Integrated Risk Management Plan

Report of Engagement Forums with members of the public

Merseyside FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE

"An Excellent Authority"

June 2012

Contents

Acknowledgements

Opinion Research Services (ORS) is pleased to have worked with Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service (MFRS) on the five engagement forums 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 its on-going programme of public and stakeholder consultation. 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; and the public is pleased that elected members take such an interest. MFRS' input is essential in achieving an informed debate.

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

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.

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Project Overview

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 five Community Forums across the local authority districts of Merseyside as part of the latter's on-going public engagement programme. ORS' role was to design, recruit, facilitate and report the five forums during May 2012. We worked in collaboration with MFRS to prepare informative stimulus material for the meetings before facilitating the discussions and preparing this independent report of findings.

Deliberative Research: Public Forums

2. The forums were designed to inform and 'engage' the participants both with the issues and with MFRS – by using a 'deliberative' approach to encourage members of the public to reflect in depth about the fire and rescue service, while both receiving and questioning background information and discussing service delivery issues in detail. The meetings lasted for between 2.5 and 3.25 hours. In total, there were 103 diverse participants at the forums. The dates of the meetings and attendance level by members of the public at each forum were as follows:

AREA	TIME AND DATE	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES
Wirral	10:00pm – 1:15pm Saturday 12th May 2012	20
Knowsley	6:00pm – 8:30pm Monday 14th May 2012	16
Liverpool	6:00pm – 8:30pm Tuesday 15th May 2012	22
St Helens	6:00pm – 8:30pm Wednesday 16th May 2012	21
Sefton	6:00pm – 8:30pm Thursday 17th May 2012	24

3. The attendance target for each meeting was between 20 and 25 people, so the recruitment programme was successful.

4. In each forum, about half the participants had attended a previous similar meeting within the last couple of years, while half were new recruits to the process. The new recruits were recruited by random-digit telephone dialling from the ORS Social Research Call Centre (in the same way as existing panellists had originally been). 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.

5. 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).

6. In all five forums (as shown in the table below), participants were a broad cross-section of residents from the local areas and, as standard good practice, were recompensed for their time and efforts in travelling and taking part.

	WIRRAL	KNOWSLEY	LIVERPOOL	ST HELENS	SEFTON
Gender	Male: 11 Female: 9	Male: 9 Female: 7	Male: 12 Female: 10	Male: 13 Female: 8	Male: 14 Female: 10
Age	18-34: 3 35-54: 7 55+: 10	18-34: 2 35-54: 8 55+: 6	18-34: 6 35-54: 10 55+: 4	18-34: 5 35-54: 5 55+: 11	18-34: 5 35-54: 10 55+: 9
Social Grade	AB: 6 C1: 4 C2: 2 DE: 8	AB: 3 C1: 3 C2: 5 DE: 5	AB: 6 C1: 6 C2: 3 DE: 5	AB: 6 C1: 4 C2: 5 DE: 6	AB: 5 C1: 6 C2: 4 DE: 9
Ethnicity	0 BME	1 BME	1 BME	0 BME	1 BME
LLTI	3	4	1	4	3

7. Although, like all other forms of qualitative consultation, forums cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the five meetings reported here gave diverse groups of people from 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 would incline on the basis of similar discussions. In summary, the outcomes reported here are reliable as examples of the reflections and opinions of diverse informed people reacting to the proposals included within MFRS' *Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP)*.

The Interview Framework

8. ORS worked in collaboration with MFRS to prepare informative stimulus material for the meeting, which considered detailed information and discussed a range of important issues, including:

The profile of MFRS – including its resources, strategic roles and challenges

The importance of prevention in the context of protection and response services

The impact of the public spending review on MFRS over four years

The possible implications of budget reductions, including the following:

Station closures (and fewer fire-fighters)

Re-defining response times

Options for more flexible duty systems

Reductions in Support Services

Council Tax increases beyond the capping level.

Obstacles and costs.

9. Each part of the meeting began with a short presentation devised by ORS and MFRS to both inform and stimulate discussion of the issues, following which the above matters were reviewed in sequence. Participants were given extensive time for questions prior to being invited to make up their minds on each discussion topic. Not all the issues were discussed in equal detail: for example, the budgetary issues were explained but were not treated as a primary issue for discussion; whereas the choices facing MFRS were examined carefully.

The Report

10. 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.

Consultation Findings with Commentary

Introduction

11. This report has been structured to address each of the areas of discussion in some detail. The views of the five meetings have been merged to give an overall report of findings, rather than five separate and rather repetitive mini-reports – but significant differences in the sub-area views have been drawn out where appropriate. Following the introductory material, each forum addressed a series of issues connected with MFRS' current and future direction. Not all the groups gave equal emphasis to each aspect of the discussions, and some groups preferred to discuss some matters at the expense of others; but, taken overall, the forums considered a wide range of important issues that are reported fully below.

12. Before discussing the main issues, all five forums reviewed the resources and profile of MFRS, with particular reference to its strategic roles in integrated risk management planning and to the current public spending review, which has reduced central government funding to the organisation.

Main Findings

13. In the main discussion, participants were asked for their opinions on the five main 'choices' faced by MFRS to address its £5.5 million funding deficit, namely:

> Reducing the number of fire stations (and thus fire-fighters and fire engines)

> Re-defining response times (for example, adopting a single response standard of, say, 'attending 90% of life incidents with at least one fire engine within eight minutes')

> Introducing alternative crewing systems to match variations in 'demand'

> Reducing support services (including prevention and protection activities)

> Raising council tax levels beyond the capping level.

