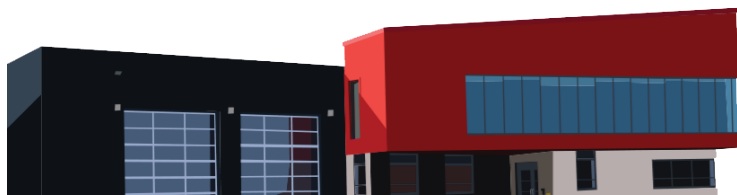




Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service

Fire Station Consultation: Aintree & Croxteth

Report of findings





Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service

Fire Station Consultation: Aintree & Croxteth

Opinion Research Services

The Strand • Swansea • SA1 1AF

01792 535300 | www.ors.org.uk | info@ors.org.uk

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Acknowledgements

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

We thank MFRS for commissioning the project as part of its on-going regular programme of public and stakeholder engagement and consultation about its risk management and service provision.

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 41 members of the public who took part in the three meetings to share their views with us: they were patient in listening to important and detailed background information before entering positively into open discussions about challenging topics.

At all stages of the project, ORS's status as an independent organisation engaging with the public as fairly as possible was recognised and respected. We are grateful for the trust, and we hope this report will contribute usefully to thinking about future service provision in the Aintree and Croxteth areas.

1. Key Findings

Key consultation findings

Initial reactions to the proposal were generally positive, but there were many questions

- 1.1 Prior to hearing any supporting information and evidence, participants were asked for their initial views on the proposed combination of Aintree and Croxteth Fire Stations into one super-station at Long Lane, Aintree. There was much support for the proposed change, with 36 participants agreeing (27 strongly) and none disagreeing.
- 1.2 There were, though, two people who neither agreed or disagreed – and a further two ‘don’t knows’. The questions asked by these participants (and others) offer some indication as to what their main concerns were, the most prevalent being around response times and firefighter numbers at the proposed new station. With regard to the former, there were particular worries around the volume of traffic and congestion around Long Lane at certain times of day, and whether any areas of Aintree or Croxteth would experience significantly longer attendance times as a result of the changes.

After hearing MFRS’s reasoning and evidence for the proposed merger, participants were universally supportive

- 1.3 After hearing MFRS’s reasoning and evidence for the proposed merger, participants were universally supportive of it– mainly due to the prospect of better response times and 24-hour cover, and the fact that the proposed new facilities would ensure better working conditions for MFRS staff.

Participants were universally supportive of the proposed new Training & Development Academy and National Resilience Centre of Excellence

- 1.4 The proposed new Training & Development Academy was strongly supported: it was acknowledged that the Service has outgrown its current Croxteth site and must have space to expand its training facilities to accommodate the wider risks today’s firefighters face.
- 1.5 Moreover, the development of a National Resilience Centre of Excellence would, it was said, further consolidate MFRS’s reputation as a leading fire and rescue service and benefit its role as the lead authority for such activity in the UK.

It was agreed that the site should be iconic, and something the area can be proud of

- 1.6 Participants were very pleased to hear of MFRS’s ambition to provide an ‘iconic’ facility that the local area, and indeed Merseyside as a whole, can be proud of.

The Long Lane site was widely supported

- 1.7 Notwithstanding the aforementioned concerns around traffic and congestion, the preferred site at Long Lane was generally supported for its centrality within the wider area.

The proposal would have a positive impact on equality, diversity and inclusion

- 1.8 No negative equality, diversity and inclusion impacts were raised: participants could only see positives in terms of accessibility and inclusivity for station staff and the communities of Aintree and Croxteth.

