



Integrated Risk Management Planning 2017-2020

**Report of Forums with
Members of the Public**

June 2016

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Acknowledgements

Opinion Research Services (ORS) is pleased to have worked with Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority (MFRA) on the five Merseyside local-authority-based “listening and engagement forums” reported here. The diverse participants engaged with the issues and discussed their ideas readily, so we trust that this report of findings will help to inform MFRA’s advance planning for 2017-20 at a time of serious financial constraints.

We thank MFRA for commissioning the project as part of its on-going regular programme of public and stakeholder engagement and consultation about its risk management and budget 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 112 members of the public who took part in the five meetings to share their views 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.

At all stages of the project, ORS’s status as an independent organisation engaging with the public as fairly as possible was recognised and respected. We are grateful for the trust, and we hope this report will contribute usefully to thinking about MFRA’s development in difficult times.

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Introduction

The Commission

1. ORS was commissioned by Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority (MFRA) to conduct five deliberative “listening and engagement” forums across Merseyside about draft possible general criteria or principles that might guide or inform the Authority’s integrated risk management planning (IRMP) for 2017-20. MFRA recognises the severe reductions in central government funding it faces and, through the forums, it wished to engage with members of the public at an early pre-consultation stage – in order to take into account their general ideas and priorities. ORS’s role was to recruit, facilitate report the deliberative meetings.
2. MFRA has conducted both pre-consultation listening and engagement and formal consultation meetings with residents across Merseyside on a regular cycle; and in this context ORS has facilitated both district-based and all-Merseyside forums for the Authority. Within this framework, the programme reported here was early-stage listening and engagement to review the general principles that might be used in MFRA’s planning for 2017-20.
3. There were no draft proposals for consideration and the five meetings focused only on general issues, criteria and principles that might be taken into account in forming proposals for yet further reductions in expenditure.
4. In summary form, MFRA’s seven draft principles were listed as:
 - Focused on the community
 - Response to emergencies
 - Safety focused
 - Based in the community
 - Value for money
 - Meeting demand
 - Continuous improvement and innovation.
5. In the forums, residents were asked to assess, rank and score these principles individually and collectively, and they were also invited to propose alternative ones.

Deliberative Research

6. The five forum 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 each of the seven draft planning principles in detail. The meetings lasted for at least two-and-a-half hours and in total there were 112 diverse participants. The dates of the meetings and attendance levels by members of the public at each forum are as shown in the table immediately below.

Forum Meetings		Date	Number of Attendees
St Helens	Newton-le-Willows Community Fire Station	Wednesday 18 th May 2016	25
Sefton	Formby Community Fire Station	Thursday 19 th May 2016	20
Liverpool	Kirkdale Community Fire Station	Monday 23 rd May 2016	21
Wirral	Birkenhead Community Fire Station	Tuesday 24 th May 2016	27
Knowsley	Bellevalle Community Fire Station	Wednesday 25 th May 2016	19

7. The attendance target for each of the forums was 20 to 25 people – so the total of 112 participants was better than anticipated. 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.
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. Consequently, as the table on the next page shows, there was a diverse range of participants from the local areas and, as standard good practice, they were recompensed for their time and efforts in travelling and taking part.

CRITERIA	ST HELENS	SEFTON	LIVERPOOL	WIRRAL	KNOWSLEY	OVERALL
Gender	Male: 13 Female: 12	Male: 12 Female: 8	Male: 11 Female: 10	Male: 13 Female: 14	Male: 12 Female: 7	Male: 61 Female: 51
Age	16-34: 8 35-54: 11 55+: 6	16-34: 4 35-54: 7 55+: 9	16-34: 6 35-54: 7 55+: 8	16-34: 5 35-54: 12 55+: 10	16-34: 5 35-54: 8 55+: 6	16-34: 28 35-54: 45 55+: 39
Social Grade	AB: 6 C1: 8 C2: 3 DE: 8	AB: 4 C1: 8 C2: 3 DE: 5	AB: 7 C1: 5 C2: 3 DE: 6	AB: 7 C1: 8 C2: 3 DE: 9	AB: 4 C1: 5 C2: 4 DE: 6	AB: 28 C1: 34 C2: 16 DE: 34
Ethnicity	0 Non-White British	0 Non-White British	2 Non-White British	0 Non-White British	1 Non-White British	3 Non-White British
Limiting Long-term Illness	0 LLTI	2 LLTI	2 LLTI	3 LLTI	4 LLTI	11 LLTI

10. Although, like all other forms of qualitative consultation, deliberative forums cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the five meetings reported here gave diverse groups of Merseyside residents the opportunity to comment in detail on MFRA's draft planning principles. 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.