Fire Stations: Possible Reductions and Criteria for Prioritisation

Context

14. Participants were informed that, assuming the 'best case' scenario of an £8.5 million budget cut in 2013/15 and a maximum £3 million saving from support functions, MFRS must find £5.5 million from front-line services – which could mean:
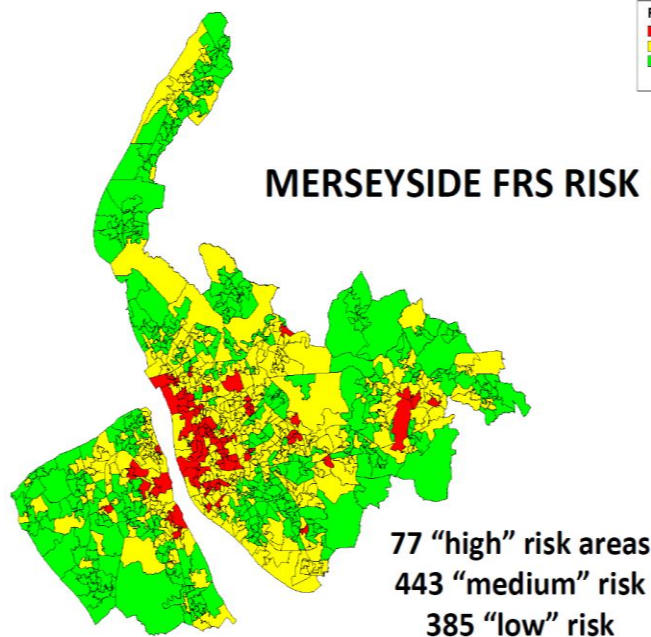
    Reduction of about 150 firefighter posts

    Closure of up to five stations

    Reduction of up to 11 fire engines.

15. Maps of MFRS' fire stations and of Merseyside's 'high', 'medium' and 'low' risk areas can be seen below:
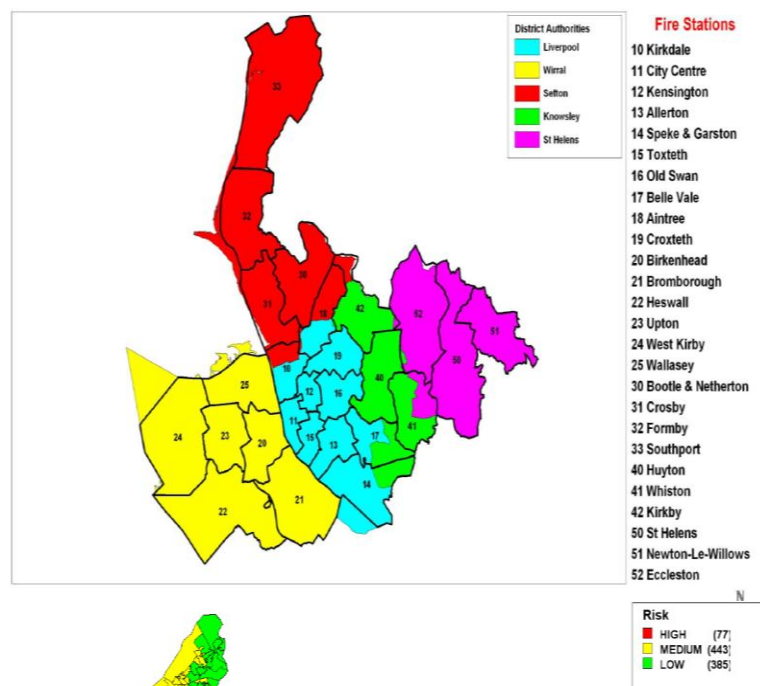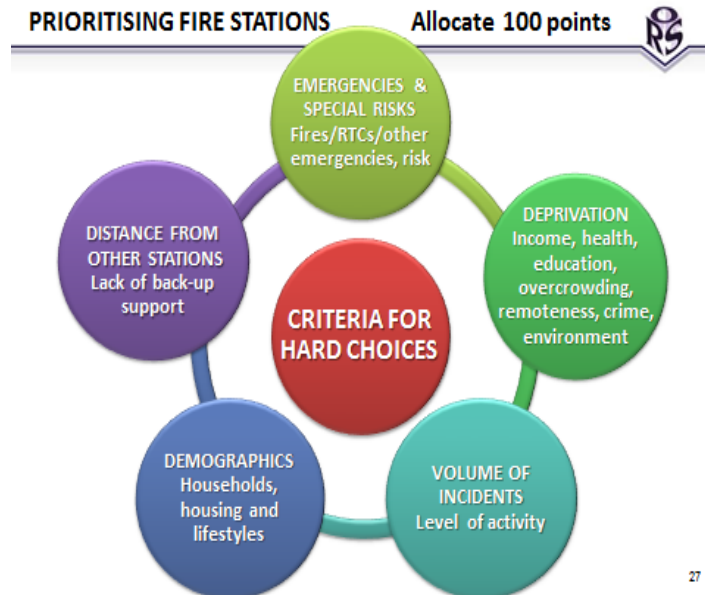
Criteria for Choice

16. In discussion about the potential closure of fire stations, participants were informed about possible criteria for making decisions, which were shown as:

17. At each forum, participants were divided into small groups and each group was given 100 points to allocate between the five criteria, to show which were more and less important. Participants took this exercise very seriously and it was worthwhile, even though there were some uncertainties in the discussion groups about how to interpret and 'separate' some of the 'overlapping' criteria.

