Public Perception & CRMP Community Consultation

Key Findings Report

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Introduction to SMSR Research

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1.0 Introduction to SMSR Research

Established in 1991, SMSR Ltd. is a dynamic and innovative social research agency with over 30 years' dedicated consultation and evaluation experience. Conducting both public interest and social policy research for over 200 organisations, SMSR has operating divisions that design and deliver research projects on behalf of the public sector across the UK, Europe, and the Far East.

As a full-service agency we offer a suite of quantitative and qualitative solutions in addition to dedicated project management, data processing and analysis functions, from research design to data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Based on technical excellence and social science our data produces opportunities for clients to build insight and make confident operational and strategic decisions.

SMSR supports public agencies to understand the populations they serve and specialises in connecting organisations to communities that are often seldom heard which are often less likely to be engaged. SMSR has been successfully engaging, consulting, and collaborating with often marginalised, underrepresented and minority groups for over three decades. We challenge the term 'hard to reach' by operating effectively in the community, representing its many demographics with equality and efficiency.

Our methodologies are demonstrably effective across the UK, where we have developed relationships with community services, not as a single-serving resource for research but working relationships for long-term sharing of information and ideas. We support approx. 25 UK police forces and OPCCs across the UK in addition to our support of Local Government, health services, education, and the charitable sector.

Examples of our consultancy assignments include: • Essex Police – Understanding public perception • Merseyside Police – Increasing diversity within recruitment • Humberside OPCC – Understanding vulnerability • Great Ormond Street Hospital – Patient pathway re-engineering • Dove House Hospice – Public & Stakeholder perception • West Yorkshire OPCC – VAWG evaluation • Greater Manchester Combined Authority – Understanding knife violence & young people

Alongside our Information Commissioners Office registration, SMSR Ltd. is a Market Research Society Company Partner and holds the Fair Data accreditation and Microsoft Cyber Essentials assurance. The SMSR workforce is vetted through UK police forces to a NPPV3 level.

2.0

Executive summary

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2.0 Executive summary

This report presents the findings from a series of focus groups conducted on behalf of Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) to support the development of their Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) for 2025-2028. The consultation sought to gather public perceptions, evaluate key initiatives, and identify areas of concern to ensure that the CRMP reflects the needs and expectations of Staffordshire's diverse communities.

Perceptions of the fire and rescue service
Participants across all groups expressed overwhelmingly positive perceptions of Staffordshire FRS. While attendees noted limited direct experience or knowledge of the service, the fire service was consistently associated with qualities such as reliability, bravery, and community commitment. The FRS was often described as a "*silent service*," valued for being trustworthy and altruistic, even among those with minimal interaction.

Confidence and trust
Levels of confidence and trust in Staffordshire FRS were high across all groups. Attendees frequently compared the service favourably to other emergency services such as the police and NHS, highlighting the FRS's reputation for professionalism and responsiveness. Community engagement, including participation in local events and safety initiatives, was a significant driver of trust. Direct experiences, such as emergency callouts and safety checks, further reinforced public confidence.

Perceived risks
Participants identified several risks to FRS operations, with funding cuts being the most significant concern. Many attendees feared that budget reductions could undermine response times, staffing levels, and overall effectiveness. Additional concerns included recruitment challenges, climate change impacts such as flooding and wildfires, and the pressures of urban expansion. The importance of providing mental health support for firefighters was also highlighted.

Three-person crew
The trial of three-person crews received cautious support, with many attendees acknowledging the potential benefit of faster response times. However, concerns were raised about the safety and effectiveness of smaller crews in larger or more complex incidents. Participants stressed the need for greater transparency and input from frontline firefighters to assess the feasibility and long-term implications of this strategy.

Media impact
National media coverage, such as the Grenfell Tower tragedy, was not seen as having a significant or lasting impact on perceptions of the FRS. Local media and social media, however, played an important role in shaping positive views, particularly by raising awareness of community involvement and public safety initiatives. Participants emphasised the value of maintaining the FRS's strong reputation by avoiding negative press and enhancing local engagement.

Communications

Despite generally low levels of awareness about FRS responsibilities, participants expressed a strong desire for more information, particularly about community initiatives and safety measures. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook were identified as key tools for engaging different demographics. Attendees also suggested expanding traditional outreach methods, such as school visits and open days, to complement digital campaigns and improve public understanding of the service.

The findings from this consultation highlight the high regard in which Staffordshire FRS is held by the public, alongside areas of concern that could impact service delivery. While perceptions of the FRS are overwhelmingly positive, addressing issues such as funding, recruitment, and communication will be essential to sustaining public trust and confidence. By adopting a balanced approach to outreach and engagement, Staffordshire FRS can continue to build strong relationships with its communities and deliver on its vision of making Staffordshire the safest place to be. The groups provided the FRE with an evidence base that supports and encourages many of the key priorities and with the CRMP and acknowledges a number of key concerns including environmental factors, local risks overall community safety and a high level of confidence in response, advice and prevention.

3.0

Introduction

3.0 Introduction

The Fire and Rescue National Framework 2018 requires that Fire Authorities, create and consult on a Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP), which identifies and assesses foreseeable fire and rescue risks for their local communities.

Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service have a responsibility to identify, manage and mitigate any foreseeable risks. After identifying any risks, the service must look at the resources they have in place and consider what they need to do to address these risks and develop plans to improve safety, whilst making the best use of those resources.

Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service have subsequently revised and developed a CRMP that sets out their priorities for the next four years from 2025 through to 2028. The priorities include people, communities and the environment and its vision is for 'making Staffordshire the safest place to be'. Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service acknowledge that to develop the CRMP effectively, they must engage with and listen to their staff, local communities, partners, representative bodies, and other stakeholders.

As part of a wider consultation that the Service conducted taking all stakeholders views into account, Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service commissioned SMSR Ltd, an independent social research company to undertake a series of five focus groups to engage with residents on the following points:

- Perceptions and of Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service
- Levels of confidence and trust in the service
- Drivers of confidence and trust
- Impact of local and national media on confidence
- Concerns and perceived risks to service delivery/community
- Testing the three-person crewing trial and its rationale
- Testing Home from Hospital, Safe and Well Visit and Falls Response initiative and the rationale
- Attitude towards collaboration and partnership working in general
- Levels of awareness of the service and information about the service
- Preferred communication mechanisms and messaging
- Evaluating any recent experience of the service

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Sample & methodology

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4.0 Sample and methodology

Resident engagement sessions were held between 15th October 2024 and 23rd October 2024, with groups taking place at various venues and locations across Staffordshire:

- 15th October 6pm to 8pm Loggerheads
- 16th October 6pm to 8pm Leek
- 22nd October 1pm to 3pm Lichfield
- 22nd October 6pm to 8pm Burton
- 23rd October 6pm to 8pm Codsall

All groups were held at the community fire stations based in each location.

Three groups were recruited using a telephone methodology with residents called using a data set that was randomised but which focussed on each of the five areas. Quotas were set based on the local population including age, gender, and ethnicity across three groups (Loggerheads, Leek and Codsall).

Two groups were recruited using a face-to-face approach. The Burton group specifically targeted the ethnic minority community, and the Litchfield group focussed on those aged under 30.

Twelve residents were recruited for each group to ensure a healthy attendance and account for the natural attrition when recruiting public groups.

Each group profile is detailed here:

Loggerheads

Gender	Age	Ethnicity
Male	25	African
Female	25	White British
Female	38	White British
Female	44	White British
Female	29	White British
Male	29	White British
Male	34	White British
Female	39	White British
Male	44	White British

Leek

Gender	Age	Ethnicity
Male	34	White British
Female	38	White British
Male	44	Other Mixed/ multiple ethnic background
Male	40	White British
Female	38	White British
Male	72	White British
Female	59	White British
Female	51	White British
Female	36	White British

Litchfield

Gender	Age	Ethnicity
Female	27	White British
Female	45	White British
Female	27	White British
Female	67	White British
Female	47	White British
Male	24	White British
Male	18	White British
Male	18	White British
Female	46	White British
Female	18	White British
Female	24	White British
Male	18	White British

Codsall

Gender	Age	Ethnicity
Male	70	White British
Female	56	Indian
Female	59	Caribbean
Male	37	White British
Female	37	Other Mixed/ multiple ethnic background
Male	27	White British
Female	30	Indian
Male	78	Other Mixed/ multiple ethnic background
Female	61	White British

Burton

Gender	Age	Ethnicity
Male	28	Pakistani
Female	30	Pakistani
Male	35	Indian
Female	66	Other Asian background
Female	26	Indian
Male	28	White British
Female	32	White British
Female	27	White British
Male	20	Pakistani

All residents were recruited one week before the group took place and were sent an email containing details of the group, including date, time and how to find the venue. Residents were also given a reminder call one hour before the group to ensure that they were still able to attend.

Each attendee was provided with a £50.00 payment to compensate them for any costs incurred and as a thank you for their participation. Incentives are distributed in line with the Market Research Society Code of Conduct.

In total, almost 48 Staffordshire residents attended the focus groups and were representative of the county, with three of the five groups area profiled against the latest census data for the specific location.

