



Draft Proposal to Close Allerton Fire Station

Report of Consultation by
Forums and a Focus Group
with Members of the Public
January 2015

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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 participants in the two forums and the focus group 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 staff who attended the sessions to listen to the public's views and answer questions. Such meetings benefit considerably from the readiness to answer participants' questions fully and frankly, as in this case.

We are grateful to all the members of the public who took part in the 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 topics, with some controversial aspects in some cases.

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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Introduction

The Commission

1. ORS was commissioned by Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority (MFRA) to convene and facilitate a Liverpool-based forum, an all-Merseyside forum and also a focus group in the Allerton station area, to consider the draft proposal to close the Allerton fire station. ORS's role was to recruit and facilitate the meetings and to report their opinions of MFRA's draft proposals to close Allerton. 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

2. 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 has conducted both 'listening and engagement' and 'formal consultation' meetings on a regular cycle.
3. The 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 a range of draft proposals, including station mergers in the Wirral, Knowsley and St Helens, and the closure of Allerton station in Liverpool.

Deliberative Research: Focus Groups and Forums

4. The 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 47 diverse participants. The dates of the meetings and attendance levels by members of the public are shown on the next page.

MEETING	TIME AND DATE (2014)	TYPE OF MEETING AND NUMBER OF ATTENDEES
Liverpool-wide Forum	18.00 – 20.50 Thursday 4th December 2014	Forum 21
Allerton Focus Group	18:00 – 20.45 Monday 1st December 2014	Focus Group 4
Merseyside-wide Forum	18.00 – 20.45 Tuesday 13th January 2015	Forum 22

5. The attendance target for the focus group meeting was 8 people, and for the forums it was 15 – so it is somewhat disappointing that the focus group attendance fell below the target since attendance expectations are normally exceeded – as happened in this case for both of the forums.
6. As usual, the 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 arrangements; and those who agreed to come then received telephone or written reminders shortly before each meeting. Such recruitment by telephone is normally the most effective way of ensuring that all the participants are independently recruited.
7. 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).
8. Despite the lower than normal attendance at the focus group, overall there was a diverse range of participants and, as standard good practice, they were recompensed for their time and efforts in travelling and taking part. The profile of the participants is shown on the next page.

	Gender	Age	Social grade	Ethnicity	Limiting long -term illness
Liverpool Forum	Male: 12 Female: 9	16-34: 3 35-54: 6 55+: 12	AB: 4 C1: 7 C2: 3 DE: 7	Non-White: British: 1	Yes: 7 No: 0
Allerton focus group	Male: 3 Female: 1	16-34: 1 35-54: 1 55+: 2	AB: 0 C1: 3 C2: 0 DE: 1	Non-White: British: 0	Yes: 1 No: 0
All-Merseyside Forum	Male: 14 Female: 8	16-34: 5 35-54: 10 55+: 7	AB: 7 C1: 6 C2: 4 DE: 5	Non-White British: 2	Yes: 2 No: 20

9. Although, like all other forms of qualitative consultation, deliberative forums cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the meetings reported here gave diverse people the opportunity to comment in detail on MFRA's draft proposal for Allerton. Because the participants were diverse, the outcomes of the meeting (as reported below) are broadly indicative of how informed opinion would incline on the basis of similar discussions.

Background Information and Discussion Agenda

The Context

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

Importance of prevention and risk-management policies – particularly via home fire safety checks

Trend showing a reduction in risk when measured in terms of the number of critical and other incidents per year

Sources of funding of MFRA – from the government and from council tax

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

MFRA's current financial constraints in the context of public spending reductions.

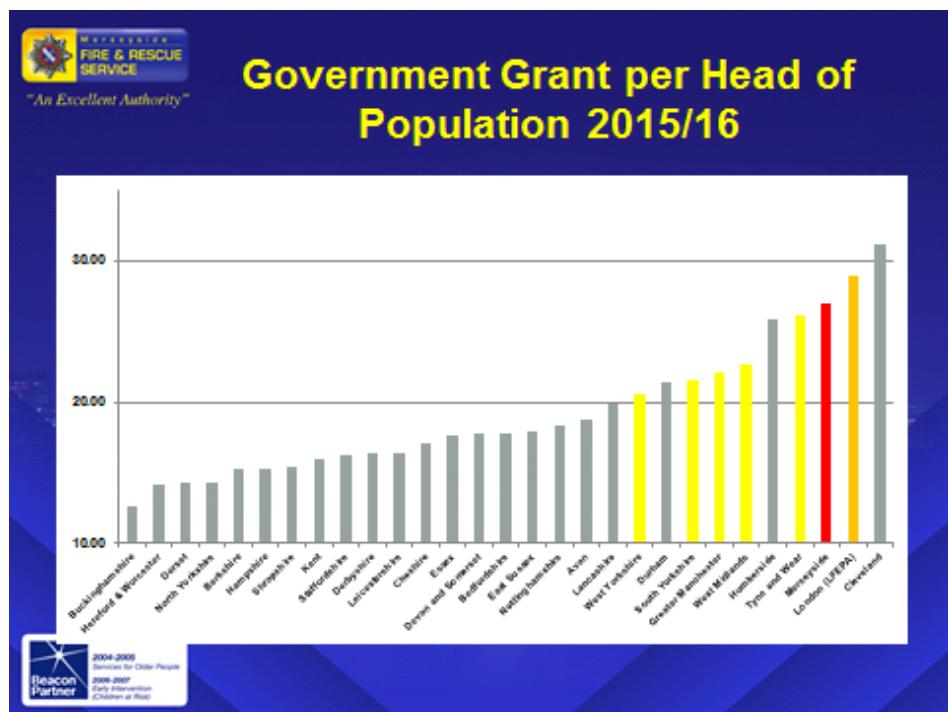
11. The meetings were also informed of the wide range of options considered by MFRA in order to reduce its expenditure, including the introduction of:
 - More low-level-activity-and-risk (LLAR) fire stations
 - Day-crewed fire stations
 - Community retained (RDS) fire stations
 - Merging some fire stations
 - Closing fire stations.
12. It is worth noting that the (several months) earlier wide-ranging ‘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 them as general background.

