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FIRE SERVICE EMERGENCY COVER: A REVIEW OF STAKEHOLDER ATTITUDES

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of FSEC is to provide protection to the public against the hazard of fire, given that a fire has occurred, whilst at the same time making provision for those other types of incident to which the Fire Service is expected to respond. The whole approach to risk assessment based FSEC needed extensive evaluation in a series of 'Pathfinder' trials, before it could be adopted nationally. One clear conclusion from these trials was that brigades might encounter resistance to any such changes, unless sufficient resources were committed to planning and undertaking appropriate consultation with the Fire Service's stakeholders. Market researchers MVA Ltd were tasked to develop a Toolbox of guidance on how this should be done.

As the first stage, a number of workshops and interviews were held with Pathfinder brigade managers, staff and union representatives. The aim of this stage was to engage in discussion with staff from different levels and types of job within the fire service to understand the views of people with varying degrees of experience of Pathfinder, to explore issues of communication, to understand what experience and resources might be available to brigades and to identify relevant stakeholders.

The second stage involved a series of focus groups held with members of the public and other selected stakeholders. Representatives came from London, Reading, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Hartlepool and Hamilton. The aim of these focus groups was to explore the participants' understanding of the fire service and their attitudes to risk and communications issues.

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Summary

Background

In its report 'In the Line of Fire', the Audit Commission drew attention to inadequacies it perceived in existing arrangements for the planning and provision of Fire Service Emergency Cover (FSEC). The purpose of FSEC is to provide protection to the public against the hazard of fire, given that a fire has occurred, whilst at the same time making provision for those other types of incident to which the Fire Service is expected to respond.

The whole approach to risk assessment based FSEC needed extensive evaluation before it could be adopted nationally. This was undertaken by a range of brigades in a series of 'Pathfinder' trials, to ensure that likely problems were encountered before any decision is taken on whether to proceed.

One clear conclusion from these trials was that brigades might encounter resistance to any such changes, unless sufficient resources were committed to planning and undertaking appropriate consultation with the Fire Service's stakeholders. As a first stage, market researchers MVA Ltd were tasked to develop a Toolbox of guidance on how this should be done.

As the first stage in the development of the Fire Service Emergency Cover Toolbox, a number of workshops and interviews were held with Pathfinder managers, staff and union representatives. They were drawn from several areas: Cleveland, Tyne & Wear, North Yorkshire, Strathclyde, Lothian & Borders, London, Oxfordshire and South Wales. The aim of this stage was to engage in discussion with staff from different levels and types of job within the fire service to understand the views of people with varying degrees of experience of Pathfinder, to explore issues of communication, to understand what experience and resources might be available to brigades and to identify relevant stakeholders.

The second part of the development of the FSEC review toolbox was a series of focus groups held with members of the public and other selected stakeholders. Representatives came from London, Reading, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Hartlepool and Hamilton. The aim of these focus groups was to explore the participants' understanding of the fire service and their attitudes to risk and communications issues.

Initial findings were also discussed with a member of HMFSI. On his recommendation, we held a workshop with a brigade that, in the view of HMFSI, has good internal communications. We chose West Midlands.

The discussions took place in the late spring and summer of 2002. This summary reflects the views of the various people who took part in the workshops and focus groups. It is encouraging that there was considerable consistency between the views of the different audiences, and this has been shown in the report at the risk of including some repetition.

It is possible that the views of the public will have changed as a result of the considerable publicity surrounding the firefighters' pay dispute and the publication of the Bain report. It will be advisable to update the research with members of the public once these issues have been resolved. In our view it will not be so necessary to update the work with staff, managers and other stakeholders.

Attitudes to Pathfinder

Those who had been involved in Pathfinder were convinced of the merits of the process. However, they thought that the task of communicating it to others would be difficult, and one that they were not sufficiently trained or resourced to undertake.

Pathfinder managers were generally supportive of the FSEC review process. However, their level of enthusiasm depended on their experience of the process, which in turn had been influenced by the resources that had been devoted to it within their brigade.

There was some concern that the Pathfinder process had taken longer than had been expected. For some, the fact that the FSEC review would take a long time and be developmental in nature only became fully apparent once the Pathfinder process had begun.

Communicating the FSEC Review Process

Local politicians should understand the basic principles of the FSEC review and the potential impact that it will have on their communities. Local government officers should be briefed before members so that they are able to respond to any questions the latter direct to them.

The Pathfinder managers also felt that it was important that their local initiatives should have the backing of a national campaign at some stage. They appeared unaware of the work that is already being done at national level. They also suggested that there should be some kind of official launch.

The biggest barrier with the FSEC review process is the difficulty of communicating a complex and evolving programme in an understandable way. Since fire-cover is an emotive issue, people will be initially suspicious of any changes. Brigades also found it difficult to explain the complexities of the process, particularly the concept of strategic cover and the way in which risk is calculated, in a simple manner.

Pathfinder managers believed that those responsible for implementing the FSEC review must be given the confidence that the difficulties suggested in the previous two paragraphs can be overcome. In particular, it has been noted that increasing familiarity with Pathfinder has led to greater acceptance of the process and this is likely to continue as the FSEC review is implemented. Greater understanding of how and why the FSEC review is being done will reduce initial suspicions and misunderstandings.

Internal Communications

The quality and effectiveness of internal communications varied from brigade to brigade. In many, managers felt that the growing pressures that they were experiencing were increasingly distancing them from front-line staff. The personal touch was disappearing because they had less time to visit the stations, and this was creating a void between staff and management. Managers believe front-line staff 'misunderstand' the roles of managers, and the responsibilities and pressures they have. These perceptions were mirrored in the attitudes of staff and their union representatives who also reported difficulties with communication and mistrust of the motives of managers. It was noticeable in many of the other stakeholder focus groups that internal communications were viewed as a problem within the fire service. HMFSI noted instances of poor communications in some brigades but have also found many examples of good internal communications. Some brigades had overcome previous communications problems and are now communicating very effectively with staff.

Union representatives felt improved communication would be a vital part in explaining the process to staff and gaining their support. At present, representatives were distrustful of management and they linked this to problems in communication. Passing information down the hierarchy is ineffective and likely to lead to a lack of consistent messages. More direct forms of internal communication must be used.

The managers believed that the staff would be suspicious of the process, and see it as threatening a reduction in jobs and closure of fire stations. Discussions with staff and

union representatives partly confirmed this. Those brigades that had embarked on early discussions with staff found that it helped to ensure co-operation.

It is not possible to foresee the outcome of the review, so the exact effects on firefighters will not be known for some time. Unions will reserve judgement until they see the outcome but if their support for the process in principal can be secured early on, it will have very beneficial results. The changing emphasis on life, property and other risks, and the explicit recognition of special services are all positive features of the FSEC review that will build support for it among staff.

It is vital to get the acceptance of staff before starting to talk to other audiences such as the public and other stakeholders. Without the support of staff, it will be very difficult to achieve the support of the public and other stakeholders. The public, in particular, has an enormous trust in fire fighters. Therefore, if the fire fighters can sell the process to these audiences on the basis that it would improve the service, then they would believe it. Conversely, if staff say that changes are being imposed by management, and these changes are detrimental to the service, then there would be public opposition to change. The FBU, and other unions to a lesser extent, is an important audience as they have a very great influence on staff attitudes.

Positive Messages

The support for the FSEC review process amongst those who have gained an understanding of it indicates that there are many positive messages that can be communicated. Stakeholders, including members of the public and staff, will be more inclined to support the process if they understand how risks to life and property and other risks are being explicitly addressed.

When communicating with stakeholder groups, there should be an emphasis on community fire safety coupled with reassurance that operational response to incidents will be maintained. It is fundamental to convince all audiences that response to emergencies will be retained but organised in a different and more flexible way appropriate for modern circumstances. Other positive messages could be taken to the business communities, such as the fire service's role in damage control and maintaining business continuity.

At the same time, it is important to convey the message that lives can be saved through various forms of preventative work. There should be a strong emphasis on statutory and community fire safety, as well as on working with the construction industries to improve building design and procedures. In particular, it will be important to show that extra resources and effort will be put into reducing the risk of fire, and how this will reduce deaths, injuries and damage. This must be done without implying that what the fire service had previously been doing was wrong.

Informing Fire Service Staff

Fire service staff would like to be provided with as much relevant information as possible, although there is a need to avoid an 'information overload' making it difficult to identify what is relevant. Although there are many communication channels that exist, it is very important that the communication with staff should be a two-way process, enabling them to raise issues of concern and put their views direct to senior management. Fundamentally, staff would like the reappearance of the 'human touch' into the communication - they want information from an individual, not a piece of paper, a video or an email. Other media, e.g. a video about the changes, could be used to back up face-to-face consultation. We found several examples within brigades of good practice at communicating face to face and providing feedback.

The experience of the managers was that a two-hour presentation to staff was barely enough time to explain Pathfinder and answer questions. There are already established

means of communication within the fire service that could be used to promote the FSEC review, which could be used in support of face to face discussions.

At present, brigades felt that they do not have sufficient resources to cope with a major consultation process. With some exceptions, they suggested that their public relations departments were not big enough to cope with the level of support that would be required. Managers felt that they had neither the appropriate skills nor the expertise to carry forward a consultation.

The FSEC review is seen as bringing a fundamental change to the role of the firefighter. With a greater emphasis on fire prevention, their work is moving outside the often insular fire station into the wider community. Problems arising in this area will therefore make staff more cynical about the FSEC review process. Staff and managers considered that they would need a great deal of support to help them in this transition. The changes that Community Fire Safety and the FSEC review will bring to the nature of the firefighters' job will have repercussions for recruitment to the fire service and staff training.

Those who had not been involved in the Pathfinder process knew little about it, and many felt that they had not been consulted about it. To extent that they understood it, staff supported the changes in risk assessment and particularly the greater emphasis on risk to life. However, the operation and potential impact of the process was unclear to them. It is therefore important that managers keep staff fully informed about the process to avoid the proliferation of potentially damaging rumours and speculation.

In general, support staff had very limited awareness of Pathfinder and felt that it did not have anything to do with them since it is concerned with fire cover and any effect on their work practices will be small.

Overcoming Barriers to Change

The culture of the service itself presents a barrier to the acceptance of change. Firefighters work for the majority of their time in the same small group and are mainly interested only in what affects their immediate environment. The 'old' public service culture of an unchanging job for life is still in existence across many parts of the service, although there are many areas of rapid change and reorganisation. The service is characterised by strong team loyalties, reinforced by a generally insular environment based on tradition and hierarchy. Change, sometimes substantial change, has occurred but often against opposition. The challenge is to work with, not against, the culture of the organisation.

