



# **Fire Station Merger Proposals for Knowsley**

**Report of Consultation by  
Focus Groups and a Forum  
with members of the public**

**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 public consultation meetings reported here. The forum and focus group 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 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 four 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's 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.

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# Project Overview

## The Commission

1. ORS was commissioned by Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority (MFRA) to convene and facilitate four consultation meetings with local residents across Knowsley.
2. ORS's role was to recruit and facilitate the meetings and to report their opinions of MFRA's draft proposals to reduce the fire stations in Knowsley by providing a new community fire station at Prescott and then closing the existing Whiston and Huyton stations, a process described by MFRA as merging the two stations. To conduct the meetings based on the fullest possible information for participants, ORS worked 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 meetings is important. MFRA has had an extensive 'engagement' with residents for a number of years and, in this context, ORS has facilitated both district-based and all-Merseyside forums regularly. Within this on-going framework, MFRA conducts both 'listening and engagement' and 'formal consultation' meetings on a regular cycle.
4. The four consultation meetings reported here followed an earlier all-Merseyside 'listening and engagement' process that considered hypothetically a wide range of policies and options for the MFRA in the context of its reduced budget due to public expenditure reductions. Having taken account of those earlier meetings and all the other available evidence, the MFRA has formulated the current draft proposals for Knowsley.

## Deliberative Research: Focus Groups and Forums

5. The four consultation meetings reported here 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 the proposals in detail. The meetings lasted for at least two-and-a-half hours and in total there were 48 diverse participants. The dates of the meetings and attendance levels by members of the public at each forum were as shown on the next page.

AREA OF KNOWSLEY	TIME AND DATE (2014)	TYPE OF MEETING AND NUMBER OF ATTENDEES
Prescot	18.00 – 20.50 June 3	Focus Group 11
Whiston	18:00 – 20.45 June 4	Focus Group 11
Huyton	18.00 – 20.45 June 5	Focus Group 8
All-Knowsley	18.00 – 20.45 June 18	Forum 18

6. The attendance target for each of the focus group meeting was between 7 and 10 people, and for the forums it was between 15 and 20 – so the recruitment programme was successful everywhere and exceeded expectations in Prescot and Whiston.
7. In the three focus groups none of the participants had attended a previous similar meeting: they were new recruits; whereas in the forum about half had attended a previous ‘listening and engagement’ meeting and half were new recruits. In both cases, the new participants were recruited by random-digit telephone dialling from the ORS Social Research Call Centre. Having been initially contacted by phone, they were 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.
8. 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).
9. In all the meetings (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.

CRITERIA	PRESCOT FG	WHISTON FG	HUYTON FG	ALL-KNOWSLEY FORUM	OVERALL
<b>Gender</b>	<b>Male: 6 Female: 5</b>	<b>Male: 6 Female: 5</b>	<b>Male: 5 Female: 3</b>	<b>Male: 12 Female: 6</b>	<b>Male: 29 Female: 19</b>
<b>Age</b>	<b>16-34: 3 35-54: 5 55+: 3</b>	<b>16-34: 3 35-54: 3 55+: 5</b>	<b>16-34: 3 35-54: 3 55+: 2</b>	<b>16-34: 6 35-54: 5 55+: 7</b>	<b>16-34: 15 35-54: 16 55+: 17</b>
<b>Social Grade</b>	<b>AB: 3 C1: 4 C2: 1 DE: 3</b>	<b>AB: 3 C1: 4 C2: 2 DE: 2</b>	<b>AB: 2 C1: 2 C2: 1 DE: 3</b>	<b>AB: 4 C1: 3 C2: 3 DE: 8</b>	<b>AB: 12 C1: 13 C2: 7 DE: 16</b>
<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>0 Non-White British</b>	<b>1 Non-White British</b>	<b>0 Non-White British</b>	<b>2 Non-White British</b>	<b>3 Non-White British</b>
<b>Limiting Long-term Illness</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>8</b>

10. Although, like all other forms of qualitative consultation, deliberative forums cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the four meetings reported here gave diverse groups of people from Knowsley the opportunity to comment in detail on MFRA' proposals for the district's fire stations.
11. 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

12. ORS worked in collaboration with MFRA to agree a suitable agenda and informative stimulus material for the meetings. The first part of each meeting began, for the sake of continuity and context, with a short review of the background issues, including the:

Importance of prevention and risk-management policies

Impact of public spending reductions on MFRA – including the reduction of fire engines from 42 to 28, and the corresponding reduction of 180 fire fighter and 90 support staff posts



Introduction of an 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.

13. The four meetings were also informed or reminded briefly of the wide range of options considered by MFRA in order to reduce its expenditure, including the introduction of:

More low-level-activity-and-risk (LLAR) fire stations

Day-crewed fire stations

Community retained (RDS) fire stations

Closing some fire stations

Merging some fire stations.

14. In passing, it is worth noting that the (several months) earlier ‘listening and engagement’ meetings had demonstrated that, when faced with a broad choice between *either* keeping all stations and changing to cheaper duty systems *or* reducing stations while protecting current wholetime duty systems, the participants clearly favoured the latter option. That is, they made at least an implicit choice in favour of reducing stations rather than changing the way Merseyside is crewed. These ‘conclusions’ of the earlier meetings were not repeated to participants in the meetings reported here, but it is interesting to note that the opinions reviewed below are certainly compatible with the outcomes of the previous ‘listening and engagement’ meetings.

