

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE AND MILTON KEYNES FIRE AUTHORITY
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

Director of Legal & Governance, Graham Britten
Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service
Brigade HQ, Stocklake, Aylesbury, Bucks HP20 1BD
Tel: 01296 744441



Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive
Louise Harrison

To: Members of Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority

9 March 2026

Dear Councillor

**MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND
PUBLIC**

Please note the content of Page
2 of this Agenda Pack

To contact our Communication
Team, please email
cteam@bucksfire.gov.uk

Your attendance is requested at an **EXTRAORDINARY MEETING** of the **BUCKINGHAMSHIRE AND MILTON KEYNES FIRE AUTHORITY** to be held in **THE OCULUS, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL, THE GATEWAY OFFICES, GATEHOUSE ROAD, AYLESBURY, BUCKS, HP19 8FF** on **18 MARCH 2026** at **11AM** (or at the rising of the Executive Committee, whichever is the later) 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, Hussain M OBE, Hussain N, Lancaster, McLean, Priestley, Rouse, Sherwell, Stuchbury and Wilson



MAKING YOU SAFER



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/UCWmIXPWAscxl3vIiv7bh1Q>

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. On-Call Improvement Programme Decision Report

To consider item 6 (**Pages 7 - 238**)

7. Date of Next Meeting

To note that the Annual Meeting of the Fire Authority will be held on Wednesday 10 June 2026 at 11 am in the Paralympic Room, Buckinghamshire Council Offices, 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)

This page is intentionally left blank



Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority

Meeting and date: Extraordinary Fire Authority, 18 March 2026

Report title: On-Call Improvement Programme Decision Report

Lead Member: Councillor Llew Monger

Report sponsor: Chief Fire Officer Louise Harrison

Author and contact: Assistant Chief Fire Officer Doug Buchanan

Action: Decision

Recommendations:

It is recommended that:

1. The removal of the following On-Call crewed fire engines at the below locations:
 - a. The On-Call fire engine at Amersham;
 - b. The On-Call fire engine at Beaconsfield;
 - c. The On-Call fire engine at Great Missenden;
 - d. The On-Call fire engine at High Wycombe;
 - e. The On-Call fire engine at Stokenchurch; and
 - f. The second On-Call fire engine at West Ashland

be authorised.

2. The closure and decommissioning of:
 - a. Great Missenden Fire Station; and
 - b. Stokenchurch Fire Station

be authorised

3. It be noted that the On-call capability at Buckingham will be retained and enhanced by the provision of a dual purpose 4x4 lightweight fire engine (with rural firefighting capability) as a replacement for the current on-call fire engine.
4. The following special appliances locations as below be noted
 - a) Rural Firefighting Vehicle at Amersham;
 - b) Crew Welfare unit at Beaconsfield; and
 - c) Rural Firefighting Vehicle at West Ashland
5. The timing and phased implementation of the approved changes be delegated to the Chief Fire Officer.
6. It be noted that recommendations for the future of Great Missenden and Stokenchurch sites will be brought to the Executive Committee at a later date.

7. The consultation feedback in relation to operational independence of the Chief Fire Officer, and that no changes to existing governance or delegation arrangements are recommended as part of this report, be noted.
-

Executive Summary

This paper seeks Fire Authority approval of the final recommendations arising from the On-Call Improvement Programme following completion of a public consultation exercise. The decision requested is to approve the proposed changes to parts of the Service's On-Call fire engine and station provision, as set out in the accompanying *On-Call Improvement Programme – Final Decision Report* and Evidence Pack.

Why a decision is required

Through the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 2025–2030, the Fire Authority committed to reviewing and modernising its response arrangements where historic or elements of the existing model no longer reflect current risk, demand or workforce realities. Evidence gathered through the CRMP, and the On-Call Improvement Programme demonstrates that the Service does not require 30 crewed appliances to manage its risk or demand. Furthermore, a number of On-Call fire engines cannot be reliably crewed and therefore cannot be safely or reliably planned into a predictable emergency response. Maintaining these arrangements does not provide dependable resilience and risks creating false reassurance for communities.

Availability is just one part of the drive for change, our analysis of current and future risk describes how our 12 wholetime fire engines meet our existing demand comfortably and how reasonably foreseeable, high impact events require the Service to be able to increase its size to 22 fire engines. Our proposal would see the Service maintain a total of 24 crewed fire engines and a strategic reserve of six fire engines, reducing the overall fleet from 35 to 30. In addition, operational fire engines will continue to be supported by specialist vehicles and Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) capability.

What is being proposed

The recommendations focus on improving the reliability, resilience and sustainability of the On-Call system by:

- removing six fire engines that analysis shows us have limited impact on response
- authorise the closure of two long-term dormant On-Call stations
- redistributing and introducing specialist vehicles where they better align with risk

- retaining and redeploying existing On-Call firefighters wherever possible to preserve skills and experience within the Service.

The proposals do not change emergency response standards agreed through the CRMP and do not reduce wholetime fire engine provision. Modelling indicates there will be no material impact on overall emergency response performance across the county.

Consultation and assurance

A 10-week public consultation was carried out between November 2025 and January 2026 following Fire Authority approval to consult. Engagement included public events, staff engagement, focus groups and an online survey. All responses were independently analysed by Opinion Research Services (ORS). Consultation feedback was considered alongside operational evidence, workforce sustainability, financial information and professional judgement. The consultation influenced the final recommendations, including refinements made to strengthen local resilience and workforce sustainability.

Strategic alignment

The proposals directly support delivery of the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 2025–2030, which was approved by the Fire Authority and includes a clear commitment to review and optimise the Service’s On-Call fire engines and specialist resources where historic arrangements no longer reflect current risk, demand or workforce sustainability.

The proposals are also aligned with findings and areas for improvement identified by His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), which has consistently highlighted the need for fire and rescue services to assure themselves that their resources are sufficient, sustainable and matched to foreseeable risk, particularly in relation to On-Call availability.

Taken together, the proposals support the Fire Authority’s strategic objectives by:

- strengthening public safety through a more reliable and resilient response
- ensuring effective and responsible use of public resources
- supporting a sustainable workforce model that can be maintained over time

Financial implications

The On-Call Improvement Programme has not been developed with the intention of achieving budgetary savings. Any financial efficiencies generated through the proposals will be reinvested to strengthen and modernise the On-Call system.

Cost Avoidance

A projected annual cost avoidance of **£133,333** is anticipated, arising from the

reduced requirement to maintain and replace five fire engines and five sets of associated equipment. These figures are based on a 15-year asset life cycle, with approximate replacement costs of **£300,000 per appliance** and **£100,000 per equipment set**.

Fire appliance replacement program	Total cost avoidance	Annual cost avoidance
	(£)	(£)
Replacement of 5 fire engines *	1,500,000	100,000
Replacement of 5 fire engines equipment sets	500,000	33,333
Total cost avoidance	2,000,000	133,333

*Removing five fire engines and equipment sets from our red fleet replacement schedule would result in an approximate cost avoidance of £2m. However, this cost has not been factored into the current Medium-Term Financial Plan (2025/26-2029/30), as it would take at least 15 years to be fully realised.

Should the proposal be agreed, there is a one-off cost avoidance in the region of £300,000 by removing the need to undertake capital work at Great Missenden and Stokenchurch within the next two years for them to remain usable, despite not providing a reliable operational response.

Revenue Savings

An estimated **£40,000** in annual savings is expected from reduced servicing and maintenance costs, calculated at **£8,000 per vehicle**.

Receipts

The sale of five fire engines is expected to generate a one-off capital receipt of **£75,000**, based on anticipated resale values.

*Sales income of end-of-life fire appliance is between £10,000-£20,000; used an average figure of £15,000.

Risk management

The following risks have been identified and assessed by the Service in developing the recommendations presented for Fire Authority approval.

Future growth and emerging risk

Significant housing and infrastructure growth is planned across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes over the medium to long term. There is a risk that future development could increase incident demand or change risk profiles in ways that require additional or different fire and rescue resources.

Mitigation: Growth and emerging risk have been explicitly considered through the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 2025–2030, informed by available planning evidence at the time the CRMP was developed, together with ongoing engagement with local planning authorities. These documents provide the Service with visibility of the scale, location and phasing of planned development. The CRMP is reviewed annually, enabling the Service to take account of emerging or adopted planning documents, new information, planning decisions or changes in risk during its lifetime and to bring further proposals to the Fire Authority if required. The recommendations do not limit the Service’s ability to expand, relocate or enhance resources in the future should evidence demonstrate that this is necessary. One removed fire engine will be retained as part of the strategic reserve, providing additional flexibility. Analysis undertaken by the Service demonstrates that increases in housing numbers do not automatically translate into a requirement for additional fire engines; what matters is how risk changes, how developments are designed, and how effectively resources can be deployed.

Recruitment, retention and workforce sustainability

Consultation feedback and staff engagement highlighted a perception among some On-Call firefighters that recruitment has not been prioritised or sufficiently supported. This presents a risk to trust, morale and confidence in the Service’s approach to sustaining the On-Call system.

Evidence demonstrates that On-Call recruitment activity has remained strong and consistent over a sustained period, with regular intakes and ongoing engagement activity. However, the Service recognises that recruitment activity alone has not translated into sustained improvements in availability at all locations, and that staff experience and perception are important considerations alongside quantitative evidence.

Mitigation: The recommendations form part of a wider On-Call Improvement Programme that explicitly recognises the limits of recruitment-only solutions and places increased emphasis on retention, workforce sustainability, engagement and support. Continued communication with On-Call staff, visibility of recruitment effort, and opportunities for redeployment will be central to maintaining trust and morale during implementation.

Impact on staff, morale, wellbeing and loss of skills

Changes to On-Call fire engines or stations may negatively affect staff morale, wellbeing or perceptions of job security. There is also a risk that, if not carefully managed, the Service could lose valuable operational skills, experience and local knowledge held by On-Call firefighters affected by the proposals.

Mitigation: The Service recognises the significant contribution of On-Call firefighters and is committed to retaining skills, experience and capacity wherever possible.

Affected staff have been and will continue to be engaged and supported through clear communication, individual discussions and redeployment opportunities to other On-Call units or roles where practicable. The proposals are not intended to reduce firefighter establishment and form part of a wider programme to strengthen long-term On-Call sustainability, retention and workforce development. Ongoing engagement with representative bodies, alongside access to wellbeing and people support, will be maintained throughout implementation.

Public confidence and perception of reduced cover

Changes to local fire engine or station provision could be perceived as a reduction in emergency cover, particularly in communities affected by the proposals.

Mitigation: Evidence demonstrates that emergency response in affected areas is already routinely provided by wholetime or neighbouring stations due to long-term On-Call unavailability. Clear communication, engagement with communities, and transparency about current availability and future monitoring through the CRMP will be central to implementation. Emergency response standards agreed through the CRMP will not change.

Overall, the Service considers that any risks associated with the recommendations are minimal and proportionate when set against the risks of maintaining current arrangements that rely on fire engines which cannot be reliably crewed.

Legal Implications: Consultation and decision-making

The consultation and decision-making processes have been carried out in line with good practice and the Gunning principles. Independent analysis of consultation responses provides assurance that the process was fair, transparent and robust.

Lawful consultation is required to be about proposals, which must themselves be at a formative stage: the “Gunning” principles, affirmed by the Supreme Court in [R \(on the application of Moseley\) v Haringey LBC \[2014\] UKSC 56; \[2014\] 1 W.L.R. 3947 at \[25\]](#)

In order to consult on proposals, it is necessary to formulate and articulate them. Officer research and informal pre-consultation and engagement are among established methods of assisting and enabling the relevant decision-maker to do so.

Further as a matter of public law the ultimate decision-maker in this respect has a duty to ask itself the relevant questions and take steps to acquire the relevant information needed to ensure that it has regard to relevant considerations when taking its decision: [Secretary of State for Education and Science v Tameside MBC \[1977\] A.C 1014 \(House of Lords\)](#).

On that basis too, therefore, officer research, informal engagement and pre-consultation, all with a view to putting relevant information before the decision-maker, are lawful.

In addition, the Chief Fire Officer was required by the statutory [National Framework](#) to have regard to the CRMP and to implement an On-Call review it mandated, including:

- (1) effecting and overseeing actions enabling the formulation of proposals for the decision-maker to consider authorising public consultation upon and
- (2) acquiring relevant information to place before the decision-maker.

In summary, to satisfy the Gunning principles any consultation:

1. Must be carried out at a time when proposals are still at a formative stage
2. The proposer must give sufficient information for any proposal to allow for intelligent consideration
3. Adequate time must be given for consultation and response

The product of the consultation must be conscientiously taken into account in making the decision. In [Draper v Lincolnshire County Council \[2014\] EWHC 2388 \(Admin\)](#) the High Court allowed a judicial review challenge on the basis that the proposer had not conscientiously considered the consultation outcome. A local authority's decision to reduce its library provision from 44 to 15 libraries was quashed. It was proper for a local authority to have a preferred option, but for consultation to be meaningful it had to be prepared to think again if those consulted were unhappy with the proposal and suggested a different solution.

In [West Dulwich Action Group v London Borough of Lambeth \[2025\] EWHC 11 \(Admin\)](#) the High Court reiterates that a decision will be unlawful if the authority fails to conscientiously consider consultation responses in making a decision. The Service commissioned an independent audit of its consultation and engagement approach. The audit reviewed the consultation design, supporting materials and communication strategy against good practice and the Gunning principles, and provided assurance that the approach was fair, transparent and robust. This audit is included within the supporting documentation.

Operational Independence

Consultation responses in relation to operational independence of the Chief Fire Officer have been considered. No changes to existing governance, delegation or accountability arrangements are recommended as part of this report, but it is proposed that a subsequent review of the current scheme of delegation should be

considered to ensure optimal flexibility is provided to make necessary operational decisions at pace.

As reported in the [‘State of Fire and Rescue: The Annual Assessment of Fire and Rescue Services in England 2024–25 ‘ published on 5 November 2025](#), HMCIFRS has stated:

‘ [A]t the time of publication, MHCLG didn’t intend to legislate to give chief fire officers operational independence. It expects to include work already carried out on schemes of delegation (how fire and rescue authorities assign responsibilities) in an updated national framework.

While I appreciate MHCLG’s recognition of the ongoing calls for operational independence, I am disappointed that no legislative action is currently planned to address this. Ongoing changes to governance, particularly under mayoral structures, make it more important than ever to clearly define the role and authority of chief fire officers. I expect MHCLG to give me an update by 5 April 2026.’

Privacy and security implications

The Service has considered privacy and information governance implications arising from the On-Call Improvement Programme and the associated public consultation.

The public consultation was conducted on an anonymous basis. No personal data was collected from members of the public attending engagement events, and no names or contact details were recorded during face-to-face engagement.

Focus groups and survey activity were independently facilitated by Opinion Research Services (ORS). ORS acted as an independent data processor and managed all personal data associated with focus group participation in accordance with their own data protection and privacy policies. The Service did not receive or retain personal data relating to focus group participants.

Limited employee personal data may be accessed by the Service during implementation, for example to support redeployment, engagement or workforce management. This activity falls within the Service’s existing HR functions and is processed in line with established policies, lawful bases and access controls.

On this basis, no new or intrusive processing of personal data has been identified. A standalone Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) has therefore not been required.

Duty to collaborate

The proposals set out in this report relate to the configuration and sustainability of the Service's On-Call fire engines and stations. No opportunities for collaboration with the police or ambulance services have been identified that would be relevant to, or would materially affect, the recommendations presented. The service has ensured through the process that the views of our neighbouring services have been captured and dialogue with the Thames Valley services has been constructive and considered within the final proposal.

The statutory duty to consider collaboration has therefore been met.

Health and safety implications

The changes relate to the configuration and deployment of On-Call fire engines, stations and specialist vehicles and do not introduce new or unusual health and safety risks to staff, the public or partner organisations.

Any operational changes will be implemented in line with the Service's existing health and safety policies, operational risk assessments, safe systems of work and training requirements. Where changes to roles, locations or equipment occur, appropriate task-specific risk assessments will be undertaken as part of normal operational and implementation processes.

Environmental implications

The proposals relate to the configuration and deployment of existing fire and rescue resources and do not involve new development, land take or changes that would adversely affect designated sites, habitats or biodiversity.

The proposals are not expected to increase harmful emissions or resource consumption. By removing fire engines that are rarely used and focusing investment on resources that can be reliably crewed and effectively deployed, the proposals support a more efficient and sustainable use of assets. The increased use of specialist vehicles aligned to local risk, including rural and wildfire capability, also supports preparedness for climate-related risks.

Environmental considerations, including sustainability and climate resilience, are addressed through the Community Risk Management Plan and will continue to be reviewed as part of future planning and decision-making. No issues have been identified that would give rise to concerns under environmental protection legislation or the Environment Act enforcement framework.

Equality, diversity, and inclusion implications

An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) has been undertaken and informed the development of the recommendations throughout the On-Call Improvement Programme. The EqIA considered the potential impact of the proposals on staff and communities, including those with protected characteristics, and has been used to identify and mitigate any disproportionate impacts.

The EqIA will continue to be kept under review during implementation, and HR will remain engaged to ensure that equality and inclusion considerations continue to inform delivery.

The consultation exercise was conducted ensuring that equality, diversity and inclusion considerations were embedded at every stage. A comprehensive pre-consultation EqIA identified groups potentially affected by the proposals, enabling the design of a fully accessible and inclusive engagement plan. Consultation materials were provided in multiple accessible formats, including Easy Read and printed versions on request, while alternative participation routes—such as online survey, targeted focus groups, and in person sessions—ensured that individuals with varying needs, working patterns and lived experiences were able to contribute.

The consultation explicitly asked for feedback relating to positive and negative EDI impacts and feedback was analysed through an EDI lens and used to understand differential impacts across groups and shape the updated EqIA. Themes emerging relating to protected characteristic groups were highlighted in the findings and used to inform the final recommendations. The updated EqIA is presented to decisionmakers as appendices to this paper. This process ensured that the consultation not only met statutory duties but also reflected best practice in inclusive engagement to prevent or minimise disproportionate impacts.

Consultation and communication

The Service has undertaken extensive engagement and formal consultation in the development of the On-Call Improvement Programme.

Following Fire Authority approval to consult in November 2025, a 10-week public consultation was carried out between November 2025 and January 2026. The consultation was designed to ensure that staff, communities and stakeholders were given a clear opportunity to understand the proposals and provide informed feedback before any decisions were taken.

Consultation activity included:

- publication of a Consultation Pack and supporting Evidence Pack
- an online public survey
- public engagement events held across the Service area

- staff focus groups and engagement sessions
- public and stakeholder focus groups
- targeted engagement with representative bodies and key partners.

All consultation responses were independently analysed by Opinion Research Services (ORS). In addition, the Service commissioned an independent audit of its consultation and engagement approach, which provided assurance that the process met good practice and the Gunning principles.

Consultation feedback was carefully considered alongside operational evidence, workforce sustainability, community impact and professional judgement. The consultation influenced the final recommendations, including refinements made to strengthen local resilience and workforce sustainability. A clear explanation of how consultation feedback influenced the final proposals is set out in the accompanying Final Decision Report.

Key milestones in the development of the proposals include:

- Fire Authority approval to consult – November 2025
- Public consultation period – November 2025 to January 2026
- Consideration of consultation findings and refinement of proposals – January to February 2026

Communication

Clear, timely and consistent communication will be critical to the successful implementation of the proposals. Primary audiences include:

- affected On-Call and wholetime staff;
- representative bodies;
- communities directly affected by the proposals;
- elected Members and key partners.

Internal and external communication will be coordinated with the Communications Team and will include:

- staff briefings and manager-led communications;
- targeted engagement with affected stations and individuals;
- public-facing information explaining the decisions and next steps;
- ongoing updates through established internal and external channels.

Communication will be phased to ensure that staff are informed at the appropriate time and prior to wider public messaging. Advice has been sought from the

Communications Team, and a detailed implementation communications plan will support delivery where required.

Background papers

[Agenda- Papers Fire Authority 12 November 2025](#)

[Agenda- Papers Fire Authority 16 October 2025](#)

[Agenda- Papers Fire Authority 8 October 2025](#)

[CRMP 2025-2030](#)

[Annual Plan 2025-2026](#)

Appendix	Title	Protective Marking
1	OIP Final Decision Report	
2	OIP Post Consultation Evidence Pack	
3	OIP Post Consultation EqIA	
4	Post Consultation ORS Final Report	
5	OIP EqIA Consultation	
6	On-Call Improvement Programme Assurance Review – Phase 1	
7	On-Call Improvement Programme Assurance Review – Phase 2 Addendum	



On-Call Improvement Programme – Final Decision Report

How consultation feedback, evidence and professional judgement informed the final proposals

Version: 1

Table of Contents

On-Call Improvement Programme – Final Decision Report	0
1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	2
2. WHY CHANGE IS NEEDED.....	4
On-Call fire engines and reliability	4
Changing communities and future risk.....	5
Supporting staff and long-term sustainability	6
A necessary and responsible step.....	6
3. HOW THE PROPOSALS WERE DEVELOPED.....	6
An evidence-led starting point	6
Early development and internal challenge	7
Fire Authority agreement to consult	7
Public, staff and stakeholder consultation.....	8
Consideration of feedback and refinement of proposals	8
4. OPTIONS CONSIDERED.....	8
Summary comparison of options	9
5. EVIDENCE THAT INFORMED THE PROPOSALS.....	9
Risk and demand.....	10
On-Call reliability and availability	10
Operational response and resilience.....	10
Workforce sustainability.....	11
Community impact and future growth	11
Financial considerations	11
6. PUBLIC AND STAFF CONSULTATION.....	12
Purpose of the consultation.....	12
How the consultation was carried out	12
Who responded	13
What we heard - headline themes	13
How consultation feedback influenced the proposals	14
Transparency and assurance	14
Summary of consultation influence	14
7. FINAL PROPOSALS.....	15
Operational independence of the Chief Fire Officer	15
Final Proposals for On-Call.....	16
Rationale for the proposals	20
What will not change.....	21
8. BENEFITS, IMPLEMENTATION AND NEXT STEPS	21
The anticipated benefits include	21
Implementation approach.....	21
9. GOVERNANCE, RISKS AND MONITORING	22
9.1 Governance and oversight	23
9.2 Risks and mitigations	23
9.4 Equality, impact and assurance	23
9.5 Monitoring and review	23
10. CONCLUSION.....	24

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report sets out the final proposals arising from the On-Call Improvement Programme public consultation and asks the Fire Authority to consider proposed changes to parts of the Service's On-Call fire engine and station provision.

In summary, the final proposals presented to the Fire Authority are to:

- Remove six On-Call crewed fire engines
- Close and decommissioning of Great Missenden and Stokenchurch Fire Stations
- Reposition specialist vehicles to better align with local risk and operational need
- Retain an On-Call capability at Buckingham through a dual-purpose appliance
- Delegate implementation timing to the Chief Fire Officer
- Defer any changes to the scheme of delegation of the Chief Fire Officer Operational Independence

Following implementation, the **Service will maintain a total of 24 crewed fire engines** and a strategic reserve of six fire engines, reducing overall fleet from 35 to 30. The fleet will comprise:

- 12 wholetime fire engines (no change)
- 12 On-Call fire engines (reduced from 18)
- Up to 6 reserve fire engines (Increase from 5)

In addition, the 24 crewed fire engines will be supported by specialist vehicles and Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) capability in line with local risk and operational need. One removed On-Call fire engine will be retained within the strategic reserve, strengthening resilience during periods of escalated, sustained or simultaneous demand.

The proposals are based on a wide range of community, operational, workforce, and financial considerations, assessed collectively and in the round. In particular, they are informed by two central factors:

The Service's response model, approved in the 2025 – 2030 Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP), requires that 12 fire engines are routinely available to deal with day-to-day emergency response demand across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. Operational data demonstrates that this level of resourcing meets 99.7% of incidents. Analysis of a five-year period further shows that the number of fire engines required during escalated, prolonged or simultaneous incidents has rarely exceeded 22 appliances, and only on exceptional occasions. This demonstrates that the Service's response model remains appropriate for foreseeable demand and the proposals in this report will enhance the Service's ability to address the risks identified through the CRMP in relation to resilience.

Some On-Call fire engines can no longer be relied upon to respond consistently. Over a sustained period, On-Call availability has declined due to long-term recruitment and retention pressures (experienced locally but also nationally). As a result, several fire engines are frequently unavailable, and in some locations have not been crewed for years. When this happens, incidents are already being managed by wholetime fire engines or resources from elsewhere.

Through the CRMP, the Fire Authority agreed that the Service must review and modernise how its resources are organised where historic arrangements no longer reflect current risk, demand or

workforce realities. The On-Call Improvement Programme is the practical delivery of that commitment. Its purpose is to **create a more reliable, resilient and sustainable operational model**.

Between November 2025 and January 2026, the Service undertook a 10-week public consultation on proposals to remove a number of On-Call fire engines that cannot be consistently crewed, close two long-term dormant On-Call stations, better align specialist vehicles with local risk, and operational need, and provide greater operational flexibility in how resources are deployed. The consultation included public events, staff engagement and independently facilitated focus groups. All responses were independently analysed by Opinion Research Services (ORS).

Consultation feedback reflected strong public interest in maintaining community safety and effective emergency response, alongside understandable concern about the loss of local fire engines and stations. Feedback emphasised the importance of clear communication, fairness and reinvestment in the remaining On-Call system. Feedback also showed particular sensitivity to the impacts on future growth and local resilience, with many wanting reassurance that the Service would continue to monitor risk and adapt resources appropriately as communities across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes develop.

All consultation responses were carefully considered alongside operational evidence, response planning, financial information and professional judgement. Community impact, staff wellbeing and workforce sustainability were central to this assessment, alongside the Service's statutory duties and response requirements. Where feedback identified unintended impacts or opportunities to improve the proposals, changes were made to strengthen the final recommendations.

As a result, the proposals have been refined in key areas, most notably through the decision to retain an On-Call fire engine at Buckingham with a flexible, dual-use vehicle. This change directly reflects what was heard during staff and public engagement and demonstrates how consultation has influenced the final proposal.

Importantly, removing fire engines that cannot be reliably crewed today does not reduce the Service's ability to respond safely now, nor does it limit the ability to grow in the future.

The recommendations in this report represent an important first step in a wider, multi-year programme to strengthen the On-Call crewing system in the Service. They focus on concentrating effort and investment on resources that can be relied upon, making better use of specialist capabilities, and reinvesting efficiencies into recruitment, training and long-term resilience. Taken together, they provide a balanced, proportionate and evidence-led approach that strengthens the reliability of the Service's response and supports delivery of the risks and priorities identified in the CRMP.

Planned development across the county is considerable in scale, but it is phased over many years and remains subject to planning, market and delivery factors. Standing still while waiting for potential

growth to materialise would leave the Service managing known risks with unreliable resources. Instead, these proposals ensure the Service remains effective today, while committing to ongoing monitoring of growth and risk through future CRMPs, with the ability to expand, relocate or enhance resources if demand demonstrably changes.

2. WHY CHANGE IS NEEDED

Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service has a responsibility to provide a safe, reliable and sustainable emergency response for the communities it serves. To do this well, the Service must regularly review how its resources are organised and be transparent about whether existing arrangements still work in practice.

Through the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 2025–2030, the Fire Authority approved a clear response model based on a detailed review of risk and demand. This work confirmed that

- **12 fire engines are sufficient to meet day-to-day emergencies**
- that the Service must also be able to increase its response to **around 22 fire engines during larger or longer-lasting incidents.**

The Service remains confident that this response model is appropriate and proportionate to the risks faced across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. The day-to-day response requirement is consistently met by wholetime fire engines, which are always available to respond immediately. This part of the response model is working as intended. This means the Service continues to meet its response commitments to the public today, while this programme focuses on strengthening how additional support is provided when demand increases.

The focus of the On-Call Improvement Programme is therefore about strengthening the way On-Call fire engines support our response model.

Detailed operational data and analysis that underpin this section are set out in the Post Consultation Evidence Pack (Appendix 2).

On-Call fire engines and reliability

For many years, On-Call fire engines have been expected to both arrive quickly at emergencies and provide additional support when incidents escalate or last longer. The Service's evidence now shows that these two expectations are not being met equally.

Over time, the way people live and work has changed, and the traditional On-Call model has become harder to sustain. While On-Call firefighters remain a valued and important part of the Service, some On-Call fire engines are no longer available quickly enough to respond immediately when emergencies happen. In a small number of cases, fire engines have not been crewed for many years.

Evidence reference:

On-Call fire engine availability over time and by location is set out in the Post Consultation

Evidence Pack (Appendix 2, Section 5), including trend information showing long-term patterns rather than single-year variation.

A fire engine that cannot be relied upon cannot be safely planned into a predictable emergency response. Continuing to present uncrewed On-Call fire engines as part of the Service's day-to-day response does not reflect how they are actually used and risks creating false reassurance for communities.

The Service has continued to invest significant effort in recruiting On-Call firefighters, including targeted campaigns, community engagement and changes to recruitment processes. These efforts have resulted in regular intakes of new On-Call staff. Consultation feedback reflected a perception among some respondents that recruitment and organisational support could have been strengthened further. This is an area we will continue to focus on as part of our wider on call improvement programme. However, evidence shows that recruitment alone has not led to sustained improvements in the reliability of our On-Call fire engines. This reflects wider changes in working patterns and the difficulty of retaining sufficient numbers of people who can respond consistently and at short notice.

Evidence reference:

On-Call recruitment efforts over the last 5 years (Appendix 2, Section 5.2).

Changing communities and future risk

Communities across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes continue to change. Alongside fires, the Service increasingly responds to a wide range of incident types, including road traffic collisions, flooding, severe weather and other emergencies linked to climate change, population change and the way communities are developing.

Planned housing and infrastructure growth is a key consideration for the Service and the Fire Authority. This growth, and its potential impact on risk and demand, has already been taken into account within CRMP 2025–2030. The CRMP was developed using the best available evidence on population change, development trajectories and emerging risk, and the Service remains confident that it provides an appropriate framework for managing foreseeable growth.

Importantly, increased housing does not automatically mean that additional fire stations or fire engines are required. Both at a local level and nationally, data shows that there has not been a correlation between a growing population and incident numbers. What matters is how risk changes, how developments are designed, and how effectively resources can be deployed to respond to emergencies.

While the CRMP sets a five-year strategic framework, it is reviewed annually to ensure that new information, emerging development plans and changes in risk are considered. This provides the Service with the ability to adjust and respond during the lifetime of the CRMP, rather than waiting until the next full review.

In practice, most housing and infrastructure development is mid- to long-term in nature, with planning, construction and occupation taking place over several years. This provides the Service with both visibility and time to work closely with local planning authorities, councils and partners, to influence development through prevention and protection activity and to adapt operational arrangements where evidence shows this is required.

The proposals in this report do not limit the Service's ability to respond to future growth.

By focusing on resources that can be relied upon today, the Service is taking a responsible, evidence-led approach that protects public safety now, while maintaining the flexibility to grow and adapt as communities continue to change.

Evidence reference:

Growth assumptions, CRMP review arrangements and future risk considerations are set out in the Post Consultation Evidence Pack (Appendix 2, section 3.4).

Supporting staff and long-term sustainability

Maintaining a large number of On-Call fire engines that cannot be reliably crewed places pressure on staff and spreads limited availability too thinly. Over time, this undermines morale and the long-term sustainability of the On-Call system, which is currently ineffective.

By concentrating investment, training and support on a sustainable number of On-Call fire engines, the Service can provide clearer expectations for staff and a more stable model for the future.

A necessary and responsible step

Maintaining the current On-Call arrangements without change would not address the issues identified through the CRMP, external inspection by HMICFRS, or the consultation, including challenges around fire engines that cannot be reliably crewed. Change is therefore necessary to ensure that the Service remains clear about its capability, resilient in the face of demand, and ready to adapt as communities continue to grow and change.

The On-Call Improvement Programme represents a responsible and forward-looking step that strengthens public safety today, supports the workforce, and preserves the ability to grow and adapt in the future.

3. HOW THE PROPOSALS WERE DEVELOPED

This section explains how the Service developed and refined the proposals set out in this report. It demonstrates that the proposals were developed through a structured, transparent and evidence-led process, and that public and staff engagement was carried out in line with the Gunning principles.

An evidence-led starting point

The starting point for the On-Call Improvement Programme was the development of the CRMP 2025–2030. This included reviewing risk, demand and workforce sustainability to ensure that

the Service's approach to emergency response remained appropriate for the communities it serves, as approved by the Fire Authority.

This work confirmed that the Service's core response model, particularly the wholetime crewing element meeting day-to-day demand and response standards, remains sound. However, it also highlighted long-standing challenges in the reliability and sustainability of parts of the On-Call system. The need to address this imbalance was therefore identified through strategic planning, rather than as a reaction to short-term pressures or individual incidents.

Detailed analysis that informed this work is set out in the Post Consultation Evidence Pack (Appendix 2).

Early development and internal challenge

Before any public consultation took place, the Service undertook further work to understand how the issues identified through the CRMP could be addressed in practice. This included reviewing options, testing assumptions and considering potential impacts on communities, staff and operational response.

Operational leaders were closely involved at this stage to ensure that proposals were realistic, deliverable and supported by professional judgement. This helped ensure that the proposals presented for consultation were clear, credible and capable of being influenced by feedback.

The Service also engaged early with staff and representative bodies. A Fire Brigades Union (FBU) representative attended programme meetings, providing an opportunity for early engagement, challenge and discussion as the proposals were being shaped. Staff briefings were held to engage with potentially affected staff.

Fire Authority agreement to consult

Once initial proposals had been developed and tested internally, the Service sought Fire Authority approval to proceed to public consultation. This confirmed that the Authority agreed there was a clear case for reviewing the On-Call model and that it was appropriate to seek views from staff, communities and stakeholders before any decisions were taken.

The proposals approved for consultation were clearly defined, evidence-based and genuinely open to refinement, ensuring that consultees were able to understand the proposals and their potential impacts.

In parallel with preparing for consultation, the Service also commissioned an independent audit of its approach to consultation and engagement (Appendix C). This audit reviewed the consultation design, communication strategy and supporting materials and confirmed that the Service's approach met the requirements of the Gunning principles, with the communication strategy receiving a green rating. This provided additional assurance to the Fire Authority that the consultation was fair, transparent and robust before it commenced.

Public, staff and stakeholder consultation

A 10-week public consultation was carried out between November 2025 and January 2026. The consultation was designed to provide sufficient information, time and opportunity for people to understand the proposals and to express their views before any final decisions were made.

The consultation included:

- publication of a Consultation Pack explaining the proposals and rationale
- a supporting Post Consultation Evidence Pack providing more detailed information
- an online survey open to the public
- focus groups with staff, members of the public and stakeholders
- public engagement events held across the county
- targeted engagement with staff, representative bodies and key partners

Information was made available in alternative formats on request. The consultation approach was designed to be accessible, transparent and fair.

All responses were independently analysed by Opinion Research Services (ORS). ORS also facilitated the focus groups, enabling participants to ask questions, test their understanding of the proposals and explore issues in more depth.

Consideration of feedback and refinement of proposals

Following the close of the consultation, all feedback was reviewed in full (Appendix A). Responses were considered alongside operational evidence, community impact, workforce sustainability, financial information and professional judgement. The Service considered whether feedback:

- identified unintended impacts
- raised new evidence or perspectives
- highlighted areas where proposals could be strengthened

Where feedback demonstrated a clear case for change, proposals were refined accordingly. Where proposals were not changed, this was because the evidence continued to support the original approach.

This report explains how consultation feedback influenced the final recommendations and demonstrates that the consultation was carried out conscientiously and in accordance with the Gunning principles.

4. OPTIONS CONSIDERED

This section sets out the key factors considered as part of the On-Call Improvement Programme.

Each consideration was assessed against the Service's responsibility to maintain public safety, support a sustainable workforce, make responsible use of public money, and ensure that emergency response arrangements are more reliable and fit for the future.

Summary comparison of options

The table below summarises how each option performs against the key considerations.

Consideration	Option 1: Do nothing	Option 2: Consultation proposals	Option 3: Revised proposal (recommended)
Public safety	Maintains current arrangements but continues to rely on fire engines that are not always available	Focuses response on enabling more reliable fire engines	Focuses on enabling more reliable fire engines while retaining a flexible On-Call presence in a key location
Reliability of response	Remains inconsistent in some areas	Enables a clear and predictable response based on available resources	Enables a more reliable, clear and focused response, with added flexibility to match crew availability and demand
Impact on staff	Ongoing pressure on On-Call staff and sustainability risks	Clearer expectations and better support for sustainable On-Call cover	Clearer expectations, improved sustainability, and better use of available On-Call staff
Use of public money	Continues to support fire engines that cannot be reliably crewed	Ensures public funding supports resources that can be reliably crewed and deployed	Focuses investment on reliable resources while making better use of existing assets
Long-term sustainability	Does not address underlying challenges	Addresses challenges directly and supports long-term resilience	Addresses challenges while allowing the Service to test and adapt a more flexible model
Ability to respond to future growth	Limited flexibility	Retains flexibility to adapt through future CRMP reviews	Retains flexibility and allows resources to adapt as risk, demand and availability change.

5. EVIDENCE THAT INFORMED THE PROPOSALS

This section summarises the key sources of evidence that informed the development and refinement of the proposals. It does not repeat detailed data, modelling or technical analysis, which are provided in full within the Post Consultation Evidence Pack (Appendix 2). Instead, it explains how different types of evidence were brought together to support a balanced and responsible decision.

The Service considered evidence alongside consultation feedback, professional judgement and external scrutiny to ensure that proposals were proportionate, deliverable and focused on public safety.

Risk and demand

Understanding the types of incidents the Service is most likely to attend, where they occur and how they are changing over time is central to effective emergency response.

The CRMP 2025–2030 was developed following a detailed assessment of risk and demand across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. The Service’s planning shows that up to 12 fire engines are needed to meet normal day-to-day demand. At larger, more complex or longer-lasting incidents, additional fire engines may be required, up to 22 in total. Wholetime fire engines consistently meet the day-to-day requirement. On-Call fire engines are most valuable when additional support is needed to manage these larger, simultaneous, or prolonged incidents.

The proposals build on this assessment and do not change how we respond agreed through the CRMP. Instead, they focus on strengthening how additional support is provided when demand increases.

Evidence reference:

Risk profiles, incident demand analysis and CRMP assumptions are set out in the Post Consultation Evidence Pack (Appendix 2).

On-Call reliability and availability

Evidence shows that the ability to crew some On-Call fire engines consistently has reduced over a sustained period. This is not a short-term issue but reflects longer-term changes in working patterns and workforce availability.

Analysis considered how often On-Call fire engines are available, how this varies by location and time of day, and how it has changed over time. This evidence helped identify where current arrangements are no longer viable and where maintaining them does not provide consistent benefit.

Evidence reference:

On-Call availability trends by location and over time are provided in the Post Consultation Evidence Pack (Appendix 2, Section 5).

Operational response and resilience

The Service reviewed how incident demand is responded to in practice, including how resources are deployed when On-Call fire engines are unavailable and how response is strengthened during larger or longer-lasting incidents.

This work demonstrated the importance of planning around resources that can be relied upon, rather than assuming availability that cannot be consistently delivered. It also highlighted the value of On-Call fire engines when used to provide additional capacity and resilience during demanding incidents.

Evidence reference:

Incident attendance patterns and response arrangements are detailed in the Post Consultation Evidence Pack (Appendix 2).

Workforce sustainability

Evidence on recruitment, retention and workforce availability was considered to understand whether existing On-Call arrangements could be sustained in the long term.

While the Service has continued to recruit On-Call firefighters, the evidence shows that recruitment alone has not resulted in sustained improvements in the reliability of some On-Call fire engines. This reflects wider workforce pressures rather than a lack of effort or commitment.

The proposals are intended to support a more sustainable workforce by concentrating training, support and investment where it can have the greatest and most reliable impact.

Evidence reference:

Recruitment, retention and workforce data are included in the Post Consultation Evidence Pack, (Appendix 2).

Community impact and future growth

The Service considered how changes could affect communities across the county, including response coverage, local reassurance and the ability to respond to future growth.

This included assessing current long-term growth plans, population trends and emerging risk, alongside the Service's ability to adapt through annual CRMP reviews. Evidence shows that increased housing does not automatically require additional fire stations or fire engines, and that flexibility and deployment are critical factors.

The proposals do not limit the Service's ability to respond to future growth. Instead, they support a more reliable response now while preserving the ability to adapt as risk and demand changes.

Evidence reference:

Community impact assessment, growth assumptions and CRMP review arrangements are set out in the Post Consultation Evidence Pack (Appendix 2).

Financial considerations

Financial information was considered as part of the overall assessment to ensure that proposals represent a responsible use of public money.

This included understanding the ongoing costs associated with maintaining fire engines and infrastructure that cannot be reliably crewed, and the opportunity to focus investment where it provides consistent benefit. Financial considerations informed, but did not drive, the proposals.

The 'do nothing' option would continue to incur costs by maintaining fire engines and fire stations that are not operationally reliable. The proposals provide an opportunity to redirect

resources towards strengthening the remaining On-Call fire engines and supporting recruitment, training and resilience.

The proposals are not driven by the need to achieve savings. Any efficiencies identified are intended to be reinvested to support long-term On-Call sustainability.

Evidence reference:

Financial assumptions and cost information are provided in the Post Consultation Evidence Pack (Appendix 2, Section 7) and addressed further in the Fire Authority cover report.

6. PUBLIC AND STAFF CONSULTATION

This section summarises the public and staff consultation carried out as part of the On-Call Improvement Programme. It explains how the consultation was conducted and the main themes raised by respondents. Detailed findings are provided in the independent analysis report by Opinion Research Services (ORS) at Appendix 4.

Purpose of the consultation

The consultation was designed to ensure that communities, staff, and stakeholders were given a clear opportunity to understand the proposals, consider their potential impacts, and express their views before any final decisions were made.

The Service sought feedback on whether the proposals were understood, whether the rationale for change was clear, and whether there were any issues or impacts that required further consideration or mitigation.

How the consultation was carried out

A 10-week public consultation took place between November 2025 and January 2026. This timescale was chosen to allow sufficient time for people to engage meaningfully with the proposals.

In addition to publishing a Final Decision Report and supporting Post Consultation Evidence Pack, the Service adopted a targeted and multi-channel engagement approach. This included:

Paid social media advertising targeted at communities most directly affected by the proposals

- Press releases and media engagement to raise wider awareness
- Sharing consultation materials through local community social media groups
- Digital communications toolkits for partners and stakeholders, including suggested social media posts, newsletter content and press materials
- An explainer video distributed widely, including to town and parish councils, alongside short videos explaining key concepts such as the response model, crewing types and the role of On-Call firefighters
- In-person engagement sessions held in accessible local venues, including libraries and town halls

- Engagement packs provided to operational crews and teams, including leaflets, posters and QR codes linking directly to the survey to support promotion during routine community interactions

Information was made available in alternative formats on request to ensure accessibility.

All responses were independently analysed by Opinion Research Services (ORS), providing assurance that the findings were objective and robust.

The Service recognises that the staff, public and stakeholder focus group discussions allowed for more detailed and informed exploration of the proposals than the online survey alone. Participants were able to ask questions, test assumptions and consider the evidence in greater depth. For this reason, qualitative insights from the focus groups were given particular weight in the overall assessment, alongside survey responses, while recognising the value of all consultation feedback received.

Who responded

A total of 1,083 people and organisations engaged with the consultation. This included 956 questionnaire responses (761 full and 195 partial), participation in deliberative focus groups, and engagement at public events held across the county

Of the individual survey respondents, 804 were members of the public, alongside BFRS staff, other fire and rescue service personnel and 21 organisations

In addition, 33 residents took part in four in-depth public focus groups, 15 BFRS staff attended staff focus groups, and seven external stakeholders participated in a dedicated stakeholder session.

A full breakdown of respondent numbers, response methods and demographic information is provided in the ORS report at Appendix 4.

What we heard - headline themes

Consultation responses demonstrated clear recognition of the challenges facing the On-Call system.

*Overall, **56% of respondents agreed that BFRS needs to make changes** to the way it uses resources to address these challenges, including one-third (33%) who strongly agreed*

Support for change was particularly strong among professional stakeholders.

85% of BFRS staff and 77% of other fire and rescue service staff agreed that changes are needed, with very low levels of disagreement among BFRS staff (7%)

While 37% of respondents disagreed that changes are required, qualitative feedback indicated that this opposition was primarily linked to concerns about the loss of local fire engines or

stations, potential impacts on response times, and future growth, rather than disagreement that availability challenges exist.

Staff and stakeholders highlighted the importance of workforce sustainability, fairness, and making better use of available resources. There was also strong feedback about the geographical role of Buckingham and the value of flexibility rather than a simple removal of capability.

Respondents stressed the importance of clear communication, transparency, and reassurance that any changes would not reduce public safety and would continue to be reviewed as risks and demand evolve.

These themes were considered alongside operational evidence, workforce data and professional judgement in refining the final proposals.

How consultation feedback influenced the proposals

All consultation feedback was reviewed in full and considered alongside community impact, operational evidence, workforce sustainability, financial stewardship and professional judgement.

The Service considered whether feedback:

- identified unintended impacts
- raised new evidence or perspectives
- highlighted opportunities to improve or strengthen the proposals

Where feedback demonstrated a clear case for change, the proposals were refined accordingly. This included adjustments made to strengthen resilience, provide additional reassurance to communities, and support workforce sustainability.

Where proposals were not changed, this was because the available evidence continued to support the original approach and because alternative suggestions would not have delivered a reliable, sustainable or proportionate improvement.

The Service recognises that consultation feedback reflects both practical concerns and strong local connection to fire stations. These views were considered and assessed carefully as part of a balanced decision-making process.

Transparency and assurance

The consultation was independently facilitated and analysed to ensure transparency and credibility. The Service did not categorise or interpret responses itself.

The Fire Authority is provided with the full independent consultation report at Appendix B to support informed consideration of the final proposals.

Summary of consultation influence

The Service recognises that consultation must be meaningful and capable of influencing outcomes.

Consultation feedback confirmed broad recognition that the current On-Call model faces long-standing availability and sustainability challenges. Overall, a majority of respondents agreed that change is required, with particularly strong support among BFRS staff and professional stakeholders.

At the same time, responses reflected understandable concern about the impact of specific proposals on local communities, workforce sustainability and future growth. Feedback was detailed, considered and often constructive, particularly from staff.

While the consultation did not alter the underlying evidence regarding the need to address On-Call reliability, it did influence how the final proposals were refined, clarified and strengthened.

In particular:

- The proposal at Buckingham has been revised to retain additional On-Call capability through a dual-purpose vehicle, reflecting updated availability data and consultation feedback.
- The reserve fleet will be strengthened to enhance resilience during periods of escalated or sustained demand.
- The role of specialist vehicles has been clarified to emphasise that they complement, rather than replace, core fire engine capability.
- The final report provides clearer explanation of growth modelling, financial context and reinvestment intentions.

Consultation, particularly staff engagement, also generated constructive suggestions for improving the wider On-Call system. These included reviewing qualifications and skillsets to increase flexibility, improving recruitment and onboarding processes, strengthening retention, enhancing access to training (including hub-based and digital approaches), improving management of availability, exploring increased wholetime support or dual contracts, and investing in estate improvements.

These themes align closely with the wider On-Call Improvement Programme and will be progressed alongside implementation of the final proposals.

A detailed record of consultation themes and how they were considered is provided in the Post Consultation Evidence Pack, Section 2.2.

7. FINAL PROPOSALS

This section sets out the Service's final proposals following consideration of consultation feedback, evidence, financial information and professional judgement. The proposals are intended to improve the reliability, resilience and sustainability of the On-Call model, while maintaining a strong focus on public safety.

Operational independence of the Chief Fire Officer

As part of the consultation, views were sought on the principle of increasing operational independence for the Chief Fire Officer, recognising that this is an area of ongoing national discussion and potential future reform.

Consultation responses showed a range of views. 54% of respondents expressed support for greater operational independence, particularly where it was clearly understood to sit alongside

appropriate accountability and oversight arrangements. Others highlighted the importance of maintaining the Fire Authority's role in governance and strategic direction.

The feedback provided valuable local insight into how operational independence is perceived within the communities the Service serves and its workforce. A fuller summary of national context, inspection considerations and consultation findings is set out in the Post Consultation Evidence Pack (Appendix 2, Section 8).

Officers are **not recommending any immediate change to existing governance, delegation or accountability arrangements as part of this report**. The current roles and responsibilities between the Fire Authority and the Chief Fire Officer will therefore remain unchanged.

Final Proposals for On-Call

The proposals set out below relate solely to the configuration and sustainability of On-Call resources. No changes to governance or operational independence are being progressed as part of this decision.

Following consideration of consultation feedback, operational evidence and professional judgement, it is proposed that:

- **Six On-Call fire engines are removed from frontline operational use**, including:
 - **Two from long-term dormant On-Call fire stations, Great Missenden and Stokenchurch**
 - **Four from High Wycombe, Beaconsfield, Amersham and West Ashland.** These stations will continue to provide immediate response cover through existing wholetime or day-crewed fire engines.
 - The current appliance from Buckingham will be added to our strategic reserve and will be replaced by a smaller fire engine that can be crewed by 4 for all incident types or 2 as a specialist vehicle.
- **Great Missenden and Stokenchurch fire stations close as operational fire stations**
- **Specialist vehicles are redistributed to locations where they best match local risk and can be used more effectively**

Great Missenden and Stokenchurch have not provided a crewed On-Call fire engine response for several years and have not attended operational incidents in that time. Closing these stations as operational fire stations therefore reflects the service currently being provided and does not reduce existing response capability.

Of the six On-Call fire engines removed from frontline operational use, **one will be added to the current reserve fleet**. Reserve fire engines are not routinely crewed or planned into the day-to-day response model. They are retained to provide resilience, flexibility and training capacity, including temporary replacement of operational fire engines that are unavailable due to mechanical issues, damage or routine maintenance. In extreme circumstances, alongside use of mutual aid and national resilience, we could also make these reserve fire engines available for operational response.

Alongside this, the Service will introduce a Crew Welfare Unit to support firefighter safety and wellbeing during prolonged or complex incidents. This vehicle enhances operational resilience but does not alter the core response model or the number of frontline fire engines planned into day-to-day response.

This approach ensures the Service remains resilient and able to maintain response capability without relying on fire engines that cannot be consistently crewed.

Following implementation, the Service will operate:

- **12 wholetime fire engines (no change)**
- **12 On-Call fire engines (down from 18)**
- **Up to 6 uncrewed fire engines retained for training and resilience purposes (up by one)**

This maintains a total fleet of **30 fire engines**, while ensuring that only those that can be reliably crewed are counted as part of frontline operational response.

Importantly, this configuration continues to exceed the response model set out in the CRMP which requires the Service to be able to respond with **12 fire engines for day-to-day incidents**. It also ensures we can **scale up to 24 crewed fire engines during larger or more complex incidents**. In exceptional circumstances, additional fire engines from the reserve fleet could be brought into use through recall to duty arrangements, subject to the availability of personnel. These proposals maintain that capability and provide sufficient resilience to respond safely to both routine and exceptional demand.

Overall, the proposals are intended to improve the reliability of On-Call provision, strengthen operational resilience, and present a clearer and more accurate picture of the Service's response capability.

Amersham	
Changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On-Call fire engine is removed Rural Firefighting Vehicle relocated from Chesham
Rationale and community impact	Wholetime fire engine already provides immediate response capability. On-call fire engine cannot be reliably crewed and does not make a consistent contribution to response. On-Call fire engine was first in attendance at three incidents in 2024–2025, low impact on local response while improving wider area resilience.
Expected Benefits	Bringing On-Call staff from Amersham and Chesham together is expected to improve the reliability of the refined On-Call provision across the area.
Beaconsfield	
Changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On-Call fire engine is removed Crew welfare unit (long term intention, dependant on crewing feasibility)
Rationale and community impact	Wholetime fire engine already provides immediate response capability. On-Call fire engine cannot be reliably crewed and does not make a consistent contribution to response. Low impact on local response while improving wider area resilience.
Expected Benefits	Existing On-Call staff will be utilised to improve the availability of the nearest On-Call appliance at Marlow.
Buckingham	
Changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The existing On-Call fire engine at Buckingham is replaced with a dual-purpose vehicle. This vehicle can operate as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a full traditional fire engine when crewed by four On-Call firefighters; or a Rural Firefighting Vehicle when fewer staff are available, depending on demand and crew availability.
Rationale and community impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consultation feedback highlighted Buckingham On-Call potential viability and the importance of retaining a flexible On-Call capability in the area. Relocating and adapting an existing vehicle provides greater flexibility without reducing overall response and resilience.
Expected Benefits	Buckingham retains the ability to provide a full four-person fire engine response when sufficient On-Call staff are available.

