BUCKINGHAMSHIRE AND MILTON KEYNES FIRE AUTHORITY
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

Director of Legal & Governance, Graham Britten
Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service
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Louise Harrison
Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive

To: Members of Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority

3 November 2025
[revised 4 November 2025]

Dear Councillor

Your attendance is requested at an **EXTRAORDINARY MEETING** of the **BUCKINGHAMSHIRE AND MILTON KEYNES FIRE AUTHORITY** to be held in the **PARALYMPIC ROOM, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL, THE GATEWAY OFFICES, GATEHOUSE ROAD, AYLESBURY, BUCKS, HP19 8FF** on **12 NOVEMBER 2025** at **11.30AM or at the rising of the EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING of the FIRE AUTHORITY** <u>**whichever is the later**</u> when the business set out overleaf will be transacted.

Yours faithfully

Graham Britten
Director of Legal and Governance

Health and Safety:
There will be limited facilities for members of the public to observe the meeting in person. A recording of the meeting will be available after the meeting.

Chairman: Councillor Monger
Councillors: Adoh, Bailey, Banks, Carroll, Exon, Gomm, Hall, M Hussain OBE, N Hussain, Lancaster, McLean, Priestley, Rouse, Sherwell, Stuchbury and Wilson.

MAKING YOU SAFER

www.bucksfire.gov.uk

To observe the meeting as a member of the Press and Public

The Authority supports the principles of openness and transparency. To enable members of the press and public to see or hear the meeting this meeting will be recorded. Please visit: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWmIXPWAscxpL3vliv7bh1Q

The Authority also allows the use of social networking websites and blogging to communicate with people about what is happening, as it happens.

Adjournment and Rights to Speak – Public

The Authority may adjourn a Meeting to hear a member of the public on a particular agenda item. The proposal to adjourn must be moved by a Member, seconded and agreed by a majority of the Members present and voting.

A request to speak on a specified agenda item should be submitted by email to gbritten@bucksfire.gov.uk by 4pm on the Monday prior to the meeting. Please state if you would like the Director of Legal and Governance to read out the statement on your behalf, or if you would like to be sent a 'teams' meeting invitation to join the meeting at the specified agenda item.

If the meeting is then adjourned, prior to inviting a member of the public to speak, the Chairman should advise that they:

(a)   speak for no more than four minutes,
(b)   should only speak once unless the Chairman agrees otherwise.

The Chairman should resume the Meeting as soon as possible, with the agreement of the other Members present. Adjournments do not form part of the Meeting.

Rights to Speak - Members

A Member of the constituent Councils who is not a Member of the Authority may attend Meetings of the Authority or its Committees to make a statement on behalf of the Member's constituents in the case of any item under discussion which directly affects the Member's division, with the prior consent of the Chairman of the Meeting which will not be unreasonably withheld. The Member's statement will not last longer than four minutes. Such attendance will be facilitated if requests are made to enquiries@bucksfire.gov.uk at least two clear working days before the meeting. Statements can be read out on behalf of the Member by the Director of Legal and Governance, or the Member may request a 'team's meeting invitation to join the meeting at the specified agenda item.

Petitions

Any Member of the constituent Councils, a District Council, or Parish Council, falling within the Fire Authority area may Petition the Fire Authority.

The substance of a petition presented at a Meeting of the Authority shall be summarised, in not more than four minutes, by the Member of the Council who presents it (as above). If the petition does not refer to a matter before the Authority, it shall be referred without debate to the appropriate Committee.

Questions

Members of the Authority, or its constituent councils, District, or Parish Councils may submit written questions prior to the Meeting to allow their full and proper consideration. Such questions shall be received by the Monitoring Officer to the Authority, *in writing,* at least two clear working days before the day of the Meeting of the Authority or the Committee.

COMBINED FIRE AUTHORITY - TERMS OF REFERENCE

1.   To appoint the Authority's Standing Committees and Lead Members.

2.   To determine the following issues after considering recommendations from the Executive Committee, or in the case of 2(a) below, only, after considering recommendations from the Overview and Audit Committee:

    (a) variations to Standing Orders and Financial Regulations;

    (b) the medium-term financial plans including:

           (i)   the Revenue Budget;

           (ii)   the Capital Programme;

           (iii)   the level of borrowing under the Local Government Act 2003 in accordance with the Prudential Code produced by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy; and

    (c) a Precept and all decisions legally required to set a balanced budget each financial year;

    (d) the Prudential Indicators in accordance with the Prudential Code;

    (e) the Treasury Strategy;

    (f) the Scheme of Members' Allowances;

    (g) the Integrated Risk Management Plan and Action Plan;

    (h) the Annual Report.

    (i) The Capital Strategy.

3.   To determine the Code of Conduct for Members on recommendation from the Overview and Audit Committee.

4.   To determine all other matters reserved by law or otherwise, whether delegated to a committee or not.

5.   To determine the terms of appointment or dismissal of the Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive, and deputy to the Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive, or equivalent.

6.   To approve the Authority's statutory pay policy statement.

AGENDA

Item No:

1.   **Apologies**

2.   **Disclosure of Interests**

Members to declare any disclosable pecuniary interests they may have in any matter being considered which are not entered onto the Authority's Register, and officers to disclose any interests they may have in any contract to be considered.

3.   **Chairman's Announcements**

To receive the Chairman's announcements (if any).

4.   **Petitions**

To receive petitions under Standing Order SOA6.

5.   **Questions**

To receive questions in accordance with Standing Order SOA7.

6.   **Public Consultation – Shaping our future On-Call Service and Operational Independence for the Chief Fire Officer**

To consider item 6 **(Pages 7 to 132)**

7.   **Date of Next Meeting**

To note that the next meeting of the Fire Authority will be held on Wednesday 10 December 2025 at 2 pm at The Oculus, The Gateway Offices, Gatehouse Road, Aylesbury, Bucks, HP19 8FF

If you have any enquiries about this agenda, please contact: Katie Nellist (Democratic Services Officer) – Tel: 01296 744633 email: knellist@bucksfire.gov.uk

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE AND MILTON KEYNES FIRE AUTHORITY

ROLE DESCRIPTION

LEAD MEMBERS

1. To take a lead role in providing support and constructive challenge to senior officers in the development of strategies and plans and contributing towards the strategic direction of the Authority, within the Authority's overall policy objectives.

2. To act as a 'sounding board' for senior officers on issues within the portfolio, and be supportive in dealing with any problems at a strategic level.

3. To review, in conjunction with senior officers, the service within the portfolio.

4. To keep abreast of related developments and policies at national, regional and local level.

5. To take the lead in reporting to the Authority, one of its committees, or panels on issues within the portfolio.

6. To attend the Overview and Audit Committee, at its request, in connection with any issues associated with the portfolio which is the subject of scrutiny.

7. To act as a spokesperson for the Authority on issues within the portfolio.

8. To represent the Authority on bodies, at events and at conferences related to the portfolio, as appointed by the Executive Committee and to feedback to the Authority any issues of relevance / importance.

(Approved 8 June 2007)

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Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority

Meeting and date: Extraordinary Fire Authority, 12 November 2025

Report title: Public Consultation – Shaping our future On-Call Service and Operational Independence for the Chief Fire Officer

Lead Member: Councillor Llew Monger – Authority Chair

Report sponsor: Louise Harrison – Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive Officer

Author and contact: Simon Tuffley – Deputy Chief Fire Officer

Action: Decision

Recommendations: That progressing to a 10-week public, staff and partner consultation for shaping the future of the On-Call Service and seeking views on the Operational Independence for the Chief Fire Officer be approved.

Executive summary:

This proposal seeks the Authority's approval to proceed to a 10-week public consultation on the future shape of the on-call service across Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service (BFRS). This review represents a vital opportunity to modernise and strengthen the on-call service provision, ensuring it remains resilient and responsive to the long-term needs of all communities across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes.

The current provision of 12 wholetime frontline fire engines across BFRS is already strategically located in good locations to provide a consistent timely and effective emergency response. This core capability is strong and routinely delivers positive outcomes.

However, for a long time now, despite the outstanding dedication and commitment of BFRS on-call firefighters, the on-call service has been underperforming, and some of our specialist vehicles lack the capability and availability required to reliably meet BFRS resilience needs. The stark reality is that of the 18 standard on-call fire engines in the fleet, currently on average just one of these fire engines is available during the day, and two are available at night.

This consultation is the opportunity to start transforming the way BFRS operates, building a more resilient, diverse and capable service, fit for the future.

Extraordinary Fire Authority, 12 November 2025| Item 6 – Public Consultation – Shaping our future On-Call Service and Operational Independence for the Chief Fire Officer

7

This proposal is underpinned by robust data and operational analysis. However, officers also understand that data alone does not tell the full story. Officers recognise the importance of community impact, both perceived and real, and the Authority's role is to explain the rationale for change clearly, authentically and compassionately, with the candour to ensure the public understand and trust the Authority to decide the future capability of the service.

The proposal being presented for public consultation has also been shaped by early engagement with staff, public focus groups, and Fire Authority Members, and builds upon the strategic direction set by the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 2025-2030.

During early engagement:

- The public conveyed to BFRS- *Bring us one confident option; we trust you to do that.*

- BFRS staff shared that many on-call firefighters currently feel unrecognised for the vital role they play. There is a view that the Service could have done more to support the on-call. However, overwhelmingly, staff recognise and welcome the fact the Service is bringing forward an on-call focussed improvement agenda.

- Officers have a constructive relationship with local trade union representatives. Positively, the FBU have been engaged in the OIP project meetings from the outset and have offered valuable insights and opinion on the proposals considered as part of our improvement agenda.

- Members of the Authority expressed that they recognise the need for change, and have rightly raised concerns about how their constituents, locally, might feel about change, and the potential impact on public confidence in the Service, if changes proposed were seen as cuts to services.

Officers have listened to all this feedback and are committed to taking the services we provide to our communities to a stronger place. This is about making communities safer, not stepping back or holding on to tradition and legacy.

Proposals for Consultation

Officers propose that smaller, more versatile and specialised vehicles, designed to meet modern risks and needs, when combined with a strong provision of standard fire engines, will ensure BFRS can reach the places the Service is needed most, quickly and effectively.

Diversifying vehicle capability and the way in which they are crewed, reflects a modernised and flexible approach, where firefighters are empowered to match the right assets to the needs of the emergency. This shift will enhance operational agility and ensure the Service is fit for the long-term future.

Extraordinary Fire Authority, 12 November 2025| Item 6 – Public Consultation – Shaping our future On-Call Service and Operational Independence for the Chief Fire Officer

8

Officers are also committed to introducing a fresh employee proposition that better supports firefighters, including those in on-call roles. Officers are confident that transformation will improve morale by recognising the real and potential future value of on-call staff, investing in welfare and dignity facilities at incidents, as well as maximising the utility of BFRS on-call staff by better aligning their skill-sets with deployments.

In summary, the proposal is to remove 7 type B on-call appliances from the following stations: West Ashland, Buckingham, Great Missenden, Stokenchurch, Amersham, High Wycombe and Beaconsfield. In a number of cases, these will be replaced with specialist vehicles to be primarily crewed by on-call staff. There is a further proposal to permanently close Great Missenden and Stokenchurch as operational fire stations. Under the proposals, there are no intentions to reduce on-call staff numbers, and over the lifetime of the CRMP we will seek to increase staffing levels. We will continue to deliver our prevention and protection interventions across the whole of our geographical footprint, irrespective of these proposals.

In Buckingham and Amersham, officers are proposing to replace two standard on-call fire engines with two rural firefighting vehicles. These are specifically designed to combat the increasing risks emerging from periods of extreme heat in the UK. Both Buckingham and Amersham already have wholetime fire engines that will continue to respond effectively to routine demand. The on-call firefighters can continue to support their wholetime colleagues, as well as providing a specialist response and working more closely with their colleagues in Winslow and Chesham respectively. Officers believe this approach supports a more flexible and integrated approach between wholetime and on-call crews, strengthening resilience and improving the way BFRS responds to a broadening range of emergencies across the area.

In Beaconsfield, officers propose that one standard on-call fire engine should be replaced with a crew welfare vehicle. This new capability will support the welfare and dignity for firefighters at incidents who are often required to work in arduous conditions for prolonged periods of time. Officers also recommend this because the wholetime fire engine and the water rescue boat at Beaconsfield are reliably crewed by wholetime firefighters and provide a reliable response to a range of emergencies. Officers propose that the on-call staff at Beaconsfield can also work more closely with colleagues in Marlow and their wholetime colleagues (particularly when they are deployed with the rescue boat) to improve overall availability across the area.

Officers recommend that the third standard fire engine (On-call) at High Wycombe is no longer required because it does not offer any significant benefit to the Service and has not been crewed for a long period of time. The two wholetime fire engines at High Wycombe are crewed effectively by wholetime firefighters, so this change does not affect incident response times. The on-call crew at High Wycombe would continue to support the Turntable Ladder response arrangements (also supported by

Extraordinary Fire Authority, 12 November 2025| Item 6 – Public Consultation – Shaping our future On-Call Service and Operational Independence for the Chief Fire Officer

9

Marlow crews) as well as providing additional support to Marlow fire station, improving overall availability and resilience across the area.

In Milton Keynes (MK) officers recommend that the second on-call fire engine at West Ashland is no longer required as this does not affect the capacity of the remaining six fire engines across MK and Olney. The fourth fire engine at West Ashland cannot be crewed and is seldom used. This change also makes way for a new bulk water carrier. The rural firefighting vehicle in West Ashland will move to Broughton permanently. Officers believe this combined improvement increases the overall capability in MK and will enhance capacity for response and resilience across MK and provide better opportunities for on-call firefighters to crew standard and specialist capabilities across all MK sites.

Great Missenden and Stokenchurch fire stations have laid dormant for at least the last five years. Both buildings require significant investment to maintain and would need even more to bring them up to a modern standard. The Great Missenden station will not fit a modern standard fire engine inside. A fire engine has not responded from Great Missenden since 2017. Officers understand how communities might feel about this proposal, but officers believe the evidence pack (Appendix 2) provides that these stations have given no service and neither station is a viable option. Whilst it is true that if fully available, they would have a positive impact on local response times (within their respective station grounds), the impact is negligible on the overall Service response standards. Officers therefore recommend these stations are closed as operational fire stations.

In addition to these adaptations, officers also believe there to be an opportunity to improve the readiness of the three standard fire engines the Service holds as reserves and training school fire engines, with the aim of being able to bring these fire engines online more quickly at times of extreme pressure or major incident. This aspiration will be further supported should the Service secure a local training facility as both training staff and candidates will be located in the county, rather than the current position of being based at the Fire Service College for training events. This will formalise and improve how the Service responds to highly infrequent but extreme peak demands, such as those experienced across England on 19 July 2022, when staff had to be returned from training events outside the County.

Importantly, the current day-to-day capacity to attend incidents will not be affected by these proposals. It can only improve. At quarter two of 2025/26, the average availability of the current provision of 18 standard on-call fire engines was 9.5 percent. Despite this, BFRS continues to deliver against its Response Standard with an average first pump response time to all incidents of 8:52 mins/secs. This proposal seeks to strengthen BFRS's ability to maintain that response and ensure that an improved network of vehicles, equipment and people can meet future risk and demand with more confidence.

Extraordinary Fire Authority, 12 November 2025| Item 6 – Public Consultation – Shaping our future On-Call Service and Operational Independence for the Chief Fire Officer

10

Officers understand that these changes alone will not immediately resolve the resilience improvements being sought. **The officers' ambition by the end of this CRMP is to make BFRS an excellent, modern and agile Service.** Achieving this requires trust in professional advice, a willingness to break with tradition, and a commitment to diversifying BFRS capabilities.

Throughout the life of the CRMP and beyond, officers will continue to drive improvement and focus for the on-call service.

Officers will:

- Restructure areas of the Service to provide enhanced management oversight and support for on-call services

- Improve the systems and processes used to manage the availability of on-call staff

- Invest in on-call sites through a new estates framework and provide incentives for recruitment and retention

- Seek to recruit additional on-call firefighters, targeting areas as appropriate and recruiting from a broader pool, to ensure we meet BFRS's ambitions.

- Transform the way on-call firefighters are trained, with the Westcott Training Centre (subject to planning approval) becoming a catalyst for change from mid-2027

- Improve how non-station based operational staff are utilised to support the Service to help drive improved resilience across the on-call model.

- Encourage more wholetime firefighters and support staff to take up on-call resilience roles, strengthening integration and flexibility.

- Introduce further improvements to BFRS tiered availability, by merging crews located close to one another to maximise coverage and resilience

Operational Independence for the Chief Fire Officer

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) has recommended giving Chief Fire Officers greater operational independence. This would allow them to make strategic decisions about resources more quickly, while the Fire Authority retains oversight and accountability.

Officers believe that granting the Chief Fire Officer (CFO) greater operational independence would enable strategic decisions to be made more swiftly on matters such as fleet deployment, staffing, and equipment.

Operational Independence is not about giving the CFO authority to open or close fire stations. This would remain a matter for the Authority. However, officers believe operational independence will allow faster evidence-led decisions to meet changing risks, ensure resources are matched more effectively to community needs, whilst

Extraordinary Fire Authority, 12 November 2025| Item 6 – Public Consultation – Shaping our future On-Call Service and Operational Independence for the Chief Fire Officer

11

maintaining strong Fire Authority governance and accountability, and we are keen to understand what the public, staff and partners think about this.

The consultation material is deliberately concise and focused to encourage maximum public engagement and ensure the broadest possible range of voices are heard- inviting communities to help shape an On-Call service and a future operating environment that will not only meet today's needs but will be fit for the long term.

The Chief Fire Officer looks forward to the Authority's support in launching this important consultation and continuing the journey to transform BFRS for the future.

Financial implications:

The proposals associated with the On Call Improvement Programme are not intended to generate financial savings. It is understood that currently BRFS On-Call does not provide good value for money based on historic fire engine availability. There are limited financial implications associated with staffing costs, as there is no intention to reduce headcount.

There are some anticipated capital savings and potential receipts, that if approved through consultation would allow the Service to make some investment into the On Call provision.

The cost to date associated with supporting this project and preparing for public consultation is approximately £28k. A further £20k will be required to support delivery of the consultation. These expenses relate to payment to a company called Opinion Research Services, who provide expertise is supporting development and delivery of public consultation.

Risk management:

The On-Call improvement programme will support a number of risks on our Corporate Risk register.

- Climate Change**:** *increased risk of wildfires, flooding, gales and altered hydrology due to effects of climate change*
  The on-call review supports mitigation of this risk by ensuring resources are appropriately located to respond to emerging environmental threats.

- Workforce Availability/Stability: *Impact of employment market conditions on attraction of new staff, retention of existing staff, and overall workforce stability*
  Enhanced flexibility, targeted recruitment, and improved structures could strengthen workforce stability and availability.

- Financial Sustainability: *Future costs are significantly affected by the level of pay awards (which for most staff are determined nationally), general price inflation and changes to employer pension contributions.*

Extraordinary Fire Authority, 12 November 2025| Item 6 – Public Consultation – Shaping our future On-Call Service and Operational Independence for the Chief Fire Officer

12

A more cost-effective and sustainable on-call model could support long-term financial resilience.

All project risks associated with the On-Call Improvement Programme are being actively managed through the Service's established project management framework. The review is being delivered as a formal project, with oversight and governance through the monthly Programme Board and Strategic Leadership Board.

Legal implications:

The relevant Authority policy framework is the [Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 2025 -2030](#) (approved by the Authority at its meeting on 11 December 2024).

'During the period of this CRMP we will:

Review and optimise our On-Call pumps and specialist vehicles to ensure we can meet our risks and response standard, while looking for opportunities to increase efficiency and effectiveness. While we will seek to optimise the use of all On-Call pumps and specialist vehicles, as shown in the table on the previous page, we anticipate that this will focus on pump levels 23 to 30.'

'Future consultations

We will always consult with the public if and when we propose to make significant changes to the way your service is delivered, for example, the number of pumps used within our resourcing model.' [Minute FA53](#) refers.

Where a public authority has promised to engage in consultation before making a specific decision or a specific type of decision, failure by the public authority to do so can give rise to the decision being held to be unlawful ([Council for Civil Service Unions v Minister for the Civil Service [1985] AC 374](#)).

Privacy and security implications:

Opinion Research Services are experienced in delivering public sector public consultations. All appropriate measures are taken in the handling of information and data to ensure BFRS meet requirements in relation to privacy and security.

Duty to collaborate:

The Service continues to work collaboratively with Fire Service partners and recognised trade unions (FBU and Unison) to ensure transparency and engagement. The project team has also engaged other stakeholders as outlined in the project communication plan. The public consultation will provide further opportunity for partners to share views on our proposals, which could identify currently unforeseen collaboration opportunities.

Health and safety implications:

There are no health and safety implications arising due to this consultation.

Extraordinary Fire Authority, 12 November 2025| Item 6 – Public Consultation – Shaping our future On-Call Service and Operational Independence for the Chief Fire Officer

13

Environmental implications:

There are no environmental implications arising due to this consultation.

Equality, diversity, and inclusion implications:

An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed as part of developing these proposals and will continue to be reviewed.

The consultation material meets the required standards of accessibility.

Consultation and communication:

Communication with staff commenced in the summer of 2025 because officers felt strongly that on-call staff should be the first to hear about the proposals, as any decisions made following further consultation could directly impact them. This was conveyed via an internal Townhall briefing, with a follow up Q&A session in August 2025.

The project team undertook engagement sessions with all Authority Members. These meetings were flexible to accommodate the schedules of all Members and have been instrumental in shaping the proposals and ensuring they reflect both strategic priorities and local context.

A letter was sent to all Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes MPs on 26 September 2025 outlining the challenges associated with the On-Call service and setting out the topline proposals being considered for public consultation.

To gather views on BFRS's proposed direction and travel and help shape the option/s to be submitted to the Fire Authority for approval in late 2025, three in-depth online focus groups were held with BFRS staff, and a further three with a broadly representative cross-section of residents from across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, in September and October 2025.

The focus groups were independently facilitated by Opinion Research Services (ORS) - a spin-out company from Swansea University with a UK-wide reputation for social research. In total, 18 BFRS staff members and 26 residents took part in the in-depth sessions. Just over a third of participants (10) had attended a CRMP engagement and/or consultation forum in 2023/24; the other 16 were fresh recruits.

The engagement feedback has been highly valuable and provided some excellent insights for officers to consider. The report can be found at Appendix 3.

If approval for a ten-week public, staff and partner consultation is granted by Authority, ORS will facilitate the process on behalf of the Service. Internally the Service's communications and engagement team have developed a communications strategy and plan, to ensure we deliver a thorough consultation process with multiple engagement opportunities including online surveys, face to face surgeries (particularly around stations that may be affected), social media, and briefings to partners.

Extraordinary Fire Authority, 12 November 2025 | Item 6 – Public Consultation – Shaping our future On-Call Service and Operational Independence for the Chief Fire Officer

14

Background papers:

Community Risk Management Plan: [Community Risk Management Plan 2025-2030 - Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service](#)

HMICFRS: [Buckinghamshire - His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services](#)

Appendix	Title	Protective Marking
1	OCIP Consultation Proposal Pack	
2	OCIP Consultation Evidence Pack	
3	Early Engagement Report from ORS	

Extraordinary Fire Authority, 12 November 2025| Item 6 – Public Consultation – Shaping our future On-Call Service and Operational Independence for the Chief Fire Officer

15

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Appendix 1

ON-CALL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME CONSULTATION: PROPOSAL PACK

A consultation by Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service

Table of Contents

A MESSAGE FROM OUR CHIEF FIRE OFFICER

At Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service, our focus will always be the safety of our community. We are committed to providing an excellent, modern and agile fire and rescue service for everyone we serve. We are dedicated to having the right people, with the right skills, in the right place, at the right time to keep you safe. And together, we will continue to work to protect and safeguard people and places.

Like many other services across the country, we are facing real challenges with our On-Call fire stations and engines. Recruiting and keeping On-Call firefighters is harder than ever. A number of our On-Call fire engines are rarely used, and a small number have not been crewed for years. At the same time, we must make sure that we use public money wisely and adapt to new risks such as extreme weather, new housing and road developments.

This consultation sets out proposals to strengthen and modernise our On-Call service so that it remains reliable, resilient and sustainable. We want to hear your views on these proposals before the Fire Authority makes any final decisions.

Louise Harrison
Chief Fire Officer
Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service

ABOUT OUR SERVICE

Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service covers Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, an area of over 800,000 people. We currently have **19 fire stations** and a workforce of around **500 firefighters and support staff**.

Our crews work in two main ways:

- **Wholetime firefighters** are full-time and based at station on shifts, so their fire engines are always ready to respond.
- **On-Call firefighters** usually have other jobs or responsibilities and respond to the station when there is an emergency.

Together, they crew a fleet of **30 fire engines** and a range of specialist vehicles such as rural firefighting units, water carriers, rescue boats and turntable ladders.

We aim for our first fire engine to arrive at an incident within **10 minutes on average**.

We are proud of the dedication of our staff and the support of our communities. This consultation is part of our ongoing commitment to be open and transparent about how we deliver fire cover, and to involve the public in shaping our future.

Figure A, *Map showing which stations our fire engines and specialist vehicles are currently based at.*
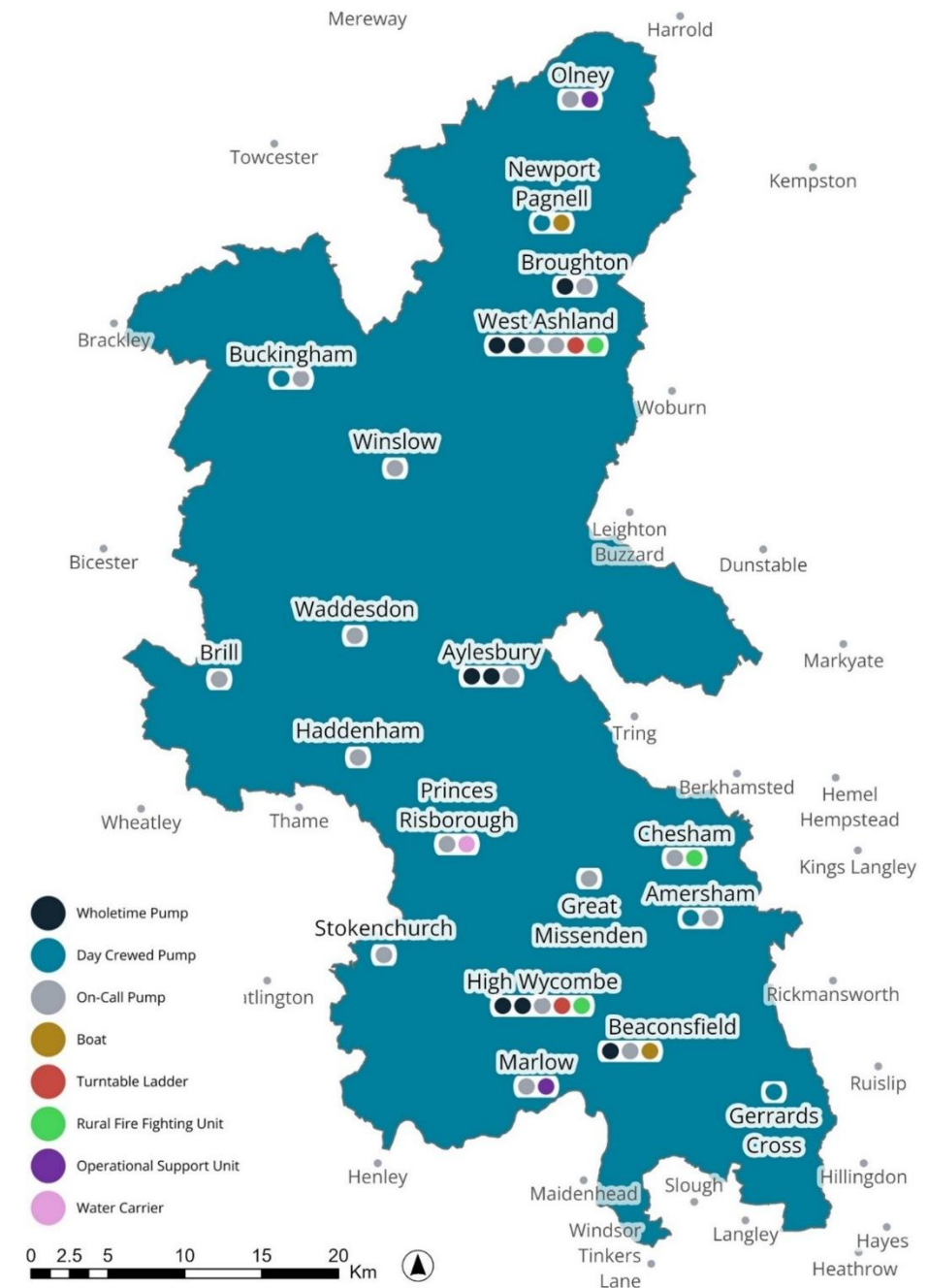
Understanding our Demand

As part of our 2025 - 2030 Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP), we reviewed how many fire engines are needed to meet demand.

Our analysis shows that **12 immediately available fire engines is the right number to meet almost all emergencies**, with over **99% of incidents managed by nine or fewer**. Even at busy times, we have only needed around 20 fire engines (a mix of Wholetime and On-Call). In the last five years, there has only been one incident where more than 20 were used simultaneously.

This gives us confidence that we can meet community needs without keeping 30 pumps crewed at all times. The focus is on making sure the fire engines and vehicles we do have are in the right places and ready to respond.

Figure B shows that having 12 pumps available covers 99.7% of our demand in the four years up to 2023. This data was the foundation for building our current CRMP and response model. More recent data continues to confirm the same pattern.

Figure B, Use of Pumps April 2019 to March 2023

21
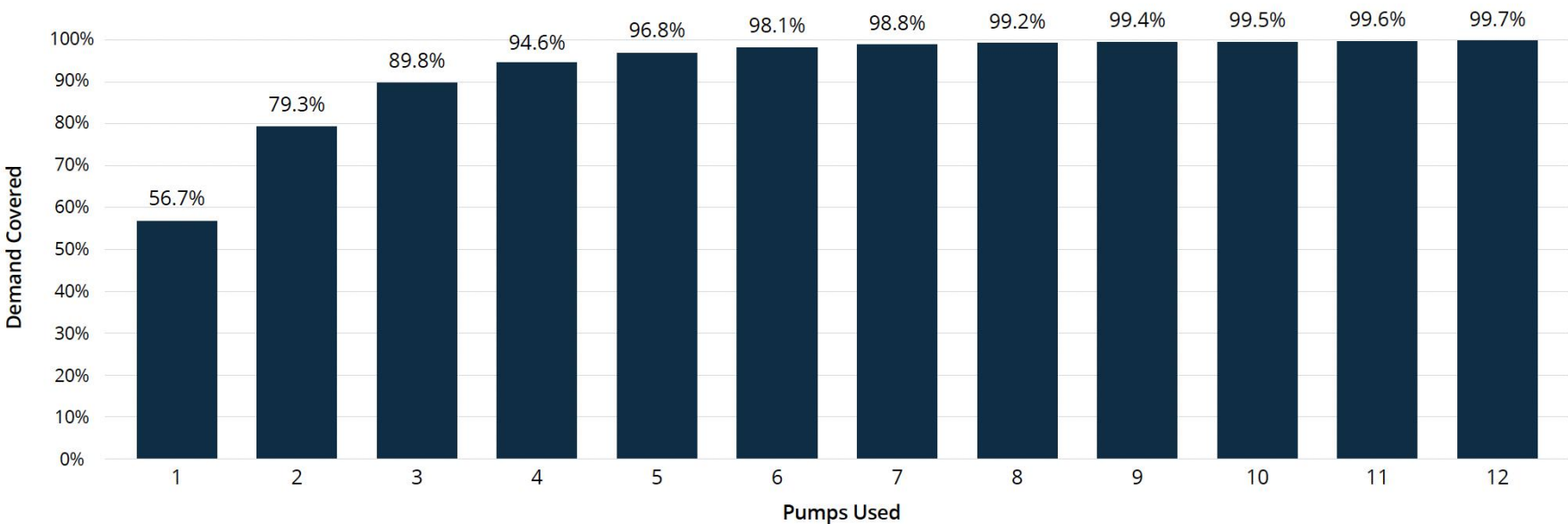
Planning for Exceptional Demand

Although most emergencies can be managed with fewer than 20 fire engines, we also plan for those very rare occasions when more are needed.