### Financial Constraints

15. Following the short review of the many options considered, the second part of each meeting briefly reviewed the implications of funding reductions that MFRA faces, including the:

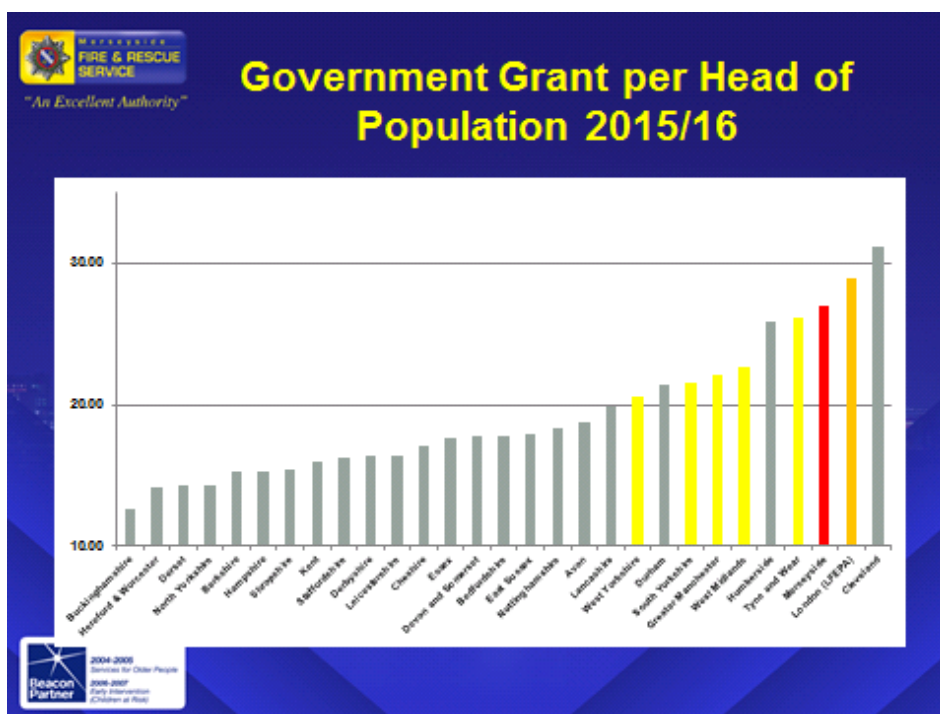
Projected budget deficit of £6.3 million by the end of 2015/16, based on projections of current expenditure levels and known financial information

Projected deficit of £9.1 million by the end of 2017/18, based on projections of current expenditure levels and plausible financial assumptions.

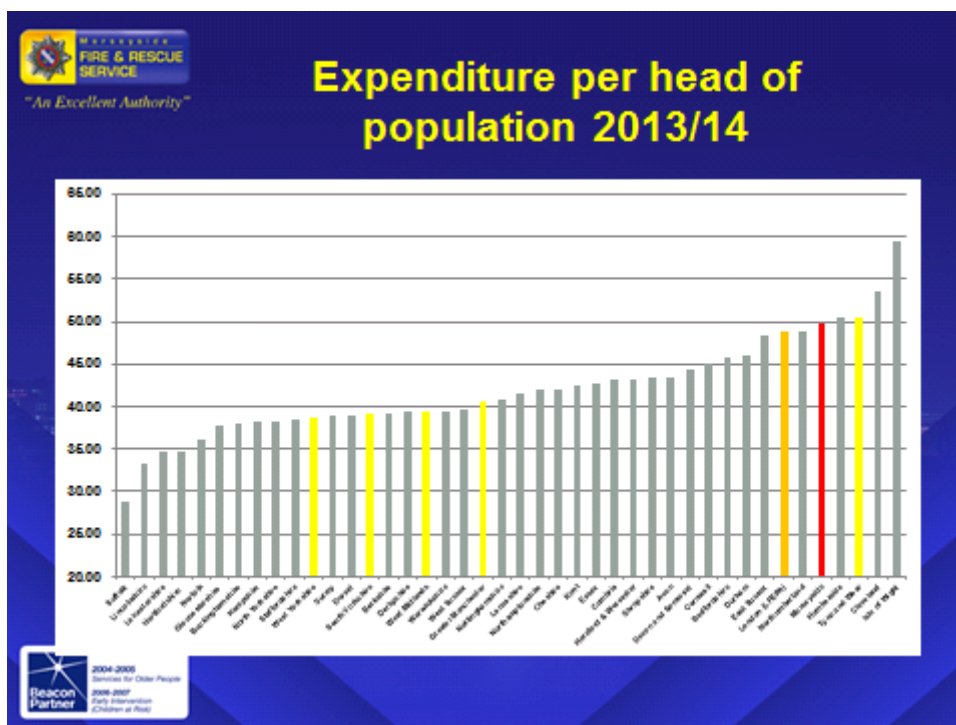
16. These financial challenges were explained neutrally as constraints requiring substantial reductions in spending to be made on a progressive basis. In order to encourage free discussion, the financial position was not used as a repeated justification of the draft proposals: participants were invited to assess the proposals on their general merits, albeit within a generally constrained position.

