



Integrated Risk Management Plan

**Listening and Engagement Forums
with members of the public**

Full Report

Opinion Research Services
Spin-out company of Swansea University



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Acknowledgements

Opinion Research Services (ORS) is pleased to have worked with Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority (MFRA) on the five IRMP Listening and 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 service planning by MFRA at a time of very serious financial constraints.

We thank MFRA for commissioning the project as part of its on-going programme of public and stakeholder engagement and consultation about its risk management planning. 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 fire officers and other staff to answer participants' questions fully and frankly; and the public was pleased that elected members took such an interest.

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 MFRA's development in difficult times. We hope also that ORS has been instrumental in continuing to strengthen MFRA'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 Authority (MFRA) to convene and facilitate five Community Listening and Engagement Forums across the local authority districts of Merseyside, as part of the Authority's on-going public engagement and consultation programme.
2. ORS' role was to design, recruit, facilitate and report the five forums about MFRA's integrated risk management planning (IRMP) during January 2014. We worked in collaboration with MFRA to prepare informative stimulus material for the meetings before facilitating the discussions and preparing this independent report of findings.

Consultation Framework

3. The context and status of the forum meetings is important. MFRA has had an extensive programme of consultation for a number of years – and in this context ORS has facilitated forums regularly, normally with five coordinated district forums each year, with a corporate (all Merseyside) forum held in the interim, six months later. With this on-going framework, MFRS manages "listening and engagement" followed by formal consultation on a regular cycle.
4. The five IRMP forums reported were listening and engagement exercises, since there were no formal draft proposals adopted by the Fire Authority, but rather a number of fairly open-ended options which participants were invited to review as "ideas for consideration" in the general context of MFRA's financial constraints.
5. Having considered the feedback from the five forums (as reported here), and also other information and insights, the MFRA will probably provisionally adopt draft proposals which will then be subject to formal consultation – most likely through the five forums, but also involving consultation in the most affected communities.
6. Therefore, the outputs reported here should not be considered as "definitive" – for they are a stage in the evolution of options into proposals – and the progression from general listening and engagement to eventual formal consultation on draft proposals.

Deliberative Research: Public Forums

7. The forums used a 'deliberative' approach to encourage members of the public to reflect in depth about the fire and rescue service, while both receiving and questioning background information and discussing service delivery options in detail.
8. The meetings lasted for at least two-and-a-half hours, except that the first, in the Wirral on Saturday morning, lasted three hours. In total, there were 111 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	10.00 – 13.30 Saturday January 11 2014	25
St Helens	18:00 – 20.45 Monday January 13 2014	20
Liverpool	18.00 – 20.45 Tuesday January 14 2014	25
Knowsley	18.00 – 20.45 Wednesday January 15 2014	18
Sefton	18.00 – 20.45 Thursday January 16 2014	23

9. The attendance target for each meeting was between 20 and 25 people, so the recruitment programme was successful, except for a smaller than average attendance at Knowsley.
10. 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.
11. 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).

12. 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	ST HELENS	LIVERPOOL	KNOWSLEY	SEFTON
Gender	Male: 15 Female: 10	Male: 12 Female: 8	Male: 12 Female: 13	Male: 12 Female: 6	Male: 12 Female: 11
Age	18-34: 4 35-54: 9 55+: 12	18-34: 2 35-54: 8 55+: 10	18-34: 6 35-54: 9 55+: 10	18-34: 5 35-54: 6 55+: 7	18-34: 6 35-54: 7 55+: 10
Social Grade	AB: 7 C1: 6 C2: 5 DE: 7	AB: 4 C1: 5 C2: 3 DE: 8	AB: 7 C1: 9 C2: 2 DE: 7	AB: 2 C1: 5 C2: 5 DE: 6	AB: 6 C1: 8 C2: 3 DE: 6
BME	0	0	3	1	0
Disability/LLTI	8	5	2	2	1

13. Although, like all other forms of qualitative consultation, deliberative 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 MFRA' current and future direction of travel.
14. 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 important and diverse issues discussed in the meetings.

Background Information and Discussion Agenda

Previous Forums

15. ORS worked in collaboration with MFRA to agree a suitable agenda and informative stimulus material for the meeting, which fell into three very unequal parts. The first part of each meeting began, for the sake of continuity and context, with a short review of the outcomes of the forums held over the last two years. This retrospective review mentioned all of the following topics - the:

Importance of prevention in the context of protection and response services

Changing profile of MFRA – including resources, strategic roles, and incident profiles

53% reduction in the number of emergency incidents over the last nine years

Impact of the Phase 1 public spending reductions on MFRA – and in particular the reduction of fire engines from 42 to 37 to 33 and to the current 28; and the reduction of 270 staff – comprising 180 fire fighters and 90 support staff

Continuation of 26 fire stations – including 10 in Liverpool, six in Wirral, four in Sefton, three in Knowsley and three in St Helens

Introduction of a single overall Merseyside-wide response time standard – based on the first fire engine attending critical incidents within 10 minutes on at least 90% of occasions

Use of more productive and flexible crewing systems – including the introduction of 12 hour day and night shifts

2% increase in the MFRA council tax precept for 2013-14.

