
**ROYAL BERKSHIRE
FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE**

CONSULTATION
on the
**INTEGRATED RISK
MANAGEMENT PLAN**



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ROYAL BERKSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

Consultation on the *Integrated Risk Management Plan* 2007/8-2011/12

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Preamble

ORS is pleased to have been commissioned by the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service to facilitate and report its consultation programme on the Integrated Risk Management Plan. We trust that this report will inform the Authority's decisions in order to achieve the best outcome for the future of the fire service in Royal Berkshire.

We should like to thank the following for their support and contribution to the public consultation arrangements: Iain Cox, Chief Fire Officer, Des Tidbury, Brigade Manager Support Services, George Cross, Area Manager Support Services, and Andy Mancey, Group Manager Support Services. All were enthusiastic and helpful in partnering ORS on this project. Senior Fire Authority members also liaised helpfully with ORS on the design of the consultation programme, but at all stages of the project ORS' status as an independent research organisation consulting elected members, stakeholders and the public as fairly as possible was recognised and respected.

Of course, we are also grateful to all the members of the public, stakeholders and elected members who completed questionnaires and/or participated in the forums or focus groups to share their views with us. In the meetings, the participants were patient in listening to background information before engaging in animated question and answer sessions and open discussions.

1. Executive Summary and Conclusions

1.1 COMMISSION

ORS was commissioned by the Royal Berkshire Fire Authority (RBFA) to consult with residents, stakeholders and elected members concerning the proposals to revise certain aspects of fire cover – as detailed in the *Five Year Integrated Risk Management Plan 2007/08-2011/12*.

This report provides a full and independent account of the outcomes of the substantial consultation programme consisting of:

- Eighteen focus groups across the county, including four in Windsor and Wokingham, three in Slough, two in Reading, one in Cookham, one in Crowthorne, one in Maidenhead, one in Sonning and one in Twyford
- Three Elected Members Forums in Reading, Slough and Cookham
- Two Stakeholder Forums in Reading and Windsor
- Self-completion questionnaire distributed widely across the county available on-line via the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service's website.

The Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS) also received a number of representations which it has reported to the RBFA separately.

1.2 SCOPE AND NATURE OF MEETINGS

Although the questionnaire was able to cover all the full range of IRMP issues across various parts of Berkshire, it was not feasible for all the forums and focus groups to cover every topic. Therefore, the forums and focus groups were organised to concentrate on the issues most relevant to them: for example, the Windsor forums and focus groups discussed Windsor and Wokingham; the same Slough meetings discussed Slough, Windsor and Wokingham; and so on.

Hence, here and in the full report, the focus group meetings are reported in groups, dealing in turn with the main issues they discussed.

Throughout, the consultation programme sought to test the acceptability of the proposals by presenting them for discussion by a wide cross section of residents, stakeholders and elected

members in a range of meetings. ORS took great care to ensure that the consultation was inclusive and fair in both explaining the issues carefully and registering people's opinions conscientiously. ORS believes that the findings reported here are soundly based on conscientious consultations with wide cross-sections of people. There is no reason to doubt that when the issues affecting the future of the RBFRS are explained to the public, stakeholders and members the predominant opinions are as described in this report.

1.3 REPORT STRUCTURE

The rest of the Executive Summary is in four main sections:

- Focus groups
- Forums
- Questionnaire Consultation
- Conclusions

The remainder of the report provides a detailed guide to the points of view expressed in the focus groups, forums and questionnaire consultation. Please note that all quotations and bullet points summarising the views expressed report people's *perceptions* rather than objective 'facts' about either the fire service or the IRMP proposals.

FOCUS GROUPS

1.4 WINDSOR AND WOKINGHAM PROPOSALS

1.4.1 FOUR WINDSOR FOCUS GROUPS

Composition

The four focus groups in Windsor included 33 people from a wide range of backgrounds – including an ex-RBFRS fire-fighter and an ex-volunteer fire-fighter from Australia. The meetings concentrated mainly on the proposal not to crew the Windsor fire engine between the hours 20.00 to 0800.

IRMP Principles

In the Windsor focus groups there was broad support for the principles that RBFRS resources should be used flexibly to target known risk, but there was some caution about the idea that the RBFA should pursue value for money in governing the service.

Windsor on Windsor

In contrast to the stakeholder forums (see below), the four Windsor focus groups were tolerant of the proposal for Windsor. It would be an exaggeration to say that they endorsed it enthusiastically, for they had a number of concerns and certainly felt attached to the status quo as something they had relied upon for a long time. Nonetheless, although they acknowledged that they were not keen to see the night cover removed from the local fire station, there was a *clear majority in all the groups* that accepted that the proposal was broadly reasonable in the light of the evidence in the IRMP document.

The main concerns expressed about the proposal were:

- Response times might be lengthened
- Slough crews might be required elsewhere – raising questions about whether other satisfactory cover could be provided quickly enough for Windsor.

While expressing these concerns, the respondents generally concluded that:

- Windsor is a very safe area
- There is little for the Windsor fire-fighters to do at night
- Judgements about the deployment of resources have to be made on the basis of relative risk – based upon reliable historical data
- Districts within Berkshire should not adopt an only my backyard is important standpoint
- Wokingham needs to have additional fire safety resources
- Prevention and protection measures can make a significant contribution to public safety
- The Fire Authority should have regard to the need to provide value for money by limiting Council Tax rises.

Of course, not everyone was equally sure of all these points; and there were some participants who emphatically rejected many or even all of them in arguing for the retention of the Windsor fire engine, more or less at any cost – but the latter were clearly in the minority.

In fact, all the Windsor focus groups showed a majority in favour of the IRMP proposal. In one focus group of nine the majority accepting the proposal as broadly reasonable was 5 to 4; but in the others those in favour formed clearer majorities. In one group of nine the majority in favour was eight to one; in a group of ten the majority in favour was eight to two; and in the smallest group of five the majority in favour of the RBFA proposal was four to one.

There were some differences of opinion about whether the alternative cover should come from Slough fire station or from a night-time RDS service in Windsor – but the balance of opinion clearly favoured cover from Slough’s whole-time crew.

Windsor on Wokingham

Some Windsor residents were very concerned about the currently inadequate fire cover in Wokingham – and this was a material influence on their views of the Windsor proposal. There was no one who felt the Wokingham situation should not be improved – but those who opposed the use of the Windsor night-time crew tended to declare that Wokingham should pay for its own additional fire cover.

1.4.2 THREE SLOUGH FOCUS GROUPS

Composition

The three focus groups in Slough included 25 people from a wide range of backgrounds – including one group of BME residents. The meetings all concentrated on the proposal that Slough should provide cover for Windsor between the hours 20.00 to 0800.

IRMP Principles

Two of the three Slough focus groups discussed whether the RBFA should use its resources flexibly to assess and target risk (by balancing prevention, protection and response), while also pursuing value for money for Council Tax payers. The idea that varying risks should be assessed and targeted with flexible resources was endorsed readily; and, while respondents stressed that they do not mind paying for the fire service, there was agreement that the RBFA should pursue value for money.

Slough on Windsor

One group of six was unanimous that the proposal to transfer night-time resources from Windsor to daytime use in Wokingham was positive. A group of twelve people was more divided – with six people in favour and the others objecting on the grounds that Windsor would object to the proposal and/or that Slough station should not have to cover Windsor. In the third BME group with seven participants, the majority in favour was six to one. Although one group was divided on the feasibility and desirability of the Windsor proposal, overall the Slough groups were clearly in favour – while recognising that their judgements were influenced by the need to control the overall fire service budget.

1.4.3 FOUR WOKINGHAM FOCUS GROUPS

Composition

The four focus groups in Wokingham included 32 people from a wide range of backgrounds. The meetings concentrated mainly on the proposal to improve fire cover at Wokingham by redeploying night-time resources from Windsor, but they also discussed the possible repositioning of fire cover in the Sonning/Wargrave/Twyford area.

IRMP Principles

The Wokingham groups broadly supported the principles that RBFRS resources should be used flexibly to target known risk. They also supported preventive measures through public education and Home Fire Risk Assessments.

Participants understood the financial constraints that govern the running of the fire service, with the majority agreeing that the RBFA should pursue value for money.

There were many comments about the apparent lack of communication between RBFRS and the general public. It was felt that this leads to a lack of awareness of the range of services offered and preventive and protective measures.

Wokingham on Wokingham

All participants in Wokingham warmly welcomed the potential improvements to fire cover in the town, but a couple of them did not endorse the redeployment of resources from Windsor to facilitate the change (see below). Participants were pleased with the Wokingham proposal for the following reasons:

- Response times would be improved for Wokingham
- The proposal takes account of the intention to build 22,000 new homes in the Wokingham-Bracknell area
- Crewing problems would be solved.