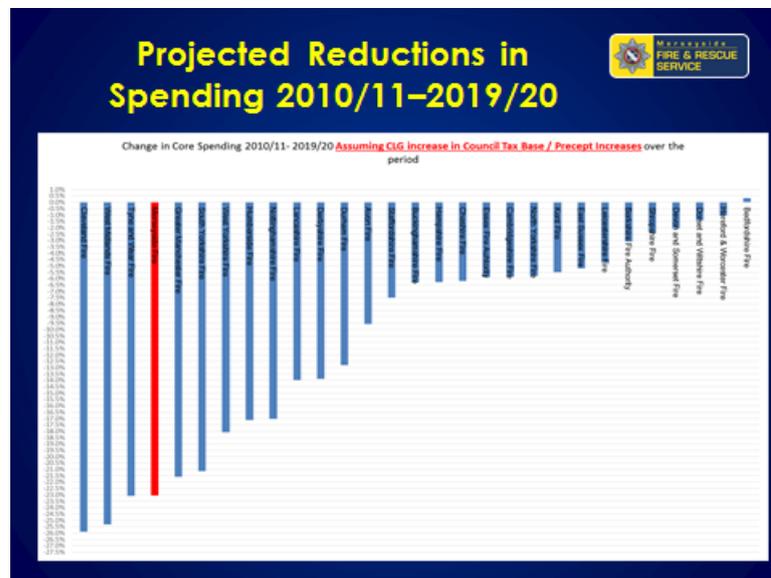
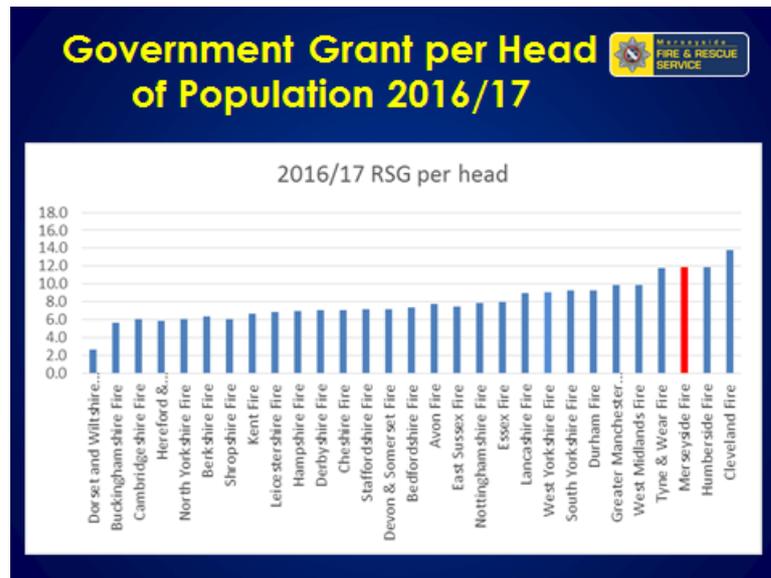
Conduct of the Meetings

11. Early in the meetings, the residents were asked during small round-table discussions to rank the seven principles impressionistically, based on their initial feelings about their meaning and relative importance. Then, after a detailed presentation taking stock of MFRA's current position and full discussions at the round tables, the participants were asked to both score and rank the options once more, to reflect their considered and final opinions.
12. Between the two ranking exercises, the presentation covered key changes in MFRA's resources since 2011 in the context of previous and continuing reductions in central government funding. The topics reviewed included:
- Reduction in risk (when measured in terms of the number of incidents, including critical ones)
 - Reduction from 42 to 24 wholetime fire engines
 - Reduction in firefighters and support staff
 - Station mergers currently underway

