



COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT

CONSULTATION POLICY

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1. OVERVIEW

The purpose of this Policy document is to provide information and guidance in relation to how SFRS conducts public involvement and consultation. The document examines why we need to consult and what consultation is. It considers the importance of stakeholders, and why we should be inclusive in seeking a broad spectrum of diverse opinions. It stresses the critical value of stakeholder views in informing and shaping the decisions we make. The document explains roles and responsibilities, and details what is required to ensure best practice in public involvement and consultation.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) is committed to consulting with key stakeholder organisations and involving the communities we serve. Our consultations will be accessible to all and aimed at those who are most directly impacted by the proposals being consulted upon.

To ensure a robust and consistent approach to all consultations, the Service has developed this Consultation Policy. The Policy outlines how our consultation exercises will be conducted and what people can expect in terms of participation and reporting.

1.1 What is Consultation?

The Consultation Institute ([tCI 2004](#)) defines 'consultation' as:

'The dynamic process of dialogue between individuals or groups, based upon a genuine exchange of views and, with the objective of influencing decisions, policies or programmes of action.'

It is important to recognise that consultation can represent any point on a broad spectrum of activity from **Informing** (i.e. providing the public with objective and balanced information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternative opportunities, and solutions) to **Empowering** (i.e. placing the final decision-making in

the hands of the public). The public involvement and consultation work that SFRS undertakes can take place at any point on this spectrum.

Our consultation activities will never be solely one-way communication. They will have the critical element of genuine **dialogue** – the process where we discuss with, and listen to, our stakeholders. We value the contribution of stakeholders and will undertake our consultations conscientiously. We will consider what our stakeholders tell us and will commit to do all we reasonably can to ensure that their views are reflected in our decisions.

Closely linked to this, we will consider operational data and intelligence in looking at all options open to us. We will be open and accountable in our consultation processes and will explain to stakeholders why we have taken a decision.

1.2 Consultation Pack

This Policy outlines the **why** of our public involvement and consultation efforts. It provides the framework and the standards we will work to.

This Policy should be read in conjunction with our [Consultation Pack](#) – an online toolkit of practical advice and guidance which will support best practice in consultation work. The Consultation Pack is a crucial 'live' resource which will be continually developed (including updates with case studies) to help staff develop their knowledge, understanding and practical skills to ensure high quality public consultation.

1.3 Key Principles

SFRS will set out the following key principles to be applied when undertaking public consultation:

- We will consult with stakeholders, where required, before decisions are made;
- The purpose of the consultation exercise will be made clear, using easy to understand language;
- We will make clear how the information we gather contributes to the decision-making process;
- Consultations will be planned and undertaken in a timely manner;
- All interested stakeholders will have the opportunity to contribute and have their views heard;
- Consultations will be designed to be accessible for participants;
- The information we provide to consultees will help to enhance their understanding and inform their response;
- Our consultations will allow sufficient time for people to respond;
- SFRS will take appropriate and reasonable time to consider the responses of consultees;
- SFRS will report back to stakeholders;
- We will give genuine and conscientious consideration to what stakeholders tell us;
- We will demonstrate in our decision-making how stakeholder views have been considered.

These points can be further summarised in the [Gunning Principles](#).

1.4 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

We recognise the diverse characteristics and needs of our stakeholders and communities across Scotland. Our consultation work will be underpinned by the standards in our [Equality and Diversity Charter](#), to ensure that equality is mainstreamed in the planning and delivery of our consultation efforts.

1.5 The Consultation Process

All consultation and involvement work we undertake will follow a consistent pattern. It will be Planned; Resourced; Undertaken; Reported; and Evaluated. At every stage, we will work collaboratively with our stakeholders – both internally within SFRS and externally.

1.6 Internal Consultation

SFRS has a ‘staff first’ policy, and SFRS staff are key stakeholders. It is important to recognise that internal consultation is a critical process that must be undertaken in line with, and as part of, wider consultation efforts. The SFRS People Directorate will lead on internal consultation, supported by PICT (see [section 2.1](#) below) and others as appropriate.