Two groups specifically targeted those aged 18-30 (Litchfield) and ethnic minorities (Burton) respectively to ensure these less engaged groups formed part of the overall consultation being undertaken by Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service.
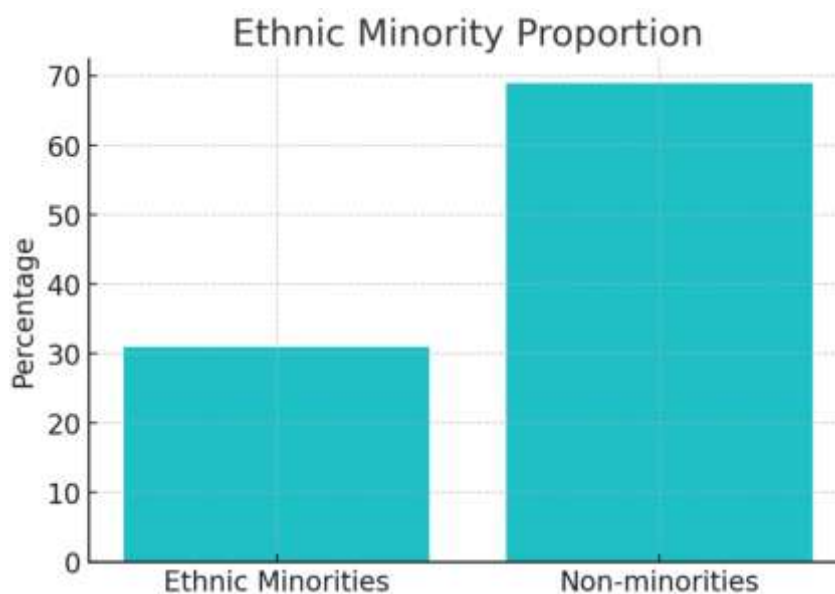
A total of 27 females (56%) and 21 (44%) males attended the groups. The youngest resident was 18 years old and the oldest 78 years old.
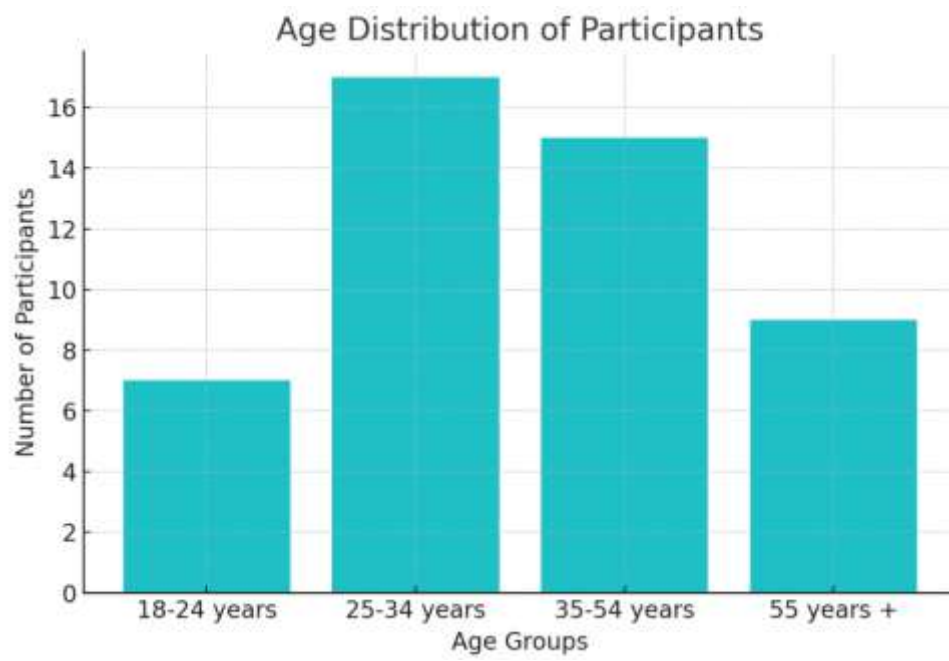
Gender

Ethnicity

Age

Age Distribution of Participants

5.0

Key findings

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5.0 Key findings

5.1 Perceptions

Attendees across all groups provided overwhelmingly positive responses when asked to describe or define the fire and rescue service (FRS) in a few words or sentences. However, many noted that thinking about the FRS "*off the top of your head*" was challenging due to limited exposure or direct experience. They described the FRS as the "*silent service*" or one that is "*only ever there if you need them,*" highlighting a general lack of familiarity with their broader functions.

> *"It's true. There's no stigma attached to the fire service. We associate them with being there to help when we are most in need. I don't know much about them, but I know they will be there if I need them."*

Participants used words such as "*heroic,*" "*reliable,*" "*brave,*" and "*cool*" to describe firefighters and acknowledged the inherent risks they take to serve their communities. Across all demographics, these qualities were universally valued and appreciated.

> *"I see them as heroes, running into a burning house when there's a fire. It's hard to think negatively about them."*

> *"People say that they're heroic, and I agree. I wouldn't want to do their job. So, generally, very positive."*

> *"There's a strong sense of appreciation because you know they are the ones running into danger when needed. It's hard to criticise them."*

Limited Awareness of FRS Activities

A recurring theme in the discussions was the low level of public knowledge about the fire service's operations. Across all five groups, the average self-reported knowledge score was 2.4 out of 10. Only a few participants—those with personal connections to FRS personnel or who followed the service on social media—scored higher than 5.

> *"Friends and neighbours who work for the fire service have nothing bad to say about it. Some people who recently joined absolutely love it. The incident response work they do, even beyond fire emergencies, is so valuable."*

> *"I follow them on Facebook, so I feel I see more about what they're up to. But if it wasn't for that, I'd be scoring a 1 or 2."*

> *"1/10; I have no idea what they do other than put fires out. You never hear from them at the end of the day."*

> *"2/10, but that isn't to say that is a problem. I know they will be there if I need them. I think they should be less known as we all think they will be there if required."*

Participants associated the FRS primarily with "*putting out fires*" and "*saving lives,*" but also recognised other roles such as road traffic collision (RTC) assistance, safety advice, and prevention work. Some recalled specific interactions, safety campaigns, or childhood experiences that had shaped their perceptions.