Staff draw a distinction between the process, which they generally support, and the outcomes, of which they remain suspicious. Front line staff are generally suspicious of the FSEC review, believing that the motives of the management are to save money and cut jobs. A considerable degree of distrust of management exists, and it is affecting morale.

With the changes in the role of the firefighter, staff and unions need to be reassured that the FSEC review will not be simply a cost cutting exercise. The communications strategy must take note of their perceptions and respond to them but must do so honestly. If the messages are perceived to be at odds with the reality then mistrust will be reinforced and the whole communications process called into question. It would be seen as an exercise in deception and dissimulation.

Part of working with the culture of the fire service will involve bringing unions into the consultation and communication process. Unions have significant influence over their members and if union representatives were in favour of the FSEC review, staff would be much less suspicious. Unions will primarily represent the interests of their members, but

could also be a valuable communication channel if they are convinced of the benefits of the process.

Unions had been sceptical and suspicious of Pathfinder at first, but the more they learnt, the more they realised its benefits. They supported the principles, particularly the changes in the risk assessment to reflect an emphasis on life rather than property. They also supported taking special services into account and the inclusion of staff safety issues. However, they would be concerned about reductions in the size of the fire service establishment and redistribution or relocation of resources and appliances. Representatives were distrustful of the management motives but acknowledged that the style of management had improved over the last few years.

If there was no attempt to make cuts as a result of the FSEC review, and perhaps even some increase in cover, then the unions would be happy to assist in communicating the message to the staff and the public. However, if the process were used differently then unions would argue the other side and would be confident of the support of the public. Endorsement of the process by unions would strongly help to bring staff on board and in turn the various wider stakeholder audiences.

The Views of the Public

In general, members of the public have little or no direct experience of the fire service and little knowledge or understanding of the demands on firefighters' time. People trusted the fire service to save them in an emergency, and feel safe just knowing that it exists.

There was a major interest in community fire safety. It gave the public reassurance that they would know what to do to help themselves in the case of a fire; it reduced the risk of fires starting and minimised their impact if they did start. Its role in reducing risk therefore needs to be described as part of any communications strategy.

People had no idea how the service assesses risk but they accepted that the nature and extent of risk had changed over time. There was some ambivalence about the current practice when it was explained. Whilst some felt it was pointless to remove the present system because it had proved to be successful, in general, it was agreed that the fire service needed to bring its system of risk assessment up to date. Too great an emphasis on the current risk assessment in communications material might induce some concern if people perceive that residential areas are not nearer the top of the risk assessment in the present system. Conversely, some stakeholders thought that they would understand and appreciate the changes more if communications started by stating the current position.

People could see the logic in the approach adopted in the FSEC review and were cautiously in favour of it. The caution was because it was such a complicated process that they could not comment on the technical aspects. The FSEC review would be accepted if it were done by the fire service itself and not by some outside agency. They trust the fire service to decide on future service requirements without reducing services, cutting corners and attempting to reduce public expenditure. Communication would be more acceptable if it came direct from a member of the local fire service rather than a local politician or MP.

If the local brigade does the review themselves and explains that changes are not because of past inadequacies but to bring cover in line with today's needs, then there is a good chance of gaining the public's acceptance. However, they must commit themselves to responding to emergencies without compromising what was there before.

It will be important for the fire service to decide whether they are 'informing' the public of the outcome or 'consulting' them on possible changes. Consultations were seen as positive because it would allow stakeholders to voice their opinion before anything was finalised. Many felt that there should be local meetings to consult people about any possible changes that might take place. These would avoid accusations of secrecy, but experience showed

that such meetings are seldom well attended. However, community fire safety has allowed the fire service to communicate successfully with people on a local level, and they could use this relationship to aid the FSEC review.

Because the public trusts the fire service more than anyone else, most felt that they would want to hear about changes from people within the service. Face-to-face contact could be very important in some areas when explaining any changes to the public – if the brigade supported the changes, the public would not see the changes as cutbacks. This might provide another justification for a consultation meeting. In areas where consultation is less necessary, members of the public thought that a simple leaflet, advertising a contact number for additional information, would be the most useful way to inform people of changes.

It is important for effective consultation and communications that any review does not lead to an overall reduction in service. A reallocation of services to higher risk areas will be more acceptable and it will be easier to secure general support for it. Many felt that if any of their local fire resources were relocated to alternative fire stations their safety would be compromised. However well the scheme is explained to the public, there will still be opposition from those who feel the level of cover provided in their area is being reduced.

Both the public and other stakeholders thought that public confidence would have to be rebuilt in areas that had reduced cover. A practical demonstration that the fire service would still arrive on time might be necessary.

Other Stakeholders

Many stakeholders have a much greater technical understanding of the issues than do members of the general public but few have knowledge of how funds and resources are allocated within the fire service. Stakeholders generally felt that the method of risk assessment has to be updated to bring it into line with current conditions.

Stakeholders who had been involved with the fire service for many years could see how the service had changed over time. They thought the public's expectations of the fire service, and what it could provide, has constantly grown over the years. Many saw the priorities of the fire service shifting from fighting fires to preventing them. For them, change and development is normal.

Some stakeholders thought that the risk assessments within organisations, and associated codes and practices, were much tougher these days. The risk assessment procedure within businesses could therefore be a way of communicating the FSEC review to the local industries and other local stakeholders.

Different stakeholders had different concerns. Local Authorities felt that changes in the risk assessment would have a major impact on the council and there were many issues for which they would have to prepare. The council has responsibility for the wellbeing of the community. It was believed that the more senior members of the council would certainly raise funding concerns. Many stakeholders will find it difficult to accept that any changes will be in order to create a modern service rather than leading to cutbacks. Their experience of new schemes is that they are generally introduced to reduce costs, rather than increase national spending, and therefore there will be scepticism to overcome. These concerns will have to be addressed.

In relation to who should persuade the public, many of the stakeholders felt that this should come directly from the fire service, the management, chief officers and the brigade staff, and not from the local politicians. The media could also be difficult to work with, both locally or nationally. The use of leaflets to communicate these changes to the stakeholders was seen as secondary to other methods.

The problem with consulting businesses was that the issue of money would always be raised - what is the additional cost to the business? There are also implications for business insurance costs.

Whatever technique is used to promote the FSEC review, the stakeholders suggested a customer service model for communications with publicity focusing on the positive aspects, i.e. how will the service be better for being modernised. Others proposed some sort of partnership approach integrating the various emergency services and the local authorities.

Conclusion

This study has identified many pointers on how various stakeholders might be expected to view the introduction of the proposed new Fire Service Emergency Cover planning process. It also suggests where brigades may need guidance and support if they are to convince these stakeholders that the positive aspects of the process outweigh those aspects, which they might consider less desirable. Work will now commence on developing this guidance, identifying what information needs to be conveyed when and to whom, and suggesting ways in which this could be done.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

- 1.1.1 In its report 'In the Line of Fire', the Audit Commission drew attention to inadequacies it perceived in existing arrangements for the planning and provision of Fire Service Emergency Cover (FSEC).
- 1.1.2 The purpose of FSEC is to provide protection to the public against the hazard of fire, given that a fire has occurred, whilst at the same time making provision for those other types of incident to which the Fire Service is expected to respond. This is achieved by first estimating the likelihood of an incident occurring in a given location and its severity by the time of arrival of the first attendance, and then providing the type and weight of intervention likely to be required.
- 1.1.3 A series of risk assessment 'toolkits' has been developed, together with a technique for response planning, giving brigades more flexibility in how they achieve the FSEC standards. A brigade's performance will be assessed on its ability to hold risk below nationally prescribed limits, and to drive down risk where it is possible to do so without incurring disproportionate costs.
- 1.1.4 The whole approach to risk assessment based FSEC needed extensive evaluation before it could be adopted nationally. This was undertaken by a range of brigades in a series of 'Pathfinder' trials, to ensure that likely problems were encountered before any decision is taken on whether to proceed.
- 1.1.5 Implementation of the proposed new FSEC process may result in very little being changed but, equally, it could result in changes in the locations of fire appliances and in the crewing patterns required for them.
- 1.1.6 One clear conclusion from these trials was that brigades might encounter resistance to any such changes, unless sufficient resources were committed to planning and undertaking appropriate consultation with the Fire Service's stakeholders. As a first stage, market researchers MVA Ltd were tasked to develop a Toolbox of guidance on how this should be done.
- 1.1.7 The research was carried out in order to develop a greater understanding of people's perceptions on the fire service as well as inform the development of guidance on the implementation of the FSEC. Focus groups were held with members of management, staff, unions, the general public and other stakeholders during the late spring and summer of 2002.
- 1.1.8 The following chapters describe the views of the various people who attended the focus groups. In each chapter, we summarise such consensus that emerged although not everyone would share all of these views. We have also set out any important differences in view. It is encouraging that there is considerable consistency between the views of the different audiences we spoke to, and we show this in the report, at the risk of including some repetition.

1.2 Structure of this Report

- 1.2.1 Chapter two describes the focus groups held with management, chapter three explores the focus groups held with the staff, and chapter four the focus groups held with union representatives. Chapter five presents the responses from the focus groups held with the public in Reading, Edinburgh, London and Strathclyde. Chapter six focuses on the responses of the focus groups with other local stakeholders held in Newcastle, Cleveland and Strathclyde. The final chapter, chapter seven, draws on some of the concluding ideas from all of the focus groups, highlighting any consistent similarities and differences.

1.2.2 Quotations from people who attended the workshops and focus groups are shown in this report in quotation marks and italics, although they are not attributed to individuals in order to preserve the confidentiality that was promised to participants.

2 Pathfinder Managers

2.1 Introduction

2.1.1 Workshops were held with managers from several Pathfinder brigades; London, Edinburgh, Cleveland, South Wales, Strathclyde, Tyne and Wear, North Yorkshire, Lothian and Borders. Attendees came from a variety of backgrounds including planning and operational roles and human resources, amongst others.

2.1.2 Topics covered were:

- What messages should brigades communicate to their various audiences, including employees, unions and other local stakeholders;
- To what extent should the messages focus on risk, community safety, targeting of resources, pro- and re-active services;
- How should messages about risk, safety, resources and operations be best expressed;
- How and when should messages be communicated to employees, unions and other stakeholders;
- What support needs will brigades have.

2.2 Managers' Experiences

2.2.1 Managers were generally supportive of the FSEC review process. However, some described how their initial reaction had been one of distrust as to the motives of the process and questioning the necessity and purpose of it. As their knowledge and understanding had increased, most claimed to have found the process "a revelation" to them. *"The initial reaction was, and I think this is the initial reaction that I was trying to get over, one of initial Fire Fighters saying there ain't nothing wrong with what we've got. But when you look at it and you look at it in depth, there is a lot wrong with what we've currently got"*. Managers support changes in emphasis on risk assessment and its change in attitude to an emphasis on risk to life rather than risk to property.