We do this by:

- **Working as part of a bigger Thames Valley and national network** – if we ever need extra support, we can call on neighbouring services through mutual aid, and we provide the same in return.
- **Sharing a control room with Oxfordshire and Royal Berkshire fire and rescue services** – this means we can see all available fire engines across the Thames Valley. The quickest fire engine will always be sent, regardless of which service it belongs to.
- **Keeping additional pumps available** – some fire engines not normally crewed are retained for training or reserve use and could be made available in extreme circumstances.

This ensures that even on the rarest of occasions, we can provide the resilience needed to keep our communities safe.

Our Specialist Vehicles and Additional Capabilities

We don't just rely on traditional fire engines. We also have a range of specialist vehicles and national support arrangements that make us more resilient when unusual or large-scale emergencies happen.

Our specialist vehicles include:

- **Rural Firefighting Vehicles (RFVs):** smaller, more agile vehicles that can reach remote or off-road areas quickly, especially useful during hot, dry summers when grass or woodland fires are more common.
- **Water Rescue Units and Boats:** for incidents on rivers, waterways and lakes or during flooding.
- **Turntable Ladders:** high-reaching vehicles used to access tall buildings or deliver water from height.
- **Incident Support Units:** vans that carry specialist equipment to major or complex incidents.
- **Water Carriers and Welfare Units:** to provide extra supplies and support for crews at prolonged incidents.
- **Operational Support Unit** - carries extra or specialist equipment which isn't routinely carried on a standard fire engine.

These vehicles allow us to respond more effectively and flexibly, to lessen the number of full-sized fire engines needed. See figure A (pg. 4) for where they are currently are in the county

National Resilience

We are proud to host one of only 20 national Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) bases. This national network of fire and rescue services support one another during large-scale or complex emergencies. USAR deals with collapsed buildings and other specialist rescues. Through national resilience we can provide and receive support from the national network when it is needed most.

EASY READ SUMMARY

Why we are Asking for your Views

Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service needs to make changes to how our **On-Call fire engines and fire stations** are organised.

- Recruiting and keeping On-Call firefighters is much harder than it used to be.
- Some of our On-Call fire engines are rarely used, and a small number have not been crewed for years.
- Our communities are changing, new housing developments, an ageing population with more complex needs, busier roads, and the growing risks from climate change and extreme weather all mean we must adapt.
- We must also make the best use of public money.

That is why we are asking for your views.

This programme of work is not designed to cut budgets, reduce firefighter numbers or divert resources from our frontline.

It is important to note these proposals will not cause any reduction to the public safety and protection work we carry out. Interventions relating to fire safety and fire prevention will continue to be undertaken based on risk and vulnerability.

What We are Proposing

We are consulting on proposals to:

- Replace some On-Call fire engines that cannot be reliably crewed with specialist vehicles that are better matched to local risks and community needs.
- Close two On-Call stations that have not been able to crew an engine for many years (Great Missenden and Stokenchurch).
- Base specialist vehicles at the stations that best match local risks and community needs, making it easier to crew them and improving how quickly they can respond.
- Give the Chief Fire Officer more flexibility to make quicker, evidence-based decisions about where resources are based.

Streamlining our On-Call fleet will provide opportunity to reinvest savings back into our On-Call provision and realign resources to improve availability and resilience.

It will enable us to use our budget more effectively and invest where it will have the greatest impact on frontline response and improvement and modernisation of station facilities, vehicles and equipment.

What this Means for You

We will still provide strong fire cover across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes.

99.7% of emergencies can be met with our 12 wholetime fire engines, which are always crewed. Even at times of high demand, we can meet the needs of our communities with 20 fire engines, made up of both Wholetime and On-Call crews. It is very rare that more are needed. Only once in the last five years did we need more than 20 fire engines at the same time.

We have carefully reviewed the impact on the affected communities. These proposals wont negatively impact our ability to meet our response standard and we also expect to see greater resilience for dealing with less frequent, high impact events and incidents. This is because the changes are designed to make sure our On-Call fire engines are more consistently crewed and specialist vehicles are in the right places to respond when needed.

Your views are essential in helping us understand the perspectives from communities before any decisions are made.

Further key points are:

- There will be no **cuts to wholetime fire engines or firefighter numbers**.
- These proposals **only affect On-Call fire engines.**
- Specialist vehicles will be in the right place to respond faster.

How to Have Your Say

We want to hear your views on these proposals. Your feedback will help us understand what matters most to local people and will be considered before the Fire Authority makes any final decisions.

If you would like **more detail on the proposals, including the data and the reasons behind them**, you can find this further on in this pack and in our supporting Evidence Pack.

If you're viewing an electronic copy of this document, you can respond online by following the link below.

Participation is open to anyone (under-16s should be supported by a parent or guardian), including individuals, businesses, public and voluntary organisations, and our own staff. If you're responding on behalf of an organisation, your feedback will be attributed to that organisation.

If you have any questions about the survey, or would like this document or the questionnaire in a different format, please email us at: **OIP@bucksfire.gov.uk**

You can have your say by:

- Completing our online survey at: [insert web link]
- Emailing us at:OIP@Bucksfire.gov.uk
- Writing to us at: BFRS HQ, Stocklake, Aylesbury, Bucks HP20 1BD
  The consultation is open until **[insert closing date]**.

WHY CHANGE IS NEEDED

Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service is proud to serve our communities, but we are facing challenges that mean we must look carefully at how we provide cover in the future.

On-Call fire engines

Some of our On-Call fire engines are not being used as often as they once were. A number are rarely crewed, and a small number have not been crewed for years. This is mainly because it has become harder to recruit and retain On-Call firefighters, as fewer people live and work close enough to their local fire station to respond when alerted.

Figure C shows how the availability of our On-Call fire engines has fallen sharply over the past decade, from more than 50% in 2011/12 to under 15% in recent years. This means many On-Call fire engines are not crewed when needed.

Figure C, *BFRS On-Call Availability from 2011-2025*
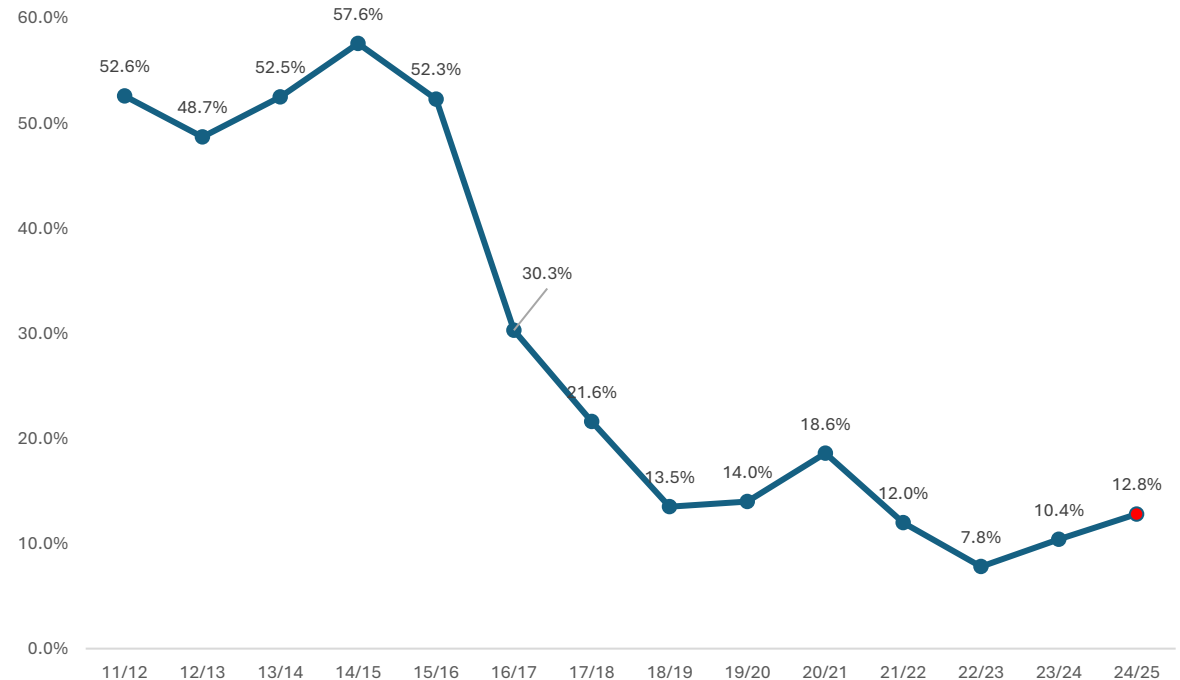
What the data tells us
Over the last decade On-Call fire engines have become less consistently crewed. This is not about demand, but about difficulty recruiting and retaining people who can respond quickly enough. It means that some On-Call fire engines are rarely, if ever, available.

Response times

Across the county, we aim to reach emergencies in **10 minutes on average**. In urban areas this is often quicker, while in more rural areas it can sometimes take longer. Wholetime fire engines are always crewed and ready to respond immediately, giving them the best chance of meeting this target.

On-Call fire engines, however, can only achieve a 10-minute turn-in time around **7% of the time on average**. This figure only reflects the time it takes On-Call firefighters to get to the station and the fire engine leaving. When travel to the incident is added, the majority of these cases will not meet the overall 10-minute response standard.

Figure D shows that our On-Call fire engines are rarely ready to respond to an emergency within 10 minutes, and are much more likely to take longer than 20 minutes, or not be crewed at all.

The data in Figure D was calculated using a different method than in Figure C, so the average availability percentages will differ by 0.3%, deemed to be insignificant.

> **What the data tells us**
> On-Call crews remain vital for resilience and support, especially at bigger or longer incidents. However, they cannot be relied upon as the first fire engine at an emergency. This is why we believe changes are needed to how On-Call fire engines are organised, so we can provide more cover where it is needed most.

Figure D, On-Call Firefighter Availability in Tax Year 2024/2025

Available in -	10 minutes	20 minutes	1 hour	3 hours
Broughton	7.5%	0.6%	1.1%	0.2%
Olney	21.9%	0.7%	5.3%	14.5%
West Ashland 1	18.4%	0.5%	1.3%	0.3%
West Ashland 2	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Aylesbury	10.2%	0.3%	0.9%	1.4%
Buckingham	14.9%	0.7%	0.1%	0.1%
Winslow	18.1%	3.6%	6.5%	4.3%
Brill	2.2%	0.1%	0.2%	0.1%
Waddesdon	12.0%	2.7%	10.1%	18.4%
Haddenham	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Amersham	0.7%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Chesham	3.1%	0.3%	0.4%	0.4%
Great Missenden	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
High Wycombe	2.7%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%
Princes Risborough	7.9%	3.8%	7.3%	6.4%
Stokenchurch	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Marlow	8.5%	0.6%	0.4%	0.5%
Beaconsfield	1.1%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%
Average	7.2%	0.8%	1.9%	2.6%

Changing communities

The risks we face are not the same as they were 10 or 20 years ago. At the same time, an ageing population means we are seeing different risks, from mobility-related rescues to medical emergencies. Climate change is also affecting us, with more grass fires during hot summers and greater risk of flooding during heavy rainfall.

Our work is no longer just about fighting fires. That's why traditional fire engines are not always the right answer for the risks and incidents we face today.

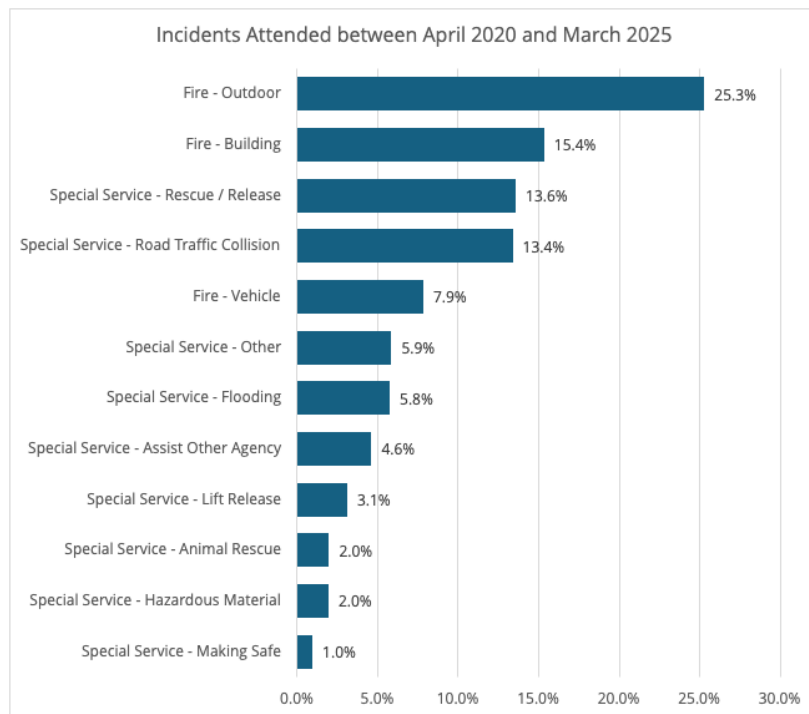**Figure E,** *Chart Shows Different Incidents Attended*

Incidents Attended between April 2020 and March 2025

Incident	%
Fire - Outdoor	25.3%
Fire - Building	15.4%
Special Service - Rescue / Release	13.6%
Special Service - Road Traffic Collision	13.4%
Fire - Vehicle	7.9%
Special Service - Other	5.9%
Special Service - Flooding	5.8%
Special Service - Assist Other Agency	4.6%
Special Service - Lift Release	3.1%
Special Service - Animal Rescue	2.0%
Special Service - Hazardous Material	2.0%
Special Service - Making Safe	1.0%

Figure F shows actual On-Call fire engines going to incidents (2020–2025)**.** This chart shows that almost all incidents are attended by immediately available (wholetime) fire engines. On-Call pumps are mobilised much less often.

What the data tells us
The risks faced by our communities are becoming more complex. This means we need to adapt our Service, making sure fire engines, specialist vehicles and crews are placed where they can respond to the risks most likely to happen in the future.

Figure F, *Actual Fire Engines Mobilised to Incidents 2020-2025*

■ Immediately Available Pumps   ■ Reamaining 11 Pumps
■ Proposed 7 Pumps
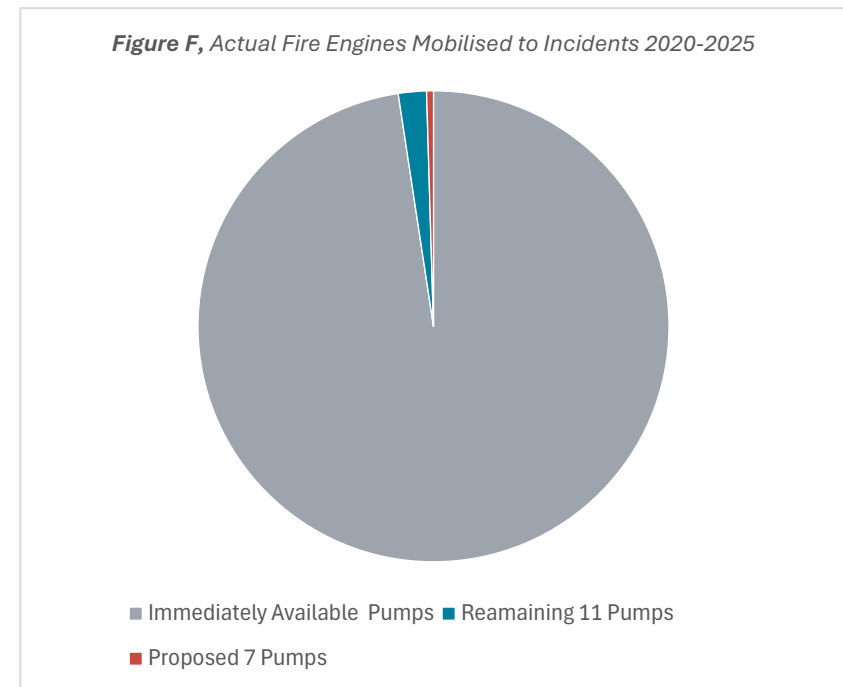
Making best use of resources

We have a responsibility to use our people, fire engines, and specialist vehicles in the most effective way. This means:

- Making sure we have the **right people with the right skills in the right place at the right time**.
- Basing **specialist vehicles** (such as turn table ladders and urban firefighting vehicles) at the stations where risk and community need are greatest.
- Reviewing how On-Call fire engines are organised

On-Call firefighting is a national challenge. The traditional On-Call system no longer reflects the way people live today. In many rural areas the pool of potential recruits is small, and across all communities people have less free time to commit. This makes it harder to recruit and retain On-Call firefighters, and to crew every On-Call fire engine. We face the same challenge. Each fire engine must have a minimum of four firefighters, including people with specific skills such as driving and incident command. At the moment, we have more On-Call fire engines than we can regularly crew, which means some vehicles are unavailable even though we still have firefighters in the system.

Figure G shows how often On-Call fire engines are available as 1st line (ready within 10 minutes), 2nd line (within 20 minutes), 3rd line (within 1 hour), or 4th line (up to 3 hours). Stokenchurch and Great Missenden show availability due to two occasions where the fire engines were used for standby activities and training respectively.

This highlights that while we have On-Call fire engines across the county, many of them are not available quickly enough to be the first fire engine at an emergency. Instead, a number are only available after longer periods, meaning they are less reliable for immediate response but still valuable for resilience at larger or extended incidents.

This is **not about cutting the cover we provide or cutting firefighter numbers**. It is about making every fire engine and vehicle count. We are committed to making the best use of our firefighters' skills and **reinvesting in the remaining On-Call stations, training, and firefighter numbers.** This will help improve reliability and strengthen the role of On-Call in our Service, while keeping our ability to scale up when larger or multiple incidents happen.

> **What the data is telling us**
> The data shows that only a small proportion of On-Call fire engines are crewed as 1st line and ready to respond within 10 minutes. Most are not available until later, as 2nd, 3rd or 4th line fire engines, which reduces their usefulness for urgent emergencies. This underlines the challenge of relying on the current On-Call system for fast first response.

Figure G, On-Call Fire Engine Availability 2020-2025

Legend: 1st Line, 2nd Line, 3rd Line, 4th Line
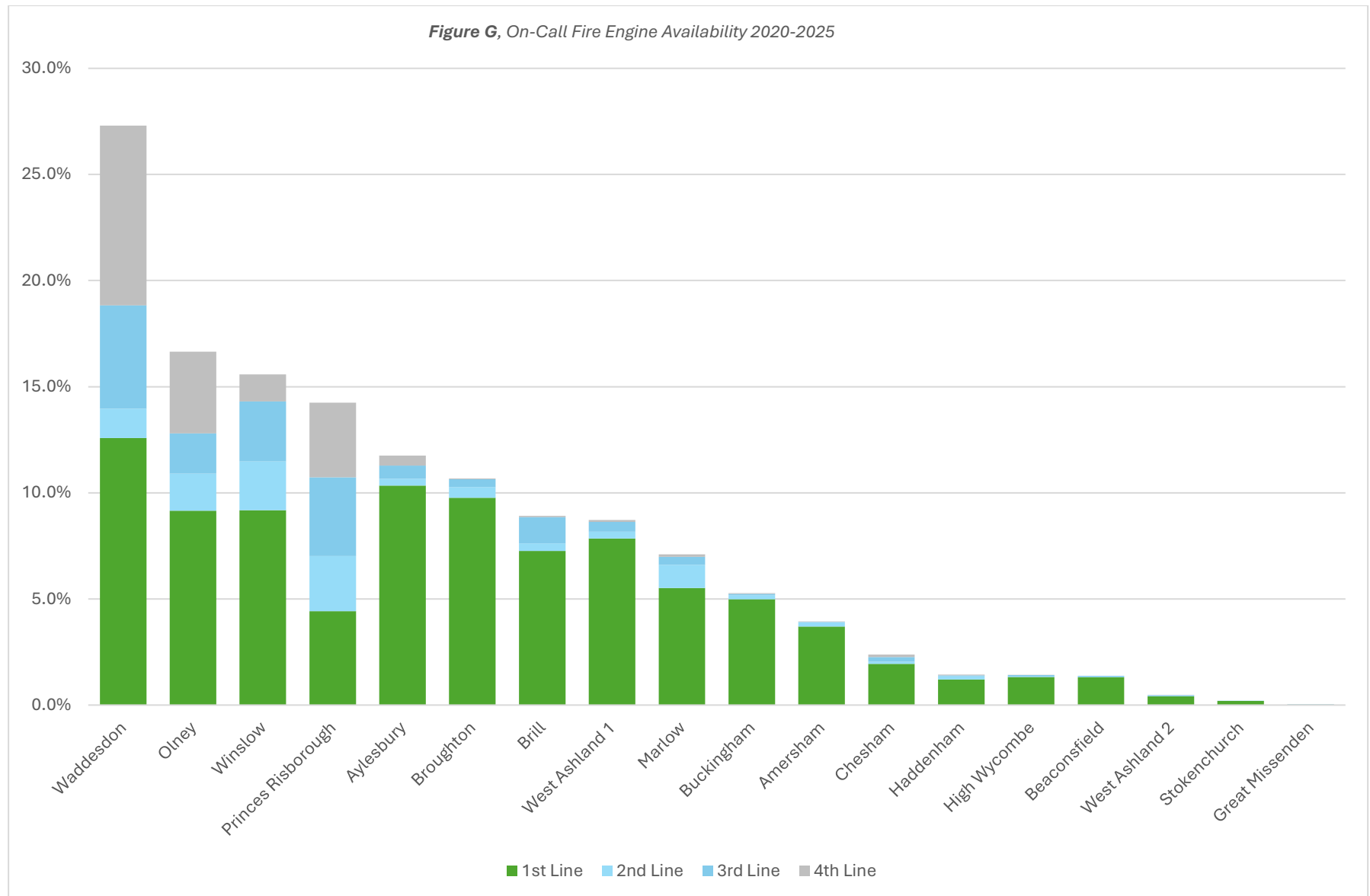
THE PROPOSALS IN DETAIL

We are proposing changes to how some of our On-Call fire engines and stations are organised. A number of On-Call appliances are rarely crewed, and some not at all, while risks in our communities continue to grow and change.

These proposals are about delivering on our promise:

A modern, agile fire and rescue service with the right people, in the right place, with the right equipment at the right time. Keeping our communities safe.

- Some On-Call fire engines are rarely crewed or used.
- Recruitment and retention of On-Call firefighters is increasingly difficult.
- We need to place crews and vehicles where they are most needed, based on today's risks.
- We want to reinvest resources back into strengthening On-Call provision, so more fire engines are crewed and available when needed.

How we shaped these proposals

We based our proposals on:

- **Data** – response times, appliance use, and local risk.
- **Professional judgement** – drawing on the expertise of senior officers and frontline crews.
- **Early engagement with staff, FA members and the public** – we ran early engagement focus groups and shared information with Fire Authority members to test ideas and gather initial feedback.
- **Public safety and community impact** – the test for every option.

Stations proposed for closure (long-term dormant)

Great Missenden	On-Call fire engine has had **0% availability** over the past five years, with no incidents attended in 2024/25. Residents are already covered by nearby wholetime fire engines, supported when needed by neighbouring services. The quickest available fire engine is always sent, regardless of county boundaries. Maintaining a non-operational station still incurs ongoing costs. Closing it allows us to reinvest resources into strengthening cover where fire engines are available and needed most. **A detailed review of Great Missenden, including financial and operational analysis, is provided in the Evidence Pack (see page 39).**	Our analysis shows this change **will not slow down** fire engine response times
Stokenchurch	On-Call fire engine has had **0% availability** over the past five years, with no incidents attended in 2024/25. Residents are already covered by nearby wholetime fire engines, supported when needed by neighbouring services. The quickest available fire engine is always sent, regardless of county boundaries. Maintaining a non-operational station still incurs ongoing costs. Closing it allows us to reinvest resources into strengthening cover where fire engines are available and needed most. **A detailed review of Stokenchurch, including financial and operational analysis, is provided in the Evidence Pack (see page 45).**	Our analysis shows this change **will not slow down** fire engine response times

Stations affected by removal or replacement of On-Call Fire Engines

A full review of all stations listed below in alphabetical order, including financial implications, staffing figures and demand modelling, is set out in the evidence pack (see page 31).

Amersham	Remove 1 On-Call fire engine Replace with Rural Firefighting Vehicle	• Current On-Call availability has been consistently low • Will not reduce our ability to meet response standards, either across the Service or locally. • Amersham would gain a Rural Firefighting Vehicle, providing important specialist capability for tackling grass and woodland fires. On-Call staff could be redeployed to Chesham to strengthen crewing and improve fire engine availability there.	Our analysis shows this change **will not slow down** fire engine response times
Beaconsfield	Remove 1 On-Call fire engine Replace with Crew Welfare Unit	• Current On-Call availability has been consistently low. • Will not reduce our ability to meet response standards, either across the Service or locally. • Beaconsfield would gain a Crew Welfare Unit, improving resilience by providing dedicated support for firefighters at incidents.	Our analysis shows this change **will not slow down** fire engine response times
Buckingham	Remove 1 On-Call fire engine Replace with Rural Firefighting Vehicle	• Current On-Call availability has been consistently low. • Will not reduce our ability to meet response standards, either across the Service or locally. • A Rural Firefighting Vehicle would provide important specialist capability, and Buckingham is well placed for this. • On-Call staff could also support Winslow through a tiered response, improving its availability.	Our analysis shows this change **will not slow down** fire engine response times
High Wycombe	Remove 1 On-Call fire engine	• Current On-Call availability has been consistently low. • Will not reduce our ability to meet response standards, either across the Service or locally.	Our analysis shows this change **will not slow down** fire

			engine response times
West Ashland	Replace 1 On-Call fire engine with new Water Carrier Move Rural Firefighting Vehicle to Broughton	• The second On-Call fire engine is not used or required. • Will not reduce our ability to meet response standards, either locally or across the Service. • West Ashland will retain one On-Call fire engine, and with staff focused on this unit its availability is expected to improve. • Staff can instead help improve availability of the remaining On-Call fire engine. • Taking account of Milton Keynes' growth, the relocation of the Rural Firefighting Vehicle to Broughton, alongside stronger On-Call availability, will mean a better and more resilient service across the city.	Our analysis shows this change **will not slow down** fire engine response times

(Top of table, continued row): • Existing On-Call staff could be used to support the crewing of the Turntable Ladder and provide tiered response to neighbouring stations such as Marlow and Princes Risborough.

Important Reassurance

These proposals do **not** involve any cuts to firefighters or Wholetime fire engines. All of our wholetime fire engines will remain fully crewed and available 24/7.

In some places, we may make better use of our On-Call firefighters by focusing them across fewer fire engines, or by introducing specialist vehicles that require smaller crews. This means the crews we have are ready when you need them most.

16

Operational Independence

Why this matters

Every emergency is different, and our ability to respond quickly depends on having the right people, vehicles, and equipment in the right place at the right time.

At present, many operational decisions, such as redeploying fire engines, require approval from the Fire Authority. This can create delays when swift action is needed.

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) has recommended giving Chief Fire Officers greater operational independence. This would allow them to make strategic decisions about resources more quickly, while the Fire Authority retains oversight and accountability.

What Operational Independence would Mean

Granting the Chief Fire Officer (CFO) greater operational independence would enable evidence-based decisions to be made more swiftly on matters such as fleet deployment, staffing, and equipment. **For example:**

- If an area faced increased wildfire risk, the CFO could replace a traditional fire engine with a Rural Firefighting Vehicle better suited to the terrain.
- If an On-Call station was struggling to recruit crew, the CFO could redeploy that fire engine to a busier station, while replacing it with a specialist vehicle needing fewer firefighters.

Clear accountability

Operational independence would not reduce the accountability of the Fire Authority. Instead, responsibilities would be clearly defined.

Fire Authority responsibilities

- Setting Service priorities
- Approving budgets and council tax
- Setting response standards
- Appointing or dismissing the Chief Fire Officer
- Opening and closing fire stations would remain a Fire Authority decision, with operational input from the CFO.

Chief Fire Officer responsibilities

- Allocation of staff
- Organisation and deployment of resources
- Managing operational needs
- Expenditure within delegated limits

What we are proposing

We are asking for your views on giving the CFO greater operational independence. **This would:**

- Allow faster, evidence-led decisions to meet changing risks
- Ensure resources are matched more effectively to community needs
- Retain strong Fire Authority governance and accountability.

BENEFITS OF THE PROPOSALS

These proposals are designed to give Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes a fire and rescue service that is modern, agile, and better matched to today's risks. They will help us make the most of our people and equipment, while keeping communities safe.

The key benefits are:

- **More availability where it counts** – by focusing firefighters across fewer fire engines and placing specialist vehicles where they are most needed, more vehicles will be crewed and ready to respond when you call.
- **Improved resilience** – stronger cover during peak demand and major incidents, such as wildfires, flooding, or large-scale emergencies.
- **Specialist skills and equipment** – introducing or moving Rural Firefighting Vehicles, Welfare Units, and other specialist vehicles ensures we can deal more effectively with new and emerging risks.
- **A sustainable, modern service** – instead of spreading resources thinly, we concentrate investment on the vehicles, equipment, and stations that communities rely on most.
- **Firefighter wellbeing** – dedicated welfare support for crews at longer incidents, and improved facilities across the Service.

- **Quicker, evidence-led decisions** – greater operational independence for the Chief Fire Officer means we can adapt more swiftly as risks change.
- **Value for money** – making sure public funding goes further by matching resources to risk and reinvesting savings into strengthening On-Call availability.

Impact on Response Times

We know people want to understand what these changes mean for emergency response. That's why we tested different scenarios using detailed modelling.
The key finding is clear:

- Compared to a **theoretical best case** (all 18 On-Call fire engines crewed and ready, which we know is not realistic), our proposal shows only a very small difference, averaging **around 8 seconds slower**.
- But compared to the **more realistic picture today**, where many On-Call engines are not available, our proposal performs much better, with average improvements of **around 34 seconds faster**.

This means the **upward benefit outweighs the downward risk**, because concentrating resources on fewer, better-staffed appliances gives us more reliable cover. The full station-by-station modelling is published in the **Evidence Pack**.

HAVE YOUR SAY

This is your chance to tell us what you think about our proposals. Your feedback is vital and will help the Fire Authority make the final decision.

Who Can Take Part

The consultation is open to **everyone**, whether you live, work, or travel through Buckinghamshire or Milton Keynes. There are no age limits, although responses from under-16s should be supported by a parent or guardian. We want to hear from residents, businesses, partner organisations, and anyone with an interest in how we keep our communities safe.

How to Take Part

- **Online:** Complete our consultation survey at [insert web link].
- **Paper copy:** Printed surveys are available on request – call 01296 744400 or email OIP@bucksfire.gov.uk
- **Alternative formats:** If you need the consultation in another format (for example, large print, easy read, or translated into another language), please contact us and we will provide it.
- **In person:** We will also be holding community events across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes where you can find out more and share your views. Details will be published on our website and social media.

What Happens Next

All responses will be collected, analysed, and presented to the Fire Authority. Your views, alongside the evidence in this pack and the supporting Evidence Pack, will help shape the final decision.

The consultation closes on **[insert date]**. Please make sure you have your say before then.

GLOSSARY

Appliance – Another word for a fire engine or specialist fire vehicle.

Availability – The percentage of time a fire engine is crewed and ready to respond to an emergency.

Chief Fire Officer (CFO) – The most senior officer in Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service, responsible for leading the Service and making operational decisions.

Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) – A five-year plan setting out how the Service will assess and manage risks across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes.

Crew Welfare Unit – A specialist vehicle providing facilities such as rest, refreshments, and toilets to support firefighters during long or challenging incidents.

First pump / second pump – The first or second fire engine sent to an incident.

Incident Support Unit (ISU) – A van carrying specialist equipment for use at complex or large incidents.

Mutual aid – An arrangement where fire services share resources and support one another during large or simultaneous emergencies.

National resilience – The ability of UK fire services to provide and receive specialist support during national emergencies, such as large fires, terrorist attacks, or natural disasters.

On-Call firefighter – A trained firefighter who usually has another job but responds to emergencies when available, normally from home or work near their station.

On-Call fire engine (On-Call pump) – A fire engine crewed by On-Call firefighters rather than full-time (Wholetime) firefighters.

Operational independence – The ability for the Chief Fire Officer to make quicker, evidence-based decisions about staff, vehicles, and resources, while the Fire Authority retains oversight.

