

FOR PUBLICATION

Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Authority
Executive Committee
14 March 2023

SUBJECT: OPTIONS APPRAISAL FOR BEDFORDSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE COMMUNITY PANEL

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Background information: Bedfordshire and Luton Community Foundation link <https://blcf.org.uk/about-us/>
 Bedfordshire Police Community Scrutiny Panel [community-scrutiny-panel-meetings](https://www.bedsfire.gov.uk/scrutiny-panel-meetings)

Implications

This table provides a short statement of the impact of the recommendations in this report and/or a reference to the relevant paragraph/s in the report.

Will this report affect any of the following?

	Yes / No	Impact / Reference
Financial Implications	Yes	Potentially a small cost in paying for venues. Chairperson's attendance allowance.
Risk Management	Yes	Reputational risk and need for confidentiality agreements with panel members
Legal Implications	No	
Privacy and Security Implications	Yes	Confidentiality agreements with panel members
Duty to Collaborate	No	

Health and Safety Implications	No	
Equality, Diversity and Inclusion	Yes	Gender balance for panel and diverse membership
Environmental Sustainability	No	
Consultation and Communication	No	

PURPOSE:

To brief members on the findings from recent meetings and research on developing a Community Panel.

RECOMMENDATION:

That Members acknowledge the contents of the report and decide on the best option.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Authority’s (the Authority) approach to community engagement is working well and the public’s response to surveys, station open days, and events such as the Bedford River Festival is excellent. In addition, the Authority is working closely with partners to avoid ‘consultation fatigue’ and avoid periods when other consultations are open. For example, the annual community safety partnership consultations in June. The Authority allows four weeks for formal consultations.
- 1.2 However, the resource implications for annual ‘set piece’ consultation exercises is significant and there must be adequate time given for the consultation process. This is important because the Authority has signed up to the Gunning Principles and principle number four states¹ there must be adequate time and involvement for consideration and response. Currently the

¹ See <https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/The%20Gunning%20Principles.pdf>

Authority's formal consultation process tends to start when proposals have already been developed and this gives limited scope for early co-design and community involvement on policy ideas.

- 1.3 The Head of Strategic Support and Assurance (HSSA) has met with various individuals including council community liaison managers, police scrutiny panel members, and police Independent Advisory Group chairs to learn about local practice. Other organisations such as Nesta, Bristol City Council, the Consultation Institute and Devon and Somerset FRS. This has revealed a variety of options which are set out below. All but one UK FRS - Devon and Somerset FRS – has its own ad hoc Community Panel which does not meet regularly. All others have linked their community panel work with local councils or police and crime commissioners.
- 1.4 This report aims to give Authority Members four options in using a Community Panel to involve the public in developing ideas earlier and get regular 'sense checking' on activity that affects their communities. A Community Panel could also boost the scrutiny function of the Authority as considered in the recent Local Government Association's independent review of governance.

2 Option 1 – collaborate with the Bedfordshire Police Community Scrutiny Panel

2.1 Benefits include:

- Our new mission statement is about Working Together, and this includes working with partners
- Raises profile of FRA activity and strategy
- May result in better media coverage
- Our CRMP consultation in January 2023 resulted in the highlighting of various efficiencies which included collaboration with other public services
- Cost savings in not having a single Authority Community Panel and the costs associated with supporting and paying for this
- Integrates agendas and may avoid duplication

2.2 Risks include:

- Agendas may have limited FRS coverage
- The public may confuse Police operational activity with FRS activity
- Proposals may inadvertently impinge on the role of Authority Members
- May raise an unfounded perception that this is a precursor to service integration

- The Authority may have less control over the panel's terms of reference

3 Option 2 – integrate with council community citizens panels

3.1 Benefits include:

- All of the above
- Potentially enhances democracy by working with local councils
- Good time to shape the new Luton and Central Beds citizens panels
- More control over the panel's agendas and terms of reference

3.2 Risks include:

- May have to repeat the process three times
- Only Bedford Borough Council has a functioning citizens panel, the other two councils are developing their ideas, so the amount of effort involved setting these up will need to be monitored and managed carefully
- FRS agenda items may take a low priority
- Meetings may quickly get out of sync with Authority meetings
- Agenda items may get more of a 'political' response

4 Option 3 – develop a dedicated Fire and Rescue Service Community Panel

4.1 Benefits include:

- Focused and dedicated meeting agendas
- Opportunity to gain subject matter expertise
- Members of the Panel could be nominated by local councils, Police and Crime Commissioner, Police Independent Advisory Groups and other stakeholders with a chairperson directly recruited or elected
- Greater opportunities for synchronisation with FRA meetings
- Complete control over the panel's terms of reference

4.2 Risks include:

- May cost more. Paying for a chairperson at £250 a day is more than Members allowances.
- The relationship between the Community Panel chairperson and FRA Chairman is important and must be apolitical
- Proposals may inadvertently impinge on the role of Authority Members.
- Reputational risk and need for confidentiality agreements with panel members

5 Option 4 - Commission the Community Voluntary Service Bedfordshire or Bedfordshire Local Resilience Forum to do this on behalf of the Authority

5.1 Benefits include:

- May have less of a direct capacity implication on the Service
- Could be seen as more independent from the Authority
- Opportunity to link with the Bedfordshire Local Resilience Forum
- More control over the panel's terms of reference

5.2 Risks include:

- All the risks in paragraph 4.2 above
- Most expensive option. Soft costings reveal this will cost between £5 and £15k a year by CVSBeds.
- The Authority would have less say in the agendas or strategic direction of the Panel.

6 **RECOMMENDATION:**

6.1 That Members acknowledge the contents of the report and decide on the best option.

STEVE FRANK
HEAD OF STRATEGIC SUPPORT AND ASSURANCE