



East Sussex
Fire & Rescue Service

Medium Term Plan and Budget Consultation for 2013-14

**Report of Public Consultation for
East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service
January 2013**

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Acknowledgements

Opinion Research Services (ORS) is pleased to have worked with East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service (ESFRS) once more on the consultation reported here. The public engaged with the issues under consideration and discussed their ideas readily, and we trust this project will contribute to the continued development of ESFRS' public engagement and consultation.

We thank ESFRS for commissioning the project. We particularly thank the senior officers who attended the sessions to listen to people's views. Such meetings benefit considerably from the readiness of ESFRS' senior managers and officers to answer participants' questions fully and frankly. Their input was essential in achieving an informed debate.

Above all, we are grateful to all the members of the public who took part in the interesting meetings and shared their views readily with us. They were patient in listening to background information before entering positively into the spirit of open discussions.

At all stages of the project, ORS' status as an independent organisation consulting the public as objectively as possible was recognised and respected. We are grateful for the trust, and we hope this report will be useful in thinking about the future of the organisation.

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Project Overview

The Commission

1. On the basis of our long-standing experience with the UK fire and rescue service, and our status as the sole approved provider of research and consultation services under the terms of the Fire Services Consultation Association's National Framework Contract, ORS was commissioned by East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service (ESFRS) to convene and facilitate two forums and one focus group with members of the general public to review ESFRS' Medium Term Plan 2013/14-2017/18 and its budget for 2013 - 2014.
2. ORS' role was to design, recruit, facilitate and report the three sessions during November and December 2012. We worked in collaboration with ESFRS to prepare informative stimulus material for the meetings before facilitating the discussions and preparing this independent report of findings.

Deliberative Research: Public Forums and Focus Groups

3. The forum and focus group sessions were designed to inform and 'engage' the participants both with the issues and with ESFRS – by using a 'deliberative' approach to encourage members of the public to reflect in depth about the fire and rescue service, while both receiving and questioning background information and discussing service delivery and budgetary issues in detail. The meetings lasted for between 2 and 2.5 hours.
4. In total, there were 32 diverse participants at the sessions. The dates of the meetings and attendance level by members of the public were as follows:

AREA	TIME AND DATE	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES
Hailsham (Forum) For residents of Eastbourne Borough and Lewes, Rother and Wealden Districts	6:30pm – 9:00pm Tuesday 13th November 2012	15
Brighton (Focus Group) For residents of the City of Brighton and Hove	7:00pm – 9:00pm Wednesday 14th November 2012	6
Hastings (Forum) For residents of Hastings Borough	6:30pm – 8:30pm Monday 17th December 2012	11

5. None of the participants at the first two sessions had attended any earlier meetings with either ESFRS or ORS and all were recruited by random-digit telephone dialling from ORS' Social Research Call Centre. The participants at the third meeting, in Hastings, had previously attended one forum for the Hastings Review consultation. Having been initially contacted by phone, the recruits were then written to - to confirm the invitation and the arrangements; and those who agreed to come then received telephone or written reminders shortly before each meeting. Such recruitment by telephone is the most effective way of ensuring that all the participants are independently recruited.

6. Overall, participants were a broad cross-section of residents from the local areas and, as standard good practice, were recompensed for their time and efforts in travelling and taking part.

	OVERALL
Gender	Male: 17 Female: 15
Age	18-34: 8 35-54: 11 55+: 13
Social Grade	AB: 4 C1: 12 C2: 7 DE: 9
Ethnicity	1 BME
LLTI	3 with Long-term Limiting Illness
Geographical Area	City of Brighton and Hove: 6 Eastbourne Borough: 4 Hastings Borough: 11 Lewes District: 4 Rother District: 3 Wealden District: 4

7. In recruitment, care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by disabilities or any other factors, and the venues at which the forums met were readily accessible. People's special needs were all taken into account in the recruitment and at the venues. The random telephone recruitment process was monitored to ensure social diversity in terms of a wide range of criteria – including, for example: local authority area of residence; gender; age; ethnicity; social grade; and disability/long-term limiting illness (LLTI).