Wokingham on Windsor

The Wokingham groups acknowledged that they could not be completely impartial about the Windsor changes, and they appreciated that the Windsor proposal may be poorly received there. Nonetheless, the majority of Wokingham residents endorsed the proposal for the following reasons:

- Windsor (particularly the affected area) is very low-risk
- The Windsor engine is used comparatively infrequently at night meaning that, in their opinion
 - The impact at Windsor would not be great
 - The lack of use of the engine and crew is a waste of RBFRS resources

- The proximity of Slough fire station to Windsor.

The following concerns were also expressed:

- Providing cover to Windsor from Slough could worsen Slough's own cover during the night (although most recognised that Slough would not have to make the night-time journey into Windsor frequently)
- Future development in Windsor could increase risk
- If staff are to be re-deployed from Windsor to Wokingham, it must be done sympathetically
- There is potential for comeback on the RBFA if a fatal incident occurs during the period of reduced cover at Windsor.

With regard to the options for night-time cover at Windsor, the majority chose the provision of cover from Slough rather than a Windsor RDS service for the following reasons:

- The reliability of 24-hour crewing (as at Slough)
- The cost-effectiveness of using an existing service rather than establishing an RDS service at Windsor
- Good road links between the two towns
- The difficulties experienced by the FRS in recruiting and retaining RDS staff.

Further, establishing an RDS crew in Windsor was seen by several as a potential waste of resources given that:

- The RDS crew could be unavailable at certain times, meaning the Slough engine would be mobilised anyway
- Slough would be able to reach Windsor in the same time as an RDS crew because of the five minute delay
- The frequency of night calls at Windsor is low.

Three of the four Wokingham groups were unanimous the RBFA should go ahead with the removal of full-time night cover from Windsor and transfer the resources to Wokingham. In fact, only one participant was firmly against the proposal (despite agreeing that improved fire cover is desirable for Wokingham).

There was full agreement in three of the four groups that Windsor's night cover should come from Slough, rather than from an RDS service; and most in the fourth group were of the view.

1.4.4 SONNING FOCUS GROUP

Composition

The focus group in Sonning included ten people from a wide range of backgrounds and of a wide range of ages, all of whom live in the village of Sonning. The meeting concentrated mainly on the proposal to close Sonning and Wargrave fire stations and open a new community fire station at Twyford, but the group also discussed the potential changes at Reading and the proposed improvement of fire cover at Wokingham by redeploying night-time resources from Windsor.

IRMP Principles

Participants at Sonning felt that RBFA should use its resources flexibly to assess and target risk (by balancing prevention, protection and response).

Sonning on Wokingham and Windsor

The Sonning group felt that fire cover must be improved in Wokingham; and they thought it was fair to redeploy resources from Windsor to Wokingham as a fair means of achieving this – though they said that *selling it to people in Windsor may be another issue!*

All agreed that night-time cover in Windsor should be provided from Slough, given that the full-time crew *can get there that quickly* and that *the relief road is straight in...You can drive straight into Windsor town.*

1.4.5 MAIDENHEAD FOCUS GROUP

Composition

The Maidenhead group included six people from a range of backgrounds and ages, all of whom live in Maidenhead. The meeting concentrated on the potential closure of Sonning and Wargrave fire stations and opening of a new community fire station at Twyford; the possible appliance changes at Cookham and the Wokingham/Windsor proposals.

IRMP Principles

Participants at Maidenhead endorsed the flexible use of resources to target risk, as well as the balancing of prevention, protection and response. The group referred to a lack of RBFRS advertising about the work it does and the services it provides – which leads to a lack of public awareness.

Maidenhead on Wokingham and Windsor

The Maidenhead group was unanimous in its support of improved fire cover at Wokingham – and participants viewed the redeployment of resources from Windsor as a better use of resources.

Although endorsing the redeployment of resources from Wokingham to Windsor, the Maidenhead group was sympathetic to the Windsor situation. However, it was recognised that those who will receive a slower response in Windsor are at very low risk of fire. In order to reduce risk even further it was suggested that the RBFRS should proactively undertake education and prevention work there.

There was unanimous agreement at Maidenhead that, if the proposal is implemented, night-time cover at Windsor should be provided from Slough. A Windsor RDS crew would be needed very infrequently and the Slough crew would be more cost-effective.

1.4.6 CROWTHORNE FOCUS GROUP

Composition

The focus group in Crowthorne included 10 people from a wide range of backgrounds and ages, all of whom lived in Crowthorne. The meeting concentrated mainly on the proposal to trial response to parts of Crowthorne from Camberley fire station, but the group also discussed the potential changes at Sonning, Wargrave and Twyford, as well as the proposed improvement of fire cover at Wokingham by redeploying night-time resources from Windsor.

IRMP Principles

The Crowthorne group supported the principle that RBFRS resources should be used flexibly to target known risk. They also expressed a great deal of support for work in the area of prevention and protection. However, several participants commented on the lack of communication between RBFRS and the general public – which they said leads to a lack of awareness of the services offered.

Crowthorne on Wokingham and Windsor

Crowthorne respondents agreed that fire cover must be improved in Wokingham, particularly given the growth of the area and the difficulties involved in recruiting and retaining RDS firefighters there.

The Crowthorne group also accepted the transfer of resources from Windsor to improve fire cover at Wokingham. The group believed that *a smaller number will lose out and a bigger number will benefit...that's what risk management is all about.*

In terms of the options for night-time cover in Windsor, most tended to choose cover from Slough over an RDS service because of the proximity of Slough to Windsor and the difficulties experienced by the FRS in recruiting RDS staff.

1.4.7 READING (Caversham Road) GROUP

Composition

The small focus group in Reading (Caversham Road) included four people from the immediate vicinity of the Caversham Road fire station. The meeting concentrated mainly on the proposals for Reading, but also included discussion on the possible changes at Wokingham and Windsor.

IRMP Principles

The Reading (Caversham Road) group agreed that the RBFA should use its resources flexibly to assess and target risk by balancing, prevention, protection and response. There was much support for preventive and protective measures. While stressing that they are happy to pay for the service, there was agreement that the RBFA should pursue value for money.

Reading (Caversham Road) on Wokingham and Windsor

The Reading (Caversham Road) group was strongly of the view that Wokingham is in need of better fire cover and accepted the redeployment of resources from Windsor to assist this improvement. They described the proposal as *the greatest good for the greatest number*. While understanding Windsor's concerns, participants felt that the affected areas are low risk. It was also suggested that RBFRS should offer Home Fire Risk Assessments in the areas.

The group members felt that alternative cover from Slough was better than the RDS option – due to the proximity of the town, good road links, difficulties recruiting RDS staff and the cost-effectiveness of using Slough.

1.5 COOKHAM PROPOSALS

1.5.1 COOKHAM FOCUS GROUP

Composition

The focus group in Cookham included eight people from a wide range of backgrounds – all of whom live in the Cookham area. The meeting concentrated solely on replacing Cookham's single fire engine with two off-road vehicles that can offer support elsewhere in Berkshire when required.

IRMP Principles

The Cookham group accepted the principles of IRMP and agreed that the RBFA should use its resources flexibly to assess

and target risk by balancing, prevention, protection and response.

A minority of participants expressed concern that:

- Elected members are making decisions about issues such as fire cover and resources
- Proposals (such as those for Cookham) are formulated behind closed doors.

Cookham on Cookham

After a long debate on the issues, participants at Cookham were broadly supportive of the proposal for their area (although a minority had some important objections).

Several had heard rumours in the press that Cookham fire station was to close and were relieved to hear that a presence would remain in the village – which was unanimously agreed to be important. Respondents also questioned whether the existing RDS crew would remain, and were very supportive of the fact that they would.

Aside from the retention of the RDS crew, the majority saw the following as the main benefits of the proposal for Cookham:

- Having the specialist off-road vehicle at Cookham will not only cater for the needs of the area (which can flood), but will also provide flexibility across Berkshire
- Cookham could become somewhat of a 'Centre of Excellence' for the entire county of Berkshire (it was suggested that, as the Fire and Rescue Service is looking long-term at basing specialist vehicles at Cookham, the station may be less vulnerable to closure in the future)
- A smaller fire engine could provide firefighters with better access to certain parts of Cookham
- If the cost of running Cookham fire station is reduced by providing the two smaller vehicles, *it is more likely that the station will stay. A station that is heavily costly could be more of a target when looking at cutting resources...*
- The cost savings associated with the proposal would allow a redeployment of resources into prevention and protection – in the high-risk areas of Reading and Slough for example. Further, although it was acknowledged that Cookham is low-risk, participants suggested that some of the money be spent on such activities in their area to 'soften the blow' of losing the large appliance

Despite the above, it was clear that a minority of participants were resistant to the changes, stemming from the fact that they are extremely happy with the service currently provided

from Cookham fire station. The main concerns highlighted by this minority were:

- The lightweight engine could be inadequate in the event of a large fire
- Back-up appliances from Maidenhead may have to come to Cookham on a more regular basis to provide cover for the lightweight engine
- If both Maidenhead engines are at another incident, Cookham may have to wait longer for back-up, which could be potentially more serious because of the reduced capacity of the lightweight appliance
- The perceived loss of Cookham's 'local' service in that *these other two [appliances] are not for Cookham, they are just being housed here to help everybody else*.