18. The chart below shows that, overall, participants considered Emergencies and Special Risks to be the most important criteria, followed by Deprivation, Volume of Incidents, Demographics and, lastly, Distance from Other Stations. Indeed, in terms of the top two criteria, only Sefton diverged from the common view, placing Deprivation first and Emergencies and Special Risks second. (Individual sub-group scores have been merged for each of the forums, to produce overall 'forum scores' used in the table.)
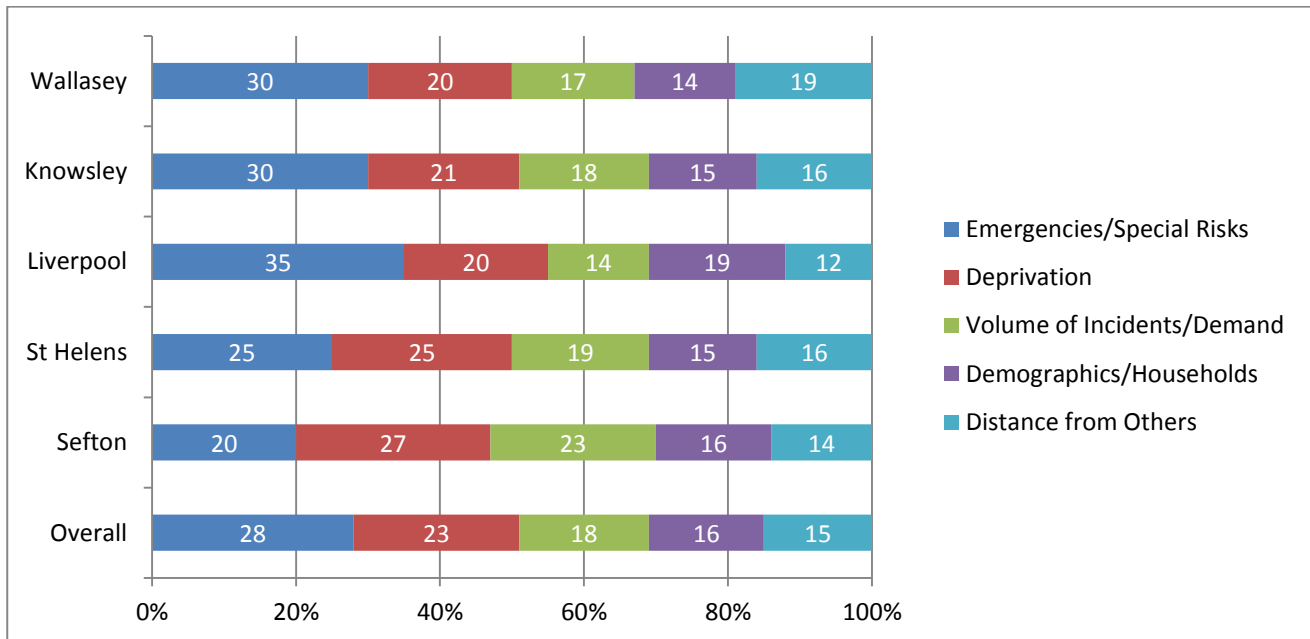
19. Some participants gave reasons for their scores, for example:

We gave emergencies a lower score because many special risks have other forms of cover (Sefton)

The Wirral has six stations with low incidents and that has influenced our score. It is over-provided. But the further away it is, the higher score it should get if other things are equal (St Helens).

20. It was also argued that all five criteria are linked, and should not be taken in isolation:

There is a lot of overlap in terms of the criteria and issues - they are linked (Wirral).

21. Other comments made and questions asked at this stage related to:

Deprivation will become more prevalent in certain areas in future

The need for MFRS to manage and reduce Automatic Fire Alarm (AFA) calls

The need to include transport links in the list of criteria

The potential for using smaller response vehicles more frequently

The potential to relocate some fire stations to more strategic locations:

22. For example, some typical comments were:

Deprivation is going to get worse in some areas like the Wirral (Wirral)

You need to manage your incidents like AFAs (Knowsley)

> *At our primary school we tell the Fire and Rescue Service if it is only a false
> alarm - so we manage the incident to take stress off MFRS* (Knowsley)

> *You have to look at transport links* (St Helens)

> *What about using smaller response vehicles to replace some fire engines?
> For example, landrovers with proper equipment…* (Liverpool).

Distribution of Fire Stations

23. The discussion agenda about possible criteria for the prioritisation of fire stations did not explicitly raise issues about their relative distribution across the five local authority districts of Merseyside. However, when looking at the maps of fire stations and relative risk across Merseyside (see paragraph 15 above), participants certainly noticed the varying numbers of fire stations in each area – as the following comment about Wirral clearly shows:

> *The Wirral has six stations with low incidents…It is over-provided.*
> (St Helens).