## Taking Stock

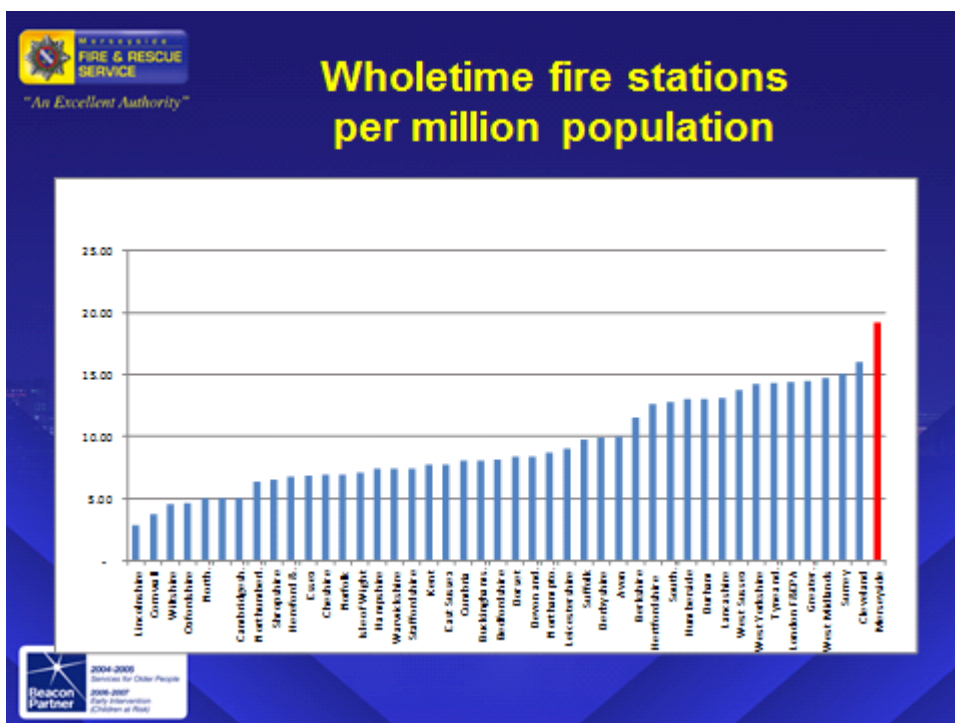
17. The introduction to each meeting also tried to ‘take stock’ of MFRA in terms of its much reduced risk levels (with incidents having reduced by 53% over the last nine years), strategic roles and allocation of resources. Participants were shown comparative data on the (still relatively high) levels of government funding and the emergency cover resources that MFRA (and the other metropolitan fire and rescue services) have enjoyed over the last half century.
18. For example, the following graphics were explained briefly – with Merseyside highlighted in red and the other big metropolitan authorities in yellow.
19. The chart below 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.

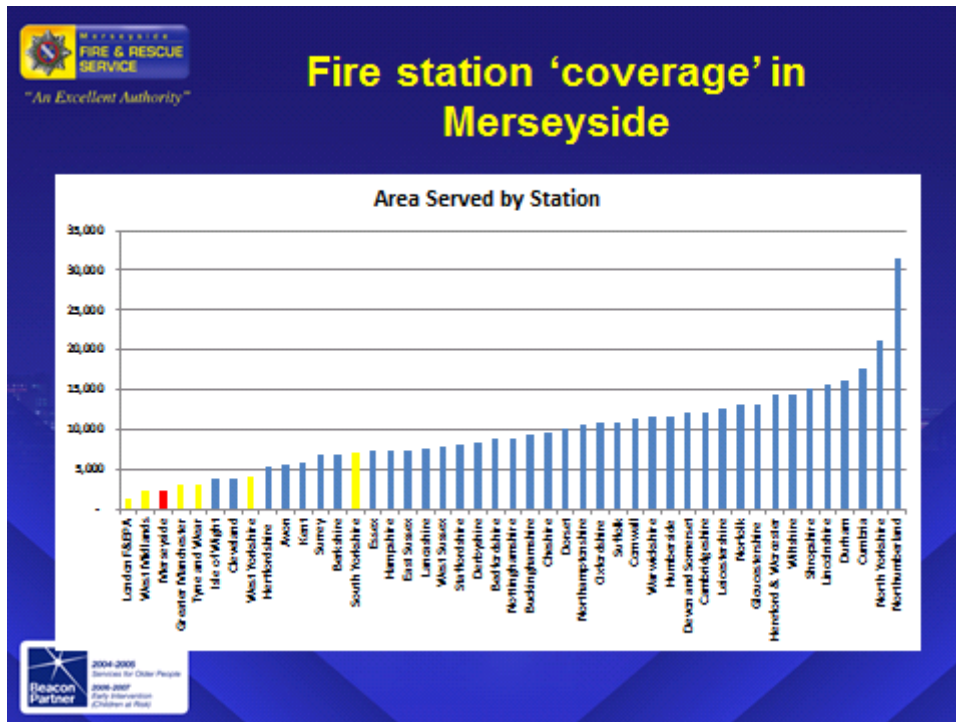


20. Therefore, even in recent years, MFRA has been able to maintain a relatively high level of expenditure per head of population – as the chart on the next page shows.

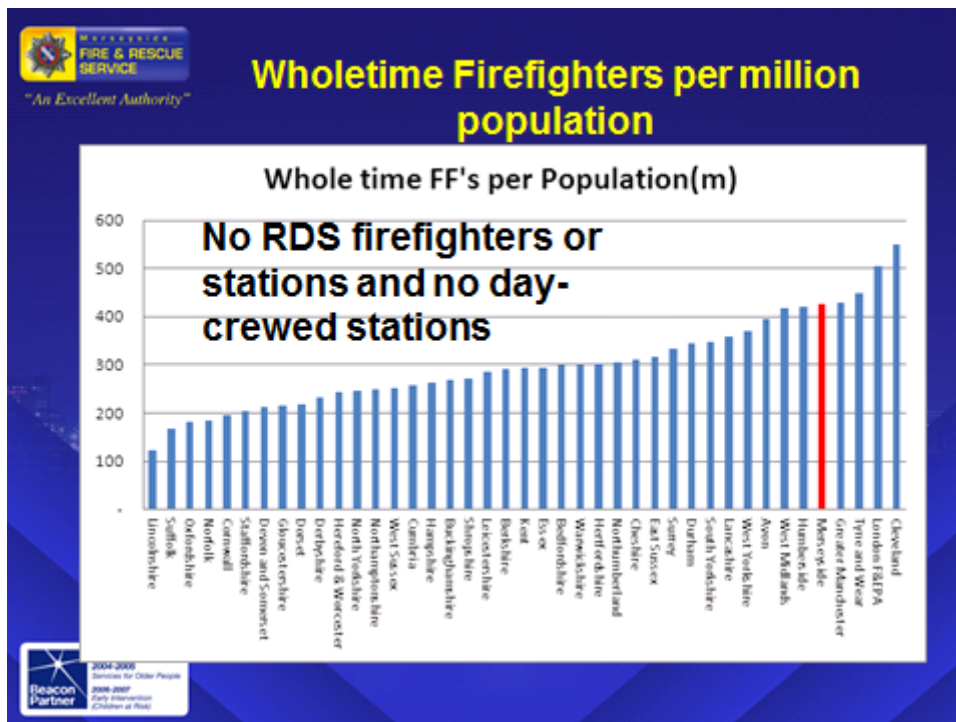


- 21. Due to its funding, and due to historical assessments of risk deriving from intensive bombing in WW2, Merseyside has had a large number of closely located fire stations (especially in Liverpool and the Wirral) in order to meet the statutory response time standards that prevailed from the 1950s to 2004 –as the two charts below illustrate.