For the participants that expressed concerns, this proposal represents the 'thin end of the wedge' – the first step towards the total removal of fire cover from Cookham.

Overall, of the eight participants, two remained firmly against the IRMP proposal for Cookham at the end of the session. The remaining six approved the RBFA proposal to replace Cookham's single fire engine with two off-road vehicles that can offer support elsewhere in Berkshire when required.

1.5.2 THREE SLOUGH FOCUS GROUPS

Composition and Estimates of Risk

The Slough focus groups and their estimates of fire death risk have been outlined in the Windsor section above.

Slough on Cookham

Two of the three Slough focus groups discussed the Cookham proposal to replace the current single fire engine with two off-road vehicles (including one light-weight fire engine) that can also provide support elsewhere when needed. Both groups approved the idea – though some members had reservations about the desirability of basing both off-road vehicles in eastern Berkshire. They asked:

Could you not manage with just one off-road fire engine there – do you need two if it is such a safe area?

Cookham is not very central in Berkshire – so why keep them both there?

The Slough respondents were happy with keeping the fire station, using existing resources and keeping a mobile vehicle in Cookham, but they stressed their reservations about the location of the two specialist vehicles for Berkshire.

1.5.3 MAIDENHEAD FOCUS GROUP

Composition and Background Views

The composition and background views of the Maidenhead group have been outlined in the Windsor and Wokingham section above.

Maidenhead on Cookham

For participants in Maidenhead, the proposal for Cookham is an economical and practical solution that offers greater flexibility across Berkshire and a more appropriate rescue facility for the Maidenhead/Cookham area.

1.6 READING (DEE ROAD) PROPOSALS

1.6.1 DEE ROAD AREA FOCUS GROUP

Composition

Eight diverse people attended the focus group drawn from the immediate vicinity of the Dee Road station.

Dee Road on Dee Road

The Dee Road area residents were cautious about approving the closure of their very local fire station. They were concerned about a range of issues:

- Where alternative cover might come from for West Tilehurst – and how quickly?
- Value for money
- How real would be the benefits to the rest of Reading?
- How the Dee Road site might be used if vacated by the RBFRS?

Several residents perceived that the general reason for the proposals was to more accurately target risk in the general Reading city centre area – and they accepted that the move to Caversham Road would achieve this.

On the basis of the comments above, it will not seem surprising that the members of the focus group were divided equally about whether it is reasonable to close the Dee Road fire station while moving the appliance to Caversham Road. Four were opposed, but four found the idea acceptable. In other words, the outcome was not clear-cut.

The evidence is that many informed respondents would remain opposed to the proposal; but about as many could be persuaded that it is a reasonable outcome – given the balance of risks in different parts of Reading.

1.6.2 CAVERSHAM ROAD AREA FOCUS GROUP

Composition and Background Views

The composition and background views of the Caversham Road group have been outlined in the Windsor and Wokingham section above.

Caversham Road on Dee Road

The changes to Dee Road were accepted by the Caversham Road group; participants were comfortable that the proposal had been developed by the 'experts'.

With specific regard to the Tilehurst area, participants recognised that *a lot of it is not built-up area anyway...it's not densely populated in the way Reading is*. However, they also acknowledged that those living in the area may not endorse the proposal so readily. It was suggested that all 6,600 residents who will no longer receive a response in ten minutes may benefit from a Home Fire Risk Assessment – which could go some way to negating what they saw as the adverse effects of the proposal for those living in the area.

1.6.3 SONNING FOCUS GROUP

Composition and Background Views

The composition and background views of the Sonning focus group have been outlined above, in the Windsor and Wokingham section.

Sonning on Dee Road

Whilst recognising the potential concerns of those living in Tilehurst, participants felt that *you can't argue with the maths...more people will benefit and the Fire Service is supposed to serve the whole community not just Tilehurst*. Indeed, they were very positive about the potential developments in Reading, acknowledging that Tilehurst is *a low-risk area... responsible people live there*. It was suggested that Tilehurst residents should be offered Home Fire Risk Assessments in order to reduce the potential impact of longer response times.

1.6.4 TWYFORD FOCUS GROUP

Composition

The focus group in Twyford included seven people from a range of backgrounds and of a range of ages, all of whom live in the village of Twyford. The meeting concentrated mainly on the proposals for Sonning, Wargrave and Twyford, but also included discussion on the possible changes at Reading and the proposed improvement of fire cover at Wokingham by redeploying night-time resources from Windsor.

IRMP Principles

Participants at Twyford generally agreed that the RBFA should use its resources flexibly to assess and target risk by balancing, prevention, protection and response and they endorsed the promotion of preventive and protective measures. Participants said they are happy to pay for the service, but agreed that the RBFA should pursue value for money.

Twyford on Dee Road and Caversham Road

Participants at Twyford fully endorsed the proposals to redevelop the Reading (Caversham Road) fire station. The closure of Dee Road and the relocation of the appliance to Caversham Road was also acceptable. The group felt the location of Caversham Road is good and they were pleased to think most of the town is benefiting from enhanced cover. There was some discussion about possible concerns in Tilehurst – so it was suggested that RBFRS offer Home Fire Risk Assessments to residents there.

1.7 READING (CAVERSHAM RD) PROPOSALS

1.7.1 CAVERSHAM ROAD AREA FOCUS GROUP

Composition and Background Views

The composition and background views of the Caversham Road focus group have been outlined in the Windsor and Wokingham section.

Caversham Road on Caversham Road

The redevelopment of the Caversham Road facility as a community fire station was warmly welcomed by participants in the area because the current building is in need of renovation and the existing site is a good location.

The concept of a community fire station was positively viewed by participants. Such a facility would, it was felt, be ideally located in the area and would be well-used, providing it is sufficiently advertised to the community and that the public is reassured that the facility will not interfere with fire-fighters' daily activities.

1.7.2 DEE ROAD AREA FOCUS GROUP

Composition, Risk and IRMP

The composition and background views of the Dee Road area focus group have been outlined above.

Dee Road on Caversham Road

There were some objections to the proposal to expand and 're-brand' the Caversham Road station as a community fire station.

However, the great majority of respondents approved of the Caversham Road changes, saying that they believed strongly in education. Only one person out of seven was opposed to the Caversham Road changes.

1.8 SONNING AND WARGRAVE PROPOSALS

1.8.1 SONNING FOCUS GROUP

Composition and Background Views

The composition and background views of the Sonning focus group have been outlined above, in the Windsor and Wokingham section.

Sonning on Sonning and Wargrave Proposals

The group accepted the closure of its local fire station (as well as that at Wargrave) given that the appliances are not always available, the buildings need renovation, Twyford is very close to both Sonning and Wargrave, and many RDS staff at Wargrave come from Twyford. The group also agreed that Twyford is the most appropriate location for a new fire station – particularly because of the good road access in and out of the village.

A number of participants expressed regret about the loss of their local station – because it is part of the history and character of the village, as well as a feature that provides a sense of safety and security for the residents. However, the participants accepted that these points do not warrant rejecting the changes. One person, though, was concerned that the RDS staff living in Woodley (who currently cover Sonning) will no longer be eligible for RDS duty at Twyford because of the five-minute rule.

Participants were positive about a community fire station at Twyford; they felt this would improve links between the RBFRS and the community. However, the group said people must be encouraged to use the new facility and reassured that their doing so will not impede the work of operational staff there.

1.8.2 TWYFORD FOCUS GROUP

Composition and Background Views

The composition and background views of the Twyford focus group have been outlined above, in the Reading section.

Twyford on Sonning and Wargrave

All of those who attended the group at Twyford were in favour of having a community fire station in the village. The location of a new station was thought to be ideal – particularly because of the village's infrastructure and its proximity to both Sonning

and Wargrave. Participants thought the development would make people feel safer and raise the profile of prevention. It was felt that the new station could lead to a 'culture change' as people were encouraged to contact the RBFRS more. It was strongly suggested that RBFRS should go proactively into the community – to make themselves known to the community so that people feel comfortable in developing stronger links with their FRS.

The group felt the proposal for Sonning and Wargrave is reasonable and they felt that objections to the proposal could be overcome.

1.8.3 THREE SLOUGH FOCUS GROUPS

Composition, Risk and IRMP

The composition and background views of the Slough focus groups have been outlined above, in the Slough section.

Slough on Sonning and Wargrave Proposals

Two of the three Slough focus groups discussed the related Sonning and Wargrave proposals to close Sonning fire station while providing cover from Reading's Wokingham Road and building a new RDS Community Fire Station at Twyford before closing the Wargrave fire station. The proposals were generally very readily approved – because Twyford is a higher risk area, is central and has local RDS personnel.