24. The natural conclusion that some forum members drew from the maps was that. in relation to both Wirral and Liverpool:
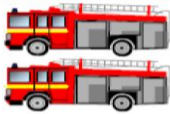
> *You might need to relocate some of your fire stations to more strategic
> locations.* (St Helens)

25. While not a central focus of the discussion agenda, participants in St Helens and Knowsley certainly noticed that they had three fire stations in their areas compared with much higher numbers in Liverpool and Wirral. While these differences were not highlighted acutely in the general discussion of abstract criteria, there seems no doubt that they would come into sharp focus in relation to any proposals to close particular stations.

Redefining Response Times

Context

26. MFRS is one of the fastest emergency responders, achieving 90% performance against targets within five minutes in 'high-risk' areas, six minutes in 'medium-risk areas' and seven minutes in 'low-risk' areas – rather better than the 'historical' national standards (repealed in 2004) shown in the table below.

HOME OFFICE STANDARDS OF FIRE COVER

RISK CATEGORY	FIRE BRIGADE ATTENDANCE	
CATEGORY 'A' Built up areas in large cities containing large commercial and industrial premises or high rise property where there is a strong chance of fire spread.	TWO PUMPS WITHIN 5 MIN	THIRD PUMP WITHIN 8 MIN
CATEGORY 'B' Areas in towns and cities such as smaller industrial areas, extensive shopping centres and factory estates	FIRST PUMP WITHIN 5 MIN	SECOND PUMP WITHIN 8 MIN
CATEGORY 'C' Extensive areas of residential dwellings such as terraced property, blocks of flats or light industry/commercial	ONE PUMP WITHIN 8 TO 10 MIN	
CATEGORY 'D' Consisting of rural property, villages and farms	ONE PUMP WITHIN 20 MIN	

27. Home Office research, however, states that there is little difference in terms of casualties between attendance times of 1-5 minutes and 6-10 minutes – and so MFRS proposes to adopt a single response standard of, say, 'attending 90% of life incidents with at least one fire engine within eight minutes'.

Views on Response Times

28. Overall, as the table below shows, eight-in-ten participants supported the adoption of a single response standard – providing it states '<u>within</u> eight minutes', and that the Service continues to endeavour to get to incidents as quickly as possible:

> *Given the isochrones for eight minutes (showing the overlap), it seems a very reasonable standard!* (Sefton)
>
> *I'd be happy to see an overall response time target if that is fast enough to stop fires ripping through buildings* (St Helens)
>
> *No one wants to worsen the service, but faced with the reductions we have to make changes…and the target is 'within' eight minutes* (Liverpool)
>
> *This seems reasonable because it is 'within' these eight minutes so it will often be quicker* (Wirral)
>
> *When you dial 999 you need help quickly and it is good to know that someone will do their best to be as quick as possible* (Liverpool).

29. The table below shows the large majorities of participants who felt the stated standard is reasonable and acceptable.

RESPONSE TIMES FOR LIFE RISK INCIDENTS To attend 90% of life incidents within 8 minutes with at least one fire engine – but with no specific standard for the second engine's attendance time			
	Reasonable	**Unreasonable**	**Don't Know**
Wirral	19	0	1
Knowsley	13	3	0
Liverpool	11	10	1
St Helens	18	2	1
Sefton	23	0	1
OVERALL	**84**	**15**	**4**

30. Some typical questions and comments were:

> *What is reasonable in your experience? Do you agree with the government's assessment regarding the importance of marginal differences in response times* (St Helens)

> *You have to judge the reasonableness of the standards…you might be over-achieving now* (St Helens)

> *The Fire and Rescue Service should decide what is an acceptable response time standard* (Wirral).

31. Several people commented that now is an opportune time to review response standards, given that they were formulated some time ago and may no longer be relevant in many areas:

> *If the response standards are so old, then they could be out of date and this might be a good time to rethink them properly* (Knowsley)

> *The old standard was based upon the risk to industry, so is it possible to reduce the cover in city centres given that the risk features have moved?* (Sefton).

32. One important consideration for participants at all forums was that low risk, outlying areas should not be overlooked in terms of response, in order to prevent the serious escalation of incidents:

> *It's important that there is someone available to get to low risk areas within a certain minimum time; they should not be neglected* (Wirral)

> *There is an issue about the difference between risk and impact. Incidents can have a very big impact in low risk areas* (Wirral)

> *In a time of austerity, we need a practical solution, not the perfect solution; but people in rural areas need to be treated as equally as possible within a single standard* (Liverpool).

While endorsing a single standard, people felt it was important that residents in more remote areas, with slower response times, should be informed of what their likely response times – so they can take sensible precautions themselves; and it was said that MFRS should undertake prevention work in such places to mitigate the slower response as far as possible:

> *It sounds reasonable but I'd like to know how long it will actually take in the areas outside the eight minute target…if you are in an outlying area, people need to know what their response times are* (Knowsley)

> *The problem is that most of Merseyside is very compact…but the other areas are outside and need to know* (Knowsley)

> *We need to mitigate the slower response with prevention work in those areas* (Knowsley).

33. Those who disagreed with the proposed change to response standards did so primarily through fear of higher casualty rates and a poorer service standard:

> *It all depends if the change will worsen the casualty figures* (St Helens)

> *It is not a problem until someone dies* (St Helens)

> *The critical issue is what is the cost of lengthening the response time standard? Why did we have a quicker standard if it was unnecessary? I find it counter-intuitive that life risk won't increase with longer standards…* (Knowsley)

> *Your service standard is what sets you apart…we might not want a basic service* (St Helens).