> "Just fetching cats out of trees, right? Yeah, that's the stereotype. Sorry, everyone. But when there's a car accident or if someone gets lost in the woods, they also help with that kind of stuff. They do a lot of mountaineering and rescue work, and they're heavily involved in flood rescues as well. That's probably why they take on so many responsibilities beyond just putting out fires. At least, that's how I see it."

> "No, we're positive, and at least thinking that you know. I always think about the jaws of life and how they rescue people, things like school fairs, and when they say, 'Don't put out a chip fire with water.' Yeah, those demonstrations. I always felt that it's good, solid advice to save your life."

> "Positive. I know on my road there's a lot of elderly people, and they go around every year to check their fire alarms. They have a system, so they check-up. Apart from the obvious, which is going to fires, they do a lot more."

> "My perception is positive too. I remember the fire trucks coming to school, and we got to try on the helmets. Even now, working in the NHS, I see the preventative side of what they do. They help make sure people can return to their homes safely by checking fire hazards, like fall risks."

> "I wonder if that comes from our childhood, like watching shows like Fireman Sam. It starts early, and then it just stays positive."

A strong and positive reputation

Despite the limited knowledge or engagement many participants had with the fire service, the general perception was again overwhelmingly positive. Participants appreciated the FRS's reliability and their visible commitment to public safety. The service was perceived as trustworthy, altruistic, and universally respected, even among those who had little direct contact with it.

> "Even in a hypothetical situation where the fire service couldn't save everyone, I think most people would give them the benefit of the doubt. We know they do their best, so it's easy to see them in a favourable light."

> "Locally, the fire service has a good reputation. My kids get booklets from the Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service with activities. It's called the Elephant Club, and they love it. I just think they are amazing. No particular reason—I just think what they do is very special and is to be commended."

> "Yeah, I don't think there are any negatives to highlight. They're there when you need them, but, like touch wood, hopefully most of us have never really had to use them."

"I've always had a positive perception of firefighters. Even before having any experience, I've respected them. It's different from other services, like the police, where opinions can be mixed. But with the fire service, there's always been respect, probably because they risk their lives for others."

"They do more than fight fires; they respond to car accidents, cutting people out of vehicles before the ambulance arrives. They're incredible."

This feedback highlights the high regard in which the fire service is held and the strength of its reputation as a vital and trusted part of the community.

5.2 Confidence and trust

Following the discussion on initial perceptions, attendees were asked to reflect on their levels of confidence and trust in Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service and the rationale behind their views. Across all groups, participants expressed high confidence and trust in the FRS, often describing the service as reliable, approachable, and professional.

Participants frequently compared the FRS to other emergency services, such as the police or NHS, which they perceived less favourably. These comparisons highlighted the FRS's strong reputation for responsiveness and reliability.

> *"I have a strong sense of security with the fire service. I trust them, unlike other services, where we often expect delays or problems."*

> *"You don't hear much about them compared to paramedics or police, but I have the most faith in the fire service. My family has had to wait hours for ambulances, and I don't trust the police as much. But the fire service? I feel like they'd respond quickly if needed."*

> *"Hearing all of this, it's clear why the fire service is well-regarded. Unlike the police, who often face trust issues, the fire and rescue teams are generally seen in a positive light. You rarely hear about major fires or incidents. They're just not in the news as frequently as the police."*

> *"It sounds like everyone has a positive view of the fire service. Even though we may not see them often, there's a general trust in their abilities. And as someone mentioned, they don't receive the same level of scrutiny as the police."*

> *"The fire service seems to have a better reputation than the police. You don't hear about them as often, but when you do, it's usually positive. They're quite visible on social media, sharing news and updates, so the information is there if you're interested."*

> *"The fire service is supportive and safe, unlike the police, who are often criticized for being heavy-handed. There's a stark difference in public perception, with the fire service enjoying much higher trust."*

The role of community engagement

Many participants noted that the FRS's relatively low public profile worked to its advantage. While direct knowledge of the service's operations might be limited, this absence of controversy preserved their positive reputation. Participants also emphasised the service's community involvement as a key driver of confidence, particularly their presence at events, schools, and local community stations.

> *"I've noticed, fortunately, I've never had to call the fire service. But I see them at community events, and they really engage well, especially with younger people. It gives off a positive feeling."*

> *"They always participate in events, like school fetes, and organise charity car washes and such, making them more approachable. This place is even called a 'community space station,' emphasizing community involvement."*

"There's a strong community connection with the fire service. Many firefighters are local residents with other jobs, and people take pride in that. It's different from how we perceive other roles."

"There's always this assumption that the fire service does a good job, partly because we don't hear negative stories about them. They share lots of information on social media, but it's up to us to engage with it if we want to. But just knowing they're there and holding events gives you a lot of confidence."

"The community events they participate in, like visiting schools or running scarecrow competitions, are memorable and well-received."

"The fire service does a fantastic job engaging with children. When the Community Fire Station first opened, there was a big celebration, and they continue to be active in local events like summer scarecrow festivals. It keeps them visible and positively reinforces their role."

"Yeah, I don't know a lot about them, but they have a good reputation. We did trips to the fire station in primary school, but I haven't had to call them myself. But you just feel you can trust them, and they will be there for you. There is a local feel which just pushes up that confidence in them."

"They are always great with the kids, letting them try the helmets on, have a look at the engines, and it makes you feel positive about them."

