



Surrey Fire & Rescue Service Community Survey

Focus Group Discussions Headline Findings - June 2023



1 Introduction

As part of preparations for Surrey Fire and Rescue Service's (SFRS) Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) a series of consultation and engagement activities have been conducted. The first phase of these centred around an online survey hosted on Surrey County Council's (SCC) questionnaire platform between 4th January 2023 to 14th February 2023.

A second phase commenced between 26th April 2023 and 7th June 2023 and consisted of five focus group discussions conducted online. The aim of these discussions was to obtain greater insight into SFRS's three areas of work (Prevention, Protection and Response) as well as into SFRS's five key priority incident types (Building Fires, Floods, Water Rescue, Road Traffic Collision, and Wildfire).

Whilst the first phase was quantitative in orientation (e.g., an online survey designed, in the main, around responses via pre-selected tick boxes) the second phase was more qualitative in orientation. This allowed for greater detail by using respondents' own words alongside more in-depth insight obtained from interactions between individuals whilst they discussed SFRS's three areas of work, and five priority incident types, using their shared experiences.

This report's main objective is to provide an overview of how the focus group discussions were conducted as well as to provide a preliminary 'headline' account of the basic findings.

2 Methods of Engagement

The five focus group discussions were conducted online, and in the evenings, to increase the chances of participation by allowing for respondents' daytime schedules. Members for each group were selected according to specific demographic criteria (detailed below) to allow for any unique differences of insight to emerge. The only fixed selection criteria applied across all groups was that each individual had to live and/or work in the Surrey County Council area, thus enabling shared experiences to be discussed by group members that were relevant to the SFRS geographical area of operation.

Focus Group 1: Phase One Survey Respondents (4 members)

Focus Group 2: Phase One Survey Respondents (3 members)

Focus Group 3: Rarely Heard Populations ~ Different Ethnic Minority Groups¹ (3 members)

Focus Group 4: Rarely Heard Populations ~ Young People (3 members)

Focus Group 5: Booster Session ~ Young People (1-2 members²)

Each discussion was hosted by members of the SCC Research Team and SFRS Engagement Team.

¹ Category terminology follows Office for National Statistics guidance (<https://style.ons.gov.uk/house-style/race-and-ethnicity/>).

² The final group discussion was added to 'boost' numbers of overall members to the group discussions. Please note: the group started with 2 members, however, one of the group members dropped out of the discussion due to ICT issues.

To ensure consistency across focus group discussions, and with the previous online survey, a structured discussion guide was employed that included subjects to cover (arranged by components) and cues to facilitate discussion amongst group members.

The discussion guide's five components included: first, an opportunity for members to introduce themselves and to describe their connection with Surrey. Second, an 'icebreaker' employing a word association activity that employed key words relevant to SFRS's area of work and the overall research (e.g., fire, water). Third, a component that asked group members about their personal experience of SFRS work and asked them to reflect on which of SFRS's three areas of work (Prevention, Protection, and Response) was most important. The fourth component discussed SFRS's five priority incident types in terms of levels of concern, and a final fifth component was an open opportunity for any additional comments, thoughts, and feedback.

The group discussions were planned to run for 90 minutes, were recorded, and automatically transcribed using MS Teams (SCC organisational license), and informed consent was obtained from all respondents before recording commenced to satisfy research ethics requirements.

Recruitment to each of the focus group discussions proved to be problematic. Each group was originally planned for between 10-15 members (over recruited to anticipate members dropping out), however, in practice much lower attendance numbers were encountered. Research methodologists recommend an ideal number of eight members for group discussions where, for these discussions, the average count across all groups was three members. Although participation rates fell below recommended thresholds there were nonetheless useful insights obtained relevant to SFRS's CRMP.

3 Method of Analysis

To draw out findings from the discussion data, transcriptions from each focus group were reviewed using basic thematic analysis. This involved a member of the Research Team reading through the data (the focus group discussion transcriptions), organising these data into clusters, and then identifying patterns in meaning within each of the focus group's discussions as well as across all five of the focus groups.

Preliminary 'headline' findings are presented below and are set around relevant components of the discussion guide.

4 Findings

Preliminary headline findings are detailed below, as mentioned above, arranged according to the relevant components of the discussion guide. This is followed by a short summary of observations related to convergent and divergent patterns of insight across the five focus groups.

