

FOR PUBLICATION

Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Authority
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SUBJECT: COMMUNITY PANEL UPDATE

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Background Papers:

[Agenda for Executive Committee on Thursday, 21st September, 2023, 10.00 am | Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#)

[Agenda for Executive Committee on Tuesday, 14th March, 2023, 10.00 am | Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#)

Implications

This table provides a short statement of the impact of the recommendations in this report.
Will this report affect any of the following?

	Yes / No	Impact / Reference
Financial Implications	Yes	Purchase of email marketing suite (not solely for this purpose)
Risk Management	Yes	Reputational risk – engaging with public/not listening to customers
Legal Implications	No	
Privacy and Security Implications	No	
Duty to Collaborate	Yes	Opportunity for collaboration with partner organisations

Health and Safety Implications	No	
Equality, Diversity and Inclusion	Yes	Diverse representation of communities, engaging with seldom-heard groups
Environmental Sustainability	No	
Consultation and Communication	Yes	Engaging with key stakeholders in researching options available within Bedfordshire. Communication following community engagement to close the loop of topics raised.

PURPOSE:

To update members on the Service’s community panel way forward following a decision made at FRA Executive Committee 21 September 2023.

RECOMMENDATION:

That Members acknowledge the contents of the report.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Service wants to have meaningful engagement with the communities it serves; to listen to their concerns, get their feedback on decisions taken by the Authority about the future plans and priorities of the fire service, and to increase strategic visibility amongst the public.
- 1.2 The first community panel was held earlier this year and it did not meet the objective as set out to FRA in March.
- 1.3 The CRMP 23-27 has been consulted on with the public of Bedfordshire.
- 1.4 This report aims to give Authority Members an update following the first panel and to understand the plan moving forward.

2 Background

- 2.1 Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Authority in March this year (March 2023) requested the Service establish its own community panel to support community engagement activity to involve the public in “developing ideas earlier and get regular sense checking on activity that affects their communities”.
- 2.2 Less than a handful of fire and rescue services in England host its own in-person community panel/forum.
- 2.3 A community panel was hosted by the Service in May 2023 and was attended by 14 representatives from partner organisations.
- 2.4 A presentation was delivered about the Service and the proposed CRMP, before a discussion held about the risks/challenges faced by organisations who attended and the communities of Bedfordshire that we all serve.
- 2.5 It was suggested the panel be renamed the Community Partner Panel to reflect membership.
- 2.6 No further meetings of this panel or the development of a panel for residents/the public have taken place.
- 2.7 Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service attends partnership panels, meetings and engagement opportunities at a number of levels across the Service, including at senior management level and through the community fire safety team (partnerships manager). Some of these welcome members of the public to represent their community.
- 2.8 There is currently no central coordination of community engagement activity of this nature by the Service. Recording of this activity as a Service is therefore limited.
- 2.9 The Interim Head of Communications has engaged with counterparts in blue light services, local authorities and other fire and rescue services to understand best practice as well as what opportunities are available locally. Opportunities are available to strategically sit on resident/community panels that are already hosted and are being developed by partner organisations.

3 FRA Executive Committee decision

- 3.1 The FRA Executive Committee on 21 September 2023 voted to both continue to collaborate with partners to sit on existing partner panels, forums and resident engagement opportunities and to establish a virtual community panel.
- 3.2 It was highlighted the need for attendance at existing panels to be better coordinated and recorded moving forward to enable BFRS to strategically manage attendance, themes discussed and act upon local issues raised in such forums.
- 3.3 The benefits of attending established panels include:
 - Alignment with vision statement about Working Together, and this includes working with partners
 - Raises profile of FRA activity and strategy with public and partners

- Our CRMP consultation in January 2023 resulted in the highlighting of various efficiencies which included collaboration with other public services
- Cost savings and the costs associated with supporting and paying for this
- Integrates agendas and will avoid duplication
- Collaborative solutions can be held to public account

3.4 Risks include:

- Agendas may have limited FRS coverage and airtime may be limited
- The public may confuse responsibility/activity of partner organisations
- The Authority may have less control over terms of reference
- May have to repeat the process a number of times (e.g., three council community citizen panels, ICB, and policing)

3.5 The development of a virtual community panel was supported by the FRA Executive Committee to enable the organisation to have access to a group of engaged members of the public at regular intervals throughout the year to survey, consult and ask for opinions on a range of topics.