The Interview Framework

8. In order to address key issues about the future of ESFRS in an informed manner, all the forums began with some initial scene-setting and 'ice-breaker' questions about risk levels and the cost of ESFRS services, followed by a detailed but interactive presentation covering all the following issues in an introductory manner:

Governance of ESFRS

Fire cover resources and facilities

Incident profiles and risk levels – in total and by time of day

Response times

The interconnection of prevention, protection and response

Proportions of government grant and council tax funding for ESFRS

Impact of four-year public spending review

ESFRS' potential funding gap.

9. All of these issues were presented in an interactive manner and participants were encouraged frequently to interject to clarify and question many matters. Following the clarification of the strategic roles of a modern fire and rescue services, the three meetings discussed in depth the following issues:

The role of prevention and public education services and the extent to which they should be prioritised alongside other roles for ESFRS

To what extent and in what way prevention and public education services should be targeted to those who are most at risk

How ESFRS might save money and/or increase revenue to narrow the funding gap – for example by reducing fire engines/lengthening response times; or introducing different crewing systems; or increasing revenue by raising its council tax precept.

10. In order to deliberate more effectively, at each meeting participants were divided into small groups which were asked to score each option as more or less worthy of being pursued. Participants took the exercises very seriously. Discussion of the three options was done in two stages: first, participants were asked for their **provisional** or **initial views**; then later, after a detailed consideration of the options, they were asked to formulate their **final** or **considered views**.
11. Each part of the meetings began with a short presentation devised by ORS to both inform and stimulate discussion of the issues, following which the above matters were reviewed. Participants were given extensive time for questions prior to being invited to make up their minds on the issues.

Qualitative Research

12. Although, like all other forms of qualitative consultation, forums and focus groups cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the three meetings reported here gave diverse groups of people from across East Sussex the opportunity to comment in detail on ESFRS' direction of travel. 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 on the basis of similar discussions. In summary, the outcomes reported here are reliable as examples of the reflections and opinions of diverse informed people reacting to the issues under consideration.

The Report

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

Consultation Findings with Commentary

Introduction

14. This section reports the findings from the three meetings while also revealing the reasoning of participants. It has not been necessary to report the findings from the sessions separately because all three sets of participants shared considerable common ground - but where there were real differences in opinion the groups are compared and contrasted. Not all the individuals gave equal emphasis to each aspect of the discussion, but, taken overall, the forums considered a wide range of issues that are reported fully below.

Main Findings

Introductory Section

Awareness of Risk and Finances

15. In order to investigate their background perception of fire risk in the community, the forum and focus group participants were asked to 'guesstimate' the annual total death rate from fires across East Sussex. Not surprisingly, many over-estimated the number – with many estimates ranging between 30 and 300, and one person even putting the figure at 5,000! However, there were also several more accurate guesses of between six and 15.
16. When asked how much it costs to crew one 24/7 wholetime fire engine per year, people's estimates generally tended to be much lower than the actual cost (which is about £1M) in ranging usually from £200K to £750K. Only one person estimated in excess of £1M.
17. A couple of participants correctly guessed that ESFRS' annual budget is in the region of £40M, but most assumed it was about or more than £100M; only a few under-estimated (at £3M to £10M).
18. When asked how much each band D household pays per year for ESFRS services there were widely varied estimates: a small number guessed very accurately, but most quoted supposed figures in the range of £200-£300. The majority of participants that estimated at the higher end of the scale were pleasantly surprised that the actual figure is currently £81.86.
19. Overall, then, many people tended to overestimate both risk (expressed as the number of fire deaths) and the costs of running the fire and rescue service. These trends are not unique to East Sussex and, indeed, the estimates given in these groups were no less accurate than those typically given elsewhere.

Awareness of Roles

20. There was good awareness that the FRS role is now wider than only firefighting. People knew that ESFRS also undertakes the following: rescue work such as dealing with RTCs and flooding; education and community work (including Home Fire Safety Checks and school visits); inspections of commercial premises; and animal rescues.

Governance

21. When asked an open-ended question about the difference between the Fire Authority and the Fire and Rescue Service, all groups found it very difficult to answer: that is, no-one was able to give an account of the role of the authority in relation to the service – and none knew how the authority is comprised proportionately of elected members from the constituent local authorities.

