

Allerton Consultation

Public meetings and stakeholders Meeting

Promotion

Two evening public meetings and a breakfast stakeholders meeting were held as part of the Allerton Fire Station consultation process.

The meetings were all held at Blue Coat School, the stakeholder breakfast on the 8th of December, the first public meeting on the 10th December and the second on the 15th January.

These meetings were widely promoted in the local media, on the internet, social media, our own staff meetings and newsletter distribution to public buildings, businesses and local supermarkets.

The Liverpool Echo ran articles announcing the consultation, the public meetings and reaction from the public to the proposed closure of the station. Radio Merseyside and Radio City interviewed the Chief Fire Officer and mentioned the public meetings.

MFRS Facebook page and the MFRS website carried information from the day the consultation was launched and there was regular promotion of the process on twitter and social media generally.

An initial newsletter was widely distributed to the media and local people. Following the response from the first public meeting a second document was produced and distributed responding to some of the issues the public had raised.

Meetings were held with all Allerton station staff providing the same information as the public meetings.

Signers were engaged for the meetings and a hearing loop was also available to ensure any attendees with hearing impairment could participate.

Feedback

The format of the public meetings and stakeholder meetings was a formal presentation by the Chief Fire Officer explaining the reasons for the changes being proposed and its impact on MFRS operational activities.

This was followed by an invitation for people to ask questions of the MFRS senior management who attended.

Four people attended the stakeholders breakfast, 20 people attended the first public meeting and eight people attended the second public meeting.

8th December Stakeholders meeting questions and answers

Question: What does population density play in it? (question asked during presentation when map showing all the stations was on the screen).

Answer: The Chief explained the population levels in the Liverpool areas and compared to Wirral and what the stations cover and referred to an earlier slide that showed the population covered by stations.

Question: As years go by there are more cars on the road and more congestion – do (response) times alter?

Answer: The Chief explained the numbers mentioned in the presentation on response times was based on actual response time data and was around 99% accurate.

Comment: From a business perspective, to me it makes sense. I don't see how you can justify keeping it (Allerton) open. People get quite passionate about things like this in their area but I think business-wise you have got to do it.

Comment: It's a 'no brainer'. To me it makes perfect sense.

Comment: It (the presentation) is visual – that’s what people like. I can’t see how you could justify keeping it open looking at that (the presentation). An increase of 45 seconds (response time) by shutting it – it’s nothing really.

Question: I understand where you are coming from. Has there been any health risk impact assessment?

Answer: The Chief explained that he was not “arguing” to close stations and had given evidence to a Select Committee on the impact of cuts in funding in regards to response and the community.

Question: Has there been any health impact assessment?

Answer: The Chief explained that in terms of risk assessment he was looking at “speed and weight of attack” and that was the “primary measure”. He explained the response time of just under 6 minutes was still exceptionally good. He explained what people were not seeing was the reduction in prevention work and this was focused on operational response.

Group Manager Ben Ryder spoke about the data sharing work and using data to target prevention activities for those in the community who are more vulnerable to fire, such as the over 65 age group.

The Chief also explained that if Allerton were to close, its area would be split between the remaining stations.

Comment: We have got to start getting realistic. Given the way the funding is and we are now at the stage where we can't avoid that. Another perspective is Merseyside has probably been spoilt as we have got ten stations. It's about managing people's expectations, what people are used to. I live in Huyton and that station is going to move – I think the way it has been presented (the draft proposal to close Allerton) I do think, when you look at it, there does not seem to be an option.

Answer: The Chief explained how fire deaths had decreased and incident numbers had decreased, but that was not by chance – it was through prevention and response work.

Question: What have the councillors said (who cover the Allerton area)?

Answer: The Chief explained politicians, including the MPs, had received a briefing. The Chief said even if Labour were to come to power in the next General Election there was "no reversing this" as the money had gone. He also said local councillors were aware of this as well.

Question: Are they (the politicians) pretty much "on board"?

Answer: The Chief explained that he could not comment on what politicians may or may not say and he would not get involved in politics but Mayor Anderson had been "fully briefed" on the financial situation.