Resilience – The ability of the Service to deal with multiple, long-lasting, or large-scale emergencies.

Response time – The time taken for a fire engine to arrive at an incident after being called. The Service aims for the first fire engine to arrive within 10 minutes on average.

Specialist vehicles – Vehicles designed for specific types of incidents, such as Turntable ladder platforms, water rescue boats, or welfare units.

Wholetime firefighter – A firefighter employed full-time, permanently based at a station, and always available to respond immediately.

Wholetime fire engine – A fire engine that is always crewed by Wholetime firefighters, providing 24/7 cover.

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Appendix 2

ON-CALL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME CONSULTATION: EVIDENCE PACK 2025

The evidence, analysis and community impact behind our proposals to modernise and strengthen On-Call provision.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of this Evidence Pack

This document brings together the detailed evidence that underpins the proposals set out in our consultation. It shows how we have assessed risk, demand and resources across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, and demonstrates the rationale for change.

The evidence draws directly from our 2025 – 2030 Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP), incident data and wider community impact information. It provides transparency on how decisions have been shaped by data analysis, professional judgement and community impact, ensuring that our proposals are proportionate, risk-based and focused on keeping people and property safe.

How to Use this Document

- **Read alongside the Consultation Pack** – this Evidence Pack is not a stand-alone document. It provides the detailed data, analysis and community impact information that supports the proposals.
- **Transparency** – includes modelling, financial information and station-level data so you can see the evidence behind the decisions.
- **Level of detail** – while the Consultation Pack is written in plain language, this Evidence Pack contains additional data tables, graphs and analysis for those who want to explore in depth.

- **Cross-references** – it follows the same structure as the Consultation Pack so you can link proposals or statements with supporting evidence.
- **Community impact** – highlights operational, financial and social impact on communities, so that consultees can make informed contributions.
- **Decision-making** – together with the public consultation feedback, this evidence will inform the final decision of Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority.

Strengthening On-Call and Community Safety through Reinvestment

This programme of work is not designed to cut budgets, reduce firefighter numbers or divert resources from our frontline.

Streamlining the On-Call fleet, by reducing the number of fire engines that are difficult to crew and not essential based on our data, we could reinvest savings back into our operational On-Call response. It offers an opportunity to use our budget more effectively and invest where it will have the greatest impact on fire engine availability to support resilience and improvement of station facilities, vehicles and equipment.

It is important to note that these proposals will not cause any reduction to the public safety and protection work we carry out. Interventions relating to fire safety and fire prevention will continue to be undertaken based on risk and vulnerability.

OUR SERVICE

This section summarises the key risk and demand evidence underpinning the proposals. The full analysis is available in our 2025 – 2030 Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) Evidence Pack, which includes detailed data, modelling and methodology. Where relevant, this pack reproduces selected graphs and tables with references provided so readers can find the complete material.

The County of Buckinghamshire

Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service (BFRS) covers the county of Buckinghamshire spanning 723 square miles in the south east of England. In the 2021 census the county had a population of 840,200.

Buckinghamshire is a predominately rural county especially in north western areas. Just over half its population live in one of three main areas, Milton Keynes, High Wycombe and Aylesbury. Milton Keynes alone is home to roughly a third of the county's residents.

Our Fire Authority is made up of Councillors from the two unitary authorities, Buckinghamshire Council and Milton Keynes City Council, which provide local government services across our area.

Buckinghamshire is bordered by six neighbouring fire services. To the east are Bedfordshire Fire & Rescue Service and Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue Service. To the south east is London Fire Brigade and to the south is Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service. The western boundary is shared with Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service and to the north is Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service.

Figure A, *Map of Our Response Area (Source: CRMP Evidence Pack, 2025 – 2030, p.149)*

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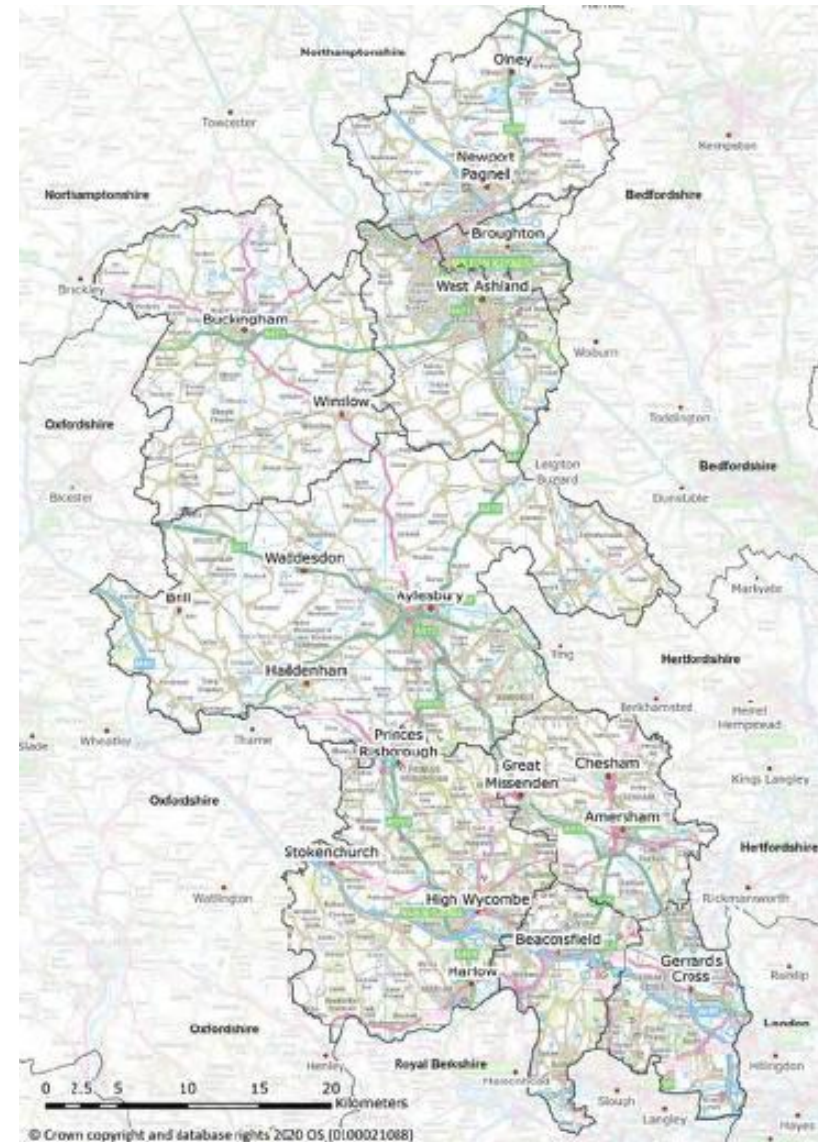
Response Capabilities and Vehicles

Our response capability is the way we effectively manage emergencies, using the right people, vehicles and equipment, coordinated through well-practised plans. It's about ensuring we can respond quickly and successfully to protect people, property and the environment across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes.

We currently have 19 fire stations across our response area. These stations house 30 fire engines, alongside a range of specialist and support vehicles that help us meet daily demand and provide resilience during large-scale or multiple simultaneous incidents.

Vehicles:

Fire Engines:

We operate a fleet of 30 fire engines. These purpose-built vehicles transport firefighters to emergencies and carry the specialist kit needed to respond safely and effectively. Each fire engine is equipped with a large water tank and pumping system, enabling crews to deliver high volumes of water when tackling fires.

Specialist Vehicles:

Not every emergency can be resolved with traditional fire engines alone. In some cases, specialist vehicles are better suited to meet the needs of an incident and can deal with specific risks more effectively.

Figure B, Map of Vehicles Located at Each Station

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44
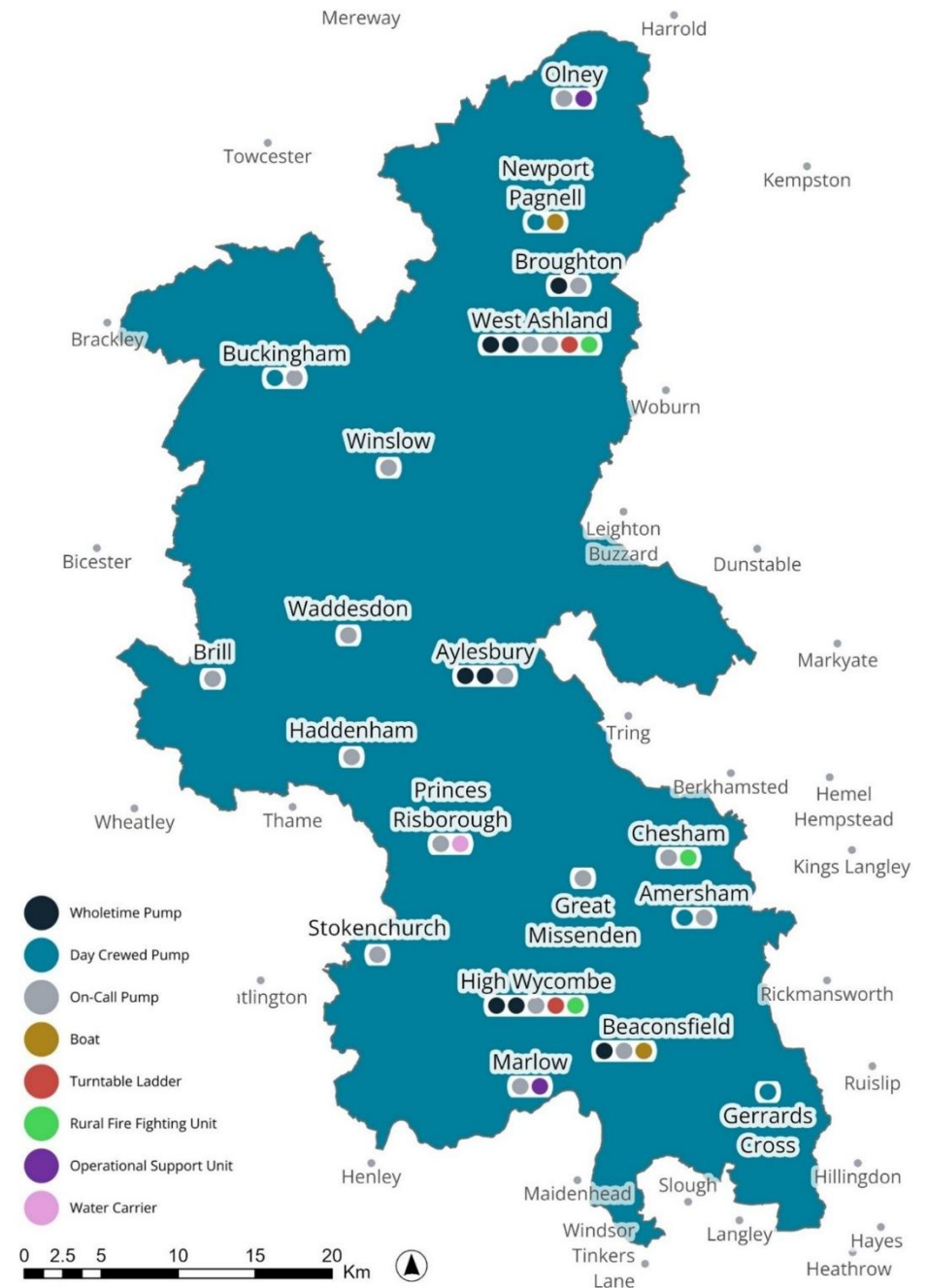
They add enormous value to our response capability and provide us with the right tools to deal with a broader range of emergencies, without sending more people than are needed, or larger vehicles than are necessary. Our specialist vehicles are:

Rural Firefighting Vehicles (RFVs):

- Smaller, more agile vehicles designed for off-road use and requiring fewer crew. Ideal for reaching remote or rural areas quickly, especially during dry summer months when wildfires are more likely. These are example of how we are developing our fleet of emergency response vehicles to enable us to better match resource to risk in a more flexible way.

Water Carriers:

- Tankers that deliver large volumes of water to incidents in areas with limited hydrant access, essential for rural fires or larger-scale fires where a greater supply of water is needed.

Boats and Water Rescue Units:

- Used for water-related emergencies, particularly in flood-prone areas, enabling crews to respond where life risk comes from water rather than fire.

Turntable Ladder (TL):

- A high-reaching vehicle that provides access to tall buildings and delivers elevated water jets or rescue capability. Crucial for urban areas and for large commercial or residential incidents.

Operational Support Unit (OSU):

- A van with tail lift for transporting specialist equipment to major or complex incidents, supporting efficient and safe operations.

We are committed to modernising our fleet to better match today's risks.

To send a fire engine to an incident we must have a minimum crew of four, including:

- A qualified driver.
- A Crew Commander (or higher) to lead the response.
- At least two firefighters trained to wear breathing apparatus.

Our Firefighters

Our firefighters work in two ways:

- **Wholetime firefighters** are full-time and either work on a shift duty system (available 24/7 from station) or a day-crewed duty system (available at station during the day, responding from home at night).

- **On-Call firefighters** respond when available, providing additional support across our service.

What is On-Call Provision?

On-Call firefighters are trained and equipped members of our community who respond to emergencies when available. When alerted they travel to their local fire station to join the crew and mobilise the fire engine to the incident.

Most On-Call staff live within ten minutes of their station and balance their firefighting role with other jobs, from landscape gardeners and company directors to full-time parents and semi-retired professionals. Their commitment is vital to our emergency response and resilience.

Some stations are crewed entirely by On-Call firefighters. These are our On-Call stations. Currently we have 10, they are in:

- Brill
- Chesham
- Great Missenden
- Haddenham (which also operates as our Training Centre)
- Marlow
- Olney
- Princes Risborough
- Stokenchurch
- Waddesdon
- Winslow

Other stations are primarily crewed by Wholetime firefighters, with On-Call crew providing support. This arrangement is in place at seven of our stations:

- Amersham
- Aylesbury
- Beaconsfield
- Broughton
- Buckingham
- High Wycombe
- West Ashland

Our two remaining stations, Gerrards Cross and Newport Pagnell, are crewed solely by Wholetime firefighters.

UNDERSTANDING RISK AND DEMAND

As a fire and rescue service we have a legal duty to protect people and property across a mix of urban and rural communities. To do this effectively we must understand the risks we face, and the demand placed on our resources, so we can match our capabilities to the emergencies we're most likely to encounter.

Risk

BFRS faces a wide range of risks, shaped by our communities, environment, and economy. These risks help determine how and where we place our people, fire engines, and specialist vehicles.

We carried out a full analysis of these risks in our **2025 – 2030 Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP)**, which can be viewed here. It sets out our overall approach for the next five years, showing how and where we match our resources to the risks we face. This consultation builds on that work and focuses on our On-Call fire stations and the way we use our specialist vehicles.

Community Risk Profile

This consultation uses the CRMP risk analysis and detailed evidence as its foundation to explain why changes are needed and how we can best match our resources to the risks we face.

We recognise our community has concerns around increasing local population. While **Figure C** indicates a downward trend in

our overall incident numbers since 2010, we are aware of future plans for additional housing growth across our area and are working with our partners as they form these plans, supporting and providing comments during their consultations. However, we can't afford to stand still and wait for their plans to be finalised, we need to make changes now. We will continuously track and monitor our data, not just through the lifetime of this CRMP, but into the future. We will adapt and respond to changes, undertaking future resource reviews where necessary.

Infrastructure and Population Growth

We heard from the early engagement focus groups that people were concerned about a perceived reduction in fire cover at a time of increased population and infrastructure growth. Our data shows us that there is no direct correlation between the growth in population and infrastructure and incident numbers. In fact, while we have seen an increase in population and infrastructure we have seen a decrease in incidents.

Figure C, Graph Showing Total Incidents per 1,000 Residents per Year (excluding co-responder)
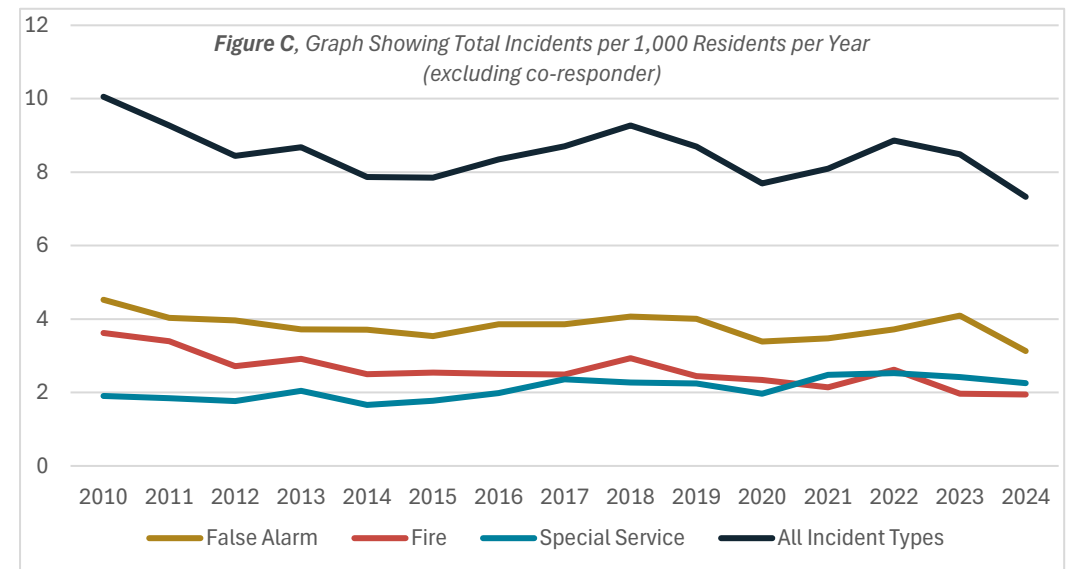
Figure D demonstrates that while population and residential dwellings have been increasing, the number of accidental dwelling fires has been decreasing.

Figure D, Graph Showing Accidental Dwelling Fires Per 1,000 Dwellings in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes
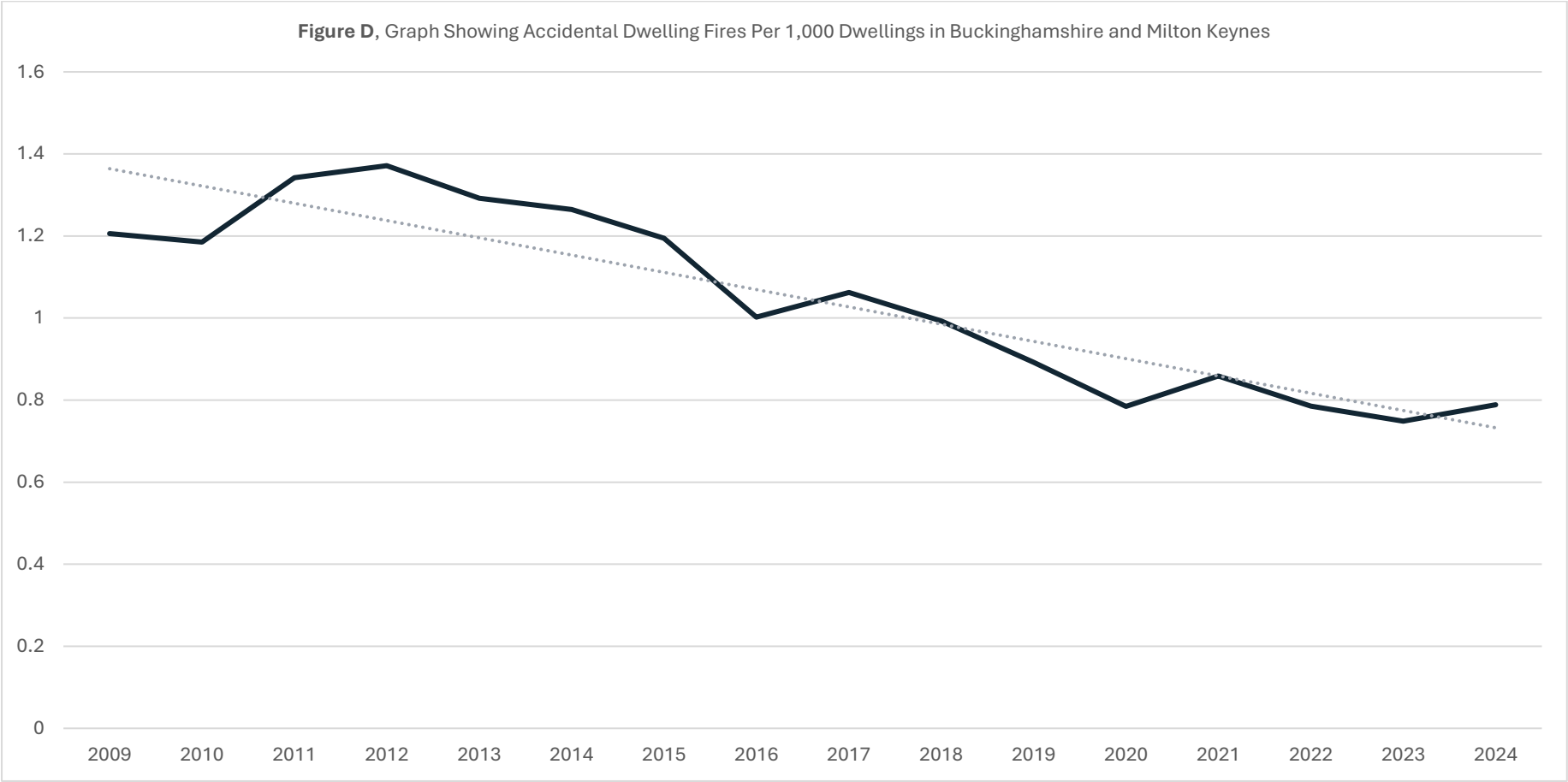
Demand

Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service covers a diverse and complex area, including the River Thames, three major motorways, rail infrastructure, and a mix of urban and rural environments.

Figure E, as shared in the CRMP 2025 - 2030

Incidents attended between April 2021 and March 2024

- 25% Fire – Outdoor
- 15% Fire – Building
- 15% Rescue/Release
- 13% Road traffic collision
- 7% Fire – Vehicle
- 6% Flooding
- 6% Assist other agency
- 3% Lift release
- 3% Other
- 2% Hazardous material
- 2% Animal rescue
- 2% Making safe
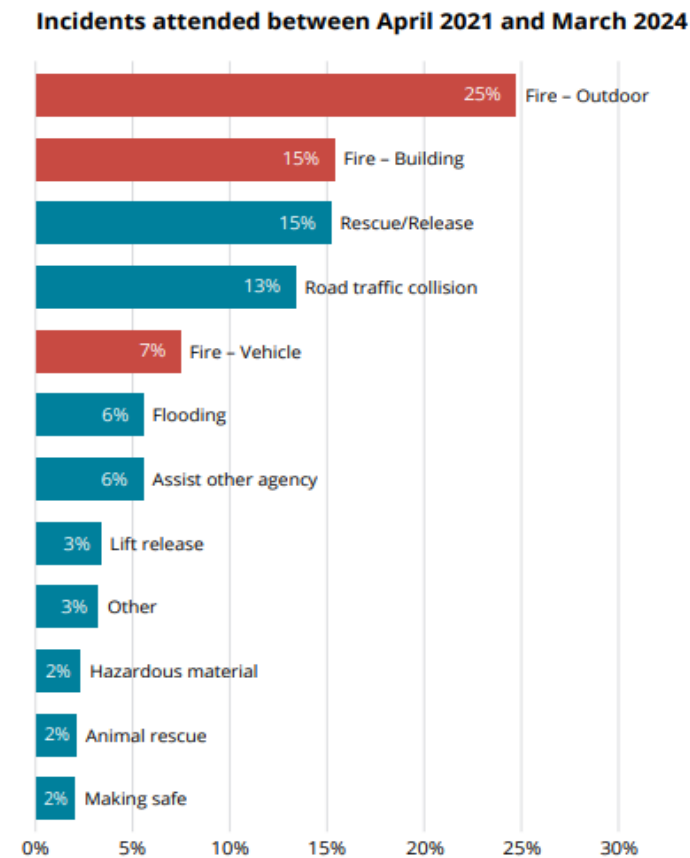
Incident density/location

Figure F plots our incident locations and provides context on the density of incidents across our service area from April 2020 to March 2025.

Figure F, as shared in the CRMP 2025 - 2030

Number of Incidents
- 1
- 2 to 5
- 6 to 10
- 11 to 20
- 21 to 50
- 51 to 100
- 101 to 200
- 201+
- Fire Stations 10km
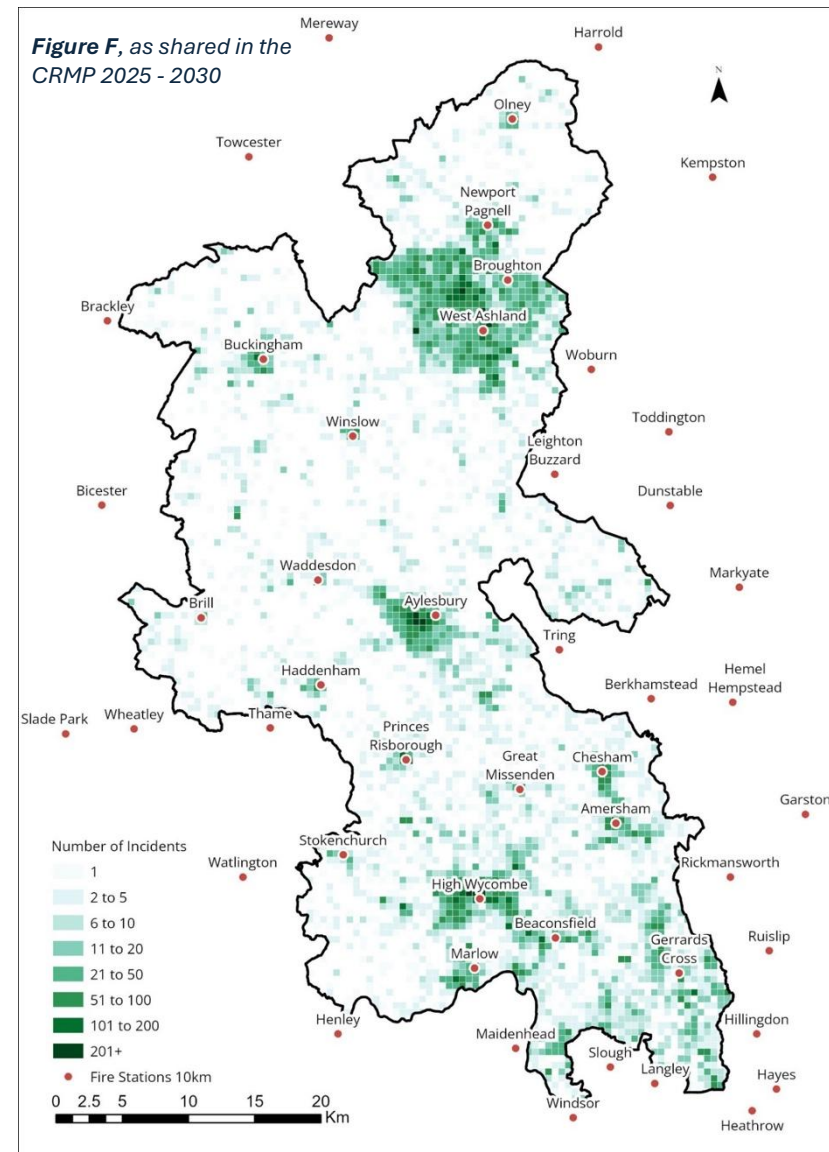
Data gathered during development of our CRMP confirms that 12 immediately available fire engines is the right number to meet most of the demand. Over 99 per cent of incidents can be handled with nine fire engines or fewer. Maintaining 12 ensures we have a strong level of resilience for immediate response.

Figure G, *Table Showing Use of Fire Engines April 2019 to March 2023*
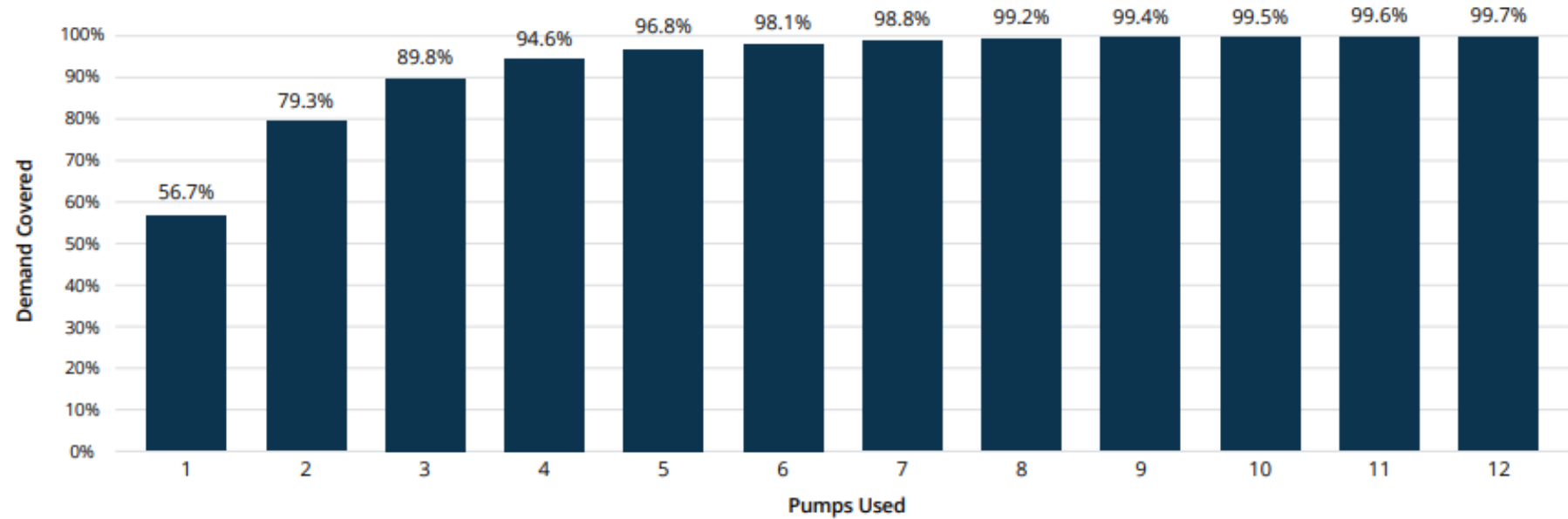
Figures H and I show the use of our fire engines by hour of the day between April 2019 and March 2023. The charts show:

- The average number of appliances used during each hour of the day.
- The average number of appliances used during each hour of the day plus standard deviation (SD). Standard deviation is a measure of variability about the mean. The majority of observations are within one standard deviation of the mean.
- The maximum number used at each hour.
- The number of fire engines would cover over 99% of the demand within that hour.

During the summer of 2022 Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes experienced two heatwaves during which the demand on our pumping appliances was exceptionally high.

To demonstrate the impact of the heatwave, we have included **Figure H** which shows the use of fire engines excluding the data between April 2022 and March 2023.

In the last five years there have only been a total of 16 hours when we have used more than 20 fire engines at one time. Of these hours 10 were on 19 July 2022 (one of the two heatwaves).

