

FOR PUBLICATION

Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Authority
Executive Committee
21 September 2023

SUBJECT: COMMUNITY PANEL UPDATE

Author and contact: Leanne Ehren
Interim Head of Communication, engagement and external affairs
Leanne.ehren@bedsfire.gov.uk

Background Papers:

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

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	Venue/event management
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 and options for ways forward.

RECOMMENDATION:

That Members acknowledge the contents of the report and decide on the preferred option(s).

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 and now the Service wants to reflect if a Service-run community panel is the best way forward.
- 1.4 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.
- 1.5 This report aims to give Authority Members an update following the first panel and to explore options moving forward.

2 Background

- 2.1 Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Authority in March this year (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 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 Opportunities are available to strategically sit on resident/community panels that are already hosted and are being developed by partner organisations.

3 Option 1 – collaborate with partners to sit on existing partner panels, forums and resident engagement opportunities

3.1 Benefits 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

3.2 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)

4 Option 2 – try again to develop a dedicated Fire and Rescue Service Community Panel or commission the Community Voluntary Service Bedfordshire or Bedfordshire Local Resilience Forum to do this on behalf of the Authority

4.1 Benefits include:

- Focused meeting agendas
- 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 timing of panel and terms of reference

4.2 Risks include:

- Cost
- Public not attending
- May not get a diverse range of attendees
- Time pressure on BFRS staff to organise in lead up to, promotion of, and follow through; to regularly host every quarter, in multiple locations to address changing community needs
- Partners may not attend/want to take part in panel as they already have existing panels
- Commissioning is most expensive option. Soft costings reveal this will cost between £5 and £15k a year by CVSBeds.

5 Option 3 – Develop virtual community panel

5.1 Benefits include:

- This option can be run alongside either of the above options
- Can be set up quickly – recruitment campaign across existing channels/events/contacts
- Can ask questions ad-hoc (TOR two times a month maximum) on a range of subjects
- 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

5.2 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

6 RECOMMENDATION:

6.1 That Members acknowledge the contents of the report and decide on the preferred option(s).

LEANNE EHREN
INTERIM HEAD OF COMMUNICATION, ENGAGEMENT AND EXTERNAL AFFAIRS