

Integrated Risk Management Planning Members' Working Group Update

Report of the Chief Fire Officer

For further information about this report please contact Alan Taylor, Chief Fire Officer, on 01743 260225, Andy Johnson, Head of Performance and Risk, on 01743 260287 or John Harrison, Temporary IRMP Manager, on 01743 260182.

1 Purpose of Report

This report presents Members with a summary of the Public Stakeholder Scrutiny Panels conducted by Opinion Research Services during January 2009. A full presentation including feedback and the questions and answers posed at the two consultations held in Shrewsbury and Ludlow was delivered by officers to the Integrated Risk Management Planning (IRMP) Members working Group on 22 January 2009.

In addition an update on the Station Risk Analysis Work currently being completed by station staff was presented to the group. Members are requested to note the main outcomes from the Panels and the progress being made with the Station Risk Analysis Returns.

2 Recommendations

The Fire Authority is asked to:

- a) Note the summary of responses to the Public Stakeholder Panels; and
- b) Note the progress being made with Station Risk Analysis Returns.

3 Background

As described in the Integrated Risk Management Plan, the Fire Authority's approach to consultation complies with guidance issued by both the Cabinet Office and the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG). The central tenet of this guidance is that the extent of consultation should be proportional to the scope of the proposed changes contained in the Draft IRMP Action Plan, and should focus upon communities or interest groups particularly affected by these changes.

To ensure the Authority receives independently corroborated feedback from this process, the Fire Authority, as in previous years, solicited the help of a consultancy company Opinion Research Services (ORS) to conduct a significant part of the consultation process. ORS have many years experience in consulting on behalf of public service bodies across the whole of the country, including involvement in many fire authorities' IRMP processes. Two Public Scrutiny IRMP and Budget consultation sessions were conducted by ORS, one in Shrewsbury on 13 January 2009 and one in Ludlow on 14 January 2009.

4 Public Stakeholder Scrutiny Panels 2009

At both panels participants were given a detailed overview of;

- The IRMP Process
- Shropshire's resources
- The Fire Authority's historic IRMP priorities
- Progress made against those priorities
- The Fire Authority's new priorities
- Areas for Significant development.

In particular participants received a detailed explanation of the Authority's historic IRMP priorities namely;

1. To undertake a Fire Cover Review of the county's response resources;
2. To drive improvement in the Retained Duty System (RDS), to ensure its long term viability; and
3. To increase Community Fire Safety (CFS) activity in the more rural areas of Shropshire.

Participants were then asked

- 1. How satisfied they were with the way the Fire Authority has implemented IRMP since 2004?**

In general respondents were satisfied and felt that the plans had been well implemented and monitored with good leadership which had led to a good allocation of resources.

- 2. If they thought it was right that we have focused on trying to improve our service in Shropshire's more rural communities?**

Respondents felt it was right stating that training, recruitment and retention was vital for the RDS Service although ideally it would be more desirable to move to more wholetime.

3. Any other risks in the community that they thought the Fire Authority should get involved in?

Need to get more smoke alarms and sprinklers in place in the rural areas. Recruitment remains an important issue. The Authority should charge for extra/irresponsible calls-out – e.g. body recovery.

Participants were then asked;

4. If they agreed with the Fire Authority's new Strategic planning priorities?

Participants agreed unanimously with the priorities set.

5. If they agree with the same priorities being used as the Strategic IRMP priorities?

Respondents felt that this was a logical progression that fitted all the strategies together.

6. If they felt that these priorities were likely to drive improvements to the service we give to the people of Shropshire?

It was felt that a lot of thought has gone into development for improvement – not just growth for its own sake and respondents felt happy that IRMP is delivering improvements for Shropshire

Finally participants were asked;

7. If they thought that improving the competence and safety of our staff will improve our service to the people of Shropshire?

Essential – for safety and efficiency of public – and for H&S of staff in dangerous job – need best equipment, but wondered what the competency is at the moment – need for better record keeping and assessment – how do you monitor the RDS staff now?

8. If the continued improvement of our Retained staff is the right priority for the Fire Authority?

RDS are good value for money – and should be a main priority for FA Good to have RDS full time availability – big improvement – and the development team – very valuable

9. If they thought this is a sound investment?

Investment will improve retention, we commend efforts of FA to balance budget.

A full report detailing all responses from the two panels has been produced by ORS and is attached as an appendix to this report.

5 IRMP Action Plan 2009/10 - Station Risk Analysis Returns

The IRMP Members Working Group was given a verbal update by officers with regard to this work which is currently being completed by stations.

The IRMP team has to date received 27 of the expected 38 returns and the team have been pleased with the general quality of the work produced. Members were given the opportunity to view a number of examples of completed returns. Members were informed that the next stage will be to fully analyse the information produced locally and where applicable prioritise and update all centrally held information to ensure a full and complete picture of risk is maintained by the service to accurately inform training, appliance, equipment and procedural needs.

6 Financial Implications

There are no direct financial implications associated with this report.

