

## Budget Consultation 2012

### Report of the Chief Fire Officer

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#### 1 Purpose of Report

This report provides a summary of the public's views and opinions regarding Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) and matters it would be prudent to take into account when setting future budgets by the Fire Authority.

#### 2 Recommendations

Members are recommended to note the contents of this report.

#### 3 Background

The Fire Authority is mandated through the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007<sup>1</sup> to engage, consult and inform the community.

In January 2012 the Service undertook a comprehensive public consultation exercise with the objective of collecting, through a robust process, the public's views and opinions regarding:

- Quality of service experienced
- Value for Money
- Potential closure of Fire Stations
- Public Value initiatives
- Budget Strategy

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2007/28/contents>

The key findings arising from the consultation exercise may be summarised as:

- The public largely believe they receive an excellent Fire and Rescue Service that represents value for money.
- The public are strongly opposed to any proposals to close fire stations.
- The majority of the public believe the cuts made / planned are appropriate, given the economic climate.
- An overwhelming majority believe the Fire Authority should reject the Freeze Grant and set a local precept.
- The majority of the public would prefer a steady state precept increase over the next four years.
- The vast majority of the public want to pay more than 4p per week extra to protect their Fire and Rescue Service.

## 4 Consultation Methodology

The consultation exercise undertaken comprised of two distinct elements – a **community street survey** and **focus groups**. Both elements were conducted, as far as reasonably practicable, in accordance with the code of conduct<sup>2</sup> issued by the UK's Market Research Society.

### Community Street Survey

During the first week of January operational personnel from all 23 fire stations undertook, on a voluntary, unpaid basis, street surveys across the communities of Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin, when they collected the views and opinions of 1,164 members of the public. A total of six questions (see appendix A) were presented, in a controlled manner, to each participant.

The statistical level of confidence generated by the results from the street survey would be equivalent to those provided by the entire population of Shropshire (circa 452,000) to 99.93% (+/- 5% variance), had they been asked the same questions. The full results are presented at Appendix B.

### Focus Groups

Approximately 500 invitations were forwarded to members of the community and businesses (who have experienced an interaction with the Fire and Rescue Service) to attend one of four focus groups scheduled for the second week of January. A total of 42 respondents agreed to take part in the focus groups and as a consequence two sessions (each of two hours' duration) were held (at Shrewsbury and Telford). Sessions were planned for Oswestry and Craven Arms, but low attendance numbers forced the cancellation of these two events. A total of five questions (see Appendix C) were presented, in a controlled manner, to the focus groups.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.mrs.org.uk/standards/downloads/Code%20of%20Conduct%202010.pdf>

The statistical level of confidence generated by the results from the focus groups is accurate to 95% (+/- 15% variance). The full results are presented at Appendix D.

## 5 Results Analysis

The findings of the public consultation exercise have been analysed and may be summarised as:

### Quality of service experienced

Of those who undertook the street survey (1,164) 38% indicated that they had used the services of SFRS. When asked for their opinions regarding the quality of service experienced 92% rated the Service as *'Excellent'*, with 7% rating it as *'Good'*.

### Value for Money

Street survey respondents were asked for their opinion regarding how they rated SFRS in terms of Value for Money. The majority (84%) of respondents rated the Service as *'Excellent'*, with a further 12% scoring the Service as *'Good'* Value for Money.

### Potential closure of Fire Stations

Members of the public (via the street survey) were asked for their opinions regarding the potential closure of fire stations. An overwhelming 93% indicated that they were *'strongly opposed'*, with a further 6% indicating that they were *'opposed'* to any closures.

### Public Value initiatives

Through the focus groups, attendees were informed of the measures that had taken place, and are planned to take place, through the Public Value Programme to secure a £3 million budget reduction. Whilst the focus groups expressed concern regarding the cessation of permanent crewing of the Aerial Ladder Platform and Rescue Tender, and the increased life of fire appliances (12 to 15 years), 60% of attendees confirmed that the cuts were appropriate, given the economic climate. The remaining attendees (40%) stated that the measures were excessive and no further cuts should be made.

### Budget Strategy

The focus groups were presented with a range of options (four) regarding the setting of a precept or alternatively accepting the Government's Freeze Grant. The overwhelming majority of attendees (95%) agreed and stated that the Fire Authority should decline the Freeze Grant and set a local precept of 2.5%. Only two attendees (5%) believed the Fire Authority should accept the Freeze Grant.

Based upon the response of the focus groups to the options regarding the Freeze Grant and precept, 52% of attendees stated that they would rather pay more council tax to avoid further service cuts, with 40% indicating that they were satisfied with the balance of cuts and a potential 2.5% precept increase. The remaining attendees (7%) offered no preference.