Question: When will this happen?

Answer: The Chief explained the consultation is running until January then a report would go to the Fire Authority and they set their budget in February for the new financial year starting in April.

Question: What if a key station appliance was sent into Allerton's station?

Answer: The Chief explained that the nearest appliance is mobilised to "stand in" and be at the key station if the key station appliance is sent somewhere.

Question: When is it closing then?

Answer: The Chief explained again that a report would go to the Fire Authority budget setting meeting was in February.

Question: Is there something about severity of incidents (in the presentation)?

Answer: The Chief explained that "life risk" incidents were referred to in the presentation and that covered the severity side of incidents.

Public Meeting Questions and Answers

Questions and Answers from the 10th December Allerton Public Meeting

Question: You mentioned a 2% increase in council tax. What is the percentage the fire service gets from council tax? Has that increased or decreased over time (of the cuts to funding)?

Answer: The Chief explained the "precept" for fire was separate on council tax bills and gave an example of what a 2% rise for a Band D property would be. He said the precept had been increased since the spending review but that increase just sets off "a little bit" the extent of the cut in funding.

Question: You have identified that the quantity is fixed to 2%. What I'm suggesting is that perhaps that percentage can be increased.

Answer: The Chief explained that there was a cap under the "excessiveness principles" and that the precept could only be increased by 2%.

Question: You cannot increase it by more than 2% in council tax?

Answer: The Chief explained that the fire, police and council could not increase their precept without going to a referendum but the fire and rescue service would have to hold five referendums, for the five areas of Merseyside, and this was unlikely to succeed as an increase of 36% would be needed in the precept to offset current cuts. He also said that if they did go to referendum no lobbying could be done to encourage people to vote for the increase in the run-up to it.

Comment: I find it very difficult. I'm talking about the Government now – that they can reduce services like this. It's a service, a provision to provide a service to the public. You can't justify it. The man explained that he had worked in Devon but Liverpool had high rise blocks here and there was deprivation.

Answer: The Chief explained that he had argued about the levels of deprivation in Merseyside and protecting those people as part of the lobbying against the cuts and the deprivation was higher than any other place in the country.

Comment: It's because we have not got Conservative MPs in Liverpool.

Question: You say Allerton closes then you have got this building. You have said you cannot maintain that station. What would happen to that land? Once it closes would the land have to be sold off?

Answer: The Chief said if the closure did go ahead then the land would be sold as it was part of making the process of station mergers and building new stations in better positions “cost neutral”.

Question: Is the capital value (of the land where Allerton is) being used (as a reason to close the station)?

Answer: The Chief said that the land sales of any of the stations they were looking to close would not really raise that much money – not a “great deal” of money.

Comment – You have got legacy issues with stations.

Answer: The Chief explained the Fire Authority had a £48million debt and it took £8m to service that debt a year and this was due to “legacy issues”. He explained the PFI funding of new stations in Merseyside had been the most cost effective but debts had arisen from such elements as avoiding compulsory redundancy in the past.

Question: Is it more cost effective to do it (close stations and sell off the land) “wholesale” rather than “piece-meal”?

Answer: The Chief explained that funding was becoming available for capital projects at different times and bids were made to help building projects but explained that he did not want to close stations.

Comment – Mark Rowe, FBU rep in the audience who attended the public consultation, said the FBU were campaigning to prevent the closure of Allerton and will be taking “the fight” to the MPs. He said the cuts will “cost lives”. He also said: “We have been devastated by these cuts” and said fire appliances had dropped from 42 to 28 in Merseyside

and explained a leafleting campaign had been started and asked people to get in touch with the FBU.

Question: You were talking about response times and safety issues. At any given time when a fire engine is going out there are only “four” firefighters but “your Standard Operating Procedures” says there should be five. She said: “That’s a safety issue”

Answer: The Chief explained that four firefighters on a fire engine could provide a “safe system of work” for committing a breathing apparatus team of two to a house fire, but the Service “aspires” to five being on board each fire appliance but that would mean less fire engines available if they all had five on board.