2. The Consultation Process

Overview of the engagement

Background to the review

- 2.1 'Integrated Risk Management' is the development of a balanced approach by Fire and Rescue Services to reducing risk within the community. This is achieved by combining Prevention, Protection and Emergency Response, on a risk-assessed basis, in order to improve the safety of the community and create a safer working environment for firefighters.
- 2.2 In 2016, Merseyside Fire & Rescue Authority (MFRA) developed and consulted on its Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) 2017-20, which was subsequently approved. Following that, a number of significant national and international incidents occurred and these, combined with changes to the City Region infrastructure and the findings of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS), gave the Chief Fire Officer and Authority cause to review the sustainability of its plans to ensure that they were still fit for purpose. In light of this, an IRMP supplement was drafted to extend the Plan to 2021, aligning it to MFRA's medium-term financial plans. A number of alternative proposals were consulted on and approved in 2019.
- 2.3 The Service began to develop its IRMP for 2021-24 in 2020, and in October/November of that year held five community engagement forums with members of the public, one in each of Merseyside's five local authority areas, to discuss how it might provide fire and rescue services during this period. The views expressed in those forums, along with other relevant evidence, then helped shape the IRMP 2021-24 proposals discussed at a subsequent session in May 2021, which was attended by 30 of the participants from the engagement forums.
- 2.4 One of those proposals, to change emergency response cover in Aintree and Croxteth, was approved for consultation by MFRA following strong public support at the forums. The consultation, which ran for 12 weeks from 15th July until 7th October 2021, sought views on the proposed combination of Aintree and Croxteth Fire Stations into a new multi-pump super-station (including the development of a state-of-the-art Training & Development Academy (TDA) and the creation of a National Resilience Centre of Excellence) at Long Lane, Aintree.

The commission

- 2.5 Opinion Research Services (ORS) - a spin-out company from Swansea University with a UK-wide reputation for social research - was appointed to convene, facilitate and report three online focus groups with members of the public, one for residents in the Aintree Fire Station area, one for residents in the Croxteth Fire Station area, and one for residents of Merseyside more widely. Pre-consultation listening and engagement and formal consultation meetings have been undertaken with residents across Merseyside on a regular cycle; and in this context ORS has facilitated both area-based and all-Merseyside focus groups for the Service for many years.

Deliberative engagement

Focus groups

- 2.6 The focus group meetings reported here used a ‘deliberative’ approach that encouraged members of the public to reflect in depth about MFRS’s proposed fire station merger while both receiving and questioning extensive background information.
- 2.7 The meetings (which were held on the online videoconferencing platform Zoom) lasted for around two hours and in total there were 41 diverse participants. The dates of the meetings and attendance levels by members of the public at each focus group are as shown in the table below.

FOCUS GROUP	DATE	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES
Aintree Fire Station area	14 th September 2021	11
Croxteth Fire Station area	15 th September 2021	7
Cross-Merseyside	16 th September 2021	23

- 2.8 The attendance target was between 8-12 people for the area-based focus groups, and 20-25 people for the cross-Merseyside session. While attendance at the Croxteth session was a little lower than desired, overall attendance levels were within the desired range. Just over half of participants had participated in one or more previous ORS-run forums or focus groups; the others were ‘fresh’ recruits.
- 2.9 Previous participants were recruited through random-digit telephone dialling from the ORS Social Research Call Centre. Having been initially contacted by phone, all participants were then written to - to confirm the invitation and the arrangements; and those who agreed to come then received telephone or email reminders shortly before each meeting. New participants were recruited by Acumen Field, a specialist recruitment agency, who initially sent out a screening questionnaire as an online survey to a database of contacts and, more widely, on social media platforms. They then collated the responses to establish a pool of potential recruits, which was ‘sifted’ to establish a contact list. People were then contacted by telephone, asked to complete a more detailed screening questionnaire and either recruited or not to match the required quotas. Those recruited were sent all the necessary details in a confirmation email and telephoned a day or two before the events to confirm their attendance.
- 2.10 In recruitment, care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by disabilities or any other factors. The recruitment process was monitored to ensure social diversity in terms of a wide range of criteria including, for example: gender; age; working status; and disability/limiting long-term illness (LLTI). Overall, as demonstrated in the table overleaf, participants represented a broad cross-section of residents – and as standard good practice, people were recompensed for their time and efforts in and taking part.