4.1 Experience of SFRS and its 3 x Work Areas (Prevention, Protection, Response)

Snapshots from across the five groups include the following:

- **Group 1** discussed their experience of SFRS via initiatives to prevent or mitigate building fires through fire evacuation plans, and use of alarms related to electrical appliances. Related to sources of information, members of this group referred to media coverage of

'fires on the commons' last year (ca. 2022) and also referred to SFRS staff as synonymous with other branches of the emergency services (e.g., Police, Ambulance Service) related to communications.

- **Group 2** talked about perceptions of the work conducted by SFRS related to rescuing people from road traffic accidents as well as lower emergency work such as rescuing cats from trees. There was discussion around specific contexts that including rescue in gravel pits and different water environments. There was also mention of funding and pay disputes with one member expressing empathy for the SFRS firefighters. Sources of knowledge included social media and chance encounters in public where SFRS staff were viewed in the same way as Police Officers – i.e., an “at distance” uniformed service. There was no consensus related to prioritizing the SFRS areas of work with some members believing response was important and others believing enforcement of building fire safety standards (vis-à-vis Prevention and Protection) was more important.
- **Group 3** discussed, and reported amongst themselves, that they had limited contact or experience of the SFRS or the work that they performed. There was little to no awareness of SFRS’s three areas of work (Prevention, Protection, Response). Despite this group’s experience of the services that SFRS provides being limited to general knowledge, social media, chance encounters in public, and news reporting, they felt positive towards SFRS. The importance of rules and regulations were discussed as well as procedures where one member reported frustration at how their landlord’s fire alarm drills lacked coherent communications, for example, their not knowing whether a fire drill was a drill or an actual fire. As with Group 2, there was no consensus around which of the SFRS areas of work was more important.
- **Group 4**’s discussions centred around their understanding of SFRS’s role in fighting fires and rescuing people in situations such as road traffic accidents. The idea that SFRS were involved in activities related to water (Flood, Water Rescue) appeared to be a revelation. One member re-told a story related to their friend who had experienced a fire in their home and, on the whole, this group member reported their friends good experience (though later raised concerns over an absence of follow-up and what happens after a fire). Across this group there was discussion around how SFRS had visited their schools with one member being able to still repeat the drills (e.g., “stop, drop and roll”) and the other two members recalling SFRS workshops and information events. Prioritization of SFRS’s three areas of work was discussed as a challenge as – for some group members – Prevention and Protection seemed very similar, and the area related to Response was slightly emotionally charged in the sense of being rescued from danger. One member had worked with a Fire Service and believed that Protection was important in terms of equipment installed being in buildings and associated regulations. However, as with the other groups, there was no consensus or agreement as to whether one of these areas was more important than the others.
- **Group 5** – the smallest of the groups – discussed sources of information about SFRS stemming from school with both members of the group reporting that their knowledge and experience was primarily obtained in this setting. One group member did reveal that they’d met a fire crew in the Guildford area and also had attended training as part of volunteering. For this group member Prevention was the most important SFRS work area as they believed it helped stop fires from starting in the first place. This group also

believed that “Protection” meant how to keep safe in a building that had caught fire and were not aware of other functions within this area of work.

4.2 Concern Related to SFRS’s Five Key Priority Incident Types

This part of the focus group discussions produced the most data and given the scope of this report – preliminary headline findings – the following brief snap shots are provided. One important note is that across the five key priority incident types there was not one that stood out as a clear cause of concern, but, more that each had different qualities that produced different types of concern.

4.2.1 Building Fire

- Design of a building raised as a concern – both interior (electrics) and exterior (cladding) discussed as relevant.
- Variety of different buildings also a factor causing concern in Surrey, ranging from country barns, high rise accommodation blocks, retail premises, factories, etc.
- The height of buildings, and the increase of high rise ‘skyscrapers’ in some parts of Surrey, caused alarm for many group members.
- The perceived lack of personal control in a building fire, and how to escape, was also a cause for worry amongst some members of the focus groups.
- The 2017 Grenfell Tower Fire incident was referenced on multiple occasions.
- Use of equipment and knowledge of fire procedures were perceived as interventions that instilled confidence and went some way to allay fears of building fires.