Financial Constraints

16. Following the brief review of the previous forums, the second part of each meeting reviewed the implications of the continuation of the public spending reductions towards 2020. The key issues considered were:

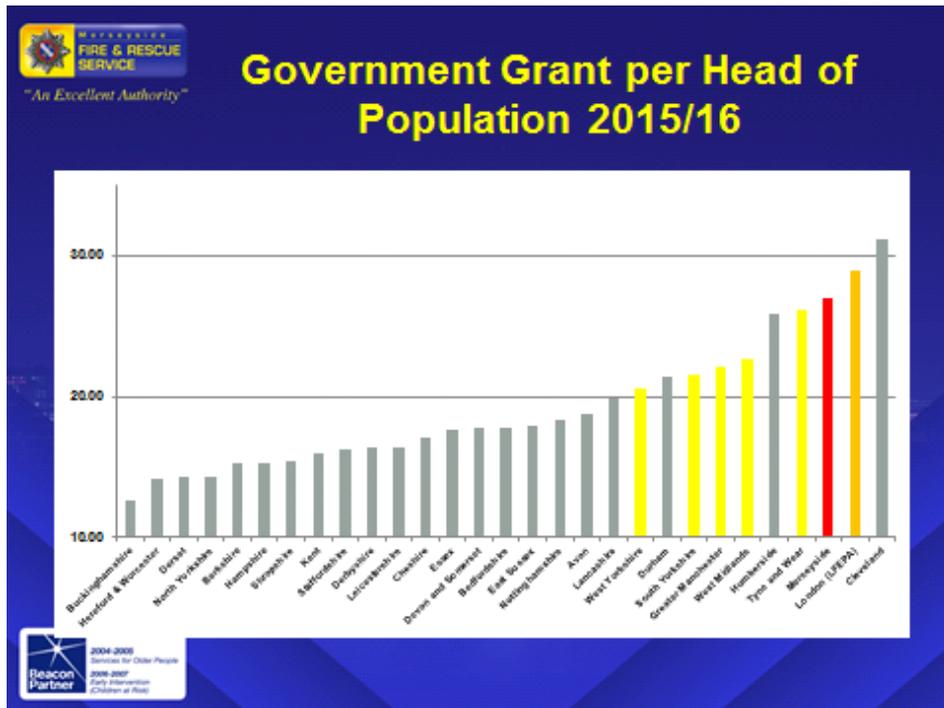
The projected budget deficit of £6.5 million by the end of 2015/16, based on known financial information

The possibility of the deficit growing to £9.1 million by the end of 2017/18, based on likely financial projections.

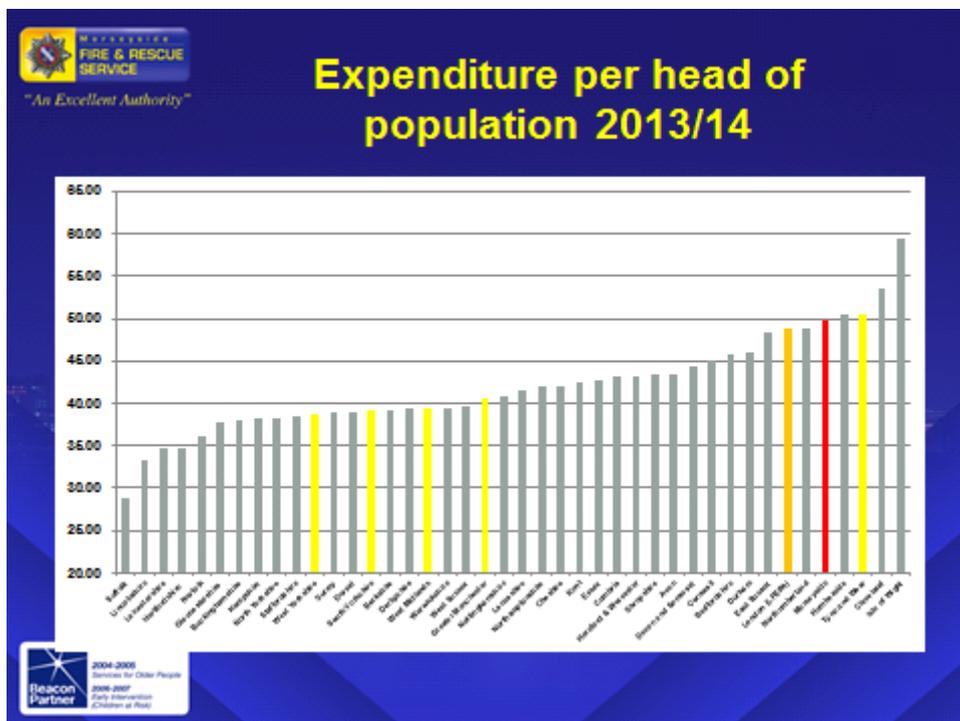
17. These financial challenges were explained neutrally and did not form a major focus of the discussion – though they were presented as constraints requiring substantial reductions in spending to be made on a progressive basis. In order to encourage free discussion, the financial position was not used as a repeated justification of each proposal: participants were invited to assess proposals on their general merits, albeit within a generally constrained position.