Financial Constraints

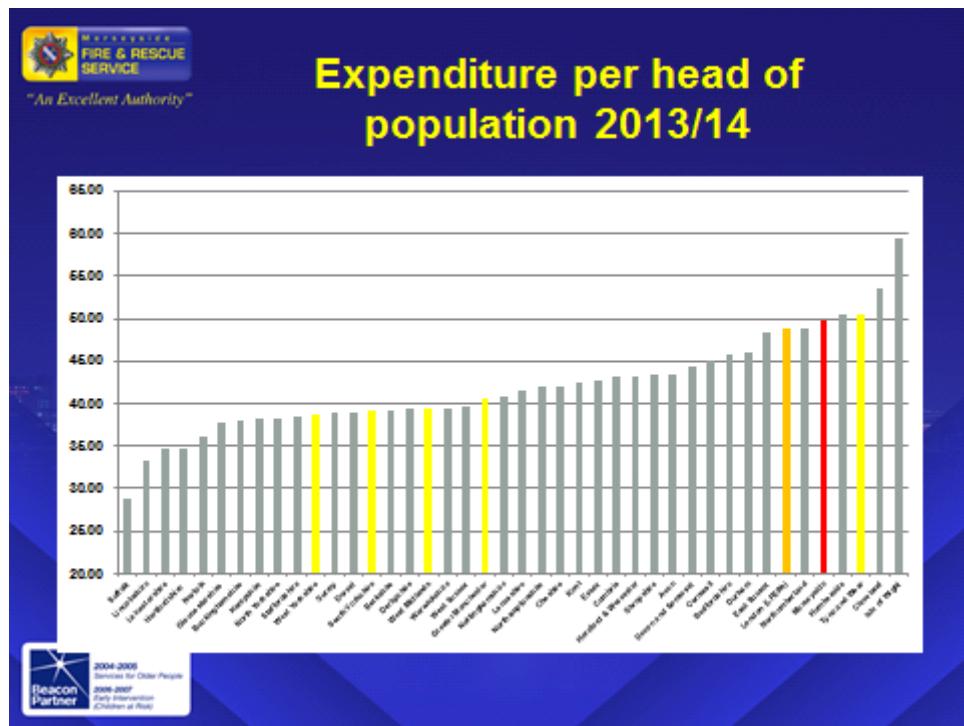
13. Following the review of the range of options considered, the meetings briefly reviewed the implications of funding reductions that MFRA faces, including the:
 - Projected budget deficit of £6.3 million by the end of 2015/16, based on projections of current expenditure levels and known financial information
 - Projected deficit of £9.1 million by the end of 2017/18, based on projections of current expenditure levels and plausible financial assumptions.
14. The financial challenges were explained neutrally as constraints requiring reductions in spending to be made progressively; but, 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