However, some participants pointed out that the proposals could be interpreted as transferring some fire service resources away from higher risk areas rather than relying on RDS crews in low risk areas.

1.8.4 FOUR WOKINGHAM FOCUS GROUPS

Composition and Background Views

The composition and background views of the Wokingham focus groups have been outlined above, in the Windsor and Wokingham section.

Wokingham on Sonning and Wargrave Proposals

Three of the four Wokingham groups (and five out of seven participants in the fourth) were in full agreement with the proposals to close Sonning and Wargrave fire stations and open a new RDS community fire station in Twyford. Participants accepted the proposal because Sonning and Wargrave are both low-risk areas close to Twyford, they have dilapidated fire stations, and they cannot ensure RDS availability – while Twyford has grown considerably and is more likely than the other two areas to expand in the future.

Most participants welcomed the idea that Twyford would have a community fire station. They said it would help RBFRS to develop relations with the community in Twyford and to disseminate safety messages widely and effectively. But participants wanted to be assured that additional fire station activities and facilities will not jeopardise emergency response activities. Finally, it was said that RBFRS should work on attracting all sectors of the community to the facility – not only the low-risk groups.

A couple of participants welcomed the development at Twyford, but felt it was undesirable to close two fire stations in Sonning and Wargrave. They suggested building a more basic fire station at Twyford, whilst keeping those at Sonning and Wargrave.

1.8.5 CROWTHORNE FOCUS GROUP

Composition and Background Views

The composition and background views of the Crowthorne focus group have been outlined above, in the Windsor and Wokingham section.

Crowthorne on Sonning and Wargrave

The proposal to close Sonning and Wargrave fire stations and establish a new community facility at Twyford was endorsed by Crowthorne respondents, not only because *Sonning and Wargrave Fire Stations are very old and the cost of repairs and upgrades would be high*, but also because it will be easier to recruit RDS fire-fighters.

The prospect of a community fire station for Twyford was generally welcomed – particularly because increased contact between the RBFRS and the community may attract people to RDS fire-fighting. Participants did, however, highlight the fact that people still see fire stations as unwelcoming and that a change in attitude is required if people are to use their local fire station for activities or advice.

1.8.6 MAIDENHEAD FOCUS GROUP

Composition and Background Views

The composition and background views of the Maidenhead focus group have been outlined above, in the Windsor and Wokingham section.

Maidenhead on Sonning and Wargrave Proposals

Participants at Maidenhead generally agreed with the proposal to close Sonning and Wargrave fire stations and establish a new community fire station in Twyford – providing changes are made in a timely fashion so that the residents of the villages are not adversely affected in any way.

1.9 CROWTHORNE PROPOSALS

1.9.1 CROWTHORNE FOCUS GROUP

Composition and Background Views

The composition and background views of the Crowthorne focus group have been outlined above, in the Wokingham and Windsor section.

Crowthorne on Crowthorne

Several members of the Crowthorne group said they had read press reports of the imminent closure of their local fire station – so they were relieved to hear of the proposal to trial response from Camberley to the south of the town. The group endorsed the trial, even questioning why such cross-border response is not already in place. However, the trial was accepted on the proviso that it is regularly reviewed and assessed to take account of issues such as new development in the area, and whether or not it is actually yielding success.

Although there was no concern about the trial per se, there were reservations about the potential implications should it be successful. Participants foresaw success leading to an extension of the trial further into Crowthorne – leaving the station more vulnerable to closure (particularly if RBFRS achieves its ultimate aim of providing 24-hour crewing at Wokingham). However, it should be noted that several members of the group were not averse to the closure of Crowthorne fire station in the future if it could be proved that adequate fire cover could be provided from elsewhere.

Nonetheless, the discussion led some to express concerns about the centralisation of services. There was concern that the removal of the station at Crowthorne could leave the town isolated in the event of a large incident. Some also mentioned that reducing the number of call-outs for RDS staff at Crowthorne will reduce their remuneration.

FORUM DISCUSSIONS

1.10 MEMBERS' FORUMS

Location and Composition

Initially, two members' forums were organised by RBFRS, at Reading and Slough, but because so few attended both these meetings an additional forum was arranged at Cookham. One Bracknell elected member attended the Reading forum; three Windsor members attended the Slough meeting; and five attended at Cookham (including three members who had already attended the Slough forums).

Reading Forum

The single elected member who attended the Reading members' forum meeting was impressed by the approach the RBFA has taken to its risk management planning. The member was reassured by both the principles and the proposals – and observed in particular that the Windsor proposal seems just like *common sense*.

Slough and Cookham Members' Forums

Windsor Proposal

The Slough and Cookham forums expressed clear opposition to the removal of night-time cover at the Windsor fire station. The members attending had considered the issues before the meeting and attended to listen to the RBFRS case before expressing their opposition. The main concerns expressed about the proposal were that Windsor:

- Response times from Slough will lengthen – particularly because of the possibility of evening congestion on the link road from Slough
- Has a unique historical and cultural heritage with large numbers of tourists.

They also argued that:

- There is no justification for using the council tax from one area to benefit another
- Windsor should not have a reduced service in order to benefit Wokingham
- Wokingham is a developing borough and should generate council tax sufficient to pay fully for its own fire service
- The marginal cost of keeping full night cover at Windsor could be raised from the council tax precept.

The members also rejected the 'intermediate' option of replacing the Windsor night-time crew with a Windsor-based RDS service – on the grounds that it would have a longer response time than the current crew.

Cookham Proposal

The elected members were concerned about RBFRS's off-road vehicles being concentrated in Cookham, but despite these reservations they agreed that the RBFA proposal for Cookham should be endorsed as a reasonable solution.

Crowthorne Proposal

The members also approved the prospect of using Surrey FRS' whole-time fire engines (from Camberley) to cover southern border areas (Yorktown, College Town and Sandhurst) of Crowthorne for a two-year trial period. They were concerned that this change might lead to the closure of the Crowthorne station in the longer term, but they did not oppose the change.

1.11 STAKEHOLDER FORUMS

Location and Composition

Two stakeholder forums were held with residents' groups and business, voluntary and statutory sector stakeholders – one in Reading and the other in Windsor. The former was attended by four people while the latter was attended by 15, reflecting both the interest in the Windsor issues and also the fact that RBFRS was careful to ensure that known critics of the IRMP proposal for Windsor were invited to the meeting.

READING FORUM

Caversham Road Proposal

There was a general acceptance that Caversham should become a community fire station – on the general grounds that preventive work is valuable and the fire station *needs bringing into the 21 Century*. The proposal for an additional fire engine at Caversham was also accepted readily, subject to some reservations about city road congestion possibly slowing response times.

Dee Road Proposal

There was a general acceptance that moving the Dee Road fire engine (closing Dee Road) would improve response to Reading centre without jeopardising west Tilehurst – given that it is a low risk area and has alternative cover available from Caversham Road, Whitley Wood and Pangbourne.

Sonning and Wargrave Proposals

The stakeholder forum also considered and approved the related proposals to close Sonning RDS fire station, provide cover from Reading's Wokingham Road station, and then build new RDS Community Fire Station at Twyford before closing Wargrave RDS fire station.

Windsor Proposal

While the Reading stakeholder forum recognised the local sensibilities in Windsor, the members thought the proposal is broadly reasonable on the grounds that:

- Windsor is a low risk area
- Strategic decisions should take account of varying risk levels to target resources most effectively
- Ending cross-border responsibilities into South Buckinghamshire increases Slough station's capacities.

The participants also agreed that it would be preferable for Windsor's alternative cover to come from Slough rather than from a Windsor RDS crew.

WINDSOR FORUM

The Windsor forum expressed overwhelming support for the retention of night-time cover at the Windsor fire station. The main concerns expressed about the proposal to remove night-time cover were that Windsor:

- Will have slower response times because of congestion on the link road from Slough
- Has a unique historical and cultural heritage
- Has many older hotels and guest houses
- Is at risk from terrorist attack
- Lies beneath the Heathrow flight path
- Should not suffer in order to benefit Wokingham.

One participant argued that the response data published by RBFRS is misleading in understating the calls on the Windsor pump.

In contrast, a small minority expressed the view that the proposal is both reasonable and safe, and that the RBFA has a duty to make the best use of its resources.

When the balance of opinion was assessed at the end of the meeting, the majority against the proposal was 11 to 2 – with 13 people voting (out of 15 attending).

QUESTIONNAIRE CONSULTATION

1.12 QUANTITATIVE CONSULTATION

1.11.1 DISTRIBUTION AND RESPONSE

Questionnaires are often associated with statistical surveys but in this case a questionnaire was used as a quantitative consultation instrument – and thousands of copies were distributed across Berkshire by the RBFRS. A total of 453 completed questionnaires were returned to ORS, 308 by post and 145 on-line.