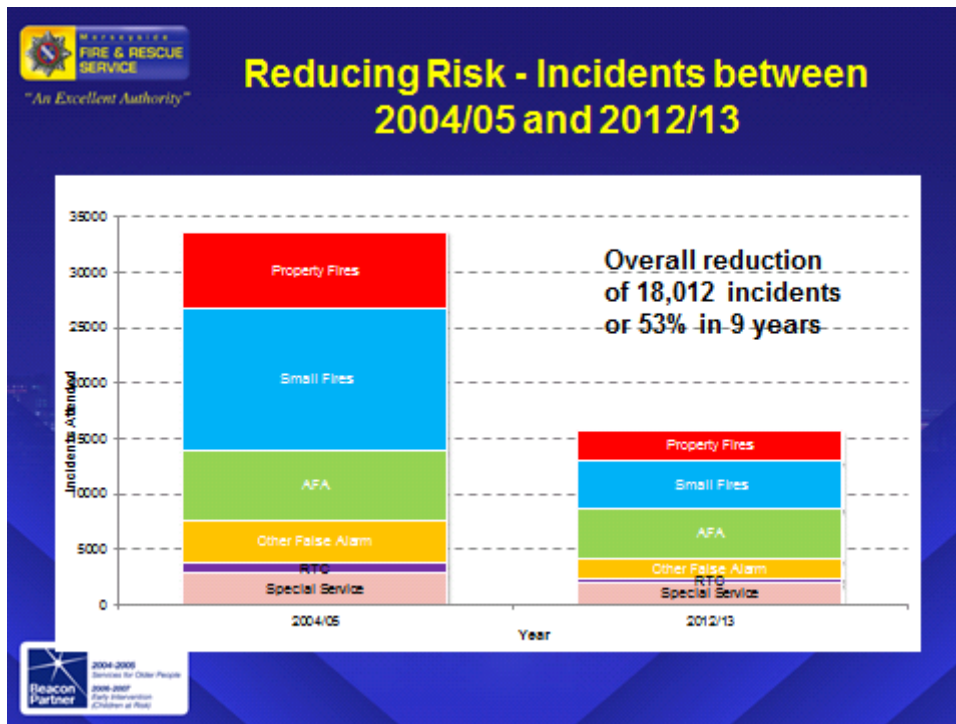




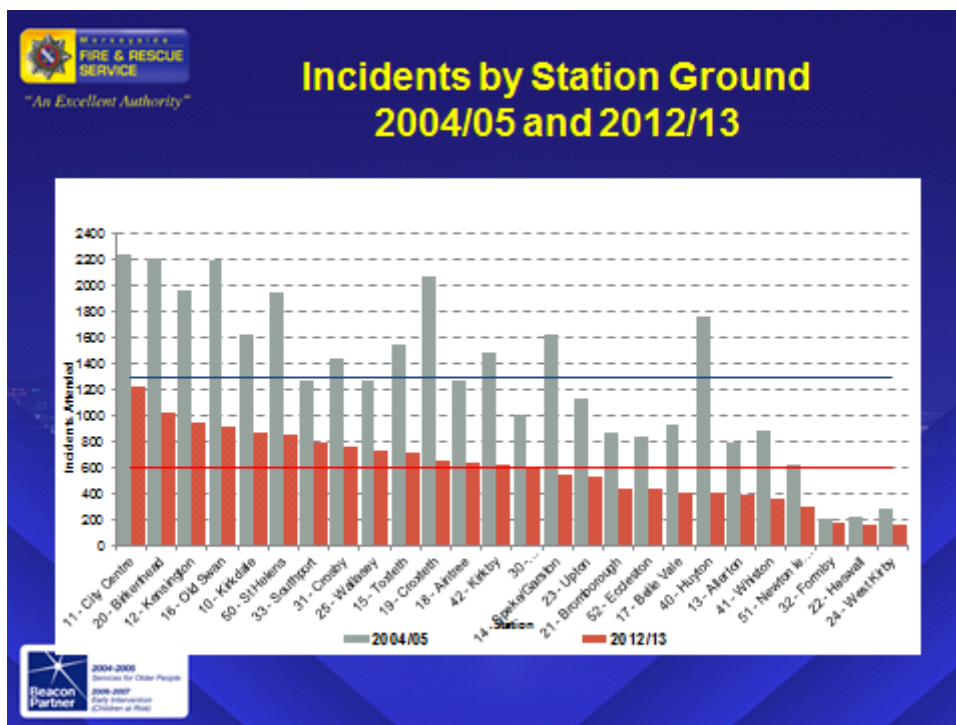
- 22. Indeed, on the basis of its population of about 1.4 million people, MFRA has more wholtime fire stations than any other area of the country, including London – and so, as the chart above shows, each of its 26 current stations covers a relatively small area.
- 23. Given its high levels of fire stations and fire engines, MFRA has maintained a relatively large number of wholtime firefighters compared with most other authority areas – as the next chart shows.