2.2.2 Managers from different brigades had different experiences of the process and therefore there were varying levels of enthusiasm for it. Some had been involved in previous consultation exercises, for example Section 19 purposes. London had greater resources and more managers who specialised in relevant activities than elsewhere.

2.2.3 An issue that arose often is the problem of defining risk:

- Many managers considered that it might be difficult achieving consistency in risk assessment across boroughs. In particular, rural and urban brigades would have very different risks and response times and therefore would struggle to follow the same risk criteria.
- Tourist resorts would also pose problems for assessing the level of risk on a consistent basis, particularly as the tourist season would dramatically increase the risks at certain times of the year;
- It was also suggested that different brigades may classify the same risks differently since this ultimately depended upon the availability of resources;

- The concept of risk is not a neutral or objective issue, but rather has cultural and emotional perceptions. No toolkit or method of consultation will change this human factor.
- 2.2.4 Managers thought that the service was going through a period of change, irrespective of the FSEC review. They highlighted:
- Changes to the nature of the firefighters' job, which would in turn affect recruitment to the fire service. The role of the firefighter would become a more preventative one and this might necessitate recruiting people with different skills and more than an interest in fighting fires. This is already beginning to happen in some brigades. However, many existing staff were comfortable with their job and did not want to move into a different area such as community fire safety. Another effect would be that fire appliances spent more time out in the community doing community fire safety projects.
 - The redeployment of personnel, stations and appliances, which they believed to be of great concern to the public and which would therefore make the process difficult. There were numerous examples of attempts to redeploy cover being prevented by a strong campaign by the media, local pressure groups or politicians. In general, this type of response was seen as a major obstacle to consultation on the FSEC review.
- 2.2.5 Managers also recognised the lengthy and evolving nature of the FSEC review but said it had only really become apparent once the process had begun. However, it was believed by some that the FSEC review was still at too early a stage of development to be making any conclusions. This uncertainty surrounding the FSEC review was thought to make communicating the process to other audiences difficult. Concern was expressed about the time that the process was taking to implement and how this was undermining its credibility. The perception of a drawn out process was creating a sense of negativity and frustration for some. There was also some suspicion expressed about the Pathfinder consultation exercise itself. It was suggested that it was taking up time with no action, getting in the way of providing a fire-fighting service and that the service had its own established means of consultation.
- 2.2.6 The managers had a number of concerns about the FSEC review process. Firstly that there remained some underlying suspicions as to the motives and intentions of the ODPM. It was suggested that the ODPM needed to be clear about what it wanted to achieve and what levels of local accountability and control there would be. What the managers mainly wanted to know was what effect it is going to have on their resources, particularly staffing levels. The fear was expressed that as soon as the government realises that it is going to cost money then the initiative would be dropped. *"The other side of the coin is everybody says the first time that there's a realisation that this is going to cost the government a lot of money, the thing will get ditched."* The Managers' second concern was about the budget and resource implications for brigades. If the process would be cost neutral across the country, it was believed that it would naturally create 'winners' and 'losers'. *"You would have to slice the cake up differently between Brigades and there would be winners and losers."*
- 2.2.7 There was a sense that the way in which the role of management was developing was creating a distance between the managers and the front-line staff. Managers felt under pressure and believed that they were expected to juggle different jobs. There was the feeling that they had lost the personal touch because there was less time to visit the stations, and this was creating a void between staff and

management. These feelings may be contributing to the perception that managers believe staff 'misunderstand' the managers' roles, responsibilities and pressures.

2.3 Communication

2.3.1 The brigades see the following groups as the main audiences with whom they must successfully communicate with:

- Brigade Staff;
- Unions;
- the general public, business/industry and other local stakeholders..

2.3.2 Communication was perceived by the managers as a major problem in getting the FSEC review to work successfully, particularly as they were trying to explain the benefits of a long and complex programme to a variety of different audiences. *"I think one of the problems is that the system is so complicated, it takes so long to explain to anybody, and I mean we've spent hours talking to people about the system in order to try and get it over and they've gone away with a massive great big headache. And these are the people from other Brigades who are generally wanting to know what we're doing."* The managers therefore considered it important to target specific messages about the FSEC review process to specific audiences.

Communicating with Brigade Staff

2.3.3 It was considered vital to get the acceptance of staff before starting to talk to outside audiences. Convincing the staff of the proposals was considered to be more problematic than the public. It was believed that it was important to convey to them that the information they provide as part of their day-to-day job will be used to build a picture of incidents and risk and impact on fire-cover. However, this would require training to help them understand the process. Overall, the staff must feel part of the new process.

2.3.4 Barriers to the acceptance of the FSEC review process by brigade staff were considered to be:

- The managers believed that the staff would be suspicious of the motives of the changes, believing them to be an opportunity to reduce jobs and close fire stations. The experience of the managers described above shows that overcoming this initial obstacle would be an important step to the staff accepting the FSEC review process. Managers felt that the initial antagonism towards the process by staff was now dying down;
- It was also necessary to account for the human factor - whilst individual firefighters may see the advantages to the brigade, they may not see the advantages for themselves.

2.3.5 The experience of one brigade had been that early discussions with staff helped ensure co-operation and this was recommended as a model others could adopt. By contrast, another example was given of a brigade in which changes in deployment (not linked to Pathfinder), were imposed from above with no consultation of personnel. This caused considerable local problems. The lesson from this was that staff must be 'carried along' with the process and changes not imposed from the top without any staff consultation.

2.3.6 Barriers to effective communication are:

- The sense of distance between staff and managers. It was suggested that many of the staff do not know, nor would recognise, the managers;
- Management also believed that the staff mistrusted those in higher ranks. They trusted their immediate boss but did not know what was going on further up the organisation. Staff felt that there was something mysterious going on and that someone is trying to cut costs and make people redundant;
- Retained fire-fighters were very influential in their local communities and may know how to 'block the system';
- Since the FSEC review process was evolving, it was difficult to say exactly how it would affect the firefighters.

Communicating with the Public

2.3.7 Managers were concerned about explaining and justifying the proposals to the public audience. Decisions about deploying resources are not objective but linked to *"emotion in the community"*. The main concerns for the management were:

- The difficulty of explaining the complexities of the process, particularly the concept of strategic cover and the way in which risk is calculated, in a simple manner for the public to understand;
- Difficulties in convincing the public of the benefits of closing down or moving fire stations and appliances since the public believe that they are more at risk if a service changes;
- Making the changes in the face of organised public opposition channelled through stakeholders, such as locally elected representatives and MP's. Where changes were proposed, small but well informed groups of local residents tended to form to resist change;
- Community resistance has been driven by brigade staff actively supporting community groups.

2.3.8 As with staff, it was considered that if the message about life and property risk could be explained to the public they would be more inclined to support it. One brigade described how previous consultation exercises had shown how people were quite surprised at how little they paid locally for their fire cover and would be prepared to pay more but they distrusted local councils to allocate resources to the fire service.

2.3.9 Managers were also concerned about how the proposals would be delivered. They were concerned that the new processes would be interpreted as an admission that what the fire service had previously been doing was wrong.

Other Stakeholders

2.3.10 The two major stakeholder groups were considered to be the general public and business/industries.

2.3.11 Stakeholder groups mentioned were:

- MP's / MEPs and local politicians;
- Local action groups;

- Charities, those mentioned are Age Concern, the Salvation Army;
- Elected local representatives;
- Industry / Industrial forums / Safety officers in industrial premises / Consultative forums. Those specifically mentioned include the rail industry and the water industry;
- Business communities, those specifically mentioned includes BAA, insurance companies, and small businesses;
- Trade unions;
- Business organisations such as CBI, LCCI;
- Heritage and rural areas / English Heritage;
- The Health Service / Health authorities;
- Environment agencies;
- Housing corporations;
- Local governments and authorities, local authority organisations. Those mentioned are the GLA, LGA;
- The London Planning Advisory Committee;
- The Fire Protection Association and Loss Prevention Council;
- Other emergency services;
- The armed services;
- Builders and developers;
- The Health & Safety executive.

2.3.12 Again, the main challenge was seen to be persuading the various stakeholder groups of the benefits of the FSEC review process. As with the staff and the public groups, awareness and understanding was linked to eventual acceptance. Targeting the messages to particular stakeholder audiences was again considered to be very important within the process. As with the general public, it was felt important that there should be a strong emphasis on community safety and reactive services when 'selling' the process.

2.3.13 Local government was considered to be a particularly important stakeholder to win over. Reasons for this surrounded ideas such as;

- Since local politicians are the representatives of the public, it was considered important that they understood the basic principles of the FSEC review and the potential impact that this scheme would have on their communities. However, it was suggested that the local politicians were unlikely to sign up to the principles without an understanding of what they will mean on the ground.
- Councils and Community Councils would also have to be persuaded of the benefits of the FSEC review and these were seen as difficult groups as they

are open to pressure from the public. Several brigades gave examples of when they were prevented from redeploying cover after a strong local media campaign put pressure on local councillors;

- Managers suggested it was necessary to raise the profile of the fire service amongst local authority offices and members through strategic partnerships.

2.3.14 It was also considered that the industrial and commercial communities may have a better understanding of the principles than the public and the information should be delivered to the stakeholders in a way that utilises this. In general, it was felt that industries and businesses would understand the concept of risk much better than the general public since risk and risk management is a part of business culture. In addition, positive messages could be taken to the industrial and commercial communities such as the fire service's role in damage control and business continuity. They could then discuss what more the fire service could do in terms of reducing the damage to premises and helping the business to get up and running quickly after an incident.

Communicating with Unions

2.3.15 The FBU was considered to be an important audience, as they were believed to have a massive influence over the workforce. The managers also thought that what the FBU and their members say will influence how the process is received by the public. In general, the managers felt that the FBU were positive about the changes since the principle of risk assessment being based on life rather than property is not something that can be argued with.

2.3.16 The FBU members who do not want their fire station moved or closed or their conditions of service changed will be the same people required to provide the information on which the FSEC risk assessment will be based. It is therefore important that staff should be actively involved in and kept informed of the process. Communication to unions and staff should focus on how collecting and processing information can help them to do a better job and make the community safer.