	<p>When staffing levels are lower, the same vehicle can still be used effectively as a Rural Firefighting Vehicle. By maintaining an On-Call fire engine at Buckingham through a dual-purpose vehicle, the proposal now helps to maintain local response resilience and avoids increased reliance on standby requirements from Milton Keynes and Over the Border.</p>
Great Missenden	
Changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On-Call fire engine is removed • Close Great Missenden fire station
Rationale and community impact	<p>No incidents have been attended from Great Missenden for at least five years, and the station has not provided an available On-Call response during that period. Emergency response to the area is already reliably provided by neighbouring stations.</p> <p>Closing the station as an operational fire station therefore reflects the current level of service and does not reduce existing emergency response capability.</p> <p>This proposal relates to operational fire cover only. No decision is being taken at this stage regarding the future use of the building or site, which will be considered separately.</p>
Expected Benefits	<p>Removing long-term dormant provision allows resources to be focused where they can be used more effectively.</p>
High Wycombe	
Changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On-Call fire engine is removed
Rationale and community impact	<p>Two Wholetime fire engines already provide immediate response capability.</p> <p>On-call fire engine cannot be reliably crewed and does not make a consistent contribution to response. On-Call fire engine (supported by wholetime colleagues) was first in attendance at nine incidents in 2024–2025, meaning the change has a negligible impact on local response.</p>
Expected Benefits	<p>Existing On-Call staff redeployed to support their nearest On-Call fire station to improve availability in South Buckinghamshire</p>
Stokenchurch	
Changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On-Call fire engine is removed • Close Stokenchurch fire station

Rationale and community impact	<p>One incident has been attended from Stokenchurch in the least five years, and the station has not provided an available On-Call response during that period. Emergency response to the area is already reliably provided by neighbouring stations.</p> <p>Closing the station as an operational fire station therefore reflects the current level of service and does not reduce existing emergency response capability.</p> <p>This proposal relates to operational fire cover only. No decision is being taken at this stage regarding the future use of the building or site, which will be considered separately.</p>
Expected Benefits	Removing long-term dormant provision allows resources to be focused where they can be used effectively.
West Ashland (second On-Call fire engine)	
Changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Second) On-Call fire engine is removed • Permanent introduction of Rural Firefighting Vehicle
Rationale and community impact	Two Wholetime fire engines already provide immediate response capability. One on call fire engine will continue to offer further resilience for the Milton Keynes area. The second On-Call fire engine was first at 0 incidents in 2024–2025, so its removal will not impact response times.
Expected Benefits	The introduction of a permanent Rural Firefighting Vehicle for On-Call crewing will improve resilience not only within Milton Keynes but across the entire Service.

Rationale for the proposals

The final proposals bring together the evidence, engagement and assurance set out earlier in this report. Taken as a whole, this work demonstrates that:

- continuing to maintain On-Call fire engines that cannot be reliably crewed does not provide a dependable or proportionate level of protection
- concentrating resources on fire engines and vehicles that can be sustained improves reliability and resilience
- retaining unreliable provision places ongoing pressure on staff without delivering consistent benefit to communities
- consultation feedback emphasised safety, fairness and long-term sustainability, and has been taken into account alongside the wider evidence base

In combination, this supports the conclusion that the proposed changes represent the most responsible and balanced option for maintaining public safety while supporting a sustainable On-Call provision.

What will not change

The proposals do not include:

- Closure of wholetime fire stations or removal of any wholetime fire engines
- Reduction in wholetime or on-call firefighter numbers
- Immediate further changes beyond those consulted on
- Withdrawal from statutory response responsibilities

Decisions relating to wider On-Call improvements beyond this programme will continue to be considered separately and in line with the CRMP.

8. BENEFITS, IMPLEMENTATION AND NEXT STEPS

This section sets out the expected benefits of the proposals and provides a high-level overview of how the On-Call Improvement Programme will continue over the lifetime of the 2025–2030 CRMP. The proposals represent the first phase of a wider programme focused on strengthening reliability, workforce sustainability and long-term resilience.

The anticipated benefits include

The anticipated benefits include:

- **Improved public safety**, by ensuring that emergency response arrangements are based on fire engines and vehicles that can be consistently crewed and relied upon when emergencies occur
- **A more dependable emergency response**, reducing reliance on fire engines that are not available in practice and ensuring communities receive a response that reflects what the Service can genuinely deliver
- **Stronger operational resilience**, particularly during larger or longer-lasting incidents, so the Service can continue to protect life and property when demand increases
- **Greater workforce sustainability**, supporting firefighters by setting realistic expectations and enabling them to respond safely and effectively
- **Clearer and more honest communication with communities**, avoiding false reassurance and helping the public understand how they are protected
- **Responsible use of public resources**, focusing investment on arrangements that directly support keeping people safe
- **Maintained flexibility for the future**, ensuring the Service can adapt to changes in risk and demand while continuing to protect communities

These benefits directly reflect the issues raised during consultation, particularly the importance placed on safety, reliable response and long-term sustainability.

Implementation approach

Subject to Fire Authority approval, implementation will take place in phases over the lifetime of the current CRMP.

Phase 1 – Implementation of structural changes (0–6 months)

- Removal and reconfiguration of appliances as set out in this report
- Engagement with affected staff and representative bodies
- Establishment of structured implementation workshops with representative bodies, including the FBU, and cross-party Member representation to support transparent delivery, workforce engagement and shared oversight of implementation.
- Establishment of monitoring and reporting arrangements
- Introduction of revised availability expectations and performance oversight
- Development of options for the future use of the Great Missenden and Stokenchurch sites, with recommendations to be brought to the Fire Authority Executive Committee for consideration.

Phase 2 - Workforce Stabilisation and Improvement (years 2-3 of the CRMP - 2026-2028)

This phase focuses on strengthening the reliability of the refined On-Call system.

Key workstreams include:

- Recruitment and Retention ambition to return On-Call staffing levels to current establishment
- Streamlined and more regular recruitment processes
- Introduction of modular training delivery (including hub-based training events and more flexible training provision).
- Review of qualifications and skillsets to increase flexibility and operational value
- Further review of contracts to ensure the On-Call role works effectively for both the Service and employees
- Improved management of availability to better align staffing levels with appliances
- Increased wholetime support and exploration of dual-contract opportunities
- Estate improvements to support sustainable crewing
- Enhancing managerial support for our On-Call staff.

This phase directly reflects constructive staff consultation feedback and aligns with improvement workshops already underway internally.

Phase 3 – Longer-Term Development (Years 4-5 of the CRMP – 2028 - 2030)

- Review of availability and performance outcomes
- Assessment of whether reliability targets have been achieved
- Consideration of further refinements to the On-Call model
- Ongoing monitoring of local development plans, population growth and emerging risk to ensure operational resources remain aligned with community risk across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes.

Future phases do not form part of the immediate decisions covered by this report.

9. GOVERNANCE, RISKS AND MONITORING

This section sets out how the Service will manage governance, risk and oversight in relation to the implementation of the proposals. It is intended to provide assurance that risks have been identified, will be actively managed, and that appropriate monitoring arrangements are in place.

9.1 Governance and oversight

Implementation of the proposals will be overseen through existing Service governance arrangements.

- **Operational delivery and workforce impacts** will be monitored through the **Service and People Delivery Groups**, including On-Call availability, staff impacts and implementation progress.
- **Performance and service scrutiny** will be provided through the **Performance and Programme Boards**, which will review relevant performance and response information and assess whether the intended benefits are being realised.

9.2 Risks and mitigations

The Service recognises that implementing change to On-Call provision carries risks that must be actively managed. Consultation feedback helped to identify and better understand these risks and has informed the approach to mitigation.

Key areas of risk include:

- **Workforce morale and retention**, particularly for On-Call firefighters at affected locations
- **Community confidence**, including concerns about response and public safety
- **Operational transition**, ensuring response remains effective during implementation

These risks will be mitigated through:

- phased implementation
- targeted engagement with affected staff, representative bodies and communities
- clear and timely communication about what is changing and why
- visible reinvestment in strengthening the remaining On-Call system

Consultation feedback has already shaped these mitigations, particularly in reinforcing the importance of reassurance, clarity of response arrangements, and retention of On-Call capability where it remains viable.

9.4 Equality, impact and assurance

Potential equality and wider impacts were considered before and throughout the consultation process, not solely at its outset. The Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) and associated risks were revisited at key stages, ensuring emerging issues were identified and considered as the programme progressed.

9.5 Monitoring and review

The impact of the proposals will be monitored as implementation progresses. This will include review of:

- On-Call availability and appliance reliability
- Operational resilience during periods of sustained or simultaneous demand
- Workforce sustainability and retention

Where monitoring identifies emerging issues or unintended impacts, corrective action will be taken.

10. CONCLUSION

This report sets out the outcome of the On-Call Improvement Programme consultation and explains how evidence, professional judgement and consultation feedback have been used together to develop the final proposals.

The evidence demonstrates that long-standing challenges with On-Call availability require action to ensure a reliable, resilient and sustainable response model. Retaining fire engines that cannot be reliably crewed does not provide a predictable or proportionate response and limits the Service's ability to invest in long-term improvement.

Consultation feedback has been considered conscientiously and alongside operational risk, response modelling and financial sustainability. This has helped shape the final proposals, the safeguards around implementation, and the approach to monitoring and review.

The proposals set out in this report represent a proportionate and necessary step within a wider On-Call Improvement Programme. They are intended to strengthen the reliability of operational response, support workforce sustainability and ensure the Service can continue to meet its statutory duties and community expectations across Buckinghamshire.

This page is intentionally left blank

ON-CALL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME EVIDENCE PACK – SUPPORTING THE FINAL DECISION REPORT

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

Table of Contents

1	KEY EVIDENCE SUMMARY	3
2.	INTRODUCTION.....	4
2.1	Purpose of this evidence pack	4
2.2	What has changed since the consultation	4
	Consideration of consultation feedback	5
3.	OUR SERVICE.....	10
3.1	The county of Buckinghamshire	10
3.2	Stations, appliances and response footprint	11
2.3	Our Firefighters	1
3	RISK AND DEMAND.....	2
3.1	Community risk profile.....	2
3.2	Incident trends and geographic demand	3
3.3	Fire engine demand and utilisation	4
3.4	Growth and future risk	5
4	RESPONSE.....	17
4.1	Response standards and mobilisation principles	17
4.2	Day-to-day response	17
4.3	Escalation and sustained incidents	18
4.4	Managing availability and maintaining resilience	18
4.5	Role of On-Call fire engines in the response model	19
4.6	Mutual aid and cross-border response.....	19
5.	ON-CALL AVAILABILITY AND RELIABILITY	20
5.1	What is On-Call provision.....	20
5.2	Availability and reliability of On-Call fire engines.....	20
5.3	Impact on escalation and operational resilience	21
5.4	Recruitment, retention and workforce sustainability	21
5.5	Workforce viability of a fully crewed 18 On-Call engine model	
	23	
6.	STATION AND ON-CALL FIRE ENGINE APPRAISALS.....	24
6.1	Evidence used in the appraisal	24
6.2	Station-specific considerations and revised provision: Buckingham	25
6.3	Impact on response times and community coverage	25
6.4	Overall sustainability and proportionality.....	27
7.	FINANCIAL CONTEXT AND EVIDENCE	28
7.1	Cost of maintaining low-utilisation On-Call fire engines.....	28
8.	OPERATIONAL INDEPENDENCE – EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT	29
8.1	Pre-consultation context	29
8.2	National policy and inspection context	29
8.3	Early engagement and consultation evidence	29
8.4	Stakeholder and political context	29
8.5	Officer advice.....	29
	GLOSSARY OF TERMS	30

1 KEY EVIDENCE SUMMARY

This Evidence Pack demonstrates that:

- Routine emergency demand can be met by around 12 fire engines, with up to 22 required during escalated, sustained or simultaneous incidents.
- Periods requiring more than 22 fire engines are rare and associated with exceptional events.
- On-Call fire engine availability is variable and, on average, immediately available within 10 minutes less than 10% of the time.
- Recruitment activity has been sustained over several years but has not resulted in consistent improvements in availability.
- Sustaining 100% availability across all 18 On-Call fire engines would require approximately 216 FTE on-call firefighters and an estimated additional staffing cost of around £2.1 million.
- Modelling indicates that the difference in average response times between a fully crewed 18-engine model and the proposed configuration is small at service-wide level.

Taken together, this evidence provides the operational and workforce context for the recommendations set out in the Final Decision Report.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 Purpose of this evidence pack

This Evidence Pack supports the On-Call Improvement Programme – Final Decision Report. It sets out the data, analysis and professional judgement that underpin the recommendations presented to the Fire Authority.

The Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 2025–2030 Evidence Pack remains the Service’s main source of risk and demand analysis. The On-Call Improvement Programme draws on that evidence but does not change the CRMP or the response standards agreed by the Fire Authority.

The Evidence Pack used during the public consultation (Version 1.2) explained the operational modelling, workforce analysis and financial information that informed the consultation proposals. Following consultation, that material has been reviewed, updated where needed, and brought together in this Final Decision Evidence Pack (Version 1).

This document should be read alongside the Final Decision Report, the Independent Consultation Report (ORS), the Equality Impact Assessment, and the CRMP Evidence Pack. Together, these documents provide the evidence to support the Fire Authority in making its decision.

2.2 What has changed since the consultation

Much of the evidence used to inform the final recommendations was presented during the public consultation and remains unchanged.

This Post Consultation Evidence Pack therefore brings together:

- Evidence previously shared during consultation, where it remains relevant
- Additional analysis carried out in response to questions raised by the public, staff and stakeholders
- Clarification and contextual information to support understanding at the decision stage

The additional analysis undertaken after consultation was primarily to provide further detail, reassurance and transparency in response to points raised. In most cases, this work did not materially change the overall assessment of risk, demand or operational sustainability, but it has been included to ensure the Fire Authority has a complete and up-to-date evidence base.

Where evidence has been carried forward from the consultation stage, commentary has been streamlined to avoid repetition, as that material has already been published.

Consideration of consultation feedback

Consultation Theme	ORS Report Reference	Key Issues Raised by Respondents	Where Addressed in Final Decision Evidence Pack	Outcome of Consideration
Recognition of On-Call challenges and need for change	Summary of Findings; Questionnaire Q1 (Section 3)	Majority acceptance that availability is poor and current model under strain; minority disagreement that structural change is required	Sections on Availability Trends; Workforce Sustainability; Operational Modelling	Considered. The consultation responses broadly align with the Service's assessment that maintaining 18 On-Call fire engines is unsustainable in its current form. No change to the strategic direction of the programme.
Recruitment and retention as root cause	Summary; Staff Focus Groups (Section 5); Submissions (Section 8)	Perception of organisational neglect; weak recruitment processes; underinvestment; belief issues are solvable without removing appliances	Workforce Analysis; Recruitment Data; FTE Gap; Sustainability Assessment	<p>Considered. The Service has invested significantly in strengthening its Wholetime establishment in recent years, with Wholetime staffing levels now at their highest point in the past decade. This reflects a strategic response to demand, inspection findings and long-term workforce sustainability.</p> <p>The challenges associated with On-Call recruitment and retention are widely recognised nationally and are not unique to Buckinghamshire. While recruitment approaches for Wholetime and On-Call roles share common elements, the On-Call model is inherently more sensitive to wider labour market and societal factors.</p> <p>Recruitment, conversion and retention data were reviewed alongside workforce modelling. While the Service will continue to review and strengthen its On-Call recruitment and retention processes as part of the wider On-Call Improvement Programme, the evidence does not demonstrate that recruitment activity alone would deliver sustained availability sufficient to maintain 18 consistently viable On-Call fire engines even if this were desirable.</p> <p>In addition, modelling and financial analysis demonstrate that restoring and sustaining full</p>

				availability across all 18 On-Call fire engines would require substantial and ongoing workforce and funding increases, without delivering proportionate operational benefit relative to routine and escalated demand. Maintaining all 18 appliances is therefore not assessed to be financially sustainable or proportionate to the level of operational requirement. The proposal is unchanged.
Recent availability improvements not reflected in data	Staff Focus Groups (Section 5); Buckingham discussion in Main Findings	View that five-year dataset lacks nuance; recent improvements at some stations; argument for allowing more time	Station-Level Availability Analysis; Trend Data; Buckingham Review Section	<p>Considered. Updated availability data and operational context were reviewed following consultation. While the broader sustainability assessment across the Service remains unchanged, the additional review identified that retaining operational response capability at Buckingham was appropriate. The proposal has therefore been amended to retain additional On-Call operational response at Buckingham through a dual-purpose vehicle.</p> <p>This amendment reflects consideration of the updated evidence in the round, including consultation feedback.</p>
Opposition to removal of On-Call fire engines	Questionnaire Q on removal (Section 3); Focus Groups; Submissions	Concerns about response times, resilience, irreversibility, loss of local cover, concentration of losses	Operational Modelling (12/22analysis); Response Time Modelling; Sustainability & Proportionality Section	<p>Considered. The Service has reviewed operational modelling, response time analysis and station-level availability data. In some locations, response times exceed the 10-minute average response standard; however, this is characteristic of rural geographies and reflects existing operating conditions rather than a consequence of the proposed changes. In certain areas, including stations with prolonged 0% On-Call availability, there is currently no operational On-Call cover. The removal of an appliance in these circumstances does not reduce an existing level of response.</p> <p>In relation to irreversibility, removal of an appliance does not preclude future reconfiguration should risk, demand or workforce conditions materially change. Growth and risk projections have been assessed within the</p>

				<p>modelling, and the Service retains the ability to reallocate or introduce resources in future through the CRMP framework.</p> <p>The wider On-Call Improvement Programme also includes a commitment to explore further sustainability measures, including geographical hub arrangements, workforce flexibility across neighbouring stations, and the movement or reconfiguration of specialist appliances where appropriate.</p> <p>Having considered these factors in the round, and subject to the amendment at Buckingham, the proposal is unchanged.</p>
Buckingham-specific concerns	Main Findings – Buckingham; Staff Focus Groups (Section 5); Submissions (Section 8)	Geographic isolation; mixed crewing impact; recent availability improvements; role as key station; concerns about RFV replacement	Buckingham Station Appraisal; Availability Trend Data; Revised Proposal Section	<p>Considered. Updated availability data, mixed crewing impacts, On-Call to day crewed pipeline considerations, operational role and geographic factors were reviewed. As a result, the proposal has been amended to retain additional On-Call operational response capability at Buckingham through the introduction of a dual-purpose vehicle. This amendment reflects consideration of the totality of evidence, including consultation feedback.</p>
Closure of Great Missenden and Stokenchurch	Questionnaire Q on closures (Section 3); Focus Groups; Submissions	Mixed views; opposition in written submissions; concerns re response times, future growth, permanent loss	Station Viability Assessment; Response Cover Modelling; Financial Sustainability	<p>Considered. Evidence confirms prolonged 0% availability and the existence of alternative cover arrangements. No material evidence was identified during consultation that alters the station viability assessment. The proposal is unchanged.</p> <p>The Service recognises that station buildings are valued community assets and acknowledges the importance of clear and timely communication with affected communities regarding the future of those buildings. Decisions relating to property use or disposal will be managed in accordance with the Authority’s governance and asset management processes, with appropriate engagement.</p>

Specialist vehicles replacing pumps	Questionnaire Q on specialist vehicles (Section 3); Focus Groups	Mixed reaction; support for flexibility; concern about reduced capability; seasonality of RFV; skill maintenance	Specialist Fleet Analysis; Operational Capability Comparison; Appliance Mix Assessment	<p>Considered. Consultation responses raised concerns regarding the perceived replacement of Type B fire engines with specialist appliances and the potential impact on operational capability.</p> <p>Following consultation, the Service clarified that the proposals relate to the reconfiguration and positioning of specialist appliances in line with local risk profiles, rather than a direct like-for-like replacement of a Type B fire engine.</p> <p>The proposal remains unchanged in substance, but the explanation of the approach has been clarified to reflect this risk-based positioning.</p>
Major incident resilience and spate conditions	Focus Groups; Submissions; Summary of Findings	Concern modelling focuses on “normal”; fear of reduced surge capacity; reliance on mutual aid	Escalation Modelling; >22 Appliance Analysis; Mutual Aid and National Resilience Section	<p>Considered. Escalation modelling and historic deployment data were reviewed. Scenarios requiring more than 22 simultaneous appliances remain rare and exceptional, and mutual aid and national resilience arrangements remain in place.</p> <p>Following consultation and further review, the Service proposes retaining one additional fire engine to increase the number of reserve appliances to up to six.</p> <p>The Service is satisfied that the revised fleet configuration maintains appropriate operational resilience relative to assessed risk and demand. The proposal is amended as set out above.</p>
Housing growth and future risk	Questionnaire comments; Focus Groups; Submissions	Concern that growth and climate risk increase future demand; suggestion to pause proposals	Growth Assumptions; Risk Modelling; CRMP Alignment Section	<p>Considered. Growth projections and future demand assumptions were tested within operational modelling. No material change to the overall demand profile was identified. The Service retains the ability to reconfigure resources in future through the CRMP framework should risk materially change. The proposal is unchanged.</p>
Financial rationale and value for money	Questionnaire Q on public money (Section 3); Submissions	Perception proposals may be cost-driven; expectation of reinvestment; divided public opinion	Financial Modelling; Cost of 18 Pumps Scenario; Reinvestment Rationale	<p>Considered. Financial modelling was reviewed alongside operational evidence. Maintaining all 18 On-Call appliances would require substantial and ongoing workforce and funding increases without delivering proportionate operational benefit relative to demand</p>

				and risk. The primary driver of the proposals remains operational requirement rather than cost reduction. Any efficiencies arising from the revised configuration are intended to support the long-term sustainability of the On-Call model, including investment in recruitment, retention and workforce resilience measures as part of the wider On-Call Improvement Programme. The proposal is unchanged.
Operational independence of the Chief Fire Officer	Dedicated section in Main Findings; Focus Groups; Submissions	Support for agility; concerns about democratic accountability; fear of “closure by stealth”; suggestion it should be separate issue	Operational Independence Section; Governance Safeguards Explanation	Considered. Consultation responses regarding operational independence have been reviewed. No formal proposal to change governance arrangements is being advanced as part of this decision. The feedback received is noted and will inform any future discussions or proposals, which would be subject to separate consideration and governance processes by the Fire Authority.
Consultation process concerns	Staff Focus Groups; Submissions; Summary	Timing (Christmas period); internal communication concerns; perception decisions predetermined; lack of nuance in data	Introduction – Consultation Process; Evidence Refresh Section; ORS Independence Reference	Considered. The consultation was independently designed, facilitated and reported by Opinion Research Services (ORS), and the process was subject to independent audit. That audit identified minor recommendations for improvement but did not identify any material procedural deficiencies. While it is recognised that the consultation period included the Christmas and New Year period, the consultation remained open for the full published duration and provided multiple channels for participation, including online responses, written submissions and in-person engagement. The Service is satisfied that the consultation process was conducted lawfully and fairly, and that all representations have been conscientiously considered as part of this decision.

3. OUR SERVICE

Supports Decision Report sections: 2, 5.1

This section provides high-level contextual information about Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service (BFRS), its operating environment, and its current response footprint.

Detailed risk analysis, modelling and methodology are set out in the **Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 2025–2030 Evidence Pack**, which remains the primary source of risk evidence for the Service.

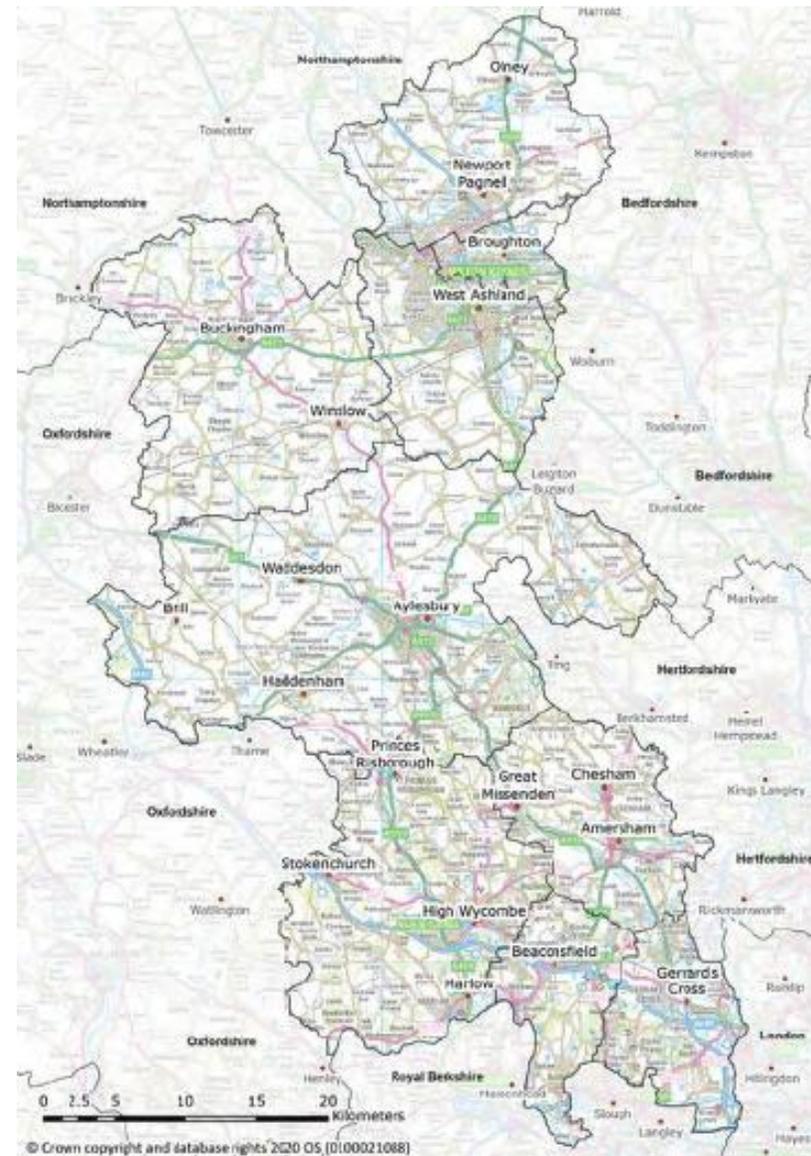
3.1 The county of Buckinghamshire

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.

According to the 2021 Census, the total population of the Service area was approximately 840,200. Population distribution is mixed, with significant urban centres alongside large rural areas. A substantial proportion of residents live within Milton Keynes, High Wycombe and Aylesbury, while other parts of the county are characterised by smaller towns and rural communities.

BFRS borders six neighbouring fire and rescue services: Bedfordshire Fire & Rescue Service, Hertfordshire Fire & Rescue Service, London Fire Brigade, Royal Berkshire Fire & Rescue

Figure A, Map of Our Response Area (Source: CRMP Evidence Pack, 2025 –



Service, Oxfordshire Fire & Rescue Service and Northamptonshire Fire & Rescue Service.

3.2 Stations, appliances and response footprint

We currently operate from 19 fire stations across our response area. These stations collectively house

- 30 operational fire engines
- five reserve fire engines that are not routinely crewed
- a range of specialist and support vehicles used to specific risks and provide resilience meet daily demand during large-scale or multiple simultaneous incidents.

Fire engines

Operational fire engines are those planned into the day-to-day response model and are available to be crewed when required.

Reserve fire engines are not routinely crewed or planned into the day-to-day response model. They are retained to provide resilience, flexibility and training, including:

- temporary replacement of operational fire engines that are unavailable due to mechanical issues, damage or routine maintenance;
- enabling operational cover to be maintained while frontline fire engines are used for training or assurance activity; and
- providing additional contingency during periods of sustained or exceptional demand.

Fire engines are the primary response vehicles for a wide range of emergency incidents. Each fire engine is crewed by a minimum of four firefighters, including:

- a qualified driver
- a Crew Commander (or higher)
- at least two firefighters trained to wear breathing apparatus.

Specialist vehicles

In addition to standard fire engines, BFRS operates specialist vehicles designed to address specific risks more effectively or efficiently. These include, but are not limited to:

- Rural Firefighting Vehicles
- Water carriers
- Boats and water rescue units
- Turntable ladder
- Operational support unit

The deployment and role of specialist vehicles is addressed further in sections relating to operational response and resilience.

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.

2.3 Our Firefighters

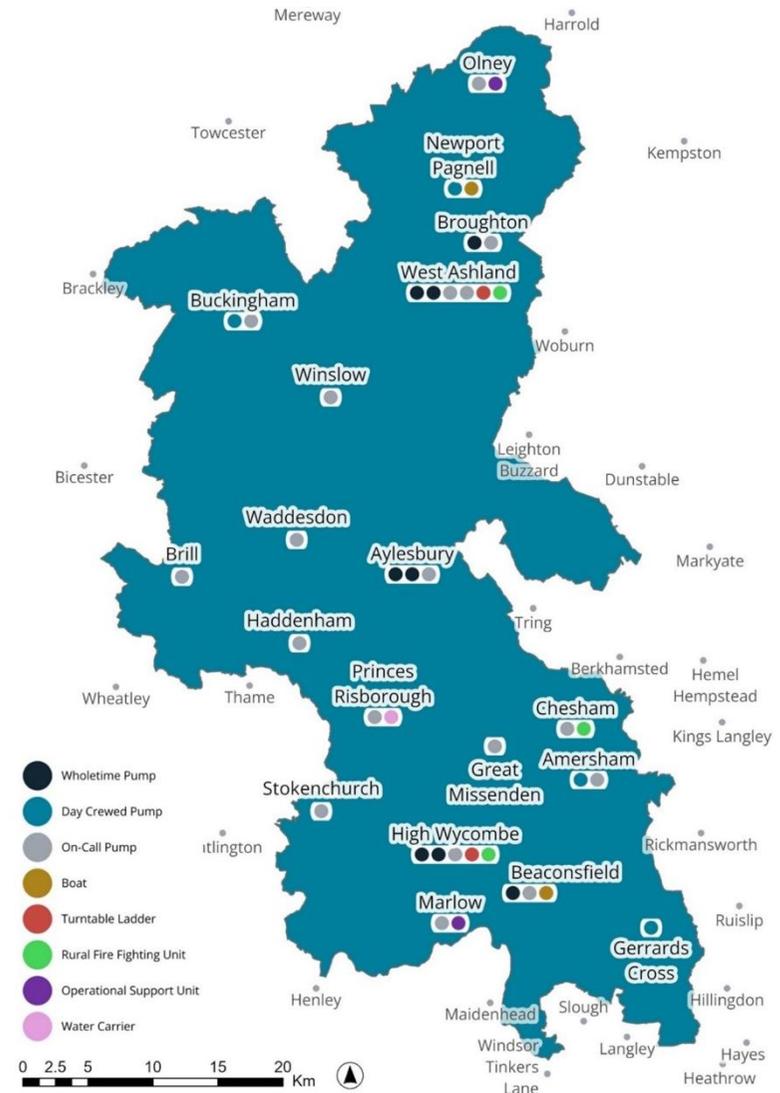
Our firefighters work in two ways:

- **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.

Some stations are crewed entirely by On-Call firefighters, while others are primarily crewed by Wholetime firefighters with additional support from On-Call staff. Two stations are crewed solely by Wholetime firefighters.

Definitions of On-Call availability and response expectations are set out in Section 5 of this Evidence Pack.

Figure B, Map showing which stations our fire engines and specialist vehicles are currently based at. Please note: Rural Fire Fighting Unit locations at High Wycombe and Chesham are temporary, permanent locations are yet to be confirmed.



3 RISK AND DEMAND

Supports Decision Report sections: 2, 5.1

This section summarises the evidence drawn from the CRMP 2025–2030 that informs understanding of current and foreseeable demand on fire and rescue resources. The CRMP remains the primary source of detailed risk assessment; this section highlights the specific evidence relied upon for this decision.

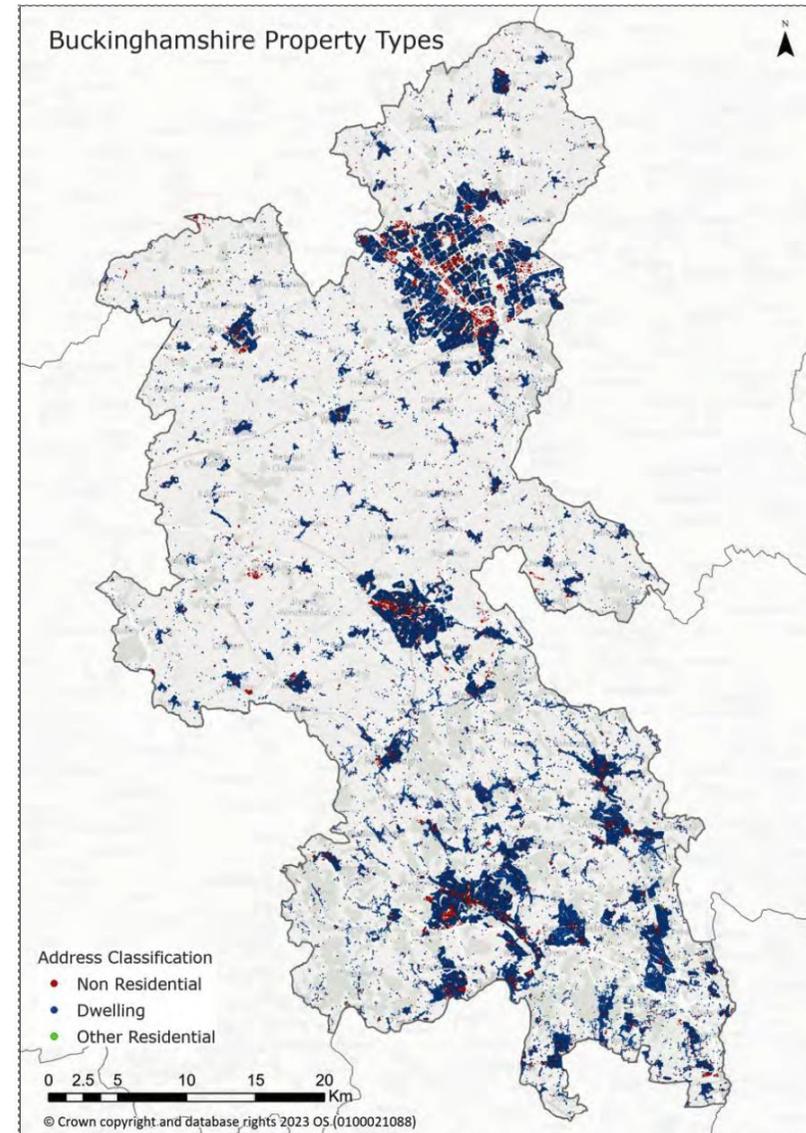
3.1 Community risk profile

Risk across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes is not evenly distributed and is closely linked to population density, building type and transport infrastructure.

Figure X shows the spatial distribution of building density by property type across the Service area. Higher concentrations of residential and non-residential buildings are located within Milton Keynes, High Wycombe, Aylesbury and along key transport corridors. These areas correspond with higher incident demand and are primarily supported by immediately available wholetime resources.

Lower-density rural areas experience fewer incidents overall but may present access and travel challenges, which are addressed through deployment and mobilisation arrangements rather than additional permanent resources.

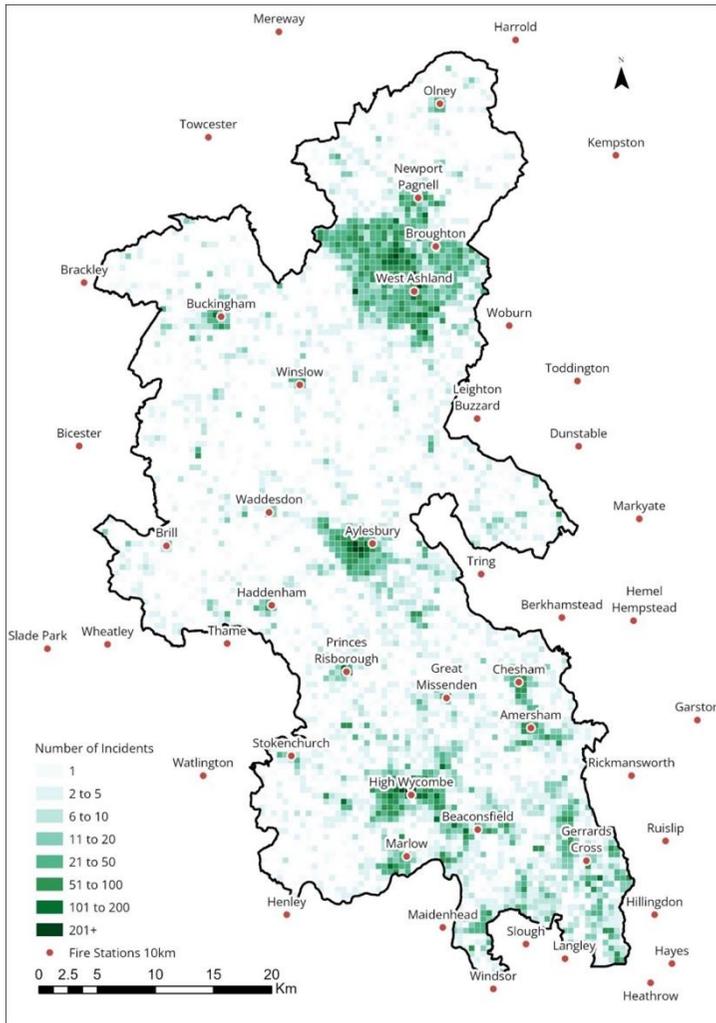
Figure C, shows the density of buildings by type across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. (Source: CRMP Evidence Pack, 2025-2030, p.153)



3.2 Incident trends and geographic demand

Incident demand is geographically concentrated, with higher volumes in urban areas and along strategic road networks (See Figure D).

Figure D, plots our incident locations and provides context on the density of incidents across our service area from April 2020 to March 2025. (Source: CRMP 2025 – 2030)



These graphs compare population growth with incident trends in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. While the population has steadily increased, incidents have remained relatively stable overall and have declined slightly in recent years, with house fires shown separately to provide further detail.. (See figure E and F).

Figure E, Population and incidents in Buckingham & Milton Keynes)

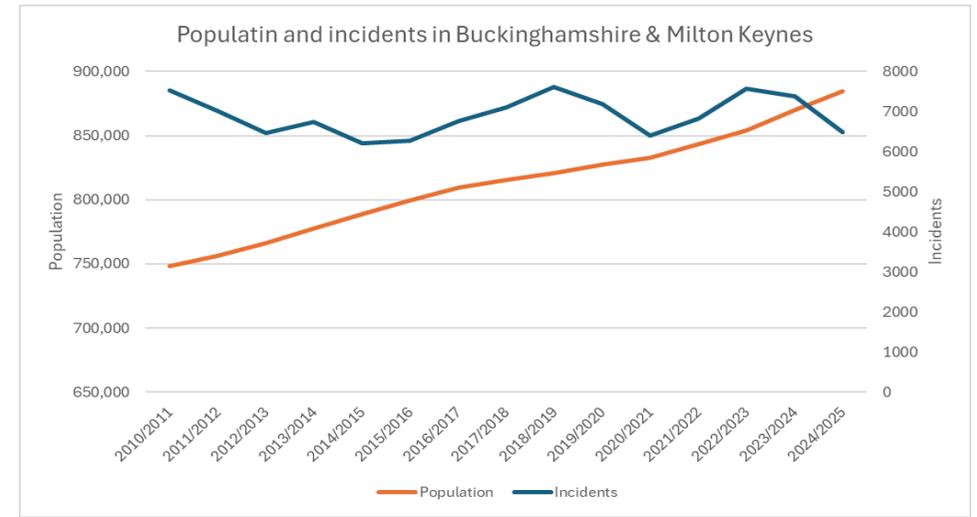
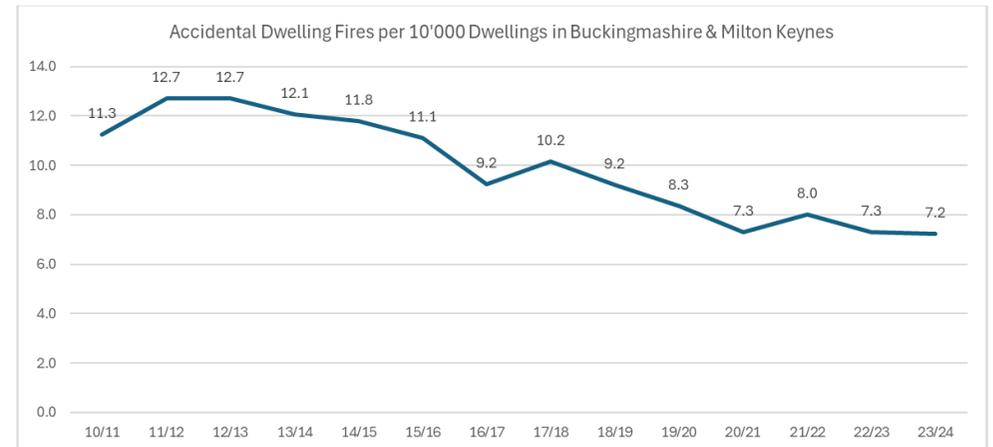


Figure F, Graph Showing Accidental Dwelling Fires Per 10,000 Dwellings in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes



3.3 Fire engine demand and utilisation

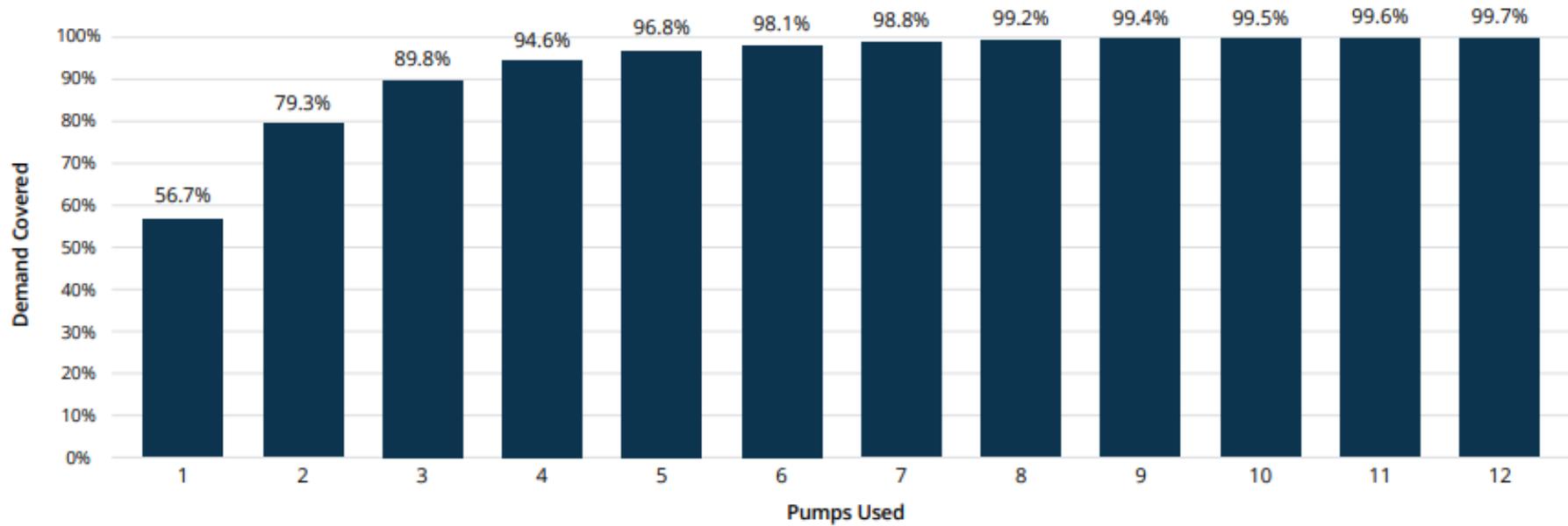
To understand how many fire engines are required to meet demand, we analysed appliance utilisation over a multi-year period.

This analysis demonstrates that:

- on an average day, demand is met with 12 immediately available fire engines
- during periods of increased or sustained demand, such as large or concurrent incidents, the Service must be able to scale its response up to 22 fire engines.

Over 99% of incidents are resolved using nine fire engines or fewer. Periods requiring more than 22 fire engines are rare and typically associated with exceptional events.

Figure G, Table Showing Use of Fire Engines April 2019 to March 2023



3.4 Growth and future risk

This section summarises the evidence considered in relation to planned housing and infrastructure growth across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, the timescales over which that growth is expected to occur, and the implications for future risk and demand.

Scale and nature of planned growth

Planned growth across the Service area has been examined in detail through the development of the CRMP 2025–2030 and through ongoing engagement with local planning authorities.

Buckinghamshire Council is preparing a new Local Plan to 2045. Emerging evidence indicates a requirement to plan for approximately 95,000 new homes over the plan period, including a contingency buffer. The draft spatial strategy explores a range of growth approaches, including urban extensions, new settlements, regeneration of brownfield land, development linked to transport hubs and employment areas, and limited expansion of sustainable villages. A significant proportion of this growth is expected to be focused in the north of the county, reflecting development constraints in the south.

Milton Keynes City Council has adopted a long-term City Plan to 2050. This provides for approximately 59,779 new homes and around 27,000 additional jobs over the plan period. The majority of growth is directed towards the existing urban area through regeneration and higher-density development, with outward

growth concentrated in a limited number of strategic city extensions.

Figures I and H show the broad spatial distribution of planned growth and development sites across the Service area.

Figure I, Source Milton Keynes City Council, City Plan 2050

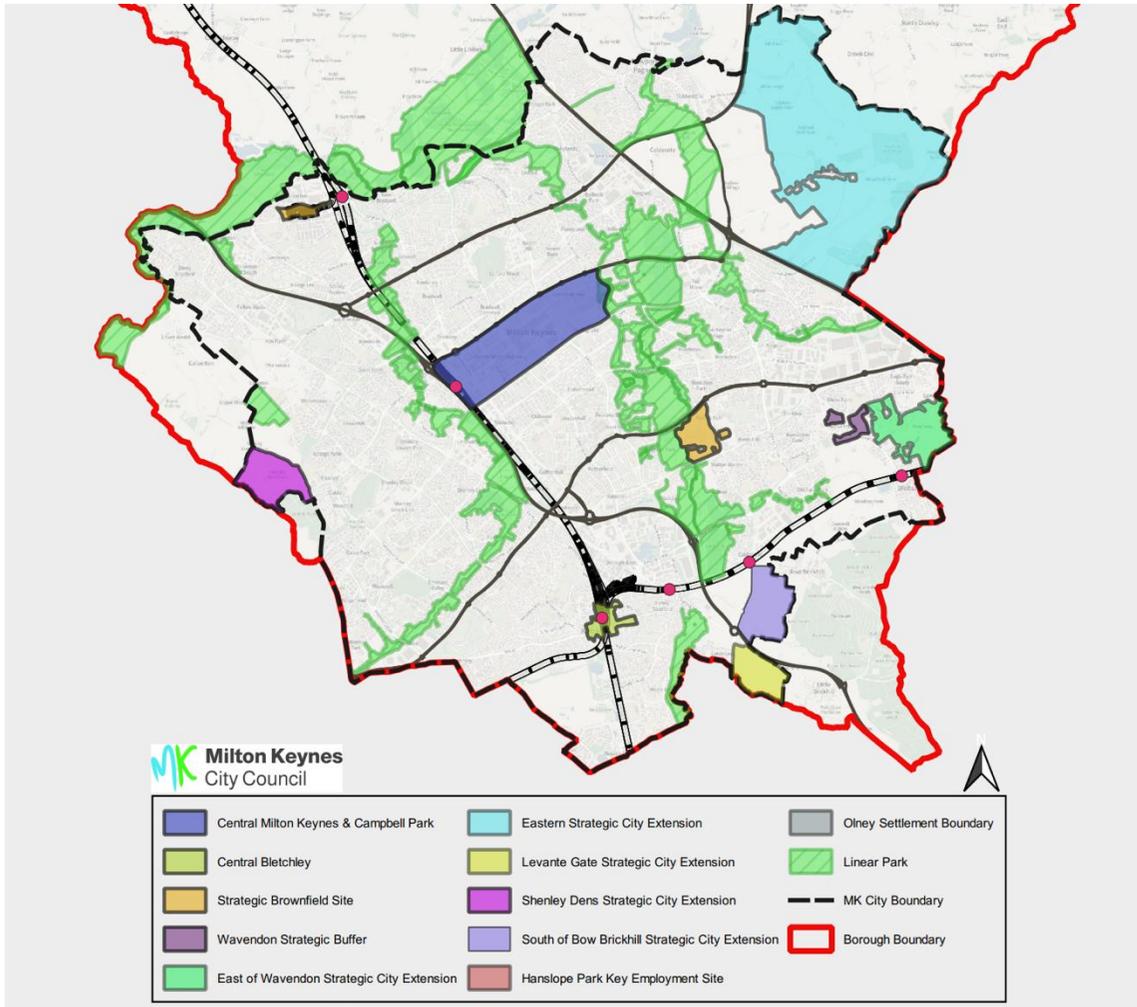
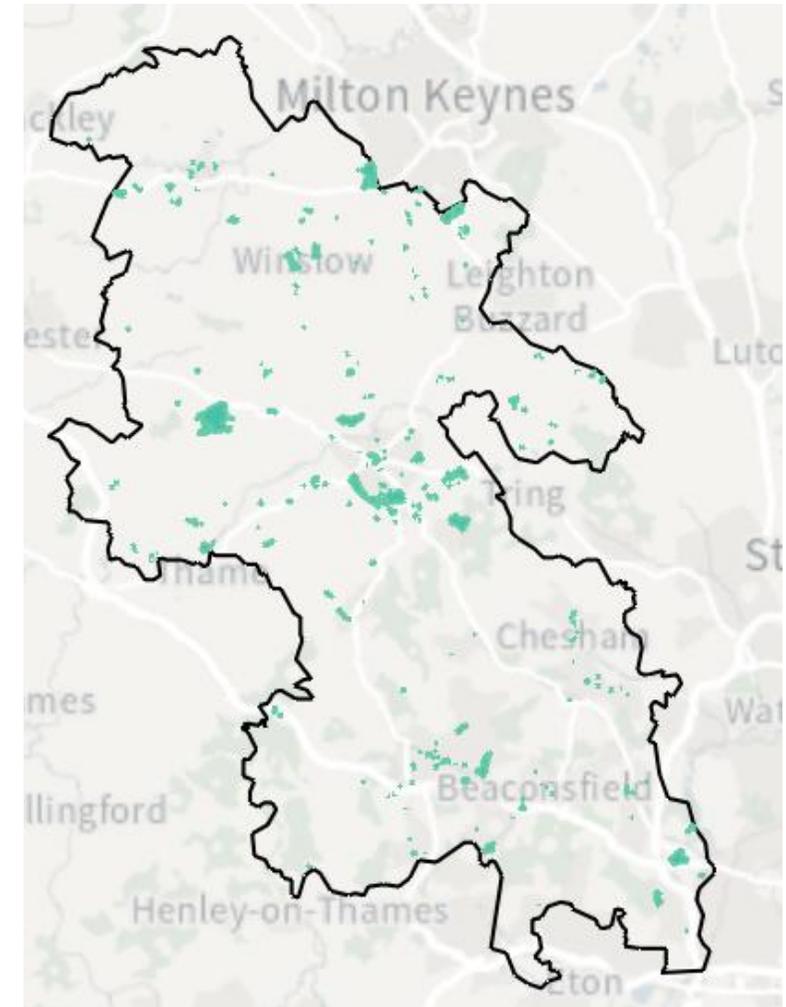


Figure H, Source Buckinghamshire Economic Growth Plan 2025–2035



Phasing, uncertainty and time horizons

Most planned housing and infrastructure growth is medium- to long-term in nature. Many proposals are at an early stage in the planning process, with site allocations, infrastructure funding and delivery programmes subject to further consultation, examination and approval.

Development typically takes place over extended timescales, with several years between plan adoption, construction and occupation. Some potential large-scale developments, including those associated with major national infrastructure projects, remain uncertain and are dependent on decisions beyond the control of local authorities or the Service.

This phasing and uncertainty means that growth does not translate into immediate changes in risk or incident demand and provides the Service with advance visibility of emerging development patterns.

Implications for risk and demand

Increased housing numbers do not automatically correlate with a proportional increase in incident demand or a requirement for additional fire stations or fire engines. The relationship between development and risk is influenced by factors including building design, density, fire safety standards, infrastructure provision, transport networks, prevention and protection activity, and the way emergency resources are deployed.

Analysis undertaken as part of the CRMP demonstrates that current and foreseeable growth can be managed within the existing response model. This assessment takes account of

both historic incident trends and the characteristics of planned development, rather than relying solely on population projections.