4.2.2 Flood

- Discussions were diverse on this SFRS key priority incident type with some groups believing flooding was not a serious concern and other groups being very concerned about the risks posed by flooding.
- Different types of equipment were discussed in relation to responding to flooding (e.g., pumps, inflatable boats) and different ways of mitigating flood risks were also discussed with specific examples referenced related to managing the course of rivers in areas such as Epsom.
- Climate change was mentioned in discussions as a cause for flooding alongside future prospects where it was believed that this could increase as a risk.
- “Time” was a divergent theme across group discussions with one group member expressing concern around how fast an emergency – and death – could arise in a flood (e.g., risk of drowning). Whilst other members thought floods were a slow event that could be controlled with escape made possible by swimming to safety.
- An interesting theme across groups was a concern and recognition of the secondary effects of flooding, including the risk of disease related to flooding (e.g., natural and/or artificial pollutants), risk of car accidents due to roads becoming damaged, and the risk of societal distress through consequences such as homelessness.

4.2.3 Traffic Accident Rescue

- A consistent theme across groups was concern related to risks associated with the variety of roads within the Surrey County area. Many members discussed how the presence of small country roads coupled with major motorways, and roads sizes in

between (e.g., fast A roads) made the risk of car accidents high thus elevating this as an important SFRS key priority incident type.

- Members across groups discussed a number of variables that were relevant to risks of car accident and need for SFRS rescue. This included driver experience and education, the condition of roads in Surrey (e.g., presence of potholes a particular concern), and how conditions were likely to worsen in the future.
- Worsening road conditions were linked – in discussions – to factors such as climate change (e.g., an increase in temperatures effecting tarmac), weight of traffic, and an absence of public transport leading to increased car usage.
- Focus group members recognised that travel by car was high risk, with one member reporting it was their highest risk everyday activity, and that when a car collision occurred the rescue attempts could be frustrated by complexity (e.g., different factors including vehicle type, presence of spilled chemicals, type of road).
- Driving speeds were a factor discussed in relation to traffic accident rescue and how urban speed restrictions, and mixing traffic with other road users (cyclists and pedestrians), could lead to higher risks – Epsom was discussed as an example.

4.2.4 Water Rescue

- Education was seen as a key aspect to water rescue at different levels. At one level, group members discussed the importance of skills such as swimming but also about water safety in different aquatic contexts (rivers, vs. gravel pits, vs. lakes). On another level there was discussion around ‘foolhardy’ behaviours and how education on how not to drink alcohol around water environments was important as an educational topic.
- Climate change emerged as a latent theme based on several group members recalling the high number of waterborne deaths during the previous year’s summer. This was attributed to weather becoming warmer in recent years – and potentially in future years – due to climate change, accompanied by more people interacting with water environments.
- Several groups were not aware of the different types of water rescue that SFRS performs and, on prompting (e.g., ice related rescue), this was discussed as an important element of water rescue, however, this lack of awareness also extended to the groups not being familiar with the different types of bodies of water in Surrey.

4.2.4 Wildfires

- All but one group discussed the role of climate change in risks associated with wildfires. Some members referred to examples outside of the UK where warmer climates, becoming hotter – such as in Spain and California – was viewed as a possible example of what might happen in Surrey. Other members made reference to the previous year’s heatwave as a concern in connection to wildfires in Surrey.
- The scale of wildfires was another theme discussed across the focus groups where concern over the uncontrolled nature of a wildfire – and its size – meant that it would take a lot of SFRS resources to control. A secondary consequence was discussed around how the scale of wildfires, and the necessary scale of the SFRS response, would lead to other areas across Surrey becoming vulnerable due to a lack of availability of SFRS fire crews.
- Proximity was another theme emerging from the group discussions – some group members lived close to forested areas in Surrey and reported that they lost sleep

over the concern of a wildfire occurring at night. However, in other group discussions, members who did not live near forested areas (e.g., more urban locales) felt that wildfires were not such a concern. This being applicable even in one group where it was recognised that Surrey is the most heavily wooded county in the UK.

- Alternative measures to tackle wildfires were also discussed in two groups with reference made to fire watches, using sniffer dogs to identify areas at risk of wildfire, and approaches taken by Native Americans in California related to allowing certain fires to burn themselves out.