Taking Stock

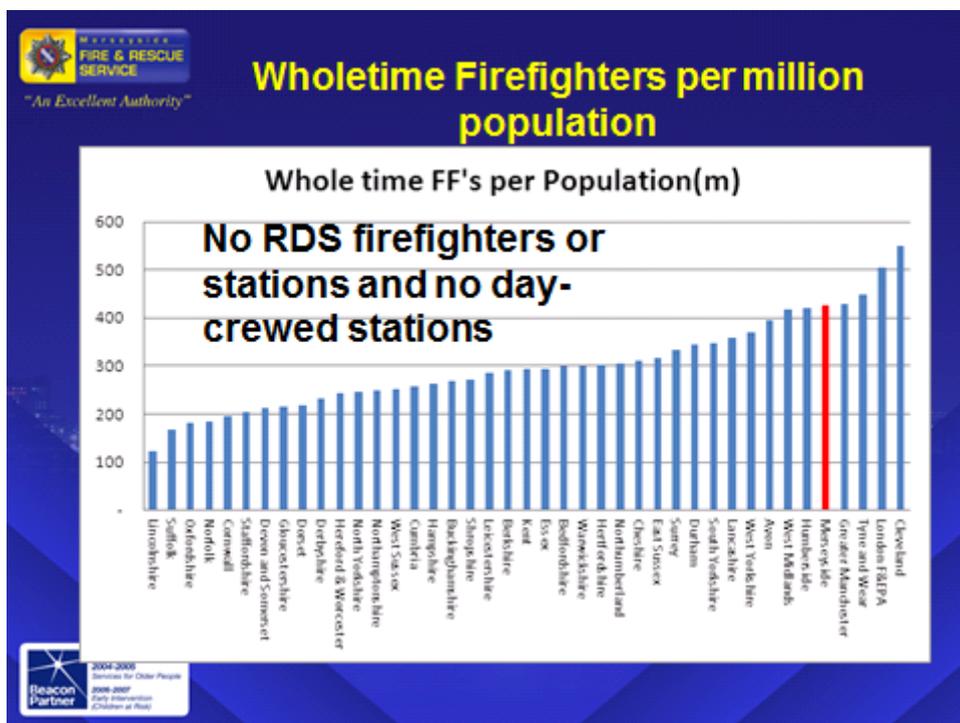
18. In this context, the third part of each meeting attempted to ‘take stock’ of MFRS in terms of its much reduced risk levels (with incidents having reduced by 53% over the last nine years), strategic roles and allocation of resources.
19. Participants were also shown comparative data to illustrate both the high levels of government funding and the substantial emergency cover resources that MFRS and the other metropolitan fire and rescue services have enjoyed over the last half century. For example, the following graphics were explained briefly – with Merseyside highlighted in red and the other big metropolitan authorities in yellow.