"Probably every year, they host fun days where you can look around the station, try on the gear, and even get your face painted. They're always friendly and down-to-earth, never stiff or formal, like the police can sometimes be. They seem approachable but also get serious messages across."

Direct experiences with the FRS

Several attendees shared firsthand experiences with the FRS, either during emergencies, through safety checks, or via educational and professional settings. These encounters were unanimously positive, with many participants stating that the service exceeded their expectations.

"They came out, installed one [alarm], and even set a schedule to check it every six months. They were so fantastic and went above and beyond, making sure I was safe and felt safe."

"I once witnessed a house fire on my street. The fire crew did an excellent job, and afterward, they came around to check on our fire safety. It was reassuring to know they were engaging with the community."

"I'm deaf, and they installed a special smoke alarm for me. It's connected to a vibrating mat under my mattress because I have to take my hearing aids out at night. They were so patient and understanding—it's made a huge difference."

"I had to call them once. I work at the Cricket and Hockey Club, and there was an event for 400 people. A group of youths set fire to trees nearby, throwing aerosols into the flames. The fire crew arrived within 5–10 minutes, moved everyone to safety, and made sure the area was secure. It was beyond expectations."

"Something caught fire in my canopy area, and it spread. But they responded quickly. When they came, they didn't just deal with the fire. They checked the whole house and installed new alarms afterward. That was unexpected, as it was the first time I'd used their service."

"There was this incident across the road. There was an explosion at one of the houses, and the fire service attended. They shut off the whole road. It was, I think, just a gas explosion— not a huge one, but it was enough to blow the windows out."

"Oh, they were very efficient. I talked to one of them as I was walking past, and they were very polite, very professional. They did a good job."

Participants from professional sectors such as education, hospitality, and social care also praised the FRS for their professionalism and proactive engagement.

"I work in a nursery, and a couple of weeks ago, two fire officers visited. The kids loved it. They got to see the fire engine and talk to the officers. It's happened multiple times at our school and at events like the Cubs meetings. The kids have a blast."

"I work in social care, and sometimes I see hoarding behaviours. The fire service has been great in those situations, checking for fire risks and making sure emergency exits are clear."

"I work at Newcastle College, and they come around to check our safety standards. It shows they take prevention seriously."

Inclusivity and diversity

Attendees generally felt that Staffordshire FRS had made strides in engaging with diverse communities, citing examples such as the use of translators and culturally sensitive approaches. However, some participants highlighted areas for improvement, particularly in workforce diversity.

"Yeah, they're good with cultural awareness. They've had translators on the phone for people who don't speak English, and I've seen their leaflets in different languages."

"I have seen a real shift in how they approach other cultures. I think they are getting much better, which in turn breeds confidence from the more diverse communities."

"But there is room for improvement in terms of representation. Most of the firefighters I've seen are white, and I don't often see diversity at higher levels of leadership."

"Women in leadership is a big gap across many industries, including fire services. It's something that definitely needs more attention."

5.3 Perceived risks

Attendees across all focus groups were asked to identify potential risks affecting their community and the county as a whole, as well as any concerns regarding safety over the next four years in line with the CRMP. Discussions revealed a range of perceived risks, with funding cuts emerging as the most significant and recurring theme.

Around 50% of attendees highlighted concerns about the impact of government cuts on Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service (FRS).

Funding and budget cuts

Participants consistently expressed worries that continued funding cuts could undermine the fire service's ability to operate effectively. Many linked these concerns to broader trends in public service underfunding and noted that cuts had already led to fewer fire stations, reduced staffing levels, and increased reliance on on-call firefighters. These changes were seen as potentially jeopardising response times and safety.

> *"Funding cuts are always a concern. If they continue to reduce budgets like they have with the NHS and police, it could impact the fire service in the long run."*

> *"Budget cuts are a real issue. On-call firefighters are heavily relied upon, and it seems like the government doesn't prioritise them as much as the police."*

> *"Yes, definitely. It's concerning that they've reduced the number of stations. If you call for a fire, you need them there quickly. The idea of more cuts is worrying."*

> *"Well, I suppose my only concern is if they have enough funding. I've read about fire station closures, and that does worry me. But they seem to be doing well with the resources they have."*

> *"They're saving lives but often on a shoestring budget. The cost of maintaining equipment, like fire trucks, is high, and if they can't update things regularly, it's a problem."*

Recruitment and retention challenges

Another prominent concern was the fire service's ability to recruit and retain staff, particularly considering low pay and the risks associated with the role. Participants, especially younger attendees, felt that firefighting was becoming less aspirational due to the perceived imbalance between risks and rewards. Several also noted that better communication about available career opportunities could improve recruitment.

> *"Staffing is another issue. If they're always looking for on-call firefighters and reducing shift numbers, it's going to affect their service delivery."*

"The fire service deserves equal respect and pay as other emergency services. Recruitment is also confusing; some people don't realise there are full-time roles available."
"Kids used to want to be firefighters. Now, I don't hear that anymore, even though the service is still active in schools."

"It's a poorly paid job, considering the risks they take. It's one thing that definitely needs to change."

"Yeah, recruitment is hard when pay is low. It's not just about money but also job satisfaction and safety."