34. One of the objectors at St Helens suggested that MFRS should:

> *Keep the current standards and show the government that you cannot achieve them due to the cuts (St Helens).*

35. On the other hand, one person at Liverpool suggested that more fire engines might safely be removed:

> *Longer response times in themselves don't save money and you could remove up to 10 pumps without lengthening the response times; it is necessary to get there as quickly as possible* (Liverpool).

36. Other comments and questions centred on response times to non-life risk incidents; the second fire engine response times; the response times of other emergency services; the potential for MFRS to be penalised for *being too quick*; the number of fire-fighters required before entry can be effected safely; and the need to inform members of the public of any changes to response time policy – for example:

> *The proposal is for life risk incidents. What will it be for non-life risk incidents? The Fire and Rescue Service role is to mitigate damage to properties so they need to get there quickly* (Liverpool)

> *What will be the attendance time for the second fire engine?* (Wirral)

> *What do the other emergency services do?* (Wirral)

> *Could you be penalised for doing too much – being too quick?* (St Helens)

> *Will five fire-fighters allow entry to a house with breathing apparatus?* (Wirral)

> *Why have you proposed a target longer than the seven minutes?* (Liverpool)

> *The public need to be told about the changes with to response and to AFAs so they understand them* (Wirral).

Alternative Duty Systems

Context

37. The traditional duty system is for two 9-hour day shifts and two 15-hour night shifts to be followed by four days off; and, as a corollary, most FRSs deploy the same number of fire engines by both day and night. However, the 'demand' or 'activity' profile (overleaf) shows that this might not be the most effective system – given that all FRSs are much busier by day than by night.

All incidents attended by Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service, during 2011/12 - by hour
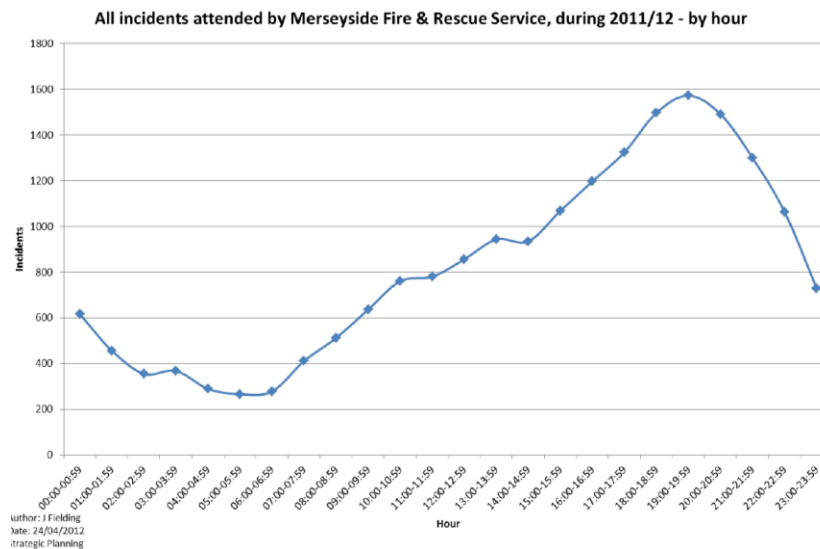
38. In fact, there are other possible shifts that can be used to provide more flexible patters of cover – for example, a range of possible options could be:

Eight-hour shifts to cover peak demand times

Day rather than 24-hour crewing (with wholetime fire-fighters also providing out-of-hours Retained cover at night)

Nucleus crewing, which provides a core of wholetime fire-fighters supplemented by Retained fire-fighters

Retained fire cover, which covers two-thirds of the territory of England and Wales and could be possible on some quieter stations.

39. Of course, none of these options were proposed; but they were used to illustrate possibilities.

Participants' Views

40. As the table below shows, the vast majority of participants across all five forums thought that MFRS should consider more flexible crewing systems to match variations in demand.

CREWING SYSTEMS Should MFRS consider more flexible crewing systems to match variations in 'demand'?			
	Yes	**No**	**Don't Know**
Wirral	18	1	1
Knowsley	16	0	1
Liverpool	17	4	0
St Helens	16	2	3
Sefton	21	3	0
OVERALL	**88**	**10**	**5**

41. Such flexibilities were considered by many to be a long overdue: people generally favoured greater flexibility as a desirable means of making savings without firefighter redundancies:

> *This is long overdue!* (Wirral)

> *You have to move with the times to change* (Knowsley)

> *I agree with flexible working hours; I don't like the long shifts because they seem too long* (Knowsley)

> *Other industries have to vary their staff and shifts to match demand* (Sefton)

> *The police shifts can be changed at a stroke* (Knowsley)

> *Hospitals have to change shifts flexibly* (Knowsley)

> *I think that it should be seen as a way of saving jobs* (Knowsley)

> *It can make savings* (Knowsley).

42. A minority of people were concerned that more flexible crewing systems could impact on response times and MFRS' ability to respond to simultaneous incidents while also alienating staff:

> *How would this impact on the response times? Would it mean different responses at night compared with the day? This has implications for the service quality* (Knowsley)

> *How often is there more than one incident on the Wirral at the same time?* (Wirral)

> *You want the most efficient service not just the most cost-effective service* (Wirral)

> *Fire-fighers have got used to the shift system and they have to be considered* (Knowsley)

With regard to the final point, however, the general consensus was:

> *You need your workforce on your side but you need a balance to get the right resources at the right time…* (Knowsley)

> *There might be a problem initially to change the system, but it can be adapted to over time* (Wirral).