7 Legal Comment

In 2003 the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister requested fire authorities to prepare IRMPs. Although this request does not have the force of statute, there was a clear expectation that the request would be complied with. This expectation has been further formalised by the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, which states that fire and rescue authorities must 'have regard' to the Government's National Framework Documents, which in turn state that fire authorities 'must' have an IRMP in place covering a minimum of a three year period (Draft National Framework 2008 to 2011).

8 Equality Impact Assessment

This report purely provides feedback from the recent Public Stakeholder Panels and an update on the IRMP Station Risk Analysis Returns and has no impact on people. An Initial Equality Impact Assessment has not, therefore, been completed.

9 Appendix

Opinion Research Services' report on Consultation on Integrated Risk Management and the Budget Strategy 2008/09 to 2011/12

10 Background Papers

There are no background papers associated with this report.

Implications of all of the following have been considered and, where they are significant (i.e. marked with an asterisk); the implications are detailed within the report itself.

Balanced Score Card		Integrated Risk Management Planning	*
Business Continuity Planning		Legal	*
Capacity	*	Member Involvement	*
Civil Contingencies Act		National Framework	*
Comprehensive Performance Assessment		Operational Assurance	
Efficiency Savings	*	Retained	*
Environmental		Risk and Insurance	
Financial	*	Staff	*
Fire Control/Fire Link		Strategic Planning	*
Information Communications and Technology		West Midlands Regional Management Board	
Freedom of Information / Data Protection / Environmental Information		Equality Impact Assessment	*

SHROPSHIRE AND WREKIN FIRE AUTHORITY

Consultation on Integrated Risk Management and the Budget Strategy 2008/09 to 2011/12



Opinion Research Services

Spin-out Company of the University of Wales Swansea

Contents

The ORS Project Team	3
Acknowledgements and Preamble	4
1. Executive Summary	5
1.1 Introduction.....	5
1.2 Methodology	5
1.3 Main Findings.....	5
2. Consultation Process.....	9
2.1 The Commission.....	9
2.2 Schedule and Conduct of Meetings	9
2.3 Inclusiveness and Representativeness	10
2.4 The Report	11
3. Research Findings	12
3.1 Introduction.....	12
3.2 Intergrated Risk Management Planning (IRMP).....	12
3.3 Budget Strategy 2008/09 – 2011/12	197

The ORS Project Team

Project Design and Management

Kelly Lock
Martyn Sullivan

Facilitation

Dale Hall

Report Authors

Dale Hall
Kelly Lock

Acknowledgements and Preamble

ORS is pleased have worked with Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority (SWFA) in conducting the research reported here – not only because respondents shared their views readily on Integrated Risk Management Planning and the budgetary proposals being put forward by the Authority, but also because the study was undertaken in order to inform the future development of Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS).

We thank SWFA for commissioning the project as part of an ongoing programme of consultation. We particularly thank the Authority members and senior officers who attended the sessions to make presentations or to answer participants' questions. The input from members and officers was essential in achieving an informed debate.

We are grateful to all those who took part in the interesting day-long meetings and shared their views with us. They were patient in listening to background information before entering positively into the spirit of open discussions.

At all stages of the project, ORS' status as an independent organisation consulting the public and stakeholders as objectively as possible was recognised and respected. We are grateful for the trust, and we hope this report will contribute usefully to thinking about the Authority's development.

We hope that ORS has been instrumental in forging a link between the Scrutiny Panel members and SFRS, and that the information in this report accurately reflects participants' views and priorities.

Executive Summary

1.1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1.1 This is a concise chapter report that aims to capture the main outcomes of the two day-long consultation meetings, but readers should also consult the main body of the report for an in-depth discussion of the issues.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

- 1.2.1 The following report details the outcomes from two full-day Scrutiny Panels with a total of 21 members of the public in Shrewsbury and Ludlow. Most participants had attended at least one previous meeting of a Scrutiny Panel, but some new members were included after being recruited randomly by telephone. At each Panel, the participants were divided into small workshop discussion groups, to examine the issues in detail following the presentations.
- 1.2.2 Both of the Panels discussed SWFA's Integrated Risk Management Planning (IRMP) during the morning session and the Authority's Budget Strategy 2008/09-2011/12 in the afternoon. The two meetings were qualitative forms of consultation. While the findings cannot be certified as statistically representative of all people in Shropshire, the meetings included a wide range of people and allowed them to question officers and members and to deliberate individually and collectively. While summarising the main themes and highlighting the key points, this report seeks to be faithful to what was said. The opinions expressed were not always unanimous, but we have endeavoured to reflect both the majority view and, where useful, the diversity of views.

1.3 MAIN FINDINGS

INTEGRATED RISK MANAGEMENT PLANNING

Progress to Date

Satisfaction with IRMP

- 1.3.1 Participants were unanimously satisfied with SWFA and SFRSs progress in the area of IRMP since 2004. The reallocation of resources undertaken was deemed appropriate to Shropshire's risk pattern and the groups were satisfied that the changes are being monitored on a regular basis to ensure an efficient service to the people of the county.

