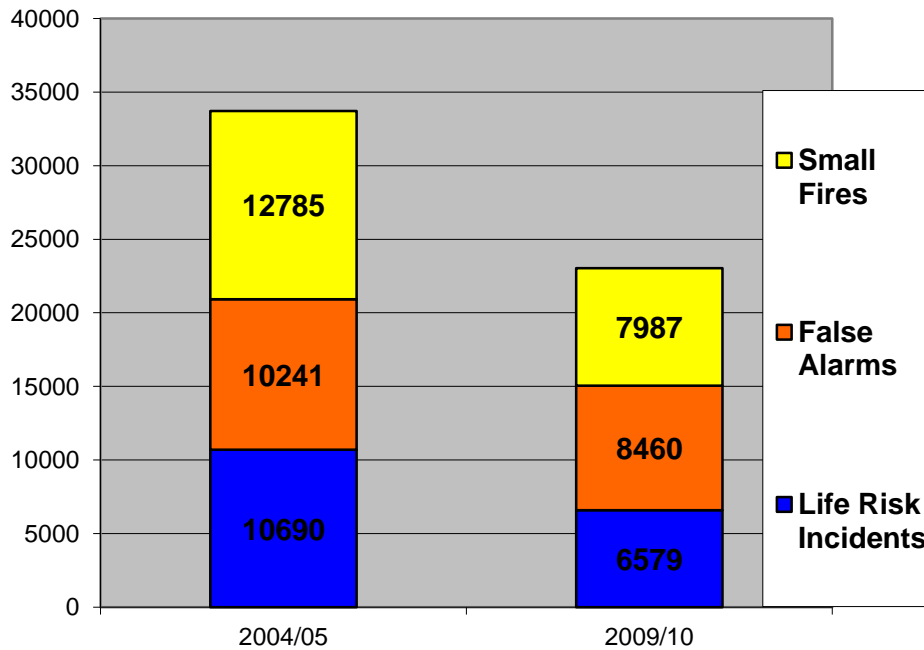
18. Some of the question raised in the general discussion of public finances were:
 - What reductions in service or capacity will the reductions cause in practice for MFRS – what are you doing about it now?
 - How much does this threaten the MFRS?
 - Other organisations have been planning for a loss of funding – so has MFRS?
 - Are you considering any new sources of funding?
 - Are the 26% cuts on top of other reductions?
 - Will these cuts make MFRS vulnerable and less effective?
 - Are the cuts going to be the same everywhere or do they affect cities in the north of England more than the southern counties?
 - Does population determine the size of the grants to local government?
 - Are fire-fighters pensions at risk due to these cuts?
 - Do fire-fighters get performance bonuses?
19. Clearly, people were concerned about how much MFRS will be affected; and they thought it should make sensible preparations for the new financial regime.
20. Significantly, there was a feeling that MFRS has taken a lower profile than local government in publicising the size and implications of the funding reductions – for example:

You do not seem to be making such a visible response!

AUTOMATIC FIRE ALARMS

Emphatic support for a new approach

21. There was a particularly detailed and careful discussion of automatic fire alarms – which showed considerable support for a significant change of policy by MFRS.
22. Participants were informed of:
 - The number and proportion of AFAs each year
 - The high proportion of AFA false alarms
 - The wide range of settings in which AFA systems are installed – including the kinds of places with vulnerable people
 - MFRS' current response policies and strength of attack.
23. The core information provided to participants is in the table on the next page – which shows that the number of incidents MFRS deals with annually is reducing (as community fire safety initiatives have continuing effects) but that the proportion of false alarms remains very high. Of course, the Forum was well aware that not all false alarms are AFAs.