3.6 The benefits of a virtual community panel include:

- Can be run alongside any other community engagement approach
- Can be set up quickly with a recruitment campaign across existing channels/events/contacts
- Can ask questions ad-hoc (TOR two times a month maximum) on a range of subjects, as and when needed
- More flexible for panel as does not require panel members to commit to attending a meeting (virtual or in-person) at a specific time and place
- Requires less time, effort and cost compared with traditional panel meets
- Ready-made test group for a range of subjects
- GDPR compliant data storage
- Successfully used by neighbour Cambridgeshire FRS – can build on their learning/utilise model
- Will get more response (measurable) to key questions from a larger sample of general public

3.7 The risks include:

- Will need to invest in suitable email-marketing software (already being explored to support BFRS external communication)
- May not get a diverse range of people take part unless targeted advertising during recruitment

- Duplication in responses
- May need to refresh recruitment drive for panel members yearly

3.8 The FRA Executive Committee requested a plan of implementation be brought for information to the full FRA.

4 Plan

- 4.1 The intention now is to put a detailed communication and engagement plan into place to cover the launch and first 12 months of the panel.
- 4.2 The next three months will be spent procuring and putting in place a GDPR-compliant email marketing system (something that is already being explored by the Service to improve its external communication with businesses and the public following the most recent HMICFRS inspection). The community engagement panel will utilise this technology also.
- 4.3 Once in place, estimated early 2024, the Communication Team will use a combination of technologies to put together an online form to allow people to sign up to receive periodic questions and surveys about the Service's activities, known as 'Hot Topics'. This short form will capture equality data, based on the recent UK census fields, to allow the team to monitor the demographic make-up of the people signing up to the group. This data is password protected and stored securely.
- 4.4 There will be a six-week sign up period, encouraging members of the public to join. This opportunity will be shared on existing social media platforms, on the BFRS website, through engagement with local media and shared with existing contact distribution lists obtained through a range of Service departments including prevention, protection and partnerships.
- 4.5 During the sign-up period, people will be given the opportunity enter a prize draw as a reward for signing up.
- 4.6 The aim will be to have 100 people signed up by the end of the six-week period.
- 4.7 A page will be created on the website with information about the panel aim and objectives and the continual opportunity to sign up, enabling the group to naturally grow over time. The team will also plan in to its schedule (recommended twice yearly) promotion of the panel to support natural growth.
- 4.8 The aim will be to have one engagement – whether it be a survey, a question with a free text box, or poll – every three months (every quarter), aligned to the CRMP and organisational objectives, or hot topics for what is trending either in industry or locally connected to the fire service.
- 4.9 The first series of engagement topics could be as follows:
- Awareness of our CRMP and priorities in the community
 - Response times
 - Understanding of on-call fire stations/crews

- How operational crews spend their time (exploring the range of activities and importance of HFSV in the community, linked to role of the firefighter, recruitment and FRS awareness)
- How we use social media

(Please see here from Cambridgeshire FRS as an example of how we will ensure the panel will have a good understanding of the fire service for answering questions that cover more complex situations: [Document.ashx \(cmis.uk.com\)](#))

- 4.10 No more than an average of two emails a month will be sent. They will vary in length and complexity, ranging from a single question to a more structured survey.
- 4.11 Staff of Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service will not be eligible to join the panel.
- 4.12 Growing the forum will be a key priority for Communication Team for the next year. The plan will be to try and increase participation with harder to reach groups using targeted advertising. This will then allow the forum to provide a representative view of activities and help shape plans moving forward.

5 RECOMMENDATION:

- 5.1 That Members acknowledge the contents of the report.

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