In terms of the overall consultation programme undertaken it is fair to say that the questionnaire provides the least reliable information about public views – for two main reasons. First, most participants were necessarily relatively uninformed of the pros and cons of the proposals – unless they had read the IRMP draft very carefully. Second, the number of respondents from each local authority area was low. With such a poor response rate, the sample cannot be described as representative of the general population (see chapter 2).

1.11.2 MAIN FINDINGS

Principles of IRMP

Almost seven in ten respondents think RBFA should target its resources towards risk areas in principle; and only one in twelve disagrees. The division of opinion on the principle of achieving value for money is much closer, but there is still a majority in favour.

Wokingham Fire Cover

There is overwhelming support from respondents for improving fire cover to Wokingham by moving to whole-time crewing – both at the all-Berkshire and Wokingham District Council levels. The Wokingham sub-area results are based upon 32 respondents from the district.

Cookham Off-road Vehicles

Respondents in Windsor and Maidenhead support the Cookham proposal with an absolute majority, but across Berkshire the position is almost exactly reversed – probably due to reservations about locating both off-road vehicles in eastern Berkshire (a point that also came up in the focus groups). The Windsor and Maidenhead sub-area results are based upon 123 respondents from the borough.

Crowthorne Cover

An absolute majority of respondents across Berkshire disagree with the proposal to cover parts of Crowthorne from Camberley for a trial two-year period. However, more than seven in ten of the Bracknell Forest area respondents agree with the proposal. The Bracknell Forest sub-area results are based upon only 18 respondents from the district.

Wargrave, Twyford and Sonning

Across Berkshire, opinion is broadly split on the Wargrave, Twyford and Sonning proposals. However, almost three-quarters of Wokingham area respondents agree with the proposal. The Wokingham sub-area results are based upon only 32 respondents from the district.

Reading Caversham Road

Across Berkshire more than eight in ten respondents support the replacement of Caversham Road fire station, and in the Reading borough area the proportion in favour is more than nine in ten. The Reading sub-area results are based upon 136 respondents from the borough.

Reading Dee Road

Across Berkshire nearly two-thirds of respondents disagree with the closure of Dee Road, and in the Reading borough area the proportion against is more than nine in ten. The Reading sub-area results are based upon 136 respondents from the borough.

Windsor Night Cover

The results across Berkshire and in Windsor and Maidenhead are very similar – with nearly nine in ten disagreeing with the removal of the night crew at both the county and borough levels. The Windsor and Maidenhead sub-area results are based upon only 123 respondents from the borough – a surprisingly low figure given that one Windsor area resident (a dedicated critic of the Windsor proposals) obtained 100 copies of the questionnaire for his distribution.

CONCLUSIONS

1.13 BALANCING OPINIONS

1.12.1 SUMMARY TABLE

The distribution of opinion is shown below in a very summary table.

PROPOSAL	APPROVED	NEITHER APPROVED NOR OPPOSED	OPPOSED
Wokingham	Four Wokingham Focus Groups Four Windsor Focus Groups Three Slough Focus Groups Reading (Caversham Road), Crowthorne, Maidenhead and Sonning Focus Groups Reading Members' Forum Questionnaire consultation (all-Berkshire and Wokingham District)		
Windsor	Four Wokingham Focus Groups Four Windsor Focus Groups Three Slough Focus Groups Reading (Caversham Road), Crowthorne, Maidenhead and Sonning Focus Groups Reading Members' Forum Reading Stakeholder Forum		Slough and Cookham Members' Forums Windsor Stakeholder Forum Questionnaire consultation (all-Berkshire and Windsor and Maidenhead District)

PROPOSAL	APPROVED	NEITHER	OPPOSED
Reading (Caversham Road)	Reading (Caversham Road), Reading (Dee Road), Sonning and Twyford Focus Groups Reading Members' Forum Reading Stakeholder Frm Questionnaire consultation (all-Berkshire and Reading Borough)		
Reading (Dee Road)	Reading (Caversham Road), Sonning and Twyford Focus Groups Reading Members' Forum Reading Stakeholder Frm	Reading (Dee Road) Focus Group	Questionnaire consultation (all-Berkshire and Reading Borough)
Cookham	Cookham Focus Group Slough Focus Groups (2/3) Maidenhead Focus Group Reading Members' Forum Slough and Cookham Members' Forums Questionnaire consultation (Windsor & Maidenhead)		Questionnaire consultation (all-Berkshire)
Sonning/Wargrave/Twyford	Sonning, Twyford, Crowthorne and Maidenhead Focus Groups Slough Focus Groups (2/3) Four Wokingham Focus Groups Reading Members' Forum Reading Stakeholder Frm Questionnaire consultation (Wokingham District)	Questionnaire consultation (all-Berkshire)	
Crowthorne	Crowthorne Focus Group Reading Members' Forum Slough and Cookham Members' Forums Questionnaire consultation (Bracknell Forest)		Questionnaire consultation (all-Berkshire)

1.13.1 NEED FOR INTERPRETATION

The summary table above needs to be interpreted on the basis of the relative weights attached to each element of the consultation programme. The researchers recommend that the focus groups are the best guide to how informed 'ordinary members of the public' might react to the proposals when explained within the context of the IRMP strategy – because the focus groups were inclusive, not self-selecting, relatively well-informed and fairly conducted.

There are at least three reasons for thinking that the Windsor stakeholders' forum, and the Slough and Cookham members' forums, exaggerate the real level of opposition in Windsor to the use of night-time cover from Slough. First, the Slough and Cookham members' forums were attended by a total of only five members; and the Windsor stakeholder forum attracted only 15 people. Second, the strength of feeling about the Windsor proposals expressed in the forums was not matched by the number of questionnaires returned from Windsor and Maidenhead. Only 123 were received from borough – which is particularly surprising given that one committed opponent of the Windsor proposal obtained 100 copies of the questionnaire to distribute. Third, the four Windsor focus groups were much more positive about the Windsor proposal than the forums. Taken together, these facts suggest strongly that the forums exaggerate the level of opposition to the Windsor proposals.

1.14.1 CONCLUSIONS

Overall, given the low numbers at the forums, and the relatively small (and unrepresentative) number of questionnaire returns, the 18 focus groups are the best guide to how informed 'ordinary members of the public' react to the draft proposals when explained within the context of the IRMP strategy. For the focus group meetings were inclusive and not self-selecting; and they were both relatively well-informed and fairly conducted in encouraging people to review the proposals critically.

Table 1.12.1 shows that there is opposition to some of the IRMP proposals in some quarters. However, when the consultation elements are compared and weighed, there is no doubt that most of the RBFA's draft IRMP proposals are broadly acceptable to informed public opinion in Berkshire. Indeed, this is something of an understatement since many of the proposals are enthusiastically endorsed.

The Windsor proposal is controversial and provokes strong opposition from some people; but, in the judgement of the researchers, the opposition in some quarters should not obscure the fact that informed 'ordinary opinion' found the proposal acceptable in the context of integrated risk management planning for the County.

2. Consultation Process: An Evaluation

2.1 BACKGROUND AND COMMISSION

ORS was commissioned by the Royal Berkshire Fire Authority to consult with residents, stakeholders and elected members in areas affected by the proposals. On behalf of the RBFA, ORS undertook the following consultations:

- A total of eighteen focus groups, including:
 - Four in Windsor
 - Four in Wokingham
 - Three in Slough, including one BME group
 - Two in Reading
 - One in Cookham
 - One in Crowthorne
 - One in Maidenhead
 - One in Sonning
 - One in Tywford
- Three Elected Member forums in:
 - Slough
 - Windsor
 - Cookham
- Questionnaire consultation using
 - Self-completion questionnaire distributed widely across Berkshire by RBFRS and also available for on-line completion.

The focus groups involved 143 ordinary members of the public in reasonably well-informed discussions; the elected members forum involved a total of six local councillors; the stakeholder forums involved 19 people; and the questionnaire consultation involved 453 respondents.

2.2 CONSULTATION PROCESS

2.2.1 INFORMATION AND DISCUSSION

The RBFA agreed with ORS that it was desirable to test the proposals for the future of the service with members of the public, stakeholders and elected members who were as far as possible well informed of the important issues. ORS took great care to ensure that all those consulted were as fully informed as possible about the meaning of the proposals and the background issues leading to their consideration.

In this context, the consultation is best understood as *testing the acceptability* of the RBFA proposals on a wide range of people by:

- Presenting the underlying rationale
- Explaining the supporting data
- Inviting questions to clarify the issues
- Encouraging a wide-ranging debate
- Summing up by asking participants to decide if the proposals under discussion are broadly reasonable or broadly unreasonable or if they don't know.

Of course, those who said they thought the proposals were *broadly unreasonable* were interpreted as preferring the status quo and objecting to the proposals.