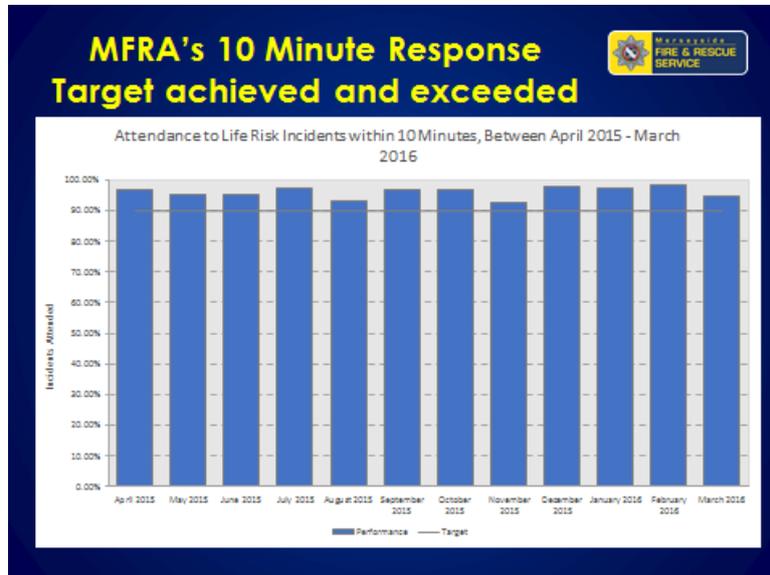
Financial savings already achieved and underway

Savings yet to be achieved for 2017-20.

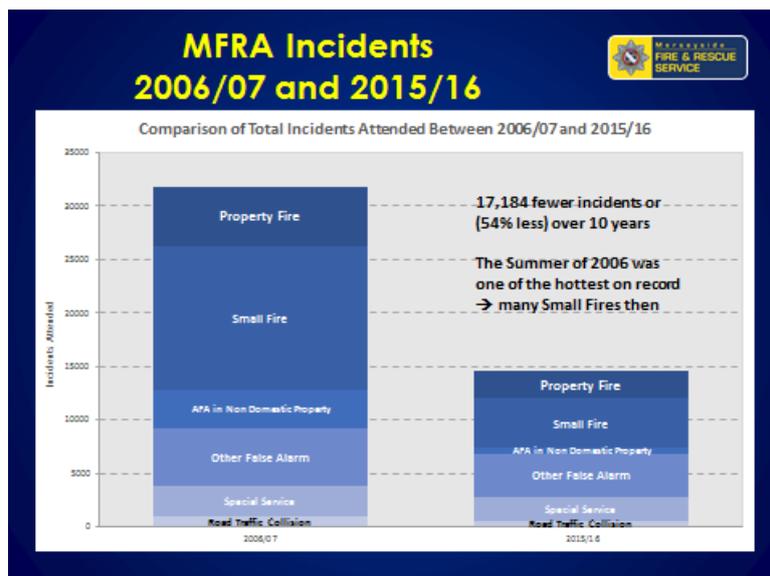
- 13. Following are some of the slides used to ‘take stock’ of MFRA’s position. In the first two, Merseyside MFRA is highlighted in red: the first shows that, relative to most other fire authorities, Merseyside still receives relatively high funding from the government; but the second shows that it faces correspondingly large proportional reductions.