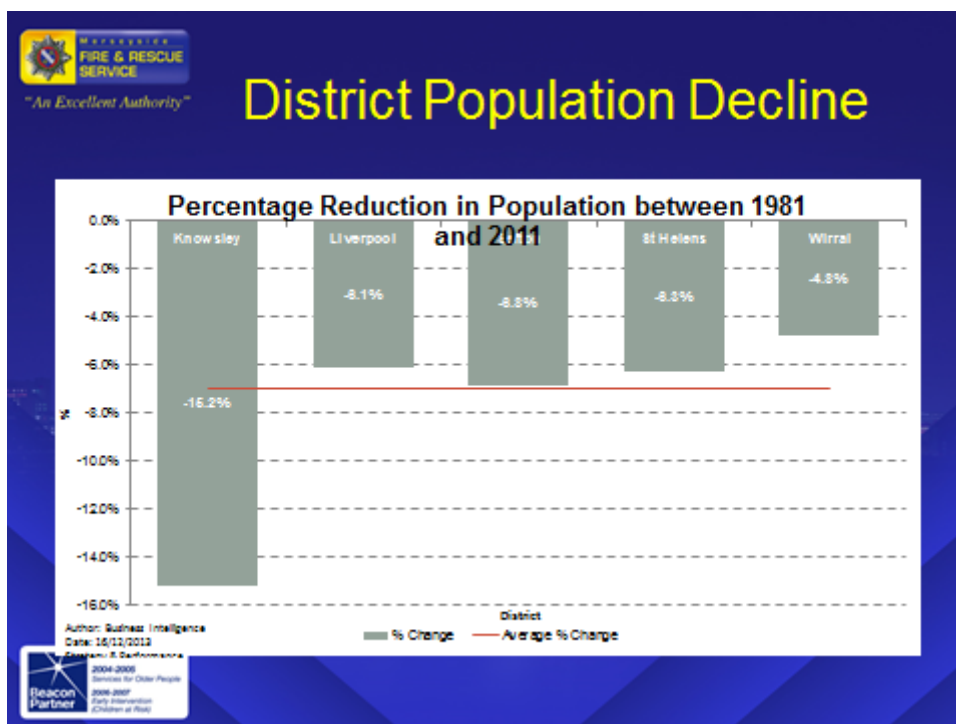
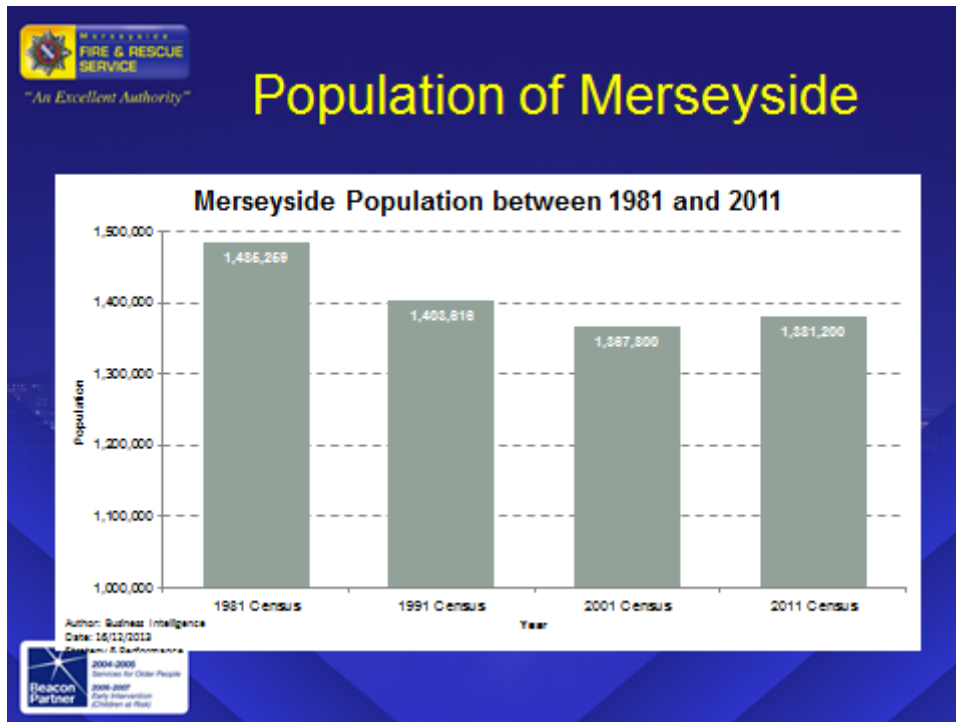
24. Partly as a result of MFRA’s very active preventative and educational work, all categories of incidents have reduced very significantly in Merseyside over the last nine years, as the chart below shows.



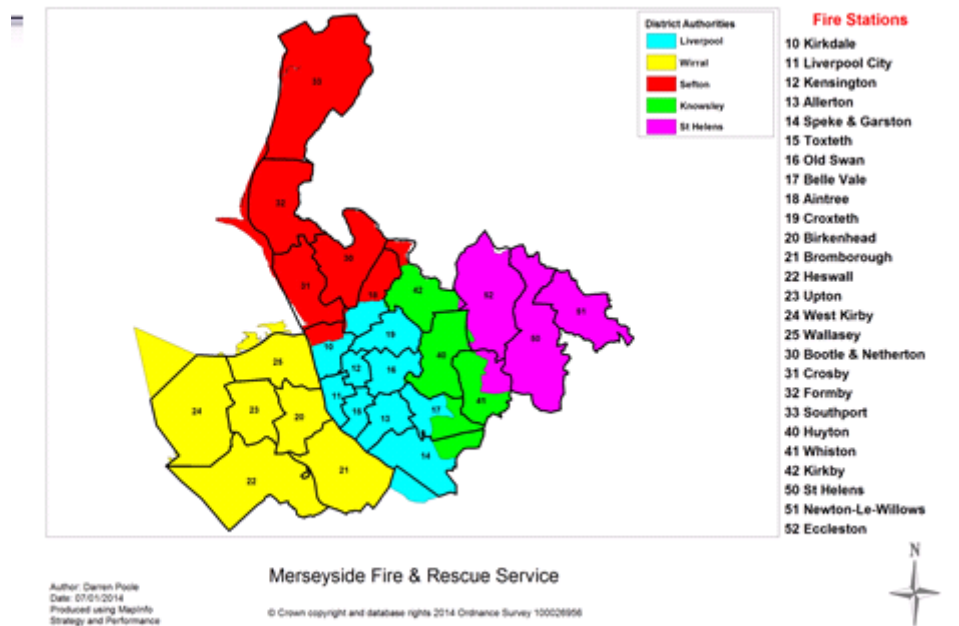
25. Not surprisingly, then, all of MFRA’s fire stations deal with many fewer incidents each year than they used recently to do – as shown below.