43. Participants at Wirral spontaneously raised (and supported) MFRS potentially increasing its use of Retained Duty System (RDS) fire-fighters – although they also considered it important that a strong wholetime presence be maintained on Merseyside:

> *You could consider using more RDS fire-fighters* (Wirral)

> *Are you under a lot of pressure to use more RDS crews? It is important to keep wholetime crews* (Wirral).

Support Services (including Prevention and Protection)

Context

44. MFRS proposes to undertake a support staff review, which could result in the loss of some specialist services and some community, anti-social behaviour and youth work. It is proposed that while MFRS will continue its prevention role, it will focus on higher risk areas, higher risk people (in low risk areas), and areas that have slower response times. It is also possible that MFRS might end the universal free provision of smoke alarms and charge the unit cost of these alarms in low risk and/or affluent areas.

Participants' Views

45. Participants valued and praised MFRS' work in the prevention/education arena, with one participant commenting that much of its reputation for excellence has been forged here. There was a definite sense that such work should continue in some form:

> *A lot of your reputation has relied on this kind of activity; it would be a shame to abandon it completely!* (Wirral)

> *It is fantastic that deaths have reduced, but prevention is very important in doing that* (Knowsley).

46. However, it is clear from the chart below that a majority of participants agreed that, given its diminishing resources, MFRS should **target its prevention work towards higher risk areas, higher risk people (in low risk areas), and areas that have slower response times**.
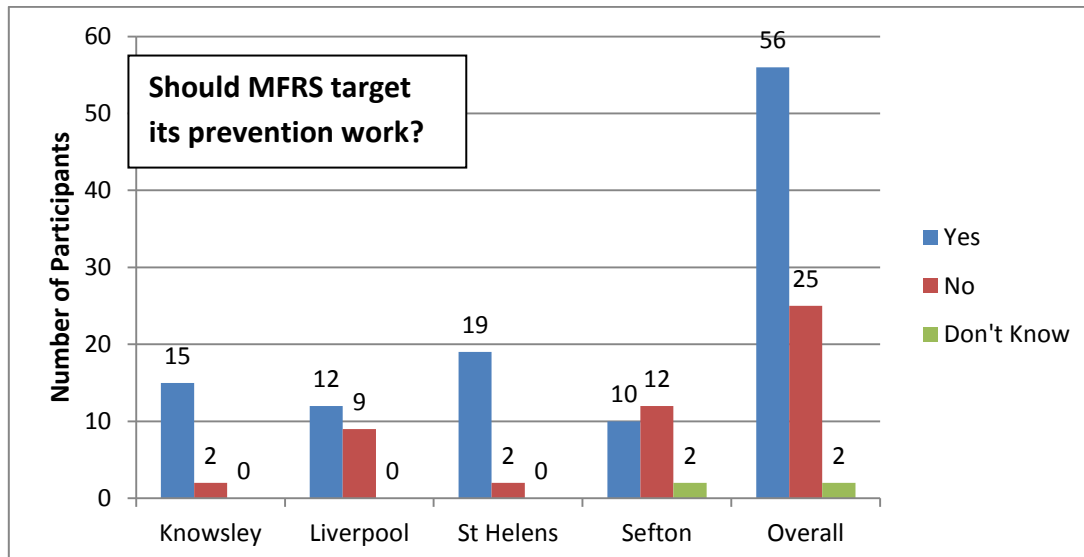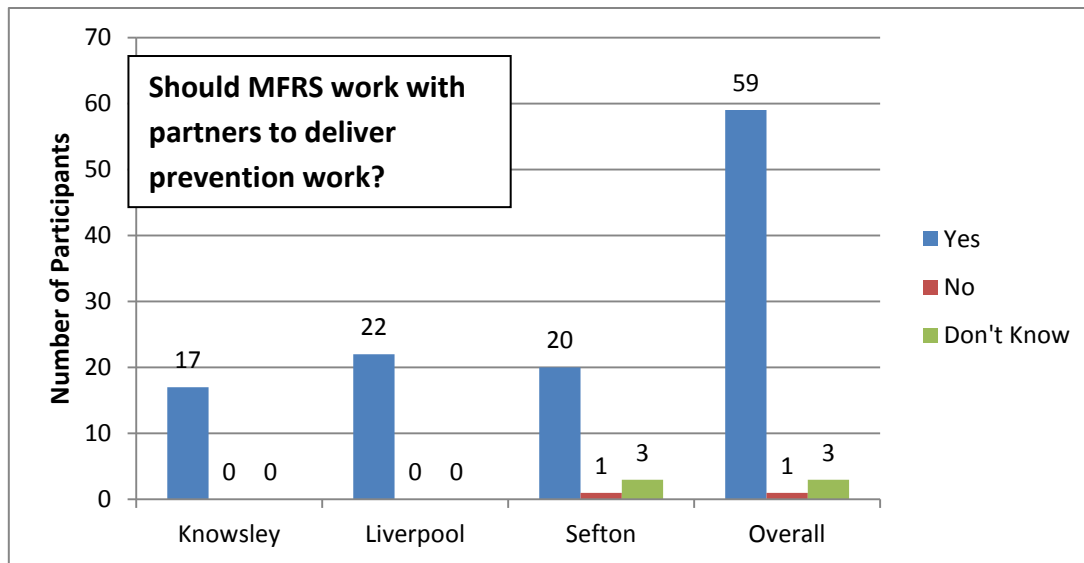

* Note: No exact count was taken at the Wirral forum, but an overwhelming majority was in favour of MFRS targeting its prevention work towards the most vulnerable areas/people.