Figure H, (Source: CRMP Evidence Pack, 2025-2030, p. 155)
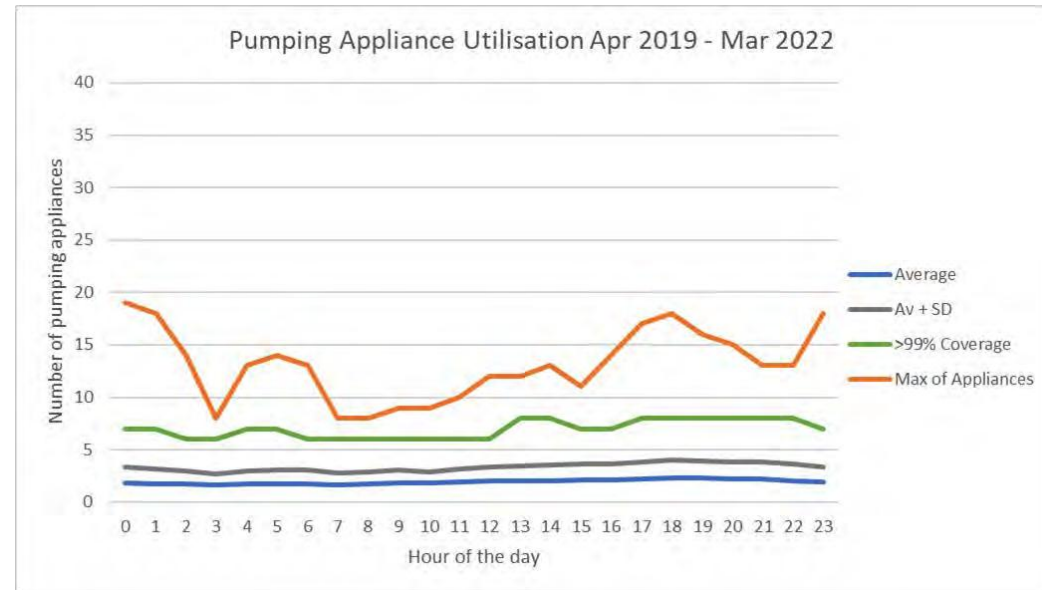
Figure I, (Source: CRMP Evidence Pack, 2025-2030, p. 155)
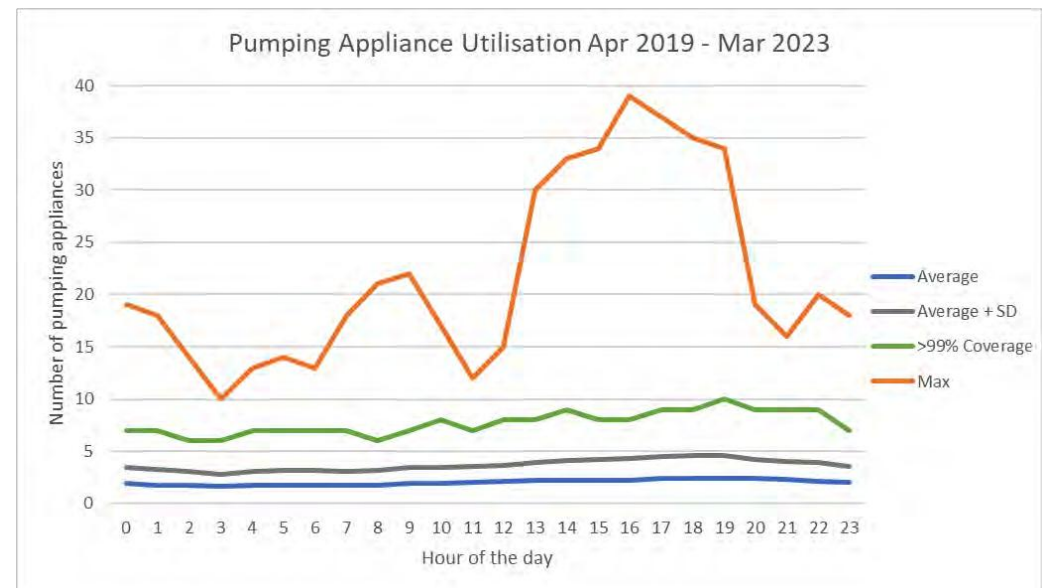
Response

Response Standards

The data also shows that the number and location of our immediately available fire engines meets our response standard, an average of 10 minutes for the first fire engine to arrive at an incident. When a 999 call is made, our Thames Valley Fire Control Service (TVFCS) identifies the location and dispatches the quickest available crew, regardless of which Thames Valley fire service they belong to.

To build our CRMP, we analysed how often our fire engines are used across the response area. This gives us a clear picture of demand. The consultation uses this information, we are not remodelling how or where we place our whole-time engines, but we are proposing changes to some On-Call engines and how specialist vehicles are used.

We've made significant investment in recent years to increase our Wholetime firefighter numbers and secure this level of assured response. This consultation does not propose any changes to that part of our service.

Figure J shows where appliances could reach within five and ten minutes if the fire appliance was situated at the station when called upon based on modelling from current station locations.

Figure J, (Source: CRMP Evidence Pack, 2025-2030, p. 153)
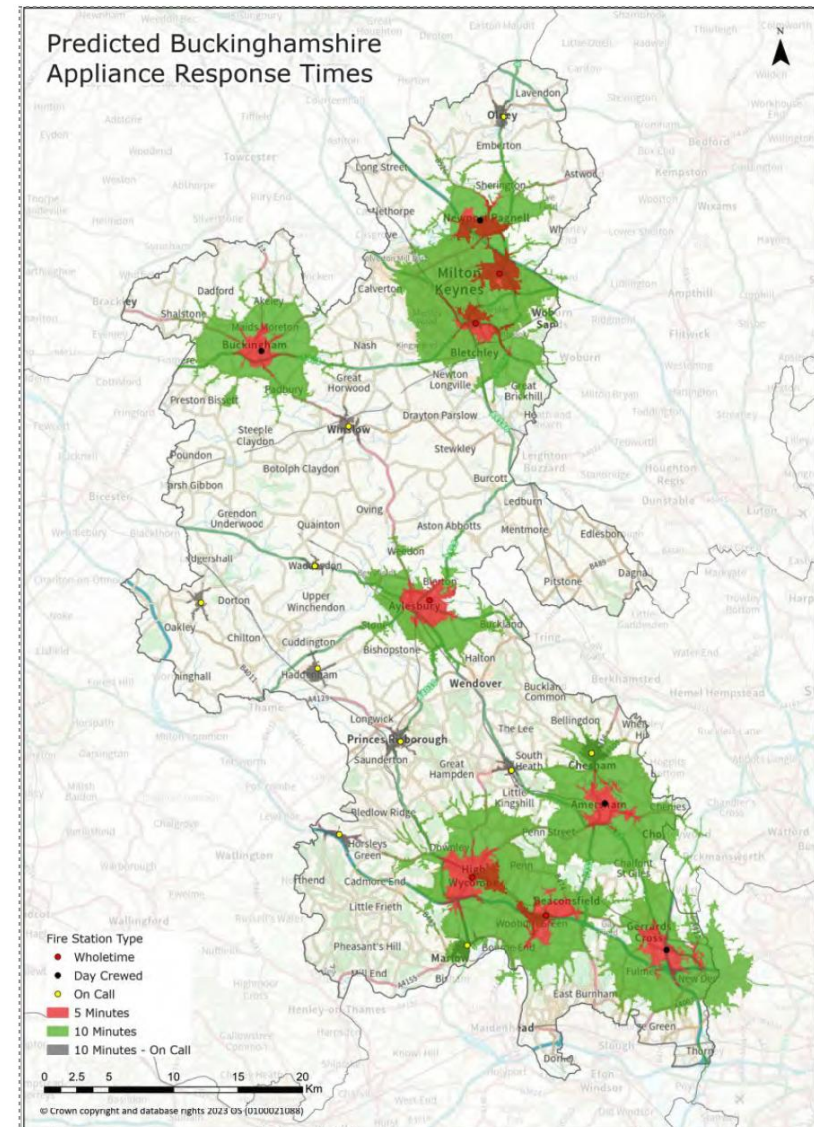
The map K shows the density of buildings by type across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes

Figure K, *(Source: CRMP Evidence Pack, 2025-2030, p.153)*

Buckinghamshire Property Types

Address Classification
- Non Residential
- Dwelling
- Other Residential

0   2.5   5   10   15   20
Km

© Crown copyright and database rights 2023 OS (0100021088)
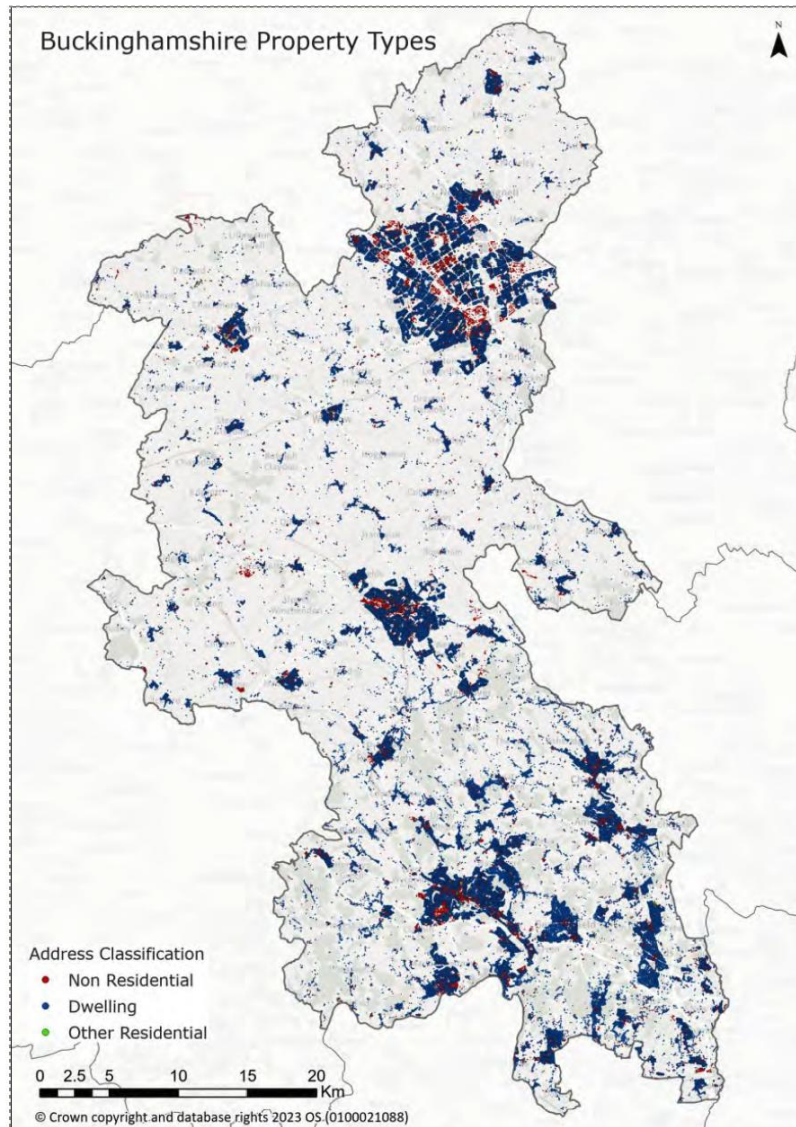
How does On-Call provision support emergency response?

In addition to day-to-day emergencies, our Service must be ready to respond to peak demand, whether that's a single large-scale incident or multiple smaller incidents occurring at the same time. These peaks can be driven by seasonal factors such as flooding, storms, snowfall, or wildfires.

To meet this demand, we need to be able to scale up our resources quickly and effectively as seen on page 155 in our CRMP Evidence Pack.

Lines of Availability:

We categorise the way our On-Call firefighters respond to alerts into four levels, known as lines of availability. These help us understand and plan how quickly additional support can be mobilised when needed.

- **First line availability:** Firefighters are immediately available, or able to reach their local fire station within 10 minutes of being alerted. This is our primary response expectation for On-Call staff.

In addition to their local station, On-Call firefighters can also provide agreed cover at alternative locations on a delayed response. This is particularly useful for supporting crews at prolonged incidents.

We offer three levels of delayed response:

- **Second line availability:**

  Able to reach their allocated station within 20 minutes of being notified.

- **Third line availability:**

  Able to reach their allocated station within 1 hour of being notified.

- **Fourth line availability:**

  Able to reach their allocated station within 3 hours of being notified.

Actual Response times

The tables below show the **actual average attendance times over the last five years**. This measures the time taken from when the first fire engine is assigned to an incident to when it arrives on scene.

- **Table 1** shows average attendance times for areas with immediately crewed fire engines.

- **Table 2** shows average attendance times for areas covered only by On-Call fire engines.

As expected, response times are quicker in areas with immediately available fire engines. The areas covered by standalone On-Call stations are typically more rural, have fewer incidents, and are further from major roads and population centres. In these locations, On-Call crews are given 10 minutes to respond to an alert before mobilising, which means response times are usually longer.

It's important to note that the **quickest available fire engine is always mobilised**, regardless of whether it is a Wholetime or On-Call crew.

Finally, due to the long-term dormancy of **Great Missenden and Stokenchurch**, the proposals for these stations and fire engines would have **no impact on response times** for these communities.

This analysis reinforces the importance of immediately available fire engines as the backbone of our response model, with On-Call fire engines providing vital resilience rather than being relied upon as the first engine to an incident.

Figure L, Table 1 showing average attendance times for areas with immediately crewed fire engines

	Amersham	Aylesbury	Beaconsfield	Broughton	Buckingham	Gerrards Cross	High Wycombe	Newport Pagnell	West Ashland
2020/2021	0:07:59	0:07:54	0:07:54	0:06:57	0:10:08	0:09:31	0:06:27	0:08:50	0:08:00
2021/2022	0:08:15	0:07:53	0:07:35	0:07:03	0:09:38	0:09:02	0:06:35	0:08:42	0:09:13
2022/2023	0:08:35	0:08:29	0:08:12	0:07:15	0:10:03	0:10:13	0:06:51	0:09:02	0:08:54
2023/2024	0:09:33	0:08:20	0:07:51	0:07:05	0:11:16	0:09:47	0:06:48	0:08:51	0:08:32
2024/2025	0:08:56	0:08:20	0:07:26	0:07:13	0:10:08	0:09:45	0:06:57	0:09:03	0:08:18

Figure M, Table 2 showing average attendance times for areas covered only by On-Call fire engines

	Brill	Chesham	Great Missenden	Haddenham	Marlow	Olney	Princes Risborough	Stokenchurch	Waddesdon	Winslow
2020/2021	0:14:50	0:11:06	0:13:01	0:11:20	0:10:59	0:12:47	0:13:04	0:12:04	0:14:57	0:13:33
2021/2022	0:14:54	0:10:20	0:12:49	0:12:32	0:10:38	0:13:37	0:13:50	0:13:19	0:16:08	0:13:41
2022/2023	0:16:48	0:11:04	0:12:42	0:12:19	0:11:28	0:15:34	0:14:30	0:13:30	0:16:15	0:12:42
2023/2024	0:15:49	0:10:26	0:13:33	0:11:32	0:11:29	0:14:43	0:13:51	0:14:03	0:15:19	0:13:32
2024/2025	0:15:01	0:11:06	0:12:51	0:11:48	0:10:54	0:14:27	0:13:49	0:14:25	0:16:53	0:13:51

ON-CALL AVAILABILITY AND CHALLENGES

On-Call firefighter availability is a national challenge.

The traditional On-Call system no longer reflects the way people live today.

In many rural areas the pool of potential recruits is small, and across all communities people have less free time to commit.

This makes it harder to recruit and retain On-Call firefighters, and to crew every On-Call fire engine.

We face the same challenge within Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. Several common factors are contributing to the decline in On-Call availability.

Changing Work and Lifestyle Habits

The traditional On-Call model is becoming less compatible with modern life. Fewer people live and work close to their local station, and many now commute longer distances, work remotely, or have unpredictable schedules making it harder to respond within the 10-minute window required for first-line availability.

Station Locations

Some On-Call stations now have a limited pool of potential recruits nearby. In areas with no current candidates, it could take years to build a crew with the right qualifications to respond to incidents.

This data shows how many people live within a 10-minute driving distance from each station and are aged between 18 and 55. We use this to provide an indication of the likely number of people it would be possible to recruit to work from each station. This helps us understand the long-term viability of a fire engine. We also understand that some areas have significantly higher than average house prices which can make it difficult for firefighters to leave in close enough proximity to a fire station to respond from it.

Figure N, *Data calculated from the 2022 mid-year population estimates (latest data available).*

Station	Estimated Population within 10-minute drive*
Amersham	29546
Aylesbury	48533
Beaconsfield	51020
Brill	2200
Broughton	84185
Buckingham	9035
Chesham	32566
Great Missenden	18378
Haddenham	11004
High Wycombe	77902
Marlow	75787
Olney	4218
Princes Risborough	9660
Stokenchurch	8110
Waddesdon	10362
West Ashland	125634
Winslow	4715

Some locations fall within 10 minutes travel of multiple stations, so they are double counted in the figures, ie. someone may be within 10 minutes of both West Ashland and Broughton, they have been included in both stations' totals.

Cost of Living Pressures

On-Call pay structures must compete with jobs that offer more certainty, higher pay, and less demand. The benefits offered for the level of commitment required can be difficult to justify for many.

We also understand that some areas have significantly higher than average house prices which can make it difficult for firefighters to live in close enough proximity to a fire station to respond from it.

Training and Skills Maintenance

Training requirements have rightly increased, but On-Call firefighters are only contracted for two hours a week on a "drill night." These sessions are also used for safety checks, briefings, and admin leaving limited time for development and skills maintenance.

These challenges have led to a steady decline in On-Call fire engine availability over the past decade. Even when we successfully recruit, maintaining reliable availability remains incredibly difficult.

The declining availability of our On-Call provision has been highlighted in recent inspections by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS):

- 2018/19 HMICFRS Inspection Report (Published December 2019):
  "Its 18 On-Call Fire Engines were only available 13.6 per cent of the time. This reflects the difficulty the service has in recruiting On-Call firefighters. This is experienced nationally."

- 2022/23 HMICFRS Inspection Report (Published October 2023):
  "We are not satisfied that the service has a plan to maintain the long-term viability of its additional 18 resilience fire engines. It is unclear why the service needs so many additional fire engines when its daily demand pattern is consistently met with 12 available fire engines. The service continues to see a reduction in its On-Call staff and has no plans to address this trend."

Figure O shows how the availability of our On-Call fire engines has fallen sharply over the past decade, from more than 50% in 2011/12 to under 15% in recent years. This means many On-Call fire engines are not crewed when needed.

Figure O, BFRS On-Call Availability from 2011-2025
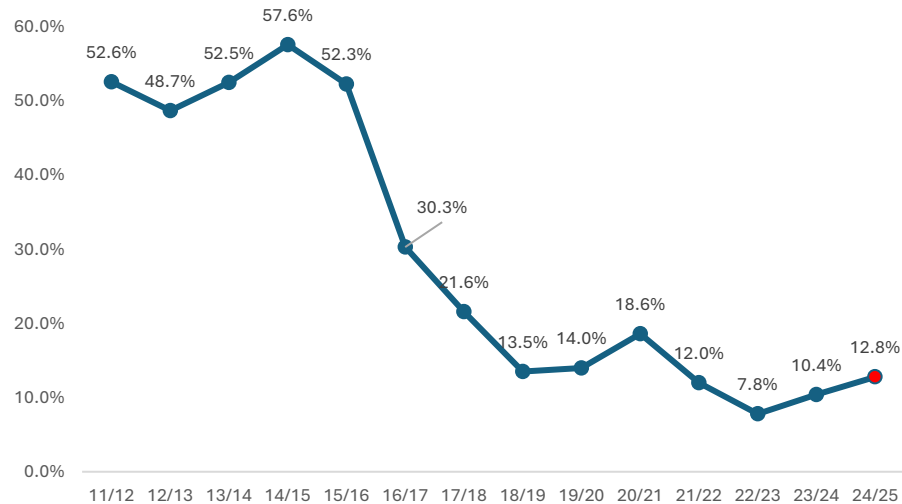
Figure P shows that our on-call fire engines are rarely ready to respond to an emergency within 10 minutes, and are much more likely to take longer than 20 minutes, or not be crewed at all.

Figure P, On-Call Firefighter Availability in Tax Year 2024/2025

Available in -	10 minutes	20 minutes	1 hour	3 hours
Broughton	7.5%	0.6%	1.1%	0.2%
Olney	21.9%	0.7%	5.3%	14.5%
West Ashland 1	18.4%	0.5%	1.3%	0.3%
West Ashland 2	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Aylesbury	10.2%	0.3%	0.9%	1.4%
Buckingham	14.9%	0.7%	0.1%	0.1%
Winslow	18.1%	3.6%	6.5%	4.3%
Brill	2.2%	0.1%	0.2%	0.1%
Waddesdon	12.0%	2.7%	10.1%	18.4%
Haddenham	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Amersham	0.7%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Chesham	3.1%	0.3%	0.4%	0.4%
Great Missenden	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
High Wycombe	2.7%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%
Princes Risborough	7.9%	3.8%	7.3%	6.4%
Stokenchurch	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Marlow	8.5%	0.6%	0.4%	0.5%
Beaconsfield	1.1%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%
Average	7.2%	0.8%	1.9%	2.6%

Figure Q shows how often On-Call fire engines are available as 1st line (ready within 10 minutes), 2nd line (within 20 minutes), 3rd line (within 1 hour), or 4th line (up to 3 hours). Stokenchurch and Great Missenden show availability due to two occasions where the fire engines were used by wholetime staff for standby activities and training respectively.

What the data tells us: This highlights that while we have On-Call fire engines across the county, many of them are not available quickly enough to be the first fire engine at an emergency. Instead, a number are only available after longer periods, meaning they are less reliable for immediate response but still valuable for resilience at larger or extended incidents.

Figure Q, On-Call Fire Engine Availability 2020-2025

Legend: ■ 1st Line ■ 2nd Line ■ 3rd Line ■ 4th Line
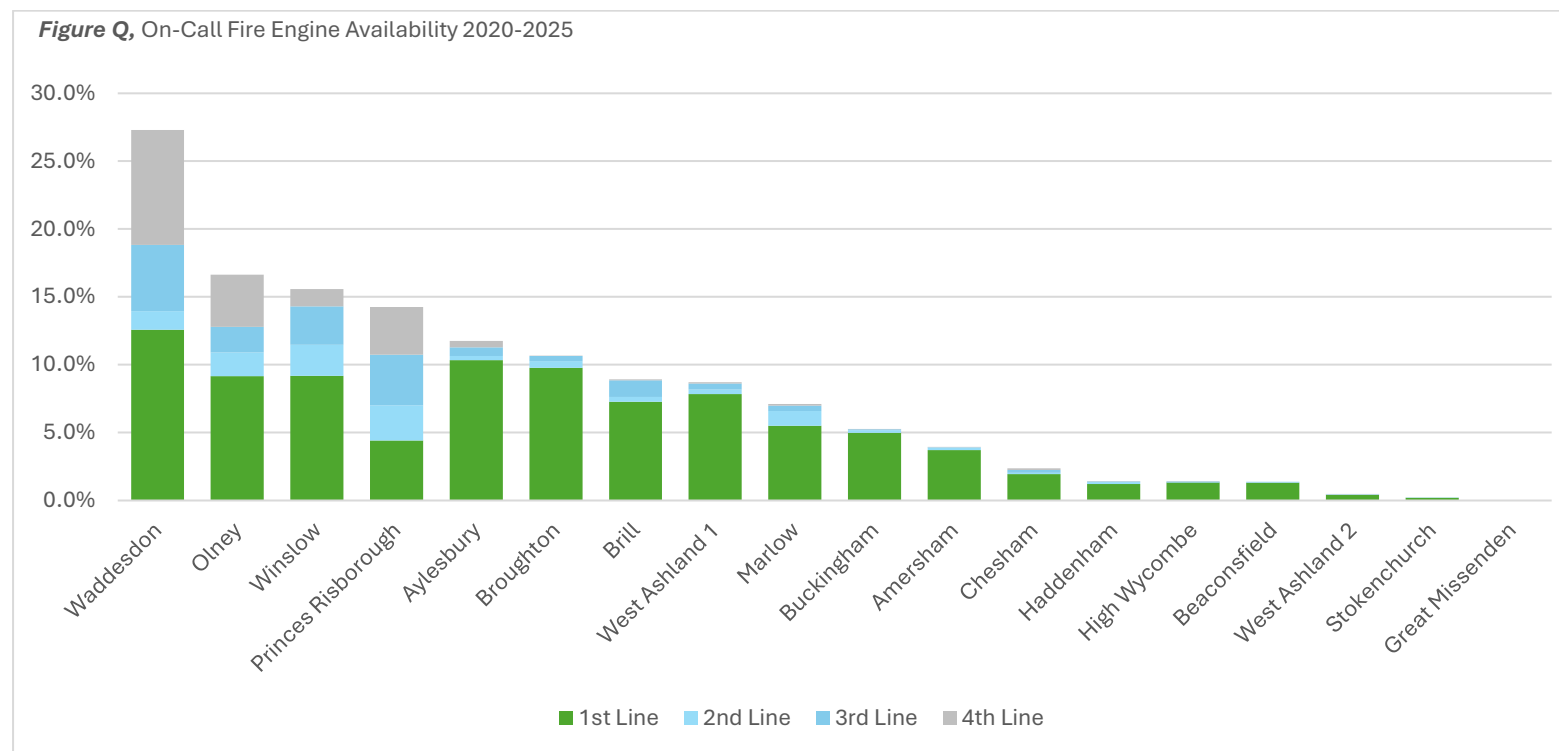
Actual Incident Response – On-Call

Community Feedback has told us they expected the fire engine from their nearest station to always respond. The quickest fire engine is sent, which is often a wholetime crewed engine that can mobilise in under two minutes. On-Call crews take around 10 minutes to mobilise, so even if an On-Call station is geographically closest, another engine may arrive sooner.

Over the last five years, On-Call engines attended 1,318 incidents and were first on scene at 653 of them. This shows their value in providing resilience but also highlights that most first responses are made by wholetime crews.

Figure P shows actual incidents attended by each On-Call fire engine between April 2020 to March 2025 excluding standbys, and how many times they were first in attendance.

Figure R, *Actual Incident Response from April 2020 to March 2025*

Pump Location	Assigned to	Mobilised	Made it on-scene	First On-Scene
Broughton	206	187	137	60
Olney	99	95	75	49
West Ashland	132	114	98	47
West Ashland	22	22	21	10
Aylesbury	139	123	118	73
Buckingham	66	56	49	27
Winslow	151	143	114	55
Brill	68	64	53	42
Waddesdon	120	105	82	49
Haddenham	20	15	13	8
Amersham	97	88	81	51
Chesham	37	35	35	25
Great Missenden	0	0	0	0
High Wycombe	51	49	42	26
Princes Risborough	82	74	64	47
Stokenchurch	0	0	0	0
Marlow	112	107	93	59
Beaconsfield	48	41	36	25
TOTAL	1450	1318	1111	653

We heard during early engagement that people did not always understand the difference between immediately available fire engines and On-Call fire engines, or to what degree either was relied on for operational response.

Figure S shows in grey the proportion of incidents mobilised to by our 12 immediately available fire engines. In blue the 11 On-Call fire engines that would remain as part of our proposal and in orange those 7 fire engines we propose to remove.

Figure S, Actual Fire Engines Mobilised to Incidents 2020-2025

- Immediately Available Pumps ■ Reamaining 11 Pumps
- Proposed 7 Pumps
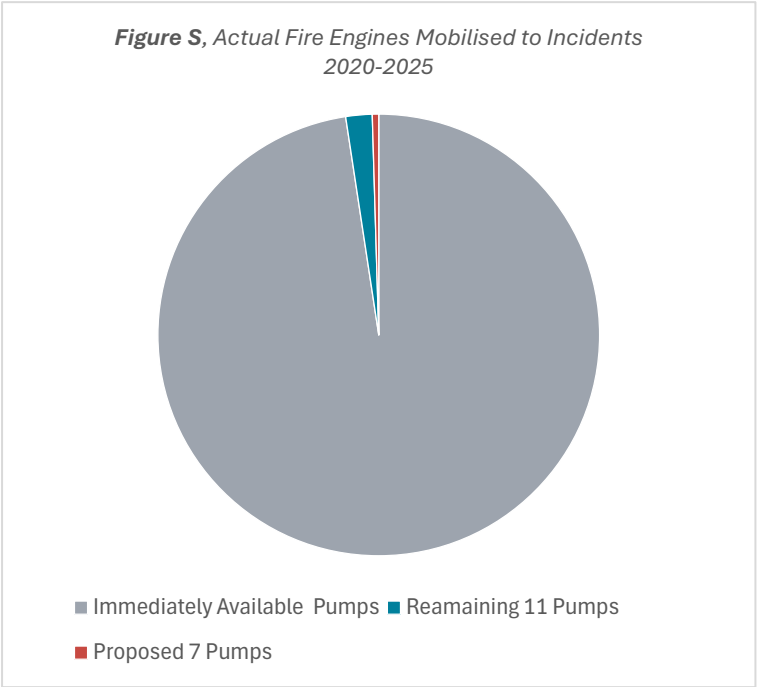
Number of On-Call Fire Engines Ready to Respond

This data shows the average number of On-Call fire engines available out of 18 per day and per night. A day is 0900-1800 and night is 1800-0900. To be available a fire engines has to be available for 5 hours in a day and 8 hours in a night. This information is taken from our KPIs.

In 2024, on average, we had

- **One of 18 On-Call fire engines available** during the day.
- **Two of 18 On-Call fire engines available** during the night.

Figure T, shows On-Call availability over 2024 by month

		Apr	May	June	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Day	2023/2024	0.7	0.5	0.6	0.8	0.7	0.6	0.3	1.2	0.6	2.7	2.0	1.3
	2024/2025	**0.9**	**0.9**	**0.8**	**0.9**	**0.6**	**0.8**	**0.5**	**1.5**	**1.2**	**2.9**	**2.1**	**2.2**
	Status	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	A	A	A
Night	2023/2024	1.1	0.7	1.0	0.9	0.4	0.5	0.7	1.0	0.6	2.3	2.2	1.8
	2024/2025	**1.1**	**1.2**	**0.9**	**1.6**	**1.6**	**1.5**	**1.3**	**2.5**	**2**	**4.3**	**3.5**	**3.6**
	Status	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	A	A	G	G	G

B	> 5
G	> 2.99
A	< 3
R	< 2

What is good
Higher is better

24

Full Time Equivalent of On-Call

To help us plan and maintain consistent fire cover, we measure On-Call availability using full time equivalent (FTE) hours. On-Call firefighters commit to being available between 40 and 120 hours per week, with 120 hours representing one FTE.

For example, three firefighters each contracted for 40 hours per week would collectively provide the same cover as one firefighter on a 120-hour contract. This helps us understand how many firefighters are needed to ensure reliable fire engine availability.

To maintain 100 per cent availability of a single fire engine, we require a minimum of 12 FTE On-Call firefighters. Across our fleet of 18 fire engines, this equates to a total requirement of 216 FTE.

Currently, the service holds contracts totalling 57.43 FTE.

At most stations, the number of On-Call firefighters is not currently sufficient to routinely crew a fire engine. This includes having the right mix of skills, such as qualified drivers, breathing apparatus wearers, and crew commanders, to meet mobilisation requirements.

Therefore, we have more On-Call fire engines than we can regularly crew, which means some vehicles are unavailable even though we still have firefighters in the system.

This is why in our current CRMP, we made a clear promise to be an excellent, modern, and agile service. We pledged to:

"Assess the required number of On-Call fire engines to align with our new response standard and address identified risks within the CRMP."

This commitment was shaped by feedback from both staff and public consultations, which emphasised the need to improve resilience and capacity across the Service.

Our proposals will give us the flexibility to adopt a more Service-wide approach to On-Call firefighter availability. For example, if we have two On-Call firefighters available at one station, and two at another who, when combined, have the full skill set required to crew a fire engine, we could allocate them to the same fire engine at the same fire station and increase the Service resilience by one On-call fire engine.

FINANCIAL PICTURE

We must make sure every pound is spent where it makes the most difference to public safety. When considering changes to our On-Call provision, we reviewed the financial impact as well as operational data.

Current Position

- The current **On-Call budget is £1.2 million per year**.
- This covers the direct cost of employing On-Call firefighters but does not include all the wider costs such

as training, equipment, vehicles, and maintaining stations.

- To **fully crew all 18 On-Call fire engines** so they were available 100% of the time would require **around £3.3 million per year** in staffing costs alone – a shortfall of over £2 million.

Fire Engine Costs

- Every fire engine brings ongoing costs. Each one typically costs:
- Around **£300,000 to purchase**.
- Around **£100,000 in specialist kit and equipment**.
- Around **£8,000 per year** for servicing and maintenance.

Station Costs

Even dormant stations (such as Stokenchurch and Great Missenden, which have not been fully crewed for some time) still require annual spending on:

- Maintenance and servicing of equipment.
- Insurance, utilities, and business rates.
- Upgrades to meet modern safety and equality standards.

Each of these two dormant stations alone will require **around £150,000 investment** within the next two years to remain usable, despite providing no operational response.

What the Proposal Means

By removing fire engines that are rarely or never available and closing two long-term dormant stations, we can:

- Reduce ongoing costs for vehicles, equipment, and building upkeep.
- Reinvest savings into making the **remaining 11 On-Call fire engines more reliable and available**.
- Improve facilities at the stations we keep, making them more modern, safe, and inclusive.
- Support new specialist vehicles (like Rural Firefighting Vehicles and Water Carriers) that better match risks in our communities.