2.4 Delivery of the Information

Staff

2.4.1 Managers considered it essential to get the acceptance of staff before starting to talk to other audiences such as the public and other stakeholders. The active involvement of staff was considered to be important and staff should be made aware that the information they collect is being used to improve fire protection. *"I think what the profession is concerned about are the things that aren't expressed right at the beginning, so say what is it for, what is the purpose of risk based standards of fire cover, what are the objectives we expect to see achieved for it, what are the outcomes".* The FSEC review processes should become part of the recruitment and training processes for all new staff. *"And I think unless people can clearly see that the outcome is something that they value or could sign up to then they are not likely to be convinced by it".*

2.4.2 The experience of the managers was that a two-hour presentation was barely enough time to touch on the surface of Pathfinder. However, the London managers felt that there were already established means of communication within their brigade that could be used to promote FSEC, such as the weekly information leaflets and a journal that is distributed every couple of months. There was also a video team who could put together training videos and the intranet system that they felt could be an effective means to communicate.

Local Stakeholders

- 2.4.3 The managers thought it was important to get the support of local government before approaching the public. It was felt that when communicating with stakeholder groups, there should be an emphasis on community safety and operational response with this audience. It would be important to show how extra resources and effort would be put into reducing the risk of fire in particular, and how this will reduce deaths, injuries and damage. At the same time, emergency response would be retained but organised in a different and more flexible way. The main difficulty of delivering such information to the public would be trying to communicate such a complex and evolving process in a positive manner.
- 2.4.4 Local consultation was seen to be an important way to ensure that people felt that they had a chance to have their say. The managers also felt it was important to roll out the FSEC review process with a combination of national and local campaigns so that the all local initiatives would have the backing of a national campaign. A national campaign would need to come from central government and should publicise the basic framework and structure. It would need to focus on community safety messages and raise awareness that there is more than one way to address fire safety. This would help the brigades to set out their own messages in context. It could also involve stakeholder groups in different parts of the country.

2.5 Brigade Support

- 2.5.1 Although guidance has been issued in the circular 5/92, and subsequent advice in the 1999 Best Value review, many still feel that the established methods of consultation for moving or closing a fire station or redeploying appliances are inadequate.
- 2.5.2 Before talking to stakeholders, the managers felt it was important to have support from the higher levels of management, from the Chief Officer and also MPs and Ministers. There was also the need to have the support in place at a local level.
- 2.5.3 Brigades felt that, at present, they do not have sufficient resources to cope with a consultation process:
- Managers commented that they had found the Pathfinder process difficult because it had not been sufficiently resourced and there were not enough appropriately informed people involved. Brigades did not have the resources to carry out the process continuously, so if the review were to continue, brigades would need to increase their budgets as well as their other resources;
 - Current brigade public relations departments were suggested to be not big enough to cope with the level of support that would be required;
 - Managers felt that they had neither the appropriate skills nor the expertise to carry forward a consultation. The managers saw themselves as professional firefighters not professional project or marketing managers. They therefore had high expectations of any 'toolkit', seeming to want an entire framework for consultation and communication.

2.6 Conclusions

- 2.6.1 In general, the managers were supportive of the FSEC review process. However, their experience as managers suggests that initial suspicions and

misunderstandings of the FSEC review process were allayed with increased understanding of how and why it was being done.

- 2.6.2 Managers believe it was most important to get the support of staff and unions before beginning a program of external consultation. To allay suspicions as to the motives of the changes, it would be important to keep staff informed and tackle misconceptions as they appeared. However, since the process takes time and develops as it goes along, it would be difficult to tell staff exactly how they would be affected.
- 2.6.3 The managers wanted any external consultation to be backed by a national campaign, although this is perhaps because they are unaware of what consultation is already being carried out at a national level. Before they would embark on public consultation they wanted to secure the support of important figures in the community, such as local MPs and local government officers and members.
- 2.6.4 Many managers felt under pressure with their workloads increasing in variety and volume. There was a sense that the staff do not understand the complexities of their position.
- 2.6.5 The biggest barrier in consulting on the FSEC review process was the difficulty in communicating in an understandable way such a complex and developing programme. Since fire cover is an emotive issue, people will be initially suspicious of changes. To overcome such problems, it would be important that messages should target particular audiences. Overall, any consultation should emphasise community safety.
- 2.6.6 The FSEC review process contributes to changes within the fire service that are seen as fundamentally altering the role of the professional firefighter. The managers therefore believe that the brigades will require a lot of support throughout the initial aspects.
- 2.6.7 The main barriers to the FSEC review process were seen as:
- The difficulty of defining 'risk' consistently across different brigades;
 - Communication problems, particularly between staff and management;
 - The suspicion among staff that the FSEC review would lead to cut-backs and job losses.

3 Staff

3.1 Introduction

3.1.1 Focus groups were held with staff from the following Pathfinder Brigades; London, Tyne and Wear, Lothian and Borders, Cleveland and South Wales. A workshop was also held with staff from the West Midlands Fire Service which had not been a Pathfinder brigade.

3.1.2 Topics covered were:

- Views of the fire service;
- Impact of Pathfinder;
- Views of Management;
- Communication.

3.2 The Changing Role of the Firefighter

3.2.1 Staff believe that their role is changing and believe that FSEC will contribute to the changes that are happening. They highlighted the following:

- The major change perceived by staff was a fundamental change to their role, becoming more preventative and their work moving outside the insular and isolated nature of the fire station into the community. Not all were comfortable with this. *"I'd say there are still a large number of firefighters that see fire safety as something that interferes with their job, they still see their prime role as fire fighting"*.
- They expect a large turn over of staff in the next few years as a result of the high recruitment levels in the 1970's and many of these members of staff now reaching retirement;
- Changes in recruitment processes would be needed to reflect the new skills required – fighting fires would no longer be the sole criterion. *"The one problem that we've got and I think we always will have is trying to get that balance. We could probably really easily recruit people who are excellent at community fire safety, those soft skills and personal issues and then we could really easily recruit loads of gung-ho, young men who want to run up ladders and rescue people. The problem is we can't find any in the middle"*.

3.2.2 Staff considered that they would need a great deal of support to help them in the transition from their traditional position to a new preventative role. They believed that the management had massively under-estimated what was required in order to carry out the work and they already felt stretched to the limit.

3.2.3 Staff also had some concerns about working with the community alongside their existing work:

- They felt that community fire safety should be done outside of what is for most people the working day since during the day few people are at home. *"I mean from a personal point of view, we spend a lot of time, community fire safety, knocking on doors of empty houses during the day, and the early evening has been the only time to catch people"*. Staff also were concerned that cold calling may irritate people and therefore prearranged visits would be needed;

- Staff have some personal safety concerns since in the past there have been attacks on fire-fighters in certain areas and consequently fire-fighters would not go into these areas for community safety work;
- Staff would require the backing of unions and insurance to undertake work in the community and wanted their conditions of service made clear. For example, when putting up a smoke alarm, it was not clear if firefighters were covered if they accidentally drilled a hole through a pipe, or if they fell off a ladder.

3.3 Views About the Impact of the FSEC Review

- 3.3.1 Staff had mixed feelings about the FSEC review process. Many seemed suspicious of its purpose. The staff supported the changes in emphasis on risk assessment and particularly its greater emphasis on life risk, but the operation and potential impact of the process was unclear to them. *"I think it's about time, I mean the most important thing in a firefighter's job is saving life, and up until now our priority is into property so it's time the emphasis changed, focus on what we are there to do."*
- 3.3.2 The culture of the service itself presents a barrier to acceptance of the FSEC review. Staff have strong allegiances, trusting their watch commander or their immediate boss. The service is based strongly on teamwork and it was considered problematic to try to break these teams up to do preventative work in smaller units. Fire fighters spend much of their time in their own fire station and therefore are only interested in what affects their own immediate environment. The changes being caused by the introduction of the FSEC review are therefore causing them to question factors which they had previously taken for granted. The fire-service has always been viewed as a public service culture and staff thought that they would have an unchanging job for life. It was felt there would be resistance to change since the fire service is an hierarchical organisation that was used to doing certain things in certain ways. The service has traditionally escaped change and from the point of view of staff, the FSEC review represents a threat to that to which they have become accustomed.
- 3.3.3 Staff felt it was essential to get their support before moving any consultation out into the community. It was considered vital in achieving the support of public and industry. The staff believed that the public and industry have an enormous trust in fire fighters. Therefore, if the firefighters sell the process to these audiences on the basis that it would improve the service, then they would believe it. It was considered that any consultation should emphasis the community safety aspect. Conversely, if staff say that changes are being imposed by management and these changes increase risks to life, then there would be public backlash against these changes.

3.4 Views About Management

- 3.4.1 It is very important to the staff that the managers communicate with them and keep them informed, since in the absence of this, rumours and speculation have proliferated. This is contributing to an overall climate of distrust and apprehension in which morale within the service is suffering. Staff were suspicious of management before, so now they are questioning the FSEC review process. Staff fear that managers are trying to save money, cut jobs and that they have some other hidden agenda.
- 3.4.2 Staff described a severe mistrust between fire stations and headquarters, much of this was based on misunderstanding and misinformation resultant of poor communication. Anything that originates from headquarters encounters

resistance, and therefore a long process of persuasion would be necessary. Staff are generally suspicious of the FSEC review, believing that the motives of the management are to save money and cut jobs. Staff felt that the personal side of the organisation has been lost and replaced with an increasing gulf between fire-stations and headquarters. To regain trust, it would be necessary to review methods of communication. Management needs to be open and keep staff informed and talk directly to the staff, rather than information having to work its way through several bureaucratic layers.

- 3.4.3 Staff felt that they had not been consulted about the FSEC review project and that 'grassroots' opinion were not taken on board. They felt that management are making decisions and imposing new ideas on the staff. They felt that they were now in the position of *"having to inform people of that which has already been decided."* One respondent described how his brigade was in a new building of which the staff were not consulted, and another brigade had experienced fire reviews that resulted in a reduction of the number of their appliances. Staff felt that historical evidence shows management has lied to them on previous occasions, so why not about the FSEC review?