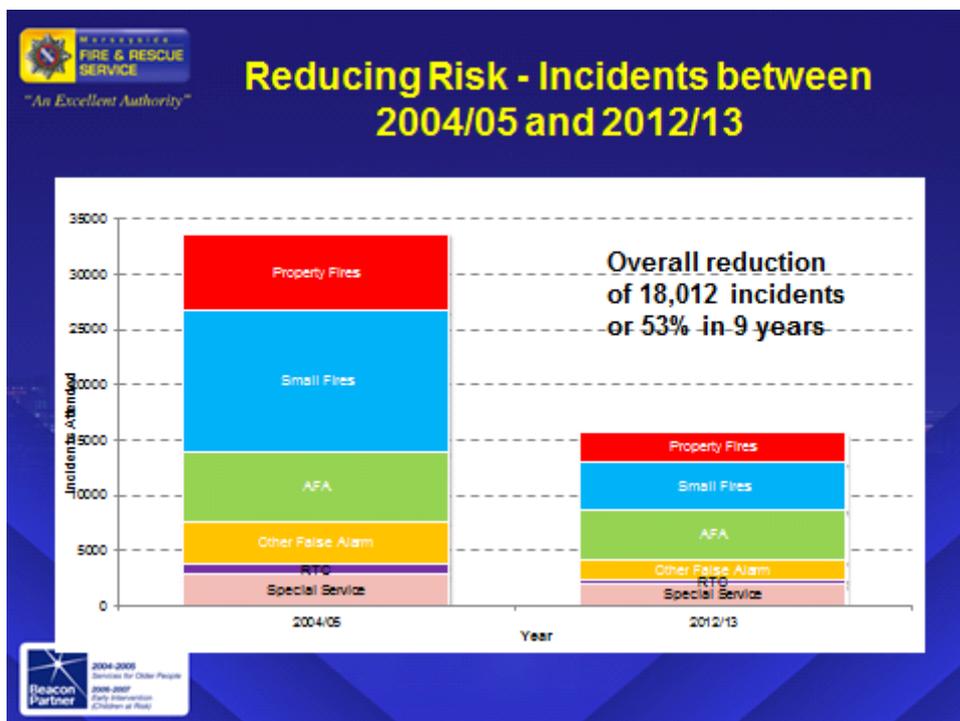
- 20. The chart above shows that, relative to most other fire authorities, Merseyside still receives a high proportion of its total funding from the government and raises a relatively small proportion through council tax.
- 21. Therefore, even in recent years, it has been able to maintain a relatively high level of expenditure per head of population – as the chart immediately below shows.



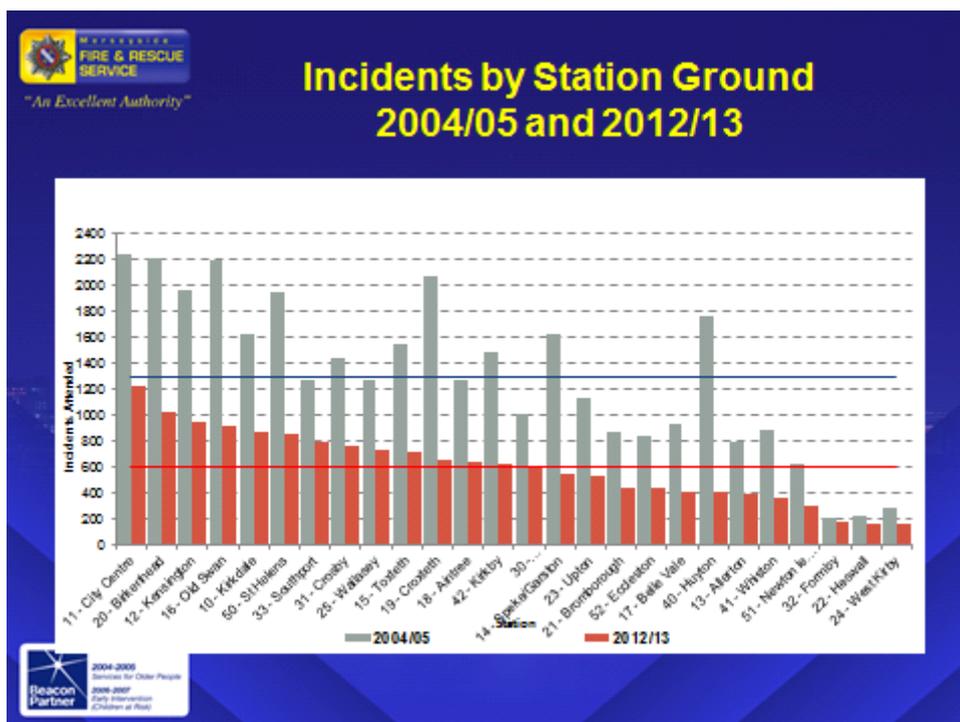
24. Given its high levels of fire stations and fire engines, MFRA has maintained a relatively large number of wholtime firefighters compared with most other authority areas – as the next chart shows.