47. Those who disagreed felt that the proposal could be counter-productive, with incident numbers rising once more as a result of less prevention work. However, for most, while any reduction is regrettable, it is also inevitable in today's economic climate – though it was generally agreed that some level of prevention activity should be maintained:

> *This is unfortunate but inevitable…we need to consider the need to focus on high risk areas because if you reduce prevention too much the risk levels could rise so you do need to maintain prevention work, even if affluent areas pay* (Liverpool).

48. The following chart shows the overwhelming support for the proposition that MFRS **should work with its partners to deliver prevention work.**

* Note: No exact count was taken at the St Helens forum, but an overwhelming majority was in favour of MFRS working with partners to deliver prevention work. The question was not asked at the Wirral forum.

49. In general, partnership working with voluntary organisations such as Age Concern was considered vital in ensuring that safety advice can be given to as wide number of people as possible in a cost-effective way - providing volunteers are sufficiently trained in providing it:

> *Age Concern could work with the FRS to deliver this kind of service because the need is increasing and people want independent living in their own homes. They could pay to have them fitted and/or fit them* (Knowsley)

> *You need to ensure they are trained people* (Knowsley)

> *It would be better to leave the delivery to charities and to give them some funding to do Home Fire Safety Checks* (Sefton)

> *It is more cost effective to use one person to fit detectors rather than to send a whole fire engine with a crew of five* (Liverpool)

> *It can seem wasteful that a complete fire engine goes to do Home Fire Safety Checks* (Sefton)*.*

50. Those who disagreed with this prospect considered that *some people like fire-fighters to do the work* (St Helens)*.*

51. **Charging for providing smoke alarms in low risk/affluent areas** was also endorsed by a large majority, who felt that those who can afford to pay should expect to have to do so:

> *People should be willing to contribute* (Liverpool)

> *Many houses can afford the cost of the units; they should pay* (St Helens)

52. In fact, some of those who had received a Home Fire Safety Check (including smoke alarms) themselves were surprised not to have been asked to make a contribution towards it, and would happily have done so:

> *Our Home Fire Safety Check was surprising in that it did not ask me to pay or contribute – so you could ask people to contribute* (Liverpool)

> *I would readily have paid for the service* (St Helens).
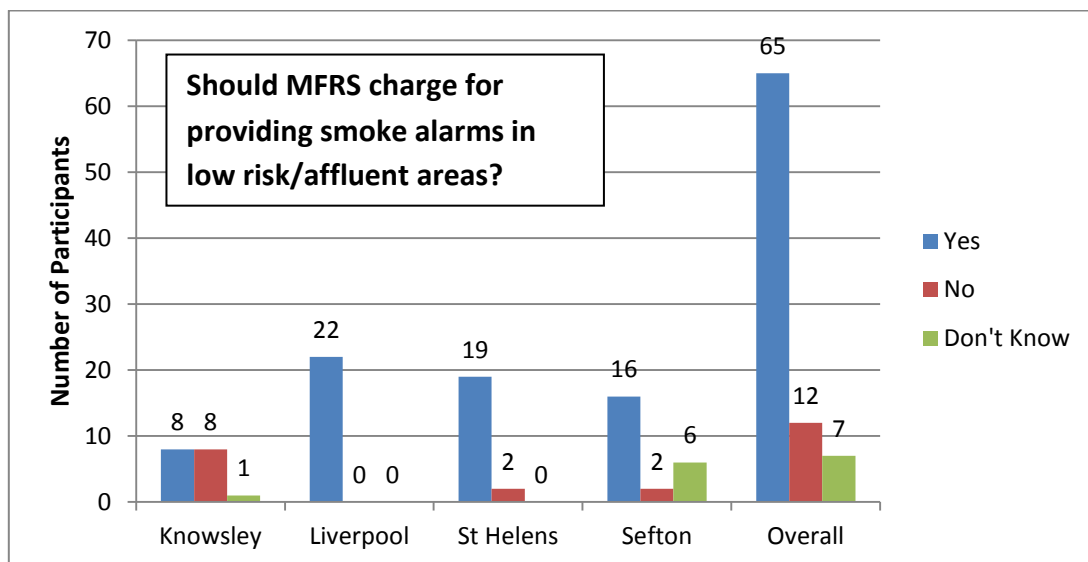
    * Note: No exact count was taken at the Wirral forum, but an overwhelming majority was in favour of MFRS charging for smoke alarms in low risk/affluent areas.

53. Those who disagreed once again felt that the proposal could be counter-productive, insofar as fewer people will request Home Fire Safety Checks, or will fit their own alarms incorrectly or in the wrong place:

> *Do you expect the demand to reduce if you charge for the units?* (Knowsley)

> *A lot of people think about the money* (St Helens)

> *You put them in the right places!* (St Helens)

> *This could cause more fires if people don't get official advice but try to fit their own badly* (Knowsley)

54. Education was considered extremely important in countering this possibility:

> *Education can do a lot to correct this by telling people the importance of proper fitting and equipment* (Knowsley).