Maintaining agility and future options

The Service manages growth-related risk through established planning, governance and review arrangements. This approach is designed to ensure that resources can be adapted proportionately as risk changes.

Where major development results in increased or relocated community risk, the Service has access to established developer funding mechanisms, including Section 106 obligations and other planning agreements. These mechanisms may be considered as part of future proposals brought to the Fire Authority for new or expanded fire stations, appliances or staffing, where evidence demonstrates that development has materially altered risk or demand.

In Buckinghamshire, potential future scenarios include the emergence of large-scale, phased development associated with new settlements or strategic urban extensions, particularly in the north of the county. These developments are expected to come forward over extended timescales and would be subject to detailed planning, infrastructure provision and mitigation. Where such growth results in a sustained change in risk profile or response demand, options could include the relocation or addition of resources, supported by developer contributions where appropriate.

In Milton Keynes, growth is progressing through a long-term, infrastructure-led strategy focused on urban regeneration and a limited number of strategic city extensions. The City Plan 2050 emphasises early provision of infrastructure and coordinated delivery. In this context, future scenarios may involve adjustments to how existing resources are configured or supported, rather than the immediate creation of new facilities, with any proposals informed by evidence of changing risk and demand.

Both planning responses reinforce the importance of embedding fire safety considerations into development from the earliest stages. This reflects learning from the Grenfell Tower Inquiry and includes expectations around high-quality building design, effective management arrangements, and early engagement with fire safety specialists. The Service engages through prevention and protection activity to influence development outcomes and reduce future risk.

The Service is also developing its ability to integrate Local Plan and City Plan growth trajectories with operational and financial modelling. By considering potential housing and infrastructure growth alongside changes in council tax base and business rate income, the Service will be better positioned to identify the point at which growth-related increases in precept income could sustainably support enhancements to fire service resources. This supports a proportionate, evidence-led approach to investment decisions, aligned to both community risk and financial capacity.

The On-Call Improvement Programme sits within this wider framework. It recognises that the role of On-Call firefighters in supporting operational resilience may evolve over time as risk changes. No specific future On-Call operating models are assumed or relied upon in the evidence supporting this decision, and any future changes would be subject to separate evidence, engagement and Fire Authority approval.

4 RESPONSE

Supports Decision Report sections: 2, 5.3

This section describes how BFRS delivers its emergency response in practice and how operational resilience is maintained. It does not restate the analysis of risk and demand set out in Section 3 but explains how that analysis is translated into operational arrangements.

4.1 Response standards and mobilisation principles

Emergency response standards for the Service are set by the Fire Authority through the CRMP 2025–2030. These standards define the response outcomes the Service plans to achieve across the area.

Incidents are mobilised using the nearest available and appropriate resource. This enables the Service to make best use of available fire engines and specialist vehicles across the response area.

Response standards are planned around resources that can be relied upon to respond immediately, with additional capacity provided as incidents escalate or continue over time.

4.2 Day-to-day response

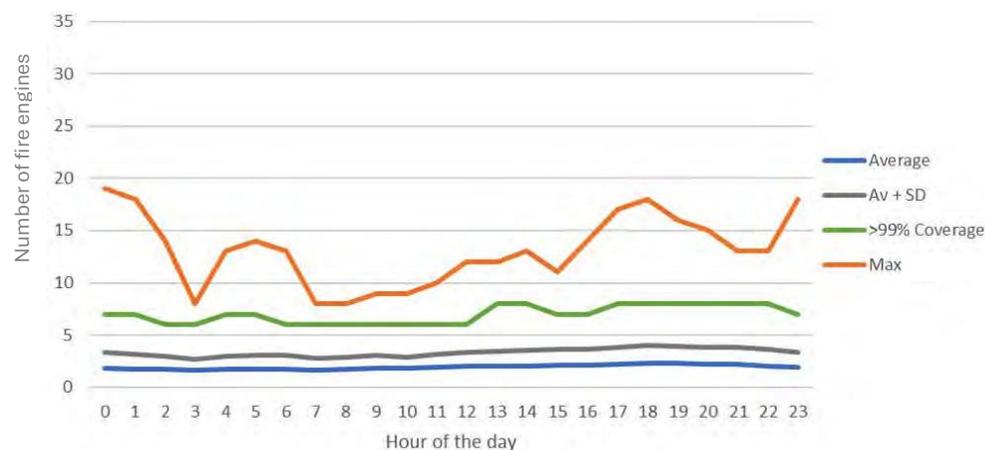
Evidence shows that day-to-day emergency demand across the Service area can be met by a core group of immediately available fire engines.

Over the last five years, around three quarters of incidents required only one fire engine. Fewer than 10% required three or more fire engines.

Analysis of incident attendance demonstrates that, on a typical day, the Service requires 12 fire engines to meet initial response demand. These initial response requirements are consistently met by wholetime fire engines, which are immediately available to mobilise.

Figure J shows the number of fire engines committed by hour of day, illustrating the level of demand experienced during routine operations.

Figure J, Fire engine utilisation April 2019 – March 2022 (Source: CRMP Evidence Pack, 2025-2030, p. 155)



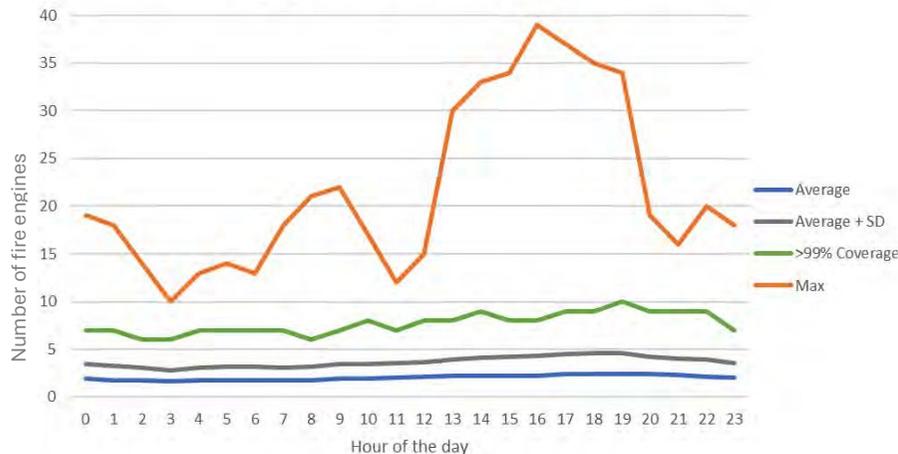
4.3 Escalation and sustained incidents

While the analysis in Section 4.2 reflects the level of resource typically required to meet day-to-day emergency demand, it is also important to recognise that very rare and exceptional incidents can require significantly larger numbers of fire engines. These events fall outside the range of demand normally used to plan the Service’s response model and are managed through escalation arrangements, reserve appliances and, where appropriate, mutual aid from neighbouring fire and rescue services.

While most incidents are resolved quickly, a small proportion require additional resources due to size, complexity, duration or the need to maintain cover for concurrent incidents.

During these periods, the Service must be able to scale its response. Evidence demonstrates that the ability to increase deployment up to 22 fire engines provides sufficient resilience to manage the vast majority of larger or longer-lasting incidents.

Figure K, Fire engine utilisation April 2019 – March 2023
(Source: CRMP Evidence Pack, 2025-2030, p. 155)



Periods requiring more than 22 fire engines are rare and typically associated with exceptional circumstances. These incidents occur infrequently and are managed through the mobilisation of reserve appliances and, where necessary, support from neighbouring services through established mutual aid arrangements. Figure K illustrates peak appliance demand during such events. The peak shown reflects an exceptional incident and should not be interpreted as typical operational demand.

4.4 Managing availability and maintaining resilience

Operational resilience is achieved by planning around resources that can be relied upon.

When a fire engine is unavailable due to mechanical issues, damage or scheduled maintenance, reserve fire engines are used to maintain operational cover. This enables frontline response to continue while ensuring that safety, training and assurance activity can be undertaken without reducing resilience.

When On-Call fire engines are unavailable, incidents are managed through alternative immediately available resources, including wholtime fire engines and support from neighbouring stations, in line with established mobilisation arrangements.

4.5 Role of On-Call fire engines in the response model

On-Call fire engines provide additional capacity and resilience, particularly during escalating or sustained incidents, periods of heightened demand, or when wholetime resources are committed elsewhere.

However, evidence demonstrates that the role of On-Call fire engines within the response model differs from that of immediately available resources. Their contribution is most effective when availability can be sustained over the duration of an incident or incident period, rather than relied upon for immediate initial response.

This distinction between immediate response and additional support underpins the Service's approach to planning and is addressed further in Section 5, which examines On-Call availability and reliability in detail.

4.6 Mutual aid and cross-border response

BFRS operates as part of a wider regional and national fire and rescue system. Mutual aid arrangements with neighbouring services provide additional resilience during major or prolonged incidents.

These arrangements are reciprocal and are used where appropriate to supplement local resources. Mutual aid supports resilience but is not relied upon as a substitute for planning sufficient and sustainable local resources.

5. ON-CALL AVAILABILITY AND RELIABILITY

Supports Decision Report sections: 5.2, 5.3

This section presents evidence relating to the availability, reliability and sustainability of On-Call fire engines. It brings together current availability data, the operational impact of variability, and longer-term evidence on recruitment and retention. The purpose of this section is to describe observed patterns and trends, rather than to set out proposals or preferred solutions.

5.1 What is On-Call provision

On-Call firefighters are not permanently based at fire stations. When alerted, they travel from their location (home or primary work location) to the station to crew a fire engine or specialist vehicle before mobilising to an incident.

On-Call availability varies by individual, time of day and day of week. Availability is influenced by factors such as primary employment, personal circumstances and proximity to the fire station. As a result, On-Call fire engines cannot be assumed to be immediately available at all times.

5.2 Availability and reliability of On-Call fire engines

Across the county, the Service aims to reach emergencies in an average of 10 minutes. In urban areas this is often quicker, while in more rural locations response times can be longer due to travel distances.

Wholetime fire engines are permanently crewed at station and are therefore immediately available to mobilise. This means they provide the most reliable means of meeting the Service's response standard.

On-Call fire engines operate differently. When an alert is received, firefighters must travel to the station before the fire engine can mobilise. As a result, the speed at which an On-Call fire engine can respond depends on who is available at that moment and how quickly a crew can assemble.

Availability data shows that On-Call fire engines are rarely able to mobilise quickly enough to form part of the immediate response model. Across the Service, an On-Call fire engine was able to mobilise within 10 minutes on average **7.2% of the time**.

This figure represents the time taken for firefighters to reach the station and the fire engine to leave. When travel time to the incident is included, most of these responses would not meet the overall 10-minute response standard.

Table 1 shows the proportion of occasions where On-Call fire engines were able to mobilise within different timeframes during 2024/2025. The percentages represent the proportion of occasions where sufficient firefighters were available to crew a fire engine and mobilise within each timeframe.

Table 1, On-Call Fire Engine Availability in 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%

On average, an On-Call fire engine was available within 10 minutes less than one-tenth of the time

5.3 Impact on escalation and operational resilience

During escalating or concurrent incidents, the speed and reliability with which additional fire engines can be brought into use is critical to maintaining operational resilience.

Where On-Call availability is variable, escalation can be delayed and is less predictable. This does not prevent the Service from meeting routine demand, but it affects the reliability with which additional capacity can be mobilised during periods of increased or sustained demand.

This evidence provides important context for understanding the role of On-Call provision within the wider response model described in Section 4.

5.4 Recruitment, retention and workforce sustainability

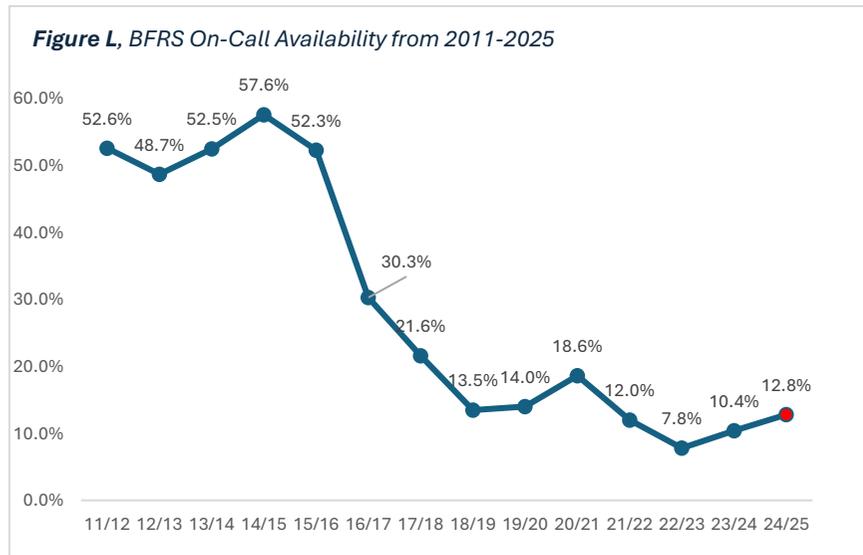
Recruitment data shows that the Service has maintained sustained On-Call recruitment activity over an extended period. Annual recruitment intakes between 2017 and 2025 demonstrate continued effort to replenish the On-Call

workforce, including during periods of operational and societal constraint.

Table 2, On-Call recruitment intakes

Year	Starters
2017	16
2018	20
2019	16
2020	21
2021	22
2022	13
2023	10
2024	25
2025	7

While recruitment numbers fluctuate year-to-year, analysis of applications, conversion rates and retention demonstrates that recruitment volume alone has not translated into sustained availability improvements.



Alongside recruitment activity, evidence shows that the Service operates a structured and sustained engagement pipeline to support On-Call recruitment.

Table 3, On-Call recruitment awareness and engagement activity

Intake cycle	Period covered	Engagement events (awareness evenings / have a go)
2021 intake	Jul–Dec 2020	6
2022 intake	Mar 2021–Jan 2022	8
2023 intake	Jun 2022–Mar 2023	9
2024 intake	Jul 2023–Mar 2024	6
2025–2026 intake	Aug 2024–Sep 2025	8

Table 3 demonstrates that awareness and engagement activity is consistent, with multiple awareness sessions delivered in advance of each intake cycle over a five-year period.

Engagement activity has been supported by a range of additional recruitment promotion techniques, including On-Call recruitment stands in targeted local communities, paid advertising (including digital screens and social media platforms), and leaflet drops in targeted areas. These activities are intended to widen reach and awareness of vacancies alongside structured engagement events.

Evidence considered through the CRMP and the consultation identify a range of factors affecting retention and sustained availability, including changes in employment patterns, travel-

to-work constraints, and increasing training and competence requirements. Taken together, this evidence indicates that retention and workforce sustainability, rather than recruitment volume alone, are the primary influences on effective On-Call availability.

This indicates that future improvement activity needs to focus on retention, the employee proposition and onboarding, alongside structural considerations. These themes are consistent with those identified through the public consultation (see Appendix 4).

5.5 Workforce viability of a fully crewed 18 On-Call engine model

During the consultation stage, modelling was undertaken to understand what would be required to sustain 100% availability across all 18 On-Call fire engines.

That modelling showed that (even if viable or realistic) maintaining full availability would require approximately 216 full-time equivalent (FTE) On-Call firefighters. Current contracted availability equates to approximately 57 FTE.

*The estimated annual staffing cost of sustaining full availability across 18 fire engines would be approximately **£3.3 million**, compared with a current On-Call staffing budget of around £1.2 million.*

This modelling formed part of the evidence presented during consultation and has been reviewed as part of the final decision-making process. It demonstrates that restoring consistent availability across all 18 On-Call fire engines would require a substantial and ongoing increase in workforce and funding even if it were necessary or desirable.

6. STATION AND ON-CALL FIRE ENGINE APPRAISALS

Supports Decision Report sections: 5.2, 5.3

This section explains how the Service assessed the role and contribution of individual On-Call fire engines, and how that evidence informed which On-Call fire engines and stations are included in the proposals. Detailed station-by-station analysis can be found in the Consultation Evidence Pack pages 31-49.

6.1 Evidence used in the appraisal

The appraisal drew on a consistent set of evidence, including:

- Availability and reliability over several years, focusing on first-line response
- Actual incidents attended and occasions where the fire engine was first on scene
- A comparison with theoretical performance if the fire engine were available 100% of the time
- Contribution to managing larger or overlapping incidents under the current response model
- Location, travel times and proximity to other immediately available fire engines
- Operational judgement and assurance.

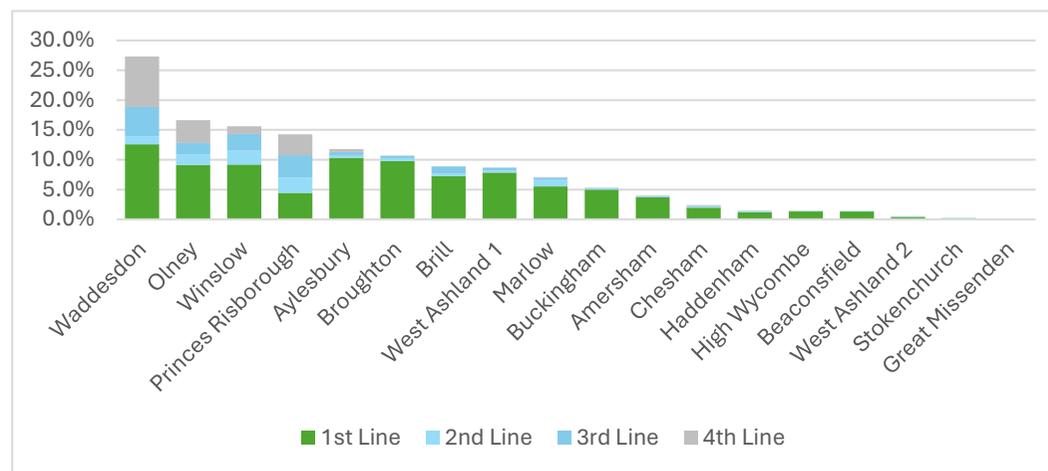
This is the same evidence base used in the consultation, with updates where needed to support the final decision.

Summary of appraisal evidence

The appraisal shows that the On-Call fire engines included in the proposals make a limited and inconsistent contribution to the current response model. In particular, availability for first-line response is low at several locations.

Figure M shows On-Call fire engine availability by station between 2020 and 2025. It highlights wide variation across the Service area and shows that contribution is poor at a number of stations. This pattern informed which On-Call fire engines were included in the proposals.

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



In 2024/25 the Service attended approximately 6,500 incidents.

*The On-Call fire engines included in the proposals attended a combined total of **23 incidents** during that period. This represents **less than 1% of total incidents attended.***

Not all stations with low availability are included. For example, Haddenham was removed from scope before the consultation, based on its geographic location and feedback from pre-consultation engagement.

Where an On-Call fire engine is proposed for removal, this does not mean that emergency response is withdrawn from the area. Response continues to be provided by existing wholetime or day-crewed fire engines and, where relevant, specialist vehicles.

Two locations, **Stokenchurch** and **Great Missenden**, operate as standalone On-Call stations. Evidence shows that these stations have not provided an operational response for a sustained period, meaning their removal does not change the level of response already being provided to those communities.

6.2 Station-specific considerations and revised provision: Buckingham

Buckingham is a day-crewed station and will continue to operate a wholetime (day-crewed) fire engine. The proposal at

Buckingham relates only to the removal of the On-Call fire engine.

Following consultation feedback and further evidence review, the Service recognised Buckingham's geographic role as a key station, and recent improvement in On-Call availability. Taking this into account, the Service proposes to retain additional local capability through a dual-purpose vehicle. This could operate either as a lightweight fire engine with a four-person crew or as a Rural Firefighting Vehicle with a two-person crew.

This approach maintains local response while remaining consistent with the wider evidence on availability and response.

6.3 Impact on response times and community coverage

Modelling was undertaken to understand the impact of the proposals on response times and community coverage. The modelling shows that, while there may be small changes in which fire engine attends first at some incidents, the proposals do not result in material changes to response performance. Some rural locations already experience attendance times beyond ten minutes due to distance and geography; this is expected and is not changed by the proposals. In these areas, On-Call fire engines are already rarely available to provide first response, meaning the proposals largely reflect the current level of service rather than reducing it.

Table 4, 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
Service Wide Total/Average	07:34	07:42	08:16	00:08	00:34	

6.4 Overall sustainability and proportionality

Taken together, the operational modelling and workforce analysis demonstrate that even if all 18 On-Call fire engines were available at 100%, routine demand would still require around 12 fire engines and escalated demand around 22. Periods requiring more than 22 fire engines remain rare and exceptional.

The modelling also shows that the difference in average attendance times between a fully crewed 18-engine model and the proposed configuration is small at service-wide level. Restoring consistent availability across all 18 On-Call fire engines would require a substantial and ongoing increase in workforce and funding.

The evidence therefore indicates that maintaining all 18 On-Call fire engines is not proportionate to the level of operational benefit achieved.

7. FINANCIAL CONTEXT AND EVIDENCE

Supports Decision Report sections: 5.6

This section summarises the financial information considered as part of the On-Call Improvement Programme. It is intended to provide context only and does not set out a full business case.

7.1 Cost of maintaining low-utilisation On-Call fire engines

Financial information was reviewed to understand the ongoing cost of maintaining On-Call fire engines that have low and inconsistent availability.

Available evidence indicates ongoing costs based on a typical 15-year asset life are approximately

- **£8,000** - routine servicing and maintenance costs, per fire engine per year
- **£1,000** - insurance costs per fire engine
- **£300,000** - replacement cost of a standard fire engine
- **£100,000** associated equipment costs

Staffing cost information was also reviewed. Due to variability in On-Call availability and staffing patterns, these figures fluctuate year-to-year and were considered as indicative rather than definitive.

Capital works and asset planning considerations

Evidence was also reviewed in relation to planned capital works required to maintain station facilities and assets. In particular, information was considered regarding the scale of capital investment that would be required to retain long-term dormant On-Call stations in operational condition.

Around £300,000 of capital investment would be required to retain Great Missenden and Stokenchurch as operational stations, despite limited operational response.

Workforce viability modelling is set out in Section 5.4.

Financial information was considered alongside operational availability, utilisation, response modelling and workforce sustainability evidence. Financial factors were not considered in isolation and did not determine the proposals.

8. OPERATIONAL INDEPENDENCE – EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

Supports Decision Report sections: 9

This section summarises the evidence and context considered in relation to the proposal to consult on operational independence for the Chief Fire Officer (CFO). It does not set out a recommendation to change governance arrangements.

8.1 Pre-consultation context

Prior to consultation, officers advised that it was appropriate to seek views on operational independence in light of the changing operational environment. This advice reflected increasing incident complexity and the need for timely operational decision-making.

Operational independence was defined as applying to **day-to-day operational command and deployment**, with strategic control, budgets, response standards and statutory oversight remaining with the Fire Authority.

8.2 National policy and inspection context

National policy and inspection findings were considered as part of this evidence. HMICFRS has highlighted operational independence as an area of national development, and Government has indicated its intention to develop statutory provision for fire chiefs to have operational independence.

This national direction formed part of the rationale for consulting locally on the issue.

8.3 Early engagement and consultation evidence

Early engagement activity showed balanced and exploratory views. Participants recognised potential benefits around clarity and agility but emphasised the importance of democratic oversight and safeguards.

The formal public consultation demonstrated broader support for operational independence once consultees understood the proposed safeguards and limits. Support was strongest where respondents were clear that operational independence would not permit unilateral decisions on station closures, appliance numbers or budgets.

8.4 Stakeholder and political context

Evidence considered included the positions of key stakeholders and partner organisations.

Buckinghamshire Council expressed concern that expanded operational independence could reduce democratic scrutiny.

The Fire Brigades Union formally opposed operational independence, citing concerns about accountability, industrial relations and service reductions.

8.5 Officer advice

Having considered on-going national debate consultation findings and stakeholder positions, officers advised that **no change should be made to the Scheme of Delegation at this time.**

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

CRMP (Community Risk Management Plan)

The Fire Authority's strategic plan that sets out how risk is assessed and how emergency response standards are determined across the Service area.

FTE (Full-Time Equivalent)

A staffing measure used to compare part-time and full-time roles. For example, two people each working half-time equate to one FTE.

On-Call firefighter

A firefighter who is not permanently based at a fire station. When alerted, they travel from home or their primary workplace to the station to crew a fire engine before responding to an incident.

Wholetime firefighter

A full-time firefighter who is based at a fire station and immediately available to respond to incidents during their duty period.

Day-crewed station

A station crewed by wholetime firefighters during the day. At night, firefighters respond from home when alerted.

Availability (On-Call)

The proportion of time that an On-Call fire engine can be mobilised within a defined timeframe (for example, within 10 minutes).

First-line response

The initial fire engine(s) mobilised to an incident to meet the Service's response standards.

Escalation

The increase in the number of fire engines or specialist resources committed to an incident as it grows in size, complexity or duration.

Sustained incident

An incident that continues over an extended period and requires ongoing resource commitment.

Mobilisation

The process of dispatching fire engines or specialist vehicles to an emergency incident.

Operational resilience

The Service's ability to maintain effective emergency response during periods of increased demand, multiple incidents, or unexpected resource unavailability.

Mutual aid

Support provided by neighbouring fire and rescue services during large or prolonged incidents.

Reserve fire engine

A fire engine not routinely crewed but kept available to replace frontline appliances during maintenance, damage, or exceptional demand.

Dual-purpose vehicle

A vehicle capable of operating either as a lightweight fire engine with a four-person crew or as a specialist rural firefighting vehicle with a smaller crew.



Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

Policy /Project/ Function	On-Call Improvement Programme			Date of Assessment	03/02/2026			
Assessment Rating: please tick 1 box <i>(The assessment rating is identified after the analysis has been completed - See Completion Notes).</i>	RED		AMBER		GREEN	X	Proportionate means achieving a legitimate aim/can be objectively justified.	
Please list methods used to analyse impact on people (e.g. consultations forums, meetings, data collection)		<p>Targeted engagement sessions with On-Call firefighters, representative bodies, and local communities potentially affected by changes.</p> <p>Review of workforce and recruitment data, including diversity statistics (gender, ethnicity, age, disability, and other protected characteristics) to assess potential workforce impact.</p> <p>Workforce Planning data reviewed monthly at People Delivery Group and Performance Board.</p> <p>Analysis of community risk data to identify any correlation between proposed changes and local socio-demographic characteristics.</p> <p>Feedback from forums and representative groups, such as the Joint Consultation Forum (JCF) and staff networks.</p> <p>Review of consultation responses from Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 2025–2030 to identify consistent themes or risks related to equality or inclusion.</p>						



Bucks Fire & Rescue Service

	<p>Review of public consultation by project team and Senior Leadership Board.</p> <p>Review of public consultation responses that specifically asked 'Are there any positive or negative impacts relating to equalities that you believe should be considered?'</p>
<p>Please list any other policies that are related to or referred to as part of this analysis</p>	<p>Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 2025–2030 – sets out strategic priorities, risk assessment, and resource allocation that underpin the proposed On-Call changes.</p> <p>All relevant People related Policies and Procedures, e.g Managing Business Change</p> <p>The consultation on the proposed reshaping of On-Call provision has been designed in accordance with the Gunning principles to ensure it is fair, transparent, and meaningful.</p> <p>The analysis of this public consultation was done by an external organisation and reviewed by the project team and Senior Leadership Board.</p>
<p>Please list the groups of people potentially affected by this proposal. (e.g. applicants, employees, customers, service users, members of the public)</p>	<p>On-Call applicants, employees, specifically people sharing protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 and members of the public.</p>
<p>What are the aims and intended effects of this proposal (project, policy, function, service)?</p>	
<p>Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service is committed to delivering a modern, agile, and effective emergency response for the communities of Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes.</p> <p>This proposal is to reshape our On-Call provision, ensuring our resources are better matched to current and future risks, demands, and public expectations.</p> <p>The proposal is informed by three years of data analysis, sector engagement, and feedback from staff and the public. It responds to longstanding challenges in recruiting and retaining On-Call firefighters, declining fire engine availability, and the need to improve value for money across our service.</p> <p>These changes aim to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Increase the availability of fire engines and specialist vehicles. 	



Bucks Fire & Rescue Service

- Enhance resilience during peak demand and major incidents.
- Deliver a more flexible, responsive, and sustainable On-Call provision.

Is any Equality Data available relating to the use or implementation of this proposal (policy, project, or function, service)? Please Tick
(See Completion notes)

Yes: X

No:

Demographic data was reviewed during the consultation and was reviewed at both a strategic (macro) and operational (micro) level.

List any Consultations e.g. with employees, service users, Unions or members of the public that has taken place in the development or implementation of this proposal (project, policy, function)?

At the early stage of formulating options for shaping our future On-Call provision, the Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) was completed to inform the development of proposals.

Six pre-public consultation focus groups were held with staff and members of the public to explore potential options and impacts.

Care was taken to ensure that no participants were disqualified or disadvantaged due to factors such as gender, age, working status, or disability/limiting illness. The recruitment process was monitored to promote social diversity across a wide range of criteria.

Public focus groups included 26 attendees, with an approximately 50/50 split of men and women, 11 participants from ethnic minority backgrounds, 3 participants with a disability or limiting illness, and a range of ages represented.

Following completion of the public consultation the EQIA has been reviewed taking into account further formal and informal consultations including full public consultation, ensuring continued inclusion of staff, unions, community stakeholders, and service users.

Full consultation included the feedback of members of the public, organisations and staff. This included 3 staff focus groups, 4 public focus groups including local residents of stations that had a proposed change, and a focus group for local organisations including category 1 partners.



Bucks Fire & Rescue Service

An online questionnaire ran for ten weeks which included the question 'Are there any positive or negative impacts relating to equalities that you believe should be considered?'. This question received 175 responses.

Financial Analysis If applicable, state any relevant cost implications (e.g. expenses, returns or savings) as a direct result of the implementation of this policy, project, or function.

Costs £

Projected Returns

£75,000 (estimated capital receipt from sale of five fire engines)

Implementation £

Projected cost avoidance £133,333 per annum

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

What impact will the implementation of this proposal have on people who share characteristics protected by <i>The Equality Act 2010</i> ? (See Completion notes)				
Protected Characteristic	Neutral Impact:	Positive Impact:	Negative Impact:	Evidence of impact and if applicable, justification if determining proportionate means of achieving legitimate aims exists
Sex (Men and Women)		X		<p>The Service continues to take proactive steps to improve gender inclusivity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women’s Network collaboration: Dedicated 'Have a Go' sessions exclusively for women will be organised to encourage exploration of On-Call roles in a welcoming and supportive environment. Following a successful event hosted by the Women’s Network in Spring 2025, the Network remains committed to collaborating with our recruitment team to help diversify our workforce. • Positive action initiatives: The Service continues to run targeted recruitment and development initiatives that have historically resulted in successful outcomes for candidates from underrepresented groups. <p>The modernisation of facilities and duty arrangements aims to improve gender inclusivity and attract a more diverse applicant base.</p> <p>These measures are designed to remove barriers, increase confidence, and improve recruitment and retention of staff in On-Call roles, contributing to a more balanced and diverse workforce.</p>
Race (All Racial Groups)		x		<p>The consultation actively encouraged participation from all community groups, ensuring transparency and fair representation. Improved engagement could</p>

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

			<p>enhance trust and inclusion.</p> <p>By focusing On-call recruitment efforts on local communities, the Service aims to improve diversity in the workforce, promote inclusion, and ensure that On-Call staff better reflect the communities they serve.</p>
<p>Disability (Mental, Physical, and Carers of Disabled people)</p>		x	<p>Flexible crewing and duty arrangements, along with consideration of individual circumstances, is intended to support carers in balancing their work and caring commitments.</p> <p>As a Disability Confident employer, the Service actively seeks to support candidates by providing reasonable adjustments and inclusive recruitment practices.</p> <p>On-call staff have the flexibility to schedule their own duties according to their personal circumstances, provided they meet the minimum required working pattern. This approach supports better work-life balance by accommodating individual commitments and responsibilities.</p> <p>Modelling outcomes confirm that the proposed changes will not produce any material degradation in county-wide emergency response performance. The analysis indicates no adverse impact on vulnerable population groups, as the enhanced availability of operational resources - achieved by retiring under-utilised legacy physical assets and deploying more responsive service provisions - maintains or improves overall service resilience.</p>

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

Religion or Belief	X			<p>Duty systems will continue to accommodate requests related to religious observance, with no negative impact expected.</p> <p>On-call staff have the flexibility to schedule their own duties according to their personal circumstances, provided they meet the minimum required working pattern. This approach supports better work-life balance by accommodating individual commitments and responsibilities.</p>
Sexual Orientation (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Straight)	X			Continued commitment to equality, diversity, and inclusion ensures no differential treatment based on sexual orientation.
Pregnancy and Maternity	X			<p>We have an established policy and procedure in place to support staff who are pregnant or on maternity leave, which was reviewed and updated in September 2025. For full details, please refer to the 'Maternity, Adoption and Parental Entitlements Procedure'.</p> <p>Modelling outcomes confirm that the proposed changes will not produce any material degradation in county-wide emergency response performance. The analysis indicates no adverse impact on vulnerable population groups, as the enhanced availability of operational resources - achieved by retiring under-utilised legacy physical assets and deploying more responsive service provisions - maintains or improves overall service resilience.</p>
Marital Status	X			No identified negative or positive impact is anticipated.

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

(Married and Civil Partnerships)				
Gender Reassignment (Includes non-binary)	X			All policies will continue to promote inclusion and equality of opportunity. Ongoing engagement with staff networks will ensure fair treatment.
Age (People of all ages)		X		<p>The introduction of more flexible and modern duty systems that could result from our proposals could attract younger recruits while retaining experienced staff through more adaptive arrangements. No disproportionate negative impact is anticipated.</p> <p>Modelling outcomes confirm that the proposed changes will not produce any material degradation in county-wide emergency response performance. The analysis indicates no adverse impact on vulnerable population groups, as the enhanced availability of operational resources - achieved by retiring under-utilised legacy physical assets and deploying more responsive service provisions - maintains or improves overall service resilience.</p>

What impact will the implementation of this proposal have on people who are impacted by and / or local factors that sit outside the Equality Act 2010 (non-legislative). Examples include social economic factors (i.e. poverty and or isolation), caring responsibility, unemployment, homelessness, urbanisation, rurality, health inequalities any other disadvantage. (See Completion notes)				
Identified impact non-legislative factor.	Neutral Impact:	Positive Impact:	Negative Impact:	Evidence of impact and if applicable, justification if determining proportionate means of achieving legitimate aims exists
All (legislative and non-legislative)		X		Building on the points above, by prioritising specialist appliances and enhancing resilience, we can better showcase the varied responsibilities of on-call firefighters.

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

				<p>This approach not only promotes a deeper understanding of the diverse and ongoing nature of their work but also broadens our recruitment reach. In turn, this may help us attract candidates from historically marginalised or underrepresented groups, contributing to a more diverse and inclusive workforce.</p>
All (legislative and non-legislative)		X		<p>Building on the existing points, by targeting key areas such as specialist appliances and identified skill gaps, we can leverage our on-call recruitment project to showcase the breadth of training opportunities available. This approach positions us as an employer of choice while supporting the upskilling of both current and incoming staff.</p>
Rurality	X			<p>Through our public consultation question on equality impacts we heard that there was a perception of an adverse impact on more rural areas and that was linked to older members of the public.</p> <p>The two standalone On-Call stations in rural areas - Stokenchurch and Great Missenden have not been providing operational response for 7-8 years so the public will not experience a change in service.</p> <p>However it is still right that we review the current response times to those areas to ensure the service we provide is in line with what our communities would expect and to ensure no adverse impact on rural communities</p> <p>We have been clear in the construction of our CRMP that more rural areas can expect a different response time profile than our more urban areas. When reviewing the response times for STO and GMI it is clear that they are in line with response times for other rural areas and in some cases achieving lower response times than some areas with crewed On-Call fire engines. This is due to their proximity to wholetime fire stations.</p>

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

Name of department head / project lead	Jacki Flower – Programme Manager Peter Sandford – People and Culture Officer
Date of EIA sign off:	03/03/2026 (Reviewed)
Date(s) of review of assessment:	

Action Plan Owner: Matty Burn	Commencement date:28/10/2025
--------------------------------------	------------------------------

As a result of performing this analysis, what actions are proposed to remove or reduce any negative identified on people (employees, applicants' customers, members of the public etc.) who share characteristics identified in the Equality Act 2010 or are non-legislative characteristics?

Action Planning

Identified Impact Protected Characteristic or local non-legislative factor	Recommended Actions
Sex	Ensure inclusive recruitment pathways Impact monitoring during implementation Engage with staff networks during process of formulating plans
Race	Ensure inclusive recruitment pathways Impact monitoring during implementation Engage with staff networks during process of formulating plans
Disability	Ensure inclusive recruitment pathways Impact monitoring during implementation Engage with staff networks during process of formulating plans

This page is intentionally left blank

Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service

On-Call Improvement Programme Consultation

Report of findings



Buckinghamshire
Fire & Rescue Service

Opinion Research Services

February 2026

Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service: On-Call Improvement Programme Consultation



Buckinghamshire
Fire & Rescue Service

Report of findings

Kelly Lock and Catherine Wall, Opinion Research Services

February 2026

Opinion Research Services

The Strand Swansea SA1 1AF
01792 535300 | www.ors.org.uk | info@ors.org.uk

As with all our studies, findings from this report are subject to Opinion Research Services' Standard Terms and Conditions of Contract.

Any press release or publication of the findings of this report requires the advance approval of ORS. Such approval will only be refused on the grounds of inaccuracy or misrepresentation

This study was conducted in accordance with ISO 20252:2019, ISO 9001:2015, and ISO 27001:2022

© Copyright February 2026

Contents

1. Summary of findings	5
Background to the engagement	5
Pre-consultation engagement	5
The consultation process	5
Nature of consultation and accountability	6
Summary of main findings	6
2. Project Overview	14
Background to the engagement	14
Pre-consultation engagement	15
The consultation process	16
3. Open consultation questionnaire	22
Introduction	22
Profile tables	22
Interpretation of the data	24
Duplicate and co-ordinated responses	25
Main findings	25
4. Resident focus groups.....	45
Introduction	45
Main findings	45
5. Staff focus groups	53
Introduction	53
Main findings	53
6. Stakeholder focus group.....	68
Introduction	68
Main findings	68
7. BFRS drop-in sessions	74
Introduction	74
Summary of key questions/issues raised.....	74
8. Submissions	76
Introduction	76

Appendix 1: list of figures.....89

Appendix 2: focus group slides.....90

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, Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service (BFRS) has made several strategic attempts to address declining availability and recruitment challenges, with varying degrees of success. Indeed, despite these attempts, during its last three 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.

Pre-consultation engagement

- 1.4 To gather views on BFRS's proposed direction of travel and help shape the proposals to be submitted to the Fire Authority for approval to proceed to formal consultation in late 2025, three in-depth online focus groups were held with 18 BFRS staff members, and a further three with a broadly representative cross-section of 26 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.
- 1.5 This early engagement was essential to ensure the consultation process was inclusive, credible, and impactful; and valuable feedback was received that directly influenced the consultation process and proposals reported here.

The consultation process

- 1.6 To understand views on proposals to reform BFRS's On-Call service, a formal consultation was undertaken by BMKFA between 19 November 2025 and 28 January 2026. BFRS commissioned ORS to undertake a programme of key consultation activities and to report respondents' views, gathered through an open consultation questionnaire, four in-person focus groups with local residents, three online focus groups with BFRS staff, and an online focus group with key stakeholders.

- 1.7 Moreover, BFRS hosted seven in-person drop-in events in potentially affected areas; and received written submissions. The themes from the events and submissions have also been independently reported by ORS.
- 1.8 In total: 956 questionnaire responses were received; 33 residents attended the in-person focus groups; seven participants attended the online stakeholder focus group; 15 participants attended the staff focus groups; 72 people attended BFRS's information events; and 10 submissions were received by BFRS.

Nature of consultation and accountability

- 1.9 The key good practice requirements for consultation programmes are that they should: be conducted at a formative stage, before decisions are taken; allow sufficient time for people to participate and respond; provide the public and stakeholders with enough background information to allow them to consider the issues and any proposals intelligently and critically; and be properly taken into consideration before decisions are finally taken. The consultation reported here meets all these requirements.
- 1.10 Accountability means that public authorities should give an account of their plans and take into account people's views. They should conduct fair and accessible engagement whilst reporting the outcomes openly and considering them fully. This does not mean that the majority views should automatically decide public policy; and the popularity or unpopularity of proposals should not displace professional and political judgement about what is the right or best decision in the circumstances. The levels of, and reasons for, public support or opposition are very important, but are considerations to be taken into account, not as factors that necessarily determine authorities' decisions. Above all, public bodies have to consider the relevance and cogency of the arguments put forward during public engagement processes, not just counting the number of people.

Summary of main findings

There was widespread recognition of BFRS's On-Call Challenges and the need to make changes to the way the Service operates ...

- 1.11 Over half (56%) of all open questionnaire respondents agreed that BFRS needs to make changes to the way it uses resources to address the On-Call challenges it faces. The level of agreement amongst respondents who are BFRS or other FRS staff members is substantially higher than for members of the public or those representing an organisation. There was general recognition from those in agreement that the current On-Call model is not currently working well; and that the proposed changes make the best use of resources and budget, and will provide a more effective service.
- 1.12 On the other hand, almost two-in-five open questionnaire respondents disagreed that BFRS needs to make changes to the way it uses resources to address the On-Call challenges it faces. The majority of those who disagreed were members of the public, who raised concerns that removing fire engines or closing stations would increase response times and be dangerous to the public, particularly at a time of housing growth and development.
- 1.13 In the focus groups, staff and stakeholders recognised BFRS's On-Call recruitment and retention challenges. Societal changes and the general affluence of the area were thought to hinder recruitment; whereas the demands of the role and disengagement because of a lack of 'shouts' were thought to contribute to high firefighter turnover.

- 1.14 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, albeit reluctantly in some cases. 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 among staff and in some written submissions that the challenges are, to some extent, of the Service's own making

- 1.15 In the focus groups, staff were strongly of the view that BFRS has been the architect of its own challenges through its 'neglect' of the On-Call service. Inadequate recruitment processes were alleged (echoed by some public focus group participants, who said they had never seen any promotion of On-Call roles locally), with On-Call firefighters largely expected to take the lead themselves in attracting others to the role.
- 1.16 The focus on Wholetime recruitment at the expense of On-Call was an issue in all three staff groups; as was the recruitment of On-Call firefighters into Wholetime roles, which has apparently depleted On-Call crewing at some stations, contributing to availability issues. This was also discussed by neighbouring fire and rescue services in the stakeholder focus group: they felt that dual contract firefighters can be helpful in addressing availability issues and assisting with On-Call firefighter development, but that caution is needed to ensure that when people do switch from On-Call to Wholetime, their commitment to the latter does not diminish so much that they are effectively lost.
- 1.17 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 to standby when a Wholetime crew at a key station is at an incident. Furthermore, the centralised Resource Management Team (RMT) was criticised for a lack of proactive On-Call resource management. It should be noted though, that recent improvements had been seen by a few participants in this respect.
- 1.18 Much of the above was echoed in most of the written submissions: declining availability was widely attributed to underinvestment, weak recruitment and retention strategies, and organisational choices, rather than structural failure of the On-Call model. The general feeling was that On-Call challenges are real but solvable, and do not justify permanent reductions in frontline provision.

There have been some recent availability improvements

- 1.19 On-Call availability was said to have improved at some stations recently, however, which was attributed in part to a reduction in bank shifts for dual contract firefighters. Previously, the financial attraction of bank shifts, coupled with a lack of consequence for not meeting On-Call hours, meant that many firefighters were opting for the former over the latter. Fewer bank shift opportunities will, it was felt, only increase On-Call availability further in future.

Most focus group participants reluctantly accepted the proposed closure of Great Missenden and Stokenchurch Fire Stations, but views among questionnaire respondents were mixed ...

- 1.20 Almost half of all questionnaire respondents agreed with the proposal to close Great Missenden (47%) and Stokenchurch (46%) Fire Stations. However, over two-in-five respondents disagreed with the proposal

(44% and 45% respectively). The level of opposition was highest among members of the public, with levels of disagreement rising to around half for this group.

- 1.21 In the focus groups, while describing their current predicament as ‘managed decline’ on the part of BFRS, staff tended to accept the proposed closure of Great Missenden and Stokenchurch Fire Stations on the basis that neither has had a crew for several years, and the viability of achieving one in future is low. This was echoed by stakeholders and most members of the public (the latter at both the focus groups and the drop-in events).

... and the proposed closures were opposed in several written submissions

- 1.22 The strongest opposition to the proposed station closures was expressed in written submissions from Buckinghamshire Council, the Fire and Rescue Services Association, the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), Gerrards Cross Town Council, and an individual respondent. Key concerns were around increased response times, removing resources that are unlikely ever to be reinstated despite future growth and climate-related risk, and permanently reducing resilience.

Views on the removal of On-Call fire engines from low availability stations were mixed

- 1.23 In the open questionnaire, respondents who are members of the public and those representing an organisation were largely opposed to the proposed fire engine removals, with almost three-in-five (57%) disagreeing. However, respondents who are BFRS employees were largely in favour of the proposal to reduce the number of On-Call engines from 18 to 11, with three quarters in agreement.
- 1.24 Stakeholders and members of the public at the focus groups and drop-in events tended to support BFRS’s proposals to remove some low-availability On-Call fire engines, providing any resources released by doing so are reinvested into the remaining On-Call service.
- 1.25 Stakeholders and some members of the public questioned whether On-Call firefighters at affected stations would be offered the opportunity to respond from another location. Retaining as many firefighters as possible was considered essential in terms of preserving their knowledge, skill and expertise; and it was hoped that consolidation would help improve fire engine availability. Having more appliances ‘on the run’ would also, it was felt, increase firefighters’ incident exposure, helping them maintain their operational knowledge and skills.
- 1.26 There were some concerns among members of the public around longer response times; less overall resilience for large or simultaneous incidents and spate conditions; managing future risk from, say, housing growth and infrastructure development; the permanent loss of resources that may be needed in future; the amount of resource potentially being lost from a relatively small area (Amersham, Beaconsfield, and High Wycombe); and the potential loss of On-Call firefighters.
- 1.27 Among staff, there was some understanding of the rationale for removing the High Wycombe and second West Ashland On-Call fire engines given their availability issues. However, staff in all three groups could not understand the rationale for removing the Buckingham On-Call fire engine, not least because its availability is higher than some stations that do not feature and is likely to improve in the near future due to upskilling among its staff. Moreover, Buckingham’s relatively isolated geographical location and status as one of BFRS’s key stations was thought to warrant retaining the On-Call appliance there.

- 1.28 The key issue raised by staff in all groups, however, was that the availability data underpinning the consultation proposals does not reflect the realities of mixed crewing in Buckingham. It was frequently said that On-Call availability is impacted by the number of times On-Call firefighters are required to ‘plug gaps’ on the station’s Wholetime appliance.
- 1.29 In the context of the consultation, removing the On-Call fire engine from Buckingham on the grounds of low availability was considered short-sighted as Buckingham’s Wholetime establishment is now more robust, meaning On-Call firefighters are less likely to be needed to ‘plug gaps’ and so more likely to be available to crew their own appliance.
- 1.30 There was also strong opposition to the proposed fire engine removals in the written submissions from Buckinghamshire Council; the Fire and Rescue Services Association; the FBU; and Gerrards Cross Town Council. It was again stressed that low availability is a symptom of On-Call neglect, not proof that appliances are unnecessary, and removing engines was viewed as accepting institutionalised failure rather than fixing it. More practically, the proposals were thought to risk reducing county-wide fire and rescue cover and resilience, increasing reliance on neighbouring services and Wholetime appliances.

There was also a mixed reaction to replacing fire engines with special appliances at some stations

- 1.31 Responses to the open questionnaire were mixed regarding the proposal to replace some fire engines with specialist vehicles. Over half (53%) of all respondents supported this proposal, with around three-in-ten strongly agreeing; while over a third (38%) disagreed, with almost three-in-ten strongly disagreeing. However, most (over three quarters) questionnaire respondents were in general agreement that the quickest appropriate vehicle should be sent to an incident, regardless of which station it is sent from.
- 1.32 In the focus groups, BFRS’s special vehicle fleet was generally viewed as a positive addition to the Service; and using On-Call firefighters to crew special vehicles was considered eminently sensible if it results in increased and more efficient use of human resources. This approach was thought to offer flexibility at incidents; and ensure firefighters experience more ‘shouts’ and practical, hands-on incident experience.
- 1.33 However, the consensus among participating staff was that special appliances should complement rather than replace traditional fire engines due to their reduced capability and, in the case of the Rural Firefighting Vehicle (RFV), seasonality. This was echoed in the written submissions from Buckinghamshire Council; the Fire and Rescue Services Association; the FBU; and Gerrards Cross Town Council, and an individual respondent.
- 1.34 Few comments were received about the proposal to replace the Amersham On-Call fire engine with the Chesham RFV, though it was viewed as unfair to the Chesham crew who utilise it often and are skilled in its use. The proposed substitution of the Buckingham On-Call fire engine with a RFV was frequently criticised, however; again, mainly due to the town’s geographic location. Moreover, as mixed crewing is likely to continue at Buckingham despite increases in the Wholetime establishment there, there was some question around how the station’s On-Call firefighters could maintain their skills and competencies on the equipment carried on a standard fire engine if theirs is removed. It was thus suggested that Buckingham retain its On-Call appliance and house an RFV, managing both on a switch crew basis.
- 1.35 West Ashland On-Call firefighters described ongoing confusion around which special vehicle they would receive if the proposals were to be implemented: the RFV currently based at the station or a new water carrier. While they were pleased to be getting one either way, some of the station’s On-Call firefighters are also able to book on at Broughton, and so participants questioned whether they would be trained on

both. This was considered sensible in principle, but potentially problematic in practice given they only have two hours drill time a week.

- 1.36 Reaction to the prospect of replacing the On-Call fire engine at Beaconsfield with a Crew Welfare Unit (CWU) was mixed. Although some participants dismissed it as little more than a glorified ‘toilet,’ the Unit was generally recognised as important on welfare grounds, and something the FBU has been ‘pushing for.’ A Beaconsfield On-Call firefighter was open minded about the proposed change, given their On-Call fire engine is rarely used, albeit they asked whether they would be permitted to take their fire kit along so they could assist at an incident if needed.

Less than half of questionnaire respondents felt that the proposed changes to On-Call provision will make better use of public money

- 1.37 While almost four-in-five BFRS employees (77%) agreed that the proposed changes to On-Call provision would make better use of public money, members of the public were less supportive, with two fifths (40%) in agreement and over two-in-five (48%) disagreeing with this.

Some alternative suggestions were made

- 1.38 Alternative suggestions made in response to the open questionnaire largely focussed on strengthening recruitment and retention of On-Call firefighters (as well as increasing the number of Wholetime firefighters): around a fifth (19%) of those who provided further comments noted something along these lines. Specifically, it was also frequently noted that BFRS does not appear to be proactively seeking to recruit On-Call firefighters, and it was suggested that this could be better promoted and advertised to the public.
- 1.39 Most of the specific alternative suggestions proposed by staff centred around maintaining the status quo (or at least the status quo minus Great Missenden and Stokenchurch) while strengthening On-Call recruitment, retention, and availability. A couple of alternative suggestions were also made at the drop-in events: a Beaconsfield attendee proposed a ‘blue light hub’ for the area; and a Great Missenden attendee felt the proposals do not go far enough and that *“all On-Call should be removed.”*
- 1.40 Across the written submissions, alternatives included pausing or withdrawing the proposals and revisiting them after future risk is clearer; retaining stations and appliances while modernising how On-Call staff are recruited, trained, and supported; exploring hybrid or flexible duty systems rather than permanent asset removal; and developing bespoke station-by-station solutions. One individual respondent provided a detailed alternative operational model, including revised station roles, different appliance mixes, and changes to availability arrangements (please see the full report for detail).

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

- 1.41 Overall, in the focus groups, staff were sceptical that BFRS has exhausted avenues to improve On-Call recruitment and availability across Buckinghamshire; and did not feel that the On-Call Improvement Programme proposals would succeed where other measures have failed. They did, though, make several suggestions as to how the Service might seek to make these availability improvements. These primarily included improvements to the On-Call recruitment process, such as making proactive visits to local residents and businesses to highlight the benefits of On-Call; offering more ‘have a go’ days; and ensuring shorter lead in times between recruitment and a firefighter’s first ‘shout.’