Rural communities

- 1.3.2 Participants endorsed SWFA's focus on trying to improve its service in the county's more rural communities.

Other risks and roles

- 1.3.3 When considering the other roles or risks that should be addressed by SFRS, an increased focus on certain aspects of community safety was frequently mentioned by participants. The continuation of home fire safety checks, formulation of escape plans, continued installation of smoke alarms, and promotion of sprinkler systems were common suggestions.

- 1.3.4 Some people at Shrewsbury suggested that SFRS should not attempt to address any other risks or roles (in addition to those already dealt with) for fear of placing an excessive strain on its resources and compromising its core service.

New Priorities

Corporate Planning Priorities

- 1.3.5 When asked whether they agree with SWFAs corporate planning priorities, participants almost unanimously answered that they did. Participants also endorsed the use of the same priorities for IRMP purposes. However, there was a strong sense that the emphasis of all strategies must remain on safety (as opposed to finance) and that the merging of corporate and IRMP priorities should not in any way compromise the safety of the public or fire-fighters. Participants were almost unanimous in their agreement that the priorities will deliver improvements to Shropshire's people.

Retained Duty System

Competence and safety of staff

- 1.3.6 It seemed self-evident to participants that improving the competence and safety of RDS staff will improve the service provided to the people of Shropshire. Further, ensuring the health and safety of retained fire-fighters was judged to be *paramount* and *nothing less than they deserve for the job they do*.
- 1.3.7 Improvements in the areas of training, development, consultation and safety will, it was felt, result in a workforce with higher morale levels, and a greater sense of value and unity.

The right priority?

- 1.3.8 It was unanimously agreed that the continued improvement of RDS staff is the right priority for the Fire Authority - particularly given the value for money, geographical coverage and flexibility they provide. A commitment to the continued improvement of RDS staff was deemed important, and so too was ensuring their retention by recognising the work they do and their dedication to the job.

A sound investment?

- 1.3.9 Participants readily agreed that continued improvement of RDS staff is a sound investment. Indeed, all panellists approved the increase in expenditure to fund the improvements and most appeared to be satisfied with the ridership factor reductions that will contribute financially to them.

BUDGET STRATEGY 2008/09 – 2011/12

Budget 2009/10

Increases in Council Tax

- 1.3.10 All the groups at both Shrewsbury and Ludlow agreed that the 3.9% rise in Council Tax to fund the SWFA is justified and reasonable. Participants were impressed by what they saw as the Authority's fiscal prudence, as well as its strive for efficiency and improvement. They were also satisfied that the proposed precept represents *good value for money and allows for extra investment in case of future 'hard times'*.

Comparatively high precept

- 1.3.11 Participants understood and accepted why SWFA has a relatively high Council Tax precept. The reasons for the precept level were understood and it was felt that, given the constraints within which it has to work, the SFRS provides satisfactory services. It was recognised (particularly by participants at Shrewsbury) that the Government is beginning to redress the balance of funding between authorities.

Government grant increase

- 1.3.12 The majority at Shrewsbury thought that the percentage grant increase received by SWFA from Government is fair in the current financial climate. The Ludlow groups, however, were more critical of the 4% grant increase than their Shrewsbury counterparts. They argued for a larger settlement and were concerned that SWFA is penalised financially for its efficiency.

Value for money

- 1.3.13 It is encouraging to report that all groups described the Fire Authority as representing value for money. Participants were certainly of the view that they receive an excellent and improving service for the amount they pay through their Council Tax. SWFA was also praised for its exercise of financial control within existing budgetary constraints.

Capital Expenditure

Expenditure on Shrewsbury's St. Michael's Street site

- 1.3.14 All participants endorsed the refurbishment of Shrewsbury's St. Michael's Street site; the building was described as unfit for purpose and badly in need of improvement for the sake of staff morale and performance. As well as recognising the need for improvement on the site, participants also accepted the financial outlay involved in doing so – including the annual repayment costs of approximately £135,000.

Reduction in borrowing costs

- 1.3.15 The groups were generally pleased with the way in which the Fire Authority has so far managed to reduce its borrowing costs.

Annual repayment costs

- 1.3.16 The need to borrow money and the associated charges were generally seen as unfortunate facts of life. There was certainly a sense that the end result of the borrowing would be worth its cost in terms of interest repayments.

Future Budgets

- 1.3.17 All groups were satisfied with the scale of future budget increases, especially in the light of the current uncertain economic situation.
- 1.3.18 As regards concerns at this stage, most centred on participants' general worries about the current state of the economy. Other sources of unease were *borrowing costs and inflation* and the *need to balance the budget in future* whilst maintaining *a good fire service for the community*.

Using the surplus

- 1.3.19 Participants were generally very satisfied with the use of the proposed surplus in 2009/10 to reduce the need to borrow for the Shrewsbury refurbishment – though in Shrewsbury some people felt the surplus might be used for the RDS, pensions or leasing charges for pumps.

Further efficiencies

- 1.3.20 Participants agreed that SFRS's officers should be required to identify further efficiencies, providing they are relevant – and providing that public and fire-fighter safety is not compromised in any way.