3.5 Communication

- 3.5.1 The focus groups illustrated that the staff at certain brigades were suspicious and untrusting of the management, and attitudes to the FSEC review process were affected by this problem. At the time we did our work, morale was low in some places and this was attributed to poor communication resulting in a climate of mistrust and uncertainty. Staff would like to be provided with as much relevant information as possible. However, the information provided to the staff should not be excessive. Creating an 'information overload' has simply resulted in people avoiding reading anything because they have to wade through everything to find what is relevant. At present, information is not targeted towards staff or presented in a reader friendly format. *"There's so many things going on at the minute and you hear this that and the other and all the rest of it. I think that when it comes down to the nitty gritty, people in the Brigade basically only want to know exactly what's going to happen, when it's going to happen"*.
- 3.5.2 Staff must also trust the channel through which information is provided. Whilst there was plenty of information available, the staff felt it was simply that which the management want them to hear. For example, it was said that 'Firefighter' was once their magazine but now it has become *"just another management tool"*. Staff also felt that the fire stations did not at present have the facilities for complex communication processes to take place.
- 3.5.3 In some brigades, staff thought that at present the channels for communication within the brigade, and the provision of information are very ad hoc. There are several different layers for information to filter down, and some thought that messages were distorted in the process. Recently email has increased the scope for communication within the service and information can now be exchanged quickly and easily. However, poor computer systems, a lack of prior consultation as to user needs and a lack of training has made it difficult to use and inaccessible to some members of staff.
- 3.5.4 Staff knew little about the FSEC review process and there was a feeling by frontline staff that they should be told more about it and what it involves. Staff in many of the brigades we spoke to felt that the dissemination of this type of information within the service was generally poor. It was suggested that a process similar to debriefing after an incident could be used. Staff felt it was not enough simply to provide the information, it was also the way in which it was provided that was important. Fundamentally, staff would like the reappearance of the 'human touch'

into internal communications - they want information from an individual, not a piece of paper. Whilst recognising that it is time consuming, staff would like management to talk to them directly about the FSEC review by making visits to individual fire stations. Staff would like managers to discuss the process openly and honestly and not to make any promises they could not keep. This should be supplemented by more detailed information which must be targeted specifically toward them. The FSEC review was perceived as a long term process but firefighters were more 'present time' oriented - they wanted to know facts about the here and now, rather than what was going to happen in the future. Staff wanted to know what was going to happen, when it was going to happen and how it would affect them. They were concerned in case there would be any loss of jobs or appliances. Therefore, it was important that any communication would be two-way and provide a means for staff to have their input. In turn, this would help regain the trust that has been lost.

- 3.5.5 In some brigades these problems of communication, while still existing, did not extend across the whole brigade and were much less severe than reported above. We came across instances where ACOs (and sometimes the CFO) visited stations for face to face discussions. Equally importantly they provided later feedback on actions that they had taken as a result of suggestions made. We also heard about "kit-kat breaks", informal meetings between, say, station commanders and senior management over a coffee with no predetermined agenda. These were highly valued and said to be effective. Clearly they boosted morale. Other practices aimed at breaking down barriers of which we were informed included visits by watches to the control room where they received a presentation and were able to take part in a question and answer session with control room staff.

3.6 Conclusions

- 3.6.1 Whilst many staff were suspicious about the mechanics of the FSEC review and the motives behind it, the staff definitely supported the new approach to assessing life and other risks rather than just property risk.
- 3.6.2 The staff present at the focus groups claimed that fire brigades were characterised by strong team loyalties. Until recently, they felt it had been a very stable environment with staff serving the same watch for a number of years. Brigades were generally insular environments based on tradition and hierarchy.
- 3.6.3 There was a distrust of the management and a sense that they do not know what managers do. Morale of staff in many brigades is low due to the current climate of change, mistrust and uncertainty. Communication was a big issue for the staff, and where there were problems with communication, it had created a gulf between staff and management.
- 3.6.4 The biggest anxiety of staff about the process was uncertainty about the impact that it would have on their jobs and the changes that would be entailed. Many believed that their role within the service would become more preventative and more based within the community. Staff also felt that they needed to be reassured that the FSEC review was more than a cost-cutting exercise.
- 3.6.5 Many of the staff felt that they should have a bigger involvement with the FSEC review process, and would like to be consulted on any of the changes that were likely to take place. Although time consuming, many believed that face-to-face communication was highly important when introducing the FSEC review process to the brigade.

4 Unions

4.1 Introduction

4.1.1 Discussions were held with representatives from FBU and GMBU brigade unions. The unions reflected the interests of a range of brigade staff which included uniformed, support and non-uniformed.

4.1.2 Topics covered were:

- Views of the fire service;
- Impact of Pathfinder;
- Views of Management;
- Communication.

4.2 Views of the Fire Service and the Impact of the FSEC Review

Uniformed Staff

4.2.1 Unions reflected the statements of managers and staff in saying that they were initially sceptical and suspicious of Pathfinder, but the more they learnt, the more they realised the benefits of the approach.

4.2.2 Unions representing uniformed staff were tentatively supportive of FSEC review -

- They supported the principles, particularly the changes in the risk assessment to reflect an emphasis on life rather than property. *"It's basically it's a move away from property-based risk assessment to life-based risk assessment. As a union, bearing in mind what it's throwing up, we're fully supportive of that concept. So we would fully support the principle of that fire cover review"*.
- They were also supportive of the fact that FSEC review takes into account special services. However, they were suspicious of the practical implications of the process for their staff;
- They supported the inclusion of staff safety issues.

4.2.3 Whilst the unions approved of the principles of the FSEC review they had reservations about its potential outcomes. Firstly, they were concerned that there should be no reductions in the size of the fire service establishment. Secondly, they were concerned about any redistribution or relocation of resources and appliances. *"All we have had for the last 23 years or so really is cuts in fire cover and fire stations closed, fire engines taken out, crew numbers reduced. I think people's expectation would be that this isn't going to deliver any improvements, this will probably be another means of making those cuts. I think there would be a high degree of scepticism and suspicion, even hostility"*.

Non-uniformed / support staff

4.2.4 The unions reflecting non-uniformed or support staff had different experiences. In general, the representatives considered that their staff were not really aware of FSEC review. There was a feeling that the FSEC review did not have anything to do with them since it is concerned with fire cover and any effect on their work practices is minimal:

- FSEC review was considered to have little if any impact of the work practices of support staff. *"I mean as far as we're concerned it affects obviously fire cover and I don't see the FSEC review having a great effect on non-uniformed people."*;
- For control room staff, the FSEC review may mean different processes for staff to go through in terms of receiving a call and mobilising a response. The unions anticipated a training need but felt that the impact on their members would be small.

4.2.5 As was the case with the other unions, the representatives supported the review of risk categories.

4.3 Attitudes to Management

4.3.1 Representatives were distrustful of the management motives and they believed that this sentiment was shared by the staff. The management styles were described as being *"dictatorial"* in the past but representatives believed that the style of management had improved over the last four years following the Maddock Review.

4.3.2 Representatives believed that there was a big difference between uniformed and non-uniformed staff in their relationship with management. The representatives believed that managers were more willing to consult with uniformed staff. There was a general feeling that management do not value non-uniformed staff, that they were considered as a *"commodity"* and not as valuable as the other firefighting staff. There was low moral amongst the non-uniformed staff and they felt that they were not there to make decisions but to simply do the work. Decisions affecting them were made without consulting them and they were told exactly what to do. For example, one representative said that they were now in new premises and had not been consulted about the move. Another said that they had been coerced by management into accepting changes resulting from a shift and staff review.

4.4 Communication

4.4.1 Many of the problems with the management were felt to be caused by the problems in communication. Representatives felt that there were too many tiers of management for information to filter through before it reached the workforce. Communication between the various layers was considered to be poor and this was impacting on morale at many levels. *"I think if you have too many people trying to put the message across you end up with a lack of consistency. You know its a question of the person at the top tells the person directly beneath him what he wants said and they pass it on to a group of people who go to fire stations, I think often you will not get a consistent message across, which is one advantage of videos I guess at least everybody is getting the same message"*. Some levels of management did not consider communication to be a problem, which in itself was said by the unions to be a problem.

4.4.2 Unions felt that they could aid the communication process but this would need care as it could place them in an awkward position. Unions must represent the interests of their members (and be seen to do so), thus they could act as communication channel between managers and staff only if they thought it was in their members' interests.

4.5 Communicating the FSEC review to Staff and Other Audiences

4.5.1 Unions had significant influence over their members and representatives considered that if they spoke in favour of the FSEC review process, staff suspicions would be considerably allayed. If there was no attempt to make cuts as a result of the FSEC review, and perhaps even some increase in cover, then the unions would be happy to assist in communicating the message to the staff and the public. However, if the process was used differently then unions would argue the other side and have the support of the public.

4.5.2 Stakeholders mentioned by unions representatives were:

- local MPs;
- the Chair of the Fire Authority;
- local pressure groups.

4.5.3 Unions felt there was a problem with staff apathy. For example, one respondent said that in the past there had been poor responses to union surveys that had aimed to improve conditions for staff. The representatives felt that staff were simply not as interested in issues as they are. Staff appeared interested only in those things that were going to affect them directly - either personally or financially. When communicating with staff it was therefore necessary to bear this in mind. Staff need to know what is going to happen in the near future, but should not be over-burdened with excessive quantities of information but rather kept informed of that which they need to know.

4.5.4 Recommendations for communicating with the staff were:

- Passing information down the hierarchy was ineffective and was likely to lead to a lack of consistent messages;
- Since the changes were so radical, any communications should be face-to-face rather than relying on printed communication. It was suggested that four or five people per brigade could be trained to go around and talk to everybody else. A video about the changes could also be made and time set aside to watch it to back up face-to-face consultation. *"Something as radical as FSEC review, I would say they need to designate four or five individuals, learn them up, train them up and then say right your job is, for the next six months, you're going to see every Tom, Dick and Harry and tell them, him or her what FSEC review's about. That's the way I would do it."*
- The key messages underlying communication to staff should be the greater emphasis on risk to life and the incorporation of special services. This needed to then be coupled with the reassurance that it was not an exercise aimed at cutting back the establishment. If the FSEC review was perceived as a cost cutting exercise then there would be resistance;
- There needs to be some kind of official launch.

4.6 Conclusions

4.6.1 Overall, the union representatives who were present at the focus groups were supportive of the principles of the FSEC review. However, they did have concerns about the practical implication for the jobs and roles of staff.

- 4.6.2 The focus groups revealed differences between the experiences of uniformed and non-uniformed staff which may affect how the FSEC review would be received by union members overall. In general, non-uniformed staff felt more alienated from the process than uniformed staff.
- 4.6.3 Union representatives felt improved communication would be a vital part in explaining the process to staff and achieving their support. At present, representatives were distrustful of management and they linked this to problems in communication.
- 4.6.4 Unions are potentially in a powerful position and have much influence over staff. They are trusted by staff in a way that management are not. Endorsement of the process by unions would strongly help to bring staff on board and this in turn would influence the wider stakeholder audiences.

5 Public

5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 Focus groups were held with members of the public recruited by face-to-face interviews in London, Reading, Edinburgh and Strathclyde. The aim of these focus groups was to explore perceptions and misperceptions that will underlie and guide communications originating within the fire service.