GENDER	AGE	WORKING STATUS	LIMITING ILLNESS OR DISABILITY	ETHNIC GROUP
Male: 20 Female: 21	16-34: 8 35-54: 16 55+: 17	Working full- or part-time: 31 Not working/retired: 10	7	White British: 39 BAME: 2

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

The agenda

- 2.12 The focus groups began with a presentation (delivered by Chief Fire Officer Phil Garrigan) of some contextual background information around the ‘story so far’ in terms of MFRS’s ambition, direction, plans and performance. A selection of the slides used to outline this information can be seen in Appendix 1.
- 2.13 The subsequent presentation then focused on the proposal itself, with participants firstly being informed that:

The existing Aintree and Croxteth Fire Stations opened in 1926 and 1962 respectively, and neither can provide the accessible, larger modern facilities firefighters and the local community need;

The existing TDA, which opened in 1967 and was redeveloped in 1999/2000, is now too small for MFRS’s needs and is landlocked by development on both sides, which restricts the Service’s ability to develop training facilities in line with the risks firefighters face locally, nationally, and internationally; and that

MFRS has undertaken an extensive review of many potential sites for a combined fire station and identified Long Lane, Aintree (which is large enough to accommodate a new fire station, TDA and National Resilience Centre of Excellence and is almost equidistant between the existing stations) as the optimum available option.

- 2.14 Participants were then shown some concept visuals of the 12-acre site as below.

Concept Visuals – an iconic building complementing its surroundings and including extensive community facilities



- 2.15 The final section of the presentation focused on response times. In particular, the methodology used by MFRS for managing the proposed station merger process was outlined¹, and participants were told that:

The predicted overall response time under the existing arrangements is attendance at life-risk incidents within ten minutes 93.7% of time (an average attendance time of 5 minutes 52 seconds from alert to in attendance), whereas that predicted from Long Lane is attendance at life-risk incidents within ten minutes 93.9% of the time (an average attendance time of 5 minutes 50 seconds from alert to in attendance); and

More locally in Aintree and Croxteth, MFRS simulated the response time to each life-risk incident in those station areas during 2019/20 from the proposed site on Long Lane, which showed that the average response time of 3 minutes 55 seconds is 34 seconds quicker than from the current stations².

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

The report

- 2.17 This report reviews the sentiments and judgements of focus group participants on MFRS's proposal to combine Aintree and Croxteth Fire Stations into a super-station on Long Lane, Aintree. Verbatim quotations are used, in indented italics, not because we agree or disagree with them - but for their vividness in capturing recurrent points of view. ORS does not endorse any opinions but seeks only to portray them accurately and clearly. The report is an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants.

¹ The Fire Incident Response Simulator (FIRS) system. This is loaded with: three years of incident data, including appliance mobilisation times; three years of appliance 'off-the-run' data; locations of stations and appliances; station boundaries; appliance/crewing shift patterns; travel time matrices; and MFRS's response standard. It is then run to determine the best emergency response, and where, when and how resources should be deployed. The system has been used for successful station mergers in Knowsley, Wirral and St Helens.

² Much of this reduction is attributable to the fact the new station would have an appliance available at night, whereas Aintree is currently staffed during the day and relies on surrounding stations for incidents at night.

3. Focus Group Findings

Detailed engagement findings

Introduction

- 3.1 This chapter reports the views from three deliberative online focus groups³ with members of the public in Aintree and Croxteth and from across Merseyside, which were independently facilitated by ORS.
- 3.2 The meeting format followed a pre-determined topic guide which allowed space for a general discussion of the key questions under consideration. A series of information slides were shared at set points during the sessions, which ensured that participants had sufficient background information to actively deliberate on the proposals. The meetings were thorough and truly deliberative in listening to and responding openly to a wide range of evidence and issues.
- 3.3 In order to quantify views on some key questions, a series of ‘quick polls’ were undertaken during the groups. Responses to these were captured and are reported in this chapter, but it is important to note that this was a qualitative research exercise and the numerical findings from the polls are not statistically valid.
- 3.4 This is not a verbatim transcript of the three sessions, but an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants in free-ranging discussions - and as the focus groups did not differ materially in their reactions to the proposals, this report combines the findings from all the meetings in a single account.

