Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service

Understanding public perceptions of priorities: Report of focus group discussions

Introduction

Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service is responsible for providing a fire and rescue service to the 805,000 people of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough and operates from 28 fire stations.

The Fire Service is in the process of finalising its latest Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) for the next three years (2021-2024). The focus groups were commissioned as part of the consultation process to gauge public opinion on the priorities and strategic aims of the Fire Service as laid out in the IRMP.

Three focus groups were held in Peterborough, Huntingdon and Cambridge with participants who were willing to share their views. This report summarises the findings of the focus groups.

Focus group locations and dates

The three focus groups were held at:

- Dogsthorpe Fire Station, in Peterborough, on Wednesday 11th December 2019
- Brampton Fire Station, in Huntingdon, on Monday 16th December 2019
- Cambridge Fire Station, in Cambridge, on Tuesday 17th December 2019

Participant recruitment

A range of participants was required to reflect the local diverse demographic. To achieve this, several approaches to recruitment were taken.

Both Athene Communications and the Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service's Positive Action Officer reached out to local community group leaders to extend the opportunity to members of their communities.

Adverts were also placed in the local press including the Peterborough Telegraph and shared on social media through Athene's Facebook and LinkedIn pages as well as on local community groups such as Muslims of Peterborough, Cambridge Community News and Huntingdon Living Noticeboard.

A screening process was conducted for potential participants to ensure that they were not closely associated with the Fire Service and that each group had a variety of ages, genders and ethnicities.

Methodology

Focus group script

The focus group script was developed to investigate participants perceptions of the Fire Service and explore their views on the Service's strategic aims and priorities. The full script is included in Appendix A.

Warm-up

The session began with a warm-up exercise. We asked participants to introduce themselves, what they do to keep busy and how they would use an unlimited budget. The purpose of this was for

participants to feel comfortable talking within the group as well as subtly getting them to think about budgets and resources.

All participants were made aware, if they weren't already, that the focus group was being held on behalf of Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service. We then introduced the representative from the Fire Service who was present at the focus group and explained that they were there to provide information or context if required.

Public service perceptions

The first activity was based on gathering people's perceptions and understanding of public services. We asked each group to name a range of public services. We then picked out three, including the Fire Service, and asked participants to suggest words that they would associate with each one.

Roles and responsibilities of the Fire Service

Next, we explored the role of the Fire Service and views on what they do. To facilitate this discussion, we printed a list of tasks and asked participants to organise them into tasks they believe the Fire Service should be responsible for and those they think they shouldn't.

Each group fed back their thoughts and we discussed emerging themes and why they made their choices. We then revealed that all tasks were completed by Fire Service and asked for the participants' reaction to this information.

The Fire Service's vision

We examined the Fire Service's vision by facilitating a group discussion on the meaning and words used in the statement. We also talked more broadly about what a vision is and if the Fire Service's vision is achievable.

The Fire Service's strategic aims

Next, we led an activity to explore the Fire Service's strategic aims. We created a series of cards which were colour-coded to represent the four strategic aims of People, Community Safety and Excellence, Operational Excellence and Value for Money. Each card represented a different factor that the Fire Service needs to consider in achieving these aims.

We asked each participant to select eight cards which they thought were particularly important in helping to achieve the Fire Service's vision. They had to include at least one card of each colour. The group then came together to discuss their choices and examine similarities and differences.

Prioritising emergency responses

For the final activity, we looked at how public services prioritise emergency responses. We talked through different scenarios and asked participants to choose which one they would prioritise, and why they think emergency services may respond more quickly to one situation than another.

We then revealed that the Fire Service does not have a triage system. Participants offered their views on whether they thought this would be of use and what benefits it may bring.

Closing the session

To end the focus group, we thanked participants for their time and gave them a chance to speak to representatives from the Fire Service and ask questions.

Findings from the discussions

Public service perceptions

During the warm-up exercise, there was a consensus that public services are essential and respected by the public. Many participants had concerns regarding funding and felt that public services were over-stretched.

While participants thought emergency public services were caring, professional and essential, there was a general feeling that unless they were needed, they were out of sight, out of mind. There was also a sense that the Fire Service received less press coverage than the other emergency services, including both positive and negative news.

Looking more closely at the Fire Service, participants respected the bravery and heroism of firefighters and were aware of the dangers of the job. The participants also described the service as trusted. Whilst a few participants mentioned prevention training and co-responding, the majority of participants focused on the role of a firefighter rather than the whole service.

The following word cloud depicts the words used by participants to describe the Fire Service:

Roles and responsibilities of the Fire Service

This task created a debate over the primary role of the Fire Service. A summary of these results can be found in Appendix B.