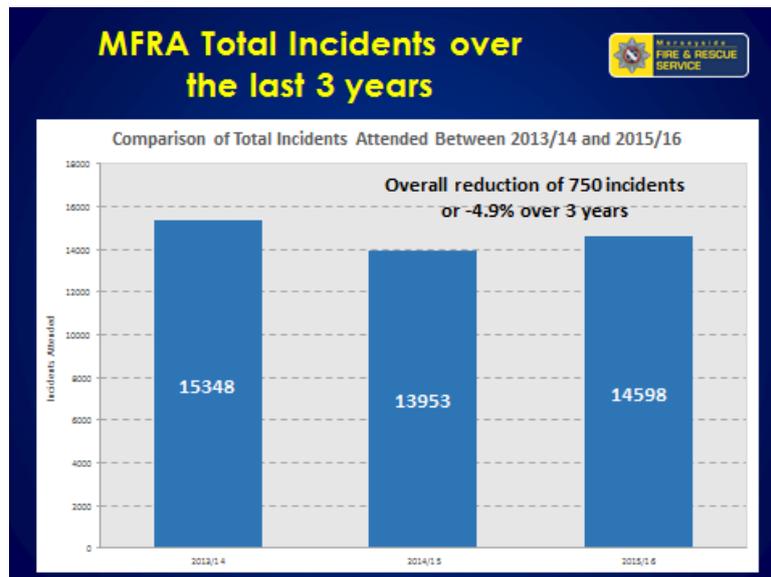


14. As the next slide below shows, despite reducing from 42 to 24 wholetime fire engines, MFRS has been able to maintain its excellent response standards.

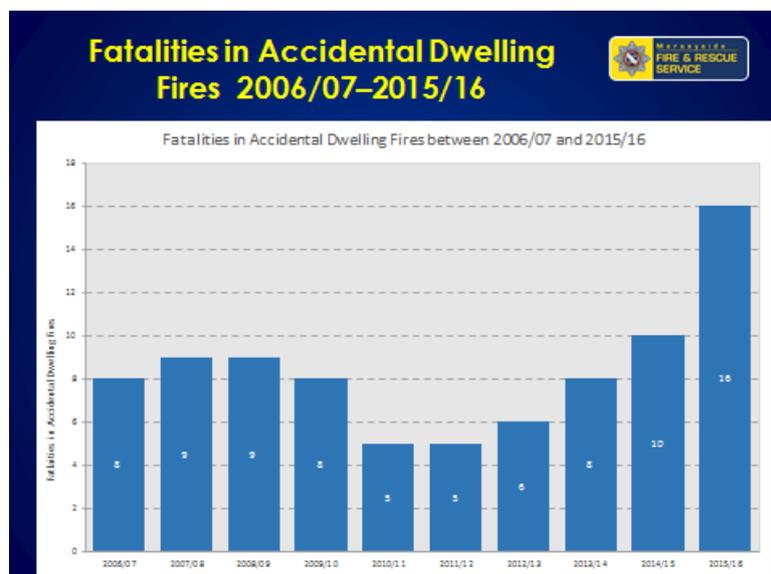


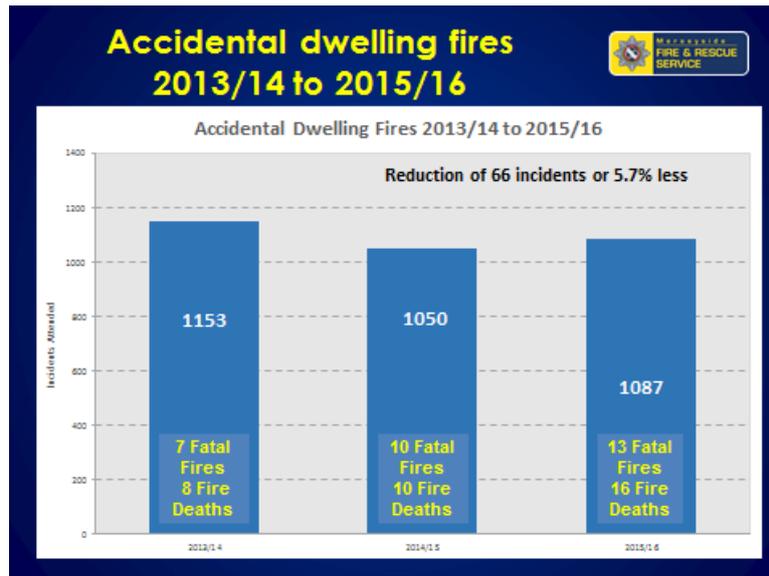
15. Part of the reason that such big front-line reductions have been possible without endangering the public is that risk (in terms of the number of incidents) has reduced considerably over the last ten years, even if the reductions over the last three years have been slighter – as the next two slides show.