Service developments for 2009/10

- 1.3.21 The overwhelming majority of participants agreed with the proposed Service Developments for 2009/10 – particularly the £107,000 kick start of the Retained Development Project.

Investment levels

- 1.3.22 Participants at both forums agreed that the proposed investment levels are satisfactory to maintain an effective service – especially given the current economic climate and the potential for future grant reductions.

Consultation Process

2.1 THE COMMISSION

2.1.1 On the basis of its experience, ORS was commissioned by SWFA to facilitate and report two public Scrutiny Panels in January 2009. It was agreed that ORS would work in collaboration with SFRS to facilitate the meetings and prepare a report of the discussions, covering the arguments and points made as well as the conclusions. SFRS encouraged ORS to facilitate the meetings and prepare this report independently.

2.2 SCHEDULE AND CONDUCT OF MEETINGS

2.2.1 Two Forums were held with members of the public in Shrewsbury and Ludlow – the make-up of which can be seen in the table below. Encouragingly, participants represented a wide spectrum of ages and socio-economic status:

Panel	Attendees	Profile
Shrewsbury	12	6 females, 6 males
Ludlow	9	4 females, 5 males

2.2.2 Participants attended a full-day forum, during which SWFA's Integrated Risk Management Planning (IRMP) was discussed in the morning, and the Budget Strategy 2008/09 - 2011/12 in the afternoon (following a hearty lunch!). Of the 21 attendees across the two panels, five have been attending similar forums for the past five years, whereas four were new recruits in 2006, seven in 2007 and five in 2008/2009.

2.2.3 Participants were invited by ORS and paid for their trouble and expenses in attending and taking part in lengthy and detailed meetings.

2.2.4 It should be noted that the attendance at the meetings was not as high as in previous years. Whilst the full-day format worked well overall, the lower attendance can perhaps be explained by the fact that people were unable or reluctant to commit to such a long session (especially so soon after the Christmas break). Further, some last minute apologies were received from those intending to participate.

2.2.5 The meetings offered an effective opportunity for the participants to understand, question and debate the issues fully. In order to make the meetings as informed as possible for the participants, SFRS prepared and delivered detailed PowerPoint presentations on IRMP and the various aspects of the Budget Strategy. The presentations specifically covered the following:

- IRMP
 - Progress to Date
 - The New Priorities
 - The Retained Priority

- Budget Strategy 2008/09 – 2011/12
 - Budget 2009/10
 - Capital Expenditure
 - Future Budgets

The groups were then given the opportunity to ask questions and seek points of clarification, before dividing into small groups and considering the issues in some detail. Finally, there was a plenary session where the groups' findings were fed-back to attendees.

2.2.6 The meeting sessions began with detailed and very informative presentations by SFRS to provide respondents with a substantial context of information within which they could understand and consider the Fire Authority's issues and proposals. This approach was used for two main reasons:

- Members of the public are typically poorly informed about how the Fire and Rescue Service operates and is managed. Although established panel members have, over the years, gained such background knowledge, this section was especially relevant for the new participants at each public panel
- The challenge was not to ask people's general impressions of the Fire and Rescue Service but to debate very particular issues – so the meetings needed to focus on them and the reasons for them

Hence, a considerable amount of information was needed before participants could debate the main specific areas of discussion in turn.

2.2.7 For these reasons, the consultation process should be considered as 'testing' the acceptability of SWFA's IRMP and Budget Strategy 2008/09 to 2011/12 – by presenting the various components clearly for discussion. The key question the researchers were asking was:

If people are made fully aware of the background to and arguments for the proposals and priorities, how convincing do they find them?

2.3 INCLUSIVENESS AND REPRESENTATIVENESS

2.3.1 Given that no public body can guarantee a particular level of response to its consultation initiatives, the foremost tests of success are fairness and inclusiveness – were participants given sufficient information and could they comment readily? In this case, the answer to that question is yes.

2.3.2 Although the outcomes of such meetings cannot be certified as statistically representative of staff and public opinion, the public meetings reported here certainly gave a very diverse range of people, drawn from differing areas of Shropshire. The participants were diverse in terms of gender, age, socio-economic and professional status, housing tenure and other criteria. Therefore we are satisfied that the outcomes of the meetings (as reported below) are broadly indicative of how Shropshire public opinion would incline on the basis of similar discussions.

2.3.3 In summary, then, the meetings are reliable and authoritative as examples of the reflections and opinions of diverse informed people reacting to SFRS' priorities and proposals.