5.1.2 Attendees within each group were:

- Edinburgh – Eight participants (four male and four female) from socio-economic groups A, B, and C1. Two aged between 20-29, two aged 30-39, two aged 40-49 and 2 aged over 60.
- Edinburgh – Seven participants (three male and four female) from socio-economic groups C2 and D. Two aged between 20-29, two aged 30-39, one aged 40-49, and two over 60.
- London – Eight participants (two male and six female) from socio-economic groups B, C1, C2 aged 20-50.
- London – Nine participants (five male and four female) from socio-economic groups C1, C2, D aged 20-50.
- Reading – Seven participants (4 male and 3 female) from socio-economic groups A, B, and C1 aged 20-50.
- Reading - Seven participants (4 male and 3 female) from socio-economic groups C2 and D aged 20-50.
- Reading - Eight participants aged 60+ (4 male and 4 female), mixed socio-economic groups.
- Strathclyde– Seven participants (three males and four females) from socio-economic groups ABC1. Two aged between 20-29, one aged 30-39, one aged 40-49, two aged 50-59 and one over 60+
- Strathclyde– Eight participants (four males and four females) from socio-economic groups C2D. Two aged between 20-29, two aged 30-39, two aged 40-49, one aged 50-60 and one over 60+

5.1.3 Topics covered were:

- The fire service - What does the fire service do? What are the public's understanding of these services? Could these services be improved, or could others provide the same service. Should the fire service provide community fire safety awareness?
- What do the public see as the main priorities for the fire service? Could this be altered in anyway to improve the service?
- What do they think the risks are of these emergencies happening to them? Have risks changed in their area over time?
- Do members of the public trust their local fire stations to provide a suitable service
- How would they like to be informed of changes to the present fire service.

5.1.4 The focus groups took place in the summer of 2003 before the firefighters' pay dispute and the publication of the Bain report created considerable publicity about the role of the fire service and the way in which it operates. As a result of that publicity, the views of the public may have changed from those that were revealed by the research. It will be advisable to update this part of the report when the issues are resolved and comment in the media has died away.

5.2 Public Experience

5.2.1 The public saw the job of firefighters as one that deserved praise. In general, the public had had little or no experience of the fire service either in their employment or as residents. Most felt that the chances of them being at risk from a fire was slim, although they often overstated this. Therefore, as long as they knew that the their local fire station was near by, there was nothing to worry about. *"The main thing is that they're basically there, they do a service. They save people's lives, they put fires out, accidents, hazardous waste and everything else. That is what they're trained for. They know what they're doing when they go for this job and they know that each day they're putting their lives on the line for other people so basically what can you say"*.

5.2.2 In many people's view, the fire service was simply there to offer peace of mind in case something did go wrong and they required the service. All respondents knew exactly where their nearest fire station was and this was important to them in a way that the location of ambulance stations, for example, was not. No one was worried about where his or her ambulance came from as long as it arrived. People trusted the fire service implicitly to save them in an emergency, irrespective of the distance of their homes from a fire station.

5.2.3 People from all the focus groups were able to list a variety of services that the fire service provides, although sometimes this needed to be prompted. Whilst the most common response was fighting fires, it was also known that their job led them to deal with a variety of situations. For example, dealing with road accidents, rescuing people and animals, educating people on fire safety and fire prevention, surveying businesses for fire regulations, dealing with chemical leaks, investigating arson, floods and suicides. However, the greatest priority for the fire service was seen to be fighting fires and therefore, it was believed by some that a few of these other services could be delegated to other agencies.

5.3 The Priorities of the Fire Service

5.3.1 Since the knowledge of the fire service was so limited, asking the focus groups to assess how well different services were performed proved difficult. Out of all the services that the fire service provide, the following were selected by the public focus groups as being a priority:

- Fighting fires in buildings;
- Promoting fire safety within the community;
- Emergencies with hazardous materials.
- Rescuing people who are trapped;
- Enforcing fire safety legislation in the workplace;

5.3.2 There was a major interest in community fire safety, as many believed that prevention was better than cure. It gave the public reassurance that they would know what to do to help themselves in the case of a fire; it reduced the risk of fires

starting and minimised their impact if they did start. One participant noted that people have *"to take some responsibility themselves and not expect the fire service to do it all for them"*.

- 5.3.3 Unless people were taught basic fire precaution, they felt they were unlikely to know how quickly a fire could get out of hand. Community fire safety offers the public a sense of confidence that they could deal with certain incidents without the help of the fire brigade. However, some believed that those who actually place demands on the fire service (kids setting cars on fire etc.) are not those who would appreciate community fire safety and therefore they questioned its universal relevance. Some suggested that retired firefighters or desk-bound firefighters should take on the community fire safety role rather than active firefighters as the latter could distract them from what many saw as their central task of attending emergencies. They did not think it would be a good idea to have an outside agency undertake such work because inside knowledge and experience of fighting fires was essential to such work. The consensus was that someone not trained as a firefighter would be unable to carry out the work at the same level as a trained firefighter.
- 5.3.4 The great majority had smoke detectors in their homes (some had responded to advertising campaigns, others just thought it was common sense). Most had some idea of the common causes of fire in dwellings and of what to do in various domestic emergencies involving the risk of fire.
- 5.3.5 Some attendees had had experience of fire officers enforcing fire safety legislation in the workplace and they thought that it should have a high priority but perhaps not for the fire service itself. Many suggested that the employer or an alternative agency could take greater responsibility in this area to relieve the fire service of the responsibility, but only if the staff received suitable training beforehand. Rationally, the group believed it was a serious issue but should not take up too much of fire officers' time. Emotionally, there was the fear that firefighters might not be available to respond to their needs if their time was taken up with enforcement duties.
- 5.3.6 Overall, the focus groups showed that the public had little knowledge or understanding of the demands on firefighters' time. Their use of resources, their priorities or the frequency with which they had to attend emergencies of various types were unknown to the public. There was simply faith in the capabilities of the fire service and the overwhelming belief that if they were unfortunate enough to be involved in a fire, that the firefighters would respond promptly and rescue them. The unanimous feeling was that the fire service provides a vital service and that they feel safe just knowing that it exists.

5.4 The Risk Factor

- 5.4.1 People generally felt comfortable with the distance that they lived from the fire service. However, as times had changed and some areas had developed, it was felt that little had been done to adapt the service to the new situation. Many acknowledged increased levels of traffic congestion, alongside the cut backs in the services, and felt that the present provision of service was out of date and in some cases no longer suitable for the greater population of the area that they were expected to cover. *"You have got less fire stations serving a much bigger area and a much bigger population and a growing population"*. For many, the distance between the local fire station and their home was not a problem, as they trusted the firefighters to arrive on time. However, the thought of resources being transferred to alternative stations caused alarm and many felt they would fight any proposal. *"I think I's at the end of the day, a question of possession, its like, you are taking away something that was mine, you know, and I want it back"*.

- 5.4.2 They had no idea how the service assessed risk. The categorisation of areas into A, B, C and D risks was initially attractive but the realisation that residential areas came only third out of four caused some disquiet. They had to be reassured that this was only a planning assumption and that each call for help was responded to as fast as possible, whatever its location. Given this they thought it was probably a good system that had stood the test of time and no-one saw the anomalies until some of these were pointed out. Others were shocked to find out that the fire service ran a risk assessment scheme that had been developed in 1947, and therefore felt that the fire service definitely needs to modernise its approach. They also felt it was unnecessary to have offices in category A when they were closed at night.
- 5.4.3 There was universal agreement, although some groups had to initially have ideas suggested by the researcher, that the nature and extent of risk has changed over time. Overall, many believed that the risk of road traffic accidents had vastly increased, as had the risk of chemical spills but that the risk of a house or workplace fire had dramatically decreased. They were aware that modern buildings had many fire safety features, mentioning flame retardant materials, smoke alarms and sprinkler systems as well as varying types of fire extinguishers and fire blankets. As a result, many felt that they were at low risk from fire.
- 5.4.4 On a rational level, they could discuss the FSEC review approach and could see the logic in it. They were cautiously in favour of it. The caution was because it was such a complicated process that they felt they could not comment on the technical aspects. An essential criterion for acceptance was that the process was done by the fire service itself and not done elsewhere with the results imposed by some outside agency (an outside agency in this context included the government). It was also highly important that any review or change did not involve a reduction in service. A transfer of services to higher risk areas was deemed acceptable by some, but not if it was leading to cut backs to the overall service.
- 5.4.5 Although it was believed that the fire service needed to modernise itself, not all people supported the idea that appliances should be redeployed to the highest risk areas. Many suggested paying more in council tax to purchase more equipment rather than relocating services across the country. One of the issues that none of the respondents was particularly aware of was how much of their tax was being used to fund the fire service at the moment. Overall, most felt happy enough to pay more if the service was to be improved further to suit today's society.

5.5 Trust

- 5.5.1 Trust was a key issue for all the focus groups. They all claimed that they trusted the fire service to decide on the future service requirements. However, they would not trust anyone else in authority, especially the government, to make any changes without reducing services, cutting corners and attempting to claw back some public expenditure. When introducing plans to the public, many therefore believed that they would prefer to hear it from a member of the local fire service rather than a local politician or MP. Most focus groups highlighted the fact that the public saw politicians as untrustworthy and pursuing their own interests – making cuts in the fire service or simply making profit. If the fire service does the review themselves and explains that this is not because of past inadequacies but to bring cover in line with today's needs and that the commitment to respond to emergencies will not be not compromised, then there is a good chance of gaining the public's acceptance of the process
- 5.5.2 However well the scheme is explained to the public, some felt that it would be impossible to get the support of those who were faced with fire engines being removed from their local station. Even if their area was classified a low risk area,

the community disliked the idea of having *their* local equipment removed to alternative areas. Whilst individually, everyone believed him or herself to be at a very low risk of fire, they still did not want fire cover to be reduced or moved from their area to one with higher risk. This was partly because the public view the emergency services more on an emotional rather than a rational level.

5.6 Informing the Public

- 5.6.1 Members of all the public focus groups liked the idea of having a member of the fire service discuss the changes that would take place. However, most felt that visits should be pre-arranged, particularly if they were going to be late in the evening. Within the ranks of the fire service, many preferred the idea of having a member of staff explain things rather than a chief officer, as it was felt that the latter would simply be 'paper pushing'.
- 5.6.2 They thought that television was a powerful means of communicating new FSEC ideas, although they did recognise that this would not be suitable for giving local details. Respondents considered that 'shock' adverts such as the drink/drive adverts were particularly effective at showing the consequences of risk. Local newspapers were believed to be the best, and most relevant medium, for offering local information, but local radio was seen as less relevant.
- 5.6.3 The use of leaflets led to mixed opinions. Whilst a small percentage felt that they were a waste of money, as they would put them straight in the bin without reading them, others said that they would be very useful. A leaflet could also give out contact numbers for additional questions and concerns for those who were interested.
- 5.6.4 The use of the internet to promote new ideas was not encouraged by the over 60's. Meanwhile the younger members of the public felt that they would only read a fire safety web-site if the URL were sent to them, they would not look for it. Meanwhile, whilst statistical data could prove that people were generally less likely to be involved in fire these days than in the past, it was suggested by some that statistics rarely had an impact on how they viewed a situation.
- 5.6.5 The information they would want to know from a leaflet would be:
- Specific details relating to their new local fire brigade.
 - Where the nearest fire station would be based;
 - What the new response time would be;
 - Are there any other cost cutting exercises?
- 5.6.6 Because everyone saw the fire service as a trustworthy organisation, many people felt they were more likely to trust alterations to the present fire service if it was done on a local level, with individual brigades making their own decisions. Door-to-door leafleting in conjunction with well-advertised local meetings were considered one of the overall best methods of communication. However it was specified that the meeting would have to be advertised as 'concerning the future of their local fire station' for people to want to attend. Above all, it would be the support of the fire service itself, for example the managers and staff, that would carry conviction.