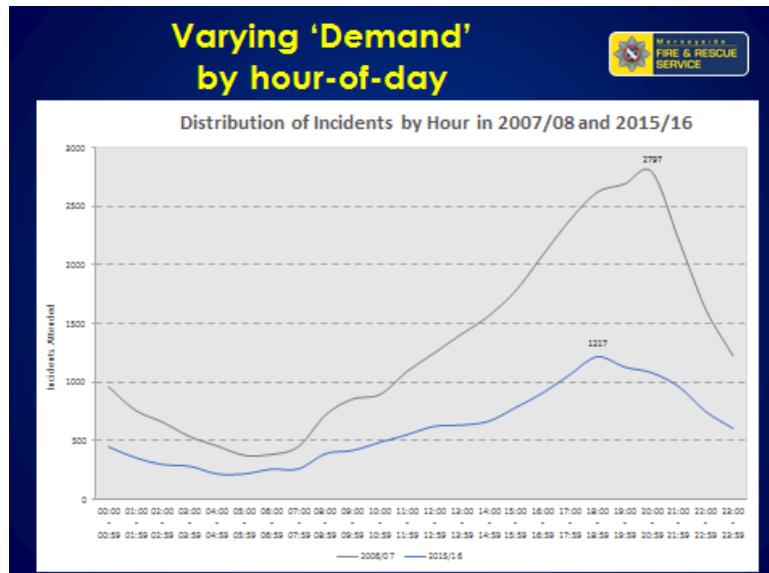


16. The next two slides show that the number of fatalities in accidental dwelling fires is low but fluctuates from year to year, reflecting the difficulties of identifying and accessing the most vulnerable people and improving their safety. It is noticeable that in 2015-16, the number of deaths increased sharply, though the increase in the number of fatal dwelling fires was less steep; over the last two years, deaths increased from 10 to 16, whereas fatal dwelling fires increased from 10 to 13. It is too soon to know, though, if an upward trend is emerging for increased fatalities.





17. All of the above slides, and others, were used to set an informed context for the detailed consideration of MFRA's draft principles – and the following slide was also used to illustrate the potential importance of *Meeting demand*. Given that incidents (including critical or life-threatening ones) are not distributed 'evenly' throughout the day and night, demand for the fire and rescue service varies very considerably over each 24-hour period – as the next slide shows.



18. The various issues and principles were also considered in the context of equality and diversity considerations and the next slide was used to ask participants if the draft principles give sufficient protection to those with protected characteristics.



Report

19. This report concisely reviews the sentiments and judgements of participants about MFRA's draft principles: it is not a verbatim transcript of the five sessions, but an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants in free-ranging round-table discussions.

Forum Findings

Introduction to the Principles

21. The five forums did not differ materially in their reactions to the principles (they were endorsed in each with relative enthusiasm), so this report combines the findings from all the meetings in a single account.
22. After the initial rankings, the principles were not just stated as simple formulas, but were explained by highlighting their various compound elements in the following ways:

Focus on the community – means targeting those most at risk, particularly the frail and elderly living alone, and those with precarious lifestyle or high risk factors

Response to emergencies – means maintaining fast response times, matching resources to varying risk, prioritising 10 key stations, having flexible working practices and duty systems, and excellent training

Safety focused – means ensuring the safety of staff and the public, and being properly equipped, with the right number of trained staff, to resolve emergencies effectively

Based in the community – means maintaining accessible local fire stations, where possible, while assessing the need for stations in the context of local risk levels, opening stations for community use, and promoting blue-light collaboration there

Value for money – means recognising that cuts are a fact of life that have to be made, and ensuring policies are financially sustainable by promoting efficiency and productivity throughout

Meeting demand – means ensuring the right level of resources are in the right place at the right time in order to maximise productivity and flexibility

Continuous improvement and innovation – means collaborating with other fire and rescue services, widening the scope of home fire safety checks, and seeking more efficient firefighter shift patterns.

23. Although each of the principles was explained as a compound of ideas (as above), it became clear in the discussions that not all the various constituent elements of each one received equal attention from residents – that is, the participants tended to minimise some of the compound elements while stressing others.

Principles Endorsed

24. Before considering the extent to which the compound principles were ‘simplified’ by the participants focusing on some constituent elements at the expense of others, it is helpful to note that they were readily collectively endorsed.
25. The residents found them very convincing in covering well the important considerations for any planning process. Participants across all the groups felt that MFRA’s draft principles were comprehensive and, while they made many comments and asked many questions, there were no suggestions of any completely different principles. Therefore, it is true to say that the five forums approved the principles and thought they could be potentially helpful in guiding the planning of service changes.
26. There was also a general feeling that they gave sufficient recognition and protection to groups with protected characteristics; indeed, it was felt that the principles of *Focused on the community*, *Meeting demand*, and *Continuous improvement and innovation*, in particular, would give protection to any vulnerable groups.