"It's also about pay. Firefighters are underpaid compared to the risks they take. Kids today see easier ways to earn money, like social media or tech jobs, so fewer people are interested in these selfless roles."

Environmental risks

Climate change and its associated risks, such as flooding, wildfires, and extreme weather, were highlighted in four of the five groups. Attendees expressed concerns about the increasing frequency and severity of these events locally and their potential impact on the fire service's workload.

"There are vast woodland areas where fires can start easily, especially in the summer. More proactive education about fire safety would be beneficial."

"Flooding is another concern. We've seen significant damage in areas that aren't even near rivers due to poor drainage systems."

"Local risks include wildfires in the moorlands, often caused by barbecues. Climate change is making it worse, and the fire service does an excellent job responding, but it's a growing challenge."

Urban expansion and housing risks

Several participants pointed to rapid population growth and new housing developments as additional safety concerns. Poor planning, the use of substandard materials, and construction in high-risk areas like floodplains were all seen as factors that could increase demand on the fire service.

"Small towns are expanding rapidly, and the fire stations aren't scaling up to meet the increased demand. It could become a real issue."

"Old buildings are fire hazards, especially as people use cheap, dangerous heating methods. It's definitely on the rise in poorer areas."

"Building on floodplains is another risk. We're putting more people in high-risk areas, and new houses are less sturdy. The fire service will be needed even more."

Staff wellbeing and mental health

One group discussed the pressures faced by firefighters and emphasised the importance of aftercare and mental health support. Participants expressed concern that without adequate supervision and counselling, staff burnout could become a significant risk to the service.

> *"Mental health support is another area. Firefighters experience a lot of trauma, and without proper aftercare, they'll burn out. We need to think about how we support them long-term."*

> *"Yeah, incidents like the Tamworth fire, where children died, are traumatic. Firefighters need proper supervision and counselling, and I worry this will only get worse with budget cuts."*

Across all focus groups, funding cuts were identified as the most significant risk to Staffordshire FRS, with participants expressing concerns about reduced staffing, fewer fire stations, and stretched resources. Recruitment challenges, environmental risks driven by climate change, and the pressures of urban expansion were also recurring themes. While attendees praised the fire service's commitment and professionalism, they emphasised the importance of addressing these risks to maintain the service's effectiveness and safety in the future. The need for better mental health support for firefighters was also highlighted as a critical area for improvement.

5.4 Three-person crew

The introduction of a three-person crew strategy was met with mixed reactions across all groups. While a slight majority that supported the trial, participants expressed nuanced views about the potential benefits and risks. The primary appeal of the initiative was faster response times, which many attendees felt could be lifesaving, but concerns about safety, crew effectiveness, and the broader implications of such a strategy were also prominent.

Support for faster response times

A majority of participants appreciated the reduced response time offered by three-person crews. They felt that even a single crew arriving earlier could provide critical assistance in life-threatening situations and start to control incidents before more resources arrived.

> *"It's hard not to argue with the fact they are getting there much quicker, and I would rather have someone there instantly than wait nine minutes for four to arrive. It could be the difference between life and death."*

> *"It's a good idea, almost like the first responder in the ambulance world. Check out the situation and start working on making the incident safe."*

> *"It has to be a good thing, surely. To have someone there rather than no one could make all the difference. Fire spreads so quickly."*

> *"It's a good thing. I know I would rather have one person there rather than wait nine minutes. I could be dead by the time they get to me."*

Situational considerations

Many attendees felt that the appropriateness of a three-person crew depended on the nature of the incident. While they agreed the strategy might work well for minor fires or less complex emergencies, they raised concerns about its suitability for larger-scale incidents requiring more personnel and equipment.

> *"If it means faster response times, it could save lives. But it depends on the situation. For bigger incidents, you need more people."*

> *"I see the benefits and concerns. It's quicker, but you're reducing the resources. It might work for smaller incidents but not for major emergencies."*

Participants expressed a lack of understanding about how crew sizes affected operational effectiveness and indicated that more information from the fire service could help alleviate concerns.

> *"Clarifying why four crew members are needed would help the public understand. Trust in the fire service is high, but people worry about cuts affecting safety."*

> *"It does seem that more information is needed about why crew sizes matter. It's about understanding their roles and safety implications."*

Trust in firefighter input

Across all groups, attendees expressed a strong preference for hearing directly from firefighters or fire service representatives about the feasibility and safety of three-person crews. Many felt that frontline officers were best positioned to make decisions about crew sizes and that their insights would carry the most weight.

> *"It should be up to the firefighters to decide. They know what they need, and their input is crucial."*

> *"Yeah, if they say they can manage, fine. But if not, it's a quality issue. Safety should be the priority. Let them tell us; that would have far more impact."*

> *"I'd want to know what firefighters think. They're the ones doing the job, and if they say four people are necessary, then we should listen to them."*

> *However, some participants were sceptical of unions' motivations, feeling they might have their own agendas that could influence the discussion.*

> *"I don't trust unions as much; they have their own agendas."*

Concerns about safety

Attendees were concerned that smaller crews might jeopardise both firefighter and public safety. They questioned whether three-person crews could adequately handle escalating situations and raised doubts about the ability of reduced teams to operate equipment effectively in more serious emergencies.