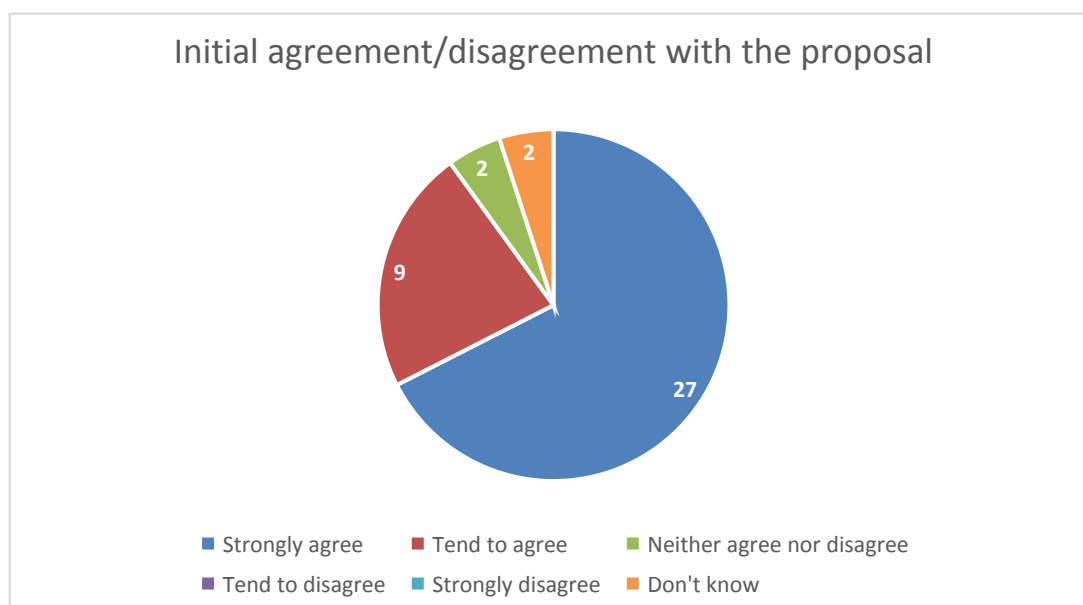
Main findings

- Initial reactions to the proposal were generally positive, but there were many questions – mainly around response times and firefighter numbers
- After hearing MFRS’s reasoning and evidence for the proposed merger, participants were universally supportive of it
- Participants were also universally supportive of the proposed new Training & Development Academy and National Resilience Centre of Excellence
- It was agreed that the site should be iconic, and something the area can be proud of
- The Long Lane site was supported for its centrality within the wider area (notwithstanding some concerns about traffic and congestion)

³ These meetings were undertaken on Zoom – as this has become a fairly familiar tool for the general public during 2020-21. Participant familiarity with the software varied and, depending on the platform they were using, some struggled to take part in the online voting tasks.

Initial reactions to the proposal were generally positive, but there were many questions and some misconceptions

Figure 1: What is your 'gut feeling' about merging Aintree and Croxteth Fire Stations into one super-station at Long Lane?



Based on responses from 41 people within the focus groups

- 3.5 At the outset of the discussion, and prior to hearing any supporting information and evidence, participants were asked for their initial views on the proposed combination of Aintree and Croxteth Fire Stations into one super-station at Long Lane, Aintree. The results show that even at this early stage there was a great deal of support for the proposed change, with 36 participants agreeing (27 strongly) and none disagreeing.
- 3.6 There were, though, two people who neither agreed or disagreed – and a further two 'don't knows'. The questions asked by these participants (and others) offer some indication as to what their main concerns were, the most prevalent being around response times and firefighter numbers at the proposed new station. With regard to the former, there were particular worries around the volume of traffic and congestion around Long Lane at certain times of day, and whether any areas of Aintree or Croxteth would experience significantly longer attendance times as a result of the changes.