Question: You have got to have a minimum to ride a fire engine?

Answer: The Chief answered that that is riding four – four firefighters on the fire appliance.

Question: One member of the public said that there are “a lot of ranks” higher than watch Manager – “would it not make sense” to have more firefighters?

Answer: The Chief explained that Merseyside had the least number of senior officers in the country.

Comment – A member of the audience said: “you are paid more than most”

Answer: The Chief explained he was paid less than the previous Chief of Merseyside and less than the London Commissioner.

Comment – A member of the audience said there were “a lot” of Watch Managers and Crew Managers at (the fire and rescue service headquarters).

Answer: The Chief explained that there were two Watch Managers in Contingency Planning as the fire and rescue service had a “legal duty” to control major hazards in their own area and said that Watch Managers did go onto stations and fire appliances when the service could do that and that was done as a matter “of routine”.

Comment – A member of the audience claimed “the only thing that has not been reduced is senior managers wages”.

Answer: The Chief explained that he had taken a £40,000 pay cut when he became Chief and deleted the Assistant Chief role and had doubled his workload.

Question: Where will the staff be based in the future if Allerton closes?

Answer: The Chief explained that the staff from Allerton would go to other stations in Merseyside.

Question: How many staff are there?

Answer: The Chief said there were 24 people at Allerton.

Question: A member of the audience asked about the number of fire appliances at stations in Liverpool.

Answer: The Chief explained the fire appliance at Allerton would be re-located to Old Swan and would be crewed by firefighters on a retained contract.

Question: How many fire engines are there at Allerton?

Answer: The Chief said there was just one at Allerton.

Question: A member of the audience mentioned a response time difference of "50 seconds" and said: "In terms of lives, how big a difference is that?"

Answer: The Chief said it was 50 seconds than he would want but the response time would be better than in other areas. He also explained that there was no outcome which will "improve the situation".

Question: Over the last ten years has the response times already reduced?

Answer: The Chief explained response times had increased.

Question: What's the difference between life and death here?

Answer: The Chief explained that he was trying to achieve the quickest response time and that doing this proposal delivers a quicker response time than making the pump "retained". He explained that doing what was proposed would have the least impact.

Question: Since the station closures in London, has any response times reduced?

Answer: The Chief said response times had increased.

Question: They have increased in London? Any evidence to support that they (firefighters) have not been there in time?

Answer: The Chief explained that if you compared the coverage of the Allerton area to other locations such as Ellesmere Port in Cheshire then there was a good coverage for the Allerton area. He also explained that

Merseyside's response times were quicker than most places in the country.

Question: With all the extra (money from tax) have we not paid for this?

Answer: The Chief explained that a campaign was run in the Echo in 2012 against the looming cuts and a petition was set up but it only attracted around 2,500 signatures from the public out of a population of 1.4 million.

Comment: People feel their opinions are not going to matter. They feel it's already a 'done deal'. Within the community it is a bit of a 'fait accompli'. The person also spoke about getting people to sign petitions against the closure.

Comment – A firefighter at the meeting said he and colleagues had been to Tesco in Allerton and collected 480 names on a petition against the closure he also claimed that they asked people if they knew about the public meeting on December 9 and claimed "no-one knew it was on".

Answer: The Chief urged people to get involved in local democracy and make their voices heard but said there was a "reality check" that the money that was being reduced had "already been taken" and he did not believe any political party, whoever wins a General Election, would change that.

Comment – We have got to fight the cuts.

Answer: The Chief explained that the Shadow Fire Minister had mentioned a cut figure of 8.5% and he said people had a democratic voice but explained that at the end of this consultation process the Fire Authority will have to make a decision.

Comment – A firefighter at the meeting in the audience said the current Chief was left a Service in a “broken” position by the previous senior officers and claimed current senior officers had not challenged the decisions made in the past.

Question: Is this it in terms of the consultation (meeting-wise)?

Answer: The Chief explained that there was another public meeting on January 15.

Question: Are you consulting all across Liverpool and in Aintree?