- 1.42 Recruitment improvements were also suggested by public focus group participants and in the written submissions, including targeted recruitment campaigns rooted in local communities; a wider information campaign to improve knowledge of the On-Call system among the general public; stronger employer engagement, including charters and incentives; and using reserves or underspends to invest in recruitment rather than removing capacity.
- 1.43 Staff and stakeholders also recommended more active leadership and support for the On-Call service - including for very busy Watch and Crew Commanders; as well as early succession planning to identify potential new managers.
- 1.44 Another strong theme among staff was the need to revisit On-Call firefighter skillsets, as maintaining current skills and competencies is very challenging in only two hours a week. Rationalisation and tailoring was considered necessary, especially if On-Call firefighters are also to be primarily responsible for crewing special appliances; and needing to maintain their skills and competencies on those.
- 1.45 Other, more specific suggestions across the staff focus groups and written submissions were:
- » offering more flexible contracts (suggested by both staff and neighbouring fire and rescue services in the stakeholder focus group)
 - » faster and more flexible training pathways to reduce dropout.
 - » exploring the idea of hubs or groups of stations
 - » modular, localised training and shared “training hubs”
 - » improved incentives, recognition, and cultural integration between Wholetime and On-Call staff
 - » allowing firefighters working in non-operational roles to provide On-Call cover where possible and appropriate (which was said to be permitted in Oxfordshire)
 - » encouraging Wholetime firefighters to provide On-Call cover
 - » 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
 - » developing a system whereby On-Call firefighters can book on for life-risk or serious incidents only within the last couple of hours of their availability, to avoid people booking off early for fear of being used for standby or relief late in their shift.

There is a need to consider messaging around the proposed changes

- 1.46 Stakeholders recognised that those living in areas with very poor On-Call appliance availability would see little practical difference to the service received from BFRS, but they urged the Service to carefully consider its messaging to affected residents, who are likely to be concerned about potential impacts. In particular, it was said that consistent, clear messaging is needed around current appliance availability; the rationale for change; and anticipated impacts (especially regarding response times).
- 1.47 This was echoed by members of the public, who said that changes such as those proposed, no matter how rational and well-evidenced, can be highly emotive; and that the Service must provide adequate reassurance for residents through positive messaging, stressing that the changes are not being made for financial reasons, but to make better use of resources and yield service improvements.

- 1.48 While they were generally cynical about the On-Call Improvement Programme, staff in all three groups said that if they could see tangible benefits to the remaining On-Call service as a result of implementing the proposals for change, they would be far more likely to support them.

The principle of operational independence for the Chief Fire Officer was supported by stakeholders, BFRS employees responding to the questionnaire, and members of the public ...

- 1.49 Over half (54%) of all open questionnaire respondents agreed that the Chief Fire Officer (CFO), on behalf of BFRS, should have operational independence to determine the make-up and distribution of the Service's operational fleet and resources. However, almost two fifths (38%) disagreed with this principle. Again, support was highest amongst BFRS employees and lowest amongst members of the public and representatives of organisations.
- 1.50 Among those who agreed with the principle of operational independence for the CFO, most felt that they should be able to make strategic operational decisions on balancing competing operational needs, allocation of staff to meet priorities, and deployment of resources. Respondents were slightly less supportive of the CFO being able to make strategic operational decisions on configuration and organisation of resources, expenditure, and the appointment and dismissal of staff.
- 1.51 In the focus groups, the principle of operational independence was supported by members of the public and stakeholders. The CFO, it was said, should be trusted to make decisions in the Service's best interests; and most participants anticipated positive impacts from this, especially in relation to efficiency and agile decision-making. There were, though, some concerns around accountability, and a feeling that this is primarily an issue for BFRS staff to decide upon.

... but it was considered potentially 'dangerous' in practice by staff and in some written submissions

- 1.52 In the focus groups, most staff members were not averse to the idea of operational independence for the Chief Fire Officer (CFO) per se. However, they were significantly concerned about the power this would confer being wielded by the 'wrong' hands. In this context, while all participants were complimentary about the current CFO and felt they would use any operational independence granted to them sensibly, they were not confident that this would be the case for any successor. Other related concerns were around a lack of accountability (which was considered especially important for a public service); and firefighters and unions losing an important avenue for 'push back' in the Fire Authority.
- 1.53 Specifically, staff members highlighted the prospect of the CFO being granted freedom to make decisions around resourcing, noting the line in the consultation pack stating, 'If an On-Call station was struggling to recruit crew, the CFO could temporarily redeploy that fire engine to a different station, while replacing it with a specialist vehicle needing fewer firefighters.' It was said that even if decisions around closing fire stations would still rest with the Fire Authority, a CFO with operational independence could engineer a closure by stealth through the removal of vehicles.
- 1.54 This was all considered important in the context of the On-Call Improvement Programme consultation, with several participants stating that even if the proposals are rejected by the Fire Authority, operational independence for the CFO could result in them being implemented regardless. This was echoed by a neighbouring fire and rescue service representative at the stakeholder focus group.

- 1.55 These sentiments were echoed by some respondents in the open questionnaire, who suggested that checks and balances are needed to prevent “*totalitarian control of the organisation*” as it could be “*difficult to reverse.*”
- 1.56 In the written submissions, there was opposition to operational independence from Buckinghamshire Council; the FBU; and Gerrards Cross Town Council. Key arguments were that it would weaken democratic accountability and oversight over public safety decisions; and ‘lock in’ reductions and prevent future Fire Authorities from reversing them. There was particular concern from the FBU over granting independence on fleet configuration, deployment, and staffing structures. There was, though, some acceptance that the CFO should have operational flexibility within clear governance limits, but not strategic authority to remove appliances or stations unilaterally.

There was a strong sense that the issue of operational independence should have been considered separately to the On-Call Improvement Programme

- 1.57 In terms of process, there was a definite sense among staff, stakeholders, and questionnaire respondents, that the consultation on operational independence should have been considered separately to that on the On-Call Improvement Programme as they are two distinct and controversial issues.

Staff and some written submissions expressed concern about the consultation process, but drop-in event attendees were more positive

- 1.58 In all three staff groups, participants focused on the content of the consultation pack, particularly the lack of reference to the implications of mixed crewing at Buckingham; the lack of nuance in the five-year dataset used, which does not reflect recent availability improvements; the lack of information on second appliance response times; and an overreliance on statistics that demonstrate the ‘norm,’ at the expense of exceptional circumstances and perceptions of the fire and rescue service as a ‘safety net’.
- 1.59 In terms of the consultation itself, staff in the Wholetime/Day Crewed session said that they felt detached from the process, having received little information directly from managers; and On-Call staff criticised what they saw as an over-reliance on written communications at the expense of personal contact, especially as they are not full-time employees with ready access to emails. Moreover, there was a sense that On-Call staff were not sufficiently involved in the options development; which has affected subsequent buy-in to the process.
- 1.60 There was also some criticism of the service’s external consultation from staff, especially in relation to the timing of some public drop-in events. Moreover, Buckinghamshire Council and Gerrards Cross Town Council explicitly criticised the consultation process for being too short and poorly timed (over Christmas and New Year); and overly relying on digital engagement, disadvantaging older residents. Positively, several public attendees said they felt more informed about the proposals after attending a drop-in event.
- 1.61 Finally, participating staff were of the view that decisions have already been taken and that BFRS is simply ‘going through the motions’ with its consultation; and were concerned that the On-Call Improvement Programme represents the ‘thin end of the wedge’ in terms of potential future reductions.

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, Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service (BFRS) has made several strategic attempts to address declining availability and recruitment challenges, with varying degrees of success.
- 2.2 Despite these attempts, during its last three 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 2021/22 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. The On-Call model approach also provides resilience, which refers to third line and fourth

line response: the capacity to maintain operations 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 2023-25:

“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 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 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.

Pre-consultation engagement

- 2.10 To gather views on BFRS’s proposed direction of travel and help shape the proposals to be submitted to the Fire Authority for approval to proceed to formal consultation in late 2025, three in-depth online focus groups were held with 18 BFRS staff members, and a further three with a broadly representative cross-section of 26 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 This early engagement was essential to ensure the consultation process was inclusive, credible, and impactful; and valuable feedback was received that directly influenced the consultation process and proposals reported here.

The consultation process

The commission

- 2.14 To understand views on proposals to reform BFRS's On-Call service, a formal consultation was undertaken by BMKFA between 19 November 2025 and 28 January 2026.
- 2.15 BFRS commissioned ORS to undertake a programme of key consultation activities and to report respondents' views, gathered through an open consultation questionnaire, four in-person focus groups with local residents, three online focus groups with BFRS staff, and an online focus group with key stakeholders. Moreover, BFRS hosted seven in-person drop-in events in potentially affected areas; and received written submissions. The themes from the events and submissions have also been independently reported by ORS.
- 2.16 The 10-week formal consultation period gave the public, staff and, stakeholders sufficient time to participate, and through its background information and evidence, BFRS sought to provide people with sufficient information to understand the proposals for its On-Call service and to make informed judgements about them.

Consultation methodology

Open questionnaire

- 2.17 The open consultation questionnaire was available online and in paper format between 19 November 2025 and 28 January 2026. In total, 956 questionnaires were received, all 956 of which were submitted online and none on paper (through the post). Of these, 761 were 'full completes' (where the respondent reached the end of the questionnaire and clicked 'submit') and 195 were 'partial completes' (where the respondent had answered at least one question). All 956 responses are considered a valid response and have been included in the analysis. For clarity, the number of respondents answering each question is noted throughout the report.
- 2.18 Most responses (935) were from individuals, but 21 valid responses were received from the following organisations:
- » Amersham Town Council
 - » Aylesbury Conservatives
 - » Buckinghamshire Conservatives
 - » Buckingham Town Council
 - » Buckinghamshire Council
 - » Buckland Parish Council
 - » Burnham Parish Council
 - » Campbell Park Parish Council
 - » Chesham & Amersham Conservative party
 - » Chesham Town Council
 - » Civil Parish of Stokenchurch
 - » Conservative Association
 - » Emberton Parish Council

- » Granborough Parish Council
- » Leckhampstead Parish Council
- » Member of parliament for Beaconsfield
- » Member of parliament for Mid Buckinghamshire
- » Quainton Parish Council
- » Ridgeway West and Ridgeway East
- » Stone with Bishopstone and Hartwell Parish Council
- » Walton Community Council

2.19 It should be noted that while open questionnaires are important consultation routes that are accessible to almost everyone, they are not ‘surveys’ of the public. Whereas surveys require proper sampling of a given population, open questionnaires are distributed unsystematically or adventitiously; and are more likely to be completed by motivated people while also being subject to influence by local campaigns. However, this does not mean that the open questionnaire findings should be discounted: they are analysed in detail in this report and must be taken into account as a demonstration of the strength of feeling of residents who were motivated to put forward their views.

Interpretation of the data

- 2.20 As the questionnaire was available for anybody with an interest in the subject to complete, the achieved sample is not considered to be representative of any set population. As such, the text refers to ‘respondents’ throughout the report, as opposed to ‘residents’ or ‘organisations’.
- 2.21 The numbers on charts are percentages indicating the proportions of residents or respondents who gave a particular response on a given question. Where percentages do not sum to 100, this may be due to computer rounding, the exclusion of ‘don’t know’ categories, or multiple answers.
- 2.22 The example comments shown throughout the report have been selected as being typical of those received in relation to each proposal.
- 2.23 The number of valid responses recorded for each question (base size) are reported throughout in parentheses. As not all respondents answered every question, the valid responses vary between questions. ‘Don’t know’ responses have been treated as invalid when calculating percentages. In cases where the base size is less than 20, a count has been used to show the number of responses, rather than a percentage.
- 2.24 Findings highlighted in this report focus on the overall results; however, it is clear from the analysis that the responses from those who work for BFRS or another FRS differ significantly from those of other individuals (members of the public). Responses submitted on behalf of organisations can also differ in nature to those submitted by individual members of the public if, for example, they represent the collective views of a number of different people or raise very specific issues. Therefore, the charts used throughout the report show the overall result, and the individual result for each stakeholder group.

Qualitative engagement

Focus groups with local residents

- 2.25 Four deliberative focus groups were undertaken with a broadly representative cross-section of residents from the areas potentially affected by the consultation proposals. ORS worked in collaboration with BFRS

to prepare informative stimulus material for the groups before facilitating the discussions and preparing an independent report of findings.

Attendance and representation

- 2.26 The focus groups were designed to inform and ‘engage’ participants with the consultation issues. This was done by using a ‘deliberative’ approach to encourage people to question and reflect on the proposals in detail. The meetings lasted for two hours and were attended as below in Table 2.

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

Area	Time and Date	Number of Attendees
Beaconsfield/High Wycombe	Wednesday 14 January 2026 6:30pm - 8:15pm	9
Stokenchurch	Monday 19 January 2026 6:30pm - 8:15pm	7
Buckingham/Milton Keynes	Tuesday 20 January 2026 6:30pm - 8:15pm	9
Amersham/Great Missenden	Wednesday 21 January 2026 6:30pm - 8:15pm	8
	TOTAL	33

- 2.27 The attendance target for the focus groups was around 6-8 people, which was achieved or exceeded at all sessions. 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. Seven participants had attended a CRMP engagement and/or consultation focus group in 2023/24; the other 26 were fresh recruits.
- 2.28 In recruitment, care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by disabilities or any other 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 long-term illness (LLTI). Overall, as demonstrated in the table below, participants represented a broad cross-section of residents – and as standard good practice, people were recompensed for their time and efforts in and taking part.

Table 2: Public focus groups (participant characteristics)

Gender	Age	Working status	Ethnicity	Disability or limiting illness
Female: 13 Male: 20	18 - 34: 9 35 - 54: 14 55+: 10	Working full-time (including self-employed): 22 Working part-time (including self-employed): 4 Not working (including unemployed, retired, homemaker, full-time student): 7	4 residents from an ethnic minority background	7 residents with a disability or limiting illness

Focus groups with staff

- 2.29 Three staff groups were held: one for On-Call staff at affected stations on Thursday 8 January 2026; one for Wholetime/Day Crewed and non-station-based staff on Monday 26 January 2026; and one for On-Call staff at affected stations on Tuesday 27 January 2026. All three groups were held online (using Microsoft Teams) between 6:30pm and 8:15pm.
- 2.30 BFRS invited expressions of interest from all relevant staff, who were asked to register directly with ORS to protect their anonymity. 24 responses were received from those wishing to attend, though other commitments meant that some were unable to do so on the day. Ultimately, 15 members of staff attended the sessions, representing Amersham, Beaconsfield, Broughton, Buckingham, Gerrards Cross, High Wycombe, Marlow, Olney, and West Ashland fire stations. Two participants were non-station based.

Focus group with stakeholders

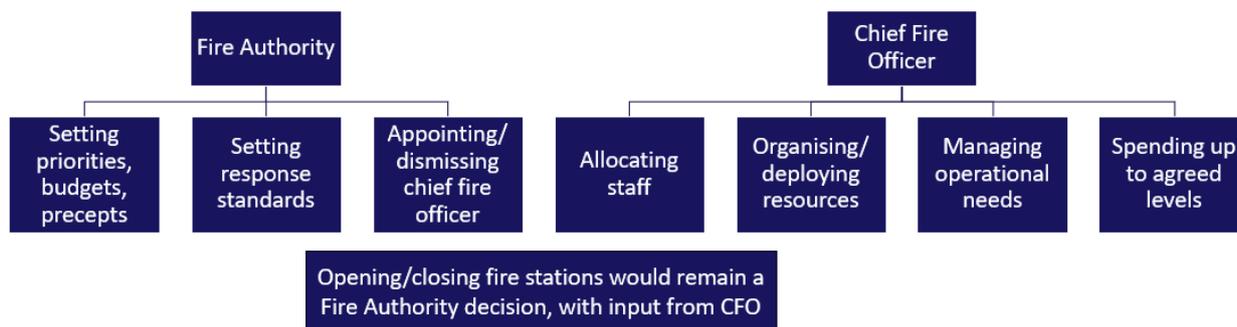
- 2.31 An online focus group was held between 10am and 11:45am on Tuesday 26 January 2025 with seven BFRS stakeholders. Attendees comprised representatives from the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care System, Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service (two representatives), Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service, South Central Ambulance Service, and Thames Valley Police (two representatives). ORS gave a presentation outlining the consultation issues and participants were encouraged to ask questions for clarification and offer their feedback throughout the meeting.

The agenda

- 2.32 ORS worked in collaboration with BFRS to agree a suitable agenda and informative stimulus material for the focus groups (see Appendix 2), which was designed to capture participants' thoughts and views on:
- » Whether they recognise and understand BFRS' On-Call challenges
 - » The proposal to close Great Missenden and Stokenchurch Fire Stations
 - » The proposals to remove fire engines from five fire stations (as overleaf)

Station	Proposal
Amersham	Remove 1 On-Call fire engine; replace with Rural Firefighting Vehicle (RFV)
Beaconsfield	Remove 1 On-Call fire engine; replace with new Crew Welfare Unit (CWU)
Buckingham	Remove 1 On-Call fire engine; replace with RFV
High Wycombe	Remove 1 On-Call fire engine
West Ashland	Remove 1 On-Call fire engine; replace with new Water Carrier Move RFV to Broughton

» The prospect of operational independence for Chief Fire Officers, whereby Chief Fire Officers could be granted operational independence to make some decisions without Fire Authority approval, as per the graphic below.



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

A note on representativeness

2.34 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.

BFRS drop-in events

2.35 BFRS hosted a series of drop-in events within potentially affected communities (Amersham, Beaconsfield, Buckingham, Great Missenden, High Wycombe, Milton Keynes, and Stokenchurch) at which 72 attendees were able to find out more about the consultation proposals, ask questions, and offer feedback.

Submissions

- 2.36 In addition to the formal consultation elements outlined above, BFRS received 10 written submissions from the following:
- » Buckinghamshire Council
 - » Fire and Rescue Services Association (two submissions)
 - » Fire Brigades Union (Buckinghamshire Brigade)
 - » Gerrards Cross Town Council
 - » Little Chalfont Parish Council
 - » Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service
 - » Simpson and Ashland Parish Council
 - » Two individual respondents.
- 2.37 These key issues raised in these submissions have been summarised by ORS in this report.

Nature of consultation

- 2.38 The key good practice requirements for consultation programmes are that they should: be conducted at a formative stage, before decisions are taken; allow sufficient time for people to participate and respond; provide the public and stakeholders with enough background information to allow them to consider the issues and any proposals intelligently and critically; and be properly taken into consideration before decisions are finally taken. The consultation reported here meets all these requirements.
- 2.39 Accountability means that public authorities should give an account of their plans and consider people's views. They should conduct fair and accessible consultation whilst reporting the outcomes openly and considering them fully. This does not mean that the majority views should automatically decide public policy; and the popularity or unpopularity of proposals should not displace professional and political judgement about what is the right or best decision. The levels of, and reasons for, public support or opposition are very important, but are considerations to be considered, not as factors that necessarily determine authorities' decisions. Above all, public bodies must consider the relevance and cogency of the arguments put forward during public engagement processes, not just counting the number of people.

The report

- 2.40 This independent report summarises the feedback from all consultation methods. In order to differentiate verbatim quotations from other information, they are in indented italics within text boxes. ORS does not endorse any opinions but seeks only to portray them accurately and clearly.
- 2.41 ORS is clear that its role is to analyse and explain the opinions and arguments of the many different interests participating in the consultation, but not to 'make a case' for any option. In this report, we seek to profile the opinions, views and arguments of those who have responded, but not to make any recommendations as to how the reported results should be used. Whilst this report brings together a wide range of evidence for BFRS and BMKFA to consider, decisions must be taken based on all the evidence available.

3. Open consultation questionnaire

Introduction

- 3.1 The open consultation questionnaire was available online between 19 November 2025 and 28 January 2026, and as a hard copy that was available on request.
- 3.2 956 questionnaire responses were received in total: all 956 were submitted online and none¹ were returned on paper. Of these, 761 were 'full completes' (where the respondent reached the end of the questionnaire and clicked 'submit') and 195 were 'partial completes' (where the respondent had answered at least one question). All 956 responses are considered a valid response and have been included in the analysis. For clarity, the number of respondents answering each question is noted throughout the report.
- 3.3 935 questionnaires were completed by individual respondents (including 804 members of the public, 109 BFRS staff members, and 22 other FRS staff members), and 21 were completed by representatives of organisations.

Profile tables

- 3.4 The tables below and on the following page show the unweighted profiles of the responses to the survey provided by individual respondents (i.e. excluding the responses from organisations). Note that the figures may not always sum to 100% due to rounding.

Table 3: Age – All individual respondents

Age	Number of respondents (Unweighted)	% of respondents (Unweighted)
Under 35	67	10
35-44	100	15
45-54	120	18
55-64	131	20
65-74	141	21
75+	102	15
Not Known	274	-
Total	935	100

Table 4: Gender – All individual respondents

Gender	Number of respondents (Unweighted)	% of respondents (Unweighted)
Female	222	34
Male	434	66
Not Known	279	-
Total	935	100

¹ One response was received by post after the close date of the survey and has therefore not been included in the analysis.

Table 5: Disability – All individual respondents

Disability	Number of respondents (Unweighted)	% of respondents (Unweighted)
Disabled	72	11
Not disabled	583	89
Not Known	280	-
Total	935	100

Table 6: Ethnic group – All individual respondents

Ethnic group	Number of respondents (Unweighted)	% of respondents (Unweighted)
White British	545	87
Other	81	13
Not Known	309	-
Total	935	100

Table 7: Respondent type – All individual respondents

Respondent type	Number of respondents (Unweighted)	% of respondents (Unweighted)
Member of the public/Other individual	804	86
BFRS staff	109	12
Other FRS staff	22	2
Total	935	100

Table 8: Local Authority – All individual respondents

Local Authority	Number of respondents (Unweighted)	% of respondents (Unweighted)
Buckinghamshire	538	82
Milton Keynes	92	14
Other	23	4
Not Known	282	-
Total	935	100

Table 9: Ward group – All individual respondents

Ward group	Number of respondents (Unweighted)	% of respondents (Unweighted)
Aylesbury	57	9
East Bucks	38	6
East Chilterns	107	16
North Bucks	102	16
South East Bucks	66	10
West Bucks	40	6
West Chilterns	103	16
Wycombe	25	4
Milton Keynes North	26	4
Milton Keynes South	66	10
Other	23	4
Not Known	282	-
Total	935	100

3.5 The following organisations identified themselves as part of their responses to the questionnaire:

- » Amersham Town Council
- » Aylesbury Conservatives
- » Buckinghamshire Conservatives
- » Buckingham Town Council
- » Buckinghamshire Council
- » Buckland Parish Council
- » Burnham Parish Council
- » Campbell Park Parish Council
- » Chesham & Amersham Conservative party
- » Chesham Town Council
- » Civil Parish of Stokenchurch
- » Conservative Association
- » Emberton Parish Council
- » Granborough Parish Council
- » Leckhampstead Parish Council
- » Member of parliament for Beaconsfield
- » Member of parliament for Mid Buckinghamshire
- » Quainton Parish Council
- » Ridgeway West and Ridgeway East
- » Stone with Bishopstone and Hartwell Parish Council
- » Walton Community Council

Interpretation of the data

- 3.6 As the questionnaire was available for anybody with an interest in the subject to complete, the achieved sample is not considered to be representative of any set population. As such, the text refers to 'respondents' throughout the report, as opposed to 'residents' or 'organisations'.
- 3.7 Graphics are used in this chapter to make it as user-friendly as possible. The charts show the proportions (percentages) of respondents making relevant responses. Where possible, the colours used in the charts have been standardised with a 'traffic light' system in which:
- » Green shades represent positive responses – for example, 'agree'
 - » Beige shades represent neither positive nor negative responses
 - » Red shades represent negative responses – for example, 'disagree'
 - » The darker shades are used to highlight responses at the extremes – for example, 'strongly agree' or 'strongly disagree.'
- 3.8 The number of valid responses recorded for each question (base size) are reported throughout. As not all respondents answered every question, the number of valid responses varies between questions ('don't know' responses have been treated as invalid).

- 3.9 In cases where the base size is less than 20, a count has been used to describe the number of responses, rather than a percentage, in order to avoid a misleading interpretation.
- 3.10 Please note that where percentages do not sum to 100 and proportions of charts may not look equal, this is due to rounding. Moreover, in some cases, due to rounding, the grouped result shown on charts, or noted in the text, is not equal to that of the individual results which make up the grouped figure.
- 3.11 Findings highlighted in this report focus on the overall results; however, it is clear from the analysis that the responses from those who work for BFRS or another FRS differ significantly from those of other individuals (members of the public). Responses submitted on behalf of organisations can also differ in nature to those submitted by individual members of the public if, for example, they represent the collective views of a number of different people or raise very specific issues. Therefore, in order to avoid a misleading interpretation, the charts used throughout the report show the overall result, and the individual result for each respondent group.
- 3.12 Where possible, analysis by sub-groups (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, and location) has also been included. To test whether apparent differences between sub-groups are statistically significant, statistical tests are applied. These consider the sizes of the samples that are being compared and the level of confidence we need to have in our testing. In line with standard social research practice, we have used a 95% confidence level. In other words, we can be 95% certain that the difference has not occurred by chance. Only differences that are statistically significant at a 95% confidence level are highlighted in the text commentary.

Duplicate and co-ordinated responses

- 3.13 It is important that engagement questionnaires are open and accessible to all, whilst being alert to the possibility of multiple completions (by the same people) distorting the analysis. Therefore, while making it easy to complete the questionnaire online, ORS monitors the IP addresses through which questionnaires are completed. A similar analysis of 'cookies' was also undertaken – where responses originated from users on the same computer using the same browser and the same credentials (e.g., user account). Where potential duplicate responses were identified, further analysis of postcode, demographics, respondent type and questionnaire responses were also carried out to confirm this and to determine which response(s) should be removed. Following this analysis, 14 duplicate responses were identified and removed.

Main findings

BFRS's On-Call Challenges

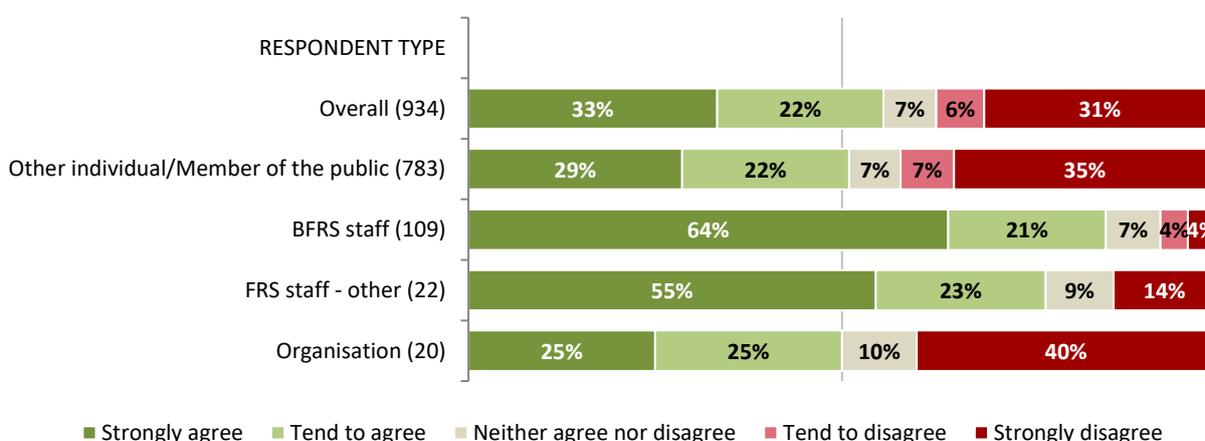
- 3.14 Questionnaire respondents were provided with the information below regarding the On-Call challenges currently faced by BFRS and asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that BFRS needs to make changes to the way it uses resources to address these challenges.

On-Call firefighting is a national challenge. The traditional On-Call system no longer reflects the way people live today. Over the past decade, the availability of BFRS On-Call fire engines has fallen sharply, from more than 50% in 2011/12 to under 15% in recent years. This is mainly because fewer people live and work close enough to their local fire station to respond quickly when alerted. As a result, some On-Call fire engines are rarely crewed, and a few have not been operational for years.

BFRS aims to reach emergencies in 10 minutes on average, but it's On-Call fire engines rarely meet this standard because firefighters need time to travel to the station before the engine can leave. Most incidents are attended by Wholetime fire engines, which are always crewed and ready to respond immediately. This means the current On-Call system cannot reliably provide fast first response, even though On-Call crews remain important for resilience at larger or longer incidents.

- 3.15 Figure 1 shows that overall, over half (56%) of all respondents agreed that BFRS needs to make changes to the way it uses resources to address the challenges outlined above, with a third (33%) strongly agreeing. However, over a third (37%) disagreed that BFRS needs to make changes, with around three-in-ten (31%) strongly disagreeing. Less than one-in-ten (7%) neither agreed nor disagreed.
- 3.16 When considered by respondent type, it can be seen that the level of agreement amongst respondents who are BFRS staff (85%), or other FRS staff (77%), is substantially higher than for other individuals (51%) or organisations (50%) and is significantly higher than the overall result (56%). Disagreement is also lowest for respondents who are BFRS staff (7%) and highest for other individuals/members of the public (42%).
- 3.17 Sub-group analysis also shows that respondents living outside of the Buckinghamshire or Milton Keynes Local Authority areas (82%), or in Aylesbury (72%) or Milton Keynes South (67%) areas, those aged 35-44 (77%) or 45-54 (67%), those who are not disabled (60%) and those who are non-White British (66%) are all significantly more likely to agree that BFRS needs to make changes to the way it uses resources to address On-Call challenges.

Figure 1: To what extent do you agree or disagree that BFRS needs to make changes to the way it uses resources to address the challenges outlined above?



Base: All respondents who answered this question (number of respondents shown in brackets on chart)

- 3.18 Respondents were asked to provide the key reasons as to why they agreed or disagreed that BFRS should make changes to the way it uses resources to address the On-Call challenges they face (Figure 2). Almost one-in-five (19%) respondents who gave a reason said they disagreed that BFRS needs to make changes because they felt closing stations or removing fire engines would be dangerous to the public; a further 13% of comments called for stations not to be closed and fire engines not to be removed in general.

“This is a very dangerous decision if it is approved. It is necessary to ensure that all fire stations remain open and are fully [resourced] in case of emergency.” (Member of the public)

“We are facing ever growing housing numbers, not the time to cut fire engines.” (Member of the public)

- 3.19 However, there were frequent responses in support of BFRS making changes to the way they use resources to address the challenges they face; 14% made comments suggesting that the On-Call model doesn't work and needs to be changed and 14% were in general agreement that making changes was the best option.

“It's clear that the proposals address the inefficient use of resources and better address the changing landscape of need in our communities.” (BFRS staff member)

“On-call model is ineffective, and not all on-call pumps are required.” (BFRS staff member)

- 3.20 Other frequent comments made by those in general agreement that changes need to be made include that the proposals make the best use of resources (11%), are the best use of the budget (6%) and will provide the most effective service (5%).

“If these stations have been unmanned then use that budget to put into stations that employ full time firefighters.” (Member of the public)

“The Parish Council supports the principle that reliability and consistency of response are more important than the nominal number of fire engines on a station list. We therefore accept the case for concentrating resources across a smaller number of sustainably crewed appliances, supported by specialist vehicles, where this is based on robust modelling and workforce data... Overall, Quainton Parish Council considers that the challenges outlined demonstrate a clear need for change and that adapting how resources are organised and deployed is the most responsible way to maintain effective fire and rescue cover for our residents.” (Organisation)

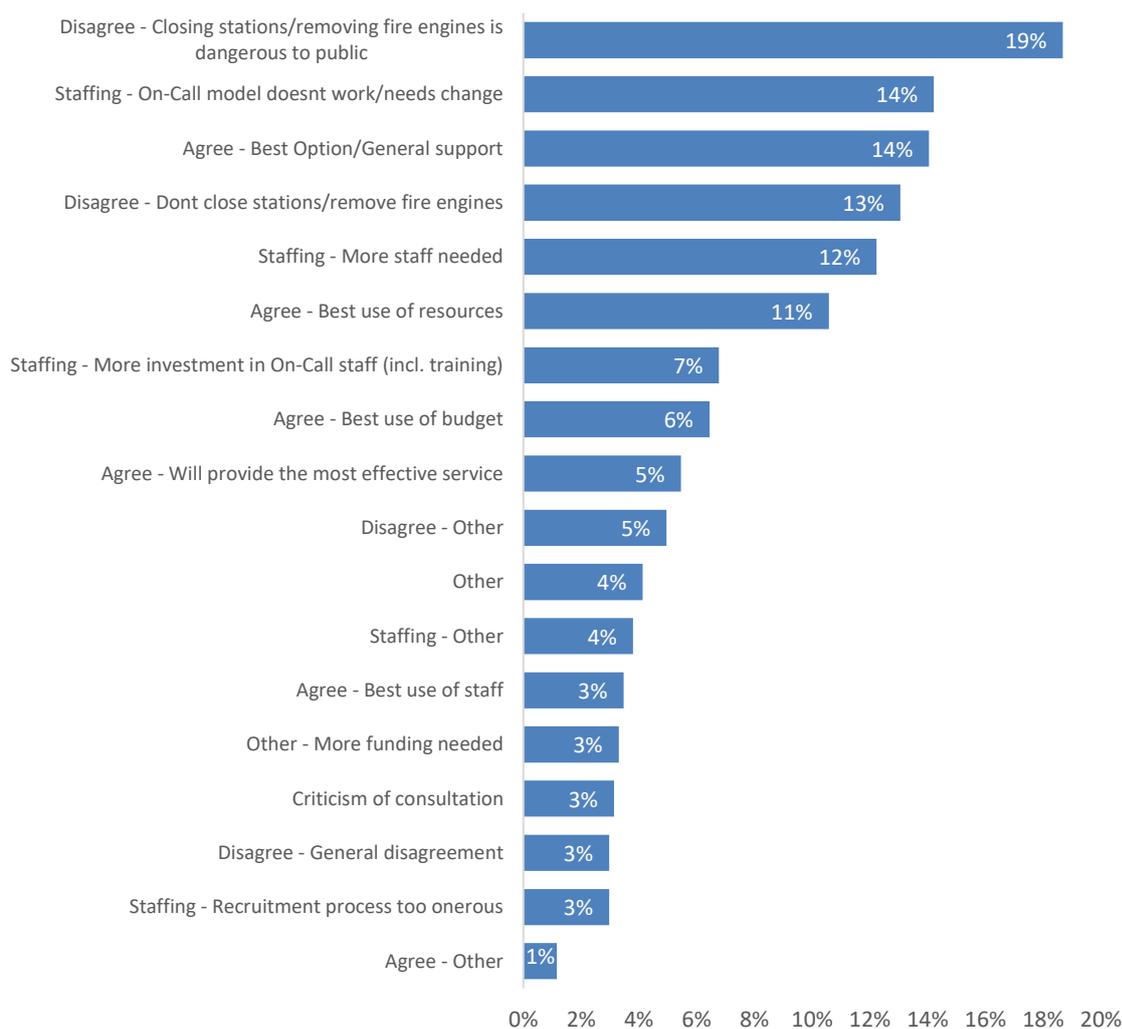
- 3.21 Staffing was frequently mentioned with 12% suggesting that more staff are needed, 7% that there should be more investment in On-Call staff (including training) and 3% agreeing that the changes would make the best use of staff. It was suggested that rather than restructuring resources, and the current On-Call system, the emphasis should be on 'improving recruitment, retention, incentives, and support for On-Call firefighters.'

“More On-Call staffing is required to meet the needs of a hugely expanding City and surrounding area like Milton Keynes and Buckinghamshire.” (Individual - unknown)

“I have been an on-call firefighter for nearly 9 years now and have seen the on-call struggle in the 2 services I was part of. Key areas that need to be addressed in my opinion include the following. Effective and efficient recruitment and training of new on-call firefighters, many people who express interest are not communicated with soon enough and the process to getting on the run is very long and slow and quite often people lose interest. There is a lack of skills to ensure the availability of the appliance, more drivers and JO's need to be trained.” (BFRS staff member)

“I strongly disagree that BFRS needs to make the proposed changes based on the issues described. The decline in On-Call availability should not automatically justify reducing or reshaping the On-Call system. Instead, the fire service should focus on improving recruitment, retention, incentives, and support for On-Call firefighters, rather than restructuring resources in a way that risks reducing local cover or slowing response times in rural communities. Many On-Call stations remain essential to their areas, and the problems highlighted are largely a result of underinvestment and lack of targeted support. With the right measures, the On-Call system can continue to provide effective, community-based emergency response without major changes to how resources are used.” (Member of the public)

Figure 2: Key reasons for answer given for Q1 (agreement/disagreement that BFRS needs make changes to the way it uses resources to address the challenges outlined above).



Base: All respondents who answered this question and gave a reason for their response to Q1 (605)

Specialist vehicles

- 3.22 Questionnaire respondents were provided with information regarding specialist vehicles and asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that replacing some On-Call fire engines with specialist vehicles would help BFRS make better use of its resources.

BFRS does not just rely on traditional fire engines, it also has a range of specialist vehicles that require smaller crews, and national support arrangements to make it more resilient when unusual or large-scale emergencies happen.

Examples of specialist vehicles include:

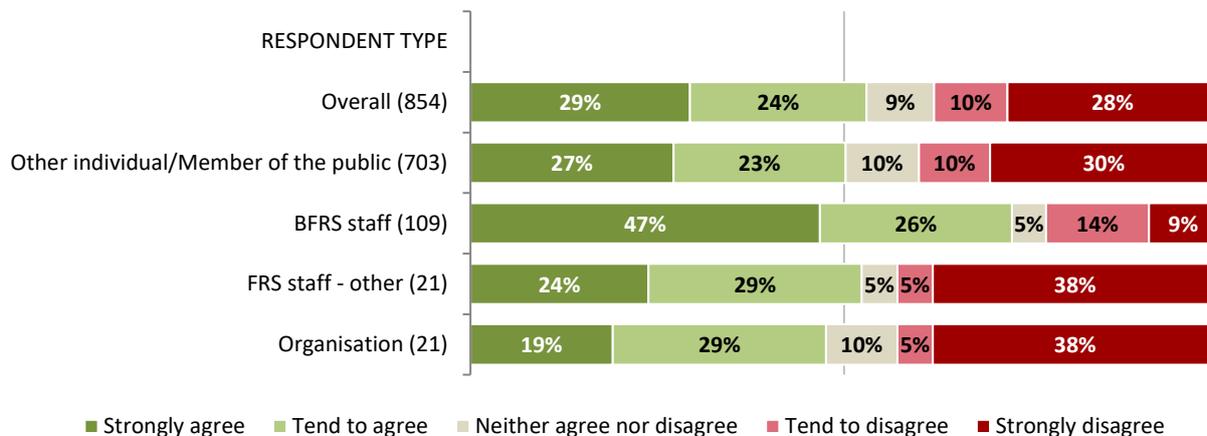
- *Rural Firefighting Vehicles (RFVs) - smaller, more agile vehicles, which can reach remote or off-road areas more quickly. These can be useful during hot dry summers when grass or woodland fires are more common.*
- *Water Rescue Units and Boats - for incidents on rivers, waterways and lakes, or during flooding.*
- *Turntable Ladders for accessing tall buildings or delivering water from height.*
- *Water Carriers and Welfare Units - provide extra supplies and support for crews at prolonged incidents.*

These specialist vehicles help BFRS respond more effectively and flexibly and lessen the number of full-sized fire engines needed.

BFRS is proposing to replace some On-Call fire engines that cannot be reliably crewed with specialist vehicles that are easier to crew and better matched to local risks and community needs.

- 3.23 Figure 3 shows that overall, over half of all respondents (53%) agreed with this proposal, with around three-in-ten (29%) strongly agreeing. However, over a third (38%) disagreed that BFRS should replace some On-Call fire engines with specialist vehicles, with almost three-in-ten (28%) strongly disagreeing. Around one-in-ten (9%) neither agreed nor disagreed.
- 3.24 When considered by respondent type, it can be seen that respondents who are BFRS staff members (72%) are significantly more likely than respondents overall (53%) to have agreed that BFRS should replace some On-Call fire engines with specialist vehicles, with almost half (47%) of respondents who are BFRS staff members strongly agreeing with this. Around two fifths of respondents who are members of the public (40%), representatives of an organisation (43%) or a staff member of another FRS (43%) disagreed with this proposal.
- 3.25 Sub-group analysis also shows that respondents in Aylesbury (66%) or West Bucks (68%) areas, those aged 35-44 years (64%), those with no disability (58%) and those who are White British (56%) are all significantly more likely to agree with this proposal.

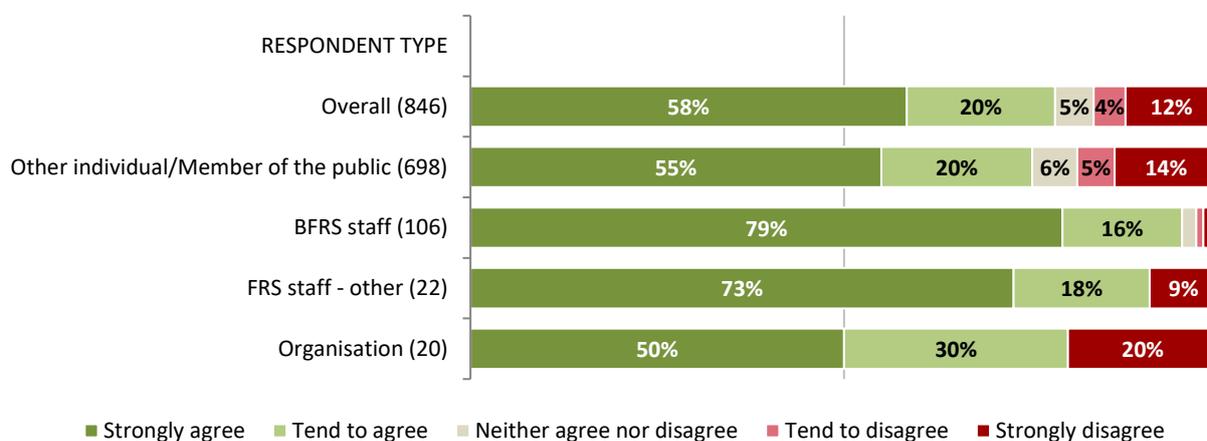
Figure 3: To what extent do you agree or disagree that replacing some On-Call fire engines with specialist vehicles would help BFRS make better use of its resources?



Base: All respondents who answered this question (number of respondents shown in brackets on chart)

- 3.26 Questionnaire respondents were then asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that the quickest appropriate vehicle should be sent to an incident, regardless of which station it is sent from. Figure 4 shows that overall, over three quarters of all respondents (78%) agreed with this, with almost three-in-five (58%) strongly agreeing. Less than a fifth (17%) disagreed that the quickest appropriate vehicle should be sent to an incident, regardless of which station it is sent from, with around one-in-ten (12%) strongly disagreeing. Five per cent neither agreed nor disagreed.
- 3.27 When considered by respondent type, it can be seen that respondents who are BFRS staff members (95%) or other FRS staff members (91%) are significantly more likely than respondents overall (78%) to have agreed that the quickest appropriate vehicle should be sent to an incident, regardless of which station it is sent from, with around four fifths (79%) of respondents who are BRS staff members strongly agreeing with this. Levels of agreement with this proposal are lower, but still high overall, for respondents who are members of the public (75%) or representatives of an organisation (80%).
- 3.28 Sub-group analysis also shows that respondents living outside of Buckinghamshire or Milton Keynes Local Authority areas (95%) are significantly more likely to have agreed with this proposal.

Figure 4: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the quickest appropriate vehicle should be sent to an incident, regardless of which station it is sent from?



Base: All respondents who answered this question (number of respondents shown in brackets on chart)

Removal of On-Call fire engines

- 3.29 Questionnaire respondents were provided with the information below regarding the proposed removal of On-Call fire engines and asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with BFRS's proposal to reduce the number of On-Call fire engines from 18 to 11, with the aim of having the remaining engines more reliably available.

Some BFRS On-Call fire engines are rarely crewed and cannot be relied upon for a quick response. Its proposal is to reduce the number of On-Call fire engines from 18 to 11, so that it can focus its On-Call crews on fewer fire engines to improve the reliability of those engines and ensure more vehicles are ready to respond when needed.

The table below outlines stations that would be affected by the proposed removal or replacement of On-Call fire engines.

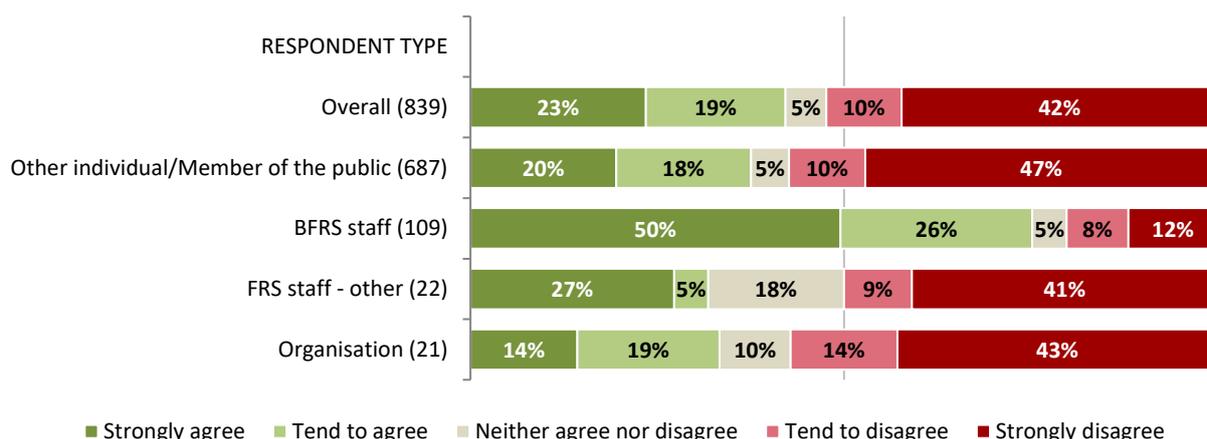
- *A rural firefighting vehicle (RFV) - A smaller, more agile vehicle designed for off-road use and requiring fewer crew.*
- *A crew welfare unit (CWU)- Provides facilities such as rest, refreshments, and toilets to support firefighters during long or challenging incidents.*
- *A water carrier - Tanker that delivers large volumes of water to incidents in areas with limited hydrant access.*

For more detailed analysis of each station, and the resources located there, please see pages 16 to 18 of the proposal pack.

Station	Proposal	Rationale
Amersham	Replace 1 On-Call fire engine with RFV	BFRS analysis shows this change will not slow down fire engine response times
Beaconsfield	Remove 1 On-Call fire engine Replace with CWU	
Buckingham	Replace 1 On-Call fire engine with RFV	
Great Missenden	Remove On-Call fire engine	
High Wycombe	Remove On-Call fire engine	
Stokenchurch	Remove On-Call fire engine	
West Ashland	Replace 1 On-Call fire engine with new Water Carrier; move RFV	

- 3.30 Figure 5 shows that overall, over two fifths of all respondents (42%) agreed with this proposal, with almost a quarter (23%) strongly agreeing. However, more than half (52%) disagreed with the proposal to reduce the number of On-Call engines from 18 to 11, with over two fifths (42%) strongly disagreeing. Five per cent neither agreed nor disagreed.
- 3.31 When considered by respondent type, it can be seen that respondents who are BFRS staff members (75%) are significantly more likely than respondents overall (42%) to have agreed that BFRS should reduce the number of On-Call engines from 18 to 11, with half (50%) of respondents who are BRS staff members strongly agreeing with this. Around half or more of respondents who are members of the public (57%), a representative of an organisation (57%) or a staff member of another FRS (50%) disagreed with this proposal.
- 3.32 Sub-group analysis also shows that respondents living in Milton Keynes Local Authority area (55%), Aylesbury area (69%) or Milton Keynes South area (54%), as well as respondents aged under 35 (56%) or 35-44 (58%), those who are male (47%), and those who are not disabled (47%) are significantly more likely to have agreed with this proposal.

Figure 5: To what extent do you agree or disagree with BFRS's proposal to reduce the number of On-Call fire engines from 18 to 11, with the aim of having the remaining engines more reliably available?



Base: All respondents who answered this question (number of respondents shown in brackets on chart)

Closure of On-Call fire stations

- 3.33 Questionnaire respondents were provided with the information below regarding the proposed closure of two On-Call stations at Great Missenden and Stokenchurch and asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with BFRS’s proposal to close each of these stations.

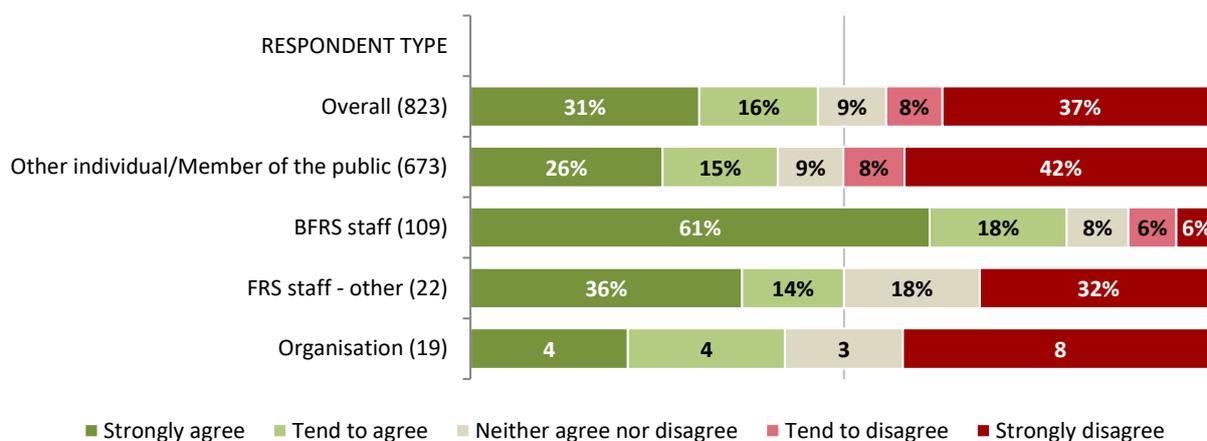
Two On-Call stations, Great Missenden and Stokenchurch, have had 0% On-Call availability for at least five years. Residents in these areas are already covered by nearby Wholetime fire engines, supported when needed by neighbouring services. The quickest available fire engine is always sent, regardless of county boundaries. Maintaining a non-operational station still incurs ongoing costs, for example maintenance and servicing of equipment, as well as insurance, utilities and business rates.

Both Great Missenden and Stokenchurch each require around £150,000 investment within the next two years to remain usable, despite providing no operational response.

BFRS proposes that closing these fire stations will allow it to reinvest resources into strengthening cover where fire engines are available and needed most.

- 3.34 Figure 6 shows that overall, almost half of all respondents (47%) agreed with the proposal to close Great Missenden Fire Station, with around three-in-ten (31%) strongly agreeing. However, over two fifths (44%) disagreed with this proposal, with over a third (37%) strongly disagreeing. Around one-in-ten (9%) neither agreed nor disagreed.
- 3.35 When considered by respondent type, it can be seen that respondents who are BFRS staff members (80%) are significantly more likely than respondents overall (47%) to have agreed with the proposal to permanently close Great Missenden Fire Station, with around three fifths (61%) of respondents who are BFRS staff members strongly agreeing with this. Half (50%) of respondents who are members of the public, around a third (32%) of those who are a staff member of another FRS, and eight out of 19 respondents who are a representative of an organisation disagreed with this proposal.
- 3.36 Sub-group analysis also shows that respondents living in Milton Keynes Local Authority area (67%) or another Local Authority area (outside of Buckinghamshire) (74%), or Aylesbury (61%), Milton Keynes South (68%) or Milton Keynes North areas (65%), as well as respondents aged under 35 (60%), 35-44 (63%) or 45-54 (59%), and those who are not disabled (50%) are significantly more likely to have agreed with this proposal.