The main point is that the consultation was conducted as a kind of scrutiny process – to allow residents, stakeholders and elected members to examine, clarify and judge the RBFA IRMP proposals on the basis of relatively detailed information. Hence, both the focus groups and forums received copies of the IRMP and a detailed presentation covering the following:

- Profile of RBFRS – its personnel, resources and activities
- Background to IRMP – the concept of risk and the challenge of risk management planning
- The importance of prevention and protection alongside the response service
- Principles of RBFA thinking: flexible use of resources and value for money
- Details of local proposals as outlined in the IRMP.

In all the meetings relating to the Reading and Windsor proposals the participants were informed of both the positive and negative aspects of the proposals. For example, in the Reading-based meetings it was emphasised that moving the Dee Road fire engine to Caversham Road would amount to the closure of the Dee Road station; and also that the move would

worsen response time to identified areas of West Reading (which were highlighted on a map). Similarly, in all the Windsor meetings, participants were informed that relying on night-time cover from Slough would worsen the response times to the Windsor Great Park and other areas of southern Windsor (which again were highlighted on a map). Conversely, the parts of Wokingham that would benefit from faster response times with a day-crewed station were also shown by map.

In each meeting there was also a question and answer session in which participants were able to explore the background, policy issues, proposals and possible consequences in considerable detail – while not just listening to but debating issues with the representatives of the RBFRS present.

In each meeting there was a clear differentiation between the question and answer period and the time for participant discussion. In the focus groups, the RBFRS officer present offered in each case to withdraw from the meeting while the participants expressed their views, but (while appreciated) this offer was not typically taken up.

Towards the end of each focus group meeting in Windsor and Slough, after the participants had expressed their overall judgements, the participants were informed/reminded that the issues they had discussed were indeed controversial. They were told, for example, that the proposals had been criticised by many and that local councillors had been prominent in criticising the proposals. In this context, the Windsor and Slough groups were asked to consider whether the meeting had been conducted fairly and whether they objected to their views being reported to the RBFA as indicative of how local residents think on the basis of detailed information about the proposals. In all cases, the participants readily agreed that their views might be reported and that the meetings had been fair.

In the opinion of the researchers, then, the consultation commissioned by the RBFA was both conscientious and fair in testing the acceptability of its proposals in a diverse range of meetings with local residents, stakeholders and elected members across Royal Berkshire.

2.2.2 ROLE OF CONSULTATION

Of course, whatever the public and stakeholders might think, consultation is not a referendum since professional services and public bodies cannot simply abdicate their expertise and responsibilities. Accountability through consultation does not mean pursuing or abandoning proposals only because they are respectively popular or unpopular. Rather, it means that public bodies should *give an account* of their proposals, and the reasons for them, and then take seriously into consideration the views of those consulted.

2.2.3 BALANCING THE CONSULTATION ELEMENTS

The Questions

So, if the consultation programme was fair and conscientious, how much importance should the RBFA attach to each element of the process? Given that all elements of the consultation programme are important, should they all be rated equally? And what if the findings of each differ? If the findings of the focus groups differ from the members' or stakeholders' forums; and if either of those differ from the outcomes of the questionnaire consultation, which element should carry most weight? How should the balance of opinion be assessed in the scales of a just interpretation? Should we just report disagreement or is it possible to make a balanced assessment of where the weight of evidence lies?

18 Focus Groups

Above all, the results of the 18 focus group meetings should be taken seriously – because they were:

- Inclusive – a diverse range of 143 people from across the county were involved
- Not self-selecting – in that people were recruited semi-randomly and did not attend the meetings on the basis of their prior opinions
- Well informed – the issues were explained carefully and fully discussed
- Fair – people could critically review the proposals and express their views freely; and their opinions were noted conscientiously in an open reporting process.

ORS recruited, facilitated and reported the focus groups relatively late in the consultation period (to allow time for the 'public debate' to have registered). As standard practice, participants were paid an allowance for their trouble and expenses in attending and taking part in the sessions. Serving and recent members of the RBFRS and their family members were not recruited to the meetings.

The focus groups comprised a good cross-section of 143 participants; and this cannot be considered a 'scientific' sample of the population, the researchers believe the focus group discussions fairly indicate the range of prevalent opinions (even though they cannot measure their statistical distribution in the wider population). Although, focus groups cannot be certified as statistically representative of public opinion, the meetings reported here certainly gave a diverse range of people, from widely differing areas of Royal Berkshire, the opportunity to review the options in depth. The participants were diverse in terms of gender, age, ethnic group, social, economic and

professional status, housing tenure and many other criteria. We are satisfied, therefore, that the outcomes of the meetings are broadly indicative of how 'informed public opinion' in Berkshire would react to similar information and discussions.

The focus groups have been criticised by one Windsor area resident because the participants were recruited and paid for their time and expenses by ORS; but, of course, it is standard good practice to remunerate participants reasonably; and people were recruited semi-randomly, because they matched the representative social profiles required – certainly not on the basis of the views they might or might not express!

Of all the forms of consultation for this study, the researchers attach the greatest importance to the focus groups – for the above reasons, and for others that will become evident below.

Two Stakeholder Forums

The Reading stakeholder forum was attended by only four people but those present represented a wide range of organisations and they took considerable interest in the proposals and the reasons for them; and the same was true at the Windsor forum, which 15 people attended.

However, it should be noted that, unlike the focus groups and the Reading forum, most of the attendees at the Windsor forum had considered the issues and had strong and committed views before attending the meeting. Therefore, the forum was something of a 'protest meeting' in which, for example, the Chief Executive of the Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead criticised the views of the RBFRS Chief Fire Officer while (like many others present) arguing forcefully against the RBFA proposals.

ORS' conduct of the stakeholder forums has been criticised by one Windsor area resident because they were staged events rather than open public meetings. However, public meetings tend to be poorly attended and unrepresentative; and the outcome of the Windsor forum, and its report here, demonstrate that the meeting was conducted fairly and openly.

Three Members' Forums

Initially, two members' forums were organised by RBFRS, at Reading and Slough, but because so few attended both meetings, an additional forum was arranged at Cookham. One member attended at Reading; three attended the Slough meeting; and five attended at Cookham (including three members who had already attended the Slough forums). Therefore, it should be noted that the discussion outcomes represent the thoughts of a small number of people.

The members' forums have been criticised by one Windsor area resident and others on the grounds that invitations were not sent to all members and they had insufficient notice of the additional Cookham meeting. However, ORS has no reason whatsoever to doubt that RBFRS' assurance that 350 invitations were sent in good time to:

- All elected local authority members in the six unitary authorities in Berkshire:
 - Bracknell Forest
 - Reading
 - Slough
 - West Berkshire
 - Windsor and Maidenhead
 - Wokingham.
- All parish councillors via their parish council clerks
- Large number of voluntary, statutory and business stakeholder organisations.

Questionnaire Consultation

Thousands of copies of the IRMP containing questionnaires were distributed across Berkshire by the RBFRS and the questionnaire was available on-line via the RBFRS website. A total of 453 completed questionnaires were returned to ORS.

In comparison with the other forms of consultation above, it has to be acknowledged that a short and simple questionnaire is not the ideal medium through which to consult members of the public about complex proposals – partly because most people will be disinclined to study the issues and will not respond by completing questionnaires. It is not surprising, then, that the total number of respondents was low and unrepresentative of the population: men outnumbered women by nearly 2.5 times, and less than a fifth of respondents were aged under-35.

Table 2.2.3: Achieved Sample Breakdown

Gender	Cases
Male	310
Female	130

Continued overleaf

Age	Cases
16 to 24	15
25 to 34	68
35 to 44	131
45 to 54	69
55 and over	150

Ethnicity	Cases
White	377
Mixed	29
Asian	14
Black	8
Chinese/other	2

LA Area	Cases
Bracknell Forest	18
Reading	136
West Berkshire	123
Windsor and Maidenhead	121
Wokingham	32
Slough	5

A Windsor area resident has criticised the questionnaire consultation as unfair on the grounds that (i) ORS would not supply him with 1,000 copies to distribute and (ii) that the questions were improper in leading respondents to agree with the RBFRS proposals. Two other complaints were received about the questionnaire design.

However, ORS believes that the questionnaire was fairly designed in focusing on the key proposals while offering residents a balanced range of options through which to express their views unambiguously. We also believe it would have been improper to supply one individual with multiple copies of the questionnaire. Indeed, it is unfortunate that the same Windsor area resident – who is a dedicated critic of the Windsor proposals – obtained 100 copies of the questionnaire for his own distribution from RBFRS – who were acting in good faith – and this has to be taken into account when considering how to weigh the total of 123 responses from Windsor and Maidenhead.

2.3 RELATIVE WEIGHTS

So we return to the question: How should the RBFA balance the evidence from the various forms of consultation? Which is most reliable? Which gives the best picture of public opinion generally?