*"Have these response times been trialled?
Narrow roads and extreme traffic queues on Long
Lane and Lower Lane at peak times would
significantly add to timings" (Aintree)*

*"Long Lane gets chocca ... and there's a
lot of factories around there so will the
traffic from those make it difficult with
engines getting in and out"
(Cross-Merseyside)*

*"... to get an average, you need a
range of figures. Was there
anywhere at the far end that
suffered significantly when you
ran the simulations?" (Aintree)*

*"The traffic around the area from about 3pm - 6pm is
stationary. How do you work out your response
times, and have you got anything that can mitigate
in terms of traffic and getting out of Long Lane during
busy times" (Croxteth)*

- 3.7 Indeed, one Croxteth participant encapsulated the primary worries expressed at the outset in the following comment.

"I see the requirement for change but am very nervous about the reliability of the response time improvements and the scale of additional engines and additional firefighters comparative to antisocial behaviour and increased population" (Croxteth)

- 3.8 Other, though less frequent, questions were around: firefighters' views on the proposals; whether the money released by selling the existing sites would be reinvested into the Service; the impact of the proposed National Centre of Excellence on MFRS's resources and finances; whether having a fire station on the 'outskirts' of the area (as opposed to in the heart of Aintree and Croxteth's communities) would prevent members of the public from accessing facilities there; whether fire station mergers have been successfully implemented in Merseyside and elsewhere⁴; and how possible disturbance to businesses and households near the new site (through the smoke generated during training exercises for example) would

"What would you expect the community to go to the station for to use the community rooms? Would it be more difficult for them to get to the station with a move to a new location?" (Cross-Merseyside)

*Centre of
national financial
move onto
Croxteth)*

"Has this been piloted anywhere else? I'm a bit concerned that Liverpool is being used commonly by the government for test runs, and worried that it puts our city and therefore our people at greater risk potentially?" (Croxteth)

"Sometimes when they're doing the training at Storrington, the smoke will come down onto Lower House Lane and it can be quite severe. How will that be mitigated to ensure you don't disturb the businesses and households near the new site" (Croxteth)

- 3.9 It should also be noted that some misconceptions were expressed during the initial discussions, most notably that the number of fire engines would reduce as a result of a merger (several participants were under the impression that there are currently three at Aintree when the actual number is one).

"Two stations closing but only one extra engine. This seems to be spreading it pretty thin. I thought there were three engines at each station in addition to the Search and Rescue so just having four at the new station doesn't seem to be as good as what we have now" (Croxteth)

⁴ Participants were informed of previous successful mergers on the Wirral, in Prescott and in St Helens.

After hearing MFRS's reasoning and evidence for the proposed merger, participants were universally supportive

- 3.10 After a presentation of MFRS's reasoning for the proposed fire station merger and the evidence underpinning it, participants were universally supportive (all but one strongly agreed, with the remaining person tending to agree). In fact, several - especially at Croxteth - stated that they had come into the session with reservations and concerns around job and fire engine losses and potentially longer response times, which had been fully alleviated.

"I started off being a bit iffy about it and I'm totally not now" (Croxteth)

"Peace of mind knowing that there will be no loss of jobs" (Croxteth)

"I think most people are ok with this all to go ahead as long as it doesn't affect response times, and lead to the lowering of firefighter levels" (Aintree)

- 3.11 Indeed, it was the prospect of better response times and 24-hour cover that seemed most pleasing to participants – as well as the fact that the proposed new facilities would ensure better working conditions for MFRS staff. Some of the many typical comments are below.

"The station will be open 24 hours, also the morale of the firefighters will improve, the response times will improve which is only a good thing" (Aintree)

"24-hour cover for the area we live in, with extra fire engines on the road which will improve response times" (Aintree)

"I strongly agree. It will be better for the community, the firefighters, the youth, and the areas as a whole. I can't see any downside" (Aintree)

"Very positive. The new station merger will reduce response times, provide a state-of-the-art training resource and provide better value for money in terms of sustainability and resources ... "
(Cross-Merseyside)

"This will not only benefit the communities but also the firefighters themselves because they'll get better training, better facilities ... and consequently a better atmosphere at the station" (Croxteth)

"I think it'll be amazing for the firefighters to turn up to work at such a grand building" (Aintree)

3.12 Several other more specific reasons were given in support of the proposal, the most common of which are outlined in the table below.