Clarity versus Ambiguity

27. Nonetheless, the forums thought that the principles could be clearer. While they were worthwhile, residents thought the principles either overlapped or were to some extent vague or ambiguous. For example:

Many could not easily differentiate *Response to emergencies* from *Safety focused* and *Meeting demand*; they thought that the definition of each of these principles could be more specific to reduce the impression of overlap

There was also some uncertainty about whether *Safety focused* referred primarily to the safety of the public or of MFRS staff – or both equally; if it was about staff, then it could be differentiated from *Response to emergencies*; but if it was about the public, then it was less clear how to distinguish it from responding to emergencies promptly

Many thought that *Continuous improvement and innovation* was not really a “distinct principle” in itself: they thought it was either implicit in the other six or would naturally emerge as a result of them being pursued

Many found *Based in the community* to be ambiguous – insofar as they did not know whether it meant primarily *Retaining as many local fire stations as possible* or *Providing for community access to fire station facilities*

Some people doubted that *Value for money* was an appropriate FRS principle since they thought the term refers to “businesses” rather than “public services”

There was also the ambiguity of whether *Value for money* means only that MFRS should *Accept the need, and plan, for budget reductions* (as a necessary evil) or that the Service should always *Plan to provide the most effective service at the lowest cost*

Meeting demand seemed to overlap with *Focus on the community* insofar as the explanation of the former related partly to *meeting the needs of diverse communities*

Overall, it was noticeable that most of the participants tended to interpret the principles as relating primarily to operational or emergency response services – so they did not spontaneously connect them with planning for prevention and protection. For example, *Focused on the community* and *Safety focused* and *Meeting demand* can actually be related not only to emergency response but also to prevention and protection programmes; but this was not so readily recognised

To the extent that it was recognised in terms of prevention, *Focused on the community* was understood and appreciated primarily in terms of *Identifying the risks and needs of the more vulnerable groups and areas* – rather than, for example, *Widening the scope of home fire safety checks to include security and well-being*

In general, *Response to emergencies* seemed not only the simplest and most obvious principle, but was taken to be the primary core function of MFRS.

Compound Elements

28. Beyond the initial presentation of the summary draft principles, after taking stock of MFRS, the principles were explained more fully – and, as paragraph 22 above shows, most of them are defined by MFRS in terms of compounds of distinct ideas that in some cases were thought by residents to compete with each other. For example, and to paraphrase:

Based in the community is explained as a compound of keeping local fire stations AND accessing the need for them in the context of local risk levels AND opening fire stations for community use AND promoting blue-light collaboration on stations.

29. The difficulty in the discussions was that residents were unsure of which of the four compound elements or ideas was the most important; so in practice some interpreted the principle to mean primarily “keeping local fire stations” while others focused on “community access”; and others focused on “assessing the need for stations” in the context of local risk.
30. Similarly, the principle of *Value for money* currently compounds recognising the inevitability of cuts AND planning for financially sustainable policies AND pursuing the most cost-effective use of resources. Once more, it was hard for residents to know which element was the core of the principle.
31. In the discussions, residents were sometimes unsure about the meaning of *Meeting demand* because the principle is presented as a compound of maximising productivity and efficiency AND meeting the needs of diverse communities AND matching resources to varying levels of risk. The importance eventually attached to this principle was probably a

result of the powerful data on how risk and demand for fire and rescue services vary so markedly over each 24-hour period.

32. Compared with the others, the most specific principle is *Focused on the community* since its explanation emphasises the single idea of targeting vulnerable people who are most at risk. In this sense, it was relatively well understood and not difficult for participants to connect it with the data about accidental dwelling fire deaths, albeit in the context of generally reducing risk.
33. All of these points about meaning, overlap, ambiguity and compound elements should be borne in mind when interpreting the relative priorities the residents gave to the different principles. However, they were certainly not meant as fundamental objections to the seven principles: rather they were matters for clarification and, where possible, future simplification.