In one sense, each form of consultation is 'true' in the context of its own purpose and none is wholly 'definitive' – so each form of consultation has provided important insights – for example:

- The members' forums showed the concerns of five members who had studied the proposals and made up their minds before the consultation meetings – and many other local members will probably agree with their views
- The stakeholder forums captured a more diverse range of views – broadly favourable to the IRMP (in Reading) and critical of the Windsor proposals (in Windsor)
- The questionnaire consultation drew 453 responses about the whole range of proposals
- The focus groups involved 143 ordinary members of the public in reasonably well-informed discussions – and seem fairly to indicate how other people might judge the proposals on the basis of similar information and arguments.

Overall, the researchers recommend that the focus groups are the best guide to how informed 'ordinary members of the public' might react to the proposals when explained within the context of the IRMP strategy. Above all, the 18 focus group meetings were inclusive, not self-selecting, well-informed and fair in encouraging people to critically review the proposals.

It seems probable that the Windsor stakeholder forum and the Windsor and Cookham members' forums exaggerate the real level of opposition in Windsor to the use of night-time cover from Slough. For example, given the strength of feeling about the Windsor proposals in the forums, it is otherwise surprising that only 123 questionnaires were returned from Windsor and Maidenhead (even though one committed opponent obtained 100 copies to distribute). The four focus groups held in Windsor definitely suggest that the forums exaggerate the level of opposition to the Windsor proposals.

The researchers' conclusion, then, is that the focus groups provide the most important evidence of informed public views, followed (some way behind) by the stakeholder forums, then by the members' forums and questionnaire findings. This perspective has informed our assessment of the evidence in Table 1.12.1 at the end of the Executive Summary above.

2.4 ALLEGED BIAS

Working together, the RBFA and ORS have sought to ensure a thorough and fair consultation process. Nonetheless, the author of this report has been accused by the same Windsor area resident (referred to above) of loading the consultation in favour of the RBFA proposals.

ORS recognises that the Windsor proposals are controversial and excite strong feelings; but we wholly reject the accusation of bias. Throughout the process of consultation, the author's priority has been to ensure that the arguments for the proposals were clearly presented – so that respondents could make their judgements in full knowledge of all the facts. The RBFA and ORS took great care to ensure that the consultation programme was substantial, inclusive, and fair in both explaining the issues and registering people's opinions conscientiously. ORS believes that these goals have been achieved. We believe that the findings reported here are soundly based on conscientious consultations with wide cross-sections of people.

2.5 ORGANISATION OF THE REPORT

Section 1 above gives an Executive Summary of the main findings from the consultation programme, while the following sections provide more detailed reports of the findings from each element. Some verbatim quotations are cited from the focus groups – not because ORS endorses them but to illustrate recurrent points of view. Whilst quotations are used, this report is not a transcript of things said, but an interpretative summary of the issues raised. The report seeks to be faithful to what people said while summarising main themes and highlighting key points.

3. Focus Groups with the Public

3.1 Introduction

As described in Section 2, a total of eighteen focus groups involving 143 members of the public were held in:

- Windsor (four)
- Wokingham (four)
- Slough (three, including one BME group)
- Reading (two)
- Cookham
- Crowthorne
- Maidenhead
- Sonning
- Twyford

As standard practice, participants were paid an allowance for their trouble and expenses in attending and taking part in the sessions. Serving and recent members of the RBFRS and their family members were not recruited to the meetings. The focus groups comprised a good cross-section of people – for the participants were diverse in terms of age, gender, social, economic and professional status, ethnic identity, housing tenure and many other criteria.

Participants received copies of the IRMP and the meetings began with a 20 minute presentation covering the following:

- Profile of RBFRS – its personnel, resources and activities
- Background to IRMP – the concept of risk and the challenge of risk management planning
- The importance of prevention and protection alongside the response service
- Principles of RBFA thinking: flexible use of resources and value for money
- Details of local proposals as outlined in the IRMP.

There were also question and answer periods in each meeting, for participants to explore the background, policy issues, proposals and possible consequences in considerable detail with RBFRS officers. But in each meeting there was a clear differentiation between the question and answer period and the

time for participant discussions. In the Windsor and Slough focus groups, the RBFRS officer present offered in each case to withdraw from the meeting while the participants expressed their views, but (while appreciated) this offer was not typically taken up. In Windsor and Slough, after the participants had expressed their overall judgements, the participants were informed/reminded that the issues they had discussed were indeed controversial – and they were asked if the meetings had been conducted fairly and whether they objected to their views being reported to the RBFA as indicative of how local residents think on the basis of detailed information about the proposals. In all cases, the participants readily agreed that their views might be reported and that the meetings had been fair.

The focus groups were dispassionate and reflective about the issues they discussed. If many eventually felt strongly about the issues, it was only as a conclusion – after examining the arguments; for few brought fixed opinions to the meeting and no one tried emotionally to influence others in the discussions.

As we said in 2.4 above, the focus groups are the best guide to how informed 'ordinary members of the public' might react to the proposals when explained within the context of the IRMP strategy. Above all, the 18 focus group meetings were inclusive, not self-selecting, well-informed and fair in encouraging people to critically review the proposals.

The chapter considers the outcomes of the focus groups in the following sub-sections.

- Windsor and Wokingham proposals
- Cookham proposals
- Reading (Dee Road) proposals
- Reading (Caversham Road) proposals
- Sonning and Wargrave proposals
- Crowthorne proposals

3.2 WINDSOR AND WOKINGHAM PROPOSALS

3.2.1 Windsor Focus Groups

Composition

The four focus groups in Windsor included 33 people from a wide range of backgrounds – including an ex-firefighter and an ex-volunteer firefighter from Australia. Two groups were convened with people in the A/B/C1 social groups and two were convened with C2/D/E groups. The four meetings all concentrated on the proposal not to crew the Windsor fire engine between the hours 20.00 to 0800.

Estimations of Risk

The focus groups demonstrated that members of the public have little idea of the level of risk from accidental fires – for when asked *How many people die in accidental fires in Royal Berkshire in the course of one year?* the estimates varied widely but were in almost all case wildly inaccurate.

Three of the four Windsor groups made explicit estimates, but only one person guessed in single figures (5) – and he was an ex-firefighter! One other person only guessed as low at 10; but the typical estimates were between 20 and 80 accidental fire deaths per year; the estimates ranged as high as 125.

While the presentation material will have done much to correct the participants' exaggerated impressions of fire risk, it should not be supposed that their underlying feelings about risk would be quickly discarded. Whatever the views of the participants, there can be no doubt that members of the public generally have very exaggerated impressions of fire risk – which is bound to make it difficult to consider reallocations of fire cover dispassionately. We shall see that this conclusion is borne out in many of the other focus groups.

Principles of IRMP

Most of the four Windsor focus groups wanted to discuss the Windsor proposals as promptly as possible, so only one group explicitly discussed whether the RBFA should use its resources flexibly to assess and target risk by balancing prevention, protection and response, while also pursuing value for money for Council Tax payers.

The idea that varying risks should be assessed and targeted with flexible resources was endorsed overwhelmingly in principle – though some wanted to emphasize that road traffic collisions (RTCs) should be taken into account and that *Windsor must be guaranteed the cover it needs*. However, the same group was cautious or even suspicious of the value for money principle – and wanted to stress from the start that *the fire service should have all the money it needs*.

Windsor on Windsor

Discussion

Despite some having doubts about one of the key principles, all four of the Windsor focus groups, after full discussion, were found to be tolerant of the proposal to remove night-time crew from the Windsor fire station. It would be an exaggeration to say that they endorsed the prospect enthusiastically, for they had a number of concerns and certainly felt attached to the status quo as something they had taken for granted for a long time.

Nonetheless, although they acknowledged that they were not keen to see the night cover removed from the local fire station, there was a *clear majority in all the groups* that accepted that the proposal was broadly reasonable in the light of the evidence in the IRMP document.

The main concerns expressed about the proposal were:

- Response times might be lengthened
- Slough crews might be required elsewhere – and, if so, could the ‘dynamic mobilisation’ of other pumps provide satisfactory cover quickly enough?

Although some emphasised these concerns as the reasons for their opposition to the proposals, the majority of respondents generally agreed with the content and implications of the IRMP draft that:

- Windsor is a very safe area
- Judgements about the deployment of resources have to be made on the basis of relative risk – based upon reliable historical data
- Districts within Berkshire should not adopt an only my backyard is important standpoint
- Wokingham needs to have additional fire safety resources
- Prevention and protection measures can make a significant contribution to public safety
- There is little for the Windsor fire-fighters to do at night
- The Fire Authority should have regard to the need to provide value for money by limiting Council Tax rises

Of course, not everyone was equally sure of all these points; and there were some focus group participants who emphatically rejected many or all of them in arguing for the retention of the Windsor fire engine more or less at all costs – but the latter were clearly in the minority.