ESFRS’ Budget Challenges

Initial Views on Key Options

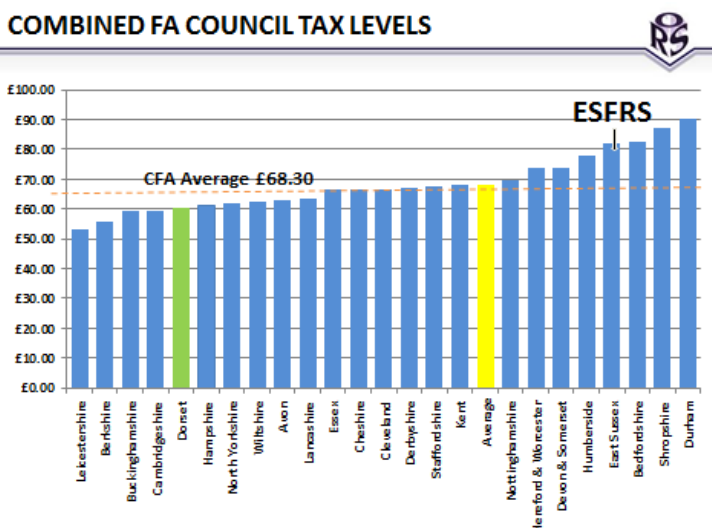
22. Very briefly, early in the meetings, participants were informed that as a consequence of reduced government funding ESFRS needs to save money and/or increase revenue. In this minimal context they were asked to prioritise the following main options - for ESFRS to:

- Save money via improved efficiency through different crewing systems
- Save money by reducing the number of fire engines – or using smaller, cheaper and/or older ones
- Save money by reducing prevention and protection activities
- Increase revenue by raising its council tax precept.

23. In all three sessions, participants were asked to prioritise the three main options by scoring them – to show to what extent each should be pursued (relative to the others) by ESFRS. In order to deliberate collectively and more effectively, at each forum participants were divided into small groups and asked to score the options separately. The results are shown further below where they are compared with people’s informed views, as a result of the discussions.

Final or Considered Views

24. Following the introductory section, to inform their considered or informed judgements, the meetings were given key information about the financial challenges facing ESFRS in the context of the next two years of the public spending review. For example, they were informed that only 38% of ESFRS’ funding comes in direct government grant, whereas 62% comes from council tax. The funding level for ESFRS was illustrated with the following graph, which shows the variations in combined fire authorities’ council tax precepts.