Attendees were asked if they would prefer the certainty of having a consistent 4p weekly increase for the next four years, or a budget that was reviewed and set each year. Almost half of attendees (48%) indicated that they would prefer the certainty of having a consistent 4p weekly increase for the next four years, with 29% opting for an annual review. The remaining 24% offered no opinion either way.

Through both the street survey and focus groups participants were asked how much they would be prepared to pay per week in addition to the existing precept levy to support SFRS. The results from the street survey indicated that 93% were prepared to pay 4p or more, with 71% of this group prepared to pay 6p or more per week (some respondents offered up to £1.50p per week). Only 2% wanted to pay nothing.

The focus group results indicated 19% of attendees would pay 4p per week extra, with 12% offering to pay 5p and 19% offering to pay 6p. The largest group (26%) were prepared to pay more, with 90% indicating that they would pay 10p extra per week. Only one person (2%) indicated that they wished to pay less than 4p. The remaining attendees (21%) offered no preference.

## 6 Budgetary Implications

The combined results of the street survey and focus groups provide Members with an informed opinion that indicates that the public would prefer the Fire Authority to reject the Freeze Grant and set a precept at a level of 6p (or more) per week.

For properties with a Band D council tax, an increase of 6p per week equates to 3.73%. Per annum, this would raise the current Band D precept of £83.81 to £86.94, an increase of £3.13 for 2012/13.

As the majority of households in Shropshire (including Telford and Wrekin) are Band A to C (70%), an average weekly increase of 3.73% would equate to approximately 5p (or less for most).

The table below indicates the weekly increase (in pence) as a percentage for Band D properties, should an increase be applied to the current (2011/12) precept.

Band D - Additional cost per week (%) given additional cost per week (pence)									
1p	2p	3p	4p	5p	6p	7p	8p	9p	10p
0.62%	1.24%	1.87%	2.49%	3.11%	3.73%	4.35%	4.98%	5.60%	6.22%

## **7 Financial Implications**

The street surveys were conducted by volunteer, off-duty personnel (at no cost). No consultants were engaged in the consultation exercise and no payment was made to members of the public and business community, who attended the focus groups.

## **8 Legal Comment**

The Fire Authority is mandated through the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007<sup>3</sup> to engage, consult and inform the community.

## **9 Equality Impact Assessment**

Officers have considered the Service's Brigade Order on Equality Impact Assessments (Personnel 5 Part 2) and have determined that there are no discriminatory practices or differential impacts upon specific groups arising from this report. An Initial Equality Impact Assessment has not, therefore, been completed.

Confidential equality monitoring was undertaken of those who attended the focus groups

## **10 Appendices**

### **Appendix A**

Community Street Survey Questions

### **Appendix B**

Community Street Survey Questions - Results

### **Appendix C**

Focus Group Questions

### **Appendix D**

Focus Group Questions - Results

## **10 Background Papers**

There are no background papers associated with this report.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2007/28/contents>

## Community Street Survey Questions

Q1. Have you ever had cause to use the services of Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service?

Yes  (Tick – then go to Question 2) No  (Tick – then go to Question 4)

Q.2 If Yes what was that contact (tick all that apply)?

Emergency Incident  Community Fire Safety  Business Fire Safety   
Other  (*please state*) \_\_\_\_\_

Q.3 How did you rate the Service you received?

Excellent  Good  Satisfactory  Poor  Bad  Can't remember

Q.4 We employ around 530 firefighters spread across 23 fire stations that ensure 24x7 cover throughout the county. For the majority of families in Shropshire/Telford & Wrekin this costs the average home £1.26p/£1.15p per week. When considering Value for Money, how would you rate your Fire Service, do you think it represents:

Excellent Value for Money  Good Value for Money  Satisfactory Value for Money  Poor Value for Money  Bad Value for Money  Don't know

Q.5 We are currently making cuts of about £3 million which will lead to a 10% reduction in our workforce and the sharing of many back-office activities with other organisations. If we have to make further cuts it may lead to the closure of up to 5 fire stations, which may include your local fire station. What is your opinion regarding the closure of fire stations. Are you:

Strongly opposed to closures  Opposed to closures  Support closures   
Don't know

Q.6 As mentioned earlier, the average household pays £1.26p/£1.15p per week to fund the Fire Service. If we were to increase this to avoid the closure of fire stations, how much would you be prepared to pay extra per week?