Both stations have
outlived their useful lives

- *"Deffo need to come into the 2020's not 1920's" (Croxteth)*
- *"I'm absolutely gobsmacked at the age of Aintree! It's a no brainer that this is a much needed venture ... especially for the morale of the firefighters themselves as working in dilapidated buildings does get you down" (Aintree)*

Better facilities for
community/youth
engagement

- *"A community resource is a great idea to maintain strong links with the local area" (Cross-Merseyside)*
- *"The use of the community resource will help embed relationships locally and assist the service working with prevention etc. and providing safe spaces for community use" (Cross-Merseyside)*
- *"It'll be great for youth engagement ... you are much more likely to get them on board with a new, modern facility like that, especially teenagers" (Aintree)*

Use of local
suppliers/tradespeople

- *"I'd like to see local firms picked. If you're taking something out of the community, It's good to see it put back in using local suppliers, building merchants etc." (Aintree)*
- *"Local jobs for local trades" (Cross-Merseyside)*

Fire station mergers,
using the same
methodology, have
worked well elsewhere

- *"The merger will enhance the service as I have seen a big improvement in the St Helens area following the recent merger" (Cross-Merseyside)*
- *"It appears as with previous mergers, that there is a strong case for the facility that's been based on research, and is based not only on prevention, but also investment in MRFS, and also a sound business case. Very impressed" (Cross-Merseyside)*

3.13 The only real concern remaining at the end of the discussions was around the inter-dependency of having to sell off the legacy estate to fund the new development:

"In terms of selling off the legacy estate, are there any risks or dependencies there about having to sell them off to fund the new station ... could these dependencies throw the construction into jeopardy" (Cross-Merseyside)

Participants were universally supportive of the proposed new Training & Development Academy and National Resilience Centre of Excellence

- 3.14 The proposed new Training & Development Academy was strongly supported, as it was acknowledged that the Service has outgrown its current Croxteth site and must have space to expand its training facilities to accommodate the wider risks today's firefighters face.

"We've outgrown that one in Croxteth and it needs modernising. Just invest in a new building and be done with it" (Croxteth)

"Great investment in the local community. Modern amenities to have the best training facilities in the Fire Service" (Cross-Merseyside)

- 3.15 Moreover, the development of a National Resilience Centre of Excellence would, it was said, further consolidate MFRS's reputation as a leading fire and rescue service and benefit its role as the lead authority for such activity in the UK.

"MF&RS ... is clearly now a leader. This proposal will further its 'top dog' status within the national F&RS community" (Cross-Merseyside)

"We are leaders, trailblazers ... this will ensure we're seen as the best" (Croxteth)

"I didn't realise the big role that Merseyside has as the lead authority. This facility will compliment that role ... and showcase us as a leading authority" (Cross-Merseyside)

It was agreed that the site should be iconic, and something the area can be proud of

- 3.16 Participants were very pleased to hear of MFRS's ambition to provide an 'iconic' facility that the local area, and indeed Merseyside as a whole, can be proud of.

"It'll be great for the local community, add a degree of prestige to the area ..." (Aintree)

"It's going to be great not only for the Fire and Rescue Service, but for the whole area" (Cross-Merseyside)

"It'll be such a good thing for Liverpool as a whole, but especially for the areas it'll be covering as they do oftentimes get a knock. I think it'll uplift those areas" (Aintree)

- 3.17 Moreover, working and training in such surroundings was thought to have not only positive wellbeing impacts but also practical benefits, as highlighted in the following comment:

"Please do not lose the aspiration of the iconic, because it's a proven fact that an additional 15-20% of retained knowledge in training comes from the surroundings, not just the trainers" (Cross-Merseyside)

- 3.18 In terms of suggestions for the design, several made comments along the lines of the following:

"A classic design, nothing too wacky or 'out there' or it'll look out of place" (Aintree)

- 3.19 And one specific idea was that:

"They should include the old plaques from both stations there somewhere ... something from Croxteth and Aintree so we can remember the old stations that have served us so well" (Aintree)

The Long Lane site was widely supported

- 3.20 Notwithstanding the aforementioned concerns around traffic and congestion, the preferred site at Long Lane was generally supported for its centrality within the wider area.