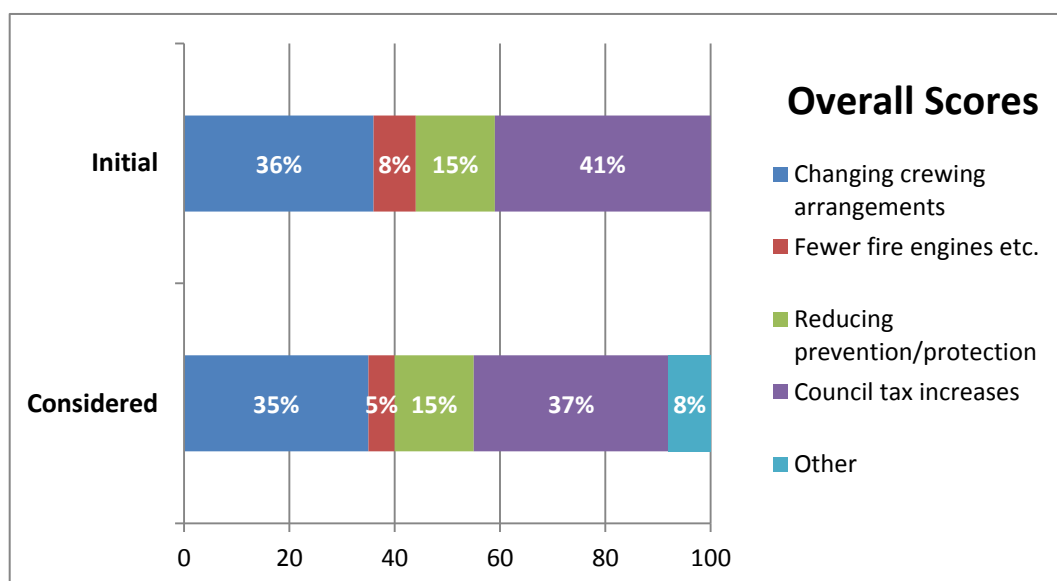


27. Without ‘special pleading’ all the above graphics were used to inform people’s considered views during the meetings – that is, they were told about the apportionment of council tax, about ESFRS’ comparative precept level and about the developing funding gap. Whatever their final conclusions, all of the participants found the information interesting and genuinely informative.
28. In order to inform further deliberations, the forums were then given more details to consider about the main options for ESFRS. Considerable care was taken by the facilitator to ensure that each of the four options were explained and considered fairly and in detail – without giving undue priority or plausibility to any one over the others. Managers and officers from ESFRS also co-operated readily in referring to the options in a neutral manner when answering any technical questions. Throughout the meetings, participants were told explicitly that each of the four options was possible and feasible – and it was for them to decide their relative desirability for the service.

Note – in the following charts the percentage scores are not percentages of people, but show the relative importance the participants gave to each of the possible priorities when asked to allocate 100 points between the various options.

Overall Comparison of Initial and Final/Considered Priority Weightings

29. For the overall analysis, the forum and focus group ‘scores’ for each option have been merged to produce the general ‘weightings’ as shown below.

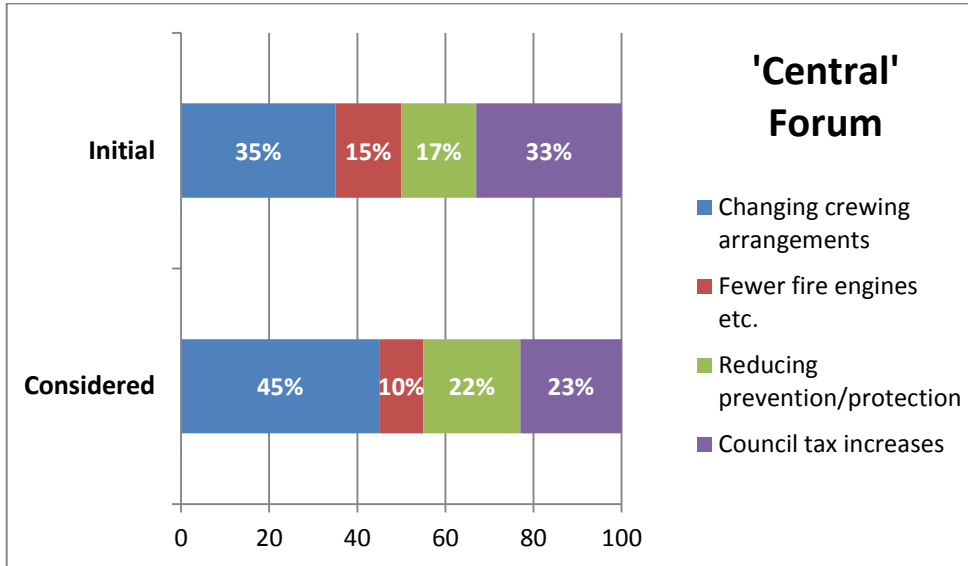


30. Interestingly, as the chart above shows, there was little difference between people’s initial and considered views. Certainly, these profiles of initial and considered priorities are much more alike than in other studies ORS has conducted in a similar way.
31. Initially, people slightly prioritised increasing council tax, with changes to crewing systems (but not a reduction in fire engines) a close second – with the other options well behind. For example, there was much less support for reducing prevention and protection and even less for reducing the number of fire engines. After all the information and discussions, the meetings’ final weightings did not differ significantly from the original profile – though support for a council tax increases marginally reduced, mainly because some prioritised ‘another’ option, namely to re-pursue a merger with West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service.