All groups believed that the Fire Service should be responsible for:

- Responding to fires
- Attending road traffic accidents
- Rescuing from height
- Responding to flooding
- Rescuing people from water
- Attending fire alarms

All groups believed that the Fire Service should not be responsible for:

- Fall prevention support
- Winter warmth checks

This reveals that participants thought the Fire Service had a more reactive role saving people from imminent danger, in line with traditional perceptions of the service.

Conversely, participants felt roles such as fall prevention support and winter warmth checks should not be the responsibility of the Fire Service and should sit with Social Services. The question of ultimate responsibility was a common theme throughout as participants began to consider not only which service should undertake these tasks, but who might have the resources and time to do so.

The tasks which caused the most differentiation in opinion were the prevention and community-based tasks. This was especially seen in Focus Group 1. Tasks such as visiting schools for educational talks and attending community events to give fire safety advice and promote the Fire Service as a career choice divided opinion. Some participants could see the benefits of educating the public and helping to prevent fires, whereas others felt this was using valuable time and resources that should instead be focused on responding to emergencies.

Fire safety training for businesses triggered a similar response with some participants stating that this was using up valuable time of the Fire Service, whereas others felt businesses should be trained by experts to help optimise fire prevention. The potential to charge for these training sessions was raised by participants at each focus group. Most felt this cost would be justified and may help to relieve funding pressures.

Discussing the fitting fire alarms for vulnerable people, Focus Group 3 had the following discussion:

Participant A: "If the Fire Service doesn't do it, who does?"

Participant B: "Well the council does…It would be an extra thing for them [the Fire Service] to do when they could be doing something else."

Talking about community tasks, a participant from Focus Group 2 said:

"Fire safety training for businesses - I am pretty sure there are private companies that do that anyway, but I think it should all be done by private companies. It shouldn't be on-call firefighters in businesses you know, locked away for god knows how long teaching people stuff… Winter warmth checks should be a council thing."

We then revealed that the Fire Service is responsible for all the tasks we'd asked the groups to discuss. Many were surprised and raised concerns around funding and the limited ability to measure the social and economic impact of the training and prevention activities.

However, it is important to note that when representatives from the Fire Service described the number of calls they usually receive in any given week compared to the NHS or police, and the hours of downtime firefighters have, they had a greater understanding of this approach.

We also discussed the balance between prevention and response activity that the Fire Service looks to achieve. Many participants had not realised that a significant proportion of time is spent on fire prevention activities – which therefore justifies the focus on activities such as the education of young people.

The Fire Service's vision

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"Our vision is for a safe community where there are no preventable deaths or injuries in fires or other emergencies."

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This activity educated participants on the vision of the Fire Service and gathered their feedback. There were two main opinions on the vision.

On the one hand, some participants thought it was inspiring, ambitious and an appropriate vision to help change culture and expectations.

On the other hand, many were concerned that it was too utopian, unrealistic and hard to deliver. Their main concern was the "no preventable deaths" clause due to the limitations of reality and people's free will, with the Fire Service not physically able to reach, educate and mitigate against the whole population.

Some considered if this vision extended 'beyond fire' and whether it should be something that all emergency services should work towards.

Talking about the vision, a participant from Focus Group 2 said:

"We thought it was a big, broad, ambitious vision. It felt beyond fire so 'all other emergencies' felt a big stretch for the Fire Service. We saw that as potentially a positive because it's quite an inspiring thing to have as a mission. So, if you are trying to recruit people into the Fire Service this might be an engaging inspirational message. From a delivery point of view that's quite tough. We thought that to have 'no preventable deaths' depends on how risky people behave and that is beyond your control. Maybe that's why [the Fire Service] does the prevention stuff…"

The Fire Service's strategic aims

Overall, participants found the statements difficult to prioritise. This indicates that, according to participants, the strategic aims and statements of the Fire Service are appropriate and justified as prioritises.

The most frequently selected statements were:

People	Community Safety Excellence	Operational Excellence	Value for Money
Keeping our people safe *Selected by 10 out of 20 participants*	**Working with partners to identify those most at risk of fire** *Selected by 10 out of 20 participants*	**Making sure our vehicles and equipment meet our needs** *Selected by 10 out of 20 participants*	**Introducing new technologies to help us be more effective** *Selected by 11 out of 20 participants*
	Work with partners to reduce the number of deaths and injuries on our roads *Selected by 11 out of 20 participants*	**Making sure we understand what the local need is for our services and what resources we need** *Selected by 11 out of 20 participants*	**Working with other emergency services** *Selected by 17 out of 20 participants*
		Making sure we meet national standards to improve the safety of our firefighters *Selected by 10 out of 20 participants*	

Table 1

The least frequently selected statements were:

People	Community Safety Excellence	Operational Excellence	Value for Money
Developing a diverse workforce and making sure it's accessible to all *Selected by 4 out of 20 participants*	**Helping businesses to comply with fire safety rules** *Selected by 5 out of 20 participants*		**Keeping an eye on what we're spending, making sure we're as efficient as possible** *Selected by 3 out of 20 participants*
Making sure we engage with and listen to our employees *Selected by 4 out of 20 participants*	**Working with developers and local authorities to increase public safety** *Selected by 6 out of 20 participants*		**Introducing more effective ways of working for our staff** *Selected by 4 out of 20 participants*

Table 2

A table of the full results can be found in Appendix C.