Answer: The Chief explained that the Liverpool consultation was just taking place in Liverpool but there were consultations in Wirral and there had been one in Knowsley for the station mergers.

Peter Rushton, Chair of the public meeting said the consultations were taking place wherever fire cover was being changed.

Question: What if the firefighters at Allerton want to stay?

Comment – A firefighter at the meeting in the audience said – “we want to stay here” and explained he had been serving the community in Allerton for 24 years.

Comment – Mark Rowe, FBU rep in the audience who attended the public consultation, said there was evidence to suggest fire station closures in London had had an impact in regards to responding to incidents and for people. He said that the FBU did not want people at home responding to beepers to get to the station but have firefighters at the station ready to respond to a call. He also spoke about the importance of response times and said if people held their breath for 3 minutes they would then see why response times mattered.

Question: Can I ask, the petition we have all signed – where is that going (question directed towards the FBU who have been collecting signatures against the closure of Allerton)?

Comment – Mark Rowe, FBU rep in the audience who attended the public consultation, said the signatures would be photocopied, he would arrange a meeting of cross-party MPs and each of the MPs would be given a “bundle” of the signatures rather than taking it to 10 Downing Street.

Question: Is the petition still going?

A firefighter explained the petition against the closure of Allerton was still going and they had around 5,000 signatures so far.

Answer: The Chief explained the consultation was running until the 26th of January and the Fire Authority will consider the outcome of the consultation and the Authority’s budget setting meeting was on 26th February.

Question: Are there more meetings and focus groups to be held on this (consultation)?

Answer: The Chief explained the Allerton station area covered parts of three different constituencies for MPs in Liverpool and that focus groups were being held for stakeholders.

Comment - A firefighter at the meeting in the audience said a Facebook page had been set up "Save Allerton Fire Station" that people could have a look at.

Answer: The Chief explained the Fire Authority has to set a legal budget in February 2015 and it could not spend money it does not have.

Question: How does it work for schools or focus meetings?

Answer: The Chief said that groups could register themselves as part of the consultation process and were then given updates and could attend stakeholder meetings.

Question: How soon would you see the station closing (Allerton) after the meeting in February?

Answer: The Chief said that it would likely be April if the Fire Authority were to decide to go ahead with the closure.

Questions and answers from 15th January Allerton Public meeting

Question: When the Chief was talking about going down to London, lobbying against cuts to funding. At this point in the presentation by the Chief, one woman asked: "How does that tie into your workload?"

Answer: The Chief explained the “utilisation rates” in UK fire and rescue services are low and possibly lower in areas that may have had a better funding settlement – e.g. less cuts. He explained the ambulance service’s utilisation rates were between 80% and 90% but explained that there were higher levels of deprivation in Merseyside. He said he wanted to keep 28 appliances and have wholetime retained firefighters to operate some of these. He said he had selected Allerton because “the operational activity levels are the lowest”, although he said there were still “life risk” call-outs.

Question: Some people might say what I’m going to say is trivial. From the heritage point of view, Allerton Fire Station is probably the most famous fire station. I do tourist guiding... everyone goes to Penny Lane. What will happen to the fire station?

Answer: The Chief explained that the Fire Authority would sell it if it was closed.

Comment: I think that is part of the reason that’s behind this proposal/idea to close Allerton Fire Station

Answer: The Chief said he was not disputing the heritage value of the site but he did not think the financial value of the site would be as large as some people may think.

Comment – The Beatles Tour goes past there five times a day.

Answer: The Chief explained that there was “no conspiracy here” and it was about what was least operational impact. He said the heritage “value”/value of the site in terms of selling did not feature in his “thinking” and the decision was how busy the station was.

Question: Have they not brought up the age of retirement (for firefighters)?

Answer: The Chief explained about pension changes that had come in in 1992, where the retirement age was 55, and changes in 2006, where the age was brought up to 60.

Comment: (We're) not going to have a good fire service if (they/firefighters) are working longer.

Question: Would they do other duties?

Answer: The Chief explained that the age increases did not help the situation and the Fire Authority had had to pay more money for some changes.