5.7 Conclusions

- 5.7.1 Overall, the public were very unquestioning about the fire service and deeply appreciative of the work that it does. Although the majority of respondents had had little or no direct contact with the fire service, it was still considered important to have fire stations close by since there is always the risk. The brigade were seen to possess certain skills and experiences that meant that there were jobs that only they could carry out.
- 5.7.2 The fire service was clearly an emotive issue for the public and therefore changes had to be addressed in a careful manner. They could not conceive of any circumstances in which there would be no need for a fire service.
- 5.7.3 Whilst some felt it was pointless to remove the present system because it had proved to be successful, most agreed that the fire service needed to bring its system of risk assessment up to date. Many were shocked to discover that residential areas were not nearer the top of the risk assessment in the present system. It was felt that the size of a building was an incorrect way to assess the level of risk, as many of the large modern buildings were now designed to minimise the risk of fire.
- 5.7.4 The reallocation of resources worried a lot of the respondents, and although the fire service was totally trusted by the community, it was generally felt that the new FSEC assessment could not be fully tested without risking people's lives.
- 5.7.5 Although many claimed not to feel less safe because they lived further away from the fire station than others, paradoxically, the thought of the fire station moving or relocating resources panicked many people. They felt that if any of their local fire resources were relocated to alternative fire stations their safety would be reduced. Most of those who thought this felt that there was nothing that would convince them otherwise until they saw a fire engine turning up on the scene of an emergency. *"Nothing would convince me until it actually happened if there was a fire down the road and I saw the fire engine there. Just see it to believe it".*
- 5.7.6 The public claimed to trust the fire brigade more than anyone else to explain any changes to them. Hence most felt that they would want to hear it from people within the service - if the brigade supported the changes, then the public would not see the changes as cut-backs. Face-to-face contact was stressed as being very important when explaining any changes to the public.
- 5.7.7 Leaflets, advertising a contact number for additional information, were highlighted as the most useful mode to inform people of changes. Others felt that there should also be local meetings in the area to consult people of any possible changes that might take place.

6 Other Stakeholders

6.1 Introduction

- 6.1.1 Focus groups were held with local stakeholders from Tyne and Wear, Cleveland, Strathclyde and Lothian and Borders. They represented communities of interest rather than communities of place.
- 6.1.2 Attendees were drawn from stakeholders identified by the local brigade. They included representatives of; Health and Safety Departments, Chemical Manufacturers, Local Authorities, Police, Ambulance Service, Emergency Planning Officers, Building Control Managers, Water Suppliers and industrial companies, amongst others.
- 6.1.3 Topics covered within the focus groups were:
- Changes within the fire service over recent years;
 - How the fire service allocates their resources?
 - Communications between the fire service and local people/stakeholders?
 - How will the FSEC risk assessment affect the present service?
 - How should they communicate the FSEC review and its outcomes to the public and other stakeholders?

6.2 Experiences of the Other Stakeholders

- 6.2.1 Those who had been involved with the fire service for many years could see how the service had changed over time, both on the operational side and the logistical side. The fire service was more willing to engage with different areas of society these days, for example, involvement with the Social Services, helping elderly and disabled people. Consequently, the public's expectation of the fire service, and what they can provide, has constantly grown over the years.
- 6.2.2 Internal communications were seen as a problem within the fire service. Although some felt that communications from the head office down to brigade staff were satisfactory, the real problem was communicating from lower to higher ranks. Many felt that the fire service should recruit in order to improve communication procedures.
- 6.2.3 Generally, none of the stakeholders had knowledge of how funds and resources were allocated within the fire service. Many felt that they only heard about these issues when they were in the news, for example, closing down a fire station. Generally though, there was confidence that the fire service knew what they were doing when it came to allocating their resources.
- 6.2.4 There were different views on whether risk assessments in the workplace had improved over the years. Whilst some felt that codes and practices were much tougher these days, others felt that risk assessment was left to untrained colleagues rather than coming from the fire service. Many felt that there was limited input from the local brigade within their workplace, and most claimed that fire prevention work was done internally with their own risk assessments. Some had independent trainers that came in to help them, but overall, the feeling was that the link between the local brigade and the stakeholders was not strong enough. *"Now certain premises they're have very good people to do the risk assessment. Whereas other people they'll be given a book and saying there you are, that's the guidance, follow that. Well it can vary tremendously"*. It was also suggested that the risk assessment procedure within businesses could be a way of

communicating the FSEC review process to the local industries and other stakeholders.

6.3 Priorities of the Fire Service

6.3.1 Many saw the priorities of the fire service shifting from fighting fires to fire prevention. In many cases, the impact that community fire safety was having on resources was leading many to believe that the fire prevention teams were under staffed. Some also felt that the areas that people were being educated in were not always the areas that caused the most damage. For example, people were not being taught how to deal with mechanical faults or chemical explosions. Whilst many believed that prevention is better than cure, there were mixed opinions on whether this job should rest with the fire service or another agency. *"Prevention's seen as being an investment, you've got to put the money in to start with, put in the schemes and the initiatives, to make sure that in the future the prevention takes place"*.

6.3.2 Many of the stakeholders were not aware that the only statutory duty of the fire service was to fight fires, and that the other services provided were simply there because they have the equipment and training to provide them. Having discussed this, many felt that the fire service should be allocated additional financial resources if it were going to have additional responsibilities. *"It's an absolutely ridiculous situation. They're getting called out to goodness knows what, special service, and they're not financed for it"*. Firefighters are no longer viewed as simply being there to fight fire, but are a general emergency response team. If the fire service were going to take on other roles outside of fighting fires, many felt that they should be given the appropriate funds to provide these additional services.

6.4 The Risk Factor

6.4.1 When the current process of risk assessment was explained to the members of the stakeholder groups, there was a mixture of responses. Some knew about it, others did not. However, it was generally felt that the scheme had to be updated as many of the original 'A risk' areas were in fact no longer such high risks. Some attendees claimed that providing fire stations relocated themselves according to the high risk areas, then this original scheme was just as suitable as the more complex FSEC review process. Some believed that the change of emphasis towards saving lives rather than buildings had already happened and were shocked to find that residential areas were still in group C.

6.4.2 For many, the key issue was that firefighters must arrive in the area within a set period of time, and if this was failing, then this was a sign that the fire station had to move. *"The ambulance service is in exactly the same position, our buildings have been in their locations since time immemorial. We look at Middlesborough ambulance station its been there I don't know many years, but the public and the housing estates have now moved out of that area and the public who we serve are miles away now"*.

6.4.3 Just because modern buildings have been designed with greater fire precautions, it does not mean that there will be fewer fires. One person used the example of cars being safer to drive these days, but said that this has not reduced the number of accidents that still happen. It was also suggested that fire prevention does not necessarily reduce the workload for the fire service – fire alarms may initially save lives but the fire service would still need to be called out to deal with the fire and assess the damage. Another participant suggested that whilst the majority of properties are continually upgrading their fire precautions, this makes little difference to the number of different resources that the fire service sends out. *"We*

can upgrade or downgrade but it doesn't seem to make any difference to the amount of manpower we take up of the fire brigade. [Hotel]... If we have an emergency on the 4th floor, if the fire service come, everyone sits in the vehicle except 4 firemen – 2 on the floor, 2 in reception ...and in total you have another 3 tenders arrive so you have 6 in total".

- 6.4.4 One issue that arose from the discussions was whether or not the fire service could measure risk simply on external factors. For example, a newly built house may have been fitted with a fire alarm and sprinkler system, but that's not going to stop people from buying cheap Christmas tree lights which may be a fire hazard. A person's mentality cannot be measured in the way fire prevention methods could be. Resources would also need to be available to relocate on a flexible basis according to changes of risks geographically. Therefore, risk assessments would need to be completed regularly to make sure that the assessment was correct and up to date, this in turn led to concerns about the cost of doing so.
- 6.4.5 One of the main issues that was discussed throughout all the other stakeholders focus groups was funding such a scheme. Some even questioned whether additional financial resources would be given to the fire service if the FSEC risk assessment led them to discover that the risk across the whole of the country had increased. People appear ready to move resources to the higher risk areas, but what if many areas prove to need additional equipment?
- 6.4.6 Members of the focus groups also discussed whether there would be a time component in the risk assessment, as certain buildings that are high priority during the day may be empty at night. However, they questioned whether this was actually a suitable assessment for a highly mobile society – a primary school may be judged as a low risk building during the evening, but what if evening classes were taking place in the buildings. People who also work from home could also affect the risk assessment.
- 6.4.7 From the Local Authorities' point of view, it was felt that changes in the risk assessment would have a major impact on the council. Since Local Authorities are responsible for community aspects, such as schools and social care, there would be financial issues that they would need to be prepared for. There is also the responsibility for a council to promote the wellbeing of the community and to avoid reductions in services. From a financial aspect it was believed that the more senior members of the council would certainly raise funding concerns.

6.5 Trust

- 6.5.1 Throughout all the other stakeholders focus groups it was possible to see the extent to which the community totally trusts the fire brigade. *"The fire brigade do a very, very good job and they are extremely good. When they turn up they look impressive".* Therefore, many felt that honesty was the best policy, and providing the fire service promoted the changes as positive improvements, the community would probably listen and take notice. However, the other stakeholders did feel that it was important for the fire service to decide whether they were 'informing' the public of the changes or 'consulting' them on possible changes – there is no point consulting them if the decision to move their local fire station has already been made.
- 6.5.2 In general, the other stakeholders felt that it would be difficult to gain the public's trust, particularly if resources were being taken away from their local station. Until the service could prove that they would be able to arrive at an emergency within a certain amount of time, it would be difficult to rebuild the public's confidence towards the fire service. The stakeholders also felt that the public did not need to know any of the politics behind the scheme – they simply need to know that there

is a suitable service if ever they needed to ring 999. The extent to which the public accepts the scheme, would depend on how logically people think – contemporary circumstances versus location of the fire station.