> *"Sending smaller crews of three instead of four seems dangerous, especially if the fire is large. It might be a matter of public awareness, but firefighter safety is crucial."*

> *"It makes sense for speed, but what if they arrive and it's more serious than expected? Safety has to be a priority."*

> *"Sometimes they get called out for minor things like bin fires, which can be a waste of resources. Sending smaller crews initially makes sense, but it raises concerns about firefighter safety and effectiveness."*

> *"Reducing crew sizes could endanger both the firefighters and the people they're rescuing. It depends on the incident, but generally, more people make it feel safer."*

Fears of normalising cost-cutting

A significant portion of attendees believed the three-person crew strategy was motivated by cost-cutting measures and worried it might become a permanent standard, further reducing resources over time. Many linked the initiative to broader trends of reduced funding in public services.

"Yeah, and there's always the concern that over time, this could become the norm, and they might cut back on four-person crews altogether."

"There's been talk about reducing crew sizes from four to three firefighters. That worries me. You need people to drive, operate equipment, and ensure safety. It feels like a slippery slope."

"If technology improves, maybe we can operate more efficiently. But for now, I'd rather they be over-prepared than underprepared. They're on low wages, and they risk burnout. Having four crew members gives more reassurance."

"Feels like budget cuts to me. We've gone from five, to four, to now three. Where does it end?"

The three-person crew strategy received cautious support from a slight majority of attendees, with many acknowledging the benefits of faster response times. However, participants stressed that the approach might not be suitable for all incidents, particularly larger emergencies. Concerns about firefighter and public safety were prominent, as was scepticism about the long-term implications of adopting smaller crews. Attendees expressed a strong desire for more information, particularly from frontline firefighters, to better understand the rationale and safety implications of the initiative. Many also feared that this strategy reflected broader cost-cutting measures that could erode confidence in the service over time.

5.5 Media impact

The influence of media on public perceptions and confidence in the fire service was debated across all focus groups. Participants largely agreed that national media coverage of fire and rescue services had little impact on their confidence, primarily due to the infrequency of such stories and the high regard in which the fire service is held. Very few attendees could recall national media stories beyond the Grenfell Tower tragedy and, to a lesser extent, a West Midlands case. Around 10% of participants mentioned Grenfell specifically.

> *"The only negative association I can think of is Grenfell Tower. That incident may have affected some people's confidence in the fire service."*

> *"Maybe Grenfell headlines a little, but it's more about the building regulations than the fire service's response."*

> *"Grenfell comes to mind. That was a massive negative event, but a lot of the blame shouldn't have been on the fire service. It was more about building regulations and safety standards."*

Some participants noted that issues like equality and workplace culture, including reports of misogyny, harassment, and bullying within fire service teams, had been highlighted in documentaries or reports, though these stories were not as widely publicised as issues affecting other emergency services.

> *"There have been reports about issues like misogyny, harassment, and bullying within fire service teams, similar to the police force. A documentary highlighted some of these problems, though they haven't been as widely publicised."*

> *"There have also been discussions about equality in the fire service, especially around gender and race. Grenfell Tower put a lot of scrutiny on the service, but I felt they were unfairly blamed. They responded to an immense crisis, and the heavy criticism seemed disproportionate."*

> *"I work for ACAS, and we deal with cases related to fire services. Most have been from West Midlands Fire Service, but I haven't seen anything negative in the media apart from major incidents like Grenfell."*

> *Overall, participants felt that negative media stories about the fire service lacked long-lasting impact, with any criticism quickly fading from public attention.*

> *"Even when there's negative media coverage, it's quickly forgotten. The fire service doesn't face long-lasting scrutiny."*

Local media and social media

In contrast, local media and social media were seen as significant influencers of perceptions at the community level. Participants highlighted how local platforms positively contributed to the fire service's reputation by raising awareness of their activities, community engagement, and recruitment efforts. Awareness was low overall.

> *"Social media locally has made people more aware of these roles. I see posts from friends who volunteer, which raises the service's profile, but TV coverage is lacking."*

> *"I have a positive perception, and I think the local media plays a role in that. You rarely hear anything negative about the fire service. The police, on the other hand, have more negative coverage, and that affects how people view them."*

> *"I've never really heard anything negative about them. In the media, you see a lot of criticism directed at the police, but not the fire service. I only hear positive stories locally, on a community level."*

> *"I think there's a general feel that the fire service is wholesome and good, and some of that is driven locally. There's so much negativity against the police in the mainstream media, but the fire service doesn't have that. You also have issues like NHS waiting times in the news, but the fire service remains well-regarded."*

> *"They are very active on social media, especially Staffordshire Fire and Rescue. They post about incidents, community events, and even recruitment drives for retainers. There's lots of accessible information if you're interested. I think it really helps in terms of how you feel about them."*

> *"On social media, fire services generally portray a positive image, but it is largely self-driven."*

> *"Yes, I do follow them on Facebook. It's usually about community events, training, or the stations' mascots, like the elephant they post about. It's easier for them to share good news compared to the police, who often post about crimes and suspects."*

Negative stories in local media

Across the five groups, only two negative stories about Staffordshire FRS were mentioned. These centred on staffing cuts and station closures, which some participants felt could impact public safety or coverage.