Nothing  2p  3p  4p  5p  6p  Other  (*please state* \_\_\_\_\_)

### Community Street Survey Questions - Results

Q1. Have you ever had cause to use the services of Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service?	Yes	No
Response:	444	720
%	38%	62%

Q.2 If Yes what was that contact (tick all that apply)?	Emergency Incident	Community Fire Safety	Business Fire Safety	Other
Response:	279	161	14	3
	63%	36%	14%	1%

Q.3 How did you rate the Service you received?	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Poor	Bad	Can't remember
Response:	410	30	2	0	0	2
%	92%	7%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Q.4 We employ around 530 firefighters spread across 23 fire stations that ensure 24x7 cover throughout the county. For the majority of families in Shropshire/Telford & Wrekin this costs the average home £1.26p/£1.15p per week. When considering Value for Money, how would you rate your Fire Service, do you think it represents:	Excellent Value for Money	Good Value for Money	Satisfactory Value for Money	Poor Value for Money	Bad Value for Money	Don't know
Response:	980	145	16	0	0	21
%	84%	12%	1%	0%	0%	2%

Q.5 We are currently making cuts of about £3 million which will lead to a 10% reduction in our workforce and the sharing of many back-office activities with other organisations. If we have to make further cuts it may lead to the closure of up to 5 fire stations, which may include your local fire station. What is your opinion regarding the closure of fire stations. Are you:	Strongly opposed to closures	Opposed to closures	Support closures	Don't know
Response:	1088	67	0	7
%	93%	6%	0%	1%

Q.6 As mentioned earlier, the average household pays £1.26p/£1.15p per week to fund the Fire Service. If we were to increase this to avoid the closure of fire stations, how much would you be prepared to pay extra per week?	Nothing	2p	3p	4p	5p	6p	Other
Response:	22	30	29	197	114	428	343
%	2%	3%	2%	17%	10%	37%	29%

## Focus Group Questions

Q.1 What do you think of the cuts made/planned so far, are they:

- Not gone far enough – further cuts could be made
- Appropriate, given the economic climate
- Excessive, no further cuts should be made

Q.2 Working in small groups, please advise us which Option would you recommend we take?

- Option 1 – Do nothing (increases our budget deficit by £338k per annum)
- Option 2 – Accept 'Freeze Grant' and put off tax rise until 2013/14 (likely then to be 5% to avoid deficit)
- Option 3 – Decline 'Freeze Grant' and set local council tax of 2.5% (removing our deficit by £338k per annum)
- Option 4 – Cut the current Council Tax (Fire)

Q.3 If you selected Option 3 - (*Option 3 – Decline 'Freeze Grant' and set local council tax of 2.5% (removing our deficit by £338k per annum)*)

What are your opinions on paying 3p – 4p (2.5%) extra per week?

- Satisfied with the balance of Service cuts and proposed council tax increase (2.5%)
- Would rather no further cuts and would pay more money per week if necessary

Q.4 If you answered - *Satisfied with the balance of Service cuts and proposed council tax increase (2.5%)*

What are your views on paying 4p per week extra, for the next 4 years?

- I would support a budget strategy that set out in advance proposed increases (*4p per week for the next 4 years*), to be reviewed annually
- I would support a budget strategy that reviewed every year proposed council tax increases, increases that would fluctuate

Q.5 If you answered - *Would rather no further cuts and would pay more money per week if necessary*

How extra would you be prepared to pay per week?

2p  3p  4p  5p  6p  other  (please state) or nothing



### Focus Group Questions - Results

Q1. What do you think of the cuts made/planned so far, are they:	Not gone far enough – further cuts could be made	Appropriate, given the economic climate	Excessive, no further cuts should be made					
Response:	0	25	17					
%	0%	60%	40%					
Q.2 Working in small groups, please advise us which Option would you recommend we take?	Option 1 – Do nothing (increases our budget deficit by £338k per annum)	Option 2 – Accept 'Freeze Grant' and put off tax rise until 2013/14 (likely then to be 5% to avoid deficit)	Option 3 – Decline 'Freeze Grant' and set local council tax of 2.5% (removing our deficit by £338k per annum)	Option 4 – Cut the current Council Tax (Fire)				
Response:	0	2	40	2				
%	0%	5%	95%	0%				
Q.3 If you selected Option 3 - What are your opinions on paying 3p – 4p (2.5%) extra per week?	Satisfied with the balance of Service cuts and proposed council tax increase (2.5%)	Would rather no further cuts and would pay more money per week if necessary	No Response					
Response:	17	22	3					
%	40%	52%	7%					
Q.4 If you answered - <i>Satisfied with the balance of Service cuts and proposed council tax increase (2.5%)</i> What are your views on paying 4p per week extra, for the next 4 years?	I would support a budget strategy that set out in advance proposed increases, to be reviewed annually	I would support a budget strategy that reviewed every year proposed council tax increases, increases that would fluctuate	No Response					
Response:	20	12	10					
%	48%	29%	24%					
Q.5 If you answered - <i>Would rather no further cuts...</i> How extra would you be prepared to pay per week?	Nothing	2p	3p	4p	5p	6p	Other	No Response
Response:	0	1	0	8	5	8	11	9
%	0%	2%	0%	19%	12%	19%	26%	21%