Why This Matters

Put simply, the alternative would be to keep spending money on vehicles and stations that **cannot be reliably crewed** and do not provide the cover our communities need. By focusing resources where they will have the greatest impact, we can deliver better value for money and a stronger, more dependable service.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

Before launching this formal consultation, we carried out some **early engagement** to help us shape ideas for our final proposal. To do this, we commissioned an independent research company to run focus groups with staff and members of the public.

This was not part of the formal consultation. Instead, it gave us useful insight into how the proposals could be seen by different groups and what concerns we may need to address as part of this consultation. The full report is included as an appendix, but some of the high-level findings are set out below.

Early engagement – High Level Results

- Recognition of the challenges and that changes were needed to allow the service to become more modern, agile while also managing risk and financial concerns.
- There was some support in all staff groups and among members of the public for the On-Call Improvement Programme's focus (i.e., using On-Call primarily for resilience and special appliance crewing).
- This support was, however, caveated with practical concerns around managing future risk from, say, population increases and infrastructure developments; resilience for larger and simultaneous incidents; an over-reliance on cross-border cover; the potential impacts of increased response times (however small) on public and firefighter safety; and the prospect of staffing reductions on remaining On-Call fire engines both within

Buckinghamshire and in neighbouring fire and rescue services.

- Data being out of date (older data was brought forward so new data is from 24/25 financial year).
- In effect, there was concern that all stations have been treated equally within the process, while there are clear differences in added value and future viability.
- Concerns that having two options made the service look indecisive, and that the service was trusted to put forward the best option based on operational knowledge.
- Option one was overall more accepted as it seemed to deal with the issues more effectively.
- The consensus was that while in an ideal world the proposed changes would not be necessary, the ideas had been carefully considered and appeared to be rational and proportionate, and to represent a better and more efficient way to spend a limited budget.
- There was significant trust in BFRS to make sensible decisions, though the need to manage public concerns and perceptions carefully and sensitively within affected areas was stressed.

What this Tells Us

These early findings are not the outcome of formal consultation, but they helped us shape ideas for our final proposal. They show that while people recognise the challenges and understand the need for change, concerns remain about future risks and reassurance.

We have reflected these concerns throughout this evidence pack, for example, by considering the impact of population growth and infrastructure developments, the need for resilience at large or simultaneous incidents, and the reliability of On-Call fire engines.

Modelling our Proposals

> *During our early engagement, the public told us they wanted to understand what any proposed changes would mean for them. To assess this, we carried out detailed data modelling.*

We have used different approaches to assess what our proposals could mean to the community. These approaches have to be based on some assumptions as they are predictions of what could happen in each situation.

We compared three situations:

1. **All On-Call fire engines crewed** – what would happen if every one of our 18 On-Call fire engines always had a full crew. This is not realistic because we don't have the people or budget to run them all. But it helps us see the "best possible" case.
2. **Our proposal** – this is the realistic possibility that we could fully crew 11 On-Call fire engines if we realign resources, using available firefighters with the relevant skills to crew each fire engine.
3. **No On-Call fire engines** – what would happen if none of the On-Call fire engines were available. This is closer to

what often happens now, because On-Call availability is low (around **12.8%** overall).

We know people might wonder why we don't just look at actual response times. The problem is that **real response times already reflect low On-Call availability**. Many On-Call fire engines are not crewed and cannot respond, so the "real" data already looks more like the **"No On-Call"** scenario in our table.

To access response times for our proposal, we used historic incident data from April 2020 to March 2025 into modelling software. The software was then used to modify which appliances are available to attend incidents.

We were able to vary how long each appliance takes to mobilise (we used the times in our current mobilising system - these vary for each On-Call appliance) and the availability of each appliance.

To keep consistency across the models all appliances were set to 100 per cent availability. Once these and other parameters were set the model ran through the historical incidents in chronological order assigning appliances based on the model setup.

Once the model had been run, details of which appliances attended which incidents within the model were summarised.

This is how the new times were calculated.

What the Results Show

The table shows the average time it would take for a fire engine to arrive in each area.

- Across the whole area, the difference between the "all engines crewed" case and our proposal is very small, just **8 seconds slower on average**.
- In some places, response times get slightly quicker under our proposal, because crews are more reliable.
- In other places, the change is a few seconds slower, but still very small overall. The very worst case, excluding dormant stations, is just **14 seconds slower (around a 2.7% change)**.
- The "no On-Call" case shows much worse times – proving how important it is that we keep some On-Call fire engines.

Two stations – **Great Missenden** and **Stokenchurch**, look like outliers in the table. Their figures show big changes, but this is only because they have had no crews for over 5 years. These are "dormant" stations that already do not respond to incidents. Our proposal is to formally remove them.

Downside Risk and Upside Benefit

- **Downside Risk** means the difference between the proposal and the "all engines crewed" case. The average downside is just **8 seconds slower**, showing the impact is very small compared to the best-possible but unrealistic scenario.
- **Upside Benefit** means the difference between the proposal and the "no On-Call" case. The average upside is **34 seconds faster**, and in some areas several minutes quicker, showing the benefits of concentrating resources where they are most reliable.

What this Means

- It is not realistic for us to crew all 18 On-Call fire engines, it would take many more staff than we can recruit and train. Even if we did, the benefit would be very small. *The total number of mobilisations would only fall by –0.9%, and first attendances by just 12 incidents out of over 6,300 (–0.2%).*
- At the moment, many On-Call engines already cannot respond because there are not enough crew, availability is only about **12%**.
- By focusing on 11 stations instead, we can make sure these fire engines are more reliable and available when needed.
- Two dormant stations, **Great Missenden** and **Stokenchurch**, would be removed, as they already do not respond.
- Other areas, such as **Amersham** and **Buckingham**, would lose an engine, but staff would be redeployed to strengthen neighbouring stations.

In summary

The proposals do not reduce our ability to respond to emergencies. Instead, it makes the service stronger by concentrating On-Call resources where they are most effective, so fire engines are more likely to be crewed and ready when needed.

Figure U, *Modelled Attendance Times*

Station Grounds	All On-Call Available – Avg Attendance Time	Proposal Avg Attendance Time	No On-Call – Avg Attendance Time	Downside Risk	Upside Benefit	None vs. All
Broughton	06:50	06:50	06:57	00:00	00:07	00:07
Newport Pagnell	08:04	08:05	08:15	00:01	00:10	00:11
Olney	09:07	09:07	14:52	00:00	05:45	05:45
West Ashland	08:21	08:23	08:31	00:02	00:08	00:10
Aylesbury	07:24	07:24	07:42	00:00	00:18	00:18
Buckingham	08:41	08:55	09:10	00:14	00:15	00:29
Winslow	09:54	09:56	15:41	00:02	05:45	05:47
Brill	12:37	12:37	17:11	00:00	04:34	04:34
Waddesdon	13:44	13:44	18:40	00:00	04:56	04:56
Haddenham	09:47	09:47	13:02	00:00	03:15	03:15
Amersham	06:37	06:43	06:54	00:06	00:11	00:17
Chesham	07:11	07:18	09:51	00:07	02:33	02:40
Great Missenden	09:40	12:36	12:58	02:56	00:22	03:18
High Wycombe	05:06	05:12	05:20	00:06	00:08	00:14
Princes Risborough	09:04	09:05	15:47	00:01	06:42	06:43
Stokenchurch	10:31	13:14	13:16	02:43	00:02	02:45
Marlow	08:53	08:57	10:22	00:04	01:25	01:29
Beaconsfield	06:26	06:30	06:33	00:04	00:03	00:07
Gerrards Cross	08:10	08:10	08:12	00:00	00:02	00:02
Total/Average	**07:34**	**07:42**	**08:16**	**00:08**	**00:34**	

FIRE ENGINE APPRAISALS

This section provides an overview of each On-Call fire station, drawing together data on staffing, availability, and incident response. It allows us to look beyond county-wide averages and understand the contribution and challenges at individual stations.

We carried out these appraisals to help shape the proposals taken into early engagement. During that process, staff and members of the public told us it was important that decisions were seen to be **fair, transparent, and based on evidence rather than assumptions**. That is why we are publishing the appraisals in this evidence pack, so that people can see clearly how each station has been assessed.

For each On-Call station we present:
- **Current staffing levels** (including Officers-in-Charge and drivers)
- **Recruitment potential** (population within catchment area)
- **Incident activity** (incidents attended and first in attendance, 2024/25 and over a five-year period)
- **Availability performance** (actual appliance availability 2024/25 and 2020–2025 average)
- **Modelled potential** (expected contribution if the appliance were 100% available)
- **Impact of the proposal** (change in predicted response times compared to current model)
- **Cross-border support** (number of incidents supported by neighbouring services)

To make comparisons clear, each area is given an **indicative score (★☆☆☆☆ to ★★★★★)** showing relative strengths and weaknesses. These scores are not absolute ratings but help to highlight where On-Call appliances contribute most to community outcomes, where they face significant challenges with crew availability, and where alternative approaches, such as redeployment of staff or introducing specialist vehicles, may provide better resilience.

By presenting this station-level detail, we aim to provide **transparency** on how the proposals affect individual communities, and explain why certain appliances are recommended for removal, retention, or transition to other roles.

Amersham Fire Engine Appraisal

Location, Geography and Risk Profile

Amersham is a semi-rural town in south Buckinghamshire, mainly residential with some commercial premises. It has good transport links (A413, Metropolitan line) and benefits from strong cover by nearby wholetime stations at High Wycombe and Beaconsfield. Key risks include residential and light commercial premises, transport routes, and some environmental risk such as wildfire during dry periods.

		Score
Number of On-Call staff / FTE	8 / 2	★★☆☆☆
Officers In Charge	2	
Drivers	4	
Recruitment pool (population within catchment)	29,546	
Incidents attended (Actual 2024/25)	3	★★☆☆☆
First in attendance (2024/25)	3	
Over-the-border appliances attending incidents (Actual 2024/25)	1	
Incidents if 100% available (theoretical comparison)		■
First in attendance if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	6	■
Actual availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	1.4%	
5-year average availability (reality comparison 2020–2025)	3.9%	★☆☆☆☆
Proposal Availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	6:43	
Predicted change in response time to community (proposal vs current)	00:11 (Quicker)	★★★☆☆

Indicative Score

- **Staffing capacity:** ★★☆☆☆ (limited, low numbers despite reasonable recruitment pool)
- **Community demand:** ★★☆☆☆ (low current incident numbers, but higher modelled potential if availability improved)
- **Current availability:** ★☆☆☆☆ (very poor, <5% average)
- **Impact of proposal:** ★★★☆☆ (slight improvement in response time predicted, with resilience gained from resource redeployment)

Summary

Amersham's On-Call fire engine has extremely low availability, averaging under 4% over five years and attending just 3 incidents in 2024/25. Under the proposal, the fire engine would be replaced with a Rural Firefighting Vehicle, which requires fewer crew and can be mobilised more reliably, offering a more practical and risk-appropriate response for the area.

Proposal: Remove On-Call fire engine, replace with RFV.

Aylesbury Fire Engine Appraisal

Location, Geography and Risk Profile.

Aylesbury is the county town of Buckinghamshire, a growing urban centre with significant housing and population growth. The area includes major transport routes, retail, education, and healthcare facilities, creating a broad risk profile. Cover is provided by two wholetime appliances at Aylesbury station, ensuring strong resilience, with the On-Call crew providing additional support when available.

		Score
Number of On-Call staff / FTE	12 / 5.33	
Officers In Charge	3	
Drivers	4	★★☆☆☆
Recruitment pool (population within catchment)	48,533	
Incidents attended (Actual 2024/25)	16	
First in attendance (2024/25)	10	★★☆☆☆
Over-the-border appliances attending incidents (Actual 2024/25)	95	
Incidents if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	71	■
First in attendance if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	12	■
Actual availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	13.4%	
5-year average availability (reality comparison 2020–2025)	11.8%	★★☆☆☆
Proposal Availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	07:24	
Predicted change in response time to community (proposal vs current)	00:18 (Quicker)	★★★☆☆

Indicative Score

- **Staffing capacity:** ★★☆☆☆ (limited, low numbers despite reasonable recruitment pool)
- **Community demand:** ★★☆☆☆ (low current incident numbers, but higher modelled potential if availability improved)
- **Current availability:** ★★☆☆☆ (low and variable)
- **Impact of proposal:** ★★★☆☆ (slight improvement in response time predicted, with resilience gained from resource redeployment)

Summary

Although Aylesbury's On-Call availability is low, the pump is retained in the proposal. This is because Aylesbury is a high-risk and high-demand area, already supported by strong wholetime cover. Keeping the On-Call pump provides additional resilience and ensures that, when crewed, it can add value alongside the wholetime appliances.

Proposal: No change

Beaconsfield Fire Engine Appraisal

Beaconsfield is an urban/semi-rural town with strong transport links (M40, A355, Chiltern rail line) and a mix of residential, retail, and light commercial risk. Its strategic location close to High Wycombe, Gerrards Cross, and Slough means it is well covered by neighbouring wholetime stations. Beaconsfield houses one Wholetime Fire Engine, Boat and Water Rescue Unit.

		Score
Number of On-Call staff / FTE	3 / 1.42	
Officers In Charge	0	
Drivers	2	★☆☆☆☆
Recruitment pool (population within catchment)	51,020	
Incidents attended (Actual 2024/25)	3	
First in attendance (2024/25)	1	★☆☆☆☆
Over-the-border appliances attending incidents (Actual 2024/25)	224	
Incidents if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	60	■
First in attendance if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	8	■
Actual availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	1.4%	
5-year average availability (reality comparison 2020–2025)	1.4%	★☆☆☆☆
Proposal Availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	06:30	
Predicted change in response time to community (proposal vs current)	00:03 (Quicker)	★★★★☆

Indicative Score

- **Staffing capacity:** ★☆☆☆☆ (low numbers despite large recruitment pool)
- **Community demand:** ★★☆☆☆ (low – very few incidents attended locally; heavy reliance on other stations).
- **Current availability:** ★☆☆☆☆ (very poor, <5% average)
- **Impact of proposal:** ★★★★☆ (moderate improvement in response time predicted if available 100% of the time)

Summary

Beaconsfield's On-Call fire engine is effectively unavailable due to minimal staffing, with almost all demand covered by the wholetime crew. It is acknowledged that over the border mobilisations are high in this part of the county. That would not change with Beaconsfield's On-Call fire engine being readily available due to the geography of this area. Under the consultation proposals, the On-Call fire engine at Beaconsfield would be **removed** and replaced with a **Crew Welfare Unit**. This provides a more effective and sustainable use of resources.

Proposal: Remove one On-Call fire engine, replace with Crew Welfare Unit.

Brill Fire Engine Appraisal

Location, Geography and Risk Profile.

Brill is a small rural village on the Buckinghamshire–Oxfordshire border, with a limited population catchment. Risks are largely residential and agricultural, with some wildfire and environmental risk in surrounding countryside. It is geographically remote compared to larger stations, but neighbouring stations (Aylesbury, Bicester) provide the bulk of first-line cover.

		Score
Number of On-Call staff / FTE	7 / 3.08	
Officers In Charge	3	
Drivers	4	★★☆☆☆
Recruitment pool (population within catchment)	2,200	
Incidents attended (Actual 2024/25)	3	
First in attendance (2024/25)	3	★★☆☆☆
Over-the-border appliances attending incidents (Actual 2024/25)	48	
Incidents if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	34	██
First in attendance if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	21	██
Actual availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	3.4%	
5-year average availability (reality comparison 2020–2025)	8.9%	★☆☆☆☆
Proposal Availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	12:37	
Predicted change in response time to community (proposal vs current)	04:34 (Quicker)	★★★★☆

Indicative Score

- **Staffing capacity:** ★★☆☆☆ (slightly better than other small villages, with more OICs and drivers, but still very limited crew and poor availability)
- **Community demand:** ★★☆☆☆ (low – few incidents attended, but theoretical demand is slightly higher than some other small stations)
- **Current availability:** ★☆☆☆☆ (very poor, <5% average)
- **Impact of proposal:** ★★★★☆ (moderate improvement in response time predicted if available 100% of the time)

Summary

While Brill's On-Call crew faces significant challenges with low staff numbers and availability, its **geographical isolation makes retaining the appliance essential**. Investment in recruitment and support will aim to improve availability, ensuring continued local resilience.

Proposal: No change

Broughton Fire Engine Appraisal

Location, Geography and Risk Profile.

Broughton serves the eastern side of Milton Keynes, a rapidly growing urban area with a very large catchment population. Risks include dense residential housing, schools, retail and commercial premises, as well as the nearby M1 motorway which generates significant transport-related demand. Broughton houses one Wholetime Fire Engine.

		Score
Number of On-Call staff / FTE	10 / 5.08	
Officers In Charge	3	
Drivers	4	★★★☆☆
Recruitment pool (population within catchment)	84,185	
Incidents attended (Actual 2024/25)	18	
First in attendance (2024/25)	9	★★★☆☆
Over-the-border appliances attending incidents (Actual 2024/25)	18	
Incidents if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	82	
First in attendance if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	13	
Actual availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	9.7%	
5-year average availability (reality comparison 2020–2025)	10.7%	★★☆☆☆
Proposal Availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	06:50	
Predicted change in response time to community (proposal vs current)	00:07 (Quicker)	★★☆☆☆

Indicative Score

- **Staffing capacity:** ★★★☆☆ (reasonable crew base and strong recruitment pool, but low availability)
- **Community demand:** ★★★☆☆ (low demand but in a high-growth area with potential for much more if availability improves)
- **Current availability:** ★★☆☆☆ (low availability with opportunity for improvement from reinvestment)
- **Impact of proposal:** ★★☆☆☆ (slight improvement in response time predicted)

Summary

Broughton serves a large population and attends a notable number of incidents, including being first in attendance at nearly half. Despite current low availability, the large recruitment pool offers potential to improve crewing with focused investment. Retaining this pump ensures cover in a high-demand area with fast road links and growing community risk.

Proposal: No change

Buckingham Fire Engine Appraisal

Location, Geography and Risk Profile.

Buckingham is a small historic market town in north Buckinghamshire, surrounded by rural villages and farmland. Local risks include domestic fires, heritage buildings, agricultural incidents, and road traffic collisions on the busy A421 and connecting routes. The town is geographically remote from larger urban centres, relying on support from Broughton, Newport Pagnell, and Winslow. This makes the right type of local cover important.

		Score
Number of On-Call staff / FTE	13 / 5.08	
Officers In Charge	5	
Drivers	5	★★★☆☆
Recruitment pool (population within catchment)	9,035	
Incidents attended (Actual 2024/25)	15	
First in attendance (2024/25)	10	★★☆☆☆
Over-the-border appliances attending incidents (Actual 2024/25)	41	
Incidents if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	56	■
First in attendance if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	15	■
Actual availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	16.2%	
5-year average availability (reality comparison 2020–2025)	5.3%	★★☆☆☆
Proposal Availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	08:55	
Predicted change in response time to community (proposal vs current)	00:15 (Quicker)	★★★★☆

Indicative Score

- **Staffing capacity:** ★★★☆☆ (reasonable crew base, but limited by small pool)
- **Community demand:** ★★☆☆☆ (moderate, partly covered by others)
- **Current availability:** ★★☆☆☆ (low and variable)
- **Impact of proposal:** ★★★★☆ (strong positive – RFV and pooling benefits)

Summary

Buckingham will continue to house a wholetime fire engine however the On-Call fire engine has struggled with availability, averaging only 5.3% over the past 5 years, despite recent improvement to 16.2%. Steady local demand. The proposal strengthens response by introducing a Rural Firefighting Vehicle and improving cross-cover with Winslow, ensuring better alignment with risks and more dependable cover.

Proposal: Remove On-Call fire engine, replace with RFV.

Chesham Fire Engine Appraisal

Location, Geography and Risk Profile.

Chesham is a semi-rural town in the Chiltern Hills, with a mixture of residential and light commercial risk. Its location on the edge of the county means it often relies on cross-border support from Hertfordshire. Road access is constrained by rural routes, which can add to travel times.

		Score
Number of On-Call staff / FTE	7 / 3.33	
Officers In Charge	4	
Drivers	4	★★☆☆☆
Recruitment pool (population within catchment)	32,566	
Incidents attended (Actual 2024/25)	5	
First in attendance (2024/25)	5	★★☆☆☆
Over-the-border appliances attending incidents (Actual 2024/25)	19	
Incidents if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	177	■
First in attendance if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	150	■
Actual availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	5.2%	
5-year average availability (reality comparison 2020–2025)	2.4%	★★☆☆☆
Proposal Availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	07:18	
Predicted change in response time to community (proposal vs current)	02:33 (Quicker)	★★★★☆

Indicative Score

- **Staffing capacity:** ★★☆☆☆ (limited, low numbers despite reasonable recruitment pool)

- **Community demand:** ★★☆☆☆ (moderate, partly covered by others)

- **Current availability:** ★★☆☆☆ (very poor, <5% average)

- **Impact of proposal:** ★★★★☆ (positive, resilience not reduced, demand already covered)

Summary

Chesham's On-Call pump will be retained, but its effectiveness will be strengthened through integration with Amersham. Pooling staff and introducing a shared RFV provides greater flexibility, improves resilience, and ensures both stations can better match resources to the local risk profile.

Proposal: No change

Great Missenden Fire Engine Appraisal

Location, Geography and Risk Profile.

Great Missenden is a rural community with relatively low incident demand. It is supported by nearby On-Call and Wholetime stations in Amersham, Chesham, and High Wycombe.

		Score
Number of On-Call staff / FTE	0	
Officers In Charge	0	
Drivers	0	☆☆☆☆☆
Recruitment pool (population within catchment)	18,375	
Incidents attended (Actual 2024/25)	0	
First in attendance (2024/25)	0	★☆☆☆☆
Over-the-border appliances attending incidents (Actual 2024/25)	0	
Incidents if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	106	■
First in attendance if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	81	■
Actual availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	0%	
5-year average availability (reality comparison 2020–2025)	0%	☆☆☆☆☆
Proposal Availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	12:36	
Predicted change in response time to community (proposal vs current)	00:22 (Quicker)	★★★★☆

Indicative Score

- **Staffing capacity:** ☆☆☆☆☆ (no staff for last 5 years)
- **Community demand:** ★☆☆☆☆ (theoretical only – covered by surrounding stations)
- **Current availability:** ☆☆☆☆☆ (very poor, unavailable)
- **Impact of proposal:** ★★★★☆ (positive, removal allows resources to be reinvested and improves response resilience)

Summary

Great Missenden has been dormant for over five years, with no On-Call crew and no realistic prospect of sustaining operations. While modelling suggests theoretical demand, in practice these incidents are already covered by neighbouring stations. Closing the site avoids significant investment costs required to modernise facilities (welfare, contamination, EDI compliance) and allows resources to be better directed elsewhere. Importantly, modelling shows that **response times for the local community will improve slightly (22 seconds)** under the proposal.

Proposal: Close station

Haddenham Fire Engine Appraisal

Location, Geography and Risk Profile.

Haddenham is a rural village in the south of Buckinghamshire, close to the Oxfordshire border. The area is largely residential, with transport risk from road and rail links. Proximity to neighbouring fire services means cross-border cover is common.

		Score
Number of On-Call staff / FTE	1 / 0.33	
Officers In Charge	1	
Drivers	1	☆☆☆☆☆
Recruitment pool (population within catchment)	11,004	
Incidents attended (Actual 2024/25)	1	
First in attendance (2024/25)	1	★★☆☆☆
Over-the-border appliances attending incidents (Actual 2024/25)	69	
Incidents if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	81	███
First in attendance if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	55	███
Actual availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	0.2%	
5-year average availability (reality comparison 2020–2025)	1.4%	☆☆☆☆☆
Proposal Availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	09:47	
Predicted change in response time to community (proposal vs current)	03:15 (Quicker)	★★★★☆

Indicative Score

- **Staffing capacity:** ☆☆☆☆☆ (extremely limited – requires urgent focus)
- **Community demand:** ★★☆☆☆ (low direct incidents, but 69 supported by cross-border appliances shows reliance on neighbours)
- **Current availability:** ☆☆☆☆☆ (virtually unavailable – 0.2%)
- **Impact of proposal:** ★★★★☆ (positive, retention provides resilience and opportunity to rebuild capacity)

Summary

Haddenham's On-Call pump has had extremely low availability, attending only **1 incident in 2024/25**. However, wider engagement and community feedback demonstrated strong concerns about resilience if it were removed, particularly given similar challenges at other local FRS On-Call stations. Retaining the pump provides strategic resilience in the south of the county and reduces over-reliance on neighbouring services. This will require targeted recruitment and investment to rebuild staffing levels and make the pump viable.

Proposal: No change

High Wycombe Fire Engine Appraisal

Location, Geography and Risk Profile.

High Wycombe is a large market town in south Buckinghamshire, situated in the Chiltern Hills with strong transport links via the M40 and A404. It is a mixed urban area with significant residential, commercial, and industrial zones. Key risks include urban flooding from the River Wye, traffic incidents on major commuter routes, and demand for support across the wider Wycombe district.

		Score
Number of On-Call staff / FTE	3 / 1.50	
Officers In Charge	0	
Drivers	2	★☆☆☆☆
Recruitment pool (population within catchment)	77,902	
Incidents attended (Actual 2024/25)	15	
First in attendance (2024/25)	9	★★☆☆☆
Over-the-border appliances attending incidents (Actual 2024/25)	51	
Incidents if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	77	███
First in attendance if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	12	███
Actual availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	2.9%	
5-year average availability (reality comparison 2020–2025)	1.4%	★☆☆☆☆
Proposal Availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	05:12	
Predicted change in response time to community (proposal vs current)	00:08 (Quicker)	★★★☆☆

Indicative Score

- **Staffing capacity:** ★☆☆☆☆ (limited, low numbers despite sizable recruitment pool)
- **Community demand:** ★★☆☆☆ (low current incident numbers, but higher modelled potential if availability improved)
- **Current availability:** ★☆☆☆☆ (very poor, <5% average)
- **Impact of proposal:** ★★★☆☆ (strong crewing opportunities and pooling benefits)

Summary

High Wycombe houses 2 Wholetime fire engines and specialist appliances. While High Wycombe's On-Call pump has struggled with availability, averaging only 1.4% over the past 5 years, despite recent improvement to 1.4% the local demand does not require an additional On-Call fire engine. The proposal strengthens response by consolidating staff to support other neighbouring stations and wholetime vehicles at High Wycombe.

Proposal: Remove On-Call Fire Engine, staff to wholetime vehicles and bolster availability at other On-Call stations.

Marlow Fire Engine Appraisal

Location, Geography and Risk Profile.

Marlow is a riverside town in south Buckinghamshire, with major road links via the A404 and proximity to the M40. The area is predominantly residential with some light industry, retail and tourism activity. Key risks include flooding from the River Thames, road traffic collisions on busy commuter routes, and the need to provide resilience to neighbouring stations in the south of the county.

		Score
Number of On-Call staff / FTE	10 / 3.50	
Officers In Charge	1	
Drivers	4	★★☆☆☆
Recruitment pool (population within catchment)	75,787	
Incidents attended (Actual 2024/25)	27	
First in attendance (2024/25)	18	★★★☆☆
Over-the-border appliances attending incidents (Actual 2024/25)	16	
Incidents if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	173	■
First in attendance if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	137	■
Actual availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	10.7%	
5-year average availability (reality comparison 2020–2025)	7.1%	★★☆☆☆
Proposal Availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	08:57	
Predicted change in response time to community (proposal vs current)	01:25 (Quicker)	★★★★☆

Indicative Score

- **Staffing capacity:** ★★☆☆☆ (reasonable crew base, some stability and good recruitment pool)
- **Community demand:** ★★★☆☆ (steady demand, high theoretical opportunity)
- **Current availability:** ★★☆☆☆ (Higher than most On-Call engines but still low)
- **Impact of proposal:** ★★★★☆ (keeping pump, continued local cover)

Summary

Marlow's On-Call pump provides important coverage in a busy community, with demand that justifies retention. Availability is low but improving, and the large recruitment pool offers opportunities for growth. Under the proposal, Marlow retains its On-Call fire engine, with efforts to strengthen availability through reinvestment and cross-cover arrangements.

Proposal: No change.

Olney Fire Engine Appraisal

Location, Geography and Risk Profile.

Olney is a small market town in the northeast of Milton Keynes, serving a rural catchment with smaller villages nearby. Risks are mainly residential, with some heritage buildings and limited light commercial activity. Its location on the A509 provides road-related risk, while its rural character creates potential for delayed response if availability drops.

		Score
Number of On-Call staff/ FTE	11 / 6.33	
Officers In Charge	3	
Drivers	5	★★★☆☆
Recruitment pool (population within catchment)	4,218	
Incidents attended (Actual 2024/25)	27	
First in attendance (2024/25)	19	★★★☆☆
Over-the-border appliances attending incidents (Actual 2024/25)	8	
Incidents if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	55	■
First in attendance if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	45	■
Actual availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	42.7%	
5-year average availability (reality comparison 2020–2025)	16.6%	★★★☆☆
Proposal Availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	09:07	
Predicted change in response time to community (proposal vs current)	05:45 (Quicker)	★★★★☆

Indicative Score

- **Staffing capacity:** ★★★☆☆ (reasonable crew base, some stability despite low recruitment pool)
- **Community demand:** ★★★☆☆ (steady demand, high theoretical opportunity)
- **Current availability:** ★★★☆☆ (good availability, significantly improved recently, but still below 50%)
- **Impact of proposal:** ★★★★☆ (keeping pump, continued local cover)

Summary

Olney has shown a strong improvement in availability, rising to 42.7% this year compared with a 16.6% five-year average. Demand is modest but consistent, with limited reliance on neighbouring services. The proposal does not remove or change Olney's On-Call pump, recognising its improved resilience and the value it provides to a rural community.

Proposal: No change.

Princes Risborough Fire Engine Appraisal

Location, Geography and Risk Profile.

Princes Risborough is a small town in the Chiltern Hills, surrounded by rural villages and farmland. Key risks include residential properties, small industrial sites, and rural fire risks such as wildfires. Its location along the A4010 and rail line adds transport-related incidents. The nearest wholetime cover is High Wycombe, with Marlow providing further resilience

		Score
Number of On-Call staff / FTE	6 / 3.17	
Officers In Charge	2	
Drivers	4	★★☆☆☆
Recruitment pool (population within catchment)	9,660	
Incidents attended (Actual 2024/25)	17	
First in attendance (2024/25)	15	★★★☆☆
Over-the-border appliances attending incidents (Actual 2024/25)	29	
Incidents if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	135	■
First in attendance if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	113	■
Actual availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	25.6%	
5-year average availability (reality comparison 2020–2025)	14.2%	★★☆☆☆
Proposal Availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	09:05	
Predicted change in response time to community (proposal vs current)	06:42 (Quicker)	★★★★☆

Indicative Score

- **Staffing capacity:** ★★☆☆☆ (reasonable crew base, some stability despite low recruitment pool)
- **Community demand:** ★★★☆☆ (steady demand, high theoretical opportunity)
- **Current availability:** ★★☆☆☆ (one of our higher availability engines however still below 50% average)
- **Impact of proposal:** ★★★★☆ (keeping pump, continued local cover)

Summary

Princes Risborough has modest but consistent demand and delivers strong first attendance when available. Availability is improving, though staffing levels remain low. The proposal does not remove or change the On-Call pump, instead aiming to strengthen resilience in this rural area where cross-cover options are limited.

Proposal: No change.

Stokenchurch Fire Engine Appraisal

Location, Geography and Risk Profile.

Stokenchurch sits on the edge of the Chilterns, near the M40 corridor. While the area has some road-related risks, it is within reach of other stations such as High Wycombe and Princes Risborough, which provide effective cover.