Different Meetings: Comparison of Their Initial and Considered Weightings

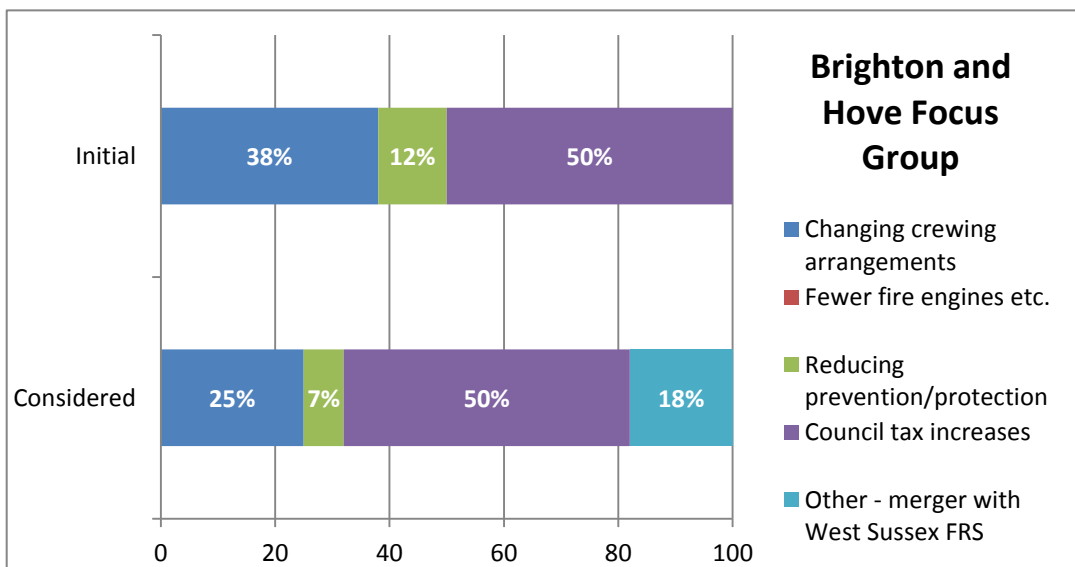
32. The following charts show people’s initial and considered weightings of the possible priorities for each meeting.

‘CENTRAL’ FORUM



33. At the ‘Central’ forum, people initially prioritised changing crewing systems to save money and increasing council tax about equally, with less support for reducing prevention and protection and reducing the number of fire engines. Their final judgements did not differ significantly from this – although support for changing crewing arrangements had increased and support for a council tax rise had declined by the same. There was a little more support for reducing prevention and protection activities and a little less for reducing the number of fire engines.

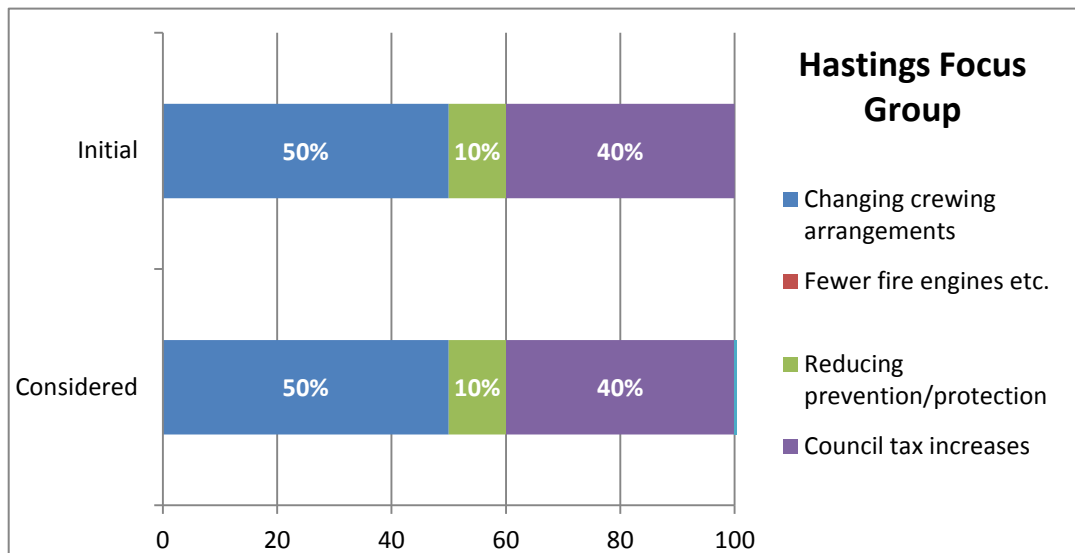
BRIGHTON AND HOVE FOCUS GROUP



Note: if numbers do not sum to 100 it is due to small rounding errors.