Many of the detailed requirements linked to internal consultation will not be required in the public-facing consultation work we do. However, where these interlink and inform one another, we will give each process equal priority.

1.7 Pre-Consultation

Before we consult stakeholders on Options, we must involve them in **Options Development and Appraisal**. This is known as the **pre-consultation stage** and is critical. Failure to do so could be seen as pre-determination – i.e. indicating we have already decided what the Options are and even what the final decision will be.

By conducting a genuine, thorough and inclusive options development and appraisal process, we will ensure that the views and priorities of stakeholders are actively sought and transparently considered. Detailed guidance on the pre-consultation stage can be found [here](#).

2. SFRS AND PUBLIC CONSULTATION

2.1 The Public Involvement and Consultation Team (PICT)

The [2022-25 Strategic Plan](#) details the organisational ambitions and values of SFRS. These are reflected in the Plan's seven Outcomes. All the consultation work we undertake will contribute towards meeting these Outcomes and will reflect the values of the Service.

The SFRS Public Involvement and Consultation Team (PICT) leads on the development and planning for the consultation work of the Service. PICT is a service-wide support function which offers expertise, advice and guidance – as well as resource support – to SFRS staff who are planning or undertaking consultation with stakeholders.

PICT is responsible for the following areas of specialist support:

- Managing and developing the Stakeholder List;
- Ongoing development of a Pack of consultation techniques;
- Applying a Consultation Plan approach to all consultations;
- Staff training and development in public involvement and consultation;
- Co-ordinating the Public Participation Group.

The detailed remit of the Public Involvement and Consultation Team is outlined in [section 5.1](#) below.

2.2 When to Involve PICT

This Policy is intended to support decision-making around when and how SFRS should undertake public consultation. This [detailed process map](#) indicates at what point it is appropriate to involve PICT and other teams (such as the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Team and Legal Services).

As soon as it is apparent that consultation work might be required, an initial discussion with PICT will provide critical advice and guidance on what is appropriate. Colleagues, regardless of location or function, are encouraged to approach [PICT](#) early in the consultation planning stage.

PICT can provide *ad hoc* advice, as required. Additionally, PICT can offer dedicated support on larger and more complex work. At the core of good consultation practice is a detailed [Consultation Plan](#). As a minimum, managers should share their draft Consultation Plans with PICT.

2.3 Governance

Where a project or larger scale piece of work is undertaken, early consideration should be given to the governance route.

Strategic Leadership Team (SLT) and SFRS Board will ultimately be responsible for taking decisions informed by, amongst other things, the consultation work we undertake. Linked to this, SFRS governance mechanisms will set the direction and delivery for some pieces of work. In public consultation, this may include agreeing Terms of Reference, resourcing and timescales.

By ensuring that work is progressed through the appropriate governance route, we can demonstrate best practice and meet legal requirements in terms of transparency and accountability. This will assist us in recording our progress in reaching key milestones, as well as helping SFRS to deliver against our strategic priorities.

2.4 Legal Obligations

As a statutory agency, SFRS has numerous legislative obligations which set out the requirements to consult with and involve local communities in our decision-making. For example, the [Fire \(Scotland\) Act \(2005\)](#) states:

Provision of Services

(2) SFRS must involve each local authority in determining priorities and objectives for SFRS in connection with the carrying out in the local authority's area of SFRS's functions. [emphasis added]

The [Police and Fire Reform \(Scotland\) Act \(2012\)](#) states:

In preparing the local fire and rescue plan, SFRS must—

consult

- (i) such persons as SFRS considers represent employees of SFRS,***
and
- (ii) such other persons as SFRS considers appropriate.*** [emphasis added]

Closely linked to this, the requirement to work in partnership with the communities we serve is emphasised within the [Community Empowerment \(Scotland\) Act \(2015\)](#).

Provisions under this Act – such as the requirement for Local Outcome Improvement Plans and Locality Plans to tackle inequalities – jointly commit SFRS to consult with local communities as part of Community Planning Partnerships.

The [2022 Fire and Rescue Framework for Scotland](#) cites as one of its seven priorities the aim of:

“... reflecting the needs of the communities we serve”.