26. In the forum in particular, it was explained that the population of Merseyside and especially Knowsley has declined in the last 30 years or so. The next slide shows the population of all-Merseyside and the following one highlights the trends in each district.



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



## Fire Station and Fire Cover Proposals for Knowsley

28. The final and much the longest part of each meeting was devoted to detailed discussion of the draft Knowsley fire station proposals, which were summarised as follows:

Building a new community fire station at Prescot (Manchester Road site)

Then closing the both one-pump stations at Whiston and Huyton

Prescot to have deployed one 24/7 pump and one wholetime retained pump

Prescot's second pump to be available through the use of retained contracts for wholetime fire-fighters for support cover duties (such as dealing with spate conditions (including widespread flooding)).

29. In other words, all the participants were informed clearly that the proposals involve closing two fire stations while building a new one (in effect, merging two fire stations into one) *and also* that new fire station will have only one fire engine permanently deployed, with the second to be used only as a resilience vehicle for periods of exceptional demand.
30. The participants were also told that the merger and proposed crewing arrangements would save at least £863,000 per annum by allowing up to 22 fire-fighter posts to be phased out, probably without the need for compulsory redundancies.

31. Finally, the age and relatively poor condition of Whiston and Huyton fire stations were highlighted with pictures; and their high maintenance costs were mentioned.



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### Huyton and Whiston fire stations → new site in Prescot



- Both stations need extensive updating
- No training facilities at Whiston
- 3.1 miles apart
- Opportunity to share Prescot site with partners



32. The meetings were also shown an impression of the appearance of the proposed new Prescot station and a plan of the proposed site.



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### Proposed Prescot Station

- Example of new stations – Belle Vale







## Equality and diversity issues

33. While considering the draft proposals, participants in all the meetings were encouraged to consider whether the proposals have any adverse implications for any vulnerable people and in particular groups with 'protected characteristics': in other words, this question was not a 'footnote' to the main discussion but an intrinsic part of the scrutiny of the draft proposals.

## Overall context to the discussions

34. In the context of the financial challenges MFRS faces, it was made clear to the participants that, in addition to the Knowsley proposals, similar proposals are likely to be brought forward over the next two years – involving the closure of other 'paired' stations at Upton and West Kirby (in Wirral) and Eccleston and St Helens (in St Helens).
35. It was clear throughout the discussions that MFRA would not be making its current and future proposals if it was not facing an urgent need to reduce its expenditure in the context of reduced central government grant funding and restrictions on council tax increases. In response to questions, the proposal was described by senior MFRS officers as the '*least worst option*' in the current situation.
36. Nonetheless, the facilitator encouraged participants to consider the proposals *in principle* – on their merits in terms of suitability, sustainability, resilience and acceptability for Merseyside – rather than to just accept them without scrutiny as inevitable. In other words, financial issues were not the primary focus of the discussion: the proposals were examined carefully and at length. Participants were given extensive time for questions and discussion prior to being invited to make up their minds on each discussion topic.

## The Report

37. This report concisely reviews the sentiments and judgements of participants about MFRA's merger proposals for Knowsley fire stations. 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.

# Forum Findings with Commentary

## Executive summary

38. The key overall findings were that:

The three station-area-based focus groups and the all-Knowsley forum were all prepared to accept and even support the proposals – as feasible, safe and reasonable in the circumstances

Some people emphasised that their acceptance of the proposals was primarily or only due to the financial challenges MFRA faces: the implication was clearly that in other circumstances they would oppose the proposals

A very small number opposed the proposals in both principle and practice, and wanted MFRA to pursue other courses of action, including continuing to lobby the government

But overall, there was overwhelming majority support for the proposals across all four meetings

Indeed, some people stressed that in their opinion the proposals are not at all undesirable, but the proper outcome of sensibly reviewing resources against declining risk

The discussions revealed some reservations about the choice of the Manchester Road site, but this was not a major issue (and arose mainly in the Prescot focus group).

39. Hardly anyone rejected the fire station proposals in their entirety or thought that MFRA should not even be considering such courses of action. There was general agreement that MFRA's proposals are a reasonable and responsible reaction to the budget reductions it is facing – and indeed could be introduced safely and sustainably.

40. None of the meetings felt that the proposals raised any specific concerns relating to vulnerable people or groups with protected characteristics, but some observed that it is important to ensure the elderly get appropriate prevention work in the form of home fire safety checks and other precautions.

## Reasoning about the Proposals

### Introduction

41. People's reasons for their views are obviously important – particularly because consultation is not just a 'numbers game' in which majority support or opposition counts for everything: the key issue is not numbers but the cogency of the arguments for or against the various options. Therefore, this section concisely reviews the various opinions, reasons, considerations and attitudes of the participants.
42. Of course, the participants did not accept the proposals 'blindly' or just 'on trust'. Indeed, most would not have reached the conclusions summarised just above without being able to see and consider the evidence provided by MFRA – including all the comparative data on how MFRA fares in funding and resources alongside other fire authorities, and also how much risk and incident levels have been reducing, not only across Merseyside but also in parallel in other parts of the country.