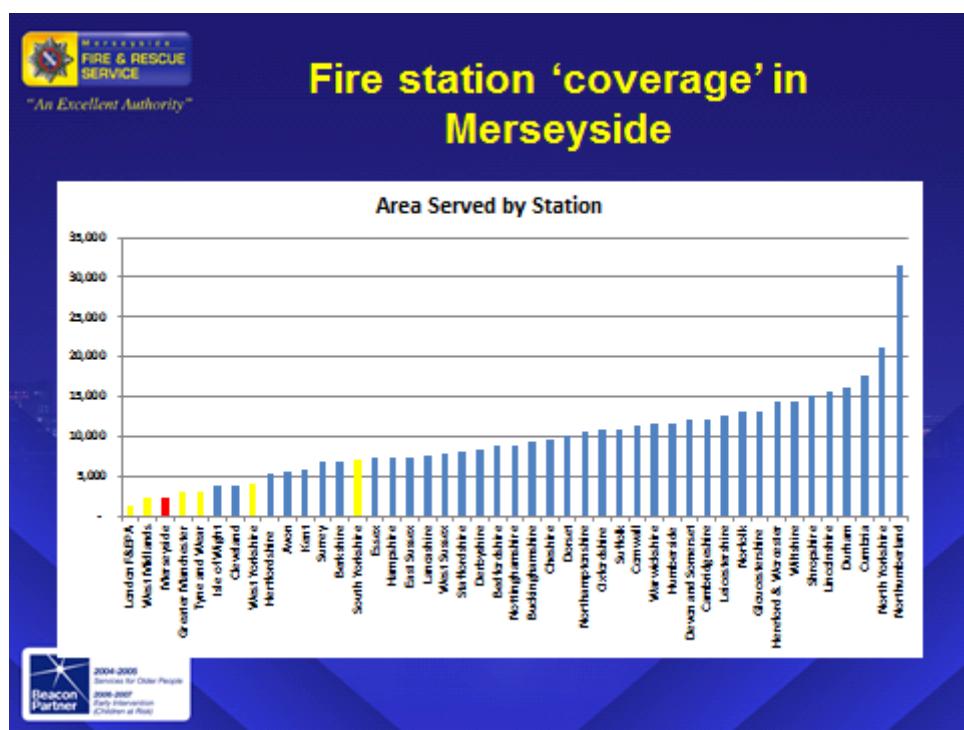
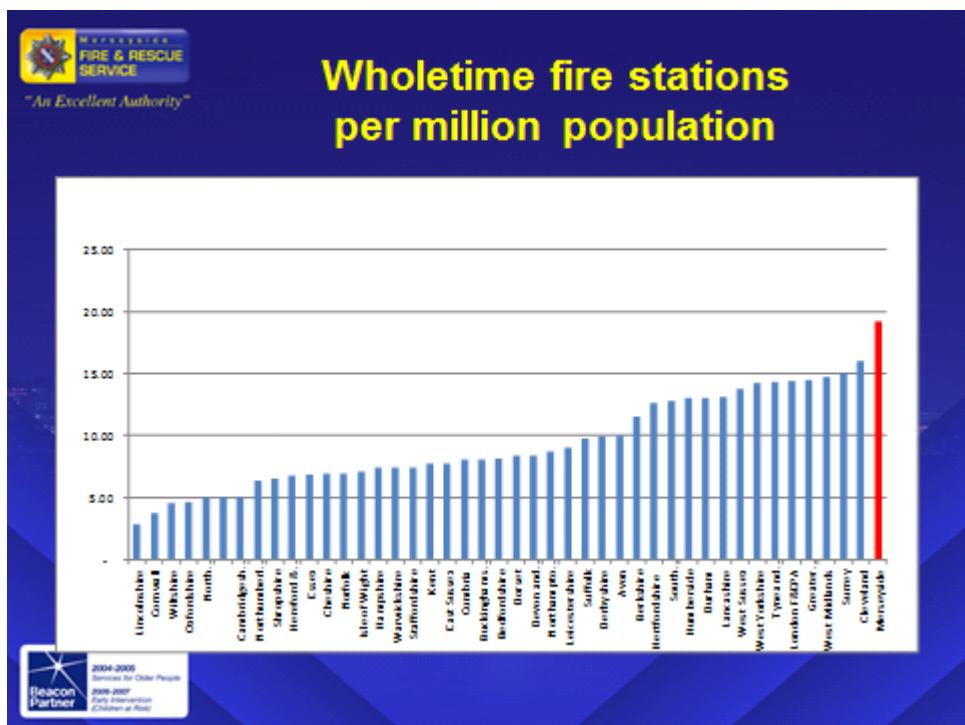
15. In fact, in order to present a balanced picture, the ORS introduction to each meeting tried to ‘take stock’ of MFRA in terms of its much reduced risk levels (reduced by 53% over the last nine years) when measured in terms of the number of critical and other incidents, strategic roles and allocation 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) continue to enjoy relative to other combined fire authorities. For example, the following graphics were explained, with Merseyside highlighted in red and the other big metropolitan authorities in yellow. The chart overleaf 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.