Figure 6: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to permanently close Great Missenden Fire Station?²



Base: All respondents who answered this question (number of respondents shown in brackets on chart)

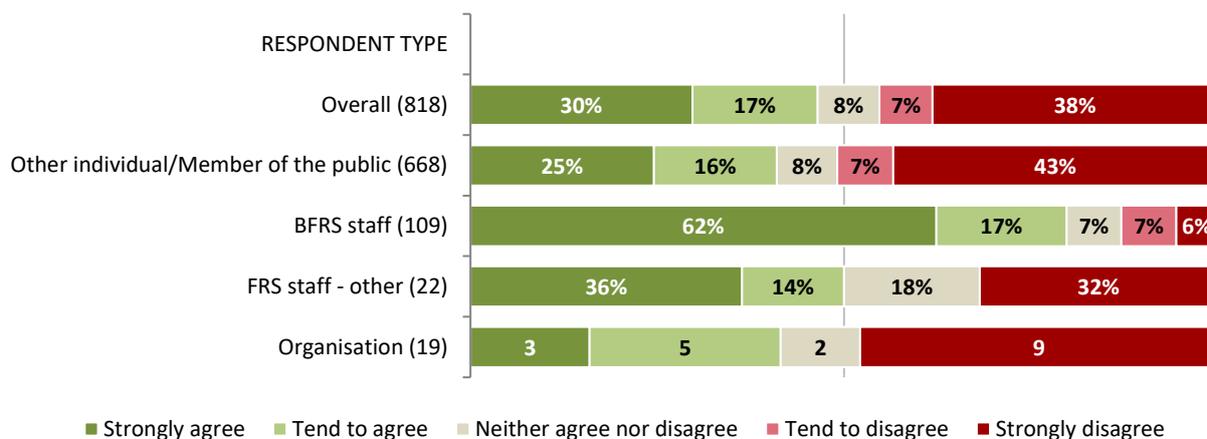
- 3.37 Figure 7 shows that overall, over two fifths of all respondents (46%) agreed with the proposal to close Stokenchurch Fire Station, with three-in-ten (30%) strongly agreeing. However, over two fifths (45%) disagreed with this proposal, with close to two fifths (38%) strongly disagreeing. Around one-in-ten (8%) neither agreed nor disagreed.
- 3.38 When considered by respondent type, it can be seen that respondents who are BFRS staff members (80%) are significantly more likely than respondents overall (46%) to have agreed with the proposal to permanently close Stokenchurch Fire Station, with over three fifths (62%) of respondents who are BFRS

² Data labels for 'organisation' are shown as counts rather than percentages on this chart owing to a low base size (19)

staff members strongly agreeing with this. Around half (51%) of respondents who are members of the public, around a third (32%) of those who are a staff member of another FRS, and nine out of 19 respondents who are a representative of an organisation disagreed with this proposal.

^{3.39} Sub-group analysis also shows that respondents living in Milton Keynes Local Authority area (67%) or another Local Authority area (outside of Buckinghamshire) (74%), or Aylesbury (65%), Milton Keynes South (68%) or Milton Keynes North areas (65%), as well as respondents aged under 35 (61%), 35-44 (64%) or 45-54 (58%), and those who are not disabled (50%) are significantly more likely to have agreed with this proposal.

Figure 7: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to permanently close Stokenchurch Fire Station? ³



Base: All respondents who answered this question (number of respondents shown in brackets on chart)

Use of public money

^{3.40} Questionnaire respondents were provided with the information below regarding balancing resources to make the most effective use of public money and asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that BFRS’s proposed changes to On-Call provision will make better use of public money.

BFRS has a responsibility to use its people, fire engines and specialist vehicles in the most effective way. This means:

- *Making sure it has the right people with the right skills in the right place at the right time.*
- *Basing specialist vehicles at the stations where risk and community need are greatest.*
- *Reviewing how its On-Call fire engines are organised.*

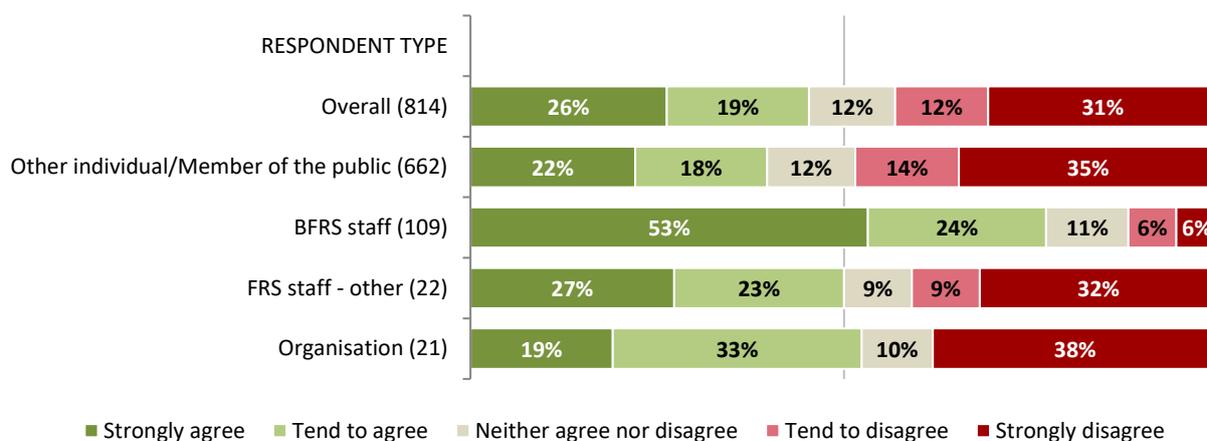
Each fire engine must have a minimum of four firefighters, including people with specific skills such as driving and incident command. At the moment, BFRS has more On-Call fire engines than it can currently crew, which means some fire engines are unavailable even though the Service still has firefighters in its system.

³ Data labels for ‘organisation’ are shown as counts rather than percentages on this chart owing to a low base size (19)

BFRS's proposed changes aim to deliver on its promise to be a modern and agile fire and rescue service with the right people, in the right place, with the right equipment at the right time to keep its communities safe.

- 3.41 Figure 8 shows that overall, over two fifths of all respondents (45%) agreed that BFRS's proposed changes to On-Call provision will make better use of public money, with around a quarter (26%) strongly agreeing. However, over two fifths (43%) disagreed with this, with almost a third (31%) strongly disagreeing. Just over one-in-ten (12%) neither agreed nor disagreed.
- 3.42 When considered by respondent type, it can be seen that respondents who are BFRS staff members (77%) are significantly more likely than respondents overall (45%) to have agreed that BFRS's proposed changes to On-Call provision will make better use of public money, with over half (53%) of respondents who are BFRS staff members strongly agreeing with this. Almost half (48%) of respondents who are members of the public, around two fifths (41%) of those who are a staff member of another FRS, and almost two fifths (38%) of respondents who are a representative of an organisation disagreed with this.
- 3.43 Sub-group analysis also shows that respondents living in Milton Keynes Local Authority area (58%) Aylesbury (61%), or Milton Keynes South (58%) as well as respondents aged 35-44 (62%) or 45-54 (55%), those who are male (49%), those who are not disabled (50%) and those who are non-White British (61%) are significantly more likely to have agreed with this.

Figure 8: To what extent do you agree or disagree that BFRS's proposed changes to On-Call provision will make better use of public money?



Base: All respondents who answered this question (number of respondents shown in brackets on chart)

Operational independence for the Chief Fire Officer

- 3.44 Questionnaire respondents were provided with the information below regarding operational independence for the Chief Fire officer and asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that the Chief Fire Officer, on behalf of BFRS, should have operational independence to determine the make-up and distribution of the Service's fleet and resources.

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

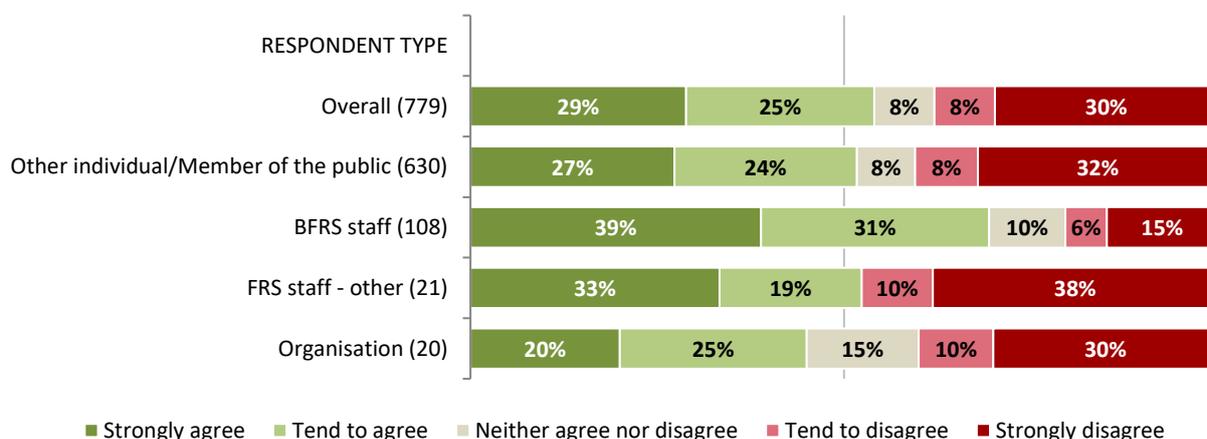
Currently many operational decisions, such as location of vehicles and equipment, and location and number of staff require approval from the Fire Authority which can cause delays when swift action is needed.

Giving the Chief Fire Officer greater operational independence would allow them to make strategic, evidence-based decisions about resources more quickly, on behalf of the Service, while the Fire Authority retains oversight and accountability.

For example: If an On-Call fire station was struggling to recruit a full crew, the CFO could temporarily move that station's fire engine to a different station and replace it with a specialist vehicle, which needs fewer firefighters, until enough firefighters were recruited at that station to crew the fire engine.

- 3.45 Figure 9 shows that overall, over half of all respondents (54%) agreed that the Chief Fire Officer, on behalf of BFRS, should have operational independence to determine the make-up and distribution of the Service's operational fleet and resources, with around three-in-ten (29%) strongly agreeing. However, almost two fifths (38%) disagreed with this, with three-in-ten (30%) strongly disagreeing. Almost one-in-ten (8%) neither agreed nor disagreed.
- 3.46 When considered by respondent type, it can be seen that respondents who are BFRS staff members (69%) are significantly more likely than respondents overall (54%) to have agreed that the Chief Fire Officer, on behalf of BFRS, should have operational independence to determine the make-up and distribution of the Service's operational fleet and resources, with almost two fifths (39%) of respondents who are BFRS staff members strongly agreeing with this. While over half of respondents who are members of the public (52%), or other FRS staff (52%), and 45% of respondents who represent an organisation also agree with this, there are high levels of disagreement amongst these groups – almost half (48%) of respondents who are staff members of other FRS's, and two fifths of respondents who are members of the public (40%) or respondents who represent an organisation (40%) disagree with this.
- 3.47 Sub-group analysis also shows that respondents living outside of the Milton Keynes or Buckinghamshire Local Authority areas (73%) as well as respondents aged 35-44 (63%), those who are not disabled (58%) and those who are White British (57%) are significantly more likely to have agreed with this.

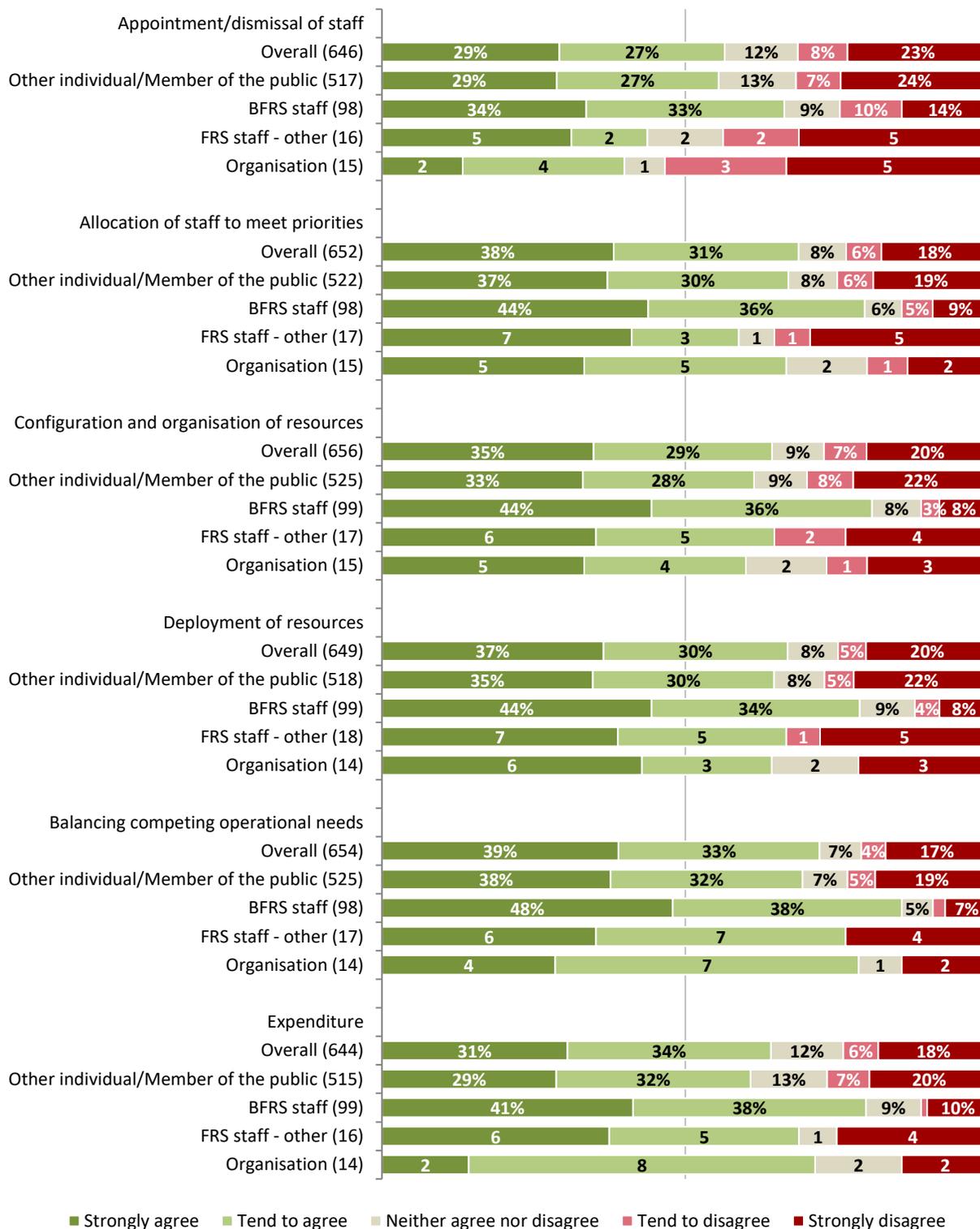
Figure 9: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the Chief Fire Officer, on behalf of BFRS, should have operational independence to determine the make-up and distribution of the Service's operational fleet and resources?



Base: All respondents who answered this question (number of respondents shown in brackets on chart)

- 3.48 Respondents were then asked, if the Chief Fire Officer, on behalf of BFRS, is given operational independence, to what extent they agreed or disagreed that the Chief Fire officer should be able to make strategic operational decisions on six different areas. These questions were asked of all respondents however those who did not think that the Chief Fire Officer should be given operational independence were instructed to select 'Not applicable'. These responses have been excluded from the results and therefore the results presented below represent only those respondents who agree that the Chief Fire officer should be given operational independence.
- 3.49 Figure 10 shows that overall, the highest levels of agreement that the Chief Fire officer should be able to make strategic operational decisions are within the following areas: *balancing competing operational needs* (72%), *allocation of staff to meet priorities* (69%), and *deployment of resources* (67%) with two thirds or more of respondents who think the Chief Fire officer should be given operational independence agreeing.
- 3.50 Over three in five respondents who think the Chief Fire Officer should be given operational independence also agreed that they should be able to make strategic decisions around the *configuration and organisation of resources* (64%) and *expenditure* (64%). The area with the lowest level of agreement that the Chief Fire Officer should be able to make strategic decisions was the *appointment and dismissal of staff* (57%).
- 3.51 When considered by respondent type, it can be seen that respondents who are BFRS staff members are significantly more likely than all respondents to agree that the Chief Fire Officer should be able to make strategic decisions across all the six areas. It is also interesting to note that for respondents who are BFRS staff members, the areas with the highest (*balancing competing operational needs* – 86%) and the lowest (*appointment/dismissal of staff* – 66%) levels of agreement are the same as for all respondents overall, however the order of the remaining areas in terms of level of agreement differs, with respondents who are BFRS staff members ranking *configuration and organisation of resources* and *expenditure* higher relative to other areas when compared with respondents overall.
- 3.52 Sub-group analysis also shows that when compared with all respondents overall, respondents aged 75 years or above are significantly more likely to agree that the Chief Fire Officer should be able to make strategic operational decisions around *appointments/dismissal of staff*, *allocation of staff to meet priorities*, *deployment of resources*, and *balancing competing operational needs*. Respondents who are not disabled are significantly more likely to agree that the Chief Fire Officer should be able to make strategic operational decisions around *appointments/dismissal of staff*, *configuration and organisation of resources*, and *deployment of resources*.

Figure 10: If the Chief Fire Officer, on behalf of BFRS, is given operational independence, to what extent do you agree or disagree that they should be able to make strategic operational decisions on each of the following ...?⁴



Base: All respondents who answered this question, i.e. those who think the Chief Fire Officer should be given greater operational independence (number of respondents shown in brackets on chart)

⁴ Data labels for 'organisation' and 'FRS staff- other' are shown as counts rather than percentages on this chart owing to a low base size (below 20)

Further comments

- 3.53 Respondents were asked if they had any other comments about BFRS's proposed changes to resourcing and how they might affect them/their community and/or any other alternative suggestions for how BFRS can create a modern, resilient and sustainable fire and rescue service. Figure 11 shows the proportion of respondents making comments around different themes.
- 3.54 Just over one-in-ten (12%) made comments in general agreement with the proposed changes, with the general sentiment that BFRS officers know best.

"BFRS are doing a good job in difficult conditions and are in the best position to determine future needs." (Member of the public)

"It's very refreshing to receive this consultation. Everything that has been asked makes sense and is a good use of the resources. Local and brigade operational decisions should always be made by the CFO or delegated principal officer. This is great to read, and I am excited for this consultation to progress." (Member of the public)

"Generally agree with the concepts within the plan. They appear logical and use effective data to identify where to reduce risk in the community." (Organisation)

"Proposed changes all seem logical and make economic sense, as long as response times and resources are not compromised." (Member of the public)

- 3.55 However almost a quarter (24%) of respondents made comments disagreeing with the proposals and calling for no resource reductions. One-in-twenty said they disagreed with changes to the On-Call model (5%) or with giving the Chief Fire Officer operational independence (5%).

"You need to retain local services, as time is the essence. Also, no one person should be able to make decisions on the future of the fire service." (Member of the public)

"I don't like the cuts. I don't like the way the statistics have been presented to justify the cuts." (Member of the public)

"Fewer appliances however they are designated, will leave communities feeling vulnerable and at risk." (Member of the public)

"Where questions are asked about how much power the Chief officer should essentially have, I believe checks and balances must be largely brought in, Fed or Union reps to prevent totalitarian control of the organisation. It will be difficult to reverse if greater powers are handed to one person, likely impacting those on the front line." (Member of the public)

- 3.56 Several concerns were raised: around one-in-ten were concerned that the proposed changes would increase response times (11%), and/or be a risk to life or property (9%). Seven per cent had concerns around increases in housing development and general population within the Service area, and six per cent had concerns about their proximity to motorways and high numbers of road traffic accidents.

"Reducing provision is likely to increase response times and endanger lives." (Member of the public)

“By removing fire stations I believe puts the public at risk, by fire engines having to cover many more miles to respond to emergencies” (Unknown)

“Marlow will be massively adversely impacted by the closure of Stokenchurch, and the removal of the Fire Engines in High Wycombe and Beaconsfield especially as we have to build an additional 95,000 homes in the near future which equates to approximately 250,000 additional residents just in Bucks, without the additional homes in Milton Keynes.” (Member of the public)

“The Labour government want 95,000 new homes built in Buckinghamshire. This means increased number of people, property (business and homes) and vehicles on the roads. This increase could lead to more RTAs which needs 2 crews ... If the number of engines is decreased, what cover can be given if there is a house fire at the same time? Bringing engines from another station will put that area at risk if there are RTA/fires there. There is no real back-up, and everyone will be spread too thinly. This will result in higher stress for the Firefighters which could lead to endangering themselves or leaving the Service altogether. The Fire Brigade union does not support these CUTS either. I support the Fire Brigade fully, but I do NOT support these cuts.

“So, what happens to rural areas when you need multiple units to attend a fire, if you reduce availability. Oh well just burn then. Not good enough. God forbid 2 fires at either end of the county as the same time.” (Member of the public)

- 3.57 Around one-in-five (19%) suggested that an alternative to the proposed changes would be to put more resources into recruiting staff. A further 5% suggested that BFRS should increase the number of full-time fire fighters. One-in-ten (10%) also commented that money saved must be reinvested.

“I... BFRS is not particularly proactive at seeking to recruit On-Call firefighters. There are many BFRS people, including current wholetime firefighters, living close to, for example, Beaconsfield Fire Station but no effort to proactively recruit these people for on-call service has been made.” (BFRS staff member)

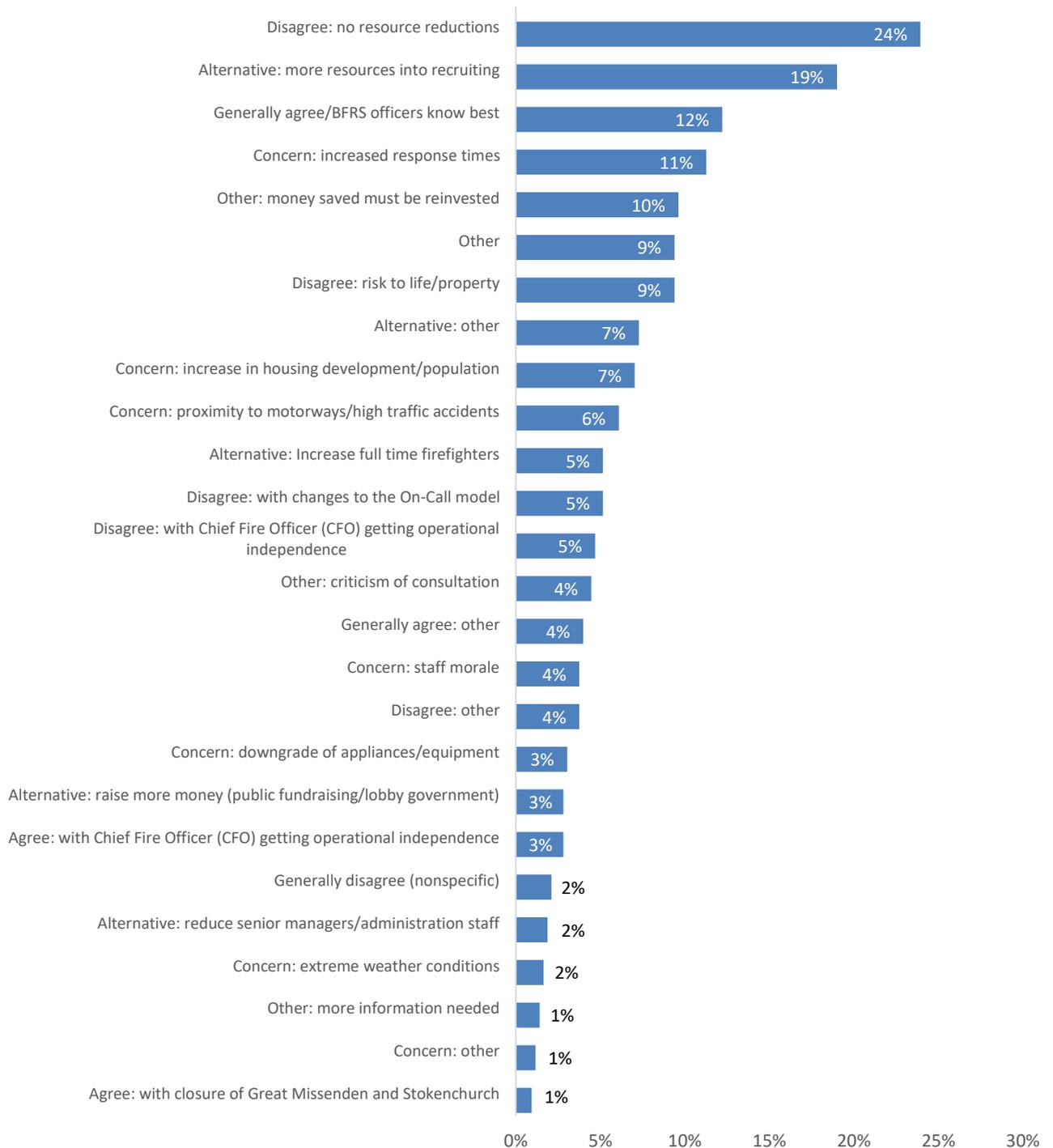
“I am 19 I live in High Wycombe ... I really want to be a firefighter and from my perspective I don't think we should close down any stations. I understand that it would be more cost effective, but for young people like me that want to do this job, On-Call firefighters is a chance for us to get our foot in the door. I also feel like available jobs should be advertised more, especially for young people around my age, as it would be a very good opportunity for our career and to pursue something we want to be passionate about.” (Member of the public)

“Any savings made need to be funnelled into proper full training & recruitment.” (Member of the public)

“I urge the Authority to withdraw these proposals and instead work constructively with staff, unions, local MPs and communities on a credible recruitment and retention strategy that protects, rather than diminishes, public safety.” (Organisation)

“I am aware of the financial cost to the Service to maintain the aforementioned stations and vehicles, despite not being active. This money should be spent elsewhere and reinvested within another part of the Service. It's time to make some hard but necessary decisions. This is long overdue and I can say all of the above, as a current Operational employee of BFRS. I fully support this decision.” (BFRS staff member)

Figure 11: Do you have any other comments about BFRS’s proposed changes to resourcing and how they might affect you/your community; and/or any other alternative suggestions for how BFRS can create a modern, resilient and sustainable fire and rescue service?



Base: All respondents who answered this question and provided further comments (426)

Impacts on equalities

^{3.58} Respondents were also asked if there are any positive or negative impacts relating to equalities that they feel should be taken into consideration. Figure 12 shows the proportion of respondents making comments around different themes.

- 3.59 More than a third (36%) of respondents who provided a response to this question felt that the proposed changes will have no impacts relating to equalities. It was noted, however, that it is important that BFRS keep an eye on vulnerable groups and review data for specific areas to ensure that equality across communities is maintained.

“Can't foresee any negative impact on equalities. (Member of the public)

“I do not believe equality should be affected by these proposals.” (Member of the public)

“I don't see any obvious negative impacts, as long as the Service keeps a close eye on how any changes affect local communities once they are in place. The commitment to maintaining response standards should help ensure that vulnerable groups, including older people and those with disabilities, are not put at a disadvantage. It would still be sensible to review data for areas with higher levels of vulnerability, such as neighbourhoods with supported housing or greater social need, to check that access to emergency services remains consistent. Ongoing engagement with these communities would also help identify any issues early and make sure the proposals continue to support fairness and equal access to help when it is needed. (BFRS staff member)”

- 3.60 Specific groups that could be negatively impacted that were mentioned frequently by respondents were the elderly (6%) and those living in rural communities (5%). Other groups mentioned that may be negatively impacted include those with disabilities and neighbourhoods with greater social need.
- 3.61 Respondents who identified the elderly and those living in rural communities as being more vulnerable specifically highlighted the importance of considering the needs of these groups in any future decision making to ensure they are not disproportionately affected in an emergency and that everyone feels safe.
- 3.62 Concerns were also raised around the risks of a predominantly digital consultation not fully capturing the views of these groups, though it should be noted that paper versions were available by request and while no survey responses were completed this way, over a third (36%) of all survey respondents were aged 65 years or above, and 15% were aged 75 years or above.

“Due to the ageing population and increasing disability including mental health, it is important that vulnerable people of all ages feel safe and can rely on responsive emergency services. Factors including changes in the climate should be considered such as increased flooding and extensive dry spells which increase the risk of fire should be factored into the decision.” (Organisation)

“Beaconsfield has a higher-than-average proportion of elderly residents. Running this consultation as an online exercise will disadvantage the elderly who may not get as much of a chance to have their opinions heard. You should have mailed this consultation to every household.” (Member of the public)

“The proposals are likely to have a negative impact on older people, particularly those living in rural and semi-rural areas. Office for National Statistics Census data shows that a disproportionate number of people aged over 65 live in rural communities, which are also the areas most affected by proposed reductions in on-call fire engines and station closures. Older residents are more likely to have increased vulnerability to fire and medical emergencies and are more dependent on timely emergency response. Any increase in response times resulting from reduced local fire cover would therefore disproportionately affect this group. There are also accessibility concerns with the consultation process itself. The consultation has been conducted largely online and over a holiday period, which risks excluding older residents, those with disabilities, and people who are digitally disadvantaged. This raises concerns that the views of protected groups may not be adequately captured. To reduce these negative impacts, BFRS should ensure that equalities considerations are explicitly factored into decision-making, including maintaining adequate local fire cover in rural communities, improving engagement through non-digital consultation methods, and fully assessing the impact of increased response times on vulnerable groups before any changes are implemented.” (Member of the public)

- 3.63 It was also highlighted by some respondents that all (equality) groups may be affected, some more than others, and all should be considered.

“All equalities should be at least considered.” (Member of the public)

“As stated before, be transparent at all times. Naturally some will be affected more than others if there are home station moves or appliances are changed. Each person should have a voice in how they may wish to proceed and given other opportunities if possible.” (Organisation)

- 3.64 A BFRS employee described how the proposed changes could positively impact on equality both for the public and for staff. The importance of communication, support and monitoring to minimise negative impacts was also highlighted.

“I think the proposed changes could have positive equality impacts if they are managed carefully. A more consistent and reliable emergency response benefits the whole community, particularly vulnerable groups who may rely most on timely fire and rescue services. Improving availability and response times can help reduce inequalities in service provision between different areas. There is also potential for positive impacts on the workforce. More flexible and sustainable ways of staffing could open up opportunities to a wider range of people who may currently be excluded by the On-Call model. Making sure changes are well communicated, supported, and monitored will help minimise any negative impacts and ensure the proposals deliver fair outcomes for both the public and staff. (BFRS staff member)

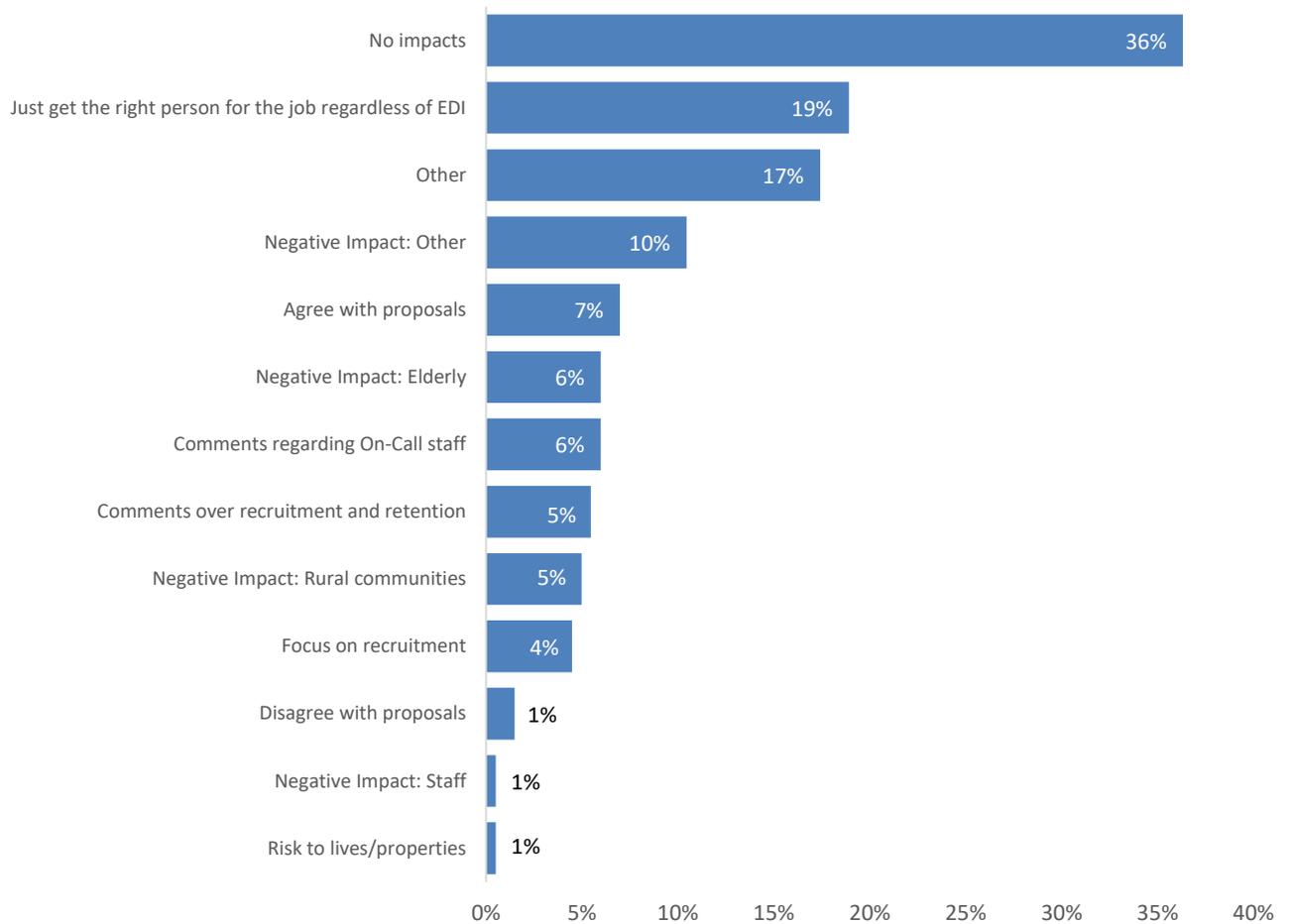
- 3.65 Around one-in-five (19%) respondents rather than identifying specific groups who might be impacted, made comments along the lines of ‘just get the right person for the job regardless of EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion).’

“Ability, experience and fitness for role are more important than balancing equalities.” (Member of the public)

“Employing personnel should be done on a capability basis and not for meeting targets on equality.” (Member of the public)

3.66 Respondents also used this opportunity to make further comments relating to agreeing (7%) or disagreeing (1%) with the proposals, On-Call staff (6%), recruitment and retention (5%), focussing on recruitment specifically (4%), negative impacts on staff (1%) and risks to lives and properties (1%).

Figure 12: Are there any positive or negative impacts relating to equalities that you believe should be considered?



Base: All respondents who answered this question and provided comments (201)

4. Resident focus groups

Introduction

- 4.1 This chapter reports the views from four deliberative focus groups with members of the public in the potentially affected areas across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, which were independently facilitated by ORS. This is not a verbatim transcript of the four 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 ask questions throughout, and all the meetings were successful in stimulating 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 prior 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, albeit reluctantly in some cases.

"... When you realise that there's a lot of wasted resource in the wrong place that could improve the Service, that surely has got to be the way to go at the moment. It's not my want, but I understand the rationale." (Stokenchurch)

- 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.

"The main problem is that you are funding this and it's not working efficiently enough. And you want to put that money elsewhere ... because they can't actually help you out in an emergency." (Amersham/Great Missenden)

"For such poor availability ... it makes no sense to spend council tax money on these appliances, and it doesn't seem to disable anything you've got already" (Buckingham/Milton Keynes)

- 4.5 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.

"Have they looked at their recruitment processes, because I'm 28, I've lived within five minutes of Marlow Fire Station since I was 17 and I've never heard of an On-Call firefighter. I don't know how effective that recruitment process is if someone like me has never heard of it." (Beaconsfield/High Wycombe)

"I have never seen advertisements for community On-Call ... I didn't even know it was a thing. So, no wonder it's dropped off ... No-one's ever mentioned it to me ever." (Amersham/Great Missenden)

- 4.6 One participant disagreed, however, having looked into the process of becoming an On-Call firefighter.

"... I can't say I agree; there was loads of social media advertising probably about 18 months, two years ago. They did some online sessions as well. So, you could either go to Risborough or wherever it was to find out about it or you could attend online sessions." (Stokenchurch)

- 4.7 The same participant suggested 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 and childcare.

"I was really keen to do it. I attended the online session, and then it was very much like, 'You need to pass the fitness test, and then you go on a one week or two week residential, then you've got to do the two-week Breathing Apparatus course.' So that, coupled with a day job and two young children, made it unfeasible for me at the time ... I would happily do it; I just can't do the training as it currently stands ... I completely understand you need to go through rigorous training because you do not want an incompetent firefighter, but that's where the issue lies for me." (Stokenchurch)

There was reluctant support for the closure of Great Missenden and Stokenchurch Fire Stations and the removal of some On-Call pumps...

- 4.8 The consensus among participants across the four groups was that while in an ideal world the proposed fire station closures and fire engine removals would not be necessary, the proposal has been carefully considered and appears to be rational and proportionate. In considering Great Missenden and Stokenchurch specifically, participants recognised the crewing difficulties there; and did not consider this to be an easily rectifiable situation.

"I don't think you'll ever get that crew out of Stokenchurch, because from experience, the kind of people that live there now is more of an ageing population ... I just don't think the way the Stokenchurch is set up, you'll ever get people coming forward." (Buckingham/Milton Keynes)

- 4.9 Key arguments in support of the proposed changes were that they would:

- » represent a better use of resources

"I've only had one exposure to Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue ... when the first person on the scene at a cardiac arrest was a first responder from the fire station with a defibrillator, who saved the person's life. To me, that is invaluable. And if money can go from paying On-Call people to do nothing back into the service to provide more of that, then yes." (Amersham/Great Missenden)

*"It feels like it's not really fit for purpose anymore and if the budget can be invested in ways that are actually more efficient, do more and have better impact."
(Beaconsfield/High Wycombe)*

- » help On-Call firefighters improve their competencies

*"The people On-Call might not be prepared if they are not called out ... I mean, they have to practice ..."
(Beaconsfield/High Wycombe)*

- » result in positive response time impacts for the service area as a whole

*"... You do have to look at the stats and what is going to be best for everybody as a whole which, if it's 34 seconds, doesn't sound very much, but I imagine in a fire, that's quite a lot of time saved."
(Stokenchurch)*

- 4.10 Indeed, several 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 (and most likely others) could support change.

*"It's really sad for Stokenchurch, but to be honest I want to know that when I'm phoning 999, the quickest fire engine will come to me, I don't care where it comes from ..."
(Stokenchurch)*

*"... The only thing that people in Stokenchurch or Great Missenden will want to be assured of is that if Amersham or whoever are covering ... the response time will be acceptable ... So, as long as it can cover that location quickly, I don't really see where the argument is against closing it ..."
(Beaconsfield/High Wycombe)*

- 4.11 It was considered essential, though, that in the event of change, any savings made are re-invested into ensuring the remaining On-Call service is as robust as possible; and that all On-Call firefighters at affected stations are offered redeployment opportunities.

*"You said it wasn't about reducing budget, so does that mean that the budget is reinvested in the Service?"
(Beaconsfield/High Wycombe)*

*"And we wouldn't be losing or making redundant these On-Call staff. They'd have the opportunity to use their skills and go work elsewhere?"
(Amersham/Great Missenden)*

...but several concerns were expressed around doing so

- 4.12 This is not to say there were no concerns. Several participants across the four groups worried about:

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

*"You said that 2022 was the only time recently when all appliances were needed at the same time ... If that happened again, what would happen? I suppose everywhere's burning so where would you get help from?"
(Buckingham/Milton Keynes)*

“The engines that would be removed that have low availability, but they still do something, would that risk other areas; the overall picture?” (Amersham/Great Missenden)

» Managing future risk

“That is based at current levels of everything, it's not necessarily planning for the future. We do have new housing developments going up ...” (Stokenchurch)

“... Does the Milton Keynes development plan play into that as well? Because we've got massive pressures in terms of numbers of new homes ...” (Buckingham/Milton Keynes)

» The permanent loss of resources that may be needed in future

“My concern is, you sell a building ... you've lost that resource forever. Five years down the line, you are having more accidents on the motorway, you've got larger Infrastructure, you've got more people, you've got new business units ... We need potentially something here and the option's gone... I know there's a maintenance cost because of the roof, but that motorway is only going to get busier ...” (Stokenchurch)

» The potential impacts of increased response times (including for second attending appliances), especially in Buckinghamshire's remotest areas.

“I think we can all see the logic of reducing the number of pumps but how would that impact on response times? I know that the Great Missenden on-call station and the Stokenchurch one is earmarked to be closed, so how much time would that add to the vehicle getting there from High Wycombe or Amersham?” (Beaconsfield/High Wycombe)

“Are there situations when an On-Call appliance would go out and follow a Wholetime appliance? In terms of response, that could make a significant difference.” (Amersham/Great Missenden)

» The amount of resource potentially being lost from a relatively small area (Amersham, Beaconsfield, and High Wycombe)

“Amersham, Beaconsfield and High Wycombe; aren't they three relatively quite close areas? Obviously, I know work has been done as to what's going to be better to move from where but that feels like it's quite a lot within a concentrated area.” (Stokenchurch)

» The potential loss of On-Call firefighters

“Do you expect to move any existing On-Call firefighters? When you close some of the stations and merge them ... will some of those people say, ‘Well, I’m not going ...’, will you lose some of those because they are not prepared to go further?” (Beaconsfield/High Wycombe)

» Whether any future recruitment drive would be successful

“You’ve said that the plan then is to re-invest into recruitment and build from there? How’s that actually going to take place? Because if you are struggling now ... how do you get better?” (Buckingham/Milton Keynes)

- 4.13 In considering the proposed fire station closures, several participants questioned what would happen with the buildings themselves. A couple felt that the stations should be retained to account for possible future need (others disagreed due to maintenance costs), while suggested for alternative use included an air ambulance base, a BFRS training or welfare base, and a community interest facility.

“Is that then an opportunity for a community interest building, or other aspects when it comes to education, etc.” (Buckingham/Milton Keynes)

Making more and better use of special vehicles was supported

- 4.14 There was strong support for BFRS making more and better use of special vehicles, which were praised for their agility, and ability to operate within narrow spaces/on difficult terrain, with fewer staff.

“The terrain is difficult for heavy vehicles ... up and down hills and narrow lanes and that. It’s got to be difficult chucking one of those around.” (Beaconsfield/High Wycombe)

“The RFV with only two makes it a lot easier for people to go in and out, and that makes much more sense, especially with the gravelly lanes around here; they are a nightmare to get up and down.” (Amersham/Great Missenden)

- 4.15 One Stokenchurch participant suggested that special vehicles could be used to *respond to motorway accidents and things ... something at a pinch point waiting ... That way you are not spending your resource having something that’s not necessary, because it’s nice to have the station there, but we need something that provides a resource ...* (Stokenchurch)

Several suggestions were made for improving On-Call recruitment in future

4.16 As mentioned earlier in this chapter, while participants were sympathetic to BFRS's recruitment challenges, there was some scepticism as to whether all avenues had been exhausted. Suggestions included targeting:

- » educational institutions like schools, colleges, and universities

"We've talked about social media, but I think also potentially ... schools as a potential option, universities, etc." (Beaconsfield/High Wycombe)

- » sports clubs and gyms, and more 'youth-friendly' social media platforms

"People like my son. He's a fit, strapping young boy, interested in the gym. He would have been perfect, but he's not on Facebook. He's on TikTok and Instagram ... Advertise at the gyms and the football and rugby clubs." (Stokenchurch)

- » community social media pages

"Would a social media presence not be better? Your Amersham is ridiculous, anything you want to know, or put on there ... There's about 50,000 members, which is surely better than a banner outside your station, which some people in the town never pass on a daily basis." (Amersham/Great Missenden)

4.17 It was also said at Stokenchurch that the general public have little knowledge of how the On-Call service works (which was borne out by the number of questions participants themselves asked about it), or indeed its very existence in many cases. Providing more information about, say, remuneration, place of work, and required commitment, and stressing the rewards of 'civic duty' was thus recommended.

"Do you have to be physically stationed at the fire station on shift, or can you just be in the area to respond to demands from that centre? I think maybe it's worth marketing how it fits into someone's life ..." (Stokenchurch)

"... The reward and the civic duty of what you are doing ... I think there's a lot of people who would like to give something back, to be there should anyone else need them." (Stokenchurch)

"Is this a volunteer post or do you get paid? Maybe people don't know that it's paid, so they won't want to say yes if they don't know they are getting paid." (Stokenchurch)

Participants trusted BFRS to make decisions in the best interests of the county, but felt it must deliver positive messaging around the changes

4.18 Overall, participants displayed a great deal of trust in BFRS to make decisions in the best interest of its residents, staff, and other stakeholders. However, they also said the changes such as those proposed, no matter how rational and well-evidenced, can be highly emotive within affected communities, and that the Service must provide adequate reassurance for residents through positive messaging, stressing that the changes are not being made for financial reasons, but to make better use of resources and yield service improvements. Some of the many typical comments are below.

“... You’ve got to just try and get across that, faced with this challenge, you are trying to make the best of it however you can ... That you are redeploying assets and resources rather than making cuts. Everybody’s first assumption will be that you are cutting the service, but you need to persuade them that there is an improvement ... with no reduction in response times from what it is at the moment. That’s the message that needs to be out there ...” (Beaconsfield/High Wycombe)

“I think you’ve just got to go for the benefits ... overall times are going to be reduced, not losing jobs. Stress that it’s a change in service rather than a reduction so it doesn’t look like you are cutting it back so you can save money.” (Amersham/Great Missenden)

“... It’s really difficult to get all of this across to the public. Attending things like this, we can probably go away and be quite well educated ... I can tell my parents, I can tell my friends, ‘I’ve been to this and when you read that headline, bear in mind that there’s actually an underlying justification and potentially an improvement.’” (Buckingham/Milton Keynes)

“I was just trying to understand the heart of it. Whether it was, like, ‘We need a quicker faster service out there.’ or whether it’s, ‘This building’s rotting away and we don’t want to waste our money on it ... That’s massive PR because what do we want the fire service for? We want to be safe. So, if that’s the whole point of changing it, then actually that’s a massive win publicly. And then secondary to that is this building’s non-use.” (Amersham/Great Missenden)

- 4.19 A specific point made at the Buckingham/Milton Keynes session was around the need to stress what resource would remain at affected stations. Focusing on appliance removals and special vehicles was thought to have detracted from the fact that Amersham, Beaconsfield, Buckingham, High Wycombe, and West Ashland Fire Stations would still have at least one Wholetime or Day Crewed fire engine, causing unnecessary panic among residents.

“... That’s the thing that’s missing ... it doesn’t tell you what’s left. It’s saying we are going to take the appliance away and we are going to replace it with a smaller vehicle. If I have a house fire, I don’t want to wait for it to come from Winslow or Milton Keynes ... you are taking stuff away, but what’s left?” (Buckingham/Milton Keynes)

There was widespread support for ‘Operational Independence’ for the Chief Fire Officer on some issues

- 4.20 The overwhelming majority of participants agreed that the Chief Fire Officer (CFO) should have ‘operational independence.’ 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. Some typical comments are below.

“You are talking about people who are experts in the field ... It’s exactly how you’d expect an organised corporation to organise it. ... You’d expect someone to be overseeing all those operations at that level.” (Beaconsfield/High Wycombe)

"It makes sense ... It's almost like you've got a board for the overarching, 'This is what we are going to do, this is the strategy, this is the budget,' but also, 'You are the one that's on the ground doing the work, you sort out what you need and where you need it ... If you need any further permission or you need more money or something, you'll have to put a proposal and come to us.' It seems relatively simple." (Stokenchurch)

- 4.21 Most people anticipated positive impacts from granting the CFO such independence, especially in relation to efficiency and agile decision-making.

"I work for the NHS and it's removing some of the layers, simplifying some of the approval processes and things at the moment ... That does feel like it will make a real difference to getting things done quicker, so yeah, I support it." (Beaconsfield/High Wycombe)

"I think that makes perfect sense ... You're looking at a board of councillors and what gives them the right on an educational basis to know any better than the CFO ... They should definitely be given the right to be able to make quick decisions ..." (Amersham/Great Missenden)

- 4.22 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 any decisions taken.

"You do need some accountability to see that the standard levels are reached, that the service levels are maintained ..." (Beaconsfield/High Wycombe)

"As long as there's mechanism where you can say, 'Okay, there's an issue here. This isn't working.'" (Buckingham/Milton Keynes)

- 4.23 Only one participant explicitly disagreed with the idea of operational independence for the CFO: they did so on the grounds that:

"There may be those who aren't working to best practice ... In this scenario, you're going to get good and bad bosses ... You're leaving decisions up to individuals rather than having a level and having them adhere to that level. I prefer that approach [because] they could make bad decisions." (Buckingham/Milton Keynes)

- 4.24 Moreover, at the Amersham/Great Missenden focus group, there was some feeling that this is not an issue for the public to decide on; and that seeking the views of BFRS staff is far more important.

5. Staff focus groups

Introduction

- 5.1 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.
- 5.2 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...

- 5.3 Staff in all three groups recognised BFRS's On-Call recruitment and retention challenges. Societal changes and the general affluence of the areas in which On-Call stations are located (especially in the south of Buckinghamshire) were thought to hinder recruitment, whereas the demands of the role and disengagement because of a lack of 'shouts' were thought to contribute to high firefighter turnover.

"None of us can sit here in a little glass box and say that the On-Call system in Bucks is really working ... A lot of these changes and measures probably have been coming for quite some time." (Wholetime/Day Crewed)

"... They are starting and thinking that they are joining something really cool and they are going to go out the doors ... They can't keep bringing people in to just leave them disappointed; spend all that money training them up, kitting them up, and then a year down the line, they say, 'Well, I'm not doing this because this isn't why I signed up.'" (On-Call, affected station)

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

- 5.4 There was a strong sense among participating staff that BFRS has been the architect of its own challenges through its 'neglect' of the On-Call service in recent years. In particular, inadequate recruitment processes were alleged, with On-Call firefighters largely expected to take the lead themselves in attracting others to the role.

"Recruitment at Bucks Fire and Rescue has been poor. They don't attack it professionally ... a banner out the front, stick it on Facebook, and then they wonder why there's no success." (On-Call, unaffected station)

"... We've only really recruited people via word of mouth or people we've known ... to the point where we were literally knocking on doors, handing out letters, and speaking to people door-to-door and getting people to join our station ..." (On-Call, affected station)

- 5.5 The focus on Wholetime recruitment at the expense of On-Call was a particular issue in all three groups. Participants specifically highlighted 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.

"Another issue with that recruiting piece ... is around the whole On-Call to Wholetime transferees ... Because of that we've seen the numbers of On-Call firefighters decrease over the years ... There's a number that we've lost that could be providing more cover than [they are] able to now ... because they work all week for the Fire Service and in their spare time, they might not want to [do] as much ... It then seems a bit unfair to say, 'Availability is really poor, so we are not going to be able to maintain this truck; we are going to consider removing it.'" (On Call, unaffected station)

- 5.6 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 to standby when a Wholetime crew at a key station is at an incident.

"It's almost like that control have gone, 'Right, where's the next available Wholetime pump to get this station on standby' rather than going, 'Oh look, there's that station's actual On-Call unit ready to go.' It almost makes us feel like we were second-class firefighters in a sense." (On-Call, affected station)

- 5.7 Furthermore, the centralised Resource Management Team (RMT) was frequently criticised for a lack of proactive On-Call resource management. It should be noted though, that recent improvements had been seen by a few participants in this respect.

"... It can't be expected for the On-Call crew to ... sit at home and go, 'My pump's not on, let me look at the 17 other fire engines, where will I make a difference and book on'. There is no resource management of On-Call ... There's a WhatsApp group now that goes out to managers and says ... 'There's available crewing opportunities here if any of your crew want to go second or third line,' but there's no chase up of that ..." (Wholetime/Day Crewed)

"In January, we've occasionally had Wholetime come over ... It has happened a couple of times now where if we are missing one driver, we will now get a driver ... It'd be good to see that carry on because ... they have made an improvement there" (On-Call, unaffected station)

There have been some recent availability improvements

- 5.8 On-Call availability was said to have improved at some stations recently, however, which was attributed in part to a reduction in bank shifts for dual contract firefighters. Previously, the financial attraction of bank shifts, coupled with a lack of consequence for not meeting On-Call hours, meant that many firefighters were opting for the former over the latter. Fewer bank shift opportunities will, it was felt, only increase On-Call availability further in future.

“In January, the bank shifts are going ... If you've got a chance for £350 (or whatever it is) a night bank or doing a bit of On-Call, you are going to take that ... But now the bank shifts are almost non-existent. People are going, ‘Oh, I might have to book on the On-Call.’” (On-Call, unaffected station)

“... A lot of On-Call members of staff ... were taking themselves off their retained fire engine and getting paid an overtime shift on a Wholetime station ... Now we are in a better place. We've got more Wholetime staff, we are staffing our fire engines better, and now that those On-Call members of staff don't have those opportunities to go and do the bank system, they are making themselves available for their truck ...” (On-Call, affected station)

Most participants reluctantly accepted the proposed closure of Great Missenden and Stokenchurch Fire Stations

- 5.9 While describing their current predicament as ‘managed decline’ on the part of BFRS, participating staff tended to accept the proposed closure of Great Missenden and Stokenchurch Fire Stations on the basis that neither has had a crew for several years, and the viability of achieving one in future is low.