### Prior awareness of the proposals

43. Both the forum and focus groups showed that few people were already aware of the proposals for Huyton and Whiston fire stations before attending the meetings reported here. For example, even in the all-Knowsley forum – where at least half of the participants had attended an earlier 'listening and engagement' meeting, and who might therefore be expected to be more aware than average of MFRA issues – only five out of 18 attendees said they had heard of the proposals.
44. In the three focus groups, the prior awareness levels were similar, ranging from none to about a third of the people being aware of the proposals in general terms. In Whiston and Huyton, for example, only one person in each group had heard about the proposals for the local station; and in Whiston it was *because it had been rumoured for a long time in the local paper*.
45. This data does not imply that MFRA has not publicised the issues sufficiently or not been open about its proposals; rather, it shows the difficulty of promoting consideration of complex issues if they do not immediately excite public awareness as seriously controversial.

### Awareness of financial issues

46. The all-Knowsley forum was widely aware in general terms that MFRA, like other public bodies, faces serious financial challenges; and the focus groups were also somewhat more aware, in general terms, of the widespread trend towards reduced budgets in the public sector. Financial awareness was probably highest in Prescott, with about two-thirds of the 11 participants being aware of general financial challenges facing MFRA. Nonetheless, even in Prescott, several of those who said they were aware also added that they:

*Did not know that the fire and rescue service has been hit as hard as local authorities!*

47. Interestingly, in Prescot, at least one participant strongly criticised the graphs used to illustrate MFRA's projected £9.1 million budget deficit on the ground that by not using a base of zero £million on the vertical axis the chart:

*...[V]ertically exaggerates the savings to be made in the context of the whole budget – and so makes the position appear more drastic than it actually is.*

48. This point was discussed in full and in Prescot and the other following meetings it was emphasised that the projected expenditure levels were based on a 2% per annum increase. While the issues were clarified considerably, the critic felt his original point remained cogent: that is, the income and expenditure projections should be shown with a zero £million base on the vertical axis, in order to give a more proportionate impression respectively of decreases and increases.

### Awareness of risk levels

49. About a third of the participants in the all-Knowsley forum were aware that incident levels across Merseyside have been falling markedly over a number of years; but the focus groups are probably a better guide to general public awareness. For example, only a few people in Huyton, and no one in Whiston, was aware that the number of incidents has reduced so much – though when seeing the data on reducing risk one person remarked that:

*It's true that you don't hear so many alarms nowadays as before!*

### Issues raised about the proposals

50. In this section, the comments and questions from the forum and three focus groups have generally been 'combined' without differentiation because (a) they followed broadly similar themes in each case and (b) to avoid repetition of similar points from different meetings; but where necessary any differences of emphasis between the meetings have been highlighted.
51. In the context of the evidence supplied to them in the meetings, the participants raised a wide range of issues – including all the following issues.

Public services are facing 'death by a thousand cuts'

The proposals amount to a reduction in service to the public since

Will these be the final budget and service reductions – and, if not, where will the cut-backs end?

There has been a big reduction already, from 42 to the current 28 fire engines – and these changes mean there will be even fewer

Why has Knowsley been selected when it has many fewer fire stations than Liverpool?

Was Knowsley chosen mainly because land is available for a new station?

How resilient will the service be in Knowsley if the proposals are introduced?

Where will our nearest support come from?

How are average response times calculated?

How will response times be maintained?

Could risk levels increase again in future?

Will risk levels continue to fall, albeit at a lesser rate?

What support cover is available for Knowsley from the other local authority areas within and outside Merseyside?

Under what conditions would the second fire engine at Prescott be mobilised?

The importance of maintaining fire prevention work in Knowsley

Have the fire-fighters been consulted on the proposals and, if so, what was their response?

Will redundancies result from these proposals?

How will the new fire station be funded?

Will the old sites be sold off?

Is there scope for a wider range of (smaller) response vehicles?

52. In the context of resilience and fire cover standards, some concerns were expressed vividly and the following are typical examples of the comments and questions:

*When a fire engine is lost, it's gone for ever! It's fire-fighters that put fires out! Have you asked if people would be willing to pay more for the fire service? This could be 'death by a thousand cuts' with progressive reductions in resources!*

*The fire service is a service that should be properly funded and they are cutting things to the bone*

*The proposals amount to a reduction in service to the public since we'd lose one of the 24/7 fire engines in the area!*

*Since Knowsley is the poorest council in England why is the government not helping us more?*

*The document says the cuts could amount to £20M by 2020! How will we manage that? We are paying for what the banks did!*

*We should maintain both wholetime fire engines despite not then making the savings*

*You have cut £20M by getting rid of 14 fire engines; but will you have to do the same again if you have to save another £20M? That would be awful!*

*18 years ago I had a serious fire in the house and I'm worried that the response times would go up in future – leading to a loss of life! It seems ridiculous that we have only 28 fire engines in this city!*

*Have you considered the possibility of terrorism? Could you cope with a 9/11 incident?*

*What would be the response time to a serious incident if the first fire engine was already out?*

*If you move another fire engine to Prescott when the first engine is out, then the station would be crewed (but not by its 'own' engine)*

*If you see the risks increasing after these changes, can you go back to the government or will you have to continue to make savings regardless?*

*Are all the neighbouring fire services reducing their services – and will this lead to increased reciprocity?*

*Is the proposed new site guaranteed? Other people could try to buy it*

*People will be losing jobs! Can you guarantee that there will be no redundancies?*

*Do you have the capacity to lose 100 fire-fighters by natural retirement?*

*Will the fire prevention work be maintained?*

*Will you still deliver the Prince's Trust work at the new station in Prescott – can that continue there? Are they mainly Huyton youths who attend there?*

*Who has the final say on whether the proposals go ahead or not?*

*Will any of the cost come from the Fire Authority Reserves?*

*Would you need to borrow money for the building costs?*

*Does the government grant cover the full cost of the new fire station?*

*Will you sell the two old sites?*

*Do you have to sell the two sites before you can build the new one?*

*The council cuts are leaving a lot of empty buildings which no one wants to buy right now!*

*Will the FBU take action on this?*

53. However, while these issues were raised in full and frank discussions, it should not be assumed that the participants were uniformly and finally negative about the proposals: far from that, they were prepared to raise new ideas themselves and could generally see the point of the proposals.
54. In relation to new ideas, there were suggestions that MFRA could recruit part-time or retained fire-fighters to work alongside wholetime fire-fighters – for example, to crew support vehicles – and also that it might be sensible to use some smaller response vehicles for secondary fires.