55. Another concern was that:

> *It seems like a postcode lottery if some areas get them free and others don't (Knowsley).*

56. When asked whether the provision of free smoke alarms should be means tested, it was agreed that this would result in too much bureaucracy and administration, and that resources should be allocated on a risk basis:

> *It is not feasible to means test the charge; it needs to be based on risk rather than resources* (Sefton).

57. Another suggestion was that MFRS should *ask for donations to the fire service instead of charging for smoke alarms* (Knowsley).

Council Tax Increase

Context

58. MFRS had two options for 2012-13: take a government grant of about 3% and freeze council tax or to reject the government grant and increase council tax in order to avoid a larger increase in the following year. The Service also has to consider 2013-14 and onwards. MFRS relies heavily on its grant from government (about 63% of its budget with 37% from Council Tax).

59. Avoiding £5.5 million of front line cuts would require a 24% increase in Council Tax, which is well beyond likely the capping level and so would require a referendum (or five referendums, with one in each Borough).

Participants' Views

60. Although several participants felt that they themselves could support a large council tax rise, it was widely felt that the population at large would not do so in the current economic climate – with lower or frozen wages and higher living costs:

> *This would be a very unpopular thing to do!* (Wirral)

> *We can't afford it at a time when costs go up for everything* (Wirral)

It is a big increase when everyone has accepted a pay freeze. We have had a four-year pay freeze so my salary has reduced…a big increase like this is too much (Knowsley)

A lot of people might be against this because of the shortage of money that people have (Knowsley)

A lot of people in Liverpool work for the public sector and they are facing reductions in their standard of living. My heart says yes but my pocket says no (Liverpool).

61. At Knowsley, one participant questioned whether this would be a case of 'robbing Peter to pay Paul' insofar as council tax benefits may have to increase to pay for the rise, placing a greater burden on local government finances:

I pay full council tax and I could pay the extra without protest, but there are a lot of unemployed people whose council tax is paid for them; so would their benefit just go up to compensate or would they actually pay for this? (Knowsley)

62. There was also concern that a large Council Tax increase could set two undesirable precedents – that is, it could:

Be a precedent for other authorities to make similar increases in Merseyside

Encourage central government to think that more central taxation could be transferred to the local level.

63. Some typical comments were:

A 24% increase would be a precedent for the other services to try to increase it (Wirral)

If people agree to this the other authorities might decide to go in the same direction (Knowsley)

We are trying to blow against the will of the government - the police are going to want to do the same…and this would be a very big increase (Liverpool)

Could the police do exactly the same? If so, this could all escalate! (Sefton)

If we pay all that more, it sets a precedent for the government to transfer even more cost to the council tax by making further reductions in funding (Wirral)

Would the government further reduce its contribution to direct grants if they see us increasing our council tax so much? (Liverpool)

It was recognised that reductions to government grants is shifting the balance towards local taxation - which was opposed by the majority of participants. Though one St Helens forum member said:

> *Some Fire and Rescue Services get less in government grants and more in council tax so this transfer to local taxation could equalise things* (St Helens)*.*

64. Some at the Wirral forum doubted the need for a large council tax rise, given that the forums had agreed on some substantial changes to MFRS' operations:

> *We have said we agree with the proposals, so we don't need to do this…* (Wirral)

> *We need to look at the savings achieved from the other changes we have approved* (Wirral).

Participants here also felt that the current situation is sufficiently serious to warrant MFRS using some of its reserves to prevent large council tax rises and detrimental reductions to services:

> *How much reserve funding do you have?* (Wirral)

> *Is the contingency for a rainy day? This is it!* (Wirral)

65. Overall, even those few who felt they could support a council tax rise of 24% felt that the required referendum would be expensive and ultimately unwinnable, given that the majority of the population is struggling economically and would be hard to persuade:

> *My view is that to increase council tax would be justified but we'd never win a referendum…so we'd just waste £2 million. You are gambling £2 million to win £5.5 million* (Knowsley)

> *The people won't agree to this* (Knowsley)

> *I agree there should be an increase but it will not get enough public support in a referendum…people won't understand!* (Liverpool)

> *When the tax goes up so much people don't understand; how will the public know why it is being done?* (St Helens)*.*

66. These views are reflected in the overall balance of opinion on the issue of whether MFRA should increase council tax to compensate for all or some of the government grant reductions. Almost exactly half of participants across the five forums (52) felt that it should not, with a further 16 people abstaining from the vote. Only a third (35) felt that the council tax rise should be introduced (or at least proposed via a referendum).

COUNCIL TAX Should MFRA increase council tax to compensate for all/some of the grant reductions?			
	Yes	**No**	**Don't Know**
Wirral	7	12	1
Knowsley	4	12	1
Liverpool	16	3	2
St Helens	5	14	2
Sefton	3	11	10
OVERALL	**35**	**52**	**16**

67. Perhaps tellingly, participants at St Helens and Sefton were initially asked for their views on in principle about a council tax rise. In this context, 11 people were in favour at St Helens and eight at Sefton – but this dropped to only five and three respectively following a detailed discussion – suggesting that several people had been convinced of the non-achievability of winning a referendum on the issue. It was, however, suggested that a smaller rise may be more palatable to more of the population, which *might* make a referendum victory more likely.