24. The Forum was not in favour of continuing to treat all AFAs as emergencies and sending at least two or three fire engines – when over 90% of AFAs are false alarms due to poor equipment, maintenance, management and/or irresponsible behaviour. There was a general feeling that this pattern of response is wasteful and diverts emergency resources from more important incidents as well as from fire prevention and training work.
25. A range of possible response options was outlined for both 'vulnerable' and 'non-vulnerable' situations, including:
 - Not attending AFAs unless incidents are confirmed by 999 calls
 - Responding with motorbikes/vans rather than sending two or three fire engines
 - Responding with one fire engine
 - Maintaining current response levels.
26. The Forum unanimously rejected continuing the current policy of treating all AFAs as emergencies and sending at least two or three fire engines – because this pattern of response is wasteful and diverts resources from more work. The Forum was very 'sympathetic' to MFRS in currently attending numerous false AFAs, but the complexities and sensitivities of the issues were recognised in a lengthy discussion.
27. Eventually, the most radical option of not responding to AFAs unless they are confirmed by 999 calls was favoured by three-quarters of the participants for 'non-vulnerable' situations and by two-thirds of them for 'vulnerable' situations.
28. Only about a sixth and a fifth (respectively for 'vulnerable' and 'non-vulnerable' situations) favoured the option of responding with a motorbike/van rather than committing with a full response.

29. Only one in twelve or eight (respectively for 'vulnerable' and 'non-vulnerable' situations) favoured responding with one fire engine.
30. In other words, no one favoured continuing to send a full emergency response to daytime AFAs of any kind – though it was recognised that 'vulnerable' situations might need to be treated differently, particularly at night.
31. Some of the typical comments made in the course of the discussion were:
- Triaging these incidents is important – to have a proper risk assessment – based upon the particular circumstances*
- The daytime policy can be more radical than the night-time policy. Non-vulnerable buildings will often be empty at night – so there will be no 999 calls*
- Could you reverse the process by contacting the address where the AFA is activated?*
- Take a radical approach even to vulnerable buildings*
- How many false AFAs happen in vulnerable buildings?*
- Will vulnerable buildings be affected by these?*
- How should hospitals be treated since they have a lot of AFAs?*
- How many times do the worst offenders actually have fires? How often do hospitals have fires?*
- AFAs might not be as important as people think*
- Motorbike responses could use local bases in high risk areas – to provide more flexible response*
- Charging is a reasonable policy for some bad offenders*
- You could charge £100 for each incident, but the irresponsible organisations might disconnect their systems!*
- Do you stop attending to repeat offenders?*
- Are you proactive enough in tackling the repeat offenders and educating people to reduce them? It is better than hitting them after the event*
- Will spending reductions increase the false AFAs?*
- What is the cost of attending a false AFA? How much might you charge for them?*
- Can you go and educate schools and colleges about fire safety and responsible behaviour in relation to false alarms?*
32. The participants recognised the complications that can arise in different types of premises and organisations at different times of the day, but they clearly supported a radical new approach to AFAs.
33. Above all, they were concerned with the waste of resources though the mismatch between often trivial incidents and the full deployment of the emergency response service. They wanted to reduce AFAs by proactive management, fines and taking firm action against repeat offenders

(including hospitals); but they were also ready to embrace a policy of not responding immediately (in normal circumstances) unless AFAs are supported by confirmatory emergency calls.

COMMUNITY FIRE SAFETY AND INVOLVEMENT

Emphatic support for continuing community fire safety programmes in the context of public expenditure reductions

34. The Forum reviewed MFRS' risk mapping and risk reduction programmes (through a range of community fire safety initiatives) in relative detail.
35. Even though participants were well-aware of the implications of public expenditure reductions, there was considerable support for MFRS continuing its programmes of community fire safety. That is, the Forum unanimously agreed that even in times of reduced public sector funding, it is "very important" for MFRS to continue its risk reduction strategies and community fire safety programmes.
36. There were concerns about how effectively community fire safety could be continued in the context of staff reductions, but the Forum felt it was clearly important to do so:

It is important to maintain the risk reduction strategy – it reduces anti-social behaviour – and eventually you might need fewer fire engines.
37. In the context of community fire safety, it is pleasing to note that an older lady from St Helens was particularly appreciative of MFRS visiting her home twice to undertake home fire safety checks.
38. Shortage of time prevented the full range of MFRS' community involvement initiatives being discussed in detail, but participants were clearly aware of them – and they unanimously agreed that it is important for MFRS to continue working with communities, partners and charities to reduce anti-social behaviour. One typical comment was:

It is important! In Liverpool anti-social behaviour has reduced. Community Watch has helped.