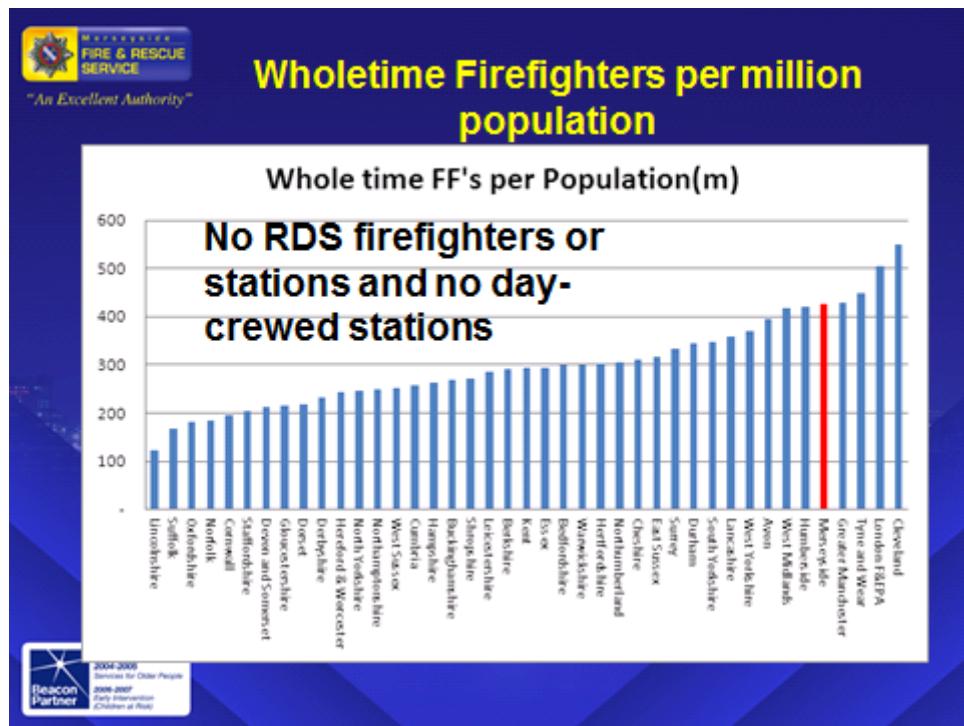
16. Therefore, even in recent years, MFRA has been able to maintain a relatively high level of expenditure per head of population – as the next chart shows.



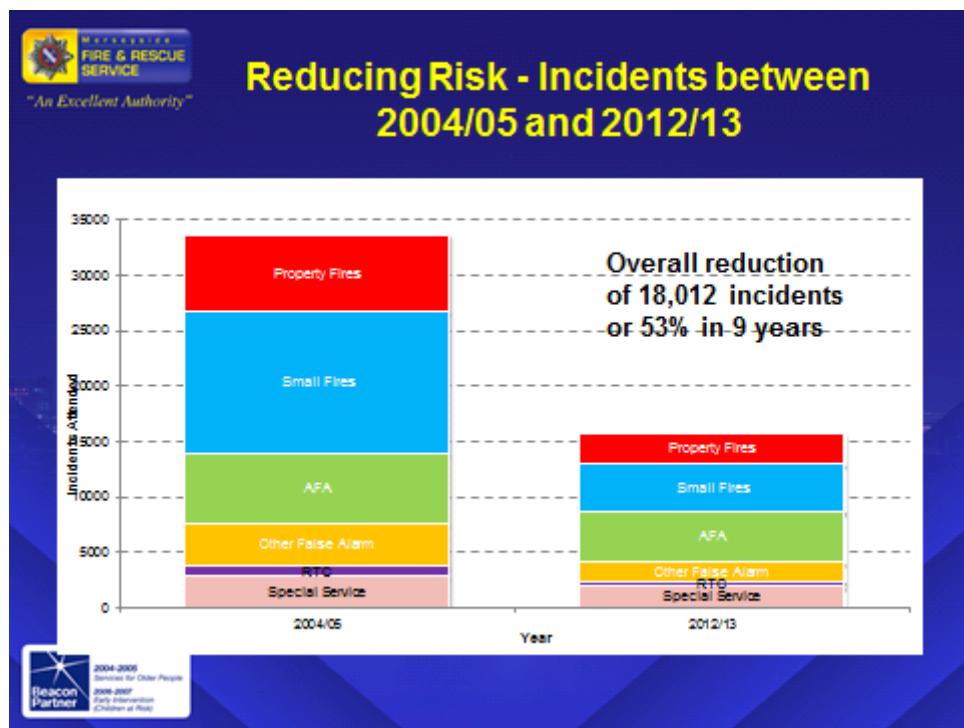
17. Due to its funding, and due to historical assessments of risk deriving from intensive bombing in WW2, Merseyside has had a large number of closely located fire stations (especially in Liverpool and the Wirral) in order to meet the statutory response time standards that prevailed from the 1950s to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