		Score
Number of On-Call staff / FTE	1 / 1	
Officers In Charge	1	
Drivers	0	★☆☆☆☆
Recruitment pool (population within catchment)	8,110	
Incidents attended (Actual 2024/25)	0	
First in attendance (2024/25)	0	★★☆☆☆
Over-the-border appliances attending incidents (Actual 2024/25)	15	
Incidents if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	65	████
First in attendance if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	53	████
Actual availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	0%	
5-year average availability (reality comparison 2020–2025)	0.2%	★☆☆☆☆
Proposal Availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	13:14	
Predicted change in response time to community (proposal vs current)	00:02 (Quicker)	★★★☆☆

Indicative Score

- **Staffing capacity:** ★☆☆☆☆ (no crew, just one firefighter)
- **Community demand:** ★★☆☆☆ (steady demand, high theoretical opportunity)
- **Current availability:** ★☆☆☆☆ (station dormant for years)
- **Impact of proposal:** ★★★☆☆ (positive, removal allows resources to be reinvested and improves response resilience)

Summary

Stokenchurch has not had a crew for many years, with 0% availability and no incidents attended in 2024/25. Although modelling shows potential demand, in practice this cannot be met. Closing the site avoids significant investment costs required to modernise facilities (welfare, contamination, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion compliance) and allows resources to be better directed elsewhere. Importantly, modelling shows that **response times for the local community will improve slightly (14 seconds)**
Proposal: Close station.

Waddesden Fire Engine Appraisal

Location, Geography and Risk Profile.

Waddesdon is a rural village in central Buckinghamshire, surrounded by small settlements and agricultural land. The area is primarily residential with some commercial premises and heritage risks (including Waddesdon Manor, a National Trust site attracting significant visitors). Transport risk exists from the A41, with potential for RTCs. The station provides resilience across a wide rural catchment, where travel times from neighbouring stations can be extended.

		Score
Number of On-Call staff / FTE	7 / 4.33	
Officers In Charge	2	
Drivers	4	★★★☆☆
Recruitment pool (population within catchment)	10,362	
Incidents attended (Actual 2024/25)	17	
First in attendance (2024/25)	8	★★★☆☆
Over-the-border appliances attending incidents (Actual 2024/25)	27	
Incidents if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	83	■
First in attendance if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	54	■
Actual availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	43.3%	
5-year average availability (reality comparison 2020–2025)	27.3%	★★☆☆☆
Proposal Availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	13:44	
Predicted change in response time to community (proposal vs current)	04:56 (Quicker)	★★★★☆

Indicative Score

- **Staffing capacity:** ★★★☆☆ (moderate, scope for recruitment growth)
- **Current availability:** ★★★☆☆ (improving trend with strong recent year performance)
- **Community demand:** ★★☆☆☆ (steady use with reliance from neighbouring areas)
- **Impact of proposal:** ★★★★☆ (keeping pump, continued local cover. Improved response times under proposal)

Summary

Waddesdon's On-Call pump shows steady community demand and improving availability, rising significantly in 2024/25 compared to its 5-year average. While the recruitment pool is limited, performance suggests effective use of resources and value in maintaining the pump. The proposal makes no changes to Waddesdon, recognising its importance in covering a geographically rural area where neighbouring response times are extended.

Proposal: No change.

West Ashland Fire Engine Appraisal

Location, Geography and Risk Profile.

West Ashland is a key part of the Milton Keynes fire cover, sitting in a high-population urban environment with major transport infrastructure including the M1, A5 and rail links. Risks include high residential demand, commercial/retail hubs, and major road incidents. The station also provides resilience to neighbouring towns, making it a strategically important site. West Ashland houses two fire engines and a Turntable Ladder with Wholetime cover.

On-Call fire engine one:

		Score
Number of On-Call staff / FTE	11 / 5.08	
Officers In Charge	3	
Drivers	5	★★★☆☆
Recruitment pool (population within catchment)	125,634	
Incidents attended (Actual 2024/25)	31	
First in attendance (2024/25)	14	★★★★☆
Over-the-border appliances attending incidents (Actual 2024/25)	26	
Incidents if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	124	■
First in attendance if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	33	■
Actual availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	20.8%	
5-year average availability (reality comparison 2020–2025)	8.7%	★★☆☆☆
Proposal Availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	08:23	
Predicted change in response time to community (proposal vs current)	00:08 (Quicker)	★★★★☆

Indicative Score

- **Staffing capacity:** ★★★☆☆ (moderate coverage, with good recruitment pool)
- **Community demand:** ★★★★☆ (one of our busier On-Call engines but still on 31 incidents attended in a year, theoretical opportunity)
- **Current availability:** ★★☆☆☆ (improving trend, rising year performance)
- **Impact of proposal:** ★★★★☆ (positive, removal allows resources to be reinvested and improves response resilience)

Summary for On-Call fire engine one

Fire Engine1 is the stronger of the two On-Call appliances, showing rising availability and clear demand within the city. Retaining this Fire Engine, alongside the new Water Carrier, ensures West Ashland continues to provide urban resilience and flexibility.

Proposal: No change

On-Call fire engine two

Incidents attended (Actual 2024/25)	2	★☆☆☆☆
First in attendance (2024/25)	0	
Over-the-border appliances attending incidents (Actual 2024/25)	26	
Incidents if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	32	■
First in attendance if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	7	■
Actual availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	0.6%	★☆☆☆☆
5-year average availability (reality comparison 2020–2025)	0.5%	
Proposal Availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	08:23	★★★★☆
Predicted change in response time to community (proposal vs current)	00:08 (Quicker)	

Indicative Score
- **Staffing capacity:** ★☆☆☆☆ (crew go to On-Call fire engine 1, not enough for 2 On-Call fire engines)
- **Community demand:** ★☆☆☆☆ (low demand only 2 incidents attended in the year, theoretical opportunity low at 32 incidents)
- **Current availability:** ★☆☆☆☆ (almost no availability 0.5%)
- **Impact of proposal:** ★★★★☆ (Removal allows resources to be concentrated on Pump 1 and the Water Carrier)

Summary for On-call fire engine two
Fire Engine 2 has not been viable for several years, with negligible attendance and very low availability. Removing this appliance is sensible, enabling resources to be focused on strengthening Fire Engine 1 and introducing the Water Carrier to meet operational risks.
Proposal: Remove One On-Call Fire Engine, replace with new Water Carrier.

Winslow Fire Engine Appraisal

Location, Geography and Risk Profile.

Winslow is a smaller market town in northern Buckinghamshire with a modest recruitment pool but growing development pressures, including new housing expansion and East–West rail. Its semi-rural setting creates risk from road traffic collisions on surrounding A-roads, alongside domestic fire risk and agricultural incidents. Proximity to other On-Call stations provides resilience, but Winslow plays a valuable role in local cover.

		Score
Number of On-Call staff / FTE	11 / 5.08	
Officers In Charge	1	
Drivers	5	★★★☆☆
Recruitment pool (population within catchment)	4,715	
Incidents attended (Actual 2024/25)	33	
First in attendance (2024/25)	14	★★☆☆☆
Over-the-border appliances attending incidents (Actual 2024/25)	1	
Incidents if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	116	■
First in attendance if 100% available (theoretical comparison)	81	
Actual availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	32.8%	
5-year average availability (reality comparison 2020–2025)	15.6%	★★★☆☆
Proposal Availability (reality comparison 2024/25)	09:56	
Predicted change in response time to community (proposal vs current)	05:45 (Quicker)	★★★★☆

Indicative Score

- **Staffing capacity:** ★★★☆☆ (moderate, workable but officer resilience limited)
- **Community demand:** ★★☆☆☆ (minimal reliance on over-the-border appliances)
- **Current availability:** ★★★☆☆ (improving trend with strong recent year performance)
- **Impact of proposal:** ★★★★☆ (good improvement on response times, keeping engine ensures stability and resilience for the area)

Summary

Winslow demonstrates stronger and improving availability than some other standalone On-Call stations, with a notable increase from its 5-year average. Additionally, they do not have Wholetime cover like other fire engines with low availability. Despite its smaller recruitment pool, the pump consistently attends incidents and is first in attendance for a significant proportion, showing good operational impact. The decision to retain Winslow reflects both its improving trend and its geographical importance, providing resilience in the north of the county where alternative cover is limited.
Proposal: No change.

Operational Independence

In our response to the Government's Fire Reform White Paper (see CRMP Evidence Pack, p.157), we supported proposals to give Chief Fire Officers greater operational independence. This reflects national recommendations from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), which emphasise the importance of clearer accountability and empowered leadership. For more detail, the full Government White Paper can be found www.gov.uk/government/consultations/reforming-our-fire-and-rescue-service/outcome/response-to-the-fire-reform-white-paper-accessible-version and our full response is published in the CRMP Evidence Pack.

In its State of Fire and Rescue: The Annual Assessment of Fire and Rescue Services in England 2023, HMICFRS highlighted the need for clearer accountability and empowered leadership. It recommended that CFOs be given the authority to make strategic operational decisions to improve public safety and adapt to changing demands.
At the same time, strong governance remains essential. Under our proposal, the Fire Authority would continue to:

- Set strategic priorities.

- Approve budgets and response standards.

- Hold the CFO to account for performance.

The CFO would be responsible for day-to-day operational decisions, working closely with the Authority to deliver the best possible service.

Task	Responsible
Setting Service priorities	Fire Authority
Budget setting	Fire Authority
Setting Council Tax precept	Fire Authority
Setting response standards	Fire Authority
Opening and closing fire stations	Fire Authority
Appointment/dismissal of the CFO	Fire Authority
Appointment/dismissal of other fire service staff	Chief Fire Officer
Allocation of staff to meet priorities	Chief Fire Officer
Configuration and organisation of resources	Chief Fire Officer
Deployment of resources	Chief Fire Officer
Balancing operational needs	Chief Fire Officer
Expenditure (within delegated limits)	Chief Fire Officer

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Appendix 3

Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service

On-Call Improvement Programme Engagement 2025-2030

Report of findings

Opinion Research Services

October 2025

Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service: On-Call Improvement Programme Engagement 2025-2030

Report of findings

Kelly Lock, Opinion Research Services

October 2025

Opinion Research Services

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Contents

1. Summary of findings

Background to the engagement

1.1   Challenges around On-Call firefighter recruitment, retention, and availability have been a persistent and nationally recognised issue for over a decade, mainly due to societal changes. Since 2010, the Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority (BMKFA) has made several strategic attempts to address declining availability and recruitment challenges, with varying degrees of success. Indeed, despite these attempts, during its the last two full inspections, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) highlighted that BFRS must improve both its understanding of community risk, and how it resources the Service.

1.2   In this context, BFRS' Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 2025-2030 committed to using data to "understand the most effective use of On-Call resources to provide resilience, manage risks and uphold our new response standard." This includes evaluating the types of pumps and vehicles BFRS has and exploring opportunities for greater efficiency and effectiveness.

1.3   To deliver on this commitment, the On-Call Improvement Programme was established to identify opportunities to ensure BFRS becomes a highly resilient fire and rescue service; fully equipped to deal with routine daily demand, and the occasional higher impact, low frequency incidents. In particular, BFRS believes that streamlining the On-Call fleet (and refocusing the role of On-Call to focus on resilience for infrequent times of high demand and crewing of the Service's special appliances) would offer an opportunity to reinvest funds into the Service, and ensure its budget is spent where it can deliver maximum benefits.

The engagement process

1.4   To gather views on BFRS's proposed direction and travel and help shape the option/s to be submitted to the Fire Authority for approval in late 2025, three in-depth online focus groups were held with BFRS staff, and a further three with a broadly representative cross-section of residents from across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, in September and October 2025.

1.5   The focus groups were independently facilitated by Opinion Research Services (ORS) - a spin-out company from Swansea University with a UK-wide reputation for social research. In total, 18 BFRS staff members and 26 residents took part in the in-depth sessions.

Summary of main findings

There was recognition of BFRS's On-Call Challenges…

1.6   Staff across all three groups recognised BFRS's On-Call recruitment and retention challenges. Societal changes, workplaces' reluctance to release On-Call staff, low pay relative to the demands of the role, and the general affluence of the areas in which On-Call stations are located were though to hinder recruitment; whereas the demands of the role and disengagement because of a lack of 'shouts' were thought to contribute to high On-Call firefighter turnover.

1.7   Particular issues were noted at 'commuter belt' stations like Amersham, Beaconsfield, Great Missenden, and High Wycombe in the south of the County, which not only have to contend with the issues highlighted

above, but also their proximity to London and the loss of firefighters each time London Fire Brigade (which offers better pay and career opportunities) recruits.

1.8 Role-based issues were also frequently highlighted, most notably that driver and junior officer (JO)/officer in charge (OIC) shortages are often the critical factor in limiting On-Call pump availability. Driver shortages were not though to be for a lack of people wanting to take on the role, but the length of time they are having to wait for courses and examinations.

1.9 Public focus group participants demonstrated little knowledge of the challenges outlined by BFRS: they were unaware of the poor availability of many On-Call fire engines for example. However, when these challenges were outlined, the need for change was largely understood and supported. Participants particularly recognised that it would likely take many years to establish fully functioning crews in areas where there are currently no or few On-Call firefighters; and that the Service needs to spend its limited budget where it feels it can deliver the greatest benefit.

… but there was a sense that the challenges are, to some extent, of the Service's own making

1.10 There was a strong sense among participating staff that BFRS has contributed to its own challenges through its 'neglect' of the On-Call service in recent years. A particular issue was the focus on Wholetime recruitment at the expense of On-Call; specifically the recruitment of On-Call firefighters into Wholetime roles, depleting On-Call crewing at some stations and contributing to their availability issues.

1.11 Other issues were around the management of, and active support offered, to On-Call crews. Several participants felt that they and their On-Call colleagues are underutilised by, for example, not being called in when staff shortages or the need to crew a special appliance results in a Wholetime pump being taken off the run. Furthermore, the centralised Resource Management Team (RMT) was frequently criticised for a lack of proactive On-Call resource management, overly focusing on Wholetime to the detriment of On-Call, and not mobilising On-Call firefighters to stand-by at stations when appropriate.

1.12 An apparent lack of respect among Wholetime firefighters toward On-Call was alleged by several participants, who said their Wholetime colleagues often 'raid' their pumps, leaving them in a mess with equipment either missing or not functional.

1.13 All of this, it was said, contributes to a lack of morale among the On-Call workforce, in some cases to the extent that firefighters have disengaged with both station-based and community activities.

1.14 Members of the public also question BFRS' recruitment efforts, suggesting that they had never seen any promotion of On-Call roles locally, which may have impacted on firefighter numbers. Furthermore, there was some feeling that the onerous training requirements for On-Call firefighters might be off-putting to potential recruits, especially as most have to fit them around the demands of their primary employment.

Staff were concerned about the data used for the Programme

1.15 In all three groups, initial discussions on the Programme focused on the availability data being used to underpin it; and specifically the fact that the 2024 dataset referenced is out-of-date in some cases.

1.16 The lack of nuance in the overall availability data was also a significant issue, particularly in relation to On-Call 'propping up' Wholetime appliances at Buckingham, High Wycombe, and Amersham. It was frequently said that On-Call availability at these stations is impacted by the number of times On-Call firefighters are required to 'plug gaps' on Wholetime appliances, but that this is not reflected in the data.

1.17 Participating staff also suggested that BFRS interrogate the data in relation to other issues, such as the exact reasons for pump unavailability (i.e., number of times appliances were used as 'spares'); precise staffing gaps to determine future station viability; and the availability being offered by On-Call firefighters.

1.18 There was concern that all stations have been treated equally within the options appraisal process, when there are clear differences in current usefulness and future viability. For example, it was said that it is impossible for firefighters at standalone On-Call fire stations like Stokenchurch and Great Missenden to add value in the same way as those at a Wholetime or Day Crewed station like Broughton or High Wycombe might. As such, while their availability figures might look relatively similar on paper, there is a considerable difference in terms of potential added value.

While there were concerns about future risk and resilience, there was also some explicit an implicit agreement with the Programme's overall direction of travel

1.19 In terms of key practical concerns about the proposed future On-Call model (i.e., reducing the number of On-Call appliances, and primarily using the remaining service for resilience and special appliance crewing), managing future risk from, say, population increases and infrastructure developments like HS2 was first and foremost among staff. Other worries were around resilience for larger and simultaneous incidents, and an over-reliance on cross-border cover.

1.20 This was largely echoed by members of the public, who also highlighted the potential impacts of increased response times (no matter how marginal) on public and firefighter safety; and the prospect of staffing reductions on remaining On-Call pumps, both within Buckinghamshire and cross-border in neighbouring Fire and Rescue Services.

1.21 However, there was some agreement in all staff groups - and among members of the public - with the Programme's overall direction of travel in terms of On-Call focus (i.e., resilience and special appliance crewing). Indeed, it was said that neighbouring fire and rescue services now primarily use their On-Call crews for two- or three-person specialist appliances like water carriers, wildfire units, and turntable ladders. As such, there was support for taking the same approach in Buckinghamshire, and for engaging crews at the earliest opportunity on what special appliance distribution could look like. This, it was felt, would not only maintain interest among On-Call staff, but also provide maximise efficiencies for the Service as a whole.

There was confusion around the rationale for the two options, and some scepticism that staff redeployment would work in practice

1.22 Both of the options discussed were frequently described by participating staff as the 'easy way out' in terms of reducing the scale of the On-Call challenge. Staff also expressed general confusion around the rationale for the two options, particularly in relation to the inclusion of Buckingham On-Call in both for the reasons outlined earlier in this chapter relating to mixed crewing; because its availability is higher than some stations that do not feature; and because of its geographical location.

1.23 There was also some scepticism as to whether the redeployment aspect of both options could be achieved. Indeed, it was described as redundancy by stealth given that some - possibly many - firefighters would not be willing to respond to a fire station some distance from their community, especially if they are likely be one of the last people turning in, and so unlikely to make it onto the pump.

1.24 Having said that, some participants said they would be prepared to redeploy to another fire station within a reasonable distance and felt others would do the same, especially if incentivised with, say, fuel

payments. However, they stressed that this would only be sustainable if enough JOs and drivers would be prepared to do it, and providing they get sufficient 'shouts' to keep them motivated and competent.

Of the two options discussed, Option 1 was unanimously preferred

1.25 Of the two options currently on the table, Option 1 was unanimously preferred by staff, not least due to their perception that the availability issues at Great Missenden and Stokenchurch are so deep rooted as to be impossible to rectify within a reasonable timeframe.

1.26 Option 2 was generally opposed as it reduces overall resilience, and because of the potential implications of removing three On-Call appliances from Milton Keynes (on the town itself and on nearby fire stations). Indeed, its inclusion in the process was considered something of a concession to public and political opinion, which is unlikely to view the closure of standalone On-Call fire stations favourably. This was a concern for staff, who feared that residents (who typically know little about how the fire and rescue service works) would - given the choice - choose Option 2 on the grounds that it is 'neater' and maintains at least a physical BFRS presence in all current locations.

1.27 Indeed, opinion was more mixed among members of the public, (though marginally more people were in favour of BFRS taking Option 1 forward over Option 2), and the reasons given for favouring Option 2 were that it would not result in any fire station closures; it removes resource from areas that would still have good fire cover after implementation; and would be less likely to inflame public and political opinion. There was also some scepticism about the rationale for Option 2, however; specifically whether its inclusion is an attempt to alleviate public and political concern around potential station closures.

1.28 On the issue of politics, it should be noted that staff in all the groups were very frustrated by what they saw as unnecessary interference in the process, which has left them feeling like political 'pawns.' While fully understanding the need for the Fire Authority to scrutinise the options put forward, participants described the opposition being expressed in some quarters as 'grandstanding,' especially given the same politicians signed off the CRMP, which committed to undertaking a review of the On-Call service.

Some revisions to the options were suggested

1.29 Despite the overall preference for Option 1, revisions to the number of stations were suggested. Most commonly, participating staff felt the 'list' should include the four pumps with close to zero availability (Haddenham, Great Missenden, Stokenchurch, and West Ashland's second pump), plus potentially Beaconsfield and Amersham, depending on the 'added value' offered by the On-Call appliances there. It was also acknowledged in the public focus groups that the final proposal/s to be taken forward to consultation could ultimately be a needs-based combination of Options 1 and 2.

There was an overall preference for one option to be taken to formal consultation, underpinned by a range of data and supporting information

1.30 Overall, staff favoured taking one well thought out and data driven option forward to formal consultation, as this would demonstrate leadership, belief, and a clear direction of travel on the part of BFRS.

1.31 Residents were more divided, though there was a marginal preference for one option because it would be simpler and easier to understand, resulting in more informed feedback. Moreover, it was said that as the experts in the matter, BFRS should be confident in proposing what it considers the best way forward. Those favouring two options felt that proposing only one would seem like a foregone conclusion to consultees. It was, though, said that BFRS should provide a recommendation in this case.

1.32 In terms of the data and information participants felt would be needed to enable consultees to make an informed judgement on a way forward for the On-Call service, key suggestions from staff were:

» An up-to-date, station-by-station analysis of current staffing establishments and pump availability, added value, and future viability

» The efforts already made to recruit On-Call firefighters, and their success rate (or otherwise)

» The specific impacts of losing each On-Call pump

» The potential benefits of the proposed changes to increase buy-in

» Plans for the future of any closed stations

» The options considered and rejected, and the reasons for this.

1.33 Members of the public desired information around:

» The rationale for the overall Programme, and the option/s taken forward

» In affected areas, how emergency response would change (or not) to mitigate concerns

» Impacts on response times, and planned mitigations in affected areas

» Call-out types in the affected areas

» Plans for the pumps and/or stations themselves

» Any potential risks or impacts of making changes

» The options considered but not taken forward, and why.

1.34 Openness and transparency was considered especially important in the event of proposed fire station closures, to ensure concerned residents are armed with the facts; and reassured that their fire cover will effectively be the same as it is currently due to availability issues.

1.35 Encouragingly, members of the public trusted BFRS to make decisions in the best interest of its residents, staff, and other stakeholders. However, they too were concerned about public perception. It was frequently said that any cuts in public services are emotive and likely to cause anxiety within affected areas. In light of all this, BFRS was strongly advised to proceed sensitively and carefully in its 'PR' around any proposed reductions, using a range of communication methods to reach all members of the community and try to alleviate their fears.

Several suggestions were made to improve On-Call pump availability in future

1.36 Overall, participating staff were generally sceptical that BFRS has exhausted avenues to improve On-Call pump availability across Buckinghamshire prior to developing the two options and divest itself of some of these pumps. Not to do so – or show that it has done so – would, it was felt, damage the credibility and reputation of the Service.

1.37 Participants made several suggestions as to how the Service might seek to make these availability improvements. These included crewing special appliances and Wholetime pumps as required (as reported above), as well as several more specific suggestions, as below.

» More active leadership and resource management to 'plug' On-Call gaps across the county

» Lessening demands on (or *"downskilling"*) On-Call firefighters

» Pooling resources at nearby stations to ensure the availability of at least one On-Call pump (perhaps via 'hubs' or 'groups' of stations)

» Implementing the recent targeted approach to recruitment at other On-Call stations

» Allowing firefighters working in non-operational roles to provide On-Call cover

» Running an internal recruitment campaign at headquarters to *"say … 'Do any of you want to ride a fire engine during the day and put the one downstairs on the run?'" (Wholetime)*

» More proactive recruitment through visits to local businesses

» Encouraging Wholetime firefighters to provide On-Call cover

» Incentivising JOs to move to areas where shortages are affecting On-Call pump availability

» Fast-tracking driving courses and examinations for On-Call recruits and firefighters with existing driving qualifications (HGV licenses for example)

» Modifying the app used to book on call to allow those within the requisite time/distance of two stations to make themselves available at either

» Using the Programme itself to raise the profile of On-Call and as a recruitment tool (this was echoed by members of the public).

Participating staff urged BFRS to use this Programme as a springboard to develop a properly functioning On-Call service

1.38 Ultimately, while staff expressed concern and cynicism about the On-Call Improvement Programme, they were also of the view that if it results in BFRS committing to ensuring the future success of On-Call through measures to improve recruitment and retention, training opportunities, and support for staff, it may be worth it. However, they remain to be convinced that this will be the case.

Reassurances were sought that decisions have not already been made

1.39 Finally, participating staff were concerned that decisions have already made as to which On-Call pumps are to be removed, suggesting that this is evidenced by the targeted recruitment recently undertaken at a select number of stations, internal discussions about future staff moves, and the use of data that supports the Service's preferences.

There was widespread support among residents for 'operational independence' for the chief fire officer on some issues[1]

1.40 The overwhelming majority of participants agreed that the chief fire officer (CFO) should have 'operational independence' in relation to appointing and dismissing BFRS staff; decisions on staffing and resources; balancing the needs of the organisation and the public; and spending up to agreed levels. The CFO, it was said, has been appointed to manage the Service, and should be trusted to do so and to make decisions in its best interests. Most people anticipated positive impacts from granting the CFO such independence, especially in relation to efficiency and agile decision-making.

1.41 It was, though, considered important that the Fire Authority continue to provide governance and oversight to ensure accountability on the part of the CFO, and act as a 'backstop' in the event of significant disagreement with a decision made by the CFO.

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[1] Due to time constraints, this issue was not discussed with staff.

9

2. Project Overview

Background to the engagement

The On-Call Improvement Programme

2.1 Challenges around On-Call firefighter recruitment, retention, and availability have been a persistent and nationally recognised issue for over a decade, mainly due to societal changes. Since 2010, the Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority (BMKFA) has made several strategic attempts to address declining availability and recruitment challenges, with varying degrees of success.

2.2 Despite these attempts, during its the last two full inspections, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) highlighted that BFRS must improve both its understanding of community risk, and how it resources the Service. In particular, the 2018/19 HMICFRS Inspection Reports stated that:

> *"Its 18 On-Call fire engines were only available 13.6 percent of the time. This reflects the difficulty the service has in recruiting On-Call firefighters. This is experienced nationally"*

2.3 This was followed up in the 2022/23 HMICFRS Inspection Report, which stated that:

> *"We are not satisfied that the service has a plan to maintain the long-term viability of its additional 18 resilience fire engines. It is unclear why the service needs so many additional fire engines when its daily demand pattern is consistently met with 12 available fire engines. The service continues to see a reduction in its On-Call staff and has no plans to address this trend"*

2.4 In this context, BFRS' Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 2025-2030 committed to using data to *"understand the most effective use of On-Call resources to provide resilience, manage risks and uphold our new response standard."* This includes evaluating the types of pumps and vehicles BFRS has and exploring opportunities for greater efficiency and effectiveness. This direction was supported by public feedback, with 'Pooling On-Call resources to improve appliance availability across larger areas' emerging as the most preferred improvement proposed by BFRS.

2.5 To deliver on this commitment, the On-Call Improvement Programme was established to identify opportunities to ensure BFRS becomes a highly resilient fire and rescue service; fully equipped to deal with routine daily demand, and the occasional higher impact, low frequency incidents.

Redefining the On-Call role?

2.6 BFRS currently has 30 pumps (traditional fire engines) available through full-time or On-Call staffing models. Pumps 1 to 12 are crewed by Wholetime and Day Crewed firefighters and pumps 13 to 30 are crewed by On-Call firefighters.

2.7 The On-Call model is a staffing approach used for day-to-day service, which is considered first line and second line response. It aims to provide cost-effective fire cover locally, particularly in rural and smaller communities. Resilience refers to third line and fourth line response: the capacity to maintain operations

98

during major or extraordinary incidents such as large fires, multiple call outs, or prolonged demand. In other words, On-Call teams support both day-to-day cover and surge capacity when the Service is under pressure. However, in practice, On-Call pumps are frequently unavailable and often cannot provide a credible level of response due to staffing challenges, including staffing numbers and gaps in qualifications. As noted in the HMICFRS report 2022/23:

> *"Through its ongoing review work, [BFRS] has also recognised that its On-Call fire engines have very limited use. This is due to its continued struggle to recruit on-call firefighters"*

2.8   Even if BFRS could make 18 On-Call pumps consistently viable, its data shows that this would have limited impact on the overall response standard and would be unaffordable under the current establishment model. It would also not offer value for money in relation to risk and demand: in the past five years, the only time all 30 pumps were required was during a two-day period in July 2022.

2.9   Considering all this, BFRS maintains a position streamlining the On-Call fleet (and refocusing the role of On-Call to focus on resilience for infrequent times of high demand and crewing of the Service's special appliances) would offer an opportunity to reinvest funds into the On-Call service, as fewer pumps would mean reduced demand on maintenance and procurement. Importantly, mutual aid and National Resilience provisions continue to form part of the Service's response arrangements, and this project does not alter the current 'Over the Border' (OTB) agreement routinely made with neighbouring Fire and Rescue Services.

The engagement process

Staff and public focus groups

2.10   To gather views on BFRS's proposed direction and travel and help shape the option/s to be submitted to the Fire Authority for approval in late 2025, three in-depth online focus groups were held with BFRS staff, and a further three with a broadly representative cross-section of residents from across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, in September and October 2025.

2.11   BFRS's key priority was that this would be a 'listening and engagement' process at an early stage in the organisation's thinking – to understand opinions and to 'test' two initial options developed to stimulate dialogue. This conforms to the Gunning Principles, which require, above all, that engagement and consultation should be at a 'formative stage', before authorities make decisions.

2.12   The focus groups were independently facilitated by Opinion Research Services (ORS) - a spin-out company from Swansea University with a UK-wide reputation for social research. Pre-consultation listening and engagement and formal consultation meetings have been undertaken across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes on a regular cycle; and in this context ORS has facilitated similar focus groups for BFRS for many years.

2.13   All meetings (listed below in a Table 1) lasted for around two hours and were attended by 18 staff members and 26 residents.

Table 1: Focus groups (area, time and date, and number of attendees)

Area	Time and Date
Public 1 Amersham, Beaconsfield, Great Missenden, High Wycombe, Stokenchurch	Tuesday 23 September 2025 6:30pm - 8:15pm
Staff 1 On-Call + Wholetime/Day Crewed and On-Call (affected stations[2])	Monday 29 September 2025 6:30pm - 8:30pm
Public 2 Aylesbury, Milton Keynes, Buckingham, Haddenham	Tuesday 30 September 2025 6:30pm - 8:15pm
Staff 2 On-Call (unaffected stations)	Thursday 2 October 2025 6:30pm - 8:30pm
Staff 3 Wholetime/Day Crewed + Wholetime/Day Crewed and On-Call (affected stations)	Monday 6 October 2025 6:30pm - 8:30pm
Public 3 Brill, Chesham, Gerrards Cross, Marlow, Newport Pagnell, Olney, Princes Risborough, Waddesdon, Winslow	Tuesday 7 October 2025 6:30pm - 8:15pm

2.14 Public participants were recruited by Acumen Field, a specialist recruitment agency, who initially sent out a screening questionnaire as an online survey to a database of contacts and, more widely, on social media platforms. They then collated the responses to establish a pool of potential recruits, which was 'sifted' to establish a contact list. People were then contacted by telephone, asked to complete a more detailed screening questionnaire and either recruited or not to match the required quotas. Those recruited were sent all the necessary details in a confirmation email and telephoned a day or two before the events to confirm their attendance. Just over a third of participants (10) had attended a CRMP engagement and/or consultation focus group in 2023/24; the other 16 were fresh recruits.

2.15 In recruitment, care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by any factors. The recruitment process was monitored to ensure social diversity in terms of a wide range of criteria including, for example: gender; age; working status; and disability/limiting illness. Overall, as demonstrated in the table below, participants represented a broad cross-section of residents – and as standard good practice, people were recompensed (via a shopping voucher) for their time and efforts in and taking part.

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[2] Affected stations refers to those potentially impacted by the two provisional options, but participants were assured that these are not final and could be subject to change.

Table 2: Participant characteristics

| Gender	Age	Working status	Ethnicity	Disability or limiting illness
Female: 13 Male: 13	18 - 34: 5 35 - 54: 14 55+: 7	Working full-time (including self-employed): 15 Working part-time (including self-employed): 8 Not working (including unemployed, retired, homemaker, full-time student): 3	11 residents from an ethnic minority background	3 residents with a disability or limiting illness

2.16 For the staff groups, BFRS invited expressions of interest from all relevant staff, who were asked to register directly with ORS to protect their anonymity. 25 responses were received from those wishing to attend, though other commitments meant that some were unable to do so on the day. Ultimately, 18 members of staff attended the sessions, representing Amersham, Aylesbury, Broughton, Buckingham, High Wycombe, Princes Risborough, and West Ashland fire stations. Participants were broken down as follows:

» Nine On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed; eight On-Call; and one Wholetime Day Crewed

» Nine firefighters; five crew commanders; and four watch commanders.

2.17 Although, like all other forms of qualitative consultation, focus groups cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the meetings reported here gave diverse groups of people from the potentially affected areas the opportunity to participate. 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 based on similar discussions.