“... When you look at the appliances that they are looking, some you probably can't argue with because the stations haven't been crewed for a number of years ... I totally understand that the likes of Stokenchurch and Great Missenden, where they really haven't had any crews there for maybe five or more years ... if we try to recruit in those areas now, it's going to still be another four or five years before we get an appliance on the run...” (On-Call, affected station)

Of the proposed On-Call fire engine removals, Buckingham attracted the most concern

- 5.10 There was some understanding of the rationale for the removal of the High Wycombe and second West Ashland On-Call fire engines given their availability issues.

“Wycombe have ... got a lot of vehicles ... and I don't think necessarily always enough crew to crew all of those vehicles, so those On-Call could be used ... They could have a role there just to backfill things.” (On Call, unaffected station)

“West Ashland ... I've never seen that pump move ... [It] quite simply is just sitting there collecting dust. They might as well just give that pump away to another charity or another country or something because it's nothing to this brigade. They don't use it.” (Wholetime/Day Crewed)

- 5.11 However, staff in all three groups could not understand the rationale for removing the Buckingham On-Call fire engine from service, not least because its availability is higher than some stations that do not feature and is likely to improve in the near future due to upskilling among its staff.

“In the full consultation pack, it has a bit of a scorecard for each fire station. And for Buckingham ... it doesn't look at what that future looks like. There's another driver currently going through their emergency response, and one going through the officer in charge piece. So in six months' time that would look different ...” (On-Call, affected station)

- 5.12 Moreover, Buckingham's relatively isolated geographical location and status as one of BFRS's key stations was thought to warrant retaining the On-Call appliance there.

“... If you get a house fire in Buckingham, your next pump's coming from West Ashland ... a 20-minute blue light run. So, you've got smoke and fire ripping out of every floor, persons reported, persons unaccounted for, you might be there with a team of four on your own for a long period of time” (Wholetime/Day Crewed)

“... Because of Buckingham's location, it's inappropriate to suggest that they have less fire cover. The organisation acknowledges that it's in a key geographical position because every time the Wholetime appliance at Buckingham leaves the fire station, another appliance comes across and sits there because it's in an important place in terms of the county and the borders. So, to me the easiest solution to that is for the On-Call appliance to be available.” (On-Call, affected station)

- 5.13 The key issue raised by participants in all groups, however, was that the availability data underpinning the consultation proposals does not reflect the realities of mixed crewing in Buckingham. It was frequently said that On-Call availability at Buckingham is impacted by the number of times On-Call firefighters are required to 'plug gaps' on the station's Wholetime appliance.

“Buckingham On-Call has the most amount of On-Call of any station and we've just completely ignored the fact they put the Wholetime pump on the run. I feel really bad for the guys and girls over there because they work their arses off to do that. They do it on the cheap as well because it would cost them a lot more to put a Wholetime member of staff in there. They are probably the busiest On-Call unit, and they are being punished for that.” (Wholetime/Day Crewed)

“On the mixed crewing side of things, we did a mini audit of the last three months of the year; mixed crewing is still in use ... We counted 14 times since October to December where the On-Call appliance was taken off the run because a driver or a firefighter or an OIC was taken to put the Wholetime appliance on the run ... It's not a massive number, it's improved since we've upped the establishment, but there's still times where On-Call availability has been affected by the Wholetime using a mixed crewing system to our detriment.” (On Call, affected station)

- 5.14 In the context of the consultation, removing the On-Call fire engine from Buckingham was considered somewhat short-sighted as Buckingham's Wholetime establishment is now more robust, meaning On-Call firefighters are less likely to be needed to 'plug gaps' and so more likely to be available to crew their own appliance.

“... In the last maybe four months, the Wholetime crew at Buckingham, the establishment has got to where it needs to be and the availability of the On-Call appliance has gone up quite considerably. But the data doesn't show that ...” (On Call, affected station)

- 5.15 Finally in terms of Buckingham, there was some resistance among current crew members to consider redeployment to Winslow, mainly based on the potential risks associated with additional travel for potentially little reward in terms of incident attendance. They also questioned the practical implications of this proposal, given the lack of space at Winslow Fire Station for, say, fire kits.

"... If everyone did go to Winslow, I've got no idea where they'd put us. It's a tiny station. But also there is an increase in risk ... because it is a 20-minute drive ... and there's a risk in travelling. And Winslow offer fairly good availability, so it's likely that you'd be driving down that way at 2am ... and the fire engine would be whizzing past you the other way on the way to Buckingham. That just doesn't feel like it makes much sense ..." (On Call, affected station)

- 5.16 Similarly, Beaconsfield On-Call firefighters were said to feel the same about redeployment to Marlow.

"... I live 15 minutes' drive from Marlow and there's one newbie there who lives about 10 minutes away ... and when they had a shout, she missed it. So what is my chance to get on that pump if they left her behind?" (On Call, affected station)

There was a mixed reaction to replacing fire engines with special appliances at some stations

- 5.17 BFRS's special vehicle fleet was generally considered a positive addition to the Service, not only in terms of offering flexibility at incidents, but also in making more effective use of On-Call firefighters, ensuring they experience more 'shouts' and practical, hands-on experience at incidents. Having a suite of 'dedicated' On-Call special vehicles would, it was felt, be of considerable benefit moving forward.

"For me, to have On-Call specials, it will be gold dust because if you can get out the door with two and you've got dedicated On-Call staff across the brigade for a water carrier or a wildfire unit ... brilliant. The jobs are changing. The traditional house fire we don't get as much of anymore, but what we do get is the wildfires, fires in outbuildings where you need a water carrier. So, in terms of specials, I think we really need to, as an organisation, invest in them. I think the On-Call will be really busy on them ..." (Wholetime/Day Crewed)

"... With the OSUs, the amount of times that goes out and keeps people interested, keeps the crews happy. Even if the pump isn't going out, you are going out on something, you are doing something, you are being utilised ..." (Wholetime/Day Crewed)

- 5.18 However, the consensus among participating staff was special appliances should complement rather than replace traditional fire engines due to their reduced capability.

"A lot of these vehicles ... were bought to add to the fleet, not as replacements. They were to add to our firefighting capability, add to our resilience, to make our jobs easier ..." (Wholetime/Day Crewed)

- 5.19 In terms of the specific appliances, Rural Firefighting Vehicles (RFVs) were considered useful but limited both in terms of the type of incidents they can be used for, and when.

"... this rural firefighting vehicle can't do 95% of the things a real fire engine can do. It won't go to house fires, it won't go to RTC's. The vehicles that they are proposing to replace fully kitted fire engines with are useful for a month in the year to get to field fires ... " (Wholetime/Day Crewed)

"Rural firefighting vehicles, they are seasonal. What we are saying to our On-Call firefighters is, 'You can go out on the special vehicle from June to early September and then the rest of the year you are not needed.' So, what it's done here and across the retained units that are affected is really brought morale down to an all-time low ..." (On-Call, affected station)

- 5.20 Few comments were received about the proposal to replace the Amersham On-Call fire engine with the Chesham RFV, though it was viewed as unfair to the Chesham crew who utilise it often and are skilled in its use. The proposed substitution of the Buckingham On-Call fire engine with a RFV was frequently criticised, however; again, mainly due to the town's geographic location.

"... The suggestions of replacing a fire engine with a wildfire unit or something similar are ridiculous because Buckingham as a town deserves to have a second fire appliance there for when their primary appliance is out at other jobs or covering in Milton Keynes or Oxfordshire or wherever it often goes ..." (On-Call, affected station)

- 5.21 Moreover, as mixed crewing is likely to continue at Buckingham despite increases in the Wholetime establishment there, there was some question around how the station's On-Call firefighters could maintain their skills and competencies on the equipment carried on a standard fire engine (for example breathing apparatus, road traffic collision gear, ladders) if theirs is removed.

"The On-Call firefighters here, even though potentially they are going to have their pump taken away, are still going to be expected to maintain their skills and competencies in operating a fire engine, putting up ladders, using BA; all equipment that's not going to be kept on a rural firefighting unit ... It's not really been discussed how we are going to facilitate that training ... They are not going to be able to use [the Wholetime] equipment and pump because it needs to be available to respond to incidents ..." (On-Call, affected station)

- 5.22 It was thus suggested that Buckingham retain its On-Call appliance and house an RFV, managing both on a switch crew basis.

"I'm sure that places like Buckingham with plenty of On-Call people would be able to switch crew both ... then we've got options during the busy spells in the summer to take the wildfire unit out ... and we've also got a rescue pump backing up the Wholetime." (On-Call, affected station)

- 5.23 West Ashland On-Call firefighters described ongoing confusion around which special vehicle they would receive if the proposals were to be implemented: the RFV currently based at the station or a new water carrier. While they were pleased to be getting one either way, some of the station's On-Call firefighters are also able to book on at Broughton, and so participants questioned whether they would be trained on

both. This was considered sensible in principle, but potentially problematic in practice given “we’ve got two hours a week to train.” (On-Call, affected station)

“It’s been very poor communication as to what we are actually getting. And I don’t see how our training time slot will accommodate it ... But I’m excited. I think having a special would be a fantastic idea because a lot of the time there is just a driver and a BA available for 24 hours at a pop. So it would go out, whatever we get .. We just need to know what we are getting, we need to know how we are going to train on it and that sort of thing.” (On-Call, affected station)

- 5.24 Reaction to the prospect of replacing the On-Call fire engine at Beaconsfield with a Crew Welfare Unit (CWU) was mixed. Although some participants described it as little more than a glorified ‘toilet’ that is largely necessary, the Unit was generally recognised as important on welfare grounds, and something the Fire Brigades Union has been ‘pushing for.’

“It’s a requirement now with the decontamination, and the union have been pushing for years for welfare. The amount of jobs, particularly if you are female, where there’s nowhere to go to the toilet ... So, I get it, they have to adhere to that ...” ((On-Call, unaffected station)

- 5.25 A Beaconsfield On-Call firefighter was open minded about the proposed change, given their On-Call fire engine “is never used” and there is likely to be more opportunity to attend incidents with a CWU. However, they said that they “joined the fire brigade not to drive a toilet to the incident or to be a dinner lady. I joined to put fires out ...” and thus asked whether they would be permitted to take their fire kit along so they could assist at an incident if needed.

“... If you can have four people going out on your welfare truck, that’s another four people at that incident. If the truck can then just be left there, you know you are still going out on a shout ... So, in theory, you could potentially be going to more shouts with the welfare unit than you would be at the moment?” (On-Call, affected station)

Some alternative suggestions were made

- 5.26 Most of the specific alternative suggestions proposed centred around maintaining the status quo (or at least the status quo minus Great Missenden and Stokenchurch) while strengthening On-Call recruitment, retention, and availability (as reported in the next section below).

“... I get that everything’s changed, but I think it’s a bit short-sighted to just go, ‘Ok, let’s try and save money by getting rid of all these appliances’ when maybe we should just be looking at the appliances which haven’t been crewed for a number of years and making a start with that and seeing if there’s anyone left on those stations ... redistribute them elsewhere.” (On-Call, affected station)

"... For maintaining resilience and options, then you leave it as the status quo, but you improve recruitment and retention and staffing of those fire stations and units ... You actively recruit for the stations and the fire appliances that you haven't got any staff for. You campaign government for better funding for what used to be the cheaper alternative within a service to cover an area, especially remote areas ... that are far-flung from Wholetime." (On-Call, affected station)

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

- 5.27 Overall, participating staff were sceptical that BFRS has exhausted avenues to improve On-Call recruitment and availability across Buckinghamshire; and did not feel that the On-Call Improvement Programme proposals would succeed where other measures have failed.

"It's a very drastic solution ... Availability has not been great, which is the rationale, which I fully understand. But then rather than try and work on that availability, it's 'We'll just take the pump away and that will solve everything ...' But it's not really addressing the issues that's caused the availability problems in the first place." (On-Call, unaffected station)

- 5.28 They did, though, make several suggestions as to how the Service might seek to make these availability improvements. These primarily included improvements to the On-Call recruitment process, such as making proactive visits to local residents and businesses to highlight the benefits of On-Call; offering more 'have a go' days; and ensuring shorter lead in times between recruitment and a firefighter's first 'shout.'

"There's loads of things you can do with active recruitment ... As part of our home fire safety visits, literally targeted letters, actually addressing people directly rather than as a broad-spectrum thing. 'Have a go' days more often ..." (On-Call, affected station)

"... Contacting local businesses might benefit and help with recruitment ... [highlighting] the skills that an On-Call firefighter can provide for your business while they are not On-Call ... It just gives them a bit more of a push to think, 'Oh actually maybe it would benefit us as a company or a business to have an On-Call firefighter' instead of just thinking, 'What happens if they just run away and leave work?'" (On-Call, affected station)

"... The time from applying to the time of actually getting on a truck is long. And that must turn people off ... I appreciate it's not just an 'Ok, you apply today, start tomorrow' kind of thing. But the whole process takes six months pretty much, probably longer To get on a truck is a long time." (On-Call, unaffected station)

- 5.29 More active leadership and support for the On-Call service - including for very busy Watch and Crew Commanders - was also strongly recommended. This, it was felt, would not only help manage resourcing in practical terms, but also with identifying staff development opportunities. It would also bring BFRS in line with Oxfordshire FRS, which was said to have more station-based On-Call support officers who, in addition to crewing fire engines when needed, assist with firefighter training and career development.

“It’s almost like we need a separate management group made-up of On-Call that supports On-Call ... To understand On-Call, what our needs are, how it runs ... We need a group of people who are available maybe 24/7 who are looking at availability, who are looking at who could move over. We could be doing big On-Call drill nights together and organising that sort of thing ...” (On-Call, unaffected station)

“Although the emphasis is on us to develop ourselves, the point is, ‘Who do we go to?’ ... It just needs a streamlined way or a person that you can go to who literally says ‘Yes, you can do that’ and it’s done ... We’ve got these On-Call support managers [but] development is a big thing and I think they could do more ... If they want to improve the On-Call, well improve it across the board, even with the training.” (On-Call, unaffected station)

- 5.30 Another strong theme across the groups was the need to revisit On-Call firefighter skillsets, as maintaining current skills and competencies is nigh on impossible in only two hours a week.

“... We’ve got a fleet of rescue pumps, all identical, and to try and keep the skill sets of an On-Call person up-to-date and up-to-scratch all the time is difficult. I think that’s maybe also where we are losing some of the On-Call people because we are putting too much on them. Maybe if we take some of the equipment away ... we could make the job of an On-Call firefighter easier ...” (On-Call, affected station)

- 5.31 Rationalisation and tailoring was thus considered necessary, especially if On-Call firefighters are also to be primarily responsible for crewing special appliances; and needing to maintain their skills and competencies on those.

“That has to be a realistic proposal for the future of the On-Call ... A more tailored approach to each On-Call station and what the local risks are; and for the equipment and training to be honed in and tailored to what they need in that area. That will assist with the recruitment in those areas ...” (On-Call, affected station)

- 5.32 Indeed, one Wholetime Crew Commander said that *“I would rather On-Call ... rock up with a water carrier and know that they are spot on trained with that water carrier or RFV ... I’d rather have a dedicated On-Caller specialised in that area because I know [they will] crack on.”*

- 5.33 There was some pushback against this among a few On-Call firefighters, however. They feared that losing certain skillsets (such as hazmat and 13.5 ladder work) would render them less useful to their Wholetime colleagues when asked to cover unexpected absence.

- 5.34 Other, more specific suggestions were:
- » offering more flexible contracts

“... Rather than these very strict contracts of 0 to 40, 40 to 60, 60 to 90 hours, Oxfordshire worked it out on an hourly basis. So, if you can give 50 hours a week, you can have a contract for that and you can also then book on extra hours ... So, it allows you to be a bit more flexible; and equally it allowed the station managers when they were recruiting people to be a bit more selective because people could say, ‘I can offer 50 hours either evenings, weekends, days ... These very rigid contracts ... can turn people away ... Whereas if you were to work it on a more hourly basis, it offers a lot more flexibility.” (On-Call, affected station)

- » exploring the idea of hubs or groups of stations

“... South, Middle, North hubs ... Maybe you have a fire engine that is available and crew can turn out on second line or whatever ... if there was a need for relief for example. Something like that where people could pool resources ... Then you've got the staff that have already been trained, they've already got kit and instead of just leaving them out on a limb, at least they can be useful.” (Wholetime/Day Crewed)

- » allowing firefighters working in non-operational roles to provide On-Call cover where possible and appropriate (which was said to be permitted in Oxfordshire)

“... People with On-Call contracts who have Wholetime jobs which aren't necessarily on fire appliances, are currently not allowed to respond from their working job. So, as an employer, we are encouraging the mechanic from across the road to leave his employment to come and ride a fire engine during his working time, but we are not allowing our employees to be released from their Wholetime contracts ... There's quite a lot of Wholetime staff with On-Call contracts that would be happy to sit on On-Call stations during the day ...” (On-Call, affected station)

- » encouraging Wholetime firefighters to provide On-Call cover

“A lot of On-Calls have gone into Wholetime, but I feel that there's not a lot of incentive for Wholetime to come into On-Call. I have actually had conversations with people who are Wholetime and they've said, ‘I live just down the road, and I wouldn't mind doing it’ but then there's no support or encouragement for them to do that ... That would boost our recruitment quite a lot with people who've already got skills ... They are already trained. They can just start booking straight on, but that doesn't really get encouraged. It's almost like they'd rather focus on Wholetime recruitment and On-Call recruitment as separate things ...” (On-Call, unaffected station)

- » 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

“... With our app, to try and change the station you are responding to is so difficult to do ... Sometimes, if I'm staying with family, I could respond to a different station and I could put that pump on the run, but they don't make it easy.” (On-Call, affected station)

- » developing a system whereby On-Call firefighters can book on for life-risk or serious incidents only within the last couple of hours of their availability, to avoid people booking off early for fear of being used for standby or relief late in their shift

“... In Leicestershire, they've got a system where they are available On-Call, but they can also change it, so they are only available ... for life-risk or serious fires. So, they can say before, I think it's the last two hours of being available, their truck will only be sent to incidents with a life risk ... Nobody would mind calling into work and saying, 'I can't come because something mental is going on' ... but you can't be doing that week in, week out, 'Oh, sorry, I'm sat at Wycombe Fire Station, and no-one's let me go yet', because you are just on a standby.” (On-Call, unaffected station)

There is a strong need to better communicate the potential benefits of the On-Call Improvement Programme

- 5.35 While they were generally cynical about the On-Call Improvement Programme, participants in all three groups said that if they could see tangible benefits to the remaining On-Call service as a result of implementing the proposals for change, they would be far more likely to support them.

“If they could go, 'Right ... we'll write these seven trucks off, but we can promise you we will never let this happen to any other station. We will focus all our recruitment efforts, our retention efforts, we'll do all of this,' then we'd all get behind it ... I imagine most people would go, 'Yeah, alright, I'm happy with that.' But because they've not said what they are doing ... why would I sit here and agree with it?” (Wholetime/Day Crewed)

“They haven't actually said what the improvements are yet. If they said, '... We are going to save £500,000 a year getting rid of these seven pumps and we will fix your fire stations, make them nicer. We'll give you better kit. We'll give you proper female changing facilities' maybe staff could get behind it, but currently no-one knows what the improvements are going to be.” (On-Call, unaffected station)

- 5.36 Once again, the example was given of the confusion at Broughton/West Ashland around which station is getting which special appliance. At the time of the focus group, Broughton staff had been told they would be getting a new water carrier, which they considered a significant benefit; whereas:

“They are getting the rural from the Wholetime ... [Broughton] is now getting the water carrier ... They are properly excited to get that bit of kit because for them, that's a two-person vehicle that can get them out of the doors ... No-one's told the West Ashland's crew that they are actually getting that ... All it takes is a five-minute conversation and you've improved morale for one On-Call unit tenfold.” (Wholetime/Day Crewed)

Operational independence for the Chief Fire Officer was accepted in principle, but seen as potentially 'dangerous' in practice

- 5.37 Most staff members were not averse to the idea of operational independence for the Chief Fire Officer (CFO) per se. However, they were significantly concerned about the power this would confer being wielded by the 'wrong' hands. In this context, while all participants were complimentary about the current CFO and felt they would use any operational independence granted to them sensibly, they were not confident that this would be the case for any successor. Some typical comments are below.

"I like our new CFO. She's been really good. She's made leaps and bounds of positive change ... My concern is it's not about the current chief, it's what we get in the future ... It's the successor." (On-Call, non-affected station)

"If you've got the right person who you can fully trust to make the right decisions, absolutely, of course you'd want them to have more autonomy in their job. But it's always who's going to come next ... Unfortunately, you can't switch it on and off depending on the person ..." (On-Call, affected station)

"... If the operational independence gets through, that's it forever, they are never going to vote to take it back. So, who's to say who the Chief is going to be in five, ten years' time? ... There's reasons safeguards are in place ... It's a huge step to take ..." (Wholetime/Day Crewed)

- 5.38 Other related concerns were around:

- » a lack of accountability (which was considered especially important for a public service)

"... On paper, it sounds really good. You want someone who knows the fire service making operational decisions ... but you are taking away the accountability." (Wholetime/Day Crewed)

"... There should always be a body of people or a committee that should be able to do the checks and balances and a vote on whether something should happen or not. When we lose that, we become a dictatorship rather a democracy ..." (On-Call, affected station)

- » firefighters and unions losing an important avenue for 'push back' in the Fire Authority

"With the Fire Authority, at least we can barter against them a bit through the union and give them a bit of push back. If we give her operational independence, it's just what she says goes, can't really fight it ... it kind of just gives her a bit of free rein." (Wholetime/Day Crewed)

- 5.39 Specifically, participating staff members highlighted the prospect of the CFO being granted freedom to make decisions around resourcing, noting the line in the consultation pack stating, 'If an On-Call station was struggling to recruit crew, the CFO could temporarily redeploy that fire engine to a different station, while replacing it with a specialist vehicle needing fewer firefighters.' Participants were sceptical that any deployment along these lines would be temporary; and used Broughton as an example of how this might be detrimental to a station's ability to improve its availability.

"... Broughton, for example, two years ago lost all its crew, went down to two. They kept the fire engine there and now there's 15 of them and it's really good ..." (Wholetime/Day Crewed)

- 5.40 Taking this a step further, it was said that even if decisions around closing fire stations would still rest with the Fire Authority, a CFO with operational independence could engineer a closure by stealth through the removal of vehicles.

"... The chief could say, 'Right, Marlow, I'm moving your fire engine and your OSU to Wycombe, I'm not closing your fire station.' But hang on, you've taken the vehicles away, so in effect, it's closed." (Wholetime/Day Crewed)

- 5.41 Similarly, some participants were worried about the potential implications of operational independence for staff; particularly in terms of redeployment at short notice.

"... Does that mean that with Chief Fire Officer independence, they go, 'Right, Olney you've got four JO's now, you are now the JO at West Ashland. You've got to travel in 25 minutes.' Is that the kind of allocation of staff they are looking at?" (On-Call, affected station)

- 5.42 This was all considered important in the context of the On-Call Improvement Programme consultation, with several participants stating that even if the proposals are rejected by the Fire Authority, operational independence for the CFO could result in them being implemented regardless.

"[If] the Fire Authority vote no to the changing of the fire engines, but yes to the operational independence of the Chief Fire Officer ... they can do what they want anyway." (On-Call, affected station)

- 5.43 In terms of process, there was a definite sense that the consultation on operational independence should have been considered separately to that on the On-Call Improvement Programme. It was thought to have been treated as something of an 'afterthought' when it is an important issue in its own right.

"... I think it only covers three pages and it's such a huge topic. It's kind of, 'Let's chuck this in there and see what happens'. This should be its own public consultation ... this shouldn't be tacked on the end of an On-Call thing ..." (Wholetime/Day Crewed)

Concerns were expressed about the consultation process

- 5.44 In all three groups, staff focused on the content of the consultation pack, particularly the lack of reference to the implications of mixed crewing at Buckingham, and:
- » the lack of nuance in the five-year dataset used, which does not reflect recent availability improvements

“The Brigade are using [data] from 2020 to 2025 ... but they've not been realistic about these statistics that they are putting out. They've put on there - how Broughton are only 10% available over the last five years, but what they haven't said is ‘Oh, but for four of them years, they didn't have a crew’ ... A little bit more information in there and it wouldn't look as if the brigade are just trying to pull the wool over people's eyes. That's what a lot of it seems like to a lot of the people on the ground ...” (Wholetime/Day Crewed)

“... There's a lot of information that they haven't put in the evidence pack ... You look at Olney, they've got a lot of new crew coming in, a lot of people gaining skill sets, so they are obviously going to become more available. Marlow is upping its establishment at the minute. Broughton have gone in the last year from about five people to 11 ...” (Wholetime/Day Crewed)

- » the lack of information on second appliance response times

“... When it talks specifically around response time ... it says, ‘This will not slow down the response time’ for all of them ... If you are in an area where you need a second appliance, you could be waiting 20, maybe 30 minutes for one to arrive, which I think is important for the public to know.” (On-Call, unaffected station)

- » an overreliance on statistics that demonstrate the ‘norm,’ at the expense of exceptional circumstances and perceptions of the fire and rescue service as a ‘safety net’

“... If you think of three summers ago ... the flooding the year just gone; these extreme things happen and the statistics can't account for them overly ... There does need some to be some kind of fat on the bone ... We do at times need to have too many people, because that one day of the year or two days of the year, we'll have just enough people. It's never going to make sense financially, but it could save a life and that's priceless. The statistics will never account for that.” (On-Call, affected station)

- ^{5.45} In terms of the consultation itself, participants in the Wholetime/Day Crewed session said that they felt somewhat detached from the process, having received little information directly from managers.

“I don't know a huge amount really. To be honest, I've probably seen more across social media and even local bits through the BBC with alleged stations being shut and stuff like that, than I've heard internally.” (Wholetime/Day Crewed)

- ^{5.46} Similarly, On-Call staff criticised what they saw as an over-reliance on written communications at the expense of personal contact, especially as they are not full-time Service employees with ready access to emails.

"... The brigade forget that most of us are working day jobs, so we can't be engaging with all the stuff that they are sending out all the time. The expectations on us are already so high. If they just send out a notice; it's unlikely that we are going to have time to read that, without being engaged personally ..." (On-Call, affected station)

- 5.47 Moreover, there was a definite sense that On-Call staff were not sufficiently involved in the options development process; which has affected subsequent buy-in to the process.

"A lot of people have their back up about how the brigade have gone about it; doing it backwards, doing working groups after they've gone, 'We are going to remove X amount of appliances and stations' ... There was no coming out and speaking to the staff, seeing what the issues are with the On-Call system ... It was, 'Here's a list of pumps we are going to get rid of' ..." (On-Call, affected station)

- 5.48 There was also some criticism of the service's external consultation, especially in relation to the timing of some of the public drop-in events.

"They were organising public consultation meetings between the hours of 2pm and 4:30pm. Everybody's at work and those that aren't at work are going to be collecting the kids from school and then taking the kids home ..." (On-Call, affected station)

- 5.49 Finally, participating staff in all three groups were of the view that decisions have already been taken and that BFRS is simply 'going through the motions' with its consultation; and were concerned that the On-Call Improvement Programme represents the 'thin end of the wedge' in terms of potential future reductions.

"I think the decision was made long ago ... Yeah, we are in a consultation. No decision to be made. That's the official line, right? But I wouldn't be wholly surprised if all those white shirts were not sat around their desk going, 'This is what we are going to do.'" (On-Call, unaffected station)

"You cut away these seven trucks. What's next? The next seven? Is it the next lowest performing ones? Because the CRMP is open until 2030; we've still got four more years left of them reviewing the On-Call. Is Olney next? Is Marlow next? Is Broughton next?" (On-Call, affected station)

6. Stakeholder focus group

Introduction

- 6.1 This chapter reports the views from the focus group with stakeholders, which was independently facilitated by ORS. This is not a verbatim transcript of the session, but an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants in a free-ranging discussion.
- 6.2 All participants were encouraged to express their opinions freely and to ask questions throughout, and the meeting was 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...

- 6.3 Stakeholders demonstrated strong understanding of BFRS's On-Call challenges, particularly around the barriers to recruitment posed by the area's demographic make-up. As a neighbouring fire and rescue service representative stated:

"... There's fire and rescue services out there that are 80%, 90% available with On-Call ... and they don't do a great deal different to us. We have our challenges with regards to the demographics of where we are, the cost-of-living crisis, and all that sort of stuff, which links into it."

... as well as the rationale for BFRS's proposals to close fire stations and remove some On-Call fire engines

- 6.4 Retaining Great Missenden and Stokenchurch fire stations was generally considered impractical given current crewing issues, and the likely unviability of improvement in this regard.

"It is a challenge and I can see where if you have stations where there's limited or next to no people there that it kind of makes sense ... It's going to take so much time and effort to actually get them to a level whereby potentially they can provide some sort of availability, that the idea is right to go, 'That's not really feasible.'"

- 6.5 There was also support for removing On-Call appliances with very low availability, providing any resources released by doing so are reinvested into the remaining On-Call service.

"It makes sense. If the availability is so poor at those stations, it's almost like you are flogging a dead horse ... It's going to take a lot of effort to get somewhere, and it might not even provide any more availability ... What benefit does it actually give in the community because they've lived without it and [BFRS is] still meeting its response times in those areas..."

“... The consolidation of resource and estate sounds a sensible idea because with that comes the benefit of being able to offer a more modern service in terms of providing the facilities for those individuals.”

- 6.6 Some questions were asked about redeployment, and whether On-Call firefighters at affected stations would be offered the opportunity to respond from another location. Retaining as many firefighters as possible was considered essential in terms of preserving their knowledge, skill and expertise; and it was hoped that consolidation would help improve availability *“because you’ll have more people at those stations if [they] take up those opportunities to be redeployed from other stations.”*
- 6.7 Having more appliances ‘on the run’ would also, it was felt, have the benefit of increasing On-Call firefighters’ incident exposure, helping them to maintain their operational knowledge and skills.

“... Training and exercising is very good, but we all know that operational experience in terms of actually discharging those skillsets is far more beneficial. So, if we are consolidating the numbers, then there is a benefit there that those individuals will be used more effectively and potentially more frequently, which will build on their knowledge and skills.”

There was support for On-Call crewed special vehicles, but some practical difficulties were highlighted in doing so

- 6.8 Using On-Call firefighters to crew special vehicles was considered eminently sensible if it results in increased and more efficient use of On-Call resources.

“I feel a specialised service is better than an unused one ... smaller and targeted.”

- 6.9 A neighbouring fire and rescue service said they had recently acquired several 4x4 vehicles to deal with wildfires, crewed by On-Call firefighters. While they said this has had a positive impact in increasing the number of incidents attended by these firefighters (which is crucial in terms of staff retention), there has been some pushback, especially in the winter, as *“crews feel that they are almost tied to the station just for the simple fact that they are not going to be utilised for wildfires, but we are still expecting them to adhere to their contracted hours.”*
- 6.10 Another neighbouring service highlighted that placing special vehicles at On-Call fire stations with poor availability runs the risk of having to *“move them to Wholetime station to primary crew them”* if that availability cannot be improved. This was thought to defeat the object of maintaining an operational service while making most efficient use of On-Call staff.

“It’s just a case of being mindful where they are placed and how they are being used.”

Stakeholders suggested several ways to improve future On-Call recruitment, retention, and availability

- 6.11 A neighbouring fire and rescue service said that their challenges are not so much around recruitment and retention of On-Call firefighters, but their availability. They felt that in the past, On-Call firefighters and managers were prepared to provide much more availability (120+ hours a week in some cases) than many

are nowadays, and that once those staff members are lost, they are becoming increasingly difficult to replace.

"... Time is precious for people, so people don't want to commit to those 120-hour contracts ... We are very much an On-Call service and that does present us with challenges, but although we are seeing a gradual decline in recruitment of on-call firefighters, it's more around the hours that they are providing."

- 6.12 However, early succession planning and offering new managers proper support was considered crucial in rebuilding crews around them.

"... We have found that once we've started to replace those managers then we can start to build a crew around that manager if we've got support systems in place to actually help them; and we are seeing some improvements across some of our On-Call stations ... Providing them with that one-to-one support and assistance, so they don't feel that they are just on their own. The key thing is those leaders at those On-Call stations and ensuring that they are fully supported and that they are good managers, because that is the heart of a station ..."

- 6.13 One example was given whereby an On-Call station's establishment had dropped to just two firefighters. One of the two was promoted to crew manager and within a two-year period, the appliance was up to 60% availability. It was, though, said that this was largely down to "having a really dedicated manager" to provide support to, and that:

"... You need people that are willing to put in a lot of time and that's the thing; that's a massive ask."

- 6.14 On the issue of recruitment, it was said that more flexibility around contracts can be more attractive to potential candidates. Indeed, one neighbouring service has successfully recruited On-Call firefighters recently by asking for fewer hours and is expecting availability to rise considerably as a result.

"... [We've stopped] being so restrictive with regards to the hours of cover ... You can provide 30 hours as a minimum and then there's bandings all the way up, whereas previously it was 79 hours as a minimum up to 120 hours ..."

- 6.15 Another neighbouring fire and rescue service commented that they have recently had more dual contract firefighters joining the On-Call service, seeing it as a 'stepping stone' to Wholetime. This has not only helped address some availability issues but also assisted with On-Call firefighter development.

"... We are losing some skills due to the fact that we are asking a lot of the On-Call to do all their training and everything ... in a two to three-hour window each week. If we've got supportive Wholetime staff there, as in more dual contract, it enables them to actually learn from others and gain that experience, knowledge and understanding."

- 6.16 However, caution was thought to be needed in this respect to ensure that when people do make the switch from On-Call to Wholetime, their commitment to the latter does not diminish so much that they are effectively lost. Moreover, managing the practical implications of dual contract On-Call firefighters who are on the same Wholetime watch was also said to be tricky.

“That is a delicate balancing act because obviously some people will maintain their On-Call commitments, some people will lose them ...”

“... When you have people who are all on the same watch; when they are off, then you are able to crew better. But when they are all on duty with the Wholetime, you've lost them for that period.”

- 6.17 As such, careful management of the On-Call to Wholetime process was advocated to ensure watch placements have minimum impact on On-Call availability.

“.. Before we do any placements, we'll look at that so we don't reduce the availability of our On-Call stations ... Saying, ‘Right, if we take them and put them on that watch instead of that watch, it will have a marked difference in availability for the station.’ We have to make that judgement, have that workforce planning ... and if it means them having to go to a different station to do that, so be it. It is just a case of trying to maximise the availability of the On-Call ... They are joining the Wholetime through that On-Call route, so we expect that little bit of two-way give.”

BFRS was urged to carefully consider its messaging to residents affected by its On-Call Improvement Programme proposals

- 6.18 While stakeholders recognised that those living in areas with very poor On-Call appliance availability would see little practical difference to the service received from BFRS (given this low availability means these areas are largely covered by Wholetime/Day Crewed appliances anyway), they urged the Service to carefully consider its messaging to affected residents. Regardless of the underlying rationale for doing so, decisions to remove fire and rescue service resources was described as ‘emotive’ and requiring significant public reassurance.

“The public messaging will be key. It makes absolute sense, but there's a likelihood, particularly in the villages and somewhere like Buckingham, that they will feel that they are losing a service that they don't actually have ... They don't have an On-Call fire service, but when they hear the station is closing, they'll feel like they are losing something ... and getting ahead of that early will be key.”

6.19 In particular, it was said that consistent, clear messaging is needed around:

- » current appliance availability and how fire and rescue cover is currently provided in areas where it is poor

“... People won't look beyond what they can see where they live ... It's trying to get them to understand that actually some [fire engines] are not attending incidents and we are already having other resources come into those areas attending those incidents ... It's a challenge because when people can see that resource, they don't know that it's not available.”

- » the rationale for change (i.e., the ‘why?’)

“A really key piece of learning that we picked up ... is that to us as the subject matter experts around the table, it makes perfect sense, but to the individual on Saturday morning over breakfast reading the paper, it's kind of like, ‘Well, how does that work?’ We took the data ... we made sure that we had a clear, consistent message in a common language that explained the ‘why’ because once people understand the ‘why’ the message is far clearer.”

- » how the modelling shows a 34 second decrease in overall response times when resources are being removed

“... It's showing where that efficiency comes from ... That's the biggest thing in terms of public perception and public interaction; why is it 34 seconds quicker when you are closing it and removing something?”

- » the potential benefits of the proposed changes

“... You are on a hiding to nothing if you put statistics and money versus emotional arguments. So, ‘I'm Miss Miggins ... how am I going to live if my fire station closes?’ does not go with, ‘Statistically, we have X amount of incidents in this area.’ You need to put a statement out about the ‘good news’ ... on your side to counter the emotional, which is going to happen on the other.”

Operational independence for the Chief Fire Officer was supported, with some concerns

6.20 The principle of operational independence for the Chief Fire Officer (CFO) was supported by stakeholders, though there was some concern around public perceptions of accountability.

“It makes absolute sense. I think the Chief Fire Officer needs autonomy to deliver a service.”

“While I can understand the workability of the proposal, I feel that the oversight might not be as obvious to the public as it is now ...”

- 6.21 Stakeholders did, however, question the wisdom of consulting on operational independence and the On-Call Improvement Programme concurrently. They argued that as two distinct and controversial issues, they should have been considered separately; and that taking them together has detracted from the core issues the Service is seeking to address.

“Pick your battles one at a time as opposed to both at the same time ... It is going to be a lot more difficult for people to actually agree to things if you've got a number of proposals that are going to make a massive difference ...”

- 6.22 Moreover, conflating the two issues in the same consultation was thought to run the risk of people seeing operational independence as a means of achieving On-Call rationalisation if BFRS's proposals are not ratified by the Fire Authority.

“... It kind of does look to the outsider, ‘We've added that part to it, so if we don't get our own way then this is the way that we will do it’ because the Chief then will have the say so to be able to go ahead and ignore what the public feels. It looks like a bit of mixed messaging.”

- 6.23 In particular, stakeholders highlighted the line in the consultation pack stating, ‘If an On-Call station was struggling to recruit crew, the CFO could temporarily redeploy that fire engine to a different station, while replacing it with a specialist vehicle needing fewer firefighters’ as an example of how people might construe the idea of operational independence.

“... You wouldn't be able to close a fire station, but the Chief Fire Officer would be able to move a fire engine if it couldn't be crewed. Well, if you move the fire engine, the fire station would have to close anyway ...”

7. BFRS drop-in sessions

Introduction

- 7.1 BFRS hosted a series of in-person information events during the consultation period, one in each of the potentially affected areas (Amersham, Beaconsfield, Buckingham, Great Missenden, High Wycombe, Milton Keynes, and Stokenchurch). At these events, attendees were able to find out more about the consultation proposals, ask questions, and offer feedback.
- 7.2 BFRS staff took notes of the questions asked and comments made at each session, which they then collated and sent to ORS for analysis and reporting. While the events were mainly for information-giving and to signpost attendees to give their feedback via the consultation questionnaire, the questions asked and comments raised have been summarised below.

Summary of key questions/issues raised

- 7.3 There was some support for BFRS's proposals at most of the drop-in events, where attendees described them in terms like 'common sense', 'rational,' and 'logical'. Indeed, several comments were made along the lines of:

"Why is this so politically volatile when these proposals make sense?" (Beaconsfield drop-in event)

- 7.4 Regarding the proposals for specific fire stations, there was understanding of the availability issues at Great Missenden and Stokenchurch; and support for a rural firefighting vehicle at Buckingham.

"Well, it's not been used for five years, has it?" (Great Missenden drop-in event)

"Stokenchurch is probably the biggest lost cause because it is inactive." (Stokenchurch drop-in event)

"We don't always need a full-size fire engine to respond to incidents so maybe a rural vehicle would be suitable for Buckingham." (Buckingham drop-in event)

- 7.5 At Great Missenden however, it was suggested that BFRS's recruitment efforts (or lack thereof) have contributed to the decline of the local fire station; and a Buckingham attendee was unconvinced that the Programme will have the desired positive effect.

"I have never heard of any recruitment for this station before" (Great Missenden drop-in event)

"Could it be said that you haven't done enough to stop the decline of the On-Call?" (Great Missenden drop-in event)

"What we need is more money, I'm not convinced this will bring the improvement you think it will." (Buckingham drop-in event)

- 7.6 There were also concerns around longer response times; and BFRS's ability to deal with increased housing and other development, and specific risks like the motorway network.

"Worried about cuts to services in general, worried about response times changing ..."
(Buckingham drop-in event)

"Wouldn't growth in the area in terms of housing mean that there will be more fires?"
(Buckingham drop-in event)

- 7.7 A couple of alternative suggestions were made: a Beaconsfield attendee proposed a 'blue light hub' for the area; and a Great Missenden attendee felt the proposals do not go far enough and that *"all on-call should be removed."*
- 7.8 A few attendees requested more information around the future use of the Great Missenden site if it is to be sold; whether any of the changes affect mutual aid arrangements with neighbouring services; and how information about any changes and outcomes will be disseminated in future.

"I want to know that we will hear what happens following any agreed change. I also want to know that we hear over the coming years what improvements have been made." (Buckingham drop-in event)

- 7.9 Other comments related to the consultation process. While one attendee at Buckingham was sceptical about their ability to influence potential change, others said they felt far more informed having attended a drop-in session.

"The original leaflet I saw had a lack of detail. I feel much more informed to make a decision."
(Beaconsfield drop-in event)

"I understand what you are looking to do now, having spoken to someone about it." (Amersham drop-in event)

"I am glad I came as you might have changed my opinion or at least helped me settle my view."
(Stokenchurch drop-in event)

8. Submissions

Introduction

- 8.1 During the formal consultation process, BFRS received 10 submissions. The table below shows the breakdown of contributors by type.

Table 12: Summary of submission contributors by type

COUNCILS (4)
Buckinghamshire Council Gerrards Cross Town Council Little Chalfont Parish Council Simpson and Ashland Parish Council
REPRESENTATIVE BODIES (3)
Fire and Rescue Services Association (x2) Fire Brigades Union (Buckinghamshire Brigade)
FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICES (1)
Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service
INDIVIDUAL RESPONDENT (2)

- 8.2 BFRS has reviewed the full submissions in detail, but each one has been summarised below for accessibility and to highlight its main arguments and any alternative proposals.

It is also important to note that the following section is a report of the views expressed by submission contributors.

In some cases, these views may not be supported by the available evidence - and while ORS has not sought to highlight or correct those that make incorrect statements or assumptions, this should be borne in mind when considering the responses.

Buckinghamshire Council

While recognising the Service's stated aim to modernise and strengthen On-Call provision, Buckinghamshire Council strongly opposes the proposals set out in the consultation, which it feels "represent a significant and unacceptable reduction in fire and rescue provision across Buckinghamshire."

The Council believes these proposals risk longer emergency response times, with consequential risk to lives and property; weaken local and county-wide resilience in the face of major incidents and emergencies; fail to account for planned housing and infrastructure growth; undermine public confidence in emergency preparedness; and reduce democratic accountability and transparency. Its detailed concerns are outlined below.

Failure to plan for future growth

The Council highlights that Buckinghamshire is experiencing unprecedented housing growth; major rail and road infrastructure projects including HS2 and East-West Rail; and increasing numbers of data

centres, Battery Energy Storage Systems, solar farms, business units and schools. There is also projected growth in neighbouring areas which will see more traffic on Buckinghamshire's strategic road network. The Council feels that as the analysis underpinning these proposals relies on historic incident data, it fails to adequately model this future risk.

The Council is particularly concerned about the impacts on communities such as Beaconsfield, Amersham, High Wycombe, Buckingham, Stokenchurch, and Great Missenden, which it says will be directly affected by a reduction in service because of these proposals.

Cuts in service without financial necessity

The Council argues that while there is no financial necessity to make these changes, the removal of six fire engines without adequate replacement and the closure of two stations "represents a clear service cut, regardless of how it is presented." It essentially says that:

"The proposals are positioned as 'reinvesting' in the service, but in reality, they will reduce capacity and diminish frontline capability unnecessarily."

Lack of investment in On-Call recruitment and retention

The Council is concerned that instead of tackling the root cause of On-Call staffing challenges through recruitment campaigns, training, and incentives (using financial underspends and reserves), the proposals simply remove appliances and close stations, reducing the county's firefighting capability.

Operational risks and resilience

The Council feels that BFRS's proposals will create significant risks to the safety, wellbeing, and resilience of Buckinghamshire residents. In particular, it says that:

- » replacing fire engines with welfare or specialist vehicles raises serious operational concerns, particularly in scenarios where multiple incidents occur simultaneously
- » the Fire Brigades Union has warned that the proposals will lead to unsafe reductions, increased response times, and weakened resilience, leaving Buckinghamshire vulnerable to major incidents, severe weather events, and emergencies requiring multiple appliances
- » while it agrees in principle that the quickest appropriate vehicle should be dispatched to an incident, this does not justify reducing the overall number of fire engines available
- » reducing On-Call fire engines and closing stations will deepen BFRS's reliance on neighbouring services, placing additional pressure on them and increasing the risk of delayed responses during periods of heightened or concurrent demand
- » closing Great Missenden and Stokenchurch fire stations removes the possibility of future recruitment and permanently reduces coverage in rural areas.

Lack of democratic accountability and governance

The Council does not support granting increased operational independence to the Chief Fire Officer as decisions affecting public safety must remain subject to robust governance, transparency, democratic scrutiny, and oversight.

Inadequate consultation process

The 10-week consultation period, spanning Christmas and New Year, is considered insufficient. In particular, the Council says that many parish and town councils would be unable to meet and agree formal responses within this timeframe. It notes that a request to extend the consultation by two weeks was rejected, while Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service has allowed 12 weeks for a similar consultation.

Equality impacts

The Council is concerned that rural communities will be disproportionately affected by these proposals, reducing access to emergency services and increasing risk for vulnerable residents.

The Council's requests

In summary, the Council requests that Buckinghamshire FRS:

- » withdraws these proposals and works with partners to develop a plan that prioritises investment, recruitment, and resilience.
- » develops a new plan that reflects future growth and risk
- » invests in recruitment and retention for On-Call firefighters, and strengthens resilience rather than cutting frontline services
- » commits to maintaining safe and adequate fire and rescue provision.

Fire and Rescue Services Association (2 responses⁵)

The FRSA argues against a misconception that the On-Call Duty System is broken and unfit for the 21st century; highlighting that *“every major national review over the past two decades concludes that the On-Call model is vital, cost-effective, and capable of renewal if properly supported.”* It also highlights the growing number of fire and rescue services (such as Humberside, Nottinghamshire, Mid and West Wales, Devon and Somerset, Shropshire, and Lincolnshire) that have invested time and resources into their On-Call Duty Systems, resulting in overall On-Call availability increases to 80-90%.

The Association strongly objects to BFRS's On-Call Improvement Programme proposals. These, it feels, *“would reduce local response capability and community safety; undermine resilience during concurrent or major incidents; contradict national policy and best practice guidance; and eliminate cost-effective infrastructure that could be modernised, not withdrawn.”* It also suggests that removing On-Call capability will deliver no financial saving, and could, in fact, increase costs due to reliance on Wholetime staff and over the border support. It is also concerned that there are no innovative new duty systems contained within the proposals, which are:

“... A retrograde step that will provide a thin, inefficient model that is likely to fail under periods of high demand and/or a major incident(s). The reliance on a 12-pump model provides no resilience and will put the public at unnecessary risk.”

⁵ Both submissions made largely the same points, which have been summarised here.

Concern is also expressed that predictive models can give false results. The Association gives the example of Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service, where an initial analysis was flawed, reducing cover to an unsustainable level. As a consequence, the Service's proposals had to be revisited.

Regarding the proposed closure of Great Missenden and Stokenchurch fire stations, the FRSA argues that:

- » the two stations serve rural and semi-rural communities where response times are already challenged by distance and road infrastructure; and removing the stations will widen coverage gaps and increase response times during life-critical emergencies
- » the On-Call system provides capacity to respond to incidents such as wildfires, flooding, and large-scale weather events; and closing these stations will reduce the Service's flexibility and resilience at a time when demand patterns are constantly changing
- » On-Call staff provide local knowledge and are the visible community presence of the fire and rescue Service. Removing the stations would erode community connections and diminish local intelligence and trust capital, both critical in effective prevention work
- » both stations could serve as future resilience hubs, training and community safety centres, or pilots for modernised On-Call models. Their closure removes all such options
- » the closures would not generate proportional savings but would permanently remove cost-effective resilience assets
- » once a fire station is closed, it is unlikely ever to be reinstated; and with population growth, climate-related risks and increased development across Buckinghamshire, the loss of these sites is *"short-sighted and strategically damaging"*
- » such a move risks creating inconsistency with national fire reform policy, which promotes collaboration, flexible crewing and maximising retained capacity across services.

The Association also suggests that low appliance availability at these stations (and others) are repairable through targeted action, including flexible availability (i.e., tiered) contracts; modular and localised training to widen participation; dedicated employer engagement programmes, support frameworks and recognition schemes; positive community-based recruitment campaigns using dedicated resources, including current On-Call staff; and improved cultural integration between Wholetime and On-Call firefighters.

Considering the above, the Association asks the Fire Authority to reject BFRS's proposals; commit to a detailed On-Call recruitment and retention improvement plan with measurable outcomes, aligned with National Fire Chiefs Council recommendations; engage communities and employers to rebuild support for the On-Call system; explore modernised contracts, improved training pathways and enhanced employer engagement; and *"ensure that any future proposals demonstrably prioritise community safety, resilience and long-term sustainability."* This, it feels, will ensure the On-Call Service in Buckinghamshire can:

"... Continue to deliver highly responsive, community-based and cost-effective emergency fire cover for Buckinghamshire."

Fire Brigades Union (Buckinghamshire Brigade)

The FBU unequivocally objects to BFRS's consultation proposals to remove seven On-Call appliances, close Great Missenden and Stokenchurch Fire Stations, and confer expanded operational independence on the

Chief Fire Officer. It says that, taken together, the proposals represent a *“coordinated and unsafe reduction in frontline fire and rescue capability, coupled with a transfer of service-shaping power away from elected members and into the hands of an unelected officer, without adequate democratic oversight, transparency, or consultation.”*

The Union says that at the core of the proposals is a *“fundamental and dangerous flaw”* that sees the Service planning to historic demand rather than foreseeable risk. It suggests that designing fire cover around recent *averages* leaves communities exposed when circumstances deviate from the norm, which is especially concerning given climate-driven events, large and protracted incidents, and sustained operational commitments are now a *“routine part of the operating environment.”*

The FBU criticises the Service’s reliance on service-wide averages (that 12 wholetime pumps deal with ‘the vast majority’ of incidents, or that ‘around 20’ appliances are available at peak for example) on the basis that risk is uneven and geographic, and multiple calls can occur simultaneously in the same area. The Union also says that *“those who will wait longer for a first appliance because their local retained pump or station has been removed will not experience an average; they will experience a slower and riskier response.”*

In considering declining On-Call availability, the FBU says that this is not evidence that appliances or stations are no longer required; but a *“product of a prolonged funding crisis and of managerial and organisational failure.”* Stations, it is said, have been allowed to stagnate, capital investment has been deferred, recruitment and retention efforts have been inadequate, and incentives have failed to keep pace with the realities of modern employment.

“To respond by permanently removing appliances and closing stations is not a solution – it institutionalises failure rather than addressing it.”

The proposed closures of Great Missenden and Stokenchurch Fire Stations are considered *“particularly indefensible.”* The Service and the Fire Authority are said to have not sustained these stations as viable retained locations, and there is concern that *“once a station is closed and infrastructure lost, response times increase, resilience is weakened, and the option of rebuilding retained cover is effectively removed.”*

The FBU is also firmly opposed to:

- » the proposed replacement of standard On-Call fire appliances with smaller, specialist, or support vehicles, which *“do not provide the pumping capacity, crew, equipment, or all-hazards versatility of a standard fire engine and cannot function properly as a first-arriving resource.”* It is said that communities that previously had access to a full fire appliance will instead wait longer for one to arrive from elsewhere
- » relying on cross-border assistance as a substitute for maintaining local resources, especially as neighbouring services, including Oxfordshire, are under significant financial pressure and facing reductions.

“Designing local cover on the assumption that other services ... will compensate for removed capacity creates shared vulnerability, not resilience.”

- » wider operational independence for the Chief Fire Officer on the basis that *“the removal of the requirement for Fire Authority approval to redeploy, relocate, or repurpose appliances*

... would allow real reductions in frontline fire cover to be made without the level of democratic scrutiny, public visibility, and consultation that the Authority has committed to in its Community Risk Management Plan.”