Comment – I don't see there's any (option) other than station closures or mergers.

Comment – The morale (of firefighters) is already very low.

A: The Chief explained that what he was trying to do was to protect full-time firefighters but the Government's view was the "future is retained". He said the reality was that "we have got to do something" and the "something we are proposing is the least worst option".

Q: What's the resilience like if there is a 10 pump fire in town?

A: The Chief explained that when there was 42 fire appliances, if there was a 10 pump fire then "you would not notice" but he said with 28 appliances the 10-minute response time comes in and that now a 5 pump or 6 pump incident "really starts to have an impact". The Chief also explained that the full-time retained option is about providing an extra

appliance (Allerton's current appliance) at Old Swan for when major incidents occur.

Comment: That's the "time bomb we'll face" (less appliances and chance of large fires and not having enough fire appliances).

Answer: The Chief explained that he is the national lead for National Resilience and had been campaigning against reducing the number of Search and Rescue Teams as the Government had wanted to reduce the number of teams by 4. He said he had managed to reduce that reduction to two less teams.

Question: What do you get funded for? Floods and road traffic accidents?

Answer: The Chief explained the changes in the Fire and Rescue Services Act making, widening the incidents fire and rescue services need to respond to. He also explained funding was provided for the Urban Search and Rescue Team and CBRNE response. He also explained that the funding mechanism was changed in 13/14.

Question: The Fire Fit Hub in Toxteth is in dire straits. What impact would it have on Toxteth Fire Station (if the Hub were to close)?

Answer: The Chief said the Toxteth Fire Fit Hub was run by a community interest company and if that were to fail then part of the site would close but the fire station would remain there. There would just be an empty building next to the fire station.

Comment: They (The Toxteth Fire Fit Hub) had "begging posters" for people to use the site.

Question: If stations are to be combined (station mergers) will they be PFI again?

Answer : The Chief said the merger station builds would not be PFI and explained that there was no longer a capital grant from DCLG for buildings and that fire and rescue services had to bid for money to do new buildings/build new stations. He explained that MF&RS had £4.5 million from bids they had put in and that would go towards the cost of building new stations. He also explained that he had inherited a debt of £45 million and it took £8 million a year to service that debt and the authority was to “pay off this mortgage”.

Question: Is it (Allerton Fire Station) a listed or graded building?

Allerton: The Chief said it was not a listed building.

Question: I used to work in Allerton police station. Apart from the Police and Crime Commissioner, is anyone else there (using the police site near Allerton Fire Station)?

Answer: The Chief said as far as he knew it was the PCC and her staff using that site at the moment.

Answer: The Chief said that if the fire station closure were to be approved then the fire and rescue service would work with the local council in regards to the disposal of the site.

Question: The fire officers who are there (at Allerton Fire Station) would be moved to other stations?

Answer: The Chief said those at Allerton would be posted to other stations.

Question: How has it been advertised (the public meetings and consultation on the closure)?

Answer: The Chief said social media had been used along with newsletters and it had been mentioned on the radio and in the local papers.

Comment: It was on Radio Merseyside yesterday by the way.

Question: Is there any (stations) that will be safe?

Answer: The Chief said that eventually there may be seven stations left (in Liverpool).

Question: **Do** you look after the docks and look after the River Mersey?

Answer: The Chief said there was no statutory duty to respond to the River Mersey but responsibility to respond to incidents at the docks was part of the fire and rescue service's role.

Question: The inland docks?

Answer: The Chief answered yes. He also explained the inshore rescue service had been inherited by MF&RS which is crewed by LLAR.

Comment – looking at the comparison of money – why have we got more?

Comment – In 1984 it (funding allocation) was put down in crayon. People were not happy so they came back 10 years later.

Answer: The Chief explained briefly about the context and history that has given rise to the current situation in regards to more fire appliances in Merseyside.

Comment: One in the audience said she would not sign a petition against the closure of Allerton now she had heard the explanation and options.

Comment: Another person said that what would happen to the Allerton Fire Station building was a “planning” issue.