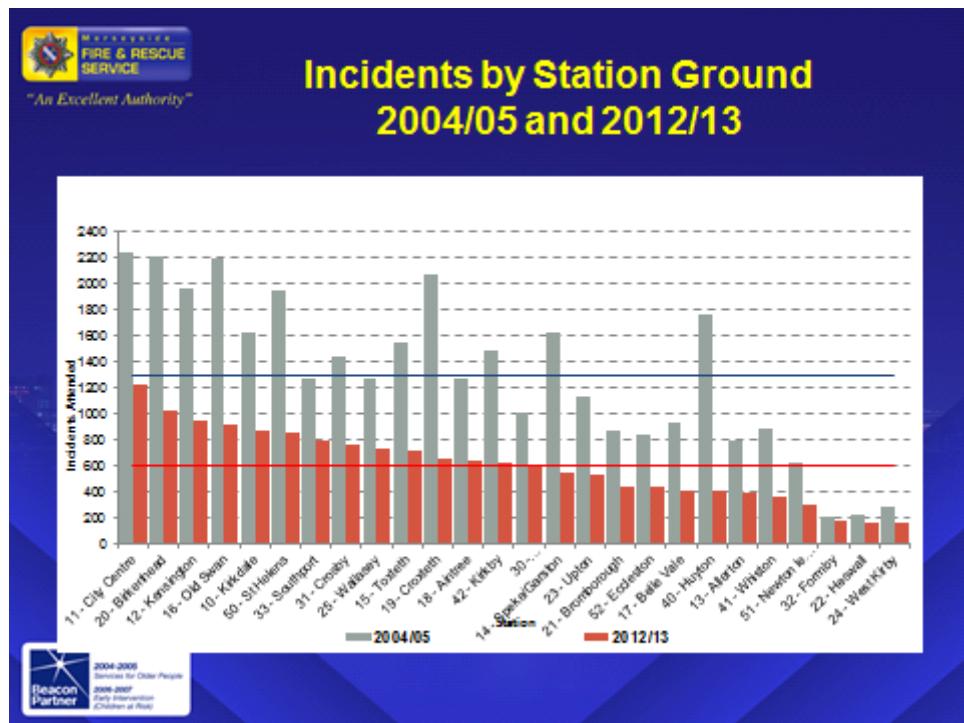
18. Indeed, on the basis of its population of about 1.4 million people, MFRA has more wholetime fire stations than any other area of the country, including London – and so, as the chart above shows, each of its 26 current stations covers a relatively small area.
19. Given its many fire stations and engines, MFRA has managed to maintain a relatively large number of wholetime firefighters compared with most other combined fire authorities – as the next chart shows.



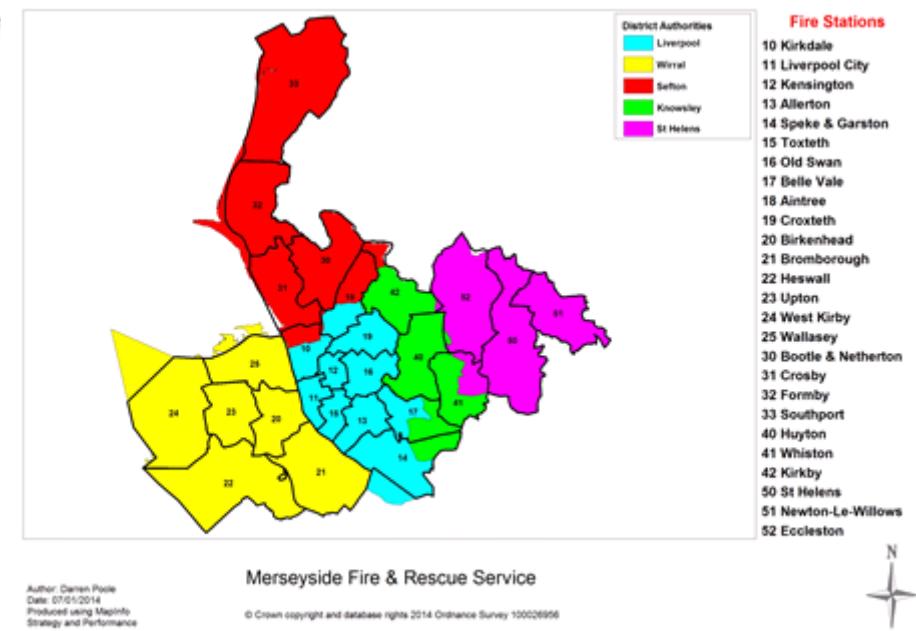
20. Partly as a result of MFRA's very active preventative and educational work, all categories of incidents have reduced very significantly in Merseyside over the last nine years, as the chart below shows.



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



22. In the context of all the above data, the meetings were shown the current distribution of MFRA's fire stations with the following map.



Draft Proposals to Close Allerton Fire Station

23. The final and longest part of each of the meetings was devoted to detailed discussion of the draft proposals, which were summarised as follows:

Closing the one-pump stations at Allerton

Moving the fire engine to the Old Swan station – but also

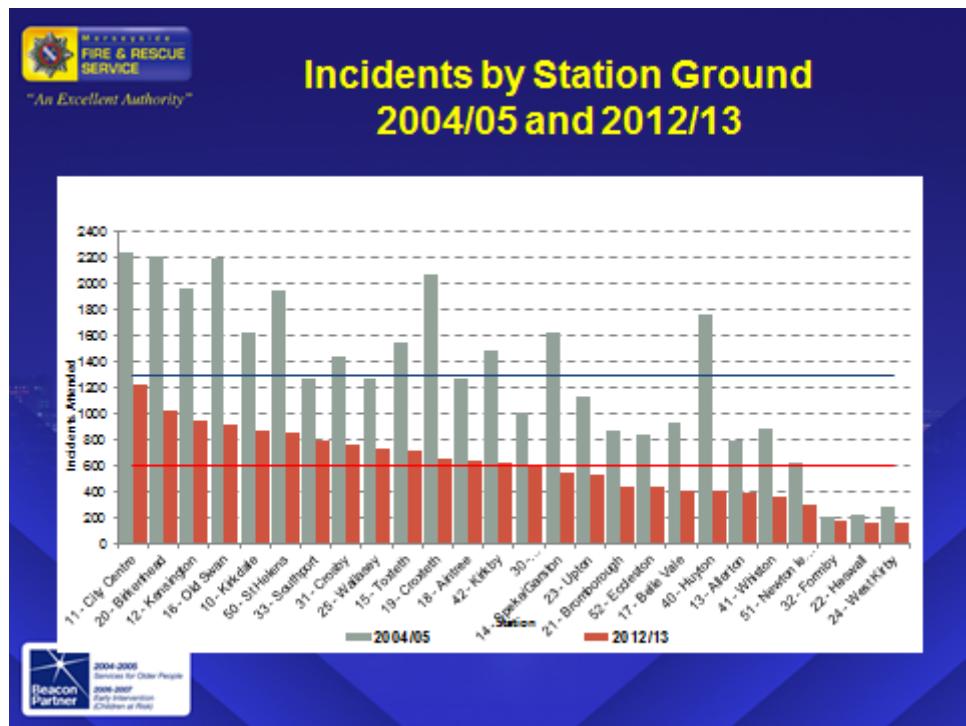
Designating the former Allerton fire engine as a reserve or resilience vehicle which would not normally be crewed – but with its back-up crew subject to recall within 30 minutes, in the event of exceptional incidents or spate conditions

Crewing the reserve second pump with wholetime firefighters who would have supplementary retained contracts to provide the support cover duties when required.

24. In the third meeting, the all-Merseyside forum, the case for Allerton's closure was examined specifically in relation to the *methodology and evidence base* that MFRA had used in reaching its conclusion that Allerton might be closed (pending the outcome of public consultation).

25. In all the meetings, there were *two distinct issues* for consultation: (a) closing the one-pump Allerton fire station *and also* (b) reducing the total number of wholetime fire engines by one – by re-designating Allerton's former engine as a reserve or resilience back-up vehicle for periods of exceptional demand. In each meeting great care was taken to ensure that participants understood how the second (reserve) fire engine would be crewed and used as only a back-up reserve vehicle in the context of the closure of the two stations and their replacement by a new one.

26. The meetings also considered very carefully the relevant evidence about reducing risk levels (see above) and response times. For example, they reviewed how the reduction in risk measured by the number of incidents has resulted in far fewer incidents for all fire stations, as shown in the chart on the next page.



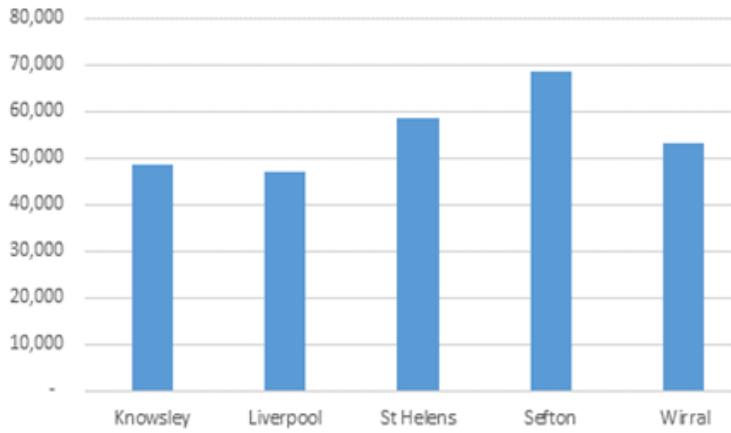
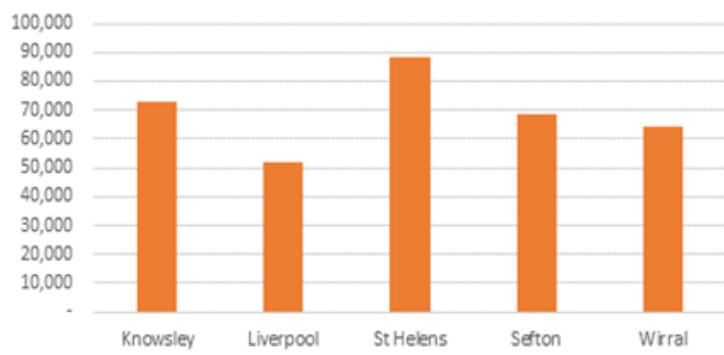
27. In addition, the meetings considered MFRA's response time target (to attend critical incidents within 10 minutes on at least 90% of occasions) and they also compared the national average response time for domestic fires (7 minutes, 24 seconds) with MFRA's average time for critical incidents (5 minutes, 23 seconds).
28. In this context, the meetings were informed explicitly about the impact on response times of closing Allerton station. Currently, the average response time in Allerton for critical incidents is 5 minutes, 9 seconds; but, with the local station closed, the average response time for the Allerton station area would be increased to 5 minutes, 56 seconds.