Prioritising the Principles

34. Early in the meetings, the residents were asked during small round-table discussions to rank the summary version of the seven principles impressionistically, based on their initial feelings about their meaning and relative importance. Then, after a detailed presentation taking stock of MFRS's current position and reviewing the principles in more detail, and after full discussion on the round tables, the participants were asked to both score and rank the principles once more, to reflect their considered opinions.
35. Interestingly, their considered judgements on the draft principles at the end of the meeting did not differ markedly from their initial rankings at the start of the meetings, as the two tables below show.

	Initial Rank	Final Rank
Response to Emergencies	1	1
Safety	2	2
Meeting Demand	3	3
Focused on the Community	4	4
Continuous Improvement and Innovation	5	5
Value for Money	7	6
Based in the Community	6	7

36.

37. Not surprisingly in the context of the above rankings, when asked to prioritise the seven principles by allocating 105 points in proportion to their relative importance, the final scores across the five forums matched the final rankings very closely.

Response to Emergencies	27
Safety	18
Meeting Demand	17
Focused on the Community	14
Continuous Improvement and Innovation	11
Value for Money	9
Based in the Community	9

38. In one sense, it is encouraging that the residents' initial and considered or final judgements match so closely since it could mean that the principles were immediately clear enough for people to rank, despite any overlapping or ambiguities. But it may also mean that the detailed explanation and discussion of the potential importance of, for example, *Value for money* and *Based in the community* actually had little effect on the participants' thinking. If the latter possibility is true, then the lack of shift in rankings was probably due to the compound nature of most of the principles – insofar as people were able to seize on one of several compound ideas in each principle and be guided throughout by that simplified interpretation.
39. It is perhaps not surprising that members of the public prioritised responding quickly to emergencies as by far the most important principle (with 27 points out of 105) – since it is the simplest (least compound) principle and clearly matches residents' idea of the fire and rescue services' most core function.
40. Unsurprisingly, they also ranked safety highly; but it is interesting that meeting demand was only very slightly behind safety (with 17 points (compared with 18) out of 105). This ranking is probably due to the influence of the data about the demand curve for MFRS across 24 hours.
41. Focused on the community was exactly 'middling' in its ranking while the position of continuous improvement and innovation probably reflects the fact that many residents thought it is implicit in all the other principles.
42. Value for money came very low down in people's priorities, perhaps because residents were reluctant to think of the fire and rescue service in what they thought of as business terms.
43. Lowest of all, though (when both rankings and scores are taken into account) was *Based in the community* – which probably shows that none of its compound ideas exerted a lot of power on people's sentiments. In this context, the most interesting finding is that (of the compound elements) even retaining as many local fire stations as possible was ranked as

unimportant in comparison with the other principles. In other words, providing the other principles can be observed, the participants seemed prepared to consider the closure of some local fire stations as reasonable and acceptable.

44. However, it should be noted that all the principles, even those ranked lowest, achieved significant scores – implying that none are unworthy of being taken into account.

Summary Conclusions

45. This concise report does not need an elaborate conclusions section, but it is worth emphasising several key points:

Currently, six of the seven principles contain compound elements and include various overlaps – so any revision might like to address these features by simplifying and highlighting the core meaning of each; this would perhaps differentiate them more clearly

For many, pursuing improvement and innovation did not seem to be a distinct principle in its own right – so it could perhaps be omitted from a future list (providing the commitment to improvement was clearly implicit in those principles remaining)

It is possible that the number of principles could be reduced from seven to say six or even five

Responding quickly to emergencies was seen as by far the most important principle because it matches residents' ideas of the Service's core function

Meeting demand was ranked third, very closely behind safety – which shows that people could accept the need for the rationalisation of resources

The low ranking of value for money probably means that people are reluctant to think of the Service in what they see as business terms

The lowest overall ranking was for based in the community – implying that none of its compound elements were rated highly and, in the context of financial constraint and rationalisation, the participants considered the potential closure of some local fire stations to be reasonable and acceptable

However, it should be noted that all the principles, even those ranked lowest, achieved significant scores – implying that none are unworthy of being taken into account.