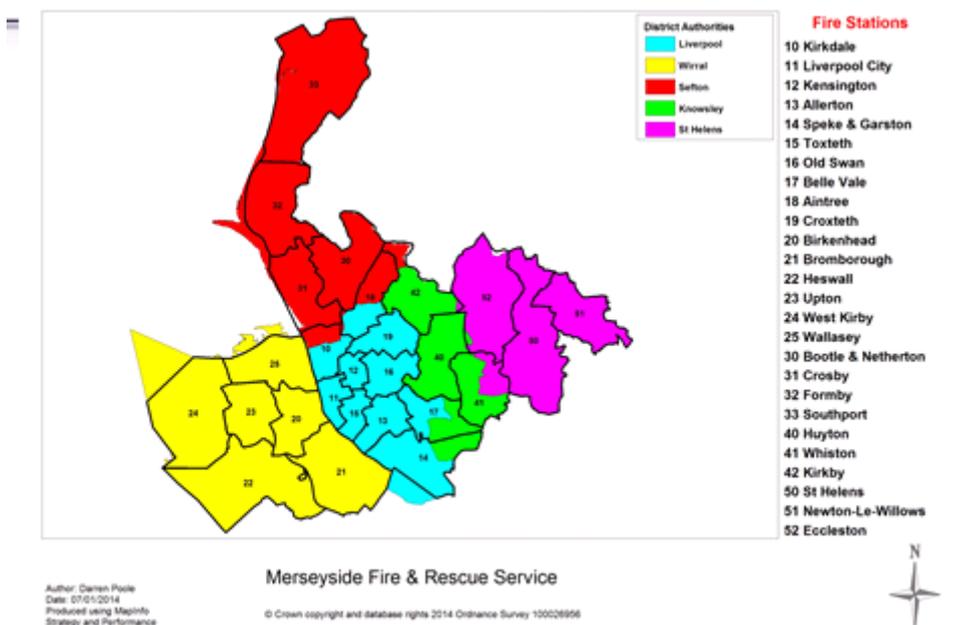
25. Partly as a result of MFRA’s very active preventative and educational work, all categories of incidents have reduced very significantly in Merseyside over the last nine years, as the chart below shows.



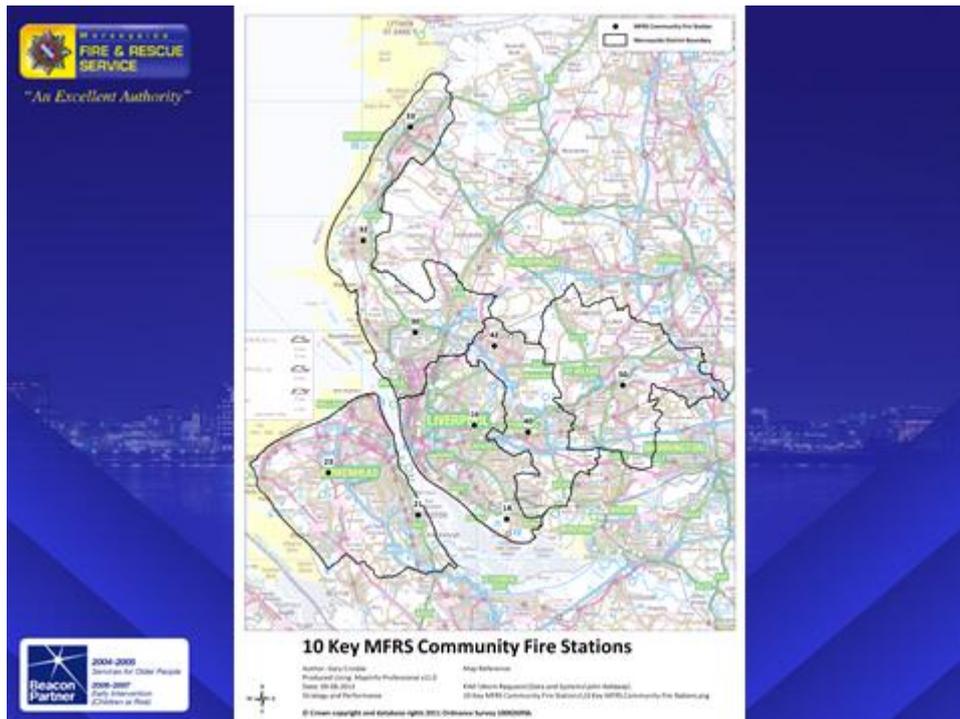
26. Not surprisingly, then, all of MFRA’s fire stations deal with many fewer incidents each year than they used recently to do – as shown below.



27. In the context of the above data, the forums were shown the current distribution of MFRA’s fire stations with the following map.



28. As part of the context for discussion, participants were informed that in principle it would be possible to maintain MFRS’s current 10-minute response standard for critical incidents from only 10 strategically located fire stations across Merseyside – including, for example, two in Liverpool, two in Wirral, three in Sefton, two in Knowsley and one in St Helens, as the following map shows.