Why Allerton?

29. In order for the meetings to better understand the range of possible options which had been, and might be considered, slides were used to explain (a) why station reductions were more appropriate in Liverpool than elsewhere and (b) why Allerton was (marginally) the most appropriate station when compared with other Liverpool stations with relatively few emergency incidents.
30. The following two slides show that currently Liverpool has the lowest population per fire station and that the city will continue in the same relative position following the implementation of three station mergers the closure of Allerton.

Why Liverpool?

Average population per station area

**Why Liverpool?**Average population per station area after
mergers and closure

- ³¹. It was made clear that, within Liverpool, there are two other stations which might be considered for closure (instead of or alongside) Allerton – so the meetings were provided with the following data to give the comparative picture. The first table shows the number of incidents in recent years for Allerton, Aintree and Kensington; the second shows the number of appliance mobilisations from each station; and the third shows the trend over nine years. Allerton has the lowest number of incidents, the lowest number of mobilisations and the biggest reduction since 2004/05.

Station	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	Grand Total
13 - Allerton	513	396	280	1,189
18 - Aintree	875	641	569	2,085
12 - Kensington	1,137	946	929	3,012

Appliance Mobilisations	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	Grand Total
13 - Allerton	611	724	717	2,052
18 - Aintree	909	982	1,021	2,912
12 - Kensington	2,103	1,040	956	4,099

Difference from 2004/05 to 2013/14

Station	2004/05	2013/14	Difference	% Difference
13 - Allerton	791	280	-511	-65%
18 - Aintree	1,267	569	-698	-55%
12 - Kensington	1,962	929	-1,033	-53%

32. In this context, the meetings were asked to consider if there were any other options – including closing Aintree and/or Kensington instead – they would like to suggest.
33. Finally, it was made clear to the participants that, in addition to the Allerton draft proposals, plans for some station closures are being brought forward in Knowsley and the Wirral, and are likely to feature in St Helens, too. It was also clearly said that MFRA would not bring forward such proposals if it was not facing an urgent need to reduce expenditure in the context of reduced central government grant funding and restrictions on council tax increases – and the proposal was described by senior MFRA officers as the '*least worst option*' in the current situation. Nonetheless, the facilitator encouraged participants to consider the proposals *in principle* – on their merits in terms of suitability, sustainability, resilience and acceptability for Liverpool and Merseyside – rather than just to 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.

Equality and diversity issues

- 34. In the Liverpool forum and focus group, while considering the draft proposals, participants 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 just a ‘footnote’ to the main discussion but an intrinsic part of the scrutiny of the draft proposals.
- 35. In the final, all-Merseyside forum the equality and diversity discussion turned on whether MFRA should set formal targets for minority group recruitment as well as using positive action methods to encourage applications from under-represented groups.

The Report

- 36. This report concisely reviews the sentiments and judgements of participants about MFRA’s proposals for Allerton and its fire engine. Verbatim quotations are used, in indented italics, not because we agree or disagree with them – but for their vividness in capturing recurrent points of views. ORS does not endorse the opinions in question, but seeks only to portray them accurately and clearly. While quotations are used, the report is obviously not a verbatim transcript of the sessions, but an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants in free-ranging discussions.

Consultation Findings

Executive summary

- ³⁷. The key overall findings regarding the draft proposals (a) to close the fire station and (b) to reduce the number of fully-crewed wholetime engines by moving the Allerton fire engine to Old Swan while also making it a reserve or resilience vehicle for recall (subject to a 30-minute delay) in exceptional conditions.

In the Liverpool forum

In each case by a ratio of two-to-one, the participants accepted the proposals, namely that:

- It is reasonable and acceptable to close a fire station in principle
- Allerton is the most appropriate station to close
- It is reasonable and acceptable to make Allerton's fire engine a reserve or resilience vehicle while moving it to Old Swan

No specific equality and diversity issues were raised.

In the Allerton focus group

The participants all accepted that it is reasonable and acceptable to close a fire station and that Allerton is the most appropriate. They were not quite unanimous about the fire engine, for there was one 'don't know'.

In the all-Merseyside forum

The participants unanimously accepted that:

- It is reasonable and acceptable to close a fire station in principle
- Allerton is the most appropriate station to close
- It is reasonable and acceptable to make Allerton's fire engine a reserve or resilience vehicle while moving it to Old Swan
- MFRA's evidence base for its conclusions was appropriate and properly used
- The methodology used for considering the selection of possible stations for closure was appropriate and should continue to be used.

Overall assessment

While the Allerton focus group was small, it is significant that the members were almost totally unanimous about all the proposals, after being given every opportunity to understand and question the information on which the draft plans were based.

While a third of the 21 Liverpool forum members were opposed, two-thirds accepted all the proposals readily after discussing the evidence.

The all-Merseyside forum accepted the proposals for Allerton unanimously and endorsed the evidence-base and methodology used in selecting that particular station.