On the issue of operational independence, the FBU says it has warned at a national level that this is frequently used as a cuts-enabling device that weakens democratic oversight and workforce voice. The Union feels that risk is magnified here by the timing of the proposal, which sits alongside plans to remove appliances, downgrade resources, and close stations.

“The Authority should not be loosening the democratic safeguards on service reduction at precisely the moment when firefighters and communities are raising concerns about safety and resilience.”

There is deep concern that this proposal has emerged without prior discussion with the FBU (particularly given the Service’s commitment to a “no surprises” approach and early engagement); and that there is no detailed, published scheme setting out precisely which decisions would remain with the Authority, which would require reporting, and which could be taken unilaterally by the Chief Fire Officer. The Union argues that *“approving such an open-ended delegation over frontline firefighting resources is unsound governance. Once granted, it would be extremely difficult to reverse, while public accountability for unpopular outcomes would continue to rest with elected members.”*

Ultimately, the FBU says that *“these proposals in their entirety must be withdrawn”* and focus should turn to constructive engagement on, and investment in, an On-Call recovery and investment plan to modernise stations, improve incentives, support shared crewing arrangements, and undertake sustained local recruitment. It also says that proceeding, without addressing the root causes of On-Call decline and without meaningful engagement, will provoke an industrial response.

Gerrards Cross Town Council

The Council strongly disagrees that BFRS needs to make changes to the way it uses its resources to address its On-Call challenges. It feels that:

- » the Service should focus on on-call recruitment, not reducing resources in a growing County
- » the on-call role should be made easier and more attractive to people, working with local employers
- » the Service is making changes based on historic data, not future demand.

The Council strongly disagrees that replacing some On-Call fire engines with specialist vehicles would help BFRS make better use of its resources. It states that there are no investments being made as part of these proposals in rural firefighting vehicles; and that it is *“misleading”* to imply so.

The Council tends to agree that the quickest appropriate vehicle should be sent to an incident, regardless of which station it is sent from as *“this is already the model which is in operation.”*

The Council strongly disagrees with BFRS’s proposal to reduce the number of On-Call fire engines from 18 to 11, with the aim of having the remaining engines more reliably available. It says that this is 25% of all vehicles across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes and that the response data is based on historic data and flawed. The Councils also believes it will lead to an increased use of neighbouring services.

The Council also strongly disagrees with the proposals to permanently close Great Missenden and Stokenchurch Fire Stations, suggesting that officers have failed to explore options to properly utilise these stations. It also notes that Great Missenden is subject to a covenant to always be a fire station.

The Council strongly disagrees that BFRS's proposed changes to On-Call provision will make better use of public money. It feels that these cuts are unlikely to save any material money due to increased costs for using other services; and that there is no financial need for these cuts.

The Council strongly disagrees that the CFO, on behalf of BFRS, should have operational independence to determine the make-up and distribution of the Service's operational fleet and resources as this would "weaken democratic oversight and may stop a future Fire Authority reversing the cuts." On the individual areas, the Council tends to agree that the CFO should be able to make strategic operational decisions around the allocation of staff, balancing operational needs, and expenditure; but strongly disagrees that they should be able to make strategic operational decisions around:

- » staff: the Council says the CFO already has this power, save the Deputy Chief Fire Officer (DCFO) appointment and dismissal. This, it feels, "*is an important appointment for the Fire Authority to retain oversight [because] the DCFO replaces the CFO in any absence or unexpected departure*"
- » configuration: the Council feels this would enable the CFO to reduce fire engines in future without needing Fire Authority approval
- » deployment: the Council feels this would enable the CFO to remove engines from locations with no consultation, risking stations being unviable.

In considering equalities, the Council feels the proposals will adversely impact over 65s, a disproportionate number of whom live in the kinds of rural areas most impacted by the proposals (evidenced by Office for National Statistics Census data). It also says that the consultation "*is being rushed over a holiday period and is too reliant on digital means,*" meaning elderly residents' views may not be captured.

Little Chalfont Parish Council

The Council is concerned that although future risks are generally acknowledged in BFRS's consultation documentation, the supporting evidence relies heavily on historic incident data and response modelling that is "*not fit for purpose and is highly unlikely to be able to deliver a 'modern agile fire service'*".

The Council also argues that the Service's Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) is not clearly aligned to any countywide strategy for developments across the county. It says that Buckinghamshire Council has not yet published its local plan and that without this, there is no agreed framework setting out the nature and amount of housing and other development, and how this will affect risk.

"Designing an 'agile modern fire service' before this is known risks decisions being made based on past demand rather than future needs. It makes the existing CRMP look like an exercise in short term cost saving, rather than a comprehensive strategic fit for future review."

The parish council recommends that:

- » as Buckinghamshire Council is due to complete the local plan in late 2026, the Fire Authority should use the data contained in it to assess future risks, plan future workforce skills and equipment needs, and assess station locations

- » the implementation of changes should be paused to incorporate issues arising from the local plan
- » a revised CRMP should be produced once the local plan is adopted, *“using updated data, forward looking, scenario-based modelling with plans for coordination with other emergency services.”*

Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service

Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service /Authority does not anticipate any significant adverse impact in terms of cross-border response or operational resilience because of BFRS’s proposals. It says that *“mutual aid and cross-border mobilisation across Thames Valley is a long-established and valued feature of our collective resilience,”* and that the proposed changes do not appear likely to materially increase demand on Royal Berkshire FRS resources or reduce the Service’s ability to maintain its response standards.

That said, Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service/Authority is keen to understand in more detail how BFRS intends to deliver services under the proposed model, as this will directly inform its own considerations as it develops and delivers its own CRMP.

The Service/Authority also consider it important that proposed changes across Thames Valley are viewed through a system-wide lens, as *“even where the direct impact on one neighbouring service is limited, the cumulative effect of multiple changes across the region can alter patterns of availability and demand over time.”* It would therefore welcome continued engagement through existing Thames Valley resilience and operational forums, including shared approaches to monitoring and evaluation after implementation.

Simpson & Ashland Parish Council

Simpson & Ashland Parish Council fully supports BFRS’s proposals, which *“have been carefully researched and evidenced in the light of changing circumstances and demands.”*

Individual respondent (1)

The respondent is of the view that the recruitment of On-Call staff *“has not been a priority or a policy of BFRS, which has led to a lack of ambition to recruit over a ten-year period ... this has now made BFRS ... the worst performing On-Call employer in the country.”*

The respondent feels that the current staffing numbers currently on On-Call stations are so low that *“BFRS will probably have to look at a different model [to] include additional Day Crewing arrangements north and central ... and then bolster the few On-Call stations that are working with decent numbers now.”* They also say that if the Service decides that the On-Call system is the most cost-effective way forward, it must invest in it and undertake an *“ambitious and radical”* recruitment programme.

Recruitment

The respondent suggests that BFRS should:

- » produce a recruitment ‘pack’ to be placed in, for example, libraries, health centres, and colleges; and a guidance document specifically for employers to show them the benefits of having On-Call personnel working for them
- » undertake outreach and targeted work, including targeted advertising, engaging with community and support groups, places of worship; and women’s sports clubs; and use media such as local radio, social media

- » set up Business Charter schemes with large firms, industries and colleges
- » develop On-Call champions/mentors to recruit local people, offering incentives for successful recruits
- » work with Job Centres to encourage people from under-represented groups to consider On-Call firefighting
- » offer taster/have a go sessions
- » ask previous On-Call employees whether they would consider returning.

Training skills and maintenance

The respondent suggests that once applicants have passed the entrance tests, they should be guaranteed to be 'safe to ride' within 90 Days and BA Competent as quickly as possible.

"Currently there is lengthy recruitment processing caused by fire & rescue services wanting to wait until there are enough candidates to test at any one time in order to make the process cost-effective, but can lead to loss of potential recruits."

They also suggest that BFRS should:

- » complete On-Call courses with smaller numbers (rather than wait for 12 available recruits) so people do not lose interest waiting; and run them either over two weeks or five weekends
- » prioritise training for drivers and officers in charge at stations that otherwise have enough On-Call firefighters numbers
- » set up 'training hubs' linking a number of On-Call stations together on one drill night to *"allow for better practical training until numbers for each fire station are sufficient;"* increase drill nights to three hours to improve skills, maintenance and training; and On-Call give On-Call junior officers additional plus hours a month to maintain station records.

Call totals and risk profiles

Over the next five to 30 years, Buckinghamshire is likely to go through a period of significant increase to its population and associated built and infrastructural environments. This, the respondent says, *"is likely to lead to an increase in the overall volume of incidents even if they continue to fall on a per capita basis."*

Moreover, they say that there is also likely to be a change to the profile of risk in the community due to the ageing and diversification of the population, with statistics showing a direct correlation between age and the likelihood of a fire resulting in a serious injury or fatality; and that a number of major engineering and infrastructure projects such as HS2, East - West rail, and the East - West Express Way will also impact on the area risk profile, particularly during the construction phase.

In light of this, the respondent suggests that BFRS must ensure it is *"reporting a response to incidents in a way that shows their effects"* and advocates the adoption of national performance measures against emergency response standards to match the methodology used by the Home Office and HMICFRS. That is, measuring performance from the time the 999 call is answered to the time the first fire appliance is on scene, rather than from the time a station is alerted to the time the fire engine arrives at the scene.

Station locations

The respondent notes that some of BFRS's On-Call stations now have a limited pool of potential recruits nearby, but that there is no quick fix in 'recruiting' Wholetime staff into On-Call roles. Indeed, with the common training standards now in place, they say it is *"just as likely that On-Call Firefighters will opt to apply for Wholetime positions, leaving the On-Call System depleted..."* This, they feel, should be balanced and used as an incentive to allow On-Call firefighters to join the Wholetime service over time.

The fact that some areas in Buckinghamshire have significantly higher than average house prices is also highlighted as making it difficult for On-Call firefighters to live in close enough proximity to a fire station; and the traditional On-Call model is said to be less compatible with changing work and lifestyle habits.

"Fewer people live and work close to their local fire station, and many now commute longer distances, work remotely or have unpredictable schedules, making it harder to respond quickly for first-line availability."

The respondent also highlights a lack of awareness in local communities of local fire stations being crewed by On-Call firefighters, and of station vacancies. They say that *"more needs to be done to interact with the public and 'sell' the role of a On-Call firefighter to members of the community."*

Current situation in BFRS

The respondent notes that incidents that require two appliances in On-Call areas are historically covered by one Wholetime appliance and one On-Call appliance and that:

"The biggest problem with having no On-Call appliances in Buckinghamshire ... is that the second appliance is also then a Wholetime Pump, which is now diminishing the number of BFRS appliances in wider areas of the county. These then will need to be covered by over the border appliances. This must mean that response times are much slower."

The respondent is concerned that two simultaneous five-pump would deplete BFRS of cover for any other incidents and asks where the Service would find relief crews in this situation, or any protracted incident over a number of days.

They also question the number of Wholetime staff covering On-Call posts, as below.

"Buckingham Fire Station is shown as having 13 On-Call personnel, but I understand the actual figures are five On-Call plus six Wholetime staff, which distorts the numbers in the document."

Proposed changes

The respondent proposes the changes outlined in the table below. These, they say, should provide 12 Wholetime and 13 On-Call appliances (once recruitment of the On-Call personnel reaches maximum capacity, with north and south RFVs jump crewed).

In addition, they suggest that the current four-line availability should be reduced to first, second and third line only, as *"a three-hour attendance time turn-in is unrealistic."*

Fire Station	Suggested Resourcing
Amersham	Remove On-Call appliance and replace with RFV, jump crewed with Chesham.

	Increase staffing levels at Chesham.
Aylesbury	Maintain 1 x On-Call rescue pump (RP), plus specialist appliances. Complete necessary work to recruit. Crew Welfare Unit to be crewed by civilian staff. Look at Wholetime crewing levels and incident numbers, as Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) appears to be jump crewed with 1 x Wholetime RP, which may influence availability, particularly during a protracted incident.
Beaconsfield	Remove On-Call appliance, area covered by Wholetime pumps. Send spare On-Call personnel to High Wycombe or Marlow for crew resilience.
Brill	Maintain 1 x On-Call RP and complete necessary work to recruit.
Broughton	Maintain 1 x On-Call RP and complete necessary work to recruit.
Buckingham	Maintain 1 x On-Call RP and complete necessary work to recruit.
Chesham	Maintain 1 x On-Call RP. Complete necessary work to recruit from population pool of 32,566. Amalgamate with Amersham and provide RFV, jump crewed with Amersham.
Great Missenden	Close fire station.
Haddenham	Maintain 1 x On-Call RP and complete necessary work to recruit.
High Wycombe	Maintain 1 x On-Call RP and complete necessary work to recruit.
Marlow	Maintain 1 x On-Call RP and complete necessary work to recruit.
Olney	Maintain 1 x On-Call RP and complete necessary work to recruit.
Princes Risborough	Maintain 1 x On-Call RP and complete necessary work to recruit.
Stokenchurch	Close fire station.
Waddesden	Maintain 1 On-Call RP and complete necessary work to recruit.
West Ashland	Maintain 1 x RP for the On-Call crew. Replace second appliance with RVF, to be jump crewed.
Winslow	Maintain 1 x On-Call RP and complete necessary work to recruit.
Agile Fire Appliances: bank staff should be used to provide additional fire appliance cover each day and night, not used on fire stations to top up existing Wholetime crewing levels. An additional two further appliances used in this way would increase the overall appliance availability to 14 across the County and could potentially strengthen the western flank of Buckinghamshire.	

Finally, the respondent cannot understand why BFRS did not acquire a 4 x 4 that can be crewed by four people instead of the RVF, as this could have been used in several rural On-Call Fire Stations over time, with Wholetime back up for incidents. They say that an RFV *“has a very specific and limited role. It cannot replace a fire appliance for house fires; road traffic collisions; rescues; breathing apparatus incidents.”*

Individual respondent (2)

As BFRS is not the first service to have to address diminishing numbers of On-Call firefighters the respondent considers it disappointing that there is no discussion in the consultation document around how other FRSs have dealt with the issue. They feel that BFRS has *“allowed the On-Call service to just wither on the vine and are currently giving the impression that it is perfectly justified in now cementing this into the system on the basis that there is no real alternative.”*

Response Times

The respondent requests more information on BFRS's 10-minute response time standard, particularly with respect to the nature of the attendance (i.e., how many firefighters will arrive, and what resources they will have). They suggest that, to assure the public, there should be a guarantee that the first attendance will include sufficient, qualified crew numbers and equipment to begin operations on arrival; and that if that is problematic for BFRS, it needs a stated response time for a second attendance as well as the first.

Station closures

The respondent questions what has changed that now makes Great Missenden and Stokenchurch unnecessary for local and wider fire and rescue cover, given *"the consultation only really referred to the lack of staff to justify the change"* and no other changes have been made to local fire and rescue cover. Furthermore, the respondent notes that BFRS only chose to disclose the impact on response times to the two villages with the two on-call stations permanently closed, whereas *"the main issue is the total time it takes to attend calls in the villages and whether that is a satisfactory level of service."*

Admittedly, on-call in these villages is problematic if not totally impossible but where is the defined alternative in the consultation? There is none. Bucks F&RS claim that these changes are not cuts but if it looks like a cut and smells like a cut then it probably is a cut.

Resilience

The respondent questions whether BFRS's resilience is adequate, suggesting that if it is not, *"mutual aid would no doubt come into play."* However, as other FRSs are in the same boat as BFRS, they ask what assurances there are that local mutual aid would be sufficient.

"... The question is whether [it] is sustainable for Royal Berkshire FRS (or Oxfordshire FRS etc.) in the long term irrespective of any inter-service fees. Surely, BFRS needs to cover the vast majority of its own area itself and leave routine over the border mutual aid for those areas involving the peculiarities of the county boundary."

Risk

The respondent considers it *"good news"* that fire calls have decreased, but states that this does not mean FRSs workloads have also lessened. They feel that a proper measure of operational workload would be *"man hours deployed at incidents,"* which is particularly important given the growth of wildfires where fire might require a lengthy attendance.

The respondent notes that nearly all the information used to assess risk in the consultation is historic, and that many newer risks (like lithium-ion batteries, large warehouses near motorway junctions, HS2, and the expansion of and taller buildings in towns) are not mentioned. In addition, they feel that the volatile international situation and the possibility of attacks against defence and infrastructure cannot be ignored. They are not convinced that BFRS has sufficient spare capacity to deal with all these issues.

"All the assurances are based on past data. Looking forward there are no statistics, no logical extrapolations, no nothing. This claim appears to be just guesswork without logical foundation."

Another risk foreseen by the respondent is BFRS staff reaction: they suggest that *“some will see this as Bucks FRS in decline,”* which may lead them to find jobs in more stable environments (like London Fire Brigade). They also highlight reputation risk, for:

“It only takes one major or unusual incident to happen and not to end well for the media, the general public, politicians and insurers to start asking difficult questions about the competence of the Service ...”

Operational independence

The respondent does not feel there is a problem with operational independence for the Chief Fire Officer per se, but says it must be carefully defined, with the outputs being the key factors. For instance, ‘attendance criteria’ should be defined not only in terms of time but also the capability delivered in that timeframe. Furthermore, the respondent says that *“if the Chief Fire Officer is to have a certain degree of independence then [they] must share the direct Duty of Care to the public with the Fire Authority.”*

Conclusion

The respondent feels that the consultation concentrates on a small picture (On-Call) to the detriment of the big picture; and that *“both need to be considered to see how the BF&RS would perform as a whole.”*

They suggest that BFRS consider a defined service delivery criterion for Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes; and consider how that can be best achieved using existing, different or brand-new resources. This, they say, may require the Service to *“think the unthinkable”* and/or build new models of delivery for critical examination.

Appendix 1: list of figures

Figure 1: To what extent do you agree or disagree that BFRS needs to make changes to the way it uses resources to address the challenges outlined above?.....	26
Figure 2: Key reasons for answer given for Q1 (agreement/disagreement that BFRS needs make changes to the way it uses resources to address the challenges outlined above).	28
Figure 3: To what extent do you agree or disagree that replacing some On-Call fire engines with specialist vehicles would help BFRS make better use of its resources?	30
Figure 4: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the quickest appropriate vehicle should be sent to an incident, regardless of which station it is sent from?	30
Figure 5: To what extent do you agree or disagree with BFRS's proposal to reduce the number of On-Call fire engines from 18 to 11, with the aim of having the remaining engines more reliably available?	32
Figure 6: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to permanently close Great Missenden Fire Station?	33
Figure 7: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to permanently close Stokenchurch Fire Station?	34

Appendix 2: focus group slides



Buckinghamshire
Fire & Rescue Service

Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service *On-Call Improvement Programme*

Background information



About BFRS

- Serves population of 800,000+ across Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes and includes:
 - Stretches of the M1, M25 & M40
 - River Thames
 - Rail infrastructure
- 19 fire stations
 - 5 x Wholetime
 - Full-time emergency response 24/7, every day of the year
 - 4 x Day Crewed
 - Full-time cover 9am-6pm and On-Call 6pm-9am
 - 10 x On-Call
 - Firefighters live/work in the area and come in when needed
- 30 fire engines (pumps) + special appliances



About BFRS



400 firefighters (75% wholetime)



Community Safety Team (home safety visits/advice)
Protection Team (business safety advice/engagement, audits, enforcement action if needed)



Thames Valley Fire Control Service (TVFCS) covers Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Royal Berkshire

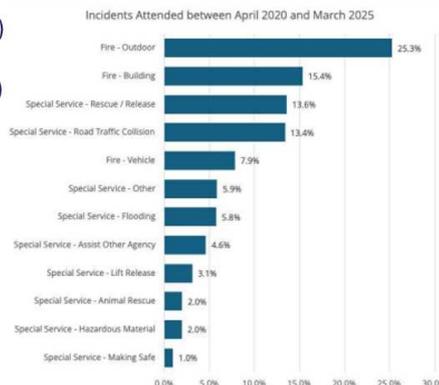


130 support staff (risk assessment, IT, HR, vehicle maintenance etc.)



Revenue budget approx. £39.5m (24/25)

c.8,000 incidents per year

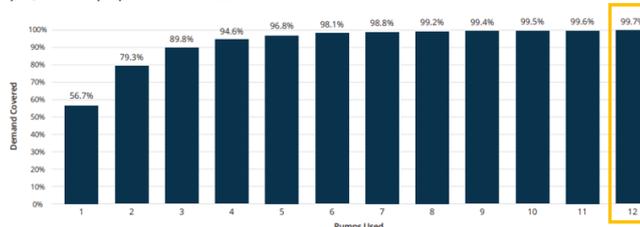


Resourcing (ensuring BFRS can respond to incidents)

Data → 12 immediately available fire engines is the right number to meet almost all emergencies

- 99%+ incidents managed by 9 or fewer
- Even at busy times, only c.20 needed (mix of Wholetime/On-Call)
- Last five years → only one incident where 20+ used at same time

Graph A, Use of Pumps April 2019 to March 2023



12 pumps covers 99.7% of demand (i.e. for 364 days of an average year)

BFRS is confident it can meet community needs without keeping 30 pumps crewed at all times

Resourcing (ensuring BFRS can respond to incidents)

BFRS plans for the very rare occasions when 20+ fire engines are needed by ...

- Calling on neighbouring services through 'mutual aid' (provides the same in return)
- Ensuring shared control room sends quickest fire engine, regardless of service
- Using specialist vehicles for specific risks/incidents (more flexible response, fewer full-sized fire engines needed)
- Utilising 'national resilience' arrangements for large-scale/complex incidents
 - E.g., Urban Search and Rescue for collapsed buildings/other specialist rescues

Rural firefighting units

- Smaller, more agile vehicles for off-road use
- Need fewer crew, can get to remote/rural areas quickly
- Vital during dry summer months → grass/woodland fires more common

Water carriers and welfare units*

- Provide extra supplies/support for crews at longer incidents

Water rescue units and boats

- For incidents on rivers, waterways, lakes; or flooding

Turntable ladder

- High-reaching vehicles used to access tall buildings or deliver water from height

Operational Support Unit

- Provides extra/specialist equipment not routinely carried on standard fire engine

Incident support units

- Carry specialist equipment to major/complex incidents

* None in BFRS currently; would be implemented post-consultation/implementation



Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service

Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service

On-Call Improvement Programme

Current Challenges



The need for change

BFRS needs to change how its On-Call fire engines/stations are organised ...

- Recruiting/keeping On-Call firefighters is much harder than it used to be

Changing working patterns → fewer people work locally, more commute/work from home outside area

Many rural areas → pool of potential recruits is small

People have less free time to commit

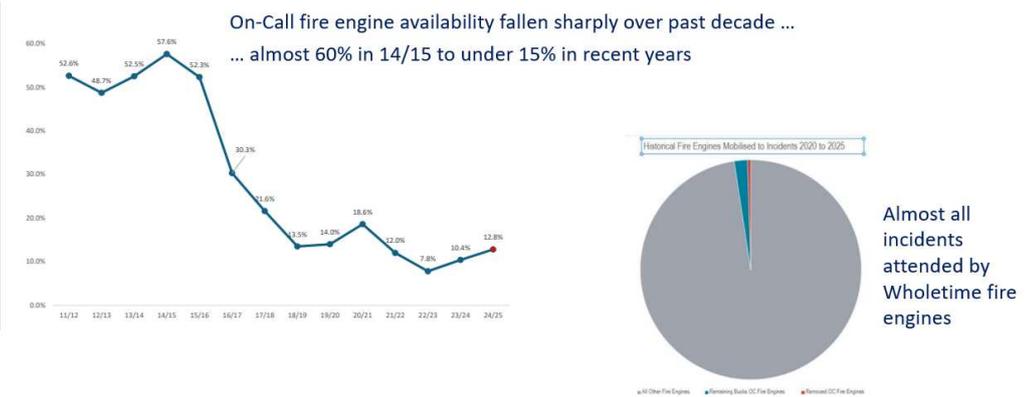
- Some On-Call fire engines are rarely used; small number not been crewed for years
- Service must adapt to changing communities
 - New housing developments, ageing population with more complex needs (more mobility-related rescues and medical emergencies), busier roads, climate change/extreme weather
- Must also make best use of public money

Proposed changes not designed to cut budgets, reduce firefighter numbers, divert resources from frontline, or reduce BFRS's public safety/protection work

Issues to consider: On-Call availability

Low availability limits operational impact of On-Call pumps (Buckinghamshire and nationally)

Figure 8, BFRS On-Call Availability from 2011-2025



Issues to consider: response times

Available in -	10 minutes
Broughton	7.5%
Olney	21.9%
West Ashland 1	18.4%
West Ashland 2	0.2%
Aylesbury	10.2%
Buckingham	14.9%
Winslow	18.1%
Brill	2.2%
Waddesdon	12.0%
Haddenham	0.0%
Amersham	0.7%
Chesham	3.1%
Great Missenden	0.0%
High Wycombe	2.7%
Princes Risborough	7.9%
Stokenchurch	0.0%
Marlow	8.5%
Beaconsfield	1.1%
Average	7.2%

2024-2025

BFRS aims to reach emergencies in 10 mins (avg.)

- Wholetime fire engines always crewed/ready to respond immediately → best chance of meeting target
- On-Call fire engines rarely ready to respond to an emergency within 10 minutes ...
- ... more likely to take 20+ minutes, or not crewed at all

On-Call → vital for resilience/support, especially at bigger/longer incidents ...

... but can't be relied on as 1st fire engine at emergencies

Questions



Any questions for clarification?

To what extent do you recognise/understand BFRS's On-Call challenges?

Do you feel that the Service needs to make changes to the way it uses its resources to address these challenges? Why?

- Advantages/positive impacts?
- Concerns/negative impacts?

Proposals for change

BFRS consulting on proposed changes to...

On-call fire engines

- Remove some On-Call fire engines that can't be reliably crewed; replace some with specialist vehicles

On-call fire stations

- Close two On-Call stations that haven't been able to crew a fire engine for years (Great Missenden/Stokenchurch)

Specialist vehicles

- Base specialist vehicles where they best match local risks/community needs

Operational independence for the chief fire officer (CFO)

- Give the CFO more flexibility to make quicker, evidence-based decisions about where resources are based

Opportunity to ...

- Reinvest savings into On-Call (i.e., firefighter numbers, vehicles, equipment, training, station facilities)
- Improve reliability/strengthen On-Call
- Keep ability to scale up when larger/multiple incidents happen
- Use budget more effectively – and invest where it will have most impact on frontline response

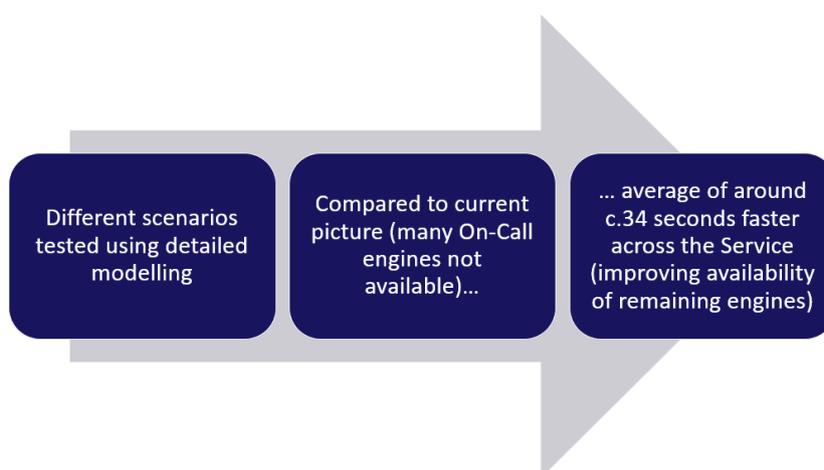
Stations proposed for closure

Station	Rationale	Impact
Great Missenden and Stokenchurch	Both On-Call fire engines → 0% availability over past 5 years Residents already covered by nearby wholetime fire engines, supported when needed by neighbouring services Maintaining stations = ongoing costs Closing the two stations → BFRS can reinvest resources to strengthen cover where fire engines are available/needed most	Analysis → will not slow down fire engine response times

Stations affected by removal or replacement of On-Call fire engines

Station	Proposal	Rationale
Amersham	Remove 1 On-Call fire engine; replace with Rural Firefighting Vehicle (RFV)	Current On-Call availability consistently low RFV = important for tackling grass and woodland fires On-Call staff could be redeployed to Chesham to strengthen crewing/availability
Beaconsfield	Remove 1 On-Call fire engine; replace with new Crew Welfare Unit (CWU)	Current On-Call availability consistently low CWU → improve resilience through dedicated support for firefighters at incidents
Buckingham	Remove 1 On-Call fire engine; replace with RFV	Current On-Call availability consistently low RFV = important specialist capability → Buckingham well placed for this On-Call staff could support availability at Winslow through 'tiered' response
High Wycombe	Remove 1 On-Call fire engine	Current On-Call availability consistently low On-Call staff could support crewing of turntable ladder and provide 'tiered response' to i.e., Marlow and Princes Risborough
West Ashland	Remove 1 On-Call fire engine; replace with new Water Carrier Move RFV to Broughton	Second On-Call fire engine not used/required West Ashland still has one On-Call fire engine → staff focus on this unit expected to improve its availability Milton Keynes' growth → relocation of RFV to Broughton, alongside stronger On-Call availability = better/more resilient service across city

Impact on response times



Questions



Any questions for clarification?

How do you feel about ... and why?

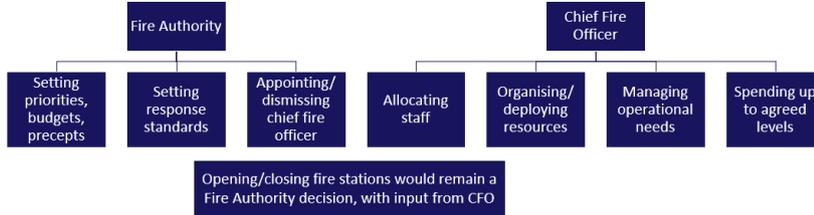
- **Proposed closure of Great Missenden and Stokenchurch Fire Stations?**
- **Removal or replacement of On-Call fire engines at:**
 - **Amersham** (remove fire engine; replace with RFV)
 - **Beaconsfield** (remove fire engine; replace with new CWU)
 - **Buckingham** (remove fire engine; replace with RFV)
 - **High Wycombe** (remove fire engine)
 - **West Ashland** (replace 1 On-Call fire engine with new Water Carrier; move RFV to Broughton)
- Advantages/positive impacts?
- Concerns/negative impacts?
 - Particular groups who might be more affected
- What could be done to reduce concerns/negative impacts?
- Alternative options?

'Operational independence' for chief fire officers

BFRS currently overseen by Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority (elected members) → must approve many operational decisions = delays when quick action is needed

HMICFRS has recommended giving chief fire officers more independence to make decisions about resources more quickly ...

... Fire Authority would retain oversight/accountability



This page is intentionally left blank



Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

Policy /Project/ Function	On-Call Improvement Programme			Date of Assessment	16/05/2025	
Assessment Rating: please tick 1 box <i>(The assessment rating is identified after the analysis has been completed - See Completion Notes).</i>	RED	AMBER	GREEN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Proportionate means achieving a legitimate aim/can be objectively justified.	
Please list methods used to analyse impact on people (e.g. consultations forums, meetings, data collection)	Data collection					
Please list any other policies that are related to or referred to as part of this analysis	Gunning principles for public consultation					
Please list the groups of people potentially affected by this proposal. (e.g. applicants, employees, customers, service users, members of the public)	On-Call applicants, employees, members of the public					
What are the aims and intended effects of this proposal (project, policy, function, service)?						
<p>This programme aims to explore options for organising our On-Call firefighters and appliances more effectively, to deliver the best possible emergency response for our communities, while also ensuring long-term sustainability and value for money.</p> <p>It forms part of a long-term commitment to improve reliability and resilience across Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service (BFRS) in line with the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) and Annual Plan.</p>						
<p>Is any Equality Data available relating to the use or implementation of this proposal (policy, project, or function, service)? Please Tick (See Completion notes)</p>						



Bucks Fire & Rescue Service

Yes:	No: X
List any Consultations e.g. with employees, service users, Unions or members of the public that has taken place in the development or implementation of this proposal (project, policy, function)?	
<p>No proposal formulated as yet, EQIA being completed in the initial stages of formulating options. Initial consultation taken place with Fire Authority Lead members.</p> <p>Consultation conducted with staff and public in six pre public consultation groups. 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.</p> <p>Public focus groups were 50/50 split of men and women across 26 total attendees, 11 from an ethnic minority background, 3 with a disability or limiting illness and from across a range of ages.</p> <p>Further formal and informal engagement will be conducted if proceeding to full public consultation.</p>	
Financial Analysis If applicable, state any relevant cost implications (e.g. expenses, returns or savings) as a direct result of the implementation of this policy, project, or function.	
Costs £ Not known at this stage	Projected Returns £
Implementation £	Projected Savings £

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

What impact will the implementation of this proposal have on people who share characteristics protected by <i>The Equality Act 2010</i> ? (See Completion notes)				
Protected Characteristic	Neutral Impact:	Positive Impact:	Negative Impact:	Evidence of impact and if applicable, justification if determining proportionate means of achieving legitimate aims exists
Sex (Men and Women)		X		Proposals may reduce the number of On-Call appliances and available roles. These On-Call appliances are currently crewed predominantly by men (not by design) as such women are under-represented in the On-Call section. Reduction in numbers of sites with On-Call roles will reduce the number of opportunities for women, however, we plan to work with the Women's Network to do specific Women's Only Have A Go Sessions in the area. We also offer positive action initiatives which historically have shown successful outcomes in helping to hire candidates from underrepresented groups.
Race (All Racial Groups)	X			The program is going to look at specific areas to recruit on-call staff, due to this, at this time there is no impact identified as we do not know the demographics of the areas we are looking at. Once further information comes to light, this may change.
Disability (Mental, Physical, and Carers of Disabled people)	X			The on-call model is already under representative of disabled individuals. Reducing these roles without actively creating accessible opportunities may further entrench under-representation. However, to mitigate against this the HR Team have taken specific training for the whole service and we are an accredited Disability Confident

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

				<p>Employer.</p> <p>Any redefined On-Call arrangements must proactively include reasonable adjustments and inclusive recruitment. Otherwise, it may maintain or deepen exclusion.</p>
Religion or Belief	X			<p>There may be scheduling or uniform implications for people of faith (e.g., prayer times, religious dress). These are already addressed in various other policies and procedures. This project does not seek to alter those arrangements.</p>
Sexual Orientation (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Straight)	X			<p>There is no direct impact expected from any of the potential changes</p>
Pregnancy and Maternity	X			<p>On-call roles can be difficult to balance with maternity needs, a range of procedures provide for maternity and pregnancy requirements in line with operational roles. Any changes will not seek to worsen these provisions.</p>
Marital Status (Married and Civil Partnerships)	X			<p>No significant adverse or beneficial impact is expected.</p>
Gender	X			<p>No significant adverse or beneficial impact is expected.</p>

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

Reassignment (Includes non-binary)				
Age (People of all ages)	X			<p>While no direct age discrimination is likely, older on-call firefighters may be disproportionately affected if they are over-represented in on-call roles and face greater barriers transitioning to other roles.</p> <p>On the other hand, modernising crewing could create more flexible opportunities in the future that may be attractive to younger recruits.</p>

What impact will the implementation of this proposal have on people who are impacted by and / or local factors that sit outside the Equality Act 2010 (non-legislative). Examples include social economic factors (i.e. poverty and or isolation), caring responsibility, unemployment, homelessness, urbanisation, rurality, health inequalities any other disadvantage. (See Completion notes)				
Identified impact non-legislative factor.	Neutral Impact:	Positive Impact:	Negative Impact:	Evidence of impact and if applicable, justification if determining proportionate means of achieving legitimate aims exists

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

Name of department head / project lead	Jacki Flower
Date of EIA sign off:	21/10/2025 (Reviewed)
Date(s) of review of assessment:	

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

Action Plan Owner: Matty Burn		Commencement date:19/05/2025		Sign off date:	
As a result of performing this analysis, what actions are proposed to remove or reduce any negative impact of adverse outcomes identified on people (employees, applicants' customers, members of the public etc.) who share characteristics protected by <i>The Equality Act 2010</i> or are <i>non-legislative characteristics</i> ?					
Action Planning					
Identified Impact Protected Characteristic or local non-legislative factor	Recommended Actions	Responsible Lead	Completion Date	Review Date	
Sex	Ensure inclusive recruitment pathways Impact monitoring during implementation Engage with staff networks during process of formulating plans	HR Project lead Project lead			
Race	Ensure inclusive recruitment pathways Impact monitoring during implementation Engage with staff networks during process of formulating plans	HR Project lead Project lead			
Disability	Ensure inclusive recruitment pathways Impact monitoring during implementation Engage with staff networks during process of formulating plans	HR Project lead Project lead			

Equality Impact Analysis (EqIA)

Completion Notes:	
Analysis Ratings:	<p>The assessment rating is located at the top of the document so that if you have several impact assessments you will be able to determine priority impact status. To assure the assessment determines the rating, the rating should not be determined before the assessment has been completed.</p> <p>Red: As a result of performing this assessment, it is evident a risk of discrimination exists (direct, indirect, unintentional, or otherwise) to one or more of the nine groups of people who share <i>Protected Characteristics (and / or local non-legislative factors)</i>. In this instance, it is recommended that the use of the activity or policy be suspended until further work or analysis is performed.</p> <p>If it is considered this risk of discrimination (is <i>objectively justified</i>, and/or the use of this proposal (policy, activity, function) is a <i>proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim</i>; this should be indicated and further professional advice taken.</p> <p>Amber: As a result of performing this assessment, it is evident a risk of discrimination (as described above) exists, and this risk may be removed or reduced by implementing the actions detailed within the <i>Action Planning</i> section of this document.</p> <p>Green: As a result of performing this assessment, no adverse effects on people who share Protected Characteristics <i>and / or local non-legislative factors</i> are identified - no further actions are recommended at this stage.</p>
Equality Data:	<p>Equality data is internal or external information that may indicate how the activity or policy being analysed can affect different groups of people who share the nine Protected Characteristics <i>and / or local non-legislative factors</i>. Examples of <i>Equality Data</i> include: (this list is not definitive)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1: Application success rates by <i>Equality Groups</i> 2: Complaints by <i>Equality Groups</i> 3: Service usage and withdrawal of services by <i>Equality Groups</i> 4: Grievances or decisions upheld and dismissed by <i>Equality Groups</i>

<p>Legal Status:</p>	<p>This document is designed to assist organisations in "<i>Identifying and eliminating unlawful Discrimination, Harassment and Victimisation</i>" as required by <i>The Equality Act Public Sector Duty 2011</i>.</p> <p>The FRSs may be keen to extend "due regard" to local/non-legislative factors such as social economic factors (i.e. poverty and or isolation), caring responsibility, unemployment, homelessness, urbanisation, rurality, health inequalities any other disadvantage. □(See Completion notes). What impact will the implementation of this proposal have on people for which there is no legal requirement? (consider each local non-legislative factor separately).</p> <p>Doing this assessment may also identify opportunities to <i>foster good relations</i> and <i>advance opportunity</i> between those who share Protected Characteristics and / or local non-legislative factors and those that do not.</p> <p><i>An EIA is not legally binding and should not be used as a substitute for legal or other professional advice.</i></p>
<p>Objective and/or Proportionate</p>	<p>Certain discrimination may be capable of being defensible if the determining reason is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) <i>objectively justified</i> (ii) <i>a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim</i> of the organisation <p>For <i>objective justification</i>, the determining reason must be a real, objective consideration, and not in itself discriminatory. To be '<i>proportionate</i>' there must be no alternative measures available that would meet the aim without too much difficulty that would avoid such a discriminatory effect. Where (i) and/or (ii) is identified it is recommended that professional (legal) advice is sought prior to completing an Equality Impact Assessment.</p>

This page is intentionally left blank



Phase 1: On-Call Improvement Programme Assurance Review

January 2026



Contents

- 1. Background and Scope of Work
- 2. Executive Summary
- 3. Observations
- A. Appendix





Section 1: Background and Scope of Work



Background and Scope of Work

Background

Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service (BFRS) is delivering an On-Call Improvement Programme (OIP) to better align available resources with risk and strengthen on-call cover. A 10-week public consultation (19 Nov 2025 – 28 Jan 2026) seeks feedback on proposals to:

- Remove some On-Call fire engines that cannot be reliably crewed, replacing some 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 a fire 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.

Scope of work

The assurance review follows a two-phased approach, with this report covering Phase 1 (up to end of December).

- Phase 1 assesses the pre-consultation process, ensuring option development and modelling are robust and consistently applied. It validates that the consultation approach and decision-making pathway are fair, transparent, and aligned with the first three Gunning Principles (see Appendix 1).

- Phase 2 focuses on post-consultation assurance, including analysis of responses, verification of conscientious consideration of feedback, and updates on evidence, financial case, and residual risks, aligned with the fourth and final Gunning Principle.

Through a series of workshops with key stakeholders and document reviews, we developed a comprehensive understanding of objectives and identified gaps to address before consultation closes. Documents reviewed in this phase are listed in Appendix 2.

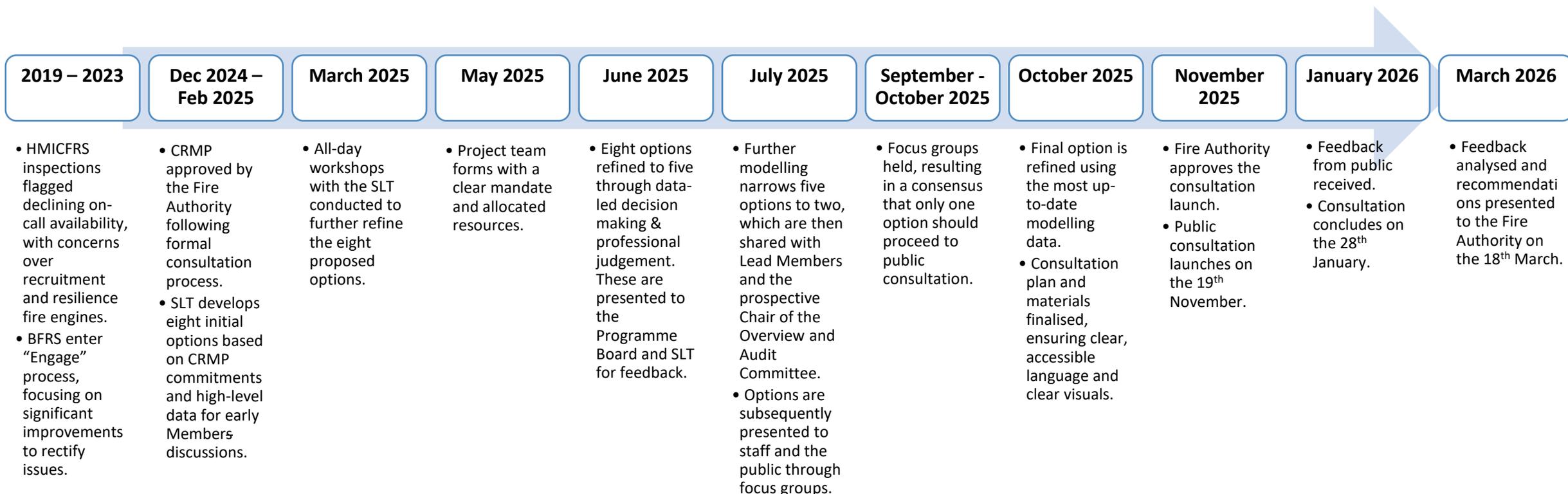
We highly appreciate the valuable contributions of the stakeholders who took part in the assurance review process, and so we would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank them all. Please find a full list of those interviewed as part of the review in Appendix 3.

Limitations

- The modelling of consultation options is executed within a software environment that we cannot independently assess. Scenario results rely on the tool's internal logic, configuration, and assumptions without external verification.
- There is high dependency on inputs and static assumptions. Outputs are primarily driven by the inputs, including data, analysis, and professional judgment. The same resource/demand dataset is used to generate multiple outputs, and while data was updated to 2025, core on-call modelling assumptions remained largely unchanged. This limits assurance on whether the rationale for change reflects dynamic operational, financial, and risk factors.

Consultation Timeline

The On-Call Improvement Project was delivered during a period of significant change, which ultimately influenced delivery timelines. The timeline below sets out the key events leading up to the consultation launch to provide an end-to-end view of the process.





Section 2: Executive Summary



Executive Summary

Phase 1 of the On-Call Improvement Programme demonstrates a clear rationale for change aligned with CRMP commitments and operational priorities, with the consultation approach meeting Gunning Principles 1-3. Overall, the programme is on track, with no fundamental barriers to continuing consultation. Targeted actions are required ahead of Phase 2 to ensure alignment with Gunning Principle 4.

Area	Observations/ Insights	RAG	Improvement Opportunities (where appropriate ahead of consultation ending)
Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Options were developed and refined through strategic workshops and subsequent work, including narrowing from a wider set of options to the consultation proposals. Decision-making includes a combination of modelling outputs and professional judgement and is influenced by operational pressures and CRMP commitments. There is a need to better document how choices were made as options were refined. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Document the rationale for reducing options, including criteria applied, feedback considered, and professional judgements made. Replace the current pros and cons approach with a structured scorecard. Ensure every option considered (including informally) has documented evidence. Produce an end-to-end methodology document to strengthen confidence in robustness and fairness of decision-making (including data sources, how sources informed decisions, and where professional judgement overrode model outputs with justification).
Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consultation materials are accessible and were developed using pre-consultation feedback. There are risks where communications content, versions, and cross-channel messaging are not consistently controlled. Engagement activity is extensive, but elements of evidence and safeguards, e.g. focus group participation and bias controls, need clearer recording. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Record the details of OTB engagement, including decisions influenced by neighbouring CRMPs Update the tactical delivery plan to include missing fields. Implement version control for communication documents and mandatory cross-channel language checks within the sign-off process to prevent inconsistencies. Issue a clarification on consultation channels to specify the maximum number of fire engines proposed for removal, and tag responses before/after clarification. Embed FAQs and supporting documents directly on the main consultation page. Track engagement metrics and flag issues early to enable timely corrective action.
Data & Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Updated datasets have been used and the modelling outputs support option development, but assurance is limited by reliance on the modelling environment and assumptions. There is a need to make clearer how modelling has been used (testing leadership-defined options) and to strengthen documentation of assumptions, audit trail, and sensitivities. Financial information needs clearer structure & linkage to operational and risk impacts. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a clear audit trail showing which datasets supported refinement of options. Record assumptions in a structured format and conduct a formal financial risk assessment. Add a note stating the model did not directly generate scenarios but was used to test leadership-defined options, clarifying the relationship between modelling and decisions. Implement a consistent format separating recurring revenue impacts from one-off items; include key financial assumptions, e.g. FTE costs, savings deliverability, disposal values. Enhance analysis by incorporating sensitivity and add a short clarification in the main consultation pack and easy-read summary to reinforce that modelling outputs are indicative and based on assumptions.
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Governance and approvals are in place, including extensive review and sign-offs ahead of consultation launch. Documentation needs strengthening to evidence decision-making, approvals, dependencies and risk management consistently. Controls should be tightened to reduce fragmented reviews and maintain traceability. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement and maintain a RAID log and include updates in project highlight reports. Record the rationale and process for initial options developed before the formal project team was established; include the basis for initiating key activities before PID sign-off. Establish clear sign-off authority and approval pathways at project initiation, documented and communicated through a RACI matrix. Including strict version control. Record all sign-offs from key functional representatives (Finance, HR, Data, Legal) in a structured decision log/approval record (names, roles, dates, conditions/caveats).

Executive Summary

Looking ahead to Phase 2 of the consultation

The On-Call Improvement Programme has a sound foundation and is appropriately positioned to continue consultation. However, Phase 2 is critical. Without strengthened arrangements for feedback analysis, evidence triangulation and decision transparency, there is a risk to compliance with Gunning Principle 4 and to the defensibility of final decisions.

- It was evidenced that the project team is already anticipating forward-looking challenges and opportunities beyond the current consultation phase:
 - The team has initiated conversations on mitigating emerging issues, including operational pressures and political sensitivities.
 - Feedback from stations has prompted consideration of alternative proposals, including options that could be implemented regardless of the consultation outcome.
 - Engagement with business-as-usual on-call teams is exploring improvements outside the consultation scope, such as contract adjustments and revised on-call arrangements.
- The consultation has generated significant interest, with 150 responses received within the first two weeks, which is well above the average for the Service's previous consultations. At the time of writing, the consultation webpage is the fourth most visited page on the Bucks Fire website.
- At the time of writing, there has been less thought given to the approach that will be followed for analysing feedback received from staff and the public in a way that ensures compliance with Gunning Principle 4: 'conscientious consideration' of responses before a decision is made.
- Given the short timeframe between consultation closure at the end of January and the final recommendation to the Fire Authority by mid-March, the team should prioritise scenario-mapping to formalise next steps. This exercise should define how feedback will be analysed and integrated to enable timely, informed and evidence-based decisions.



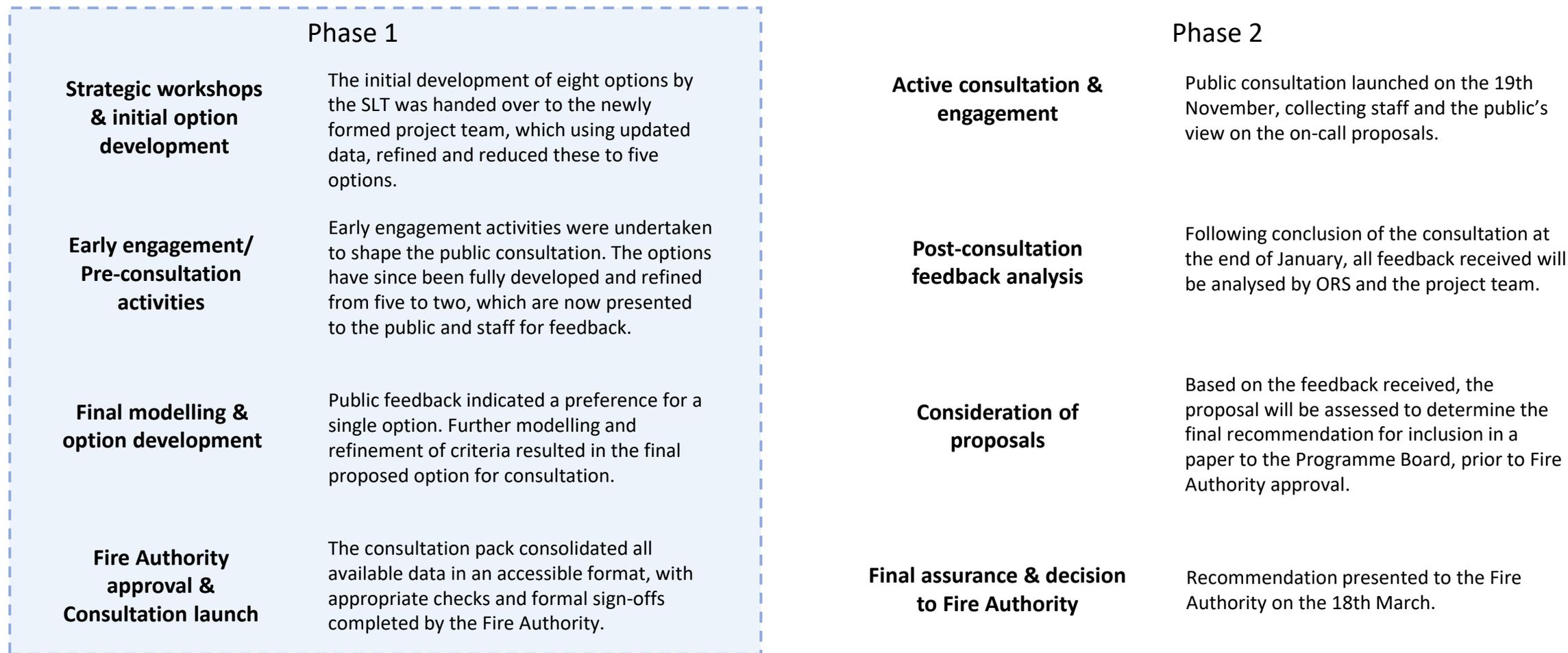
Section 3: Observations



On-Call Improvement Programme: End-to-end process

 = Report focus is for Phase 1

This review assesses activities undertaken during Phase 1 of the On-call Improvement Programme, up to the launch of consultation, based on evidence available to date. Detailed findings are presented across strategy, communications, data & finance, and governance, highlighting how option development evolved into a clear rationale for change. Phase 2 is included for context to outline the next steps in the programme.