2.4 THE REPORT

- 2.4.1 Essentially, this report reviews the sentiments and judgements of participants about SWFA's progress in the area of Integrated Risk Management Planning (IRMP), as well as its Budget Strategy 2008/09 to 2011/12.
- 2.4.2 Some verbatim quotations (*italicised* below) are used – not because we agree or disagree with them – but for their vividness in capturing recurrent points of views. ORS does not endorse the opinions in question, but seeks only to portray them accurately and clearly. While quotations are used, the report is obviously not a verbatim transcript of the sessions, but an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants in free-ranging discussions.
- 2.4.3 The next section of this report has been structured so as to address each of the areas of discussion in some detail. The views of both meetings have been amalgamated – although significant differences in their views have been drawn out. The IRMP discussions are reported first, followed by those pertaining to the Budget Strategy.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

- 3.1.1 Each Scrutiny Panel group was asked to address a series of questions, which were intended to focus their thinking but not necessarily constrain their thoughts. The 'worksheets' outlined some of the most relevant information to aid the panel in their thinking. Approximately 30 minutes was spent on each topic so the sessions were very focused. The outputs from these discussions are reported below.

3.2 INTEGRATED RISK MANAGEMENT PLANNING (IRMP)

Progress to Date

Satisfaction with IRMP

- 3.2.1 Participants at both Shrewsbury and Ludlow were unanimously satisfied with SWFA and SFRSs progress in the area of IRMP since 2004. The reallocation of resources undertaken was deemed appropriate to Shropshire's risk pattern and the groups were satisfied that the changes are being monitored on a regular basis to ensure an efficient service to the people of the county:

Very satisfied...there is clear evidence from information available that the priorities have been identified, resourced and met

We are happy that IRMP is delivering improvements for Shropshire

You've done well, lads!

Commendable effort

Good reallocation of resources to give a more efficient service

The reduction in fire engines has proved acceptable

It is being reviewed well...we are not dissatisfied

Satisfied that it seems to be very tightly monitored and makes good use of the resources available. Constantly being reviewed

- 3.2.2 That the FBU and the Audit Commission have been convinced by SWFA's approach to IRMP was also pleasing to panellists:

We are impressed by the judgement of the Audit Commission and FBU that the strategy is right

Good leadership; plans have been well thought out and implemented without dispute. They have taken the Union with them

- 3.2.3 Only one concern was noted (at Shrewsbury); one sub-group there was somewhat uneasy that *dynamic mobile cover can mean towns are depleted while the wholetime firefighters go to incidents outside towns.*

Focusing on rural communities

- 3.2.4 Given the geographic and demographic nature of Shropshire, participants endorsed SWFA's focus on trying to improve its service in the county's more rural communities:

As Shropshire is a rural county it is quite right that the Fire Authority has focused on improving the service to the rural communities

Makes sense to focus on rural areas...more so considering the nature of the county

Rural areas are essentially domestic rather than business...people are the priority

It has been demonstrated that a high percentage of the fires occur in rural communities

It's good to focus on these to reduce risks and deal with improving specialist skills specific to rural areas. For example difficulty of access in rural areas due to difficult and narrow roads

- 3.2.5 It should, however, be noted that several of Shrewsbury's newer panellists were unaware that rural Shropshire is wholly served by the Retained Duty System:

We are amazed that rural fire stations have been utterly dependent on retained staff

Whilst agreeing that ongoing training and improving conditions for firefighters in the rural areas is *vital* and *should be a priority*, those who were unfamiliar with the RDS system desired a shift towards *the progression to wholetime involvement and support of retained stations*.

Other risks and roles

- 3.2.6 When considering the other roles or risks that should be addressed by SFRS, an increased focus on certain aspects of community safety was frequently mentioned by participants. The formulation of escape plans and the installation of smoke alarms and sprinkler systems were common suggestions:

Some properties have only one exit so they need to think about fire escapes and other good practice. Public education and awareness raising is important for people in all vulnerable buildings

Focusing on getting to the root of the problem...installing smoke detectors and sprinklers. This seems especially important as many areas in Shropshire are retirement areas; cater to the specific population needs

Need to get more smoke alarms and sprinklers in place in the rural areas

You need a rolling safety education programme for community fire safety

Continue with current improvements as much as possible...raising awareness by means of working to prevent fire within the confines of the budget

- 3.2.7 The fact that operational staff are used to undertake Home Fire Safety Checks (HFSCs) and install smoke alarms was thought by some at Shrewsbury to be a waste of resources:

While we applaud the fact that 25,000 smoke detectors have been fitted, is this a waste of trained personnel?

Others, however, praised the service provided by firefighters in respect of imparting advice during such visits and suggested that they continue in this function:

I have had the RDS come to my home for a HFSC and it was excellent; they spent nearly an hour giving general advice for our safety

- 3.2.8 One sub-group at Shrewsbury suggested that SFRS should not attempt to address any other roles or risks in addition to those already dealt with for fear of placing an excessive strain on its resources and compromising its core service:

Where will resources come from? They must not compromise the core service

The Fire Service should deal with incidents in which their expertise is required as long as it does not affect their ability to fight a fire. In some cases the cost of the call-out should be charged to the appropriate authority

The New Priorities

Corporate Planning Priorities

- 3.2.9 When asked whether they agree with SWFAs corporate planning priorities, participants almost unanimously answered that they did. One group at Shrewsbury, however, strongly suggested that the 3 'C's must deliver genuine improvements...not just window dressing and spin to make it appear that the service has improved.