### Balance of opinion on the proposals

55. The questions and concerns summarised and illustrated above certainly did not lead to the Knowsley proposals being rejected – for having raised their initial concerns and then considered the replies from MFRS officers, the forum and focus groups were able to accept the proposals readily – and as “safe and feasible” rather than just as “financially inevitable”.
56. Overall, **in the all-Knowsley forum, 15 out of 18 participants found the proposals reasonable in the circumstances** on the basis that they are safe, feasible and sustainable ways to make important savings for MFRA.
57. In fact, in the forum, almost a quarter of the participants felt the rationalisation and carefully controlled reduction of fire stations is *positively desirable* in reducing over-provision and so reducing unnecessary costs. While the idea that such proposals are positively desirable was not a general view anywhere, there were many people who, after full discussion were prepared to support the proposals robustly – for example:

*Incidents have fallen by more than 50%...The prevention work had done a lot to reduce incidents and can continue to do so*

*All budget cuts have some level of risk.*

58. The last comment above was not intended either to be alarmist or to dismiss risk as unimportant; rather, in the context in which it was said, it meant that risk cannot be completely eliminated and it is an illusion to believe it can. The speaker meant that risk has to be managed and minimised, but small residual risk should not exclude rational changes where appropriate – as in this case.
59. There was **very clear majority support** for the proposals in all three **focus groups**:

Eight out of 11 supported the proposal in Whiston (with only two actually opposing)

In Huyton, the eight participants were unanimously in support

There was also unanimous support in Prescott (11 out of 11).

60. While the issues summarised above show the focus groups’ initial concerns, the indented summary immediately above shows that eventually (after full discussion) there were very high levels of support across all three focus groups, with two being unanimous. In this context, some typical supportive comments in Whiston were:

*The proposals reflect the necessary austerity measures*

*It seems inevitable and it has been thought through –it seems logical to do this – but you want to reduce the crewing of the second engine!*

*I’m happy with the idea, but it’s important to protect prevention and the Prince’s Trust work.*

61. In Huyton, the discussion led one person to observe that:

*Other fire and rescue services manage OK with fewer stations and engines.*



62. The reduced availability of the second fire engine was clearly an issue in Whiston and Huyton (but less so in Prescott); but in the context of the whole discussion most residents overcame their concerns about this and accepted the proposals overall.
63. Indeed, in Prescott more than two-thirds (8 out of 11) considered the proposals to be *positively desirable* in principle and practice – an even larger proportion than in the all-Knowsley forum (where just less than a quarter were of that opinion). In this context in Prescott, there were some bold statements in support of the proposals:

*In principle, the merger to reduce costs is a good thing – it's a sensible way to go forward*

*Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service is grossly over-spending – so the government has to act to reduce costs.*

64. In Huyton, half the groups of eight thought the proposals were sensible within the context of a properly cost-effective service, while the other four accepted them more as a regrettable necessity than a positive contribution to the evolution of the service.
65. In Prescott, there were other references to how money could be saved – for example:

*Why do you have the current 2/2/4 shift pattern? It seems very out-of-date now and there could be big savings by changing to 8 hour shifts – that would be more efficient!*

*We need to consider the shift patterns in the context of a modern service – to have an efficient and cost-effective service!*

66. Others did not refer to over-spending, but still favoured the rationalisation of some public services – for example:

*Can the new station take an ambulance station as well – the two could combine.*

### Manchester Road site

67. In Whiston people had no comments to make on the proposed Manchester Road site for the new fire station, but in Huyton the few comments were mainly positive. One person wondered about possible congestion in the vicinity of Whiston Hospital, but the others supported the choice – for example:

*Would there be a clash with emergency vehicles from Whiston Hospital?*

*The site must have been considered carefully and it seems OK*

*It's right in the middle of the whole area.*

68. In the all-Knowsley forum about seven of the 18 participants had doubts about the site – on various grounds. Some people thought the proposed site is too subject to traffic congestion; some wanted to know if other sites had been properly considered; and one objected on the grounds

that it was further from her house than the current station. For example, the main comments were:

*Prescot has traffic congestion around Tesco at the junction – it's busy and hard to get off the roundabout*

*Have you considered other sites properly?*

*It is further from my house – from 3 minutes' attendance to about 12 – but I know that's not a real objection in principle.*

69. In the Prescot focus group only a minority (3 out of 11 people) found the Manchester Road site to be a convincing choice, while almost half (5 out of 11 people) criticised the choice and three were “don't know”. The main criticisms and comments on the proposed site were:

*The proposed location is less suitable due to speed bumps, shopping traffic and access to the main road – it seems an impractical position: it's a big retail park and a 24-hour Tesco!*

*Three of the roads in that immediate area have speed bumps – and there is an increasing amount of traffic there*

*Why have you chosen this site rather than demolishing and rebuilding Huyton and selling Whiston?*

*Are there any other sites possible?*

70. In other words, local people in Prescot seemed to feel most concerned about possible congestion (as did some in the all-Knowsley forum).

## Equality and diversity issues

71. Although the issues of equality and diversity were ‘mainstreamed’ in the sense of being raised early in the discussions, as a context for people’s reflections on the issues, none of the meetings felt that the proposals caused any specific concerns about the impact on groups with protected characteristics; but some observed that it is important to ensure that the vulnerable people get appropriate consideration (through prevention work in the form of home fire safety checks and other precautions).
72. The statement that was most typical overall of the discussions on protected characteristics was made in Whiston:

*The elderly people and people with mental illness need to be considered carefully in these changes – and people with disabilities generally.*