- 6.5.3 Many of the attendees of the focus groups found it difficult to accept that the FSEC review was designed to create a modern service rather than cut costs. When they began to discuss change, they automatically assumed that cuts will take place. They worried that the service would not be as good as before, and that cut-backs would lead to a lowering of standards for the fire service. Many felt that if the public saw the changes in the service as simply means to making cut-backs then there would be public outcry. Within any budget reallocation people know that there will be winners and losers, but until people can assess their own personal loses and gains, the reaction of the public will be difficult to judge.

6.6 Communication Channels

- 6.6.1 It was felt by many of the other stakeholders that people should be informed of the FSEC review as soon as possible so that everyone is included in the consultation. The sooner people were consulted on the changes, the sooner some of the communication problems could be eliminated or resolved. Consultations were seen as being positive because they would allow the public and the stakeholders to voice their opinion before anything was finalised. Some suggested that holding a meeting in each town for people to air their views would be useful. It was felt that probably not many people would turn up, but at least the fire service would not get accused of being secretive about the review.
- 6.6.2 In relation to who should be informed of these changes, the participants claimed that all tax paying citizens should. However, attendees at the focus groups discussed how difficult it would be to gain the views of all their potential clients in a short period of time. It was also suggested that the information needed to be presented and directed in a way that the public could understand. In particular, there must be supporting facts for all of the changes so that the public can see how they will benefit.
- 6.6.3 Many felt that there needed to be an officer in the fire service who bridged the gap between the staff and the higher officers. This would be the start to improving communications within the fire brigade before communications between the brigade and the public could begin. Until members of the fire brigade and the unions were behind these changes it would be too difficult to try and communicate these ideas to the public and the other stakeholders. Some suggested that the Chief Fire Officer firstly needs to brief the Fire Authority, and then the political leaders, and then down to a committee that works alongside the public.
- 6.6.4 It was suggested by some that moving a fire station should be done in a positive way – for example, offering everyone in the original area a free fire alarm and safety check. The service would have to continue as before so that the public did not feel as though they had lost out in any way. In many ways, it was felt that if the fire brigade were behind the changes, the public would be more willing to accept the changes. Community fire safety had allowed the fire service to communicate successfully with people on a local level, and they should use this relationship to aid the new the FSEC review. Nobody likes change, and people are generally very suspicious of change, so people need to know who is behind this change in order for the public to begin to accept it.
- 6.6.5 In relation to who should persuade the public, many felt that this should come directly from the fire service, the management, chief officers and the brigade staff, and not from the local politicians. The media could also be difficult to work with, both locally or nationally. The use of leaflets to communicate these changes to the

other stakeholders was not seen as a suitable method. Many felt that they would be upset if leaflets were used as a means of informing them of any changes.

6.6.6 Whatever technique is used to promote the FSEC review, the publicity must focus on the positive aspects. For example, will response times improve, and how will the service be better for being modernised. The public and other stakeholders were aware at the time of our research of the firefighters' pay claim. Therefore, any changes within the service would have to be carefully timed so that the two issues are not linked and the FSEC review is not seen as an attempt to reduce the cost of the fire service.

6.6.7 The problem with consulting businesses was seen that the issue of money would always be most important. If there is any talk of additional fire prevention then what is the additional cost to the business? There are also the long-term effects for smaller business in rural areas who could suffer from increases in their insurance costs if they were in a low risk area and so have a reduction in cover. One participant mentioned that already there are increased insurance costs for high density buildings resulting from the increased threat of terrorism. The lesson from this should be that the fire service must communicate extensively with businesses on these financial issues.

6.7 Conclusions

6.7.1 Internal communications within the fire service were seen as a problem by many of the other stakeholders. This was particularly problematic when the brigade staff were trying to communicate with the management.

6.7.2 Many kept returning to the fact that it was not the way the new risk assessment was carried out, but rather the extent to which there would be cut backs or insufficient funds to cover such a complex project. It was thought that new schemes are generally introduced to reduce costs, not increase national spending, and therefore people would be sceptical of the FSEC review. The other stakeholders felt that the public would dislike any change that resulted in relocating fire equipment.

6.7.3 Many of the other stakeholders felt that there would have to be a greater integration between the emergency services and the Local Authorities in order for any risk assessment to be carried out successfully. Community fire safety was seen to be becoming a major part of the fire service's work, and therefore the Local Authorities should provide additional support to the fire service.

6.7.4 Informing the public should be done in a positive manner. It should show how the FSEC review would improve things, such as response times in higher risk areas, rather than focusing on the negative aspects, such as where the local fire stations are moving from. Being open and honest about the changes was also seen as being better for the public. There was general agreement that the changes should come directly from the fire service rather than any other representative. That way, they can use their 'trust' with the public to benefit the process.

6.7.5 Overall, it was suggested that the fire service needed to inform people of where they were at the moment - how they assess risk at present, and how things would improve with the new scheme. Only then could the public and other stakeholders begin to judge the new FSEC review assessment in relation to what is provided at the moment. In a sense, the fire service is offering a service, and the public are the customers, the fire service therefore needs to recognise the importance of a strong relationship.

7 Conclusions

- 7.1.1 Overall, the principles of the FSEC review were supported by the managers, staff, unions, the public and other stakeholders. In particular, the risk assessment process seemed intuitive and right for a more modern, mobile society. Whilst both the public and other stakeholders were, at first, sceptical of changing a system that works at present, they did acknowledge that risk to life was more important than risk to property and therefore things needed to change.
- 7.1.2 Both the general public and the other stakeholders claimed they had great trust in the fire service. It was therefore believed that this trust should not be abused. If the fire service guarantee the public a certain response time according to the new locations of the fire stations, then they should be able to provide such a service.
- 7.1.3 There were various concerns that developed throughout the focus groups.
- Management, staff, unions and other stakeholders alike were concerned about the motives behind proposed changes, particularly in relation to potential cuts and job losses. Changes are thought to be usually introduced to cut costs rather than increase expenditure;
 - The public's greatest concern was whether response times would be the same if stations were relocated;
 - Staff and unions were also concerned about the practicalities of the process, how it will affect them, their role and their brigade.
- 7.1.4 The greatest barrier to the FSEC review process seemed to be overcoming initial instinctive suspicions and resistance to change. The fire service felt that change would be difficult as they have traditionally shown themselves resistant to change. The culture of the service is in itself a barrier to change. The fire service is based on strong team work and loyalties, with a clearly defined role - to fight fires. The FSEC review may therefore be perceived by many as threatening these basic, long-standing principles.
- 7.1.5 Effective communication was essential to achieving support for the FSEC review since the focus groups suggested that awareness and understanding of the process leads to eventual support. At present there were a number of barriers to effective internal communication which needed to be addressed.
- The focus groups suggested that the different levels of the brigade often did not fully understand each other and their roles.
 - Staff and unions generally distrusted the management, perceiving them as distant;
 - Management believe their roles were distancing them from staff, and that the pressures of their many roles and responsibilities were not fully understood or appreciated.
- 7.1.6 The stakeholders also felt that it was important to inform people of how the fire service operates at present. Unless people know that residential areas are so low down on the risk assessment they are not going to welcome changes to a system that appears to work well. Only when the public have knowledge of the present system can they respond to the changes.
- 7.1.7 Different positions within the brigade had different perceptions and experiences of the service. For example, a management representative present at one focus group felt that the brigade already possessed established and effective methods of communication; but focus groups held at staff level in the same area revealed their

experiences to be different. It varies from brigade to brigade. Staff considered there to be an information overload and would like information to be more targeted towards their needs.

- 7.1.8 Face-to-face communication was discussed within all the focus groups. Within the work place, staff and management felt increased communication was needed to improve understanding of the FSEC review. Outside of the workplace, the public and other stakeholders stressed the importance of face-to-face communication to get the new ideas across.
- 7.1.9 There was an agreement amongst managers and staff that internal support was necessary before any external consultation took place. It was important to the staff that a personal approach was used and they would probably welcome a genuinely open approach. Media such as videos were suggested as a way to support, not replace, face-to-face communication. A difficulty was that staff wanted to know details of how the FSEC review would affect them and at the outset managers will be unable to provide such details.
- 7.1.10 The brigades' experiences had afforded them insight as to the types of messages that should be communicated to various stakeholder audiences. However, managers believed that brigades would need a lot of support with the practicalities of establishing methods of consultation and delivering information. Brigade staff would need training to understand their new roles and responsibilities and their contribution to the FSEC review.
- 7.1.11 Many of the staff were anxious that the changes surrounding the FSEC review would lead to changes in their job. Many believed that their role within the service had become more and more community based over the years and that this would be even more so with the introduction of FSEC. One participant suggested that the FSEC review actually ran the risk of turning people away from personal fire safety. Those who were keen on fire prevention and so lived in lower risk areas might risk losing their local fire station to higher risk areas in the future.
- 7.1.12 Members of all the focus groups agreed that messages about the FSEC review process needed to be targeted at specific audiences by emphasising aspects and advantages relevant to particular groups.
- Managers and staff believed that consultation must begin at brigade level and achieve the support of staff and unions before approaching the public or other stakeholders.
 - Unions felt that the communication with staff should emphasise the risk to life and reassure staff that the process is about improving the service and not making cut backs. Unions were in a powerful position to bring staff on board the FSEC review, which in turn would promote the idea amongst the wider audiences.
 - Management and staff agreed that when consulting stakeholder audiences there should be a strong emphasis on community safety. For the public, this could emphasise how cover would be revised and subsequently improved. For business/industry, this could emphasise the fire authorities' role in damage control.
 - It was felt that different stakeholder audiences would have different levels of understanding of the process and have different levels of influence. It was considered particularly important to achieve the support of local government. It was suggested that industry/business may have a better understanding of

the concept of risk and information should be delivered to such audiences in a way which utilises this;

- The focus groups with the public illustrated that the fire service was clearly an emotive issue, and therefore all changes should be addressed in a careful manner. Stakeholders generally felt that focusing in on the positive aspects, such as better response times and improved services, would be better than simply stating that things are changing and resources moving;
- The biggest barrier in consulting about the FSEC review process is the difficulty of communicating an understandable version of a complex and developmental program.

7.1.13 The choice of communication methods varied a little across the different groups although the emphasis was always on face to face communications.

- Staff and management wanted to see an increase use of face-to-face communications to promote the FSEC review. This could be backed by, not replaced by, videos;
- The public also wanted the option of talking face-to-face with someone from the brigade, either in a community meeting or the brigade calling at peoples houses. They also suggested the use of leaflets to explain local changes. Leaflets could also provide contact numbers and addresses for additional information;
- Other stakeholders claimed that they would be offended if only leaflets were used to explain any changes. They too wanted the brigade to contact them face-to-face to promote the FSEC review.