The agenda

2.18 ORS worked in collaboration with BFRS to agree a suitable agenda and informative stimulus material for the meeting, which was designed to capture participants' thoughts and views on:

» Whether they recognise and understand BFRS' On-Call challenges

» How they feel about BFRS redefining the role of its On-Call service to focus on resilience and the crewing of special appliances

» The two provisional options (as illustrated below – percentages indicate 2024 availability)

Remove 8 On-Call pumps
*Full-time fire cover maintained

*Amersham 2%	*Beaconsfield 2.4%
*Buckingham 13.5%	Great Missenden 0%
Haddenham 0.2%	*High Wycombe 2.4%
Stokenchurch 0%	*West Ashland (2nd) 0.5%

Remove On-Call pumps at Wholetime/Day Crewed Stations

Amersham 2%	Aylesbury 13.7%
Beaconsfield 2.4%	Broughton 13.8%
Buckingham 13.5%	High Wycombe 2.4%
West Ashland (1st OC pump) 15.7%	West Ashland (2nd OC pump) 0.5%

101

2.19 Participants were encouraged to ask questions throughout the discussions, and the meetings were thorough and truly deliberative in listening to and responding openly to a wide range of evidence and issues.

2.20 A further item was originally included on the agenda, entitled 'operational independence for chief fire officers.' BFRS was keen to understand whether participants agreed with the potential for chief fire officers to be granted operational independence to make some decisions without Fire Authority approval, as per the graphic below.
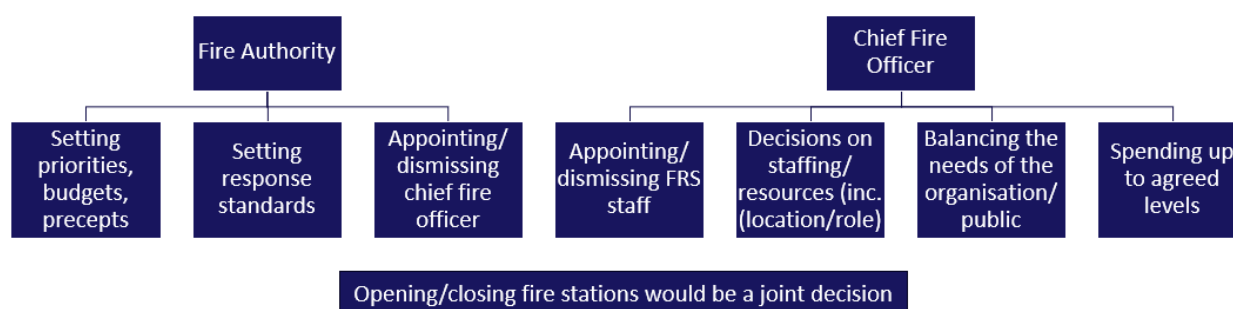
2.21 Unfortunately, due to the depth of discussion around the On-Call Improvement Programme, there was insufficient time available at the focus groups to consider this. However, when members of the public were sent their thank-you vouchers, they were asked whether they had any thoughts on the issue. Seventeen of the 26 participants responded with feedback, which has been reported in the relevant chapter.

The report

2.22 This independent report summarises the feedback from the six engagement focus groups. ORS does not endorse any opinions, 'make a case' for any point of view, or make any recommendations as to how the reported results should be used; rather we seek only to portray them accurately and clearly. While the report brings together a range of views for BFRS to consider, decisions must be taken based on all the evidence available.

3. Staff focus groups

Introduction

3.1 This chapter reports the views from three focus groups with members of BFRS staff, which were independently facilitated by ORS. It is not a verbatim transcript of the three sessions, but an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants in free-ranging discussions - and as the focus groups did not differ materially in their views, this report combines the findings from all the meetings in a single account. Any significant differences in views have been drawn out where appropriate.

3.2 All participants were encouraged to express their opinions freely and to ask questions throughout, and all the meetings were successful in stimulating wide-ranging and informed debate on the issues under consideration.

Main findings

There was recognition of BFRS's On-Call Challenges…

3.3 Staff across all three groups recognised BFRS's On-Call recruitment and retention challenges. Societal changes, workplaces' reluctance to release On-Call staff, low pay relative to the demands of the role, and the general affluence of the areas in which On-Call stations are located were though to hinder recruitment; whereas the demands of the role and disengagement because of a lack of 'shouts' were thought to contribute to high On-Call firefighter turnover.

> *"… Going back 20+ years when I first joined … we had loads of firefighters. But I completely appreciate there's a huge difference in modern employment patterns where loads people commute. Workplaces aren't as flexible about releasing their staff like they were in past decades…."* (Wholetime/Day Crewed, unaffected station)
>
> *"… We have had quite a high turnover of On-Call. They join, they don't realise the demands … They don't go on fire calls because they don't have a manager … Then they get disillusioned and think, 'Oh God, I'm taking two weeks off work to go and do a BA course, I've got to take another week off to go and do this course,' but they never go on fire calls, so they get disillusioned and disheartened and leave …"* (Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)
>
> *"If you have a unit and you don't go out the door, they will soon not be an On-Call unit because people want to be signed up to do something ..."* (On-Call, unaffected station)

3.4 In terms of geographical challenges, particular issues were noted at 'commuter belt' stations like Amersham, Beaconsfield, Great Missenden, and High Wycombe in the south of the County, which not only have to contend with the issues highlighted above, but also their proximity to London and the inevitable loss of firefighters each time London Fire Brigade (which offers better pay and career opportunities) recruits.

> *"Amersham has been through a whole raft of different ways to try and improve crewing … But the average house price there is 20 times the average wage … We've lost members of staff down to London because they will get paid more and if they're commuting to Amersham, they may as well commute into central London and earn 10 grand a year more and have more career opportunities. So, Amersham is a really difficult problem to solve" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*
>
> *"The fire crew at Great Missenden just got aged out of the job and there's no new young generation coming through because nobody can afford to buy in Great Missenden. [It's] predominantly commuters to London now and the last thing they want to do is come home and put a pager on" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

3.5 Role-based issues were also frequently highlighted, most notably that driver and junior officer (JO)/officer in charge (OIC) shortages are often the critical factor in limiting On-Call pump availability. Participants in the group for affected On-Call staff highlighted that driver shortages are not for a lack of people wanting to take on the role, but the length of time they are having to wait for courses and examinations largely due to demand among Wholetime staff.

> *"… I put in all the availability that I can and we're still really, really rarely on the run for lack of drivers and JOs and I don't feel like we have much support from the brigade to improve that" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*
>
> *"… You can have 25 fires, but you haven't got a driver, you're not going out of the door. But it takes two years to do driving … There's a big turnover of people in Wholetime … they don't stay long now; they get trained up then they go back to their own counties, or they do it for five years, or join the police or the ambulance …. And because there's a massive turnover, the courses build up and build up and then the On-Call get put to the back unless there's an immediate cancellation" (On-Call, affected station)*

… but there was a sense that the challenges are, to some extent, of the Service's own making

3.6 There was a strong sense among participating staff that BFRS has contributed to its own challenges through its 'neglect' of the On-Call service in recent years.

> *"We don't feel like we're being invested in or led … You just feel like there's this On-Call truck that's forgotten about and a bit in the way sometimes. There's no, 'Come on guys, let's go, let's get the pump on the run. We can do this, we can do that'" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

> *"I think it's a model that they can't fix because it's been left too many years, degrading. I don't think they know how to get it back working … Some of the stations are a lost cause … And every time they try, we're getting new people through the door, but they're sitting around for two years and appliances aren't going out the door because they're still lacking numbers of either personnel, OICs, and drivers and then these people are just getting fed up and moving on because they're not getting that experience of … doing what they signed up to do" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

3.7 A particular issue for participants was the focus on Wholetime recruitment at the expense of On-Call; and specifically the recruitment of On-Call firefighters into Wholetime roles, which has apparently depleted On-Call crewing at some stations and contributed to their availability issues.

> *"When I started they were basically using On-Call to prop up the numbers for Wholetime … So, all of their focus went into Wholetime, and they've done a reasonable job of recruiting … They just totally forgot about the On-Call …" (On-Call, unaffected station)*
>
> *"It's kind of like we've just been doing the Wholetime recruitment through the On-Call route and then it's like 'Well, Buckingham isn't on the run very much.' Well, no, you keep taking people out of our pool of people constantly to feed the Wholetime … If they didn't do that, we'd have at least another four people, I believe, in our crew, which would make a huge amount of difference to skill and availability …" (On-Call, affected station)*

3.8 Other issues were around the management of, and active support offered, to On-Call crews. Several participants felt that they and their On-Call colleagues are underutilised by, for example, not being called in when staff shortages or the need to crew a special appliance results in a Wholetime pump being taken off the run.

> *"We're a bit underutilised at West Ashland. We've got four standalone and available, yet you take crew off one of the trucks to man the wildfire unit when you've got four or five On-Call ready to go ... So, it's sort of like you're wasting crew. You're not being managed appropriately. If you've got a driver and a BA ready to go, call us in and then you're not having to take [the Wholetime pump] off the run" (On-Call, affected station)*
>
> *"…If we're one person short and we have On-Call firefighters available, we don't utilise them. So, we have a firefighter that you can call in in an emergency in five or 10 minutes to go out to a call. And we have the other three we need on the station. We've never used them in that way … We could potentially [be] using the people we've got in a different way to how we're using them now" (On-Call, unaffected station)*

3.9 Furthermore, the centralised Resource Management Team (RMT) was frequently criticised for a lack of proactive On-Call resource management, overly focusing on Wholetime to the detriment of On-Call, and not mobilising On-Call firefighters to stand-by at stations when appropriate.

> *"… On-Call is not a very heavily managed system … In Bedfordshire, because their service is a lot more On-Call reliant, it's a lot more heavily managed. So their version of our Resource Management Team, they are very heavily trying to put appliances available, whereas in our service people just book on and the On-Call kind of exists. RMT only really seem to touch the Wholetime. Whereas in Milton Keynes, there'll be times where there'll be two firefighters booked on at Broughton and there'll be an OIC and a driver booked on at West Ashland. Together you have a crew there and the stations are five minutes apart … It's just not looked at … There is no real push to get pumps on apart from where they're looking at seasonal crewing for high fire risk, like the summer, when we're looking at wildfires. That's the only time they really actively look at On-Call stations and try and put them on the run"* (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)

> *"… From my understanding, if [the Wholetime pump] goes out on a job, On-Call should be mobilised to stand by to station, but it never happens. I've known Broughton to come out and we've been On-Call … Which again affects our figures"* (On-Call, affected station)

3.10 Indeed, the overall feeling among On-Call staff was that they are 'doing the team's work for them.'

> *"We feel let down because we're giving it 110% all the time … And then when there's 10 On-Call pumps off the run or eight or whatever, we do a joint thing with Winslow trying to get one pump out the door between the two of us … And it's the same as if we go further afield to ask West Ashland or Broughton or anyone to get pumps out. It seems we're doing their work for them"* (On-Call, affected station)

3.11 In terms of support, a firefighter at an affected station described their experience of passing their breathing apparatus (BA) course over a month ago, and not yet starting their development folder *"because no-one's going to sit down with us and invest that time in us … No-one is giving us the time and that makes us feel like we are second best, which then leads to your problems with retention."*

3.12 An apparent lack of respect among Wholetime firefighters toward On-Call was alleged by several participants, who said their Wholetime colleagues often 'raid' their pumps, leaving them in a mess with equipment either missing or not functional.

> *"Wholetime's attitude towards … standalone On-Call who aren't also Wholetime, we do definitely feel like second-class firefighters. Our trucks are raided at every given opportunity … I spent five hours inventorying my truck alone because nobody wanted to come in and help me. For me to then come into drill night the next day, have five radios dead, two BA batteries dead, the TIC was missing, there was literally rubbish all over the floor and I was like, 'Why is that OK to do to an On-Call truck? Is it because we're On-Call or is it because, 'Oh, it's a spare truck, we can just use it how we feel?' And it's demoralising … I get quite angry about that. That's my time. That's my passion … So there is a divide … There's no respect there"* (On-Call, affected station)

3.13 All of this, it was said, contributes to a lack of morale among the On-Call workforce, in some cases to the extent that firefighters have disengaged with both station-based and community activities.

> *"… It's dwindled to the point of, 'Well, it's drill night, we go in for that and we go home.' We do some car washes and some other stuff, but no-one really seems to be interested in organising that" (On-Call, affected station)*

There was significant concern about the data used to underpin the Programme

3.14 In all three groups, initial discussions on the Programme focused on the availability data being used to underpin it; and specifically the fact that the 2024 dataset referenced is out-of-date in some cases.

> *"If you're going to have that bad news … you need to have some really good arguments and really good rationale. So, when the first thing we do is pedal out information that's a year out of date for your statistics, we look silly … The optics do not look good" (Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

3.15 For example, it was said that due to the recruitment of an additional firefighter, Princes Risborough's availability, at 22.2% in 2024, is now in the low forties; and that Broughton has more than doubled its establishment during 2025.

> *"Our crew was deficient all the way until probably November last year … Going into this year, we're only now getting people trained on things to put the pump on, run their BA, their safe working at height, their ladders, their safe to ride. So, as much as those statistics are reflective of how much the pump was available in 2024, it's also probably deficient of what recruitment has [been done] since then to improve that availability … We went from probably four people, and I think we're about 12 or 13 now. It's a very vast change …" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

3.16 Furthermore, in considering future availability, one of Buckingham's On-Call firefighters was said to be going through the development centre at the moment *"which would give them another JO who does a lot of hours. That that will only increase availability on the appliance …" (Wholetime).*

3.17 The lack of nuance in the overall availability data was also a significant issue in all three groups, particularly in relation to On-Call 'propping up' Wholetime appliances at Buckingham, High Wycombe, and Amersham. It was frequently said that On-Call availability at these stations is impacted by the number of times On-Call firefighters are required to 'plug gaps' on Wholetime appliances, but that this is not reflected in the data or recognised to the extent it should be by the Service. Some of the many typical comments on this issue are below.

> *"… I think most nights in Buckingham there is a shortfall on [Wholetime] and … they'll pinch them from [On-Call] to put them on [Wholetime]. So when we got the data through saying that Buckingham is at risk, it's like 'Well that's crazy because I think most nights we've got one of the On-Call working with on the Wholetime pump … It takes the On-Call pump off the run all the time" (On-Call, affected station)*

> *"I look at Buckingham and go, 'Okay, I want to understand why it doesn't work' because … you've got all of the skill sets and the specialisms. You've got loads of experience. You've got young people coming through and joining the unit. It looks really healthy and then the mixed crewing part of it is skewing the figures. … There isn't an understanding of going, 'That's got life in it.'" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

> *"Amersham really struggles to sustain and have an adequate number of Wholetime crew … That appliance has been kept available thanks to the On-Call staff and it's been self-managed as well … You can always rely on the On-Call firefighters to keep that appliance available and that's just being completely overlooked in my opinion …" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

> *"If you only look at pump availability, High Wycombe is a disastrous On-Call unit … on their own they'll never add value to anything. But they do other things which haven't perhaps been put into the data. So, currently at High Wycombe there are the two frontline fire appliances and a turntable ladder, but the turntable ladder is crewed by people who are on one of the frontline fire appliances as well. So, if the turntable ladder goes out somewhere, the fire appliance is now off the run … and the On-Call unit are high Wycombe backfill. Two of them come in and they replenish the crew on the fire engine and it's available again. And nowhere in that data does it show that contribution. They are regularly, four or five times a month, keeping one of the Wholetime fire engines on the run rather than the On-Call fire engines …" (On-Call, unaffected station)*

3.18 Indeed, one participant stated that they had 'done the maths' on the issue, concluding that Buckingham On-Call staff have completed around 5,000 positive crewing hours on the Wholetime pump, saving the Service around £70,000 a year at a cost of around £30,000 a year.

3.19 Similarly, the 2024 data for Waddesdon and Winslow was thought to tell a different story on paper to the situation in reality. It was argued that while Waddesdon is shown to be at 46.8% availability and Winslow at 27.7%, the former (available for almost half the year) attended 27 incidents; while the latter, available for quarter of the year, attended 70. Furthermore, for the majority of those 27 incidents, Waddesdon was said to be on a three-hour response.

> *"… So, we've painted this figure and go 'Look, Waddesdon's really good,' but it's not giving us any value for money because it's fourth line" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

3.20 Participating staff also suggested that BFRS interrogate the data in relation to several other issues, such as:

» The exact reasons for pump unavailability (i.e., number of times appliances were used as 'spares')

> *"There was a period about a year ago where Amersham On-Call went about three weeks where it could have been available, but they didn't even have a pump because it had been taken as a reserve pump …" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

» Precise staffing gaps to determine future station viability

> *"Is there a deeper level of this data that shows what was lacking from each pump at any one time? Because there's obviously a big difference between being unavailable because you need four more people or being unavailable because you need one more person. It would be good to see the breakdown of that … because that would really support the choices of station s… If you look at Amersham at 2%, if you could make one change and get it up to 40%, that is a better, more viable station than a station at 20% that would need four changes to get to 40%" (On-Call, unaffected station)*

» Availability being offered by On-Call firefighters

> *"… We've got 10 on at West Ashland. If you had a look at the hours some people are actually putting in; it's whether or not they're actually worth being there … They're taking up the spot of someone who could book on more. And management could be thinking, 'Oh, we don't need to do recruitment at West Ashland because they've got enough people,' but we've got not got enough people who are actually booking on" (On-Call, affected station)*

3.21   There was also concern that all stations have been treated equally within the options appraisal process, when there are clear differences in current usefulness and future viability. For example, it was said that it is impossible for firefighters at standalone On-Call fire stations like Stokenchurch and Great Missenden to add value in the same way as those at a Wholetime or Day Crewed station like Broughton or High Wycombe might. As such, while their availability figures might look relatively similar on paper, there is a considerable difference in terms of potential added value.

> *"We've lumped together all the stations and we've said we're going to review Stokenchurch in the same way that we're going to review High Wycombe, but they have completely different potential. The only potential for Stokenchurch is to have a crew to go on the truck at all times. The potential at High Wycombe for example... they could add value in a completely different way" (On-Call, unaffected station)*

3.22   Ultimately, it was agreed that while all fire stations appear to have been examined in a similar way, there is a difference between how much they contribute to the overall BFRS system currently, and how viable they could be in future. As such, it was suggested that the Service should:

> *"… Do a value analysis and a cost-benefit analysis … what else it is they do? You need to look at the availability [they] give to another pump … and the usability of specials to build that picture …" (On-Call, unaffected station)*

While there were concerns about future risk and resilience, there was also some explicit an implicit agreement with the Programme's overall direction of travel

3.23   In terms of key practical concerns about the proposed future On-Call model (i.e., reducing the number of On-Call appliances, and primarily using the remaining service for resilience and special appliance crewing),

109

managing future risk from, say, population increases and infrastructure developments like HS2 was first and foremost.

> *"I don't know if you can build a resource model on the everyday because there are times when it goes absolutely crazy and you do need loads of trucks. How will they pull us together if they just drop that investment in the On-Call now. And how do they predict that in a growing county … HS2 being built, a growing risk area …" (On-Call, affected station)*

3.24 Other worries were around resilience for larger and simultaneous incidents, and an over-reliance on cross-border cover.

> *"One thing the On-Call is really good at … is if we get a large-scale incident kick off within the county and we start becoming really stretched for the resources. They put out a cry for help to the On-Call and nine times out of 10 … they step up and assist and I feel like we're going to lose that. That scaling up potential could fade and … with the way summers are going, that could be needed again in the future. I just think that's just been completely overlooked, how vital that is and how well the On-Call respond to that sort of cry for help …" (Wholetime)*
>
> *"The Fire Service have said that we've seen an increase in reliance on cross-border. And then lots of the appliances on the at-risk lists are on our county borders. So, how do we go, 'There's an increase in reliance on other services, but we're going to look at cutting what we've got in those areas?' We have to get to a point where we are able to be self-sustaining" (On-Call, unaffected station)*

3.25 However, there was some agreement in all groups with the Programme's overall direction of travel in terms of On-Call focus (i.e., resilience and special appliance crewing). Indeed, it was said that neighbouring fire and rescue services now primarily use their On-Call crews for two- or three-person specialist appliances like water carriers, wildfire units, and turntable ladders which, when taken together with the standard pump, *"keeps their crews engaged" (Wholetime).* As such, there was support for taking the same approach in Buckinghamshire, and for engaging crews at the earliest opportunity on what special appliance distribution could look like.

> *"If you look at our ridership right now at Broughton, we've got an OIC and four firefighters sat there. If there was a water carrier, that's two people, wildfire unit, two or three people … When we've got gaps like this … the On-Call are leaving because they're not going out the doors. We need these specials and somewhere for them to go. There's On-Call units that are crying out 'Give us ...'" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

3.26 This, it was felt, would not only maintain interest among On-Call staff, but also provide maximise efficiencies for the Service as a whole.

> *"… We've got people at the station that we could use ... When the turntable ladder goes out, we lose a fire engine. When the wildfire unit goes out, we lose a fire engine. And as part of this review we should consider how we better use these people … it could actually prove to be extremely cost-effective …" (On-Call, unaffected station)*

There was general confusion around the rationale for the two options, and some scepticism that staff redeployment would work in practice

3.27 Both of the options discussed were frequently described by participating staff as the 'easy way out' in terms of reducing the scale of the On-Call challenge.

> *"It's a broken system. I don't think anyone knows how to fix it so we've gone with the easiest option … slim it down a bit … Let's get rid of eight fire engines, right? That's a third of our issue gone, and it just it feels like it's the easy option" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

3.28 Staff also expressed general confusion around the rationale for the two options, particularly in relation to the inclusion of Buckingham On-Call in both for the reasons outlined earlier in this chapter relating to mixed crewing; because its availability is higher than some stations that do not feature; and because of its geographical location.

> *"I don't really understand why Buckingham's on … the first list … It's blatantly obvious that Buckingham is better than Chesham On-Call and certain other stations even though [they] do mixed crewing. I just don't get it" (On-Call affected)*
>
> *"… The availability is dynamic. Buckingham is showing 15% last year. I've done the figures this year … Up until August, when we lost a BA skill set, it was over 30%. If we weren't doing mixed crewing, it'd be closer to 50% ... I'm not digging at Brill, but the data there shows 4%, last month they were available 3%. So nothing's changed there. We know it's a really difficult area to recruit, but … purely statistically based, why is Brill on neither list, because their availability doesn't stand up to scrutiny? And so therefore you look and go, 'What is the plan? None of us have got this organisational understanding to go, 'The plan over the next year is to turn Brill into a wildfire unit'" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*
>
> *"… [Buckingham] as a station, it's 15-20 minutes from Milton Keynes. If they're on their own … they are on their own for a very long time before they get any kind of back up. So … getting rid of their second appliance and a crew that are available, there isn't a rationale for it, really. Unless they are planning on something else, there is no real reason. But it comes back to the lack of information around any of that" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

3.29 There was also some scepticism as to whether the redeployment aspect of both options could be achieved. Indeed, it was described as redundancy by stealth given that some - possibly many - firefighters would not be willing to respond to a fire station some distance from their community, especially if they are likely be one of the last people turning in, and so unlikely to make it onto the pump.

> *"It's probably disingenuous where the Service has said, 'We're not going to make anybody redundant.' If you're one of the 13 members of On-Call at Buckingham and you say to them, 'Respond to the one truck that's in Winslow' … There's already 10 members of staff at that station, so you're one of 23. You're never going to go out … So, while I think the Service will say, 'We're not making anybody redundant,' you're making it unsustainable" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

> *"I could probably get to another station in about eight or nine minutes. I'm probably not going to do that too many times to watch the pump just going out the door … They're not going to make redundancies, but indirectly they know that people are not going to stay to keep doing that, putting in the drill nights just to see the back of the truck" (On-Call, affected station)*

> *"… A lot of On-Call firefighters join for the community and want to help their local neighbours … On-Call is a commitment and it is a sacrifice a lot of the time … People will do that for their local community but as soon as you talk about sending them an hour across the county; I wouldn't do that …" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

3.30 Having said that, some participants said they would be prepared to redeploy to another fire station within a reasonable distance (Aylesbury to Haddenham, Princes Risborough or Waddesdon for example) and felt others would do the same, especially if incentivised with, say, fuel payments. However, they again stressed that this would only be sustainable if enough JOs and drivers would be prepared to do it, and providing they get sufficient 'shouts' to keep them motivated and competent.

3.31 Ultimately, staff stressed that BFRS must speak to all potentially affected staff to gage their interest in redeployment prior to making any decisions that rest on its success.

> *"If your plan is to redistribute staff to the next nearest On-Call station, you would think it's a reasonable question to ask those staff if that's something that they're interested in doing" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

Of the two options discussed, Option 1 was unanimously preferred

3.32 Of the two options currently on the table, Option 1 was unanimously preferred by staff, not least due to their perception that the availability issues at Great Missenden and Stokenchurch (which *"hasn't been operational for five years"*) are so deep rooted as to be impossible to rectify within a reasonable timeframe.

> *"It takes at least three years to get a fire station up and running from not having any crew. So Stokenchurch, Missenden, even if they wanted to save them … there's many factors and issues that are hurdles to actually getting a pump on the run" (On-Call, unaffected station)*

> *"Looking at those two lists, removing the On-Call pumps at Wholetime and Day Crewed stations. That can't be the option because that would leave Great Missenden and Stokenchurch still existing with 0% availability. I can't see how you could ever justify that Option 2 over Option 1 …" (On-Call, affected station)*

3.33 There was, though, some concern around the practical implications of closing fire stations in a time of increasing risk from, for example, climate change and terrorism.

> *"Once you lose an asset, it's very, very difficult to get it back. For example, one of the stations they're looking to close, Great Missenden, it hasn't had a crew for many, many years, but once we sell that land, we're never getting that back. Communities are only getting bigger. The extra risks we're facing with climate change, terrorist incidents, things like that, it's only getting greater. And all emergency services apart from us seems to be getting bigger and we've gone, 'Let's get smaller'" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

3.34 Option 2 was generally opposed as it reduces overall resilience, and because of the potential implications of removing three On-Call appliances from Milton Keynes (on the town itself and on nearby fire stations).

> *"Future proofing areas like Milton Keynes. We've got 95,000 new homes planned in the next five years or something like that ... And they're going, 'We're considering taking all of the On-Call appliances out of Milton Keynes and obviously we all know … when we go to the prison, we're there for 20 minutes, half an hour, and that's three fire appliances unavailable. So a house fire comes in, there's only now Newport available. And where is that next pump coming from? … So, this is the realism … People need the facts because the public will just go, 'West Ashland's still there, Broughton's still there, Newport's still there'" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

> *"If Buckingham is supposed to be a key station, if they're getting dragged into Milton Keynes on the six-pump high-rise shout, then they're 20 minutes from the next nearest pump. That's what people need to understand …" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

3.35 Indeed, its inclusion in the process was considered something of a concession to public and political opinion, which is unlikely to view the closure of standalone On-Call fire stations favourably.

> *"… No chief fire officer wants to go around closing stations. That's an unpopular move with the public so, 'OK, well, we won't do that. We'll just remove trucks, but all of the stations will still stay as they are' … It just seems you want to improve availability, but you then only include three stations with incredibly low availability on one list. Very political" (On-Call, affected station)*

> *"It's not necessarily just, 'Actually the data suggests this.' It's also based on what they're going to be able to get through. MPs ultimately are going to have a large say in it …" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

3.36 This was a concern for staff, who feared that residents (who typically know little about how the fire and rescue service works) would - given the choice - choose Option 2 on the grounds that it is 'neater' and maintains at least a physical BFRS presence in all current locations.

> *"The thing is, when they go out to the public … Option 2 is the better for logistics … because it's evenly spread and there's all the fire stations and it looks pretty on the map. Option 1, there'll be gaps … You could easily be misled with that. Oh, it's a Wholetime station. Why would they need On-Call? But that's not the real picture" (On-Call, unaffected station)*

3.37 On the issue of politics, it should be noted that staff in all the groups were very frustrated by what they saw as unnecessary interference in the process, which has left them feeling like political 'pawns.' While fully understanding the need for the Fire Authority to scrutinise the options put forward, participants described the opposition being expressed in some quarters as 'grandstanding,' especially given the same politicians signed off the BFRS Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) which committed to undertaking a review of the On-Call service.

Some revisions to the options were suggested

3.38 Despite the overall preference for Option 1, revisions to the number of stations were suggested. Most commonly, participating staff felt the 'list' should include the four pumps with close to zero availability (Haddenham, Great Missenden, Stokenchurch, and West Ashland's second pump), plus potentially Beaconsfield and Amersham, depending on the 'added value' offered by the On-Call appliances there.

> *"[Option 1] is the more sensible of the proposals … if you removed Buckingham and High Wycombe from there and just said there are six that are not viable. And say, 'We've reassessed Buckingham and it adds value in this way, Wycombe adds value in this way and it's capable of adding more'" (On-Call, unaffected station)*
>
> *"I work at West Ashland and … it's really difficult to justify that second appliance. We use it, we strip it for parts, we use it for other purposes. It doesn't go out. We don't have enough staff to crew it ..." (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

3.39 Indeed, as one firefighter at the group for affected On-Call fire stations stated:

> *"While we don't want to see any stations closed, where they've not had a fire appliance or a crew for a number of years, it kind of makes sense. But the people that I see on this call today are those representing the stations where we do believe that we're really viable as a station and as an appliance ... We're just wanting, from our employers, just that little bit more around what they could do to support us?" (On-Call, affected station)*

There was a preference for one option to be taken to formal consultation, underpinned by a range of data and supporting information

3.40 Overall, staff expressed a preference for taking one well thought out and data driven option forward to formal consultation, as this would demonstrate leadership, belief, and a clear direction of travel on the part of BFRS.

> *"Show leadership, show decision-making, show that you know what you want and you can back it up with the data, and that you've got a clear direction of travel …" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*
>
> *"The public trust us ... They think we know what we're all about. Well show them we know what we're all about. 'These are the reasons we want you to say yes or no to this decision.' Don't go to the public and go, 'Can you tell us what to do?' Have the balls to go 'Right, this is what we're planning to do, tell us your opinion'" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

3.41 In terms of the data and information participants felt would be needed to enable consultees to make an informed judgement on a way forward for the On-Call service, key suggestions were:

» An up-to-date, station-by-station analysis of current staffing establishments and pump availability, added value, and future viability (including the number of firefighters needed per pump to ensure good availability)

> *"They need to put specials on there. They need to put if you're keeping another pump on there. They need to put the amount of firefighters that are there and how much they're giving for that truck … We need to be honest so that the public are fully informed rather than potentially just leading them down the path we want, because the data that we've used looks shockingly bad for some stations when it's actually value that's added. I think by being honest, we will be in a better place to get the public to make the right decision" (On-Call, unaffected station)*

» The efforts already made to recruit On-Call firefighters, and their success rate (or otherwise)

> *"I think we need to be honest about the recruitment we've done … Because when people criticise, you need to say, 'Well, actually we've run campaigns in 2020-2022-2024 and this was the uptake in this area, which is why we don't think it's viable'" (On-Call, unaffected station)*

» The specific impacts of losing each On-Call pump

> *"You do have to … say, 'If we did this Option, you need to be aware that by shutting this station you would be losing the On-Call support for, say, the animal rescue unit at Aylesbury or the environmental protection unit … So people can see the impact ..." (On-Call, unaffected station)*

» The potential benefits of the proposed changes (i.e., reinvestment in the remaining On-Call service should reductions be made) to increase buy-in

> *"This is called the On-Call Improvement Programme. So far the communication has been zero improvements. It's just been right, 'We're moving these trucks.' All right, tell us why you are moving these trucks? What benefits are there going to be? Is more money going to go into the On-Call systems? Are we going to do up stations? Are we going to provide Buckingham with a special appliance? What is the improvement? … I don't think there's any staff on board entirely because we haven't been told the benefits of this … How is this program improving our offering?" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

» Plans for the future of any closed stations (i.e., whether they will be used for a different purpose, sold, or 'mothballed' to mitigate against future increased risk)

» The options considered and rejected, and the reasons for this.

3.42 Openness and transparency was considered especially important in the event of proposed fire station closures, to ensure concerned residents are armed with the facts; and reassured that their fire cover will effectively be the same as it is currently due to availability issues (and may, in fact, improve as a result of the proposed changes).