34. A council tax increase was the favoured option for the **Brighton and Hove focus group** both before and after discussions. However, their considered views included an ‘other’ option of a merger with West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service – and in order to accommodate this they reduced their support for changing crewing arrangements and reducing prevention and protection activities.

HASTINGS FOCUS GROUP



35. The Hastings focus group prioritised changing crewing arrangements (by natural wastage) over council tax increases, but no-one in this group (or at Brighton and Hove) supported fewer fire engines and longer response times and only a few would consider reducing prevention services. There was a suggestion made in discussion about the possibility of merging with Kent FRS, but no-one chose to include this as an option during the exercise.

Council Tax – Freeze or Thaw?

36. In the above context, the groups continued to discuss some specific financial issues. They were reminded that ESFRS’s council tax precept is currently £81.86 per year (Band D property) – and has remained unchanged for three years. The vast majority of participants across all forums considered this charge to be reasonable – for example:

It seems peanuts to me compared to insuring your house or car.

37. In the ‘Central’ forum, however, two did not think the charge reasonable and there were two ‘don’t knows’.
38. It was explained that the government has offered fire and rescue authorities (and other precepting authorities) grants equivalent to a 1% increase in council tax in return for authorities freezing their council tax in 2013-14. The groups considered whether in principle it is desirable for ESFRS to accept the government grant while freezing the council tax – or whether it should perhaps reject the grant in favour of an increase in council tax. The participants clearly understood both that:

In taking the latter course, ESFRS could be accused of “rejecting a ‘free’ 1% grant”

If the council tax base level is not raised incrementally then there may either be a need for a disproportionately large increase later on or a funding gap may develop.

39. In the context of these and other considerations, the groups were asked to discuss whether an incremental increase in 2013-14 would be better than a freeze. Perhaps surprisingly, having reviewed these issues, the forums favoured incremental council tax rises by a large overall majority – with only a very small minority favouring a continued freeze and only three ‘don’t knows’.
40. The general consensus was that a 2% increase in ESFRS council would not be onerous and that people would be prepared to pay a little more for a ‘proper’ FRS:

I’ll pay an extra £5 a year for the FRS to work properly

Is this only in respect of the council tax for the Fire and Rescue Service or could it be for the whole council tax? A 2% increase on the Band D total would be a total increase of £32 per year...but if you took the FRS in isolation, it is only very small. But even £32 a year is not too much overall; I don’t mind £32.

41. This single comment should not be taken as implying that all the groups supported a 2% increase on their total council tax bills, for in many cases they were supportive for ESFRS while clarifying that this carried no necessary implications for the other authorities’ precept levels.
42. Overall, then, the forums overwhelmingly favoured progressive ESFRS council tax increases rather than a continued freeze. One person at Hastings was pleased about what they saw as the democratic decentralisation of costs, but objected to the limitations :

They want us to take responsibility while not letting us take all the decisions – for example, we can’t increase the council tax by more than 2% nor prioritise services between one authority and another.

Medium Term Plan

Introduction

43. The space devoted to the financial issues above should not be taken to imply that little attention was paid to other medium term planning issues – for the impression is partly an illusion generated by the need to include some important charts alongside careful explanation of how the discussion took place. In fact, there was considerable interest in the other strategic issues – which reflects the importance that people attached to prevention and education services in the financial priorities reported above.
44. The first issue considered by participants in relation to ESFRS’ medium term planning was whether the ESFRS should target its services to people most vulnerable/in need/at risk. This approach was widely supported.
45. More specifically, participants were asked to comment on the following proposed prioritisation schedule for ESFRS – with different groups to receive the following differential ‘attention’ with more and less proactive initiatives according to their vulnerability:

Most vulnerable households: to receive three-yearly health and wellbeing visits with partners

High risk households: to receive home safety visits, specialist alarms

Medium risk household: to receive focused safety messages (for example fireworks, Christmas lights, candles, youth education etc.)