29. In connection with the map above, it was also pointed out that although a reduction to ten strategic fire stations would be compatible with the current response time targets, it would nonetheless lengthen the current average response time of 5 minutes 22 seconds for critical incidents.
30. It was made clear in all the forums that the ten-station scenario was an “indicative hypothetical model” (albeit based on reliable data), rather than a proposal or implicit plan.

Discussion of Options

31. The final and much the longest part of the meeting was devoted to detailed discussion of several possible options for further financial savings – ranging from:

Additional “low level activity and risk” stations (LLARs)

Introduction of day crewing at some wholetime stations

Introduction of “community retained” (RDS) stations

“Merger” of pairs of older stations and their replacement by modern community fire stations – in effect a “one-for-two option”

Closure of some stations without replacement.

32. Participants were encouraged to consider the above ideas and options *in principle* – on their merits in terms of suitability, sustainability, resilience and acceptability for Merseyside. In other words, financial issues were not the primary focus of the discussion – but the options above and the choices facing MFRA were examined carefully and at length. Participants were given extensive time for questions prior to being invited to make up their minds on each discussion topic.

The Report

33. This report concisely reviews the sentiments and judgements of participants about MFRA and the five important options listed above.
34. 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.
35. The way in which the five options for consideration were assessed in the forums is explained at the start of the next chapter.

Forum Findings with Commentary

Introduction

36. The first part of this chapter reviews the relative support for each of the five options as concisely as possible; the second part reviews the arguments, considerations and points of view that the participants relied upon in making the judgements of the relative merits of the five options.
37. In the forums, following the background financial and operational information, the relative support for each option was assessed in two main ways – as follows:

First, after an explanation of each option, participants were asked whether they were “initially or provisionally interested” in the option as a possible way forward for MFRA;

Finally, when all the options had been reviewed in detail, participants were asked to nominate their first, second and third preferences and the relative levels of support were assessed through a “points score” – based on counting:

Three points for each first choice

Two points for each second choice

One point for each third choice.

38. In these ways, the relative support for each option was measured. Not surprisingly, the two measures were generally very consistent in their results; but the “points score” is the most reliable and important since it is based on participants’ considered or final judgements, after reviewing all the options fully and explicitly comparing their merits.
39. It is worth noting that in each forum this method of ‘scoring’ the options was explained to the participants, and examples of the points scores for selected options were quickly generated following people’s first, second and third choices – in order to confirm that the procedure was acceptable and generated intuitively acceptable results. This was confirmed in each forum and no one contested the scores generated.

Initial Interest in Options

40. The table below shows the numbers of people showing initial interest in each option. The numbers have been weighted and rounded to compensate for small variations in the number of participants at each Forum. (The numbers attending each forum are shown in brackets beside the district names.)

THE OPTIONS					
	LOW LEVEL ACTIVITY/RISK	DAY CREWING	COMMUNITY RETAINED	STATION MERGERS	STATION CLOSURES
Wirral (25)	23	6	1	25	14
St Helens (20)	14	7	0	23	18
Liverpool (25)	23	2	0	24	17
Knowsley (18)	12	0	0	19	18
Sefton (23)	19	6	1	21	16
Total initial supporters	91	21	2	112	83

41. In terms of initial interest, station mergers was clearly the most popular, followed fairly closely by increasing the number of low level activity and risk (LLAR) stations and, perhaps surprisingly, reducing the number of fire stations (but certainly not to a few as 10).
42. In three districts initial support for more LLAR stations almost matched support for mergers; but in St Helens and Knowsley it was less. In no area was support for station closures quite as high as for mergers, but in Knowsley they had almost equal support. In three areas initial support for LLARs exceeded that for closures, but not in St Helens and Knowsley.

Considered Judgements on Options

43. As explained above, people's final judgements based on their rankings are more important than their initial interest levels reviewed above. Therefore, the "points scores" for each option shown on the next page are the most reliable guide to the participants' considered or final judgements, after reviewing all the options fully and explicitly comparing their merits.

THE OPTIONS					
	LOW LEVEL ACTIVITY/RISK	DAY CREWING	COMMUNITY RETAINED	STATION MERGERS	STATION CLOSURES
Wirral (25)	33	5	1	75	21
St Helens (20)	37	12	0	57	20
Liverpool (25)	45	10	0	69	21
Knowsley (18)	25	5	4	60	39
Sefton (23)	21	18	2	68	33
Total Points	161	50	7	329	134

44. Station mergers was clearly the most popular option – and the points scoring method emphasises its ‘leadership’ position in all the districts; but it is interesting that LLARs and station closures had comparable levels of support, though both are a long way behind mergers – though, of course, mergers are one form of station closure in any case.
45. In Knowsley and Sefton, the prospect of station closures was more popular than increasing LLARs, but not so in the other three areas. In none of the districts was there significant support for the introduction of day crewing and community retained stations, except perhaps in Sefton, where day crewing got nearly as many points as LLARs.