- 3.2.10 Participants also endorsed the use of the same priorities for IRMP purposes; the Ludlow groups were particularly keen to see the various functions of SFRS working closely together:

It's a logical progression of original IRMP...the right way to go

Need to fit all the strategies together

To have everyone working together will yield positive results

Both 'bodies' working together could avoid the 'left' not knowing what the 'right' is doing

Nevertheless, there was a strong sense that the emphasis of all strategies must remain on safety (as opposed to finance) and that the merging of corporate and IRMP priorities should not in any way compromise the safety of the public or firefighters:

The strategic IRMP priorities which seem to put people first should still have adequate input

- 3.2.11 On a related note, some Ludlow panellists were confused as to exactly *how the service is managed and planned*. As such, they requested a *kind of visual diagram to explain*.

- 3.2.12 Participants were almost unanimous in their agreement that the new corporate planning priorities will deliver improvements to Shropshire's people:

It's obvious that much thought has gone into driving the service forward...

Improved training and consultation will always bring improvement to the service...

One group at Shrewsbury, however, commented that SWFA must be careful to avoid meaningless box-ticking for its own sake.

The Retained Priority

Competence and safety of staff

- 3.2.13 It was self-evident to participants that improving the competence and safety of RDS staff will improve the service provided to the people of Shropshire. Further, ensuring the health and safety of retained firefighters was judged to be *paramount* and nothing less than they deserve for the job they do:

We consider that improving competence by further training of retained officers is essential for both the safety and efficiency of both themselves and the public

Because of the inherent dangers of the job they deserve the best available equipment and training

The amount of training they receive seems disproportionate to the risk and sacrifices they are making. If the money can be found for even a few extra hours of training it would be a wise investment

Extended training of local firefighters may be more efficient in the long run because an incident could be dealt with by the local crew without having to call for back-up from full-time officers

- 3.2.14 Further, improvements in the areas of training and development, consultation and safety will, it was felt, result in a workforce with higher morale levels, and a greater sense of value and unity:

All staff need to feel valued then morale will be enhanced

Improved training is essential and consistent with staff safety...morale will be improved as will the efficiency of the service

Staff training and development is essential, particularly in a team environment...and consultation with staff is essential to ensure that management and staff all sing to an agreed hymnsheet

- 3.2.15 One Ludlow sub-group suggested that SWFA undertake *increased training in the operation of specialist equipment if possible* because *it seems a slightly pointless waste of resources to invest in presumably expensive equipment when a very limited number of people can use it.*
- 3.2.16 Another Ludlow group wondered how SWFA currently assesses and monitors the competency of RDS firefighters. Participants suggested that *there is a need for better record keeping and assessment* in this respect.

The right priority?

- 3.2.17 There was unanimous agreement in both forums that the continued improvement of RDS staff is the right priority for the Fire Authority – particularly given the value for money, geographical coverage and flexibility they provide:

RDS are good value for money and should be a main priority for the Fire Authority

Retained staff are critical to service delivery

The development and training and retention of retained staff is critical

It has been established that retained staff provide good value for money and is therefore a big consideration for local Fire Authorities. Local knowledge provided by retained staff is invaluable and should be encouraged

The continuing professional development of the retained staff is as important as training the wholetime firefighters. It is a large pool of flexible firefighters on whom we can rely

This seems to be the right priority considering the amount of Shropshire covered by retained firefighters and the fact they are mostly first on the scene

We welcome the innovation of retained development teams...very valuable

- 3.2.18 An organisational commitment to the continued improvement of RDS staff was deemed imperative, as was ensuring their retention by recognising the work they do and their dedication to the job:

Need to recognise their commitment and need to reduce RDS risks and improve retention

They need to keep considering how to reduce the turnover of RDS

They need to treat the RDS equally with wholetime firefighters...they must not be second class citizens

A sound investment?

- 3.2.19 That the continued improvement of RDS staff is a sound investment was undisputed by participants:

Investment in staff and good equipment always pays dividends

It's a very sound investment that will hopefully reduce turnover

The idea of improving their training is a sound investment. For instance allowing firefighters from the urban areas to consult with other crews and pass on their knowledge and experience

Indeed, all panellists approved the increase in expenditure to fund the improvements and most appeared to be satisfied with the ridership factor reductions that will contribute financially to them.

- 3.2.20 In relation to the latter point above, only one sub-group at Ludlow questioned the notion of savings being made in the wholetime service to fund RDS improvements. The group argued that *it cannot be as black and white as either cutting areas of the wholetime service or improving the safety of retained firefighters. The issue should be examined in more detail.*

3.3 BUDGET STRATEGY 2008/09 – 2011/12

Budget 2009/10

Increases in Council Tax

- 3.3.1 All the groups at both Shrewsbury and Ludlow agreed that the 3.9% rise in Council Tax to fund the SWFA is justified; participants were impressed by what they saw as the Authority's fiscal prudence, as well as its strive for efficiency and improvement:

It's about right for the reasons given

The Authority has been very prudent...3.9% is just right

It's sufficient to fund an efficient service whilst at the same time requiring relatively small efficiency savings

It is reassuring to see that the back-up planning is being done for the future

They are keeping the standards and continually improving

We commend the authority in their efforts to balance their budget by searching for efficiencies that improve the service

They were also satisfied that the proposed precept represents *good value for money and allows for extra investment in case of future 'hard times'*.