"I think it is a fantastic idea to merge stations as with Long Lane being central to all areas ... it actually narrows response times to each area" (Croxteth)

"Definitely makes sense as it is central to all areas" (Croxteth)

"Location seems strategic due to location to East Lancs, Longmoor Lane, etc." (Cross-Merseyside)

The proposal would have a positive impact on equality, diversity and inclusion

- 3.21 Finally, participants were informed that, in developing its proposals, MFRS must consider whether they would have a particular impact (either positive or negative) on people with protected characteristics⁵.
- 3.22 No negative impacts were raised. In fact, participants could only see positives in terms of accessibility and inclusivity for station staff and the communities of Aintree and Croxteth. Moreover, one member of the cross-Merseyside group foresaw possible recruitment benefits as a result of opportunities to work in improved facilities.

"The involvement and accessibility of the new station to the community seemed likely to have a positive impact on EDI"
(Cross-Merseyside)

"No implications I can see. Improved facility may increase applicant numbers and diversity of them, including from further afield geographically"
(Cross-Merseyside)

"I was particularly pleased to hear that female firefighters would have appropriate facilities for them"
(Cross-Merseyside)

"When considering people with disabilities for example, a new, more modern centre will address all the accessibility issues" (Aintree)

Overall comments

- 3.23 Overall, despite some initial misgivings, the three focus groups overwhelmingly supported the proposed combination of Aintree and Croxteth Fire Station into one super-station at Long Lane. As one Aintree participant put it, in a message to Chief Fire Officer Phil Garrigan:

"Go 'ed Phil!!!! Go build your station!"
(Aintree)

⁵ Disability; sexual orientation; age; gender identity; sex; marriage and civil partnership; race; religion or belief; pregnancy and maternity.

Whilst Improving Performance in the process - making MFRS quicker...

IRMP 2017-20		IRMP Supplement 2019-21		IRMP 2021-24 Proposed Long Lane Site	
KPI	Performance (%)	KPI	Performance (%)	KPI	Performance (%)
Overall Performance	91.7%	Overall Performance	93.7%	Overall Performance	93.9%
Average Response Time	6m 7sec	Average Response Time	5m 52sec	Average Response Time	5m 50sec

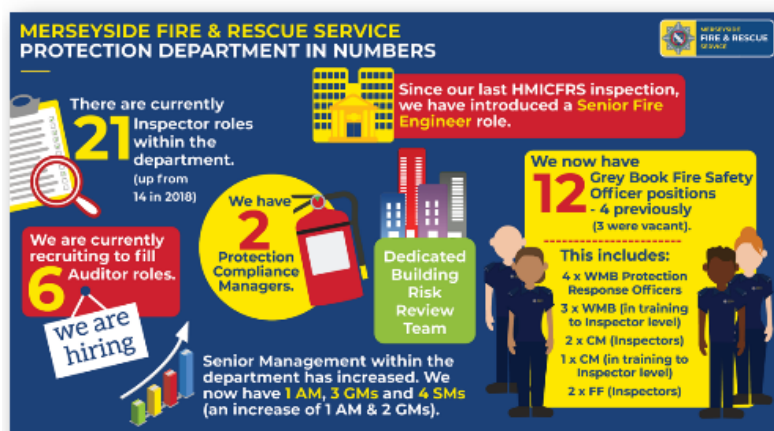
...and in several previous consultations with the public about our plans, they have made it clear that speed of response is most important to them



But dealing with **Risk, Demand and Vulnerability** - means **MFRS's** plans don't just stop at fire engines - but they do start there



So MFRS will be investing in Protection



...MFRS will also be tackling inequality head ON... creating opportunity in our communities



Whilst remaining prepared both locally...



...and Nationally