> *"I heard on the radio recently that the fire service is struggling to cover shifts because of staff cuts. They used to have five people per shift, but now they've cut it to four, impacting safety. I've heard similar concerns for years."*

> *"Yeah, they're heroes. But I do wonder if there are fewer fire stations now compared to 10–15 years ago. It seems like there are more centralised stations instead of local ones, and I read that these were going to be less and less recently."*

Staying out of media scrutiny

A recurring sentiment was that the fire service benefits from avoiding extensive media scrutiny. Participants agreed that the lack of media attention, particularly in comparison to the police or NHS, helped maintain the fire service's positive reputation and high confidence levels.

> *"But there's a risk of opening themselves up to negative press if they're more active on social media, like we've seen with police officers getting criticised."*

> *"Yeah, you only hear about the negative. Positive stories get skipped. So maybe it's better to stay low-profile and keep the focus on emergencies."*

Participants agreed that national media had limited influence on their perception of the fire service, with the Grenfell tragedy being the only widely remembered story. Local media and social media, however, played a more prominent role in shaping positive views of the service by highlighting community involvement and successes. Despite some concerns about staff cuts and station closures, the fire service's avoidance of sustained media scrutiny was seen as advantageous in protecting its reputation. Social media, in particular, was highlighted as an effective tool for maintaining visibility and building trust at the community level.

5.6 Communications

Although awareness of Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) responsibilities and activities was generally low, attendees acknowledged the challenges inherent in effectively communicating about the service. The diverse nature of the audience and the broad range of FRS activities made it difficult to reach all demographics consistently. Nonetheless, participants overwhelmingly expressed a desire to learn more about the service, particularly regarding community initiatives, pilot programs, and local responses.

Multi-platform communication

A multi-platform approach was widely regarded as essential for effective communication. Social media was frequently identified as the most impactful channel, with preferences varying by age group:

- **TikTok**: Younger attendees highlighted TikTok as an effective platform for engaging younger audiences due to its trend-based and visually engaging nature. However, some expressed concerns that this might dilute the seriousness of the service.

> *"Raising awareness on platforms like TikTok could be effective. Many people don't know that hoarding is a fire risk. These educational conversations could really help."*

> *"TikTok is trend-based, so they'd have to get creative to engage viewers. It's all about keeping people entertained."*

- **Instagram**: Many saw Instagram as a visually appealing platform well-suited to the fire service's dynamic and engaging imagery.
- **Facebook**: Attendees over 25 considered Facebook the most reliable source for community engagement and updates, particularly for events and safety campaigns.

> *"Social media is key for keeping people informed. It would be helpful if they posted more about local incidents and preventative work."*

> *"I get most of my information from social media. I've never seen a fire service video on TikTok or Instagram. If they want to reach young people, they need to use the right platforms."*

Opportunities for improvement

Participants felt the FRS could enhance its communications by adopting a more modern and creative approach, including using innovative tools and leveraging traditional methods alongside digital platforms. Suggestions included:

- **Educational content**: Sharing practical advice on fire prevention, hoarding risks, and other safety topics via social media or community events.
- **Targeted campaigns**: Using QR codes on banners, targeted ads, or digital billboards to promote ongoing pilot programs or emergency preparedness.

- **Expanded community engagement**: Increasing the use of open days and school visits to raise awareness and foster trust.

> *"Scrolling on social media, people don't want to see boring panels of information."*

> *"Community engagement, like fire station open days, could raise awareness. Social media is important, but traditional outreach methods should also be used."*

> *"Targeted social media campaigns or even leaflets through schools would be effective. Digital billboards could also work."*

Challenges and missed opportunities

Some participants noted gaps in communication efforts, such as a lack of visibility for fire stations' community spaces or inadequate promotion of safety initiatives and available services. Attendees also observed that secondary schools are often overlooked for fire safety education, which they felt could be addressed to better engage younger audiences.

> *"I remember when they built the new fire stations with community rooms. It's proactive, getting involved with the community. But they don't promote those spaces enough."*

> *"Yeah, they need to modernise their messaging. Even though primary schools get visits, secondary schools don't. We've missed that interaction."*

> *"They don't put enough useful information on there. I know they have limits, but they should share more about resources and how to get help."*

Public awareness and understanding

Attendees consistently expressed a desire for greater transparency and awareness of FRS activities, particularly around pilot initiatives and funding challenges. Many felt their own understanding of the service was limited, with some scoring their awareness as low as one or two out of ten. They suggested more accessible and engaging messaging could improve public perception and understanding.

> *"Honestly, probably a one or two. I had no idea about most of this."*

> *"Social media, local radio, or even TV ads could help, but it's hard to get the message across effectively."*

> *"More creative approaches, like leaflets or interactive workplace training, could also be effective."*

While the FRS faces inherent challenges in communicating its diverse roles and responsibilities, there is significant potential to enhance engagement through multi-platform strategies. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook were identified as key tools for reaching different demographics. Attendees highlighted the importance of balancing digital outreach with traditional methods, such as community events and school visits, to ensure inclusivity. By adopting more modern, creative, and targeted approaches, the FRS could improve public awareness and better convey the value of its work.

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