- 3.3.2 One of the Shrewsbury sub-groups even went so far as to suggest a slightly larger rise to safeguard future standards:

It's just about right but a tiny increase would ensure and maintain standards in the future

Indeed, some members of the Ludlow panel agreed that *no-one can argue with a few pennies in the case of any type of emergency service. These services may be required at any time but no-one would argue if it had to be increased either. You can't put a price on saving lives or possessions...*

- 3.3.3 Some Ludlow participants were keen to discuss the impact of the current economic crisis on people's finances. Whilst agreeing that the Council Tax rise is justified, they were of the view that it is only marginally so and were concerned about its impact on certain sectors of the community – those on a fixed income in particular:

It's only just justified...we need to consider people suffering as a result of the credit crunch

Comparatively high precept

- 3.3.4 As in previous years, participants expressed some concern that Fire and Rescue Service funding has led to SWFA's comparatively high precept. However, the reasons for the precept cost were accepted and understood by the vast majority of participants. Indeed comments were predicated on the basis that Shropshire has never fared well in such settlements, despite the efficiency of the Fire Authority:

It's correct but how do you correct the 'wrong' historical basis

We can see where the money is being spent and it is unfair that we are third

We feel that this is the result of SWFA being treated shabbily compared to other Authorities by the Government...

We are not happy to be third in the league tables but we need a better share from Government. Are we being penalised because we are efficient?

As such, and given the constraints within which it has to work, the vast majority thought it reasonable that SWFA charges what it does in order to provide a necessary service.

- 3.3.5 Further, it was recognised and appreciated (particularly by participants at Shrewsbury) that the Government is beginning to redress the balance of funding between authorities:

We are where we are but things getting fairer

We accept that the high precept [is because of] geographical and historical reasons when central Government funding has been low. This has now been recognised and is being addressed by Government

Government grant increase

- 3.3.6 The majority at Shrewsbury thought that the percentage grant increase received by SWFA from Government is fair in the current financial climate – although it was stated that the Authority and the people of Shropshire would always desire and be grateful for more:

We think it would have been nice for a larger settlement but realistically was the best that could be expected in the current financial circumstances

It is fair but perhaps not sufficient. To be more it has to be at the expense of others or by an increase in Council Tax

Others at Shrewsbury saw the rise as *a step in the right direction but not enough*. They certainly saw it as *unfair that we might have to subsidise others who are less efficient*.

- 3.3.7 The Ludlow groups were far more critical of the 4% grant increase than their Shrewsbury counterparts. They argued for a larger settlement and were angry that, in their view, SWFA is penalised financially for its efficiency and its economical use of the Retained Duty System:

Considering the sparsity factor we think we should have a bigger allocation but we understand that the reason we don't is because we have retained firefighters who provide a very good service very economically. We don't think it's fair that we should be punished for efficiency

It's extremely unfair...where do they think the money is going to come from? We will probably have to pay ourselves to save our homes and lives as where else will it come from?

Value for money

- 3.3.8 It is encouraging to report that all groups described the Fire Authority as representing value for money. Participants were certainly of the view that they receive an excellent and improving service for the amount they pay through their Council Tax:

Given the service performance standards achieved and other statistics presented today we feel we have satisfactory value for money

- 3.3.9 SWFA was also, as in previous years, highly praised for the way it is exercising financial control within existing budgetary constraints:

They are improving all the time and do well with the budget...good work!

Excellent because they perform well with what they get

It is surprising how well they are managing with what they have; thumbs up to them. Continue the good work!

We think that the balance adopted by the Fire Authority re the budget is correct and represents value for money

Capital Expenditure

Expenditure on Shrewsbury's St. Michael's Street site

- 3.3.10 All groups at both Shrewsbury and Ludlow endorsed the refurbishment of Shrewsbury's St. Michael's Street site; the building was described as unfit for purpose and badly in need of improvement for the sake of staff morale and performance:

Good to refurbish now...it's needed

It really needs it! It is in a bad state for people working there!

[One participant] has personal experience of working at the fire station and she thinks the conditions are disgusting

Better working conditions and better service and morale

We think that the money spent will improve morale and performance and with better training they will exceed in all aspects of fire safety

- 3.3.11 As well as recognising the need for improvements to the site, participants also accepted the financial outlay involved in doing so – including the annual repayment costs of approximately £135,000:

There is no alternative at the moment...things have moved on from last year. We cannot just wait for the economy to change...we have to go ahead with current resources

At the end of the day, they have tried every possible means to get around the situation

- 3.3.12 Some Shrewsbury participants expressed relief that *the Government have promised £1.3 million which compensates for not selling the land.*

Reduction in borrowing costs

- 3.3.13 Participants were generally pleased with the way in which the Fire Authority has so far managed to reduce its borrowing costs:

They are doing well here, dealing with the pressures and nothing drastic has had to be done so far