Interpretation

46. The overall impression is that, when faced with a broad choice between keeping all stations and changing to cheaper duty systems *or* reducing stations while protecting duty systems, the participants clearly favoured the latter. In other words, they made at least an implicit choice in favour of reducing stations rather than changing the way Merseyside is crewed.
47. Significantly, while two options were unpopular, no one rejected the options in their entirety or thought that MFRA should not even be considering such courses of action. That is, there was implicit agreement that MFRA’s current ideas and options are a reasonable and responsible reaction to the budget reductions it is facing – and indeed in most cases could be introduced safely and sustainably.
48. So far, though, we have considered comparative levels of support only, without taking account of the *reasons* people had for their views or the *reservations* about particular options – so those are considered in the next section.

Reasoning about the Options

Introduction

49. People's reasons for their views are obviously important in relation to the various options considered – for ultimately listening and engagement and formal consultation are not simply a 'numbers game' in which majority support counts for everything: the key issue is not numbers but the cogency of the arguments for or against the various options.
50. This section concisely reviews the various opinions, reasons, considerations and attitudes of the participants.

Low Level Activity and Risk Stations

51. People were interested in the current LLAR stations and could appreciate the value of keeping fire fighters ready for almost immediate response at night, while also saving on the costs of full night time crewing. Their main questions and concerns were about:

Potential impact on response times

The safety and fatigue of crews after a busy 12-hour day shift

How many 24-hour shifts do people do in sequence

How many stations might be converted to LLAR

What savings are achieved by LLARs

The cost of installing accommodation on/near the stations

Whether the LLAR system would work/operate if there were fewer stations

Whether fire fighters living very close to LLAR stations could be on call during the night time from their homes

How fire fighters feel about the system where it has been operated

Whether the system would suit married fire fighters as well as single persons

Whether the system would discourage potential recruits.

52. As the points scores demonstrate the option was received very positively – for example:

Theoretically, you could manage with 10 stations – so this is a good compromise to prevent you losing stations which could otherwise be closed

One of the positives of the LLAR is that if the risk is increased in an area in future then you could restore 24/7 cover if necessary.

53. Insofar as there were any real worries about the crewing system, they mainly focused on the welfare of the fire fighters:

Our responsibility is to the safety of the fire fighters – and I have reservations about LLAR because they might not sleep well; and the 12-hour day shift is long; and they are away from their families – so that could reduce their commitment and effectiveness.

Day Crewed Stations

54. People were much less favourable towards the principle of day crewed stations than LLARs. Their main questions and concerns were about:

Potential impact on response times – especially at night when wholetime RDS attend from their homes

Whether response time statistics include the five minute night time delay

Whether slower response times would be acceptable in lower risk areas

Night times might have many fewer incidents, but they were likely to be more serious

Whether it is possible to cover a station area from another wholetime station – and rely on the wholetime RDS only as a support vehicle rather than the primary response

Back-up plans if wholetime RDS are unavailable on some nights

The size of the recruitment catchment areas and the effectiveness of recruitment and retention

How much saving day crewed stations might yield

How many such stations might be required to save the necessary money

Whether it would be better for fire fighters to come from their own homes (compared with LLAR)

The proportion of fire fighters who live within five minutes of their stations

Whether the system has been tried and tested elsewhere

55. Overall, people felt that day crewing is an inferior form of cover for Merseyside, even though they were told that many FRSs use it. Many wanted to consider station closures rather than what they thought as an inferior emergency cover duty system:

It could be better to write-off the older stations and reduce your losses – it feels like [with day crewing] you are trying... to keep all your stations open – but you need to stop just trying to keep hold of all your stations!

This suggestion [day crewing] could suggest you could consider closing a station if it is so quiet at night

We don't have to choose just one option; we could have a range of options.

Community RDS Stations

56. People were very interested in the idea of community retained stations, but also very much against the prospect of introducing them in Merseyside – even though they were told that two-thirds of the area of England and Wales is primarily covered by RDS stations. Their main questions and concerns were about:

Potential impact on response times – when RDS take five minutes to attend from their homes or workplaces

How response times are monitored

How RDS availability is managed

Whether wholetime and RDS crews can work together on the same appliance

The numbers of RDS crews employed in the big metropolitan areas

The degree and intensity of training that RDS staff get

Whether RDS staff could deal with chemical hazards effectively

The risk of injury for RDS staff

Whether retired wholetime fire fighters could serve as RDS crews

How reversible is the system if risk increases over time.