It should be noted that there were only three participants in the third focus group which may have affected the results. Common themes for the frequently selected statements were working together with other services or partners and making sure firefighters have everything they need to do the job effectively and safely. This was reflected by participants selecting more statements from the Operation Excellence and Value for Money categories. Interestingly, a significant 17 of the 20 participants selected 'working with other emergency services' in their top eight and it was the most

popular choice at every focus group. This highlights the importance that the public place on a more collaborative model. The focus on operations and collaboration was mirrored in Table 2 where no Operational Excellence statements featured in the least frequently selected.

However, Value for Money was the strategic aim that caused the most division. The introduction of new technologies and working with other emergency services were the most popular across all focus groups, whereas keeping an eye on spending and effective ways of working for staff were the least popular. This was, in part, due to participants believing that monitoring spending and effectively working with staff should already be common practice.

This thought was also reflected in the People category. Many participants stated that while diversity and engaging with staff was very important, it should be happening already and is not necessarily a specific aim for the Fire Service that the public need to be aware of. It was suggested that the statements for People could be summarised into one statement.

Community Safety Excellence statements had a more consistent level of ranking and it was regarded as an important aim, but not the sole focus of the Fire Service.

Prioritising emergency responses

Each focus group understood that the emergency services' rationale for prioritising resources was a threat to life. Participants were fully supportive of this approach and agreed that this is the best way to prioritise.

Participants were generally surprised to learn that the Fire Service does not have a triage system or any other form of prioritisation in place and assumed that they would. After further discussion, it transpired that this surprise was partially due to an overinflated sense of how busy the Fire Service is in comparison to other emergency services. Once they understood that they received fewer callouts than other services and that the Fire Service could typically reach all emergencies in good time despite not having a triage system, they were less surprised. This also put the emphasis on prevention activities into perspective.

However, most participants said they trusted the Fire Service as experts and felt comfortable that if the Fire Service decided to implement a triage system, then they would support this. Equally, if the Fire Service felt such a system was not necessary, they would support this too.

Some questions were raised around potential issues with a triaging system. These included the ability of callers to describe the nature of the fire and assess the risks and severity accurately. Although, there was some discussion as to whether modern technology such as taking pictures or video calls, might mitigate some of this risk.

Overall, the participants felt a common-sense approach would be best. They felt comfortable that the Fire Service would make the right decision, given their expertise. A trial of a triaging system was suggested to see if it would work effectively.

Talking about triaging, a participant in Focus Group 1 said:

"We all agreed that triaging would be a good idea, but it would be complex, I think. [In the event of an accident] you can see somebody and [assess] whether they are hurt or not […] but a fire is a lot harder to ascertain. With the right sort of questioning, [the Fire Service] could probably get enough detail to triage, even if it's just one or two [categories] – higher and lower priority."

Conclusion and recommendations

During the focus groups, it was found that the public has a positive perception of the Fire Service. However, it appears the public has limited knowledge of the work the Fire Service carries out and is responsible for as well as the amount of time spent responding to fires compared to conducting prevention activities.

This had an impact upon the findings initially, as the participants disagreed with some of the Fire Service's priorities, believing some prevention activities should lie with other services such as the Social Services or the Local Authority. However, once the reality of the Fire Service was expressed, the participants were supportive of the Fire Service's role beyond responding to callouts and understood its focus on prevention activities.

There was also a clear appetite for more co-responding. This was the most frequently chosen priority across all focus groups.

Generally, it felt that any decision made by the Fire Service, such as the introduction of a new triaging system, would be supported by the public as they trusted the experts to make the best decision for the Service.

Overall, there seemed to be a need for greater education on the role and responsibilities of the Fire Service and its remit, particularly its prevention work.

This ties in with our earlier findings from the barriers to recruitment focus groups carried out in October 2018. There was a lack of understanding that working for the Fire Service didn't necessarily mean becoming a firefighter. Continuing to raise awareness of the range of roles and responsibilities available within the Fire Service will be important to help address this.