It's a good decision to build up a capital fund and good news that central Government has added to the pot

Annual repayment costs

- 3.3.14 The need to borrow money (and the charges associated with it) was generally seen as a somewhat unfortunate fact of life given that *there are not indefinite efficiencies to be found:*

If they need to borrow £100,000 and have to pay an extra £9,000 then that is the way it has to be as there seems to be no other way to get the money they require

It's not going to get any cheaper

There was certainly a sense that the end result of the borrowing would be worth its cost in terms of interest repayments:

It will bring benefits overall

As long as improvements are reflected in costs then it is acceptable

Benefits will be better training facilities

- 3.3.15 At Ludlow, participants were pleased that there is *substantial back-up if problems do occur with costs.*

- 3.3.16 One group at Shrewsbury suggested that the SWFA *might consider using its resources instead of paying the interest.*

- 3.3.17 As regards concerns at this stage, most centred on participants' general worries about the current state of the economy:

The economy and worries about the future

Economy in general

Other sources of unease were *borrowing costs and inflation* and the *need to balance the budget in future* whilst maintaining *a good fire service for the community.*

Future Budgets

- 3.3.18 All groups were satisfied with the scale of future budget increases, especially in the light of current economic uncertainty:

We are very satisfied. Considerable thought has been given to ensure that the service can be maintained...

Based on the information we have been given we think the future increase will be acceptable

It's hard to see into the future. We need to wait and see from this good intermediate position and tread water cautiously

Using the surplus

- 3.3.19 Participants at both Ludlow and Shrewsbury were generally satisfied with the use of the proposed surplus in 2009/10 to reduce the need to borrow for the Shrewsbury refurbishment:

We are satisfied that the Fire Authority has considered the refurbishment carefully and that the surplus is being used wisely

Very satisfied within the current economic climate

You will be putting this into the reserves for the future or lowering the borrowing requirement...

The capital reserve is the best use as long as it is not saved indefinitely. It should be spent on the headquarters and fire station next year

There is no need to inflate reserves too much if borrowing or leasing charges can be reduced

- 3.3.20 However, whilst participants' endorsement at Ludlow was unanimous, this was not the case at Shrewsbury. Some felt that the surplus should be retained for other uses and not spent on this particular project:

I'd keep hold of it...

We still have to pay for RDS pensions...

It could be used to reduce Council Tax (but this limits future options)

It could be used to reduce leasing charges for pumps; it will save revenue expenditure

Further efficiencies

- 3.3.21 Participants agreed that Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service's officers should be required to identify further efficiencies, providing they are relevant and that public and firefighter safety is not compromised in any way:

They should always look at efficiency savings providing the service is not compromised...efficiency savings will benefit the service

Better to work under some pressure rather than be complacent about funding

We think that the officers should be as efficient as possible without reducing the service

It's good to increase efficiency at all stages...

The £150,000 is a reasonable target

We should not look at efficiency savings as a necessary evil...providing services can be maintained

Only one sub-group at Shrewsbury disagreed with the above. Participants in this group desired as few further efficiencies as possible, believing that *you cannot pare [the service] away to nothing...*

Service developments for 2009/10

- 3.3.22 The overwhelming majority of participants agreed with the proposed Service Developments for 2009/10 – particularly the £107,000 kick start of the Retained Development Project:

Good idea

Improvements to the Retained service are clearly cost effective

It's in people's interests

We all agree that this is acceptable as a good long-term investment

- 3.3.23 One sub-group at Ludlow was of the view that SWFA should *monitor this carefully on the basis of this pilot scheme.*

Investment levels

- 3.3.24 Participants at both forums agreed that the proposed investment levels are satisfactory to maintain an effective service - particularly given the current economic climate and the potential for future grant reductions:

Plans seem about right for the time being given the economic climate

We have been convinced that spending less money would mean a poorer service and in the current climate spending more would seem irresponsible

The grant might be reduced in future so the 3.9% is a good holding position

3.4 OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

- 3.4.1 It is encouraging to note that all participants actively engaged with the consultation process, carefully deliberated the issues under scrutiny, and provided SWFA and SFRS with considerable feedback on its Integrated Risk Management Planning and its Budget Strategy for forthcoming years.
- 3.4.2 SWFA's progress and vision in respect of Integrated Risk Management Planning was generally uncontroversial and welcomed by participants. The groups were very satisfied with the Authority's achievements thus far (particularly the focus on improving services to Shropshire's most rural communities and enhancing the role of RDS staff) and endorsed the new priorities put forward by officers at the sessions.
- 3.4.3 In regard to the budget strategy, participants expressed general concerns about the current economic climate but ultimately supported a 3.9% Council Tax rise to fund the SWFA. The Authority was unanimously thought to exercise fiscal prudence and provide value for money, and panellists were pleased that its finances are being spent and managed in the correct way.
- 3.4.4 In all, the two sessions worked well in stimulating debate and it is hoped that the feedback received proves useful to SWFA and SFRS in finding a way forward and in attempting to improve the provision received by the communities it serves.