Reasoning about the Proposals

Introduction

38. 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.
39. The preceding executive summary shows that the meetings accepted the draft proposals. Of course, the participants did not accept the proposals 'blindly' or just 'on trust'. Indeed, most would not have reached the conclusions summarised 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; how risk and incident levels have been reducing (not only across Merseyside, but also in Liverpool and across other parts of the country); and how Liverpool's emergency cover resources compare favourably with other parts of Merseyside.

Reducing fire stations

40. Naturally, while having a wide-ranging discussion and review of the above issues, the meetings focused on reducing fire stations and changing the crewing of some fire engines. As we have shown in the executive summary above, there was overwhelming support for the draft proposals for Allerton – with unanimous endorsements in the all-Merseyside forum and the small Allerton focus group.
41. However, participants had some concerns and raised many questions – for example:

How do you choose which engines to dispense with?

Why are you not merging stations in Liverpool [instead of closing them]?

The proposal to close Allerton and use Old Swan might be appropriate in quiet times but what about the rush hour?

How do you measure the response times? Is there any time of the day when the response times are calculated? It must be slower in the rush hours with slower travel times?

North Liverpool has a lot of old houses that are fire traps – it's dangerous to reduce fire engines

If Allerton closed, what would be the impact on the service for the public?

If your staff are cut, will that have an impact on the work you can do in the community?

The savings seem to be continuously increasing from 2015-16 to 2016-17 – so how will you make the bigger savings for the latter and following years?

Will you still be able to maintain your prevention work if you have these reductions in fire stations and engines?

What will happen to Allerton station if it's closed?

Would the station ever open again, if the financial position improved considerably?

I'm worried that you are reducing the stations by four – but you will leave a hole in the Allerton area – so it will be difficult to cover?

42. All the above issues, and more, were reviewed in answers to people's questions, and the discussions prompted expressions of positive support, but without uncritical optimism – for example:

A new fire station has just been built in Belle Vale – and it is more important than Allerton is – Allerton needs updating and Belle Vale is only three miles away. Was there always an intention to close Allerton?

If you close Allerton, the overall difference in average response times [to the station area] is less than a minute – so does that impact on the level of casualties and deaths?

43. Some even thought that a more radical longer-term plan for Liverpool and other fire stations should be developed, rather than making reactive decisions based on urgent financial considerations. For example, one emphatic statement said:

This consultation seems too narrow in scope! You have to save a lot of money in the next few years, so there will be even more closures to face – so why don't you have a bigger strategic plan anticipating those cuts more boldly and rationally? Ideally, there should be more radical planning for bigger savings than you immediately need in order to use the short-term surpluses generated for investment in more and better prevention work! It's important to use the money wisely on prevention work – so the budget is not saved but spent differently.

44. The argument for a more radical approach was generally rejected, but people could clearly understand the line of thought. The main opposing point of view was:

It's dangerous to do more than you need prematurely!

45. Of course, even in accepting that the proposals are reasonable in the circumstances, there were regrets about the general financial position that MFRA finds itself in. Some typical comments were:

There'll be a big reduction from 26 to 22 fire stations – and the response times will be lengthened, and less prevention work, too – but you just can't keep reducing staff without changing the service

Is this government gets in again, then the number of firefighters will be reduced much more – it's a disgrace!

You are talking about a 100 job losses in an area with unemployment

You are between a rock and a hard place! How will you cope with risk?

I sympathise with the FRS because your hands are tied behind your back by the cuts! You are like forced into this.

46. There were some suggestions of possible savings to be made – three typical ones being:

You could keep the Allerton building and rent them out to raise income

Have you looked at other options – like new contracts for new staff – so they get less benefits than current staff?

Could you do more to discourage false alarms? They can be a big nuisance

47. Overall, though, there was no enthusiasm for increasing the number of LLAR stations or introducing community retained firefighters.

Allerton fire engine

48. The quotations reviewed above do not highlight the downgrading of the Allerton fire engine if the station closes, but the issue was presented to the meeting and after a full discussion all three meetings accepted the proposed outcome as reasonable in the circumstances. That is, they were able to accept its designation as a reserve vehicle to be crewed only in exceptional circumstances by on-call wholetime firefighters (with a 30-minute recall time). There were fewer explicit comments on the detail of this proposal, but the facilitator confirmed that all the groups understood the implications of the change before asking their opinions, which (as the executive summary shows) were in most cases favourable. People appreciated that closing the station was a one-off saving, while changing the crewing of its engine would generate annual savings.

Equalities Issues

49. Finally, in the Liverpool meetings, the discussion of equality issues was brief; but the main points made were about serving the many elderly people and schools, and also about protecting vulnerable groups from terrorist attacks – for example:

There are Jewish groups in Allerton and they are vulnerable to terrorism at the moment.

50. In the all-Merseyside forum, the equalities discussion focused on recruitment – reaching the conclusion that MFRA should not adopt formal recruitment targets for minority groups but should use positive action to encourage diverse applicants. By a ratio of two-to-one, the participants opposed formal recruitment targets, but welcomed positive encouragement of minority group applications.