Low risk households: to receive information via website publicity and national safety campaigns.

46. Participants in all three sessions unanimously endorsed the differential approach outlined above – with the Hastings group particularly supporting targeted interventions in high-risk areas and the retention of ‘life projects’, especially with young people and troubled families (by perhaps seeking external sources of funding in creative ways):

We felt that the ranking of priorities is important. The community is not just paying for one’s own facilities but for the whole society, recognising that some areas have much higher risk with nursing homes and more at risk premises

We like the idea of ‘life projects’ with youngsters, which should be focused on poorer areas and can have a big beneficial effect

We broadly agree, but the FRS needs to keep its good ‘life projects’ going in creative ways...to align them towards employability outcomes for youngsters and helping troubled families for which funding can be available.

47. There was also a definite sense that partner organisations must take more responsibility in identifying those most at risk on behalf of ESFRS:

Social landlords should take more responsibilities and so should the carer organisations that visit vulnerable people; they should report on risks.

Service Provision

48. In terms of its service provision, participants were asked whether ESFRS should:

Ensure provision is delivered to those who need it the most - even if this means that there will be both ‘winners and losers’

Review the balance between Prevention, Protection and Response Services – to ensure the services that most affect safety outcomes are the most protected

Review cheaper ways of delivering the same standards of service.

49. Once again, participants were in almost unanimous agreement that ESFRS should pursue all of these approaches; and with respect to the latter point (reviewing cheaper ways of delivering the same standards of service), it was strongly suggested that ESFRS work even more closely with voluntary organisations (and even consider setting up a charitable trust itself) and apply for National Lottery Funding in partnership with others:

Charitable trusts could be used to support community initiatives generally and maybe the ESFRS could create a trust itself? You need to work with charities like the Women’s Institute

Could you also apply for lottery funding? For Richer Communities etc. in partnership with others.

Income Generation

50. It was explained the 2,504 of ESFRS' calls in 2011/12 were special service calls – and that (excluding 454 road traffic collisions), the service attended lock-outs, lock-ins, domestic flooding, trapped people, lifts, animal rescues etc.
51. Participants were asked to comment on whether ESFRS should raise income by charging for some special service calls and a large majority were in favour of it doing so. Just over half of participants felt that all such calls (with the obvious exception of RTCs) should be charged for, whereas a further third felt that some should be charged. In other words, there was overwhelming support for the principle of charging.

CONCLUSIONS

52. The public sector spending reductions and ESFRS' funding gap do not lead informed members of the public to suppose that the service should abandon its commitment to prevention work and public education. On the evidence of these three meetings, the public want to retain these important activities and also the focus on the vulnerable and higher risk people. However, the public are ready to see a more differentiated approach developed – with selective targeting of different groups for different kinds of educative and protective initiatives. For instance, there was no support for smoke detectors and free home fire safety checks to continue to be delivered by ESFRS as “free universal benefits” for all households regardless of need or risk; rather the public thought that these initiatives should be delivered on a more rational, targeted basis, reflecting variations in risk levels.
53. The weighting exercise, in which people had to prioritise some key possible options in the context of ESFRS' funding gap shows clearly that the emphasis should not fall wholly on one initiative to the detriment of all the others: the fact that an option is given any weighting at all means that it has *some* importance.
54. Therefore, the implication is that ESFRS should **pursue a balanced approach**, giving recognition to at least three of the main ways forward. The public's main priorities are for the ESFRS to consider more **economical duty systems** and to **raise ESFRS council tax**; they do not want to see fire engines reduced and response times lengthened; but they do want to **protect preventive work in the community**, albeit in a more targeted and economical manner.
55. Both initially and when the financial situation was understood, there was considerable support for increasing the **ESFRS council tax precept** by 2% - mainly because people thought the current annual payment for Band D households is low and because they understood that the money would go exclusively to the ESFRS.