In addition, SFRS will comply with section 149 of the [Equality Act 2010](#) (Public Sector Equality Duty) and the [Equality Act 2010 \(Specific Duties\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2012](#) which require us to consult and engage with people and communities affected by decisions we make and policies, etc. we implement.

2.5 Our Commitment to Consultation

Our commitment to consultation isn't driven solely by the legal requirement to do so. Only by listening to our stakeholders, and by responding to what people tell us, can we truly meet the needs of the communities we serve.

One of the SFRS core values is community safety. Decisions on future service development and provision will be taken with the best outcomes for our communities as a primary consideration. These decisions will be evidence-based, and the views of our stakeholders are a critical part of that evidence. To make good decisions we need to engage people in the decision-making process. We are dedicated to working this way, both with our staff and with our communities. By involving people, including members of the public, we will arrive at better decisions which will make us and the communities we serve more resilient and better placed to face the challenges of the future.

Effective high-quality consultation is part of a process which informs evidence-based decisions. Participating in this process builds capacity within communities and can lead to better, more appropriately delivered services, that are tailored to the needs of our communities.

Gaining valuable information and insight from members of the public and stakeholder partner organisations helps:

- Plan, prioritise and deliver a better service that responds to changing needs;
- Demonstrate our commitment to meeting the needs of communities now and in the future;

- Ensure that limited resources are used effectively and efficiently;
- Identify potential difficulties at an early stage meaning they can be addressed before they escalate;
- Ensure that our decisions are accountable and transparent;
- Inform Human Rights and Equality Impact Assessments to ensure we consider a range of equality and diversity issues.

Whilst we will be guided by the [National Standards for Community Engagement](#), we will also be innovative and aspirational in our approach.

3. STAKEHOLDERS

Our stakeholders are individuals, groups, organisations and communities – of locality or of interest – who may be impacted by an SFRS decision, or who may influence or help shape our decisions. These stakeholders fall broadly into two categories: internal (i.e. SFRS staff); and external. External stakeholders include a wide range of partner organisations.

3.1 Stakeholder List

PICT is responsible for managing the Stakeholder List which contains the contact details (name, organisation, job title and email address) for almost 1400 external stakeholder partners. Further information on the Stakeholder List can be found [here](#).

3.2 Anonymity and Confidentiality

We will treat all contact details of consultees confidentially. This will extend to anonymising their identities and ensuring that their contributions are non-attributable. We will reassure stakeholders that they can speak freely and that their contribution will be treated in confidence. Where we run in-person consultation events, we will consider limiting or prohibiting the use of audio-visual and data recording devices (e.g. cameras,

audio recorders, etc.) which could lead to people being identified. Working with our colleagues in the SFRS Information Governance Team, we will take appropriate steps to ensure that data (including images) is not retained, published or shared online or elsewhere (either internally or externally) in a form that can lead to people being identified without their consent.

3.3 Consent

All our consultation exercises are undertaken on the basis that stakeholders contribute willingly and of their own volition. To secure this understanding and consent, we will detail at the outset of our consultation exercises – in appropriate, accessible, and relatable language – what the consultation exercise is about, why it is being carried out, and how the findings will be used.

3.4 The Public

We are especially keen to hear from members of the public who may not be associated with any community group or organisation, but who may be most directly impacted by the decisions we take.

We recognise that some consultation exercises will not be of relevance to all stakeholders, and we will shape our efforts accordingly. On other issues, we will seek a fuller, community-wide response, where we will look to involve as many stakeholders as possible.

We will dedicate the correct level and type of resource most suitable to the audience we want to hear from. Which stakeholders we approach will vary on a case-by-case basis and will be informed by the subject matter under consideration. When identifying which stakeholders to approach, we will consider whether the consultation is national, local, strategic, operational, or driven by statutory requirements or guidance.

3.5 Public Participation Group

SFRS is supported by a Public Participation Group (or PPG) which allows us to capture a critical public perspective on our consultation approach. This is a group of nine members of the public from across Scotland. The PPG meets regularly to review and assess specific key aspects of our consultation work. It is an useful means to help ensure that our consultation activities are appropriate, relevant, and relatable to people in our communities. The PPG will help ensure that our public consultation is the best it can be, and that we meet the needs of the communities we serve.

4. PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is not appropriate to have a ‘one size fits all’ consultation approach. The scope and circumstances of each consultation exercise will determine the most suitable approach. The following issues will be considered when planning consultation exercises:

4.1 Clear Purpose

When we consult, we will be clear about the purpose of each consultation exercise. Every consultation exercise will have as a starting point a concise statement – a Consultation Mandate – describing why it is being carried out, and how the findings from the consultation will be used. This will be detailed in the Consultation Plan (see [section 4.4](#) below) for each piece of work we do.

4.2 Relevant Information

The level of detail and information provided will depend on the issue being consulted on and the stakeholders we are consulting with. Where the group to be consulted is particularly knowledgeable (e.g. Fire Safety Managers), then more detailed information may be required. However, where our target audience is more generic, we will provide a level of information and in a form which is appropriate to the needs of consultees. For

larger, more strategic consultations, we will develop a Consultation Information Pack, which will provide more information and context as to why we are undertaking this work.

Regardless of the pre-knowledge of our target audience, in any consultation work, we will provide sufficient information to enable consultees to understand the proposal and respond to it in an informed manner. Information we provide will be clear on what the proposals are and who may be affected. We will also give details on alternative options along with any preference(s) as appropriate – and the reasons for these. The questions we ask will be understandable and relatable to consultees. The timescale for the consultation exercise will be clear.

4.3 Active Inclusion

Our consultation work will be designed to capture as broad a spectrum of views as possible. However, we also recognise there may be occasions when we need to hear from a highly specific or niche group. In such cases, we will adapt our consultation approach appropriately, tailoring it to capture voices and perspectives that could be otherwise overlooked.

All of our consultations will be subject to an Equalities and Human Rights Impact Assessment (EHRIA) and, where appropriate, an Island Communities Impact Assessment ([ICIA](#)). These will be developed in liaison with the SFRS Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Team.

In all our consultations, we will reach out to ‘seldom heard’ groups. Wherever possible, we will seek to consult through existing networks and partnerships (e.g. through third sector and community organisations). Our consultations will be published on the SFRS website and will be available in alternative formats as required. To help ensure we are as inclusive as possible, our Public Participation Group (PPG) will provide a broader public perspective which better reflects the communities we serve.

4.4 Consultation Plan

Much of the work involved in capturing the views of our stakeholders takes place **before** the actual consultation exercise. The starting point for all SFRS consultation activities will be a formal Consultation Plan. This is an important part of pre-consultation planning and will provide the framework to ensure a consistently high-quality approach across all the consultation work we do. Our Consultation Plan approach will include a Consultation Mandate, which will summarise briefly the reasons for, and objectives of, each consultation.

This [template document](#) – structured around a simple but effective six-step approach – prompts managers to consider the following points at the start of any consultation exercise: **What?, Why?, Who?, When?, How?** and **Evaluation**. An example of a completed Consultation Plan can be found [here](#).

4.5 Communicating with Stakeholders

In all the public involvement and consultation work we do, we will consider how we communicate with – *and listen to* – our stakeholders. We will consider:

- **who** we want to hear from;
- **why** we want to hear from them;
- **how** and **when** we will engage with them;
- **what** communication methods should be used.

We understand that our diverse communities have different needs and expectations in terms of the information they require. We will consider these needs and how we can adapt both the message and the means of communication so that stakeholders are supported to engage in a way that's best for them. Where we consult on large scale, national or strategic issues, the SFRS Communications and Engagement Team will develop a communications plan to support our public involvement work.

4.6 Consultation Fatigue

SFRS enjoys a strong positive reputation within our local communities. Stakeholders – including the public – trust us to make the right decisions to ensure community safety. However, these relationships must not be jeopardised by poorly targeted consultations. We should consider which stakeholders we approach and how often. It is important to remember that our stakeholders will frequently be contacted for their views by other service providers and agencies. Also, other SFRS consultations may be taking place at the same time. This carries a risk of ‘consultation fatigue’, where stakeholders feel inundated and become less inclined to give us their views. SFRS can reduce the risk of this happening by being aware of when other consultations are taking place, and, if possible, avoiding our consultations being undertaken at the same time. In addition, we will be innovative and creative in using a range of non-traditional consultation techniques available to us.