> *"There needs to be that transparency in places like Missenden and Stokenchurch. Those communities are all going to rise up and go, 'Save our station,' but has anyone actually told them, 'There is no crew, there is no appliance. Are you guys going to sign up and do it yourselves because otherwise you're saving nothing?'" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*
>
> *" … We need to tell them how many staff are at the fire station, how many staff you need and … actual examples saying, 'On average for an On-Call station to be on the run 25% of the time needs six people' … And then be honest about the training commitment that would be involved to get [stations] back ... The example of Stokenchurch, 'There's one person in Stokenchurch, if we move that person from Stokenchurch to Marlow you are not losing that fire engine because it's available 0% of the time. But by moving that person, it may well increase Marlow's availability.' So, being honest about what you're doing, 'We are shutting a fire station, but we have identified that shutting a fire station gives you more fire engines.' That's the only way you'll sell it to people; by being truthful rather than, 'Oh well, we only need that number' ... You've got to sell it to people that if there was a fire tomorrow, by moving this person here and shutting this fire station, we could get another fire engine to you or the next call quicker" (On-Call, unaffected station)*

Several suggestions were made to improve On-Call pump availability in future

3.43 Overall, participating staff were generally sceptical that BFRS has exhausted avenues to improve On-Call pump availability across Buckinghamshire prior to developing the two options and divest itself of some of these pumps. Not to do so – or to show that it has done so – would, it was felt, damage the credibility and reputation of the Service.

> *"… I don't feel like the Service has reached the end of that line. I don't think we've bottomed out all the suggestions … and gone 'No, these are the reasons why this won't work, we've reached the end of the route … we've made our decision that there was nothing else left to do.' I think there are tons of good ideas from employees who work these systems … It's like they've skipped a lot of steps … They've gone straight to pulling the trigger on the shotgun" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

3.44 Participants made several suggestions as to how the Service might seek to make these availability improvements. These included crewing special appliances and Wholetime pumps as required (as reported above), as well as several more specific suggestions, as below.

» More active leadership and resource management to 'plug' On-Call gaps across the county

> *"… Sometimes a JO from another station will book on to support us and we don't need the support …. They should really be then going, 'Well, actually you're probably closer to Wycombe or Marlow and they need that' … We've got two JOs, Wycombe have got none, Marlow have got one, but this JO will come to us to make three, which isn't adding any value … I know we're trying to appease people, but sometimes you've got to be 'This is what you have to do'" (On-Call, unaffected station)*

» Lessening demands on (or *"downskilling"*) On-Call firefighters

> *"There's a lot of expectation on the On-Call … An On-Call firefighter basically has to train to the same standard as a Wholetime firefighter. That is a massive challenge … and I'm not sure it's actually achievable. Maybe they should speak to the crews to better understand how they could potentially strip some of that back off them. Still give them a key role in the organisation but take that workload off them a little bit" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

» Pooling resources at nearby stations to ensure the availability of at least one On-Call pump

> *"You've got one person at Amersham … and three people at Chesham. If they move the one person from Amersham to Chesham … but they don't do that …" (On-Call, unaffected station)*
>
> *"We've got an On-Call unit at High Wycombe and an On-Call unit at Marlow … they are less than 10 minutes apart. So, a lot of the On-Call firefighters at Marlow can respond to High Wycombe. But they're Marlow based, so they're never asked to, they're never encouraged to … There would probably be enough people between High Wycombe and Marlow that we could always … keep the second truck available" (On-Call, unaffected station)*

» Explore the idea of hubs or groups of stations whereby *"if you took Marlow, Beaconsfield and High Wycombe, they are a triangle of no more than 10 minutes in any one direction … Two of them should be told by the Resource Management Team, 'You're going to be responding to high Wycombe tonight'" (On-Call unaffected)*

» Implementing the recent targeted approach to recruitment at other On-Call stations, as it was thought to have been more successful than the usual approach of *"putting a banner up outside a fire station" (Wholetime)*

» Allowing firefighters working in non-operational roles to provide On-Call cover where possible and appropriate

> *"… You have to go to employees where people work because they might work in Buckingham, but they might live in Milton Keynes or somewhere else … So they perhaps don't think of it as a career, but it could be something they could do while they work 40 hours a week in the local town or any of our areas" (On-Call, affected station)*

» Running an internal recruitment campaign to *"say to the 50 people that sit upstairs in headquarters, 'Do any of you want to ride a fire engine during the day and put the one downstairs on the run?'" (Wholetime)*

» More proactive recruitment through visits to local businesses (the industrial estate near Buckingham Fire Station for example)

» Encouraging Wholetime firefighters to provide On-Call cover

> *"There's no encouragement for Wholetime to sign up to On-Call. It's a perfect time … because everyone's worried about losing their overtime shifts so they could be having those conversations with people that, 'Oh, if you want to earn a little bit of extra money, that's there.' It's something you could push it a little bit on people … Obviously everyone knows it's there, but they maybe haven't thought about it as an idea" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

» Incentivising JOs to move to areas where shortages are affecting On-Call pump availability

> *"… Where you've got people who don't have the opportunity to get on the housing ladder in Bucks, it's a huge incentive to say to people 'If you move here this is what an opportunity looks like' … Where we look at our demographic of people that we want to try and employ or the areas where we want to employ people, it's a hugely wealthy area … We have to move with the times and go, 'Okay, what are our other options?' Other services are doing this …" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

» Fast-tracking driving courses and examinations for On-Call recruits and firefighters with existing driving qualifications (HGV licenses for example)

» Modifying the app used to book on call to allow those within the requisite time/distance of two stations to make themselves available at either

> *"For On-Call firefighters, there is an app where you can say if you're available. And we can be available to whichever station we choose … We do not have any technology capable of doing an either/or. We can only pick one. So if I was to sit in my house, I am [almost equidistant from two fire stations]. So if you had the technology, I could do either. But I can't. So I will pick the one that's likely to be available. But if you gave me an either or, I could be the officer in charge that's missing from the other" (On-Call, unaffected station)*

» Using the Programme itself to raise the profile of On-Call and as a recruitment tool

> *"I think it would be remiss of them to not use the opportunity with the public engagement they're getting at the minute … to try and raise the profile of On-Call … Not make this about fire stations; but try and make it more about what the On-Call system is. It's a total lack of awareness and I think that long-term feeds into this whole issue …" (On-Call, unaffected station)*

> *"I feel like we're very bad at talking to the public sometimes … There's been a big fire in Stokenchurch. They could have … been open and gone, 'We have one person. It's a community-run fire station for the community. It's not a full-time fire station …' They need to go out and go, 'Yes, you're right, we couldn't respond because [we've only got] X number of people … However, if we got two more people, the pump would have been on the run that day … You might find you'll get one or two people by talking to them … look at it and go, 'Actually I could do that'" (On-Call, unaffected station)*

3.45 Participants also urged BFRS to consider what other fire and rescue services are doing to ensure their On-Call system is working as effectively as possible. For example, it was said that:

» Bedfordshire FRS mobilises a 'non-structural appliance' if it has a crew available that is trained to firefighting or RTC standard, but minus a BA asset. This means that while it cannot commit BA, the crew can be sent to incidents that do not need this, or where it can make an initial intervention at one that does while waiting for a pump with the required assets. Other Services in the region were also said mobilise with unskilled assets when safe and appropriate to do so.

> *"In our region, we're one of the rare ones that don't mobilise with unskilled assets … At Olney … The last three years a child drown in the river, literally behind the station … All three occasions the pump here had an OIC, a driver, and two firefighters available who were water rescue trained, but not breathing apparatus. We won't mobilise to that child in the river because our firefighters aren't qualified to go into a house fire … We border Harrold, which is an On-Call station in Bedfordshire. Very often we will go into Harrold to back them up because they've gone to a house fire. They haven't gone as BA wearers, but they go, they make that initial intervention … And it works brilliantly because they've got there and they've done all the hard work … This is an option that gets more fire engines out to different emergencies …" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

» Bedfordshire FRS also trains its crews up much more quickly than BFRS, though it was recognised that this is largely due to having an in-house training centre, which is in the process of being established in Buckinghamshire. It has also (in line with one of the suggestions made above) incentivised On-Call OICs to move to stations with officer shortages by offering accommodation there at well under market value rent

» Oxfordshire FRS uses Wholetime watch and crew commanders to provide support and training to On-Call crews.

Participating staff urged BFRS to use this Programme as a springboard to develop a properly functioning On-Call service

3.46 Ultimately, while staff expressed concern and cynicism about the On-Call Improvement Programme, they were also of the view that if it results in BFRS committing to ensuring the future success of On-Call through measures to improve recruitment and retention, training opportunities, and support for staff, it may be worth it.

> *"If they're going to get rid of the fire stations, that's all well and good as long as they … reinvest it effectively to make sure that the other stations are well bolstered with funding to hopefully get more On-Call and to get support. So, if when they've got less … we get a good number of On-Call appliances on the run … even if it's a couple of extra appliances, then it's not saying it's worth it, but you can see why they're doing it" (On-Call, unaffected station)*
>
> *"… There are fundamental problems with On-Call as we all know, but until the senior management want it to work, they focus on proper recruitment, proper retention, proper training at reasonable frequency, then it won't work. It's doomed to failure" (On-Call, affected station)*

3.47 However, as reported above, they remain to be convinced that this will be the case.

Reassurances were sought that decisions have not already been made

3.48 Finally, participating staff were concerned that decisions have already made as to which On-Call pumps are to be removed, suggesting that this is evidenced by the targeted recruitment recently undertaken at a select number of stations, internal discussions about future staff moves, and the use of data that supports the Service's preferences.

> *"With the latest recruitment campaign that's launched to be On-Call, I understand that all of the stations that have been mentioned have not been recruited for … It's like, 'Oh, we're only going to go and focus on these other stations.' So, it feels like the decision's already been made. It doesn't feel like it's still up for debate …" (On-Call, affected station)*
>
> *"It feels like this decision's been made and now we're doing the groundwork to back up that decision. And even if we find evidence as a Service that these decisions don't make sense, 'Well, let's make them make sense. Let's dig out data that supports it. Let's throw narratives out there that support it … We're scrambling to argue the case for it" (On-Call and Wholetime/Day Crewed, affected station)*

4. Resident focus groups

Introduction

4.1 This chapter reports the views from three deliberative focus groups with members of the public across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, which were independently facilitated by ORS. This is not a verbatim transcript of the five sessions, but an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants in free-ranging discussions - and as the focus groups did not differ materially in their views, this report combines the findings from all the meetings in a single account.

4.2 All participants were encouraged to express their opinions freely and to ask questions throughout, and all the meetings were successful in stimulating wide-ranging and informed debate on the issues under consideration.

Main findings

There was recognition for, and understanding of, BFRS's On-Call Challenges

4.3 Public focus group participants demonstrated little knowledge of the challenges outlined by BFRS: they were unaware of the poor availability of many On-Call fire engines for example. However, when these challenges were outlined, the need for change was largely understood and supported.

> *"I was quite shocked by the figures about the On-Call; how many calls they go out on … It just seems an awful lot of money being put into something that's not working at the moment. So yeah, something has to change … Maybe because of how everyone's changed in day-to-day life … we have to say, 'Well, maybe this doesn't work as well. Now we have to change this as well'"*

4.4 Participants particularly recognised that it would likely take many years to establish fully functioning crews in areas where there are currently no or few On-Call firefighters; and that the Service needs to spend its limited budget where it feels it can deliver the greatest benefit.

> *"Sometimes it's got to take a major catastrophe before people say, 'We now need to get involved.' So, in another 10 years' time you might see a reversal … But at this time I think it's fair that the Service has to be designed around the resources and not necessarily what the need is"*
>
> *"It sounds like the Fire Service has a challenge with budgets like most of the public sector and it's about just working smarter I guess … Looking at the stats of where your firefighters are being deployed … and figuring out how to reconfigure that the workforce to reflect that …"*

4.5 Moreover, the need to train sufficiently and maintain competencies was understood to be essential for all firefighters, and a couple of participants questioned how the latter is possible within areas with no or little availability currently, given crews will not be attending and getting exposure to incidents.

121

> *"With regards to keeping up your competencies … I can imagine there's a hell of a lot. So how do you manage the skills fade of firefighters within rural areas where they're not really seeing that much action … It's one thing to say that the individual's trained, but then it's another thing saying they're competent. That's a massive thing…"*

4.6   People did, however, question BFRS' recruitment efforts, suggesting that they had never seen any promotion of On-Call roles locally, which may have impacted on firefighter numbers. However, one participant suggested that times have changed in that young people (boys specifically) no longer grow up wanting to be firefighters, as was the case when they were young. While they wondered there this was to some extent due to a lack of promotion of the Service to young people, they also suggested that it is more likely a consequence of societal change.

4.7   Furthermore, there was some suggestion that the onerous training requirements for On-Call firefighters might be off-putting to potential recruits, especially as most are likely to have to fit them around the demands of their primary employment.

> *"… What kind of training programs are on offer for the different people that you're trying to recruit? Is it maybe sometimes it's too intense for people or demanding. Perhaps it could be off-putting…"*

There was general agreement with the Programme's overall direction of travel

4.8   There was widespread agreement among residents with the overall direction of travel in terms of On-Call focus (i.e., resilience and special appliance crewing). One participant did question the exact rationale for this however, especially in relation to whether it is designed to boost recruitment or offer public reassurance.

> *"… The redefinition or the change in emphasis of the role of an On-Call firefighter. I wondered whether that is more aimed towards recruitment in terms of reassuring people that it's only in specialist situations or whether it's more of a reassurance for the public in terms of, 'It's not a common response team or it is more specialist'"*

There was reluctant support for the removal of some On-Call pumps…

4.9   The general consensus among participants across the three groups was that while in an ideal world the proposed fire engine removals would not be necessary, the proposal has been carefully considered and appears to be rational and proportionate.

4.10   Indeed, a couple of participants were of the view that people generally do not care where a pump is coming from in an emergency situation, only that it is coming from somewhere within a reasonable timeframe. They felt that if BFRS can guarantee this, they could support change.

> *"… I don't consider, if I would need it, where that engine's coming from, or where that person is coming from, you just want them to be able to get there as soon as they can or know that they're there, that they're on their way ..."*

…but several concerns were expressed around doing so

4.11 This is not to say there were no concerns, however. Several participants across the three groups worried about:

» Less overall resilience for, say, simultaneous incidents or spate conditions

> *"My fear is, although we talk about things that happen on very rare occasions … If you're that person who's involved in that incident and you want rescuing, it's very important, isn't it? Just because something happens rarely doesn't mean it's not very important when it does happen …"*

» Managing future risk

> *"I don't think the risk is being fully addressed … the fact there's a massive influx of developments going on in and around Milton Keynes, the developments in and around the HS2 interface and you've got the East/West, the theme parks that are going to be built over the next 10 years. Do you honestly think that's the right thing to do or do you think we need to be forward planning now for over the next 20 years?"*

» The potential impacts of increased response times (no matter how marginal) on public and firefighter safety, especially in Buckinghamshire's remotest areas.

> *"I can appreciate from a from a time perspective, it doesn't seem overly drastic but is there a direct correlation to number of fatalities within that kind of time frame? And also, is there any implication on the safety of your teams in terms of setting up?"*
>
> *"… With some of the further out places the On-Call stations were designed to serve … If we take away from the average and look at the longest possible response time, do any of those feel riskier or less acceptable?"*

4.12 There was also some worry about 'futureproofing' in the context of potentially increasing numbers of incidents in future; and the prospect of staffing reductions on remaining On-Call pumps, both within Buckinghamshire and cross-border in neighbouring Fire and Rescue Services.

> *"… What if there was more emergencies? What if the numbers suddenly started spiking up? Then what would we do? I wouldn't want to go to a system where there's a point of no return, where we couldn't open up those services again …"*
>
> *"[Have you] looked at scenarios where if you choose to close down some On-Call pumps and all of a sudden the ones that you are keeping open, the number of staff dropped there? And the ones over the border where you think they might support you? What if they decided to close that On-Call pump down"*

4.13 Moreover, while the need to model future response times under a new system was understood, the prospect of the assumptions yielded by this modelling being incorrect was concerning in that:

123

> *"… It could have a dramatic effect on response times and also the cross-border support … On the face of it, it almost looks like a no-brainer, doesn't it? It looks very straightforward and clear, but it's just whether the assumptions used are correct"*

4.14   The most prevalent concern, though, was public perception. It was frequently said that any cuts in public services, no matter how rational and well-evidenced, are emotive and likely to cause anxiety within affected areas.

> *"On one hand you've got stations like Great Missenden, Haddenham, and Stokenchurch that are empty and never used, but the minute you take those away, people are going to start panicking. They possibly don't realise that there's no cover there … It's explaining to people the reasons behind it because all they're going to see is that they're losing their fire station …"*

4.15   This was thought to be especially the case for On-Call fire stations, which are generally considered to be integral to their communities (albeit it should again be noted that few people are aware that many of them have poor availability and stand empty much of the time).

> *"… Having those on-call firefighters who are only 10 minutes away max and within that local area … If you're from a small area, they may be people you know and you've got that sense of community and there's part of me that's quite sentimental towards that. But I also think … maybe it isn't necessarily realistic anymore"*
>
> *"… If I wasn't a police officer, it'd be the 'What if, what if, what if.' Having been there and seen it, we can't base resourcing on 'what if?' scenarios otherwise everyone would expect full-time staff everywhere and those costing figures show that you can't justify that for something that may never happen. But it's about convincing the people who don't have enough idea about what the fire service do and think there's always somebody there at the end of the phone call"*

4.16   Indeed, there was some feeling that maintaining the presence of a fire station within an area, irrespective of availability, may be worthwhile to maintain a sense of security and wellbeing there.

> *The mention of security … irrespective of the status quo, if people are feeling happy and safe and secure, that's a positive. I think it's difficult to try and shake that and bring them to reality by saying, 'Oh, by the way, you're looking through rose-tinted glasses, unfortunately, it hasn't been that secure' … I suppose it's good to know what the reality is, but I think that wellness in itself is good for the community … I think a fire station stands for a lot more than just the safety of it"*

4.17   In light of all this, BFRS was strongly advised to proceed sensitively and carefully in its 'PR' around any proposed reductions, using a range of communication methods to reach all members of the community and try to alleviate their fears.

> *"I completely understand the case for change ... But I live halfway between High Wycombe and Beaconsfield. So, I know I have two fully manned fire stations ... If I was one of those people that lived a little bit further out on the map, even though … the On-Call stations are often not responsive, they may feel, 'Oh well, we had a fire station and now there's not going to be any crew coming from there.' So, it may be a little bit more PR is needed around those areas"*
>
> *" … What would be your plan for the education? Rural areas have older populations, so social media campaigns and things like that might not be effective in that age group. So, I just wondered how you might spread the message to prevent that fear from rising within those communities"*

Opinion was mixed on the provisional options

4.18   Across the three focus groups, opinion was mixed on the provisional options, though marginally more expressed a preference for BFRS taking Option 1 forward over Option 2.

4.19   Those in favour of Option 1 were primarily concerned about the removal of three pumps from Milton Keynes (as proposed in Option 2); and felt they could not support the retention of fire stations with zero availability.

> *"I think I'd choose Option 1 … Milton Keynes is such a big area and it has a high risk … and 0% on Great Missenden for example, it's not functioning anyway …"*
>
> *" … The three stations [Great Missenden, Haddenham and Stokenchurch] … between them, by my calculation, have probably less than one day's availability. So, it's a bit of a no-brainer, isn't it? If you've got three stations which offer less than a day over a year … why would you spend money on them? It doesn't make sense, does it?"*

4.20   Those who preferred Option 2 did so simply because it would not result in any fire station closures; and removes resource from areas that would still have good fire cover after implementation.

> *"I think I prefer Option 2 … It is neater and makes more sense i.e. taking on-call pumps away specifically from the stations you could best argue don't need them anyway"*
>
> *"It seems obvious to me that if you've got a full-time functioning station, then retaining that and losing the On-Call for that particular area would be the logical thing to do rather than places where you haven't got a full-time station …"*

4.21   There was also a sense that Option 2 would be less likely to inflame public and political opinion, for the same reasons as above.

> *"… In terms of Option 2, I imagine that in places where there is a Wholetime or a Day Crew, the assumption might be that that is their nearest service and so perhaps the On-Call service might not even be a consideration to people. So, I feel like it would be less of a problem public view wise than in places that are more rural and are thinking that they're disconnected from major fire stations …"*

4.22 A couple of people acknowledged that while their first instinct was to choose Option 2 for it would not result in any fire station closures, having considered the availability situation further, they viewed Option 1 as more reasonable and realistic.

> *"… I'd prefer Option 2 on paper, but having said that, I don't see the point in keeping stations open when they're not being used. And I don't think you would be able to man them in the future if you haven't up till now, so from that point of view, on that information, I'd go for Option 1"*

4.23 Indeed, there was some scepticism about the rationale for Option 2, and specifically whether its inclusion is simply an attempt to alleviate public and political concern around potential station closures rather than a data-driven, evidence-based option.

> *"What I'd want to understand is the motivation behind these two options … For me, Option 1 seems to be a better solution to an immediate problem … Is the motivation for Option 2 to alleviate public concern so that you're not closing stations altogether, even though they're not being used at all? Because if that's the motivation … I would definitely stick to Option 1"*

4.24 Another few had no preference, either because they felt they needed more information to make an informed judgement, or because they felt both were 'papering over the cracks' of more systemic, likely long-term issues within the On-Call Service.

> *"Redeployment's great, and I think that's maybe going to provide you a couple of years in terms of time; but are you just plastering over the systemic issue of more needing to happen around making the Service what it should be and what it's intended to be?"*

4.25 Furthermore, there was some sense that the final proposal/s to be taken forward to consultation could ultimately be a needs-based combination of Options 1 and 2.

> *"… The two options, my first thought when I saw them is that obviously they're quite neatly boxed into what I assume are a group of On-Call stations with the lowest cover and then those with where there's Wholetime. But I wonder if actually the solution might be a mix of that … Really thinking about what the needs are in each area and even where some are covered already by the Wholetime service, they might be some of your highest need areas and actually it makes sense to keep them. So, I wonder if it's actually a messier looking solution"*

Opinion was mixed on whether BFRS should take one or two options to formal consultation…

4.26 Participants were also divided over whether BFRS should take one or two options forward to formal consultation, though there was a marginal preference for one. Those favouring one considered that approach to be simpler and easier to understand, resulting in more informed feedback.

> *"I'll say one option ... Even spending an hour and a half talking through it, it's quite complicated to understand. I think the general public would probably not spend that much time trying to understand it and maybe make an ill-informed decision perhaps"*

> *"I think one personally, because if you give them too many options, it will just make everything a lot more difficult. I think if you just lay it out in one go, they'll be like, 'Okay, that's the information. That's what they're planning to do'"*

4.27 Moreover, it was said that as the experts in the matter, BFRS should be confident in proposing what it considers the best way forward.

> *"I'd go with just the one option because I would think, 'The Fire Service have looked into this, they're the experts, they've got all the information and they've decided this is the best option'"*
>
> *"Probably present one, as it looks like BFRS can't decide themselves and will create unnecessary and ill-informed comments from well-meaning people. I would trust firefighters to know what is best, so multiple options seems to indicate that either all are fine or nobody can choose because they're all bad"*

4.28 Those favouring two options felt that proposing only one would seem like a foregone conclusion to consultees. It was, though, said that BFRS should provide a recommendation in this case.

> *"If you give them one … It does streamline the decision process, but then at the same time it's like, 'Make a decision and the answer is yes, because if you say no, it doesn't matter because that's the choice you've got'"*
>
> *"Should there not be a recommendation from the Service? If the Service says, 'Well, these are the options but we would recommend A or B, I would feel more comfortable with that"*

4.29 In any event, it was considered essential that consultees be able to propose alternatives to, and make comments on, the options.

… But any option/s should be underpinned by a range of data and supporting information

4.30 In terms of the information required to underpin any option/s taken forward to formal consultation, participants suggested:

» The rationale for the overall Programme, and the option/s taken forward

> *"With removing the eight On-Call pumps, people might be a bit apprehensive and so it would be good to give more information as to the reasons why"*

» In affected areas, how emergency response would change (or not) to mitigate concerns

> *"… Even though I am one of the people who lives a little bit further away from a fully staffed station … because I've been educated on what's needed … I would be inclined to vote for it because it's going to help the Service out as a whole"*

> *" … What I would like to see is for those three that are losing their station … over the last year when they've had virtually no availability, how many fire and rescue incidents have there been? What have the response times been? Where have those engines come from? So, you can demonstrate that the service would be as it's been for the last 12 months, because actually they haven't been coming from their local fire station anyway … Effectively, it won't be that different ... It's just that building will not be there …"*

» Impacts on response times (particularly emphasising that in many areas there would be no discernible impact due to current poor On-Call availability)

> *"The most crucial information I would want is how the response time is being affected in my area … In some sense there's no difference … If I had information that I won't notice any change in response time ... I think I would be okay with that ..."*

» Planned mitigations in affected areas, such as increased prevention measures and investment in recruitment in affected areas

> *"Preventing fire is the best option I think … So, if there are reductions on one side, make investment on the side of awareness and prevention …"*
>
> *"… For me, Option 1 seemed like the most viable and the money saving is great, but as somebody that's part of the local community, I'd like to see that being reinvested into marketing and trying to make sure that you can cover what you've got available ... to recruit more people as just to make sure cover is available …"*

» Call-out types in the affected areas

> *"… In order to make this decision, it would have been helpful to understand what type of call-outs places like Haddenham, Stokenchurch, Great Missenden have"*

» Plans for the pumps and/or stations themselves

> *"If you're looking to close down certain On-Call pumps, will that be permanent? What if you want to reverse it just in case you made a mistake? Will you be keeping [them] on standby just in case you might need to reopen it?"*

» Any potential risks or impacts of making changes

> *"The projected impact on fatalities, injuries, property damage, rather than response time, which may not mean much in and of itself … If there's no real impact, then it's more difficult to mount an argument against it"*

» The options considered but not taken forward, and why

> *"I would say advise on the options you considered so the community are aware what was considered but then provide the pros and cons for each to provide confidence in the decision that is made"*

4.31 Echoing the staff participants, residents also suggested that the Programme itself could be used as a recruitment tool for the On-Call stations remaining after any changes are implemented.

> *"[People] don't know about Service and what they do … If they have more awareness and knowledge, maybe they'd be keen to find out more about being recruited and getting involved … Straight away people hear that you're removing services [and] it may sound negative. So, maybe focusing on the positives, getting more people involved and knowing how they can contribute to the community"*

Participants trusted BFRS to make decisions in the best interests of the county

4.32 Overall, participants displayed a great deal of trust in BFRS to make decisions in the best interest of its residents, staff, and other stakeholders.

> *" … I'm not an expert on what's proposed so I wouldn't know whether that system would work or not but as a local resident I think I would have the trust in the fire service to design a system which they think would work …"*

There was widespread support for 'Operational Independence' for the chief fire officer on some issues

4.33 The overwhelming majority of participants agreed that the chief fire officer (CFO) should have 'operational independence' in relation to appointing and dismissing BFRS staff; decisions on staffing and resources; balancing the needs of the organisation and the public; and spending up to agreed levels. The CFO, it was said, has been appointed to manage the Service, and should be trusted to do so and to make decisions in its best interests.

> *"… If an organisation believes they have appointed the right Chief then they have to trust him/her to take on responsibilities of this nature thereby allowing them to concentrate on the larger, overall decision making"*

4.34 Most people anticipated positive impacts from granting the CFO such independence, especially in relation to efficiency and agile decision-making.

> *"… I think empowering CFOs to a greater degree in the running of the services could reduce delays in decision-making and make processes more streamlined (and therefore more cost-effective)"*

> *"… Decisions can be made quickly and efficiently without delay and surely the Chief Fire Officer has been employed for their skills and everyday operational issues can be dealt with by this officer"*

4.35 It was, though, considered important that the Fire Authority continue to provide governance and oversight to ensure accountability on the part of the CFO, and act as a 'backstop' in the event of significant disagreement with a decision made by the CFO.

> *"… It's his/her role to know what's in the best interest of the FRS. They will be overseeing the entire operation on a daily basis so it only makes sense to be given the authority to call the shots. Having said that, if anyone is unhappy with the CFO's decision they can escalate it to the FA as a backup …"*

4.36 One especially detailed response was received that encapsulates the views reported above. This has been reproduced in its entirety below.

> *"Yes, within clearly defined operational boundaries.*
>
> *Operational agility is essential*
>
> *The CFO leads a frontline emergency service. Delays caused by waiting for Fire Authority approval could compromise public safety, staff welfare, or service delivery. Decisions around staffing deployment, equipment use, training schedules, or incident response protocols must be made swiftly and often in real time.*
>
> *Strategic vs. tactical distinction*
>
> *The Fire Authority rightly retains control over strategic matters: budget, risk management plans, and governance structures. The CFO should be empowered to make tactical decisions that implement those strategies—without needing constant sign-off.*
>
> *Professional expertise*
>
> *The CFO is a qualified fire service leader with deep operational knowledge. Requiring elected members (who may lack technical expertise) to approve every decision risks diluting professional judgment with political process.*
>
> *Governance already provides oversight*
>
> *The Fire Authority meets regularly, has lead members for key areas (e.g. Service Delivery, Finance, Risk), and maintains audit and executive committees. These structures allow for retrospective scrutiny and accountability—without obstructing day-to-day decision-making.*
>
> *Ideal balance?*
>
> - *Delegated authority framework: The CFO should operate under a scheme of delegation approved by the Fire Authority. This sets clear boundaries for what decisions can be made independently.*
>
> - *Transparency and reporting: The CFO should regularly report decisions and outcomes to the Fire Authority, ensuring visibility without micromanagement.*

> - *Emergency powers: In urgent situations, the CFO should have enhanced authority to act decisively, with post-event reporting to the Authority.*
>
> *Empowering the CFO doesn't weaken governance - it strengthens service delivery. The Fire Authority's role is to set the vision and hold the service accountable, not to manage it minute-by-minute.*

Overall conclusions

4.37 There was recognition of BFRS's On-Call challenges among staff and members of the public, albeit the former were of the view that they are, to at least some extent, of the Service's own making. As such, there was some support in all staff groups and among members of the public for the On-Call Improvement Programme's focus (i.e., using On-Call primarily for resilience and special appliance crewing).

4.38 This support was, however, caveated with practical concerns around managing future risk from, say, population increases and infrastructure developments; resilience for larger and simultaneous incidents; an over-reliance on cross-border cover; the potential impacts of increased response times (however small) on public and firefighter safety; and the prospect of staffing reductions on remaining On-Call pumps both within Buckinghamshire and in neighbouring fire and rescue services.

4.39 In considering the options development process, staff were concerned about whether the 2024 availability data underpinning it is still current; and whether nuances such as availability being impacted by On-Call firefighters 'plugging gaps' on Wholetime appliances, were sufficiently considered. In effect, there was concern that all stations have been treated equally within the process, while there are clear differences in added value and future viability.

4.40 In terms of the options on the table at the time of the engagement, Option 1 was unanimously preferred by staff, who were of the view that the inclusion of Option 2 was something of a concession to public and political opinion. This was a concern, with staff fearing that residents (who typically know little about how the fire and rescue service works) would - given the choice - choose Option 2 on the grounds that it is 'neater' and maintains at least a physical FRS presence in all current locations. This was to some extent borne out in the public groups, where opinion was more mixed on the options and the reasons for favouring Option 2 reflected staff concerns (i.e. that it would not result in any fire station closures; it removes resource from areas that would still have good fire cover after implementation; and would be less likely to inflame public and political opinion).

4.41 Overall, staff favoured taking one well thought out and data driven option forward to formal consultation. Residents were more divided, though they again marginally favoured a single option. Regardless, it was considered essential that any option or options taken forward (be it Option 1, Option 2, and/or some variation) are underpinned by up-to-date data and the range of supporting information suggested earlier in this chapter; and that openness, transparency, and honesty is put at the heart of the process.

4.42 Ultimately, while they were generally concerned and somewhat cynical about the On-Call Improvement Programme, staff considered it worth pursing if it results in BFRS committing to ensuring the future success of On-Call through measures to improve recruitment and retention, training opportunities, and support for staff. They also made several specific suggestions for improving On-Call pump availability (as reported earlier in this chapter) which they felt would strengthen the Programme if adopted.

4.43 As for members of the public, the consensus was that while in an ideal world the proposed changes would not be necessary, the proposal has been carefully considered and appears to be rational and proportionate; and to represent a better and more efficient way to spend a limited budget. There was significant trust in BFRS to make sensible decisions, though the need to manage public concerns and perceptions carefully and sensitively within affected areas was stressed.