4.3 Additional Thoughts and Comments

Three snapshots from across the five groups include the following:

- One group discussed the role of analysis to control for different fire risks and referenced how much useful information was available on the SFRS website that they had not been aware of.
- Another group discussed concerns over fire emergency ‘aftercare’ in the context of helping fire victims with possible PTSD, issues such as homelessness and home insurances, and how it was not easy to distinguish SFRS’s role in these areas.
- The final group discussed how SFRS communications could be improved as they believed the service was almost ‘invisible’ within their community.

4.4 Patterns of Insight Across/Between Focus Groups

Focus groups 1 and 2 differed from the other groups – these groups’ members reported that they had lived in the Surrey area for longer periods of time (ca. 10-20 years+), presented as more established in professional status reporting employment in senior positions within private and public sectors, and were more likely homeowners.

Patterns of insight unique to this group included more references to either direct, or indirect, involvement with the SFRS teams (e.g., neighbours’ experience of fire in the home), a greater awareness of organisations and authorities with overlapping responsibility with SFRS (e.g., the role of water authorities in relation to the SFRS key priority incident types “Flood”, and “Water Rescue”), with these members introducing an international perspective through members having worked outside of the UK (e.g., comparisons between SFRS and the roles and responsibilities of Fire Rescue Crews in the US).

On initial analysis, focus groups 1 and 2 appeared more cognisant of concerns and risks associated with “Flood” and “Water Rescue”, as well as “Wildfires” (relevant to SFRS’s five key priority incident types).

Focus groups 3, 4 and 5 differed from the first two groups in respect to the period of residence in Surrey with most of these groups’ members reporting an association with Surrey solely by student status (e.g., studying at University of Surrey / living at halls of residence). These groups’ members presented as being in more of a professional-career building phase of their working life with many members reporting a student status, junior roles, part-time work, or unemployed status, and – subsequently – were less likely homeowners.

Patterns of insight unique to this group included less direct experience of the SFRS teams in Surrey with awareness limited to high street ‘drive by’ moments (e.g., a fire engine driving

past members en route to an incident), learning activities in an educational setting (ranging from primary school to university level), or non-SFRS organisational health and safety briefings and training (e.g., via Scouts or university halls of residence management).

On initial analysis, and unique to these groups, there appeared to be a greater awareness of the role of the climate crisis, the impact of wildfires on wildlife and non-human species (especially Group 3), and the impact that technology had on increasing risks to Road Traffic Accidents and Rescue (e.g., the unique fire risk challenges presented by electric vehicles in a road traffic accident situation, and increased risk of fire presented by societal increase in electrical devices from mobile phones to electric scooters – Groups 3 and 4).

Groups 3, 4 and 5 appeared less concerned by the SFRS key priority incident types “Flood”, “Water Rescue”, or “Wildfire” as they reported Surrey did not have a significant presence of water features alongside an absence of direct experience. This was a key departure from focus groups 1 and 2 which, on reflection, might have arisen due to lower familiarity with Surrey with members of focus groups 3, 4 and 5 having lived in the county for less years and in fewer locations.

Patterns of convergent insight for the focus groups centred around SFRS communications with all five focus groups discussing how knowledge and awareness of SFRS services was limited. Group members were either reliant upon ‘homework’ prior to the group discussion (Group 1) or dependent on memories from primary school (Group 4). Another point of agreement in the focus groups centred around the SFRS first area of work “Prevention” with many members across groups agreeing that Surrey’s residents had a responsibility to (i) be aware of accident risks related to fire / rescue from water / road traffic accident risks / wildfires, and (ii) to behave in a way that did not increase risks (e.g., to behave in a responsible manner). However, linked with this, across the group discussions there was a moderate consensus that some of SFRS key priority incident types were less ‘solve-able’ with “Prevention” (via education) as these were either unforeseen or “acts of nature”, particularly with “Flood” and “Wildfire”.

5 Next Steps

This report represents a preliminary reporting of headline findings from the five focus group discussions based on the data that these research activities produced.

However, given that the data – in the form of focus group transcriptions (from ca. 7 hours of discussion) – totalled approximately 383 pages containing, in the region of, 92,000 words (all utterances included), further analysis is possible.

Dependent on resources, this can take the form of the following steps:

- Consolidation of transcriptions, recordings, and SCC Research / SFRS Engagement Team facilitator notes.
- Facilitators’ review of focus group notes to compare, contrast themes with the aim of enhancing thematic analysis.
- Use of illustrative quotations from focus group members and visualization (e.g., word clouds – dependent upon the suitability of data).