Strategic workshops & initial options development

Observations and Areas of Improvement (1/3)

Strategic workshops
& initial option
development

Early engagement/
Pre-consultation
activities

Final modelling &
option development

Fire Authority
approval &
Consultation launch

Area	Observations/ Insights	RAG	Improvement Opportunities (where appropriate ahead of consultation ending)
Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HMICFRS inspections (2019, 2023) has highlighted declining availability and sustainability of on-call provision, raising concerns about recruitment challenges and the long-term viability of resilience pumps. The priorities set out in the 2025–2030 Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) and 2025-2026 Annual Plan triggered a formal review of the effectiveness of on-call service provision. • Between December 2024 and February 2025, the senior leadership team (SLT) documented eight options, deliberately balancing data-driven and politically realistic approaches to reflect operational and strategic constraints. These were further refined, presented to the Chairman and Members of the Executive Committee at a workshop, serving as a “critical friend” review, with informal feedback factored into the next phase. • SLT workshops in March 2025 confirmed that options were at a formative stage; however, while key considerations and requirements were noted, the evaluation relied on lists of pros and cons rather than a structured framework, limiting comparability and consistency. • Recognising the complexity of the review, a dedicated project team was established by SLT in April/May 2025 to ensure clear accountability and rebuild the logic from scratch using updated data and guiding principles. This team refined the options from eight to five by June 2025, applying operational judgment alongside structured data analysis. • The project team’s refinement approach is reflected in the Members (Lead Members and prospective Chair of the Overview and Audit Committee) and SLT Workshop in July 2025 and June 2025, respectively. The five options discussed were: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do nothing/ maintain all 18 on-call pumps 2. Entire removal of all 18 on-call pumps 3. Removal of 8 on-call pumps and closure of two stations 4. Removal of 10 on-call pumps supported by appraisal methodology 5. Removal of on-call pumps based at Wholetime stations • While four options were formally documented and presented for SLT sign-off, the fifth option was only discussed verbally and lacked supporting evidence such as financial analysis and operational impact assessment. This omission reduces transparency and assurance that all proposals were subject to consistent scrutiny and governance standards. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly document the rationale for balancing CRMP commitments (eight pumps) against more ambitious options (ten pumps) to demonstrate how strategic priorities informed decision-making. • Replace the current pros and cons approach with a structured scorecard that applies consistent criteria across options, such as financial impact, operational resilience, and risk to all options. • Record any new options raised during meetings in the minutes, including the rationale, identified data gaps, and agreed next steps. • Ensure that every option considered, whether formally presented or discussed informally, is supported by documented evidence including financial analysis, operational impact, and risk assessment.

Strategic workshops & initial options development

Observations and Areas of Improvement (2/3)

Area	Observations/ Insights	RAG	Improvement Opportunities (where appropriate ahead of consultation ending)
Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engagement was primarily internal; with SLT and members' workshops surfacing political constraints while also ensuring alignment with the strategic aims set out in the CRMP and Annual Plan. These feedback loops supported consistency with organisational priorities. Wider public and staff engagement on specific options had not yet commenced, although staff were informed that an on-call service review was underway. This indicates that external consultation was still at a formative stage. Meetings were held with Thames Valley partners, including Oxfordshire and other over-the-border (OTB) fire services, to understand consultation best practices. No formal benchmarking of cross-border data was undertaken due to the absence of shared proposals and information. Instead, the project team reviewed neighbouring CRMPs to assess potential impacts. Although cross-border impacts were considered in options refinement through anecdotal insights gathered in interviews (alongside OTB data used in the modelling), the rationale and process for these decisions were not formally documented, reducing transparency and auditability. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Record the details of OTB engagement, including the rationale for decisions influenced by neighbouring CRMPs, to demonstrate how external factors shaped the options. Establish a structured approach for documenting discussions, identified data limitations, and impact assessments from OTB plans.
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Although the team was formed in April/May 2025, key governance remained under the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). The project team was composed of experienced officers, including a Project Manager, Group Commander, Project Sponsor, Head of Communications, Data Intelligence Manager, and representatives from HR, Finance, and the Fire Brigades Union (FBU). This multidisciplinary structure provided a strong foundation for managing operational, financial, and stakeholder considerations. The Chief Fire Officer (CFO) played a visible role as the face of the consultation and demonstrated a strong commitment to continuous improvement and eliminating inefficiencies. From interviews, it was evident that the CFO aimed to avoid politically convenient solutions and instead present proposals that would materially improve the effectiveness and resilience of the on-call service. The project mandate, approved by the Programme Board in May 2025, provided a clear foundation, including objectives, critical success criteria, scope, financial parameters, milestones, and defined roles and responsibilities. It also documented requirements for messaging, timing, and accessibility to align with the Gunning Principles and the Service's governance framework. High-level risks, dependencies, and assumptions were recorded; however, detailed mitigations, timelines, and tracking mechanisms were not observed. While the formal Project Initiation Document (PID) was approved in September 2025, key activities such as option refinement and senior stakeholder engagement began earlier under the authority of the mandate. This approach ensured continuity but introduced governance and risk management gaps during the interim period, as detailed controls and mitigations were not yet in place. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Record the rationale and decision-making process for the initial set of options developed before the formal project team was established. Expand the documentation of dependencies and assumptions to include specific mitigations, timelines, and tracking mechanisms earlier in the process to reduce risk exposure. Include a note in project records explaining the basis for initiating key activities before PID approval, outlining how governance and accountability were maintained during this period.

Strategic workshops & initial options development

Observations and Areas of Improvement (3/3)

Area	Observations/ Insights	RAG	Improvement Opportunities (where appropriate ahead of consultation ending)
Data & Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of the eight initial options was grounded in CRMP and additional data (i.e. cross border mobilisation, response standards and local area reports), to define risk profiles and station needs. This early reliance on CRMP ensured a robust starting point with clear commitments. However, there is limited detail on which additional datasets were used and how they were combined to produce the eight options presented. To narrow the scope from eight to five options, a structured methodology was applied, supported by modelling across several dimensions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Response performance: Historical response data and predicted modelling outcomes. Crewing and availability: Current and historic staffing reliability, including specialist vehicle availability. Cost analysis: Actual running costs and additional upgrade requirements. Recruitment pool: Sustainability based on local population and proximity. Resilience and cross-Border Role: Contribution to overall service resilience and over-the-border implications. Site requirements: Contaminant management, EDI compliance, and infrastructure development needs. Demand profile: Area incident volume and future risk considerations. While evidence exists of datasets, reports, and workings (including documented static assumptions for degradation modelling) there is limited documentation of the rationale for transitioning from eight to five options and how inputs, assumptions, and outputs were linked to option creation. This gap reduces transparency in the data-led approach and weakens the audit trail. There was confusion observed on model outputs, as it did not directly generate the five options considered. High-level degradation modelling provided an indicative view of how many on-call appliances could potentially be removed without compromising resilience. From this, leadership created option sets influenced by professional judgment, and the Data Intelligence team subsequently assessed the chosen scenarios to show operational impact in the modelling outputs. Financial factors, such as reinvestment of funds and value for money (rather than cost-cutting), were recognised as significant drivers. There was evidence of a sound financial comparison of options, highlighting trade-offs between service provision and cost pressures. While the approach is broadly robust, assurance depends on reconciling arithmetic discrepancies, validating FTE cost assumptions, and confirming the deliverability of savings. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a concise summary explaining the rationale for narrowing from eight to five options, including the inputs, assumptions, and outputs that informed this process. Ensure sign-off by both finance and data intelligence teams to strengthen governance and auditability. Include a short explanatory note in project documentation stating that the model did not directly generate scenarios but was used to test leadership-defined options. This will provide clarity on the relationship between modelling and decision-making. Implement a consistent format that separates recurring revenue impacts from one-off capital items, validating key assumptions such as FTE costs, savings deliverability, and disposal values. Enhance future analysis by incorporating sensitivity tests on savings and timing assumptions and by documenting dependencies and risks explicitly. This will strengthen assurance and support informed decision-making under varying scenarios.

Early engagement/ Pre-consultation activities

Observations and Areas of Improvement (1/2)

Strategic workshops & initial option development	Early engagement/ Pre-consultation activities	Final modelling & option development	Fire Authority approval & Consultation launch
--	---	--------------------------------------	---

Area	Observations/ Insights	RAG	Improvement Opportunities (where appropriate ahead of consultation ending)
Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In July 2025, the five options were reduced to two (Options 3 and 5, see page 11) and presented to Lead Members and the prospective Chair of the Overview and Audit Committee, who agreed to proceed with developing a consultation plan for FA approval. This exercise, along with feedback received, helped shape the proposals to reflect both strategic priorities and local context. From anecdotal interview insights, it was noted that the rationale behind options refinement was based on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Removing extreme scenarios (Option 1 and 2) and retaining realistic/defensible choices. Member's and staff feedback from early engagement Appraisal methodology, detailing local data, modelling, and professional judgment to assess the viability of the two shortlisted options. While this provided a good basis for evaluating operational and financial impacts, the document lacks a structured framework that documents the same criteria for all stations. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure the rationale for reducing five options to two is clearly documented, including the criteria applied, feedback considered, and professional judgments made.
Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A comprehensive communications strategy and tactical delivery plan were developed, mapping proposed activities from pre-consultation through to consultation closure. The documents evidenced: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A multi-channel approach with targeted outreach to segmented stakeholder groups. Statutory compliance with the Gunning Principles, the Equality Act 2010, and Data Protection requirements. Communication principles aligned to those set out in the BFRS Annual Plan. The project team provided verbal confirmation that all these principles guided decisions throughout the consultation process, supporting an inclusive, consistent, and transparent approach to decision-making and outputs delivered. Engagement sessions with MPs and staff, led by the Chief Fire Officer (CFO), were launched early to gather feedback on proposals. This demonstrated proactive efforts to listen and respond to concerns ahead of the formal consultation launch. Six focus groups were facilitated by Opinion Research Services (ORS), involving 18 BFRS staff members and 26 residents. ORS, an independent consultation specialist, had previously run CRMP consultation focus groups. Approximately one-third of participants had engaged previously, which ORS confirmed is accepted practice when earlier sessions were for shaping materials rather than formal views. Safeguards such as transparency, balanced facilitation, and clear reporting were implemented to prevent bias. The focus groups provided credibility and allowed the project team to incorporate public perspectives, addressing potential community impacts and reputational risks before releasing the consultation plan. Inclusive engagement with members, staff, MPs, representative bodies, and the public ensured that proposed options were evidence-based and informed by stakeholder input. This approach aligns with Gunning Principle 1, as no final decision had been made or predetermined at this stage, and stakeholder views were considered throughout. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To ensure robustness, update the tactical delivery plan to include all missing fields, such as document version, latest update date, start date, publish date, dependencies, and document links. Implement version control for all communication documents to track changes and maintain transparency throughout the consultation process. Record the rationale for including repeat participants in focus groups and the safeguards applied to prevent bias, ensuring this is clearly referenced in consultation records.

Early engagement/ Pre-consultation activities

Observations and Areas of Improvement (2/2)

Strategic workshops & initial option development	Early engagement/ Pre-consultation activities	Final modelling & option development	Fire Authority approval & Consultation launch
--	---	--------------------------------------	---

Area	Observations/ Insights	RAG	Improvement Opportunities (where appropriate ahead of consultation ending)
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The project team held weekly meetings to review progress and agree on follow-up actions. These meetings included discussions on risks and issues, ensuring that emerging challenges – such as political constraints influencing station-level exclusions and member feedback – were surfaced and mitigated appropriately. High-level assumptions and dependencies were documented in the PID. However, there was no evidence of continuous tracking or updating of these items throughout the project lifecycle, limiting visibility of changes and their impact on decision-making. A separate, robust risk register was maintained and updated monthly by the Project Manager and reviewed by the Project Sponsor. This provided a structured approach to risk management, although the absence of integrated tracking for assumptions and dependencies created a gap in overall governance. Project highlight reports covering timescales, costs, scope, risks, and resources were produced and shared with the Programme Board and SLT during monthly programme meetings. This ensured a degree of governance and oversight throughout the project. Project meeting agendas included explicit consideration of the Gunning Principles, supporting transparency, fairness, and inclusivity in the consultation process. Evidence presented at this stage confirms compliance with Gunning Principle 1, as no final decision had been made or predetermined at this stage, and data remained a key driver for decision-making. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement and maintain a RAID (Risks, Assumptions, Issues, Dependencies) log to document and track these elements consistently throughout the project, ensuring that changes are captured and communicated to decision-makers. Include RAID updates in project highlight reports to provide Programme Board and SLT with a complete view of project risks and dependencies alongside progress updates.
Data & Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The two viable options were refined further through modelling and shared with the public. It was acknowledged that modelling these proposals was inherently complex, particularly where some appliances had very limited or no availability, making it challenging to demonstrate real-world impacts on response times. Evidence showed a clear financial rationale for change based on staffing costs, as maintaining 18 on-call appliances at full availability would cost £3.3m annually compared to the current £1.2m budget, creating a £2.1m shortfall (excluding equipment, PPE, and training costs). However, there was no activity-based cost allocation model, meaning the financial impact of removing an appliance from a whole-time station was not fully represented. Operational inefficiencies such as low availability and inconsistent performance were acknowledged, but detailed performance metrics and risk modelling were limited. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a clear audit trail showing which datasets supported the option refinement to two. Record all assumptions in a structured format and conduct a formal financial risk assessment to identify potential cost uncertainties and mitigation strategies. Complement the financial case with performance metrics (e.g., appliance availability rates, response times) and risk modelling to provide a balanced view of operational and financial impacts.

Final modelling & option development

Observations and Areas of Improvement (1/2)

Strategic workshops & initial option development	Early engagement/ Pre-consultation activities	Final modelling & option development	Fire Authority approval & Consultation launch
--	---	---	---

Area	Observations/ Insights	RAG	Improvement Opportunities (where appropriate ahead of consultation ending)
Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public feedback received from ORS indicated a preference for a single, well-defined proposal, reflecting an expectation that BFRS, as the professional authority, should provide a clear recommendation. It also included the public's understanding and rationale for rejecting, retaining or transitioning of certain fire engines to specialist vehicles, providing transparency and an audit trail. These insights were instrumental in shaping the final consultation plan, demonstrating genuine consideration of stakeholder views in shaping decision-making. While Haddenham's on-call pump was included in the modelled options, it was ultimately removed from the final scope, reducing proposed removals from eight pumps to seven. Interviews indicated that this decision was based on professional judgment, influenced by anticipated changes at Oxfordshire stations and associated over-the-border (OTB) impacts. However, this rationale was not formally documented, limiting transparency, particularly regarding financial implications and risk assessment. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a methodology document to strengthen confidence in the robustness and fairness of decision-making. Include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data sources used. How these sources informed decisions. Instances where professional judgment overrode model outputs, with justification. Provide formal documentation showing how ORS focus group findings were translated into specific changes in the final proposal.
Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The decision was taken to engage staff earlier and more transparently in the process, ahead of any formal consultation. This proactive approach aimed to build trust, enhance engagement, and gather feedback on the proposed changes. Engagement activities continued, including individual meetings with Members and MPs to discuss proposals and address concerns. Communications risks were actively monitored and managed, with media requests handled appropriately to maintain control of messaging. The Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) was initiated at project inception and finalised prior to consultation launch, providing comprehensive coverage of protected characteristics such as age, gender, and ethnic group. However, the associated action plan lacks robustness: actions are generic, not aligned to SMART principles, and completion and review dates are missing. This limits accountability and progress tracking. Demographic data was reviewed during the consultation, and recent actions show monitoring of under-represented groups and targeted outreach. However, there is no consistently documented weekly review process, making it difficult to evidence systematic monitoring or demonstrate ongoing management of equality risks. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Record how lessons from OTB services were applied to engagement strategies, providing evidence of continuous improvement and knowledge transfer. Define specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) actions within the EIA action plan, including clear completion and review dates. Including EIA progress updates in project highlight reports can ensure visibility at Programme Board and SLT level, reinforcing governance. Introduce a clear, documented weekly review process for demographic data, recording findings and any actions taken. This will provide an auditable trail of equality monitoring and support best-practice consultation management.

Final modelling & option development

Observations and Areas of Improvement (2/2)

Area	Observations/ Insights	RAG	Improvement Opportunities (where appropriate ahead of consultation ending)
Data & Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The modelling approach utilised Cadcorp software and was supported by historic external validation from ORH consultancy, which confirmed alignment between ORH and BFRS in-house models. This provided confidence in the credibility and robustness of the methodology. Final modelling incorporated five years of cleansed incident data, including the most up-to-date data for 2025, which had not been available in earlier stages. The team modelled the final scenario selected by leadership by replaying historic incidents under different conditions, including the busiest day on record for BFRS as a worst-case scenario. Outputs were analysed in Excel to produce key performance metrics that could be built into the consultation narrative, ensuring a robust evidence base for decision-making. Modelling remained a combination of quantitative analysis and professional judgment, particularly where data alone could not reflect real-world reliability (e.g., stations with persistent availability issues). As a result, the modelling presented in consultation materials is indicative and not intended to provide precise or predictive outcomes. The absence of clear caveats in the main consultation pack and easy-read summary creates a risk that stakeholders may misinterpret outputs as definitive predictions. Interviews confirmed that incident data analysis shows year-on-year stability, with consistent patterns and no significant growth in overall volumes. Forecasts indicate that any future increases will be concentrated in specific areas already identified. These trends validate current projections and provide assurance on financial planning for the consultation proposal. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Add a short clarification in the main consultation pack and easy-read summary to reinforce that modelling outputs are indicative and based on assumptions. This ensures consistency across all materials and helps manage stakeholder expectations, particularly for audiences who may not review the supplementary evidence pack. Provide a formal record of model limitations and assumptions, including their impact on results presented in the consultation pack. Examples include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 24/7 availability assumptions Road network assumptions roadworks Real vs. modelled attendance discrepancies Document how stability in incident data and future projections were factored into financial and operational risk assessments, reinforcing confidence in the consultation proposal.
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anecdotal confirmation was provided that project team representatives from Finance, HR, Data, and Legal signed off on the final proposal scheduled for presentation at the extraordinary FA meeting on 16 October. However, this sign-off was not formally documented in project records, limiting transparency and traceability of governance decisions. Established delegation arrangements were followed, with the CFO exercising authority for preparatory engagement and option development to inform proposals for FA consideration, consistent with statutory duties and delegated powers. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Record all sign-offs from key functional representatives (Finance, HR, Data, Legal) in a structured decision log or approval record. This should include names, roles, dates, and any conditions or caveats associated with the approval. Maintain clear documentation of delegated authority and engagement processes in future programmes to reinforce transparency and traceability.

Fire Authority approval & Consultation launch

Observations and Areas of Improvement (1/3)

Area	Observations/ Insights	RAG	Improvement Opportunities (where appropriate ahead of consultation ending)
Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The consultation was identified as highly politically sensitive, with active campaigning around the proposals creating significant complexity and heightened staff stress due to fears of job losses. Despite this, messaging remained consistent that the proposals were not focused on cost-cutting but on optimising the use of funds allocated for on-call pumps. To manage reputational and operational risks, a comprehensive strategy was implemented, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Media monitoring and social media oversight by specialist teams, supported by escalation protocols through weekly SLT updates. Use of the communications strategy as a foundation for determining whether corrective public statements should be issued. A targeted approach to address political misinformation and disinformation, complemented by media briefings for staff attending public events, outlining key messages, topics to avoid, and de-escalation techniques. Doorstep and interview training incorporated into development pathways, alongside communications issued to stations on managing unexpected councillor visits or filming. Collectively, these actions demonstrate a proactive and structured approach to safeguarding the integrity of the consultation process. However, there was limited evidence that lessons learned from previous consultations were explicitly embedded into the current strategy. The consultation period was set at 10 weeks – shorter than the widely accepted 12-week best practice but longer than the 6-week minimum often used by other local authorities. This timeframe was chosen to balance political pressures and resource availability, avoiding a potential nine-month delay due to upcoming elections. While not optimal given the Christmas period, the 10-week window provided consultees with reasonable opportunity for feedback. This approach demonstrated compliance with Gunning Principle 3, ensuring adequate time for consideration and response from consultees. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Draft and share documentation outlining staff wellbeing considerations and support mechanisms implemented during the consultation, given the noted stress arising from its political sensitivity. Conduct a lessons-learned exercise from previous consultations and integrate findings into the current strategy before consultation closure. This will strengthen continuous improvement and future readiness. Record all risk mitigation measures (e.g., media monitoring, misinformation protocols, staff training) in a structured log to ensure transparency and provide evidence of proactive management.
Data & Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> While the Evidence pack provides clear financial figures (cost per fire engine, station upgrade costs, staffing shortfall), there is no explicit cross-reference showing how these financial assumptions were integrated with operational risk modelling outputs. For example, the cost implications of retaining or removing specific appliances are not directly tied to risk scores or resilience metrics in the same section. This limits assurance that financial decisions were fully risk-informed. The Evidence pack models operational scenarios (all on-call crewed, proposal, no on-call) but does not present corresponding financial sensitivity analysis for these scenarios. Without this, consultees cannot see how costs would vary under different availability or recruitment outcomes, which is critical for assessing affordability and resilience under uncertainty. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create an integrated decision matrix that links financial assumptions with operational risk indicators. Develop a financial sensitivity analysis alongside operational modelling, showing cost ranges for key scenarios, i.e. partial availability at 30-50%, recruitment shortfall, delayed station closures.

Fire Authority approval & Consultation launch

Observations and Areas of Improvement (2/3)

Strategic workshops & initial option development	Early engagement/ Pre-consultation activities	Final modelling & option development	Fire Authority approval & Consultation launch
--	---	--------------------------------------	---

Area	Observations/ Insights	RAG	Improvement Opportunities (where appropriate ahead of consultation ending)
Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The consultation pack incorporated pre-consultation feedback and was designed using clear and accessible language principles, aiming for clarity at a level understandable by a nine-year-old. However, compressed timeframes meant language and framing were not tested in focus groups prior to launch. Reliance on lengthy written materials (a 21-page consultation document and a 50-page evidence pack) may have limited accessibility for some audiences despite an easy-read summary. Multiple response channels were provided, including an independent online survey managed by ORS and printed surveys with freepost return options. Outreach activities leveraged council networks, paid and organic social media campaigns, localised station posts, press releases, and targeted community Facebook groups. Community drop-in events were organised to explain proposals while directing attendees to the ORS survey, ensuring neutrality in data collection. Efforts to engage vulnerable groups included distributing a digital toolkit to community leaders, parish and town councils with a request to cascade messaging. However, monitoring of this cascade was not undertaken, creating reliance on goodwill and limiting assurance of reach. Furthermore, outside of ORS survey reporting, there was limited formal analysis of groups not reached and corrective action taken, particularly for vulnerable groups and geographically affected communities. Consultation materials used deliberately varied wording to provide an easy-read version. While this improves accessibility, the change from early documentation stating: "Remove seven on-call fire engines from stations with persistently low availability", updated to "Remove some on-call fire engines that cannot be reliably crewed" may still create ambiguity for some audiences regarding the maximum scale of change. FAQs intended to support the consultation were hosted on a separate webpage due to website template restrictions. This created an accessibility gap, as stakeholders were unlikely to locate FAQs without a direct link. Although remedial actions were being investigated four-weeks into the ten-week consultation, this approach fell short of best practice. Despite these gaps, the overall approach prior to consultation launch demonstrated compliance with Gunning Principle 2, ensuring consultees had sufficient, relevant, and accessible information to provide informed responses. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a process for tracking engagement metrics (e.g., demographic and geographic coverage, survey completion rates, event attendance) and flagging issues such as inconsistent messaging or low participation early, enabling corrective targeted action during the consultation. Leverage ORS expertise to identify and reach additional participants, ensuring representation from vulnerable groups. Add a short clarification across the consultation website and related materials, for example: <i>"For clarity, the proposal relates to the potential removal of up to seven on-call fire engines; the easy-read materials use simplified wording to aid accessibility."</i> If implemented, tag feedback received before and after the clarification to support transparent analysis of any change in perceptions. Implement strict version control and mandatory cross-channel language checks within the communications sign-off process to prevent future inconsistencies. For increased robustness, test understanding of materials with staff and the public ahead of launch. Embed FAQs and other supporting documents directly on the main consultation page from the outset. Where technical limitations exist, establish rapid workaround processes like banners or temporary links to maintain visibility. Implement a mandatory pre-launch checklist to confirm that all guidance documents and supporting materials are accessible and correctly positioned before consultation begins. Embed existing video presentations and educational resources prominently on the consultation homepage to provide a clear, accessible overview of proposals. Retain full consultation and evidence packs as supporting documents for those seeking detailed information.

Fire Authority approval & Consultation launch

Observations and Areas of Improvement (3/3)

Strategic workshops & initial option development	Early engagement/ Pre-consultation activities	Final modelling & option development	Fire Authority approval & Consultation launch
--	---	--------------------------------------	---

Area	Observations/ Insights	RAG	Improvement Opportunities (where appropriate ahead of consultation ending)
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The consultation pack underwent extensive internal reviews and sign-offs to avoid any implication of a pre-determined outcome. Formal decision-making authority remained with the Fire Authority, which approved the consultation plan at its extraordinary meeting on 12 November 2025. While Members' roles during early stages were advisory rather than decision-making, this approach complied with governance requirements and ensured that final approval rested with the FA. The Programme Board maintained awareness of key milestones through monthly highlight reports; formal approvals were primarily managed internally by SLT and project team members across Finance, HR, Communications, and Data functions. A series of extraordinary meetings were convened to address urgent issues and enable timely decisions. A lessons-learned document highlighted recurring issues, including timeline slippage, inaccurate staff contact data, unclear roles and responsibilities, and multiple document revisions extending approval timelines. These gaps point to deficiencies in project controls and stakeholder coordination, reducing assurance over timely and transparent delivery. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain the project schedule, containing all activities and milestones, as a live document with regular progress reviews and defined escalation routes. This will help keep the project on track and provide ongoing assurance over delivery. Establish clear sign-off authority and approval pathways at project initiation, documented and communicated through a RACI matrix. This will clarify accountability and improve transparency. Limit review cycles by introducing a structured sign-off schedule and consolidated feedback windows. Apply strict version control standards to reduce fragmentation and ensure alignment across stakeholders.



Appendix



Appendix 1

The Gunning Principles

They were coined by Stephen Sedley QC in a court case in 1985 relating to a school closure consultation (R v London Borough of Brent ex parte Gunning). Prior to this, very little consideration had been given to the laws of consultation. Sedley defined that a consultation is only legitimate when these four principles are met:

1. Proposals are still at a formative stage: A final decision has not yet been made, or predetermined, by the decision makers.
2. There is sufficient information to give 'intelligent consideration': The information provided must relate to the consultation and must be available, accessible, and easily interpretable for consultees to provide an informed response.
3. There is adequate time for consideration and response: There must be sufficient opportunity for consultees to participate in the consultation. There is no set timeframe for consultation,¹ despite the widely accepted twelve-week consultation period, as the length of time given for consultee to respond can vary depending on the subject and extent of impact of the consultation.
4. 'Conscientious consideration' must be given to the consultation responses before a decision is made: Decision-makers should be able to provide evidence that they took consultation responses into account

These principles were reinforced in 2001 in the 'Coughlan Case (R v North and East Devon Health Authority ex parte Coughlan²), which involved a health authority closure and confirmed that they applied to all consultations, and then in a Supreme Court case in 2014 (R ex parte Moseley v LB Haringey³), which endorsed the legal standing of the four principles.

Since then, the Gunning Principles have formed a strong legal foundation from which the legitimacy of public consultations is assessed and are frequently referred to as a legal basis for judicial review decisions.⁴

1 In some local authorities, their local voluntary Compact agreement with the third sector may specify the length of time they are required to consult for. However, in many cases, the Compact is either inactive or has been cancelled so the consultation timeframe is open to debate.

2 BAILII, England and Wales Court of Appeal (Civil Decision) Decisions, Accessed: 13 December 2016.

3 BAILII, United Kingdom Supreme Court, Accessed: 13 December 2016.

4 The information used to produce this document has been taken from the Law of Consultation training course provided by The Consultation Institute.

Source: Local Government Association. The Gunning Principles. Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/The%20Gunning%20Principles.pdf> (Accessed: 4 December 2025).

Appendix 2

Documents Reviewed (1/2)

Project Team

1. OIP Mandate.docx
2. OIP Project Initiation .docx
3. Operational Response Resilience Programme - Options Appraisal V2.docx
4. SMT Away Day 1st April RSVP.png
5. SMT Away Day 30th March RSVP.png
6. Members Workshop Final draft.pptx
7. Members Workshop June 2025 final version for sign off.pptx
8. Members Workshop June 2025 proposed SLT version.pptx
9. SLT Notes 260625.docx
10. On-Call Improvement Programme Early Engagement FINAL.docx
11. Meeting Agendas for Project team meetings (21 pptx files)
12. 15 Jul 2025 Notes.docx
13. Fire Authority Minutes October 2025.eml
14. Neighbouring CRMP.png
15. OFRS catch up.ics
16. OIP all staff update 06.11.2025.pptx
17. OIP consultation FAQs.docx
18. OIP EQIA.docx
19. OIP EQIA FINAL.docx
20. OIP Lessons Learned Log.docx
21. OIP Risk Register.xlsm
22. On-Call improvement programme internal engagement.pptx
23. Online survey response summary 11 December 2025.pdf
24. Options appraisal methodology.docx
25. Monthly Project Highlight Report (7 docx files)

Data & Finance

1. 2.0 Mar 2025 KPIs for CRMP PB V1.0.pdf
2. Cross Border Mobilisation Review 2024-2025 - DRAFT - Not to be shared externally.pdf
3. Response Standards Report 2024-2025 FINAL July 2025.pdf
4. Service Wide - Local Community, Risk and Incident Trends 2024 v1 0.docx
5. West Ashland - Local Community, Risk and Incident Trends 2024 v1 2.pdf
6. BFRS Appliance Availability - Mazars Dec 2025.xlsx
7. 1 Models Summary.xlsx
8. 2 OC Model Results Summary.xlsx
9. Actual Pump Attendances 2425.xlsx
10. Estimated First Appliance Areas All Bucks All OTB.pdf
11. Final Models Oct 2025 Details.xlsx
12. Model 25\OC\05 - Sample.xlsx
13. Overall Summary On-Call Oct 2025.xlsx
14. Resource Modelling - Incident and Resource input data - Sample.xlsx
15. Resource Modelling - Station Locations.xlsx
16. Resource Modelling Screenshot Examples - Build Inputs.docx
17. CN - Summary - 17-12-2023.xlsx
18. CRMP - Response Model.pptx
19. On-call resource modelling - Draft.docx
20. Resource & Demand - For Fire Authority March 2024.pptx
21. resource review\docx
22. Sim Demand.docx
23. sim demand outputs.xlsx
24. CRMP Timeline - Key Decision Points.docx
25. FW_ On-Call costs.msg
26. On-Call Establishment 2025-26.xlsx
27. On-call station costs 2425.xlsx

Appendix 2

Documents Reviewed (2/2)

Communications

1. FAQ file – website
2. Media coverage – websites
3. Communication Strategy.docx
4. Communications Delivery Plan.docx
5. Partners and Councils Brief.docx
6. External Press Release.docx
7. Members Brief.docx
8. Supplier Brief.docx
9. Pre-consultation engagement report.docx
7. Digital tool Kit (including flyers and posters, images, social banners, newsletters, social posts, and external presentation to town parishes)

Appendix 3

Stakeholder Interviews

Name	Role
Craig Newman	Data Intelligence Team Manager
Emily Hilling	Head of Communication & Marketing
Jacki Flower	Project Manager
Louise Harrison	Chief Fire Officer
Matty Burn	Group Commander On-Call Development Programme
Mark Hemming	Director of Finance & Assets

This page is intentionally left blank



Phase 2 Addendum: On-Call Improvement Programme Assurance Review

March 2026



Contents

- 1. Background and Scope of Work
- 2. Executive Summary
- 3. Observations and Improvement Opportunities
- A. Appendix



Section 1: Background and Scope of Work



Background and Scope of Work

Background

Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service (BFRS) is delivering an On-Call Improvement Programme (OIP) to better align available resources with risk and strengthen on-call cover. A 10-week public consultation (19 Nov 2025 – 28 Jan 2026) seeks feedback on proposals to:

- Remove some On-Call fire engines that cannot be reliably crewed, replacing some 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 a fire 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.

Scope of work

The assurance review followed a two-phased approach, with this report covering Phase 2.

- Phase 1 assessed the pre-consultation process, where it was found that option development and modelling were overall robust and consistently applied. It validated that the consultation approach and decision-making pathway were fair, transparent, and aligned with the first three Gunning Principles (see Appendix 1).

- Phase 2 focuses on post-consultation assurance, including analysis of responses, verification of conscientious consideration of feedback, and updates on evidence, financial case, and residual risks, aligned with the fourth and final Gunning Principle.
- ‘Conscientious Consideration’ focused on evidence that BFRS undertook a structured review of the ORS report and other inputs, tracked themes across public/staff/stakeholder responses, re-examined assumptions and analysis considering feedback, and documented what changed and why, including where views did not alter the proposal.

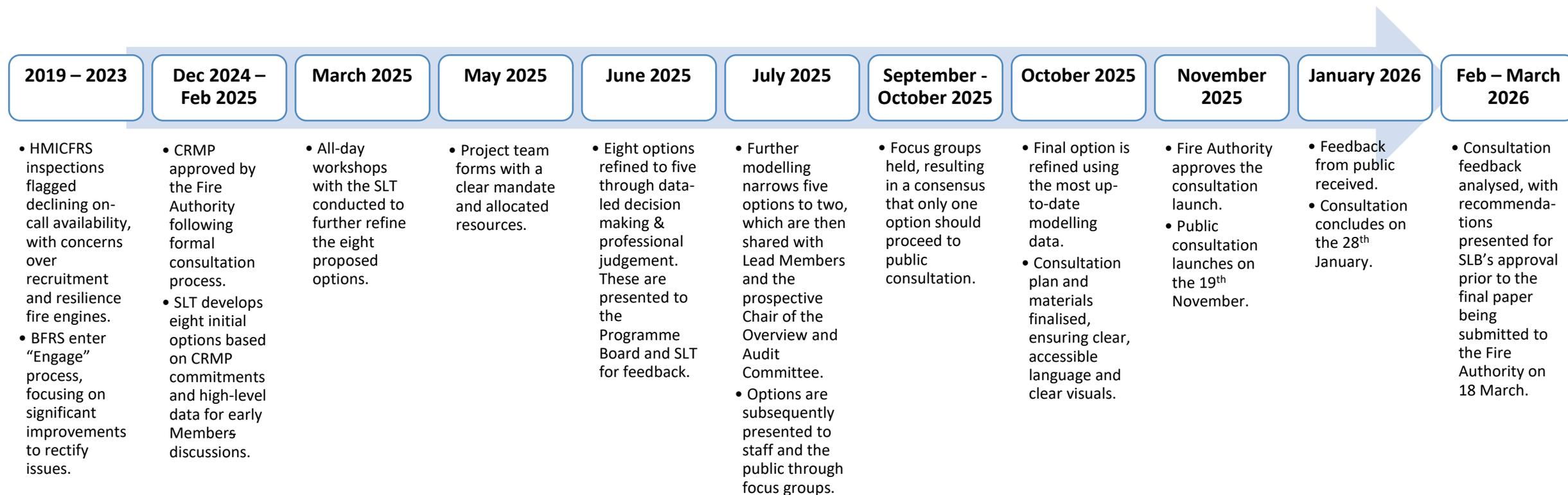
Through document review and a call with the Group Commander for OIP, we developed a thorough understanding of how the feedback influenced the emerging recommendations. Documents reviewed in this phase are listed in Appendix 2.

Limitations

- Although engagement was high in volume, the open questionnaire was self-selecting, meaning responses reflect motivated participants rather than a representative sample. Although ORS removed duplicates and segmented results to aid interpretation, the findings should be regarded as indicative of sentiment rather than a statistically balanced view.
- Running the on-call proposals and operational independence question within the same consultation created confusion among respondents. Many viewed the two issues as linked, with some believing operational independence could be used to implement appliance changes regardless of consultation outcomes. This conflation risks influencing how respondents framed their feedback and introduces a degree of interpretation bias.

Consultation Timeline

The On-Call Improvement Project was delivered during a period of significant change, which ultimately influenced delivery timelines. The timeline below sets out the key events leading up to the consultation launch and the final decision point of the proposals, providing an end-to-end view of the process.



On-Call Improvement Programme: End-to-end process

 = Report focus is on Phase 2

This review assesses activities undertaken during Phase 2 of the On-call Improvement Programme, based on feedback received from respondents. Detailed findings demonstrate how feedback was taken into conscientious consideration for the final proposals for change.

Phase 1

Strategic workshops & initial option development

The initial development of eight options by the SLT was handed over to the newly formed project team, which using updated data, refined and reduced these to five options.

Early engagement/ Pre-consultation activities

Early engagement activities were undertaken to shape the public consultation. The options have since been fully developed and refined from five to two, which are now presented to the public and staff for feedback.

Final modelling & option development

Public feedback indicated a preference for a single option. Further modelling and refinement of criteria resulted in the final proposed option for consultation.

Fire Authority approval & Consultation launch

The consultation pack consolidated all available data in an accessible format, with appropriate checks and formal sign-offs completed by the Fire Authority.

Phase 2

Active consultation & engagement

Public consultation launched on the 19th November, collecting staff and the public's view on the on-call proposals.

Post-consultation feedback analysis

Following the conclusion of the consultation at the end of January, all feedback received was analysed by ORS and the project team.

Consideration of proposals

Based on the feedback received, the proposal was assessed to determine the final recommendation for inclusion in a paper to the Programme Board, prior to Fire Authority approval.

Final assurance & decision to Fire Authority

Recommendation will be presented to the Fire Authority on the 18th March.



Section 2: Executive Summary



Executive Summary (1/2)

On the balance of evidence, the On-Call Improvement Programme has established a clear and structured process for demonstrating ‘conscientious consideration’ of consultation feedback, supporting compliance with Gunning Principle 4. The programme team has revisited assumptions, updated the analysis, and refined proposals where appropriate, with all material adjustments evidenced, reasonable, and clearly traceable to stakeholder input.

Consultation activity generated significant engagement across staff, the public, and wider communities, with 956 questionnaire responses, focus groups, drop-ins, and written submissions forming a rich, triangulated, evidence base. While opposition remains present in some areas, particularly around appliance removal and station closures, the programme demonstrates an iterative and transparent approach to addressing concerns.

Provided the final decision paper explicitly evidences the full issue-to-decision audit trail, including additional transparent analysis and supporting documentation, it will clearly demonstrate that consultation feedback has been conscientiously considered in line with Gunning Principle 4, ahead of the SLB and Fire Authority decisions in March 2026.

Area	Observations/ Insights	RAG	Improvement Opportunities
Conscientious Consideration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The programme has applied a structured, transparent methodology to analyse consultation feedback, including ORS evidence, re-examination of assumptions and weighting of substantive concerns. A comprehensive themes-to-actions tracker provides the core audit trail from issues to analysis to decisions, evidencing Gunning Principle 4 in practice. Engagement levels were high and diverse, with 956 questionnaire responses, focus groups, drop-ins and submissions forming a robust evidence base. There is clear evidence that consultation responses have informed refinements to proposals, although clarity of final documentation will determine completeness of the audit trail. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete and integrate the updated EIA, highlighting differential impacts, mitigations, and post-implementation monitoring expectations. Ensure the final paper clearly maps feedback to analysis to rationale to decision, demonstrating full compliance with Gunning Principle 4. Strengthen modelling transparency, clarifying assumptions, caveats and data updates, i.e. recent availability trends. Provide a concise, integrated evidence summary (quantitative and qualitative) in the final decision paper to improve Members’ readability and reinforce defensibility.
Impact of Feedback on Proposals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feedback analysis led to tangible, evidence-based changes, including retaining Buckingham on-call appliance, adding RFV capability, and establishing a strategic reserve. Staff and stakeholder feedback provided operational insight not fully captured in earlier modelling, prompting refinement of assumptions and proposals. Broader concerns about on-call sustainability (recruitment, training, support) triggered reassessment of long-term viability and forward planning needs. While no new modelling was undertaken, additional analysis and consultation inputs provided a credible basis for adjustments and strengthened governance readiness. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define and document the strategic reserve governance, i.e. activation triggers, readiness standards, reporting. Specify the Buckingham dual-use operating model, including competency maintenance, mixed-crewing parameters and performance measures. Strengthen the implementation plan, covering recruitment actions, reinvestment metrics, timeline for site-use decisions, and structured engagement. Provide a clear narrative showing how consultation led to changes, and where justified decisions were made not to change proposals, supporting Members’ understanding and transparency.

Executive Summary (2/2)

The table below summarises the original proposal themes, the feedback received during consultation, and the resulting impacts. This provides Members with a clear, visual overview of how stakeholder input has shaped the evolution of the proposals and how the programme has strengthened its evidence base and governance readiness.

Phase 2 confirms that the programme has moved beyond delivering consultation materials into a structured, evidence-based consideration phase. Subject to final documentation refinements, the programme is positioned to present a transparent, defensible evidence base to support Fire Authority decision-making.

Original Proposal / Theme	Feedback Received & Consideration	Response / Proposed Impact
Removal of selected On-Call appliances	Mixed consultation response. Staff highlighted operational realities like mixed crewing and improving availability. ORS findings show higher opposition among members of the public, noting concern around resilience and response times.	Proposal has been refined following review of operational data. Buckingham on-call appliance likely retained and there is consideration of keeping one appliance as a strategic reserve to maintain resilience and flexibility.
Closure of Great Missenden & Stokenchurch stations	Focus groups and staff largely accepted closure due to prolonged lack of crewing, though written submissions raised future growth concerns.	Proposal broadly unchanged. Defer decisions on future site use pending targeted engagement. Equality and rural-impact analysis being strengthened to evidence minimal operational impact and provide clearer rationale for decision-makers.
Replacement of fire engines with specialist vehicles	Support for quicker, risk-appropriate response vehicles, but concern that specialist appliances should complement rather than replace traditional pumps.	Messaging refined to emphasise operational flexibility and reinvestment. Additional explanation to be included in final paper on capability differences and training implications.
Operational independence for Chief Fire Officer	Feedback indicated confusion and strong concern around governance and accountability. Staff and stakeholders felt this issue should be separate from the on-call proposals.	Operational independence proposal likely removed from final recommendations to reduce conflation with On-call Improvement Programme changes and mitigate governance risk.
Growth and future risk assumptions	Consultation raised concerns about housing growth and long-term risk beyond CRMP timeframe.	Additional data-led analysis undertaken to validate assumptions with expanded incident projections beyond dwelling fires. Evidence to be incorporated into final decision narrative.
On-Call recruitment and perceived underinvestment	Strong theme from staff and submissions that availability challenges are due to longstanding organisational underinvestment rather than structural issues.	Financial narrative in paper shifting toward visible reinvestment and service improvement actions, i.e. recruitment, retention, welfare, training.
Equality and rural community impacts	Concerns about older and rural communities experiencing disproportionate impacts.	Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) being updated. Final paper should include clearer articulation of impacts, mitigations, and rationale.
Consultation process and engagement approach	Criticism of timing (consultation over the Christmas period) and communication channels. Some respondents felt decisions were pre-determined.	Programme documenting engagement activity, benchmarking consultation length, and strengthening narrative on how feedback has influenced changes.
Reinvestment expectations	Stakeholders expected visible reinvestment if assets reduced.	Financial methodology and associated metrics refined in final decision paper. Reinvestment framing to emphasise service improvement outcomes rather than budget savings.



Section 3: Observations and Improvement Opportunities



Conscientious Consideration

Observations and Areas of Improvement

Observations/ Insights	RAG	Improvement Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The project team has implemented a structured methodology to analyse consultation findings, including a review of the ORS report, with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identification of material issues Re-examination of assumptions/modelling leading up to the consultation Specific weighting of substantive concerns (including minority views) A commitment to update the Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) and set out what changed and why in the final decision paper. Evidence of the outlined approach is captured through a working 'themes-to-actions' Excel tracker, mapping concerns to considerations and responses/changes across key themes. Stakeholder groups, and the rationale / explanation, including any further work/analysis carried out is also documented. This demonstrates active engagement with consultation outcomes rather than retrospective justification of pre-determined decisions. The ORS report provides independent, methodical reporting of open questionnaire results, focus groups (residents, staff, wider stakeholders), drop-ins, and submissions, forming a defensible basis for consideration. There were high levels of engagement with 956 questionnaire responses; in-person and virtual focus groups totalling 55 attendees; 72 attendees at drop-ins. The report also explicitly explains the nature of consultation and accountability standards, describing how it meets best practice, strengthening assurance over process integrity. Responses included mixed views on the proposals with a clear variation between public and staff perspectives. While feedback was not formally weighted, operationally informed staff and sector views were naturally treated as more technically significant where relevant, given their direct understanding of risk and service delivery. At the same time, detailed public feedback was systematically captured through the themes-to-actions tracker to demonstrate that all viewpoints were fully considered as part of the decision-making process. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This tracker is the core audit trail evidencing conscientious consideration, as decision-makers showed they 'conscientiously took into account' consultation responses before any decision, including a transparent audit trail of issues raised, analysis undertaken, and how this informed the final recommendations in the paper presented to the Senior Leadership Board for formal internal sign-off early March, followed by Fire Authority decision mid-March. On balance, there is evidence of a structured 'conscientious consideration' process with traceability from issues raised to responses and, at times, changes. Completion quality will ultimately rest on how clearly the final decision paper evidences the linkage between the tracker, EIA updates, and the final recommendations. We therefore consider Gunning Principle 4 (see Appendix 1) is being addressed, subject to final documentation and sign-off steps in March 2026. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete the updated EIA and integrate its key findings directly into the final decision report to demonstrate how equality-related concerns, particularly those affecting rural and vulnerable communities, have been assessed and addressed as part of the decision-making process. The updated EIA should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set out differential impacts by geography and demographic characteristics (rurality and age). Identify and describe mitigations such as cover mapping, communications, and station-level engagement. Commit to post-implementation monitoring, including how equality impacts will be tracked, reported and escalated if required. Given the volume and variety of evidence sources, produce a concise, integrated summary of the consultation evidence (quantitative + qualitative) within the decision paper, highlighting key themes, patterns and divergence, i.e. differences between public and staff perspectives, so Members can clearly see the breadth and reasoning behind stakeholder views. This strengthens Gunning Principle defensibility.

Impact of Feedback on Proposals

Observations and Areas of Improvement

Observations/ Insights	RAG	Improvement Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The key themes and the Service's high-level responses are detailed below, including analysis of responses and subsequent changes to proposals: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Growth & future risk: Respondents questioned whether proposals account for long-term housing/infrastructure growth and emerging risks. The Service added growth analysis and a placeholder estimated incident uplift calculation to its evidence pack, concluding that no present change is warranted but flagging the need to monitor distribution of risk. Asset reduction & resilience: Concerns focused on response times, reduction in resilience, and over-reliance on neighbouring/OTB services. The Service reconfirmed that the seven targeted on-call appliances contributed ~38 attendances out of ~9,827 last year (~0.39%) and explored a 'strategic reserve' to retain one removed appliance for resilience. Buckingham on-call appliance: Internal/staff concerns (mixed-crewing effects, station's strategic geography, recent availability improvements, pipeline value for day-crewed staffing) led the Service to remove Buckingham on-call appliance from the removal list and consider dual-use (Type B/RFV) crewing. Operational independence: Feedback indicated confusion and perceived conflation with the on-call proposals. Staff and stakeholder groups raised accountability concerns. The Service is not proposing changes to the scheme of delegation at this stage, noting likely national policy movement and retaining evidence for future consideration. This prevents the risk of implementing a decision that may need to be reversed. Rural and vulnerable groups: Concerns centred on rural response times and elderly populations. The Service plans to update the EIA and confirmed that the two proposed station closures have not provided an operational response for years. Through analysis, rural response times remain within expected profiles given whole-time cover patterns. Evidence of the updated EIA was still outstanding at the time of the review. Consultation process criticisms: Some viewed timing and channels as sub-optimal, Phase 1 of the report and the ORS report nevertheless set out how the consultation meets good practice requirements (formative stage, sufficient time/information, transparent reporting). Additional benchmarking has been carried out and OIP intends to summarise the process transparently with appropriate justifications in the final paper. Future of station sites: Respondents requested clarity on future use of proposed closed stations. The Service is considering decoupling cessation of permanent fire cover from site decisions to allow targeted community engagement on the future of the sites. Reinvestment: Staff and the public asked that any asset rationalisation be matched with visible reinvestment (on-call recruitment, facilities, training, welfare). The Service proposes clearer reinvestment narrative and accompanying financial methodology in the final paper, recognising that most savings will be one-off in nature, and that many on-call operational improvements require ongoing revenue funding. On-call sustainability: Some respondents argued that low availability stemmed from longstanding issues in recruitment, management support and wider organisational investment to the on-call model rather than structural factors. While this feedback related to broader on-call issues rather than the proposals, the Service revisited these assumptions and confirmed that maintaining all 18 appliances would remain operationally ineffective and financially unviable. It has committed to strengthening future recruitment and wider on-call improvement activity. While no new modelling was done, there is credible evidence that several consultation themes and further data-led validation and analysis drove tangible and reasonable changes to the emerging recommendations. We consider this line of sight appropriate and traceable, subject to the final decision paper explicitly cross-referencing each change to the originating feedback themes. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure the final paper clearly links each proposal change to the specific consultation feedback that informed it, explains any representativeness limitations of the questionnaire, and sets out key modelling assumptions and caveats, including late data updates such as recent availability trends. This will reinforce demonstrable conscientious consideration and ensure Members have full visibility of underlying assumptions to avoid misinterpretation. Develop structured forward plans codifying: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The governance and planned activation arrangements for the strategic reserve appliance, Buckingham dual-use operating model: set out the competency maintenance plan, mixed-crewing guardrails, and success measures (availability, second appliance response, training attendance). Strengthened recruitment and development measures to address longer-term on-call challenges with a proposed timeline. Set out a clear implementation plan for changes, reinvestment priorities and metrics, the future engagement process for station sites, and lessons learned from the consultation process, ensuring stakeholders understand both how feedback shaped the proposals and how delivery will be phased and managed.



Appendix



Appendix 1

The Gunning Principles

They were coined by Stephen Sedley QC in a court case in 1985 relating to a school closure consultation (R v London Borough of Brent ex parte Gunning). Prior to this, very little consideration had been given to the laws of consultation. Sedley defined that a consultation is only legitimate when these four principles are met:

1. Proposals are still at a formative stage: A final decision has not yet been made, or predetermined, by the decision makers.
2. There is sufficient information to give 'intelligent consideration': The information provided must relate to the consultation and must be available, accessible, and easily interpretable for consultees to provide an informed response.
3. There is adequate time for consideration and response: There must be sufficient opportunity for consultees to participate in the consultation. There is no set timeframe for consultation,¹ despite the widely accepted twelve-week consultation period, as the length of time given for consultee to respond can vary depending on the subject and extent of impact of the consultation.
4. 'Conscientious consideration' must be given to the consultation responses before a decision is made: Decision-makers should be able to provide evidence that they took consultation responses into account

These principles were reinforced in 2001 in the 'Coughlan Case (R v North and East Devon Health Authority ex parte Coughlan²), which involved a health authority closure and confirmed that they applied to all consultations, and then in a Supreme Court case in 2014 (R ex parte Moseley v LB Haringey³), which endorsed the legal standing of the four principles.

Since then, the Gunning Principles have formed a strong legal foundation from which the legitimacy of public consultations is assessed and are frequently referred to as a legal basis for judicial review decisions.⁴

1 In some local authorities, their local voluntary Compact agreement with the third sector may specify the length of time they are required to consult for. However, in many cases, the Compact is either inactive or has been cancelled so the consultation timeframe is open to debate.

2 BAILII, England and Wales Court of Appeal (Civil Decision) Decisions, Accessed: 13 December 2016.

3 BAILII, United Kingdom Supreme Court, Accessed: 13 December 2016.

4 The information used to produce this document has been taken from the Law of Consultation training course provided by The Consultation Institute.

Source: Local Government Association. The Gunning Principles. Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/The%20Gunning%20Principles.pdf> (Accessed: 4 December 2025).

Appendix 2

Documents Reviewed & Stakeholders Interviewed

Documents reviewed

1. Opinion Research Services (Feb 2026): On-Call Improvement Programme Consultation – Report of Findings
2. Considerations of Consultation Themes Excel Tracker
3. Consideration of Final ORS Report/Process Email
4. Final Deadlines Document

Stakeholder Interview

Name	Role
Matty Burn	Group Commander On-Call Development Programme

This page is intentionally left blank