57. Some telling comments from across the forums were:

The technical difficulties with fires mean that this approach [community RDS] is not suitable in urban areas – it's for rural areas where fires are fewer and smaller and less complex

I would rather have trained and experienced fire fighters than enthusiastic 'amateurs' doing the job

It would make more sense to have fewer stations and keep the wholetime fire fighters – where they are focused and ready

You want the best people but the pool would be restricted to people within five minutes – so you are reducing the available people

Congestion could stop people getting to their stations within five minutes

I don't trust the five minute response time at night – when people have to get up and get dressed first

Recruitment is difficult and employers do not want to release their staff

We don't want to devalue our wholetime fire service!

Station Mergers

58. People were very interested in how and where this option might be used; and they were also very favourable about it following discussion. In particular, it seemed a positive option because it reduces the number of old, expensive-to-run, unsuitable stations while providing new and better located facilities. Their main questions and comments were about:

Whether the capital value of the closed sites could be realised for MFRA

Whether the capital would have to be borrowed

Whether they would be PFI schemes

Whether government funding would be available

Whether the new stations would be built before the old ones are closed

How long the building programme would take

Whether there would be a net reduction in fire engines compared with the un-merged cover

How the second fire engine on merged stations would be crewed and used, if not an immediate response vehicle

Whether the second appliance could be maintained as now

If the new sites would provide a chance to collaborate with the ambulance and police services more effectively

Would there be compulsory redundancies as a result of mergers

How sites for the new stations would be selected in relation to risk and populations

How many potential mergers could there be.

59. In the context of a generally favourable reception for this option, some typical comments from across the forums were:

This would be a positive change which moves forward by reducing the excessive number of fire stations (the costs of those are a burden) and it is good that it lets the emergency services work together

It would be good to have a new Wirral station inland rather than just near the coast

Prescot makes sense as a location

Mergers are a good idea in principle.

Station Closures

60. In all areas participants knew that, in principle, station closures could affect all districts (depending on relative risk, and station numbers and coverage); but in both Sefton and Liverpool the participants were made aware that their areas could be affected, owing to the relative numbers of fire stations in the five districts.
61. It might seem surprising that participants across the forums were able to accept that some stations might be closed – but they took seriously the comparative and historical evidence about the over-provision of stations (particularly in relation to Liverpool, Sefton and the Wirral districts).
62. As we have said about the points scores, overall, when faced with a broad choice between keeping all stations and changing to cheaper duty systems *or* reducing stations while protecting duty systems, the participants clearly favoured the latter: they made at least implicit choices in favour of reducing stations rather than changing the way Merseyside is crewed.
63. All the participants were aware that station closures are an emotive issue and difficult for the public to understand. Their main questions and concerns were about:
- How the public will react to closures
 - Whether it is safe to close stations
 - Resilience for big incidents with fewer fire fighters and stations
 - Whether risk will increase significantly in the medium term due to economic, social and benefits changes
 - Whether educational and preventative work could continue with many fewer fire fighters
 - The criteria that would be used to select stations for closure
 - How education and prevention have reduced risk
 - Whether fire engines would be reduced
 - The fact that stations might be lost for good
 - Whether the government grant to MFRA would be adversely affected by station closures
 - Whether the capital value of the closed sites could be realised for MFRA
 - Whether closures are being imposed by the government.
64. There were a number of supportive comments across the forums, including in Liverpool and the Wirral. For example, the following comments came from Wirral:
- Closures are much more emotive and hard to sell, but there is some point to it*
 - You can sell mergers more easily than this*
 - Emotion should not come into it – the fire service has to educate local opinion properly on the options*
-

You have to run in a business-like manner in relation to costs

If you could run with 10 stations then there is scope for some closures

You have to look to the future because the cuts won't go away.

65. In Liverpool there was also an interest in the possibility of station closures and the option was the third most popular. Two significant comments were:

Which are the quietest Liverpool stations?

If you closed a station you could still use some of the fire fighters elsewhere

If you close a station completely, will this affect the grant from the government.

66. In Sefton the comments were less overt and more guarded (as one person suspected a 'government conspiracy to privatise the fire and rescue service' and others were concerned about a reduction in the number of fire fighters and amount of prevention work if MFRA stations were closed); but there was broad support for the view that:

A hybrid solution and partnership with [FRS] neighbours could continue – so this would give flexibility: shared services is an idea that won't go away!

Equalities Issues

67. In most of the forums there was just time to ask participants whether the options in any way disadvantaged any of the equalities streams or protected groups.
68. The unanimous response was that they did not jeopardise any minority group; indeed, it was generally agreed that the elderly and other groups would gain positive benefit from the enhanced community facilities at newly built 'merged' fire stations.