4.7 The Right Consultation Technique

The methods we use to consult with stakeholders will be determined by the aims and scope of the exercise and the audience being consulted. SFRS has an online Consultation Pack– a toolkit of [different consultation techniques and approaches](#). These include Workshops and Focus Groups, Pop-Ups, Deliberative Events, Walk-Throughs, Public Meetings, etc. PICT staff will support colleagues across SFRS to assess these techniques to determine the most suitable options for the consultation exercise they will be undertaking.

4.8 Timescales

We recognise that high-quality consultation requires sufficient time to plan, resource, undertake, analyse, report and evaluate. We will identify and dedicate this time at the planning stage of every consultation exercise. These time-frames will be set out in the

Consultation Plan for each consultation exercise. All our consultation activities will be designed so that potential consultees have adequate time to be made aware of the consultation, to consider the proposal(s) and to respond.

In considering what time frame is appropriate, we will take into account the nature and potential impact of the proposal(s). We will also consider the needs of those who may require longer to respond (e.g. due to disability, or those whose first language is not English).

While there is no fixed minimum term to consult with members of the public, good practice is to allow twelve weeks. This may be extended if a consultation raises complex issues, or if the consultation is run over a holiday period. In some circumstances, a shorter consultation period may be appropriate.

4.9 Using What Stakeholders Tell Us

We will consult to ensure we have captured a range of views on an issue. The topics we consider may be complex and even contentious. As such, the decisions SFRS takes may be challenging. Regardless of the nature or scale of the issue, we will demonstrate how we have considered stakeholder responses and how these have contributed to the decisions we make. Within this, we will be transparent in showing how key points which emerge from a consultation are recorded and presented for further consideration. This will be reported through an appropriate and agreed governance route.

Where stakeholders raise concerns and issues, we will take reasonable and proportionate steps to address these, using professional judgement, and guided by our statutory responsibilities to take decisions.

4.10 Reporting Back

Findings from our consultation exercises will be communicated to stakeholders in a timely manner. In doing so, we will consider the best, most accessible and appropriate form(s) of communication to meet their needs. In reporting back, we will demonstrate how we have reflected on the issues raised by stakeholders. We will also explain the rationale for the decision(s) we make. Whenever we complete a consultation exercise, we will normally make the following available on the [Consultations page](#) of the SFRS website:

- the findings from the consultation;
- a summary of how these will be used;
- any decisions taken;
- details of next steps in the process.

This will include information on changes that will be made as a result of what we learn from our public consultations.

4.11 Tracking Consultations

All consultations – particularly ones which will inform significant changes to Service delivery or footprint – must be designed and managed carefully. An important part of this is tracking (or ‘monitoring’) our consultation work. Tracking and evaluation are different – but **are** linked. Tracking consultations involves recording of actions and milestones reached.

Tracking consultations gives us an assurance that we are consulting appropriately, and we are mitigating against (particularly legal) challenge. Importantly, by tracking our consultations, we can show our compliance with regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty and our commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion in consultations. A

separate guidance note on tracking consultations is available [here](#). This details the milestones / actions that should be tracked and recorded during any consultation.

4.12 Evaluation

Evaluating consultations involves measuring how successful we are against our original objectives. This will often involve a degree of subjective judgement. All our consultation exercises will be evaluated using an Evaluation Template. This will involve capturing the views and experiences of stakeholders involved in the process. This template and a separate guidance note on evaluation is available [here](#). Specifically, **lessons learned** should form a distinct element of the evaluation stage and should be recorded to inform continuous improvement.

5. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

5.1 Public Involvement and Consultation Team (PICT)

The Public Involvement and Consultation Team is responsible for ensuring that we undertake the highest quality consultation in accordance with the SFRS Consultation Policy. In doing so, the Team will:

- Ensure the principles and commitments in this Policy are adhered to;
- Promote and support consultation best practice throughout SFRS;
- Manage and develop the SFRS Stakeholder List;
- Advise on the key considerations when planning consultations – for example: survey design; stakeholder identification; best methods to use; appropriate timescales, etc.;
- Signpost to stakeholder networks and partnerships;
- Provide training, support, advice and guidance;
- Provide and update appropriate consultation support materials;
- Regularly review the Consultation Policy.

As indicated in [section 1.6](#) above, the SFRS People Directorate will lead on internal consultation (with staff and representative bodies), assisted by PICT and others, as appropriate.

5.2 Local Senior Officers and Functional Management Teams

Local Senior Officers and their local senior management teams will normally be responsible for initiating public consultation in their area. This includes the tracking and evaluation of consultations and will require professional expertise and judgement in deciding the scope and extent of the consultation undertaken. Please refer to [this process map](#) which details the stages of a typical consultation exercise.

The [Consultation Plan](#) is a critical early step in mapping out the stages, roles and responsibilities in undertaking consultation activities. Local Senior Officers should develop a carefully considered Consultation Plan as the foundation for successful consultation work. LSOs will be responsible for determining who within their own management team leads on specific consultation activities.

PICT should be sighted at an early stage on all change proposals, and local managers should also liaise with the Communications Team, Legal Services, People Directorate etc. as appropriate.

Local Senior Officers should monitor the consultation exercise on an ongoing basis. This is important to ensure transparency and accountability and will assist staff to evaluate the success of their efforts. In the case of more complex work, it may be prudent for managers to involve a member of PICT in the planning and delivery of the consultation.

5.3 Project Team

Where appropriate, consultation exercises which focus on national, strategic issues will be supported through a multi-team approach. Such a team will likely involve distinct specialisms, such as People Directorate, Portfolio Office, PICT, Communications, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, Legal Services, etc.

5.4 Role of Public Participation Group

SFRS is supported by a Public Participation Group (PPG). This comprises nine members of the public who meet six times per year. The PPG provides a uniquely *public* perspective on proposals around service development and change. The opinions and insight captured from the PPG will be considered alongside other sources – e.g. CRIM data, online survey findings, PESTLEO analyses, etc. – and will contribute to a comprehensive consultation approach. Our communities will be assured that, by involving the PPG, the public's contribution has made a positive impact on decisions made by the SFRS. Further information on the PPG can be found [here](#).

6. CONCLUSION

As stated above “... only by listening to our stakeholders, and by acting on what people tell us, can we truly meet the needs of the communities we serve.”

This Policy document provides the basis upon which SFRS will undertake our public involvement and consultation work. We recognise that priorities change, just as communities and circumstances develop. To reflect this, this Policy will be subject to formal review every three years. In addition, we will also adapt the Policy to reflect significant changes – internal or external – affecting service delivery. By doing so, and by involving our stakeholders in this process, SFRS can be confident that we have a high quality, appropriate and responsive approach to respond to, the needs of our stakeholders and communities throughout Scotland.

<p>Contact: Public Involvement and Consultation Team, SFRS SFRS.Publicinvolvement@firescotland.gov.uk</p>
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7. ASSOCIATED DOCUMENTS / REFERENCES

[Consultation Pack](#)

[Equality and Diversity Charter](#)

[Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessment – Consultation Policy](#)

[Strategic Plan 2022-2025](#)

[The Consultation Institute, Definition of Consultation](#)

[Local Government Association, Gunning Principles](#)

[Scottish Community Development Centre, National Standards for Community](#)

[Engagement](#)

[Scottish Government, Fire and Rescue Framework for Scotland 2022](#)

[Scottish Government, Island Communities Impact Assessment: guidance – consultation](#)

[Community Empowerment \(Scotland\) Act 2015](#)

[Equality Act 2010](#)

[Equality Act 2010 \(Specific Duties\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2012](#)

[Fire \(Scotland\) Act 2005](#)

[Police and Fire Reform \(Scotland\) Act 2012](#)