There was also broad support for two principles of IRMP thinking – namely, that RBFRS resources should be used flexibly to target known risk and that the RBFA should pursue value for money. As we shall see, both of these principles were also endorsed in the questionnaire consultation.

Typical Views Expressed

Some typical questions and views drawn from each of the meetings are given below. They have been ordered to move from relative pessimism to relative optimism – which was the route taken by the discussions (but no other changes have been made to the quotations).

*Why is Wokingham not covered properly? It seems awful!
Why has it been left for so long?*

Why can't the RDS availability problem for Wokingham be solved in Wokingham?

Over 24 hours, where are the spikes of activity?

It is ridiculous that you cannot spend more than 5% more on the fire service!

Where does the money go? How does the precept work?

The problem is that you need more money from the government – it is the central government that has capped you at 5%

You have to take account of the possibility of terrorist incidents - Windsor is an emotional target

We have air planes flying overhead – Windsor is a unique place

There is a lot of congestion in the evening that can obstruct the service route from Slough – it all seems a gamble

It would be nice to have fire engines everywhere

I'm against it due to the population increase and funding issues

I'm against it because each area should have its own cover

What would happen if the two Slough engines were engaged elsewhere, who would support Slough – how would it be covered if Windsor itself could not reinforce Slough at night?

I naturally feel very parochial about the removal of our night-time service – and it feels like the thin end of the wedge in terms of reducing risk

Windsor would be the station that would attend my fire – so it is hard to let it go – even though I know it is 'selfish'

We have an emotional pull – all that you have said is absolute sense – but we still have an attachment to Windsor

You can make statistics do anything you want – but I want the most rapid local service we can get

I live in Old Windsor which will get a reduced service – so will I get a reduction in the Council Tax?

We pay our Council Tax and will not get a rebate – so we will be paying for another Borough to have our fire engine

What would be the difference in the Old Windsor response time?

Do you have small first-response vehicles to go to incidents to make assessments – the system works very well overseas and is much more flexible – it can give a very rapid first-response service – and if you did that you could have fewer people on the station overnight

We should take account of Wokingham's needs – if we have limited resources we have to get the best use out of it

I have a nephew in Wokingham and I'd hate to think he died in a fire there because we had an engine idle in Windsor – we have to care about other people

My brother works in a superstore in Wokingham and they can have emergencies as well – like when the tree fell on the store

What would happen if you did this and it did not work? If you take away our night-time cover will you evaluate it?

Would an RDS crew work in Windsor? What would happen if they were not available in an emergency?

Would a Windsor RDS crew be slower than the whole-time coming from Slough?

Would a whole-time crew be more in touch with training etc than a Windsor RDS crew?

Have you considered changing the RDS system to a Volunteer system whereby they stay at the station

Many people think the fire station will be shut entirely – that's the impression we get in the press!

We got the impression from the press that the station would be shut down completely

I got the impression that it was the fire station that was opposing the closure of the station

This is OK but we have to be sure that Slough can meet future risk levels

It's OK as long as we have our own cover up to 8pm.

It can seem completely the right thing to do

With all of these things you have to move on to the next stage – it is ridiculous to pay 14 fire-fighters usually to sleep at night on the station

I can see that the figures show it would be the right thing to move it

A lot of Windsor people will be against this – unless they know the arguments

Some people just won't listen to the arguments – they want a 24/7 fire engine on the basis that they pay their council tax

You will still get a fire engine coming from Slough

I can see this makes perfect sense but Windsor residents are bound to have a personal reaction to this – Windsor people are bound to be emotional about it

The fire service should decide this professionally

I was surprised to hear those night-time figures for Windsor

Windsor used to be a part-time station

It is very quiet in Windsor at night and Slough could provide cover

You mean you could put those fire-fighters somewhere else to do more good – or do you just mean they should not sleep at night?

It is good to deploy people to higher risk areas.

Balance of Opinion

As we have just seen, there was broad support for the principles that RBFRS resources should be used flexibly to target known risk but more caution about the idea that the RBFA should pursue value for money in governing the service.

In relation to the specific Windsor proposals, all the groups showed a majority in favour of the IRMP proposal for Windsor. In one group the balance of opinion was fairly evenly divided, but generally the majority in favour was very clear.

In one group of nine the majority in favour of the proposal was as many as eight to one – though one of the eight in favour said his/her approval was based on the assumption that everything else has been done to solve the problems of fire cover in Wokingham. The group felt that, wherever the cover

comes from, *there must not be a general reduction in service to Windsor households generally* (though they accepted that under the new arrangements some parts of Windsor would have a slower response than now at night-time).

There was general agreement that Windsor would be better served at night-time by fire cover from Slough. No one supported the Windsor RDS option.

In a group of ten the majority in favour of the proposal was eight to two – once more with an inclination to support Slough as the source of replacement cover, rather than a Windsor RDS crew.

In a group of nine the majority in favour was much narrower at five to four. Everyone agreed, though, that if the change was introduced then Windsor's night-time cover should come from Slough rather than relying on an RDS service in Windsor.

In the smallest group of five, the majority in favour was four to one. Three of the five favoured a night-time RDS service in Windsor (because it would make people feel better and would provide back up if both Slough engines were busy); but two thought the fire service should adopt *whatever is the most effective/fastest*.

Conclusions

Overall, then, having debated the issues in detail, the Windsor focus groups approved the RBFA proposals to remove the fire crew from Windsor overnight.

There were some differences of opinion about whether the alternative cover should come from Slough fire station or from a night-time RDS service in Windsor – but the balance of opinion clearly favoured cover from Slough's whole-time crew.

Windsor on Wokingham

Some Windsor residents were very concerned about the currently inadequate fire cover in Wokingham – and this was a material influence on their views of the Windsor proposal. There was no one who felt the Wokingham situation should not be improved – but those who opposed the loss of the Windsor night-time crew declared that Wokingham should pay for its own additional fire cover.

3.2.2 Slough Focus Groups

Composition

The three focus groups in Slough included 25 people from a wide range of backgrounds. One group was convened with people in the A/B/C1; there was one with C2/D/E groups; and the third group was convened with people from BME groups. The three meetings concentrated on the proposal not to crew

the Windsor fire engine between the hours 20.00 to 0800, but some other topics were also discussed.

Estimations of Risk

As in Windsor, the Slough groups over-estimated the risk of death from accidental fires. All three groups made explicit estimates, but only six people guessed less than 100 (with estimates ranging from 20 to 80). Most people guessed that the figure is between 100 and 150!

Principles of IRMP

Two of the three Slough focus groups discussed whether the RBFA should use its resources flexibly to assess and target risk (by balancing prevention, protection and response) while also pursuing value for money for Council Tax payers. The idea that varying risks should be assessed and targeted with flexible resources was endorsed readily. There was particular support for preventive measures through public education and home fire safety checks:

Schools and the elderly are a good place to start – the elderly are the people without detectors

The HFSC was very good in my home – they found that my detectors were in the wrong place and I had some petrol stored.

On the other hand, people were not uncritical of the procedures by which home fire safety checks are undertaken:

It took five men to come and do the check and I don't see why it could not have been one!

The RBFRS should follow-up prevention work to ensure that people have taken notice and have acted on the home safety checks – there should be some evaluation of the effects of the service.

There were also some reservations about the possible selective provision towards greatest need – for example:

Everyone should have home fire safety checks provided – home owners should not be disadvantaged – and whole areas should be targeted rather than selected households.

Nonetheless, the general principle of flexible service planning was endorsed readily:

This is fine – it is a more flexible approach in this day and age – we have to meet the moving needs of new housing etc

We're happy with this – providing there's sufficient cover generally.

While stressing that they do not mind paying for the fire service, there was definite agreement that the RBFA should pursue value for money:

The RBFA should keep the increased cost to within the 3.6% level – as for pensioners and inflation

The Council Tax needs to be limited!

If you had more money would you still do all the proposals?

Slough on Wokingham

Discussion and Balance of Opinion

The Slough residents readily agreed that Wokingham deserves more consistent and effective fire cover:

The 70% [RDS] unavailability is a big issue!

They acknowledged the need for more resources and no one thought this was a controversial issue in itself.

Slough on Windsor

Discussion

All three Slough focus groups were able to accept the proposal to remove night-time crew from the Windsor fire station in order to transfer little used resources to Wokingham. There were some initial reservations about providing cover from Slough, but this too was generally accepted after full discussion of the issues.

The main concerns expressed about the proposal were:

- Reservations about potentially increasing risk in Slough by using its fire engines for Windsor
- Worries about cutting the fire service in Windsor.

Nonetheless, the majority of respondents generally agreed that:

- Wokingham has greater need than Windsor
- Judgements about the deployment of resources have to be made on the basis of relative risk and financial constraints.

Typical Views Expressed

Some typical questions and views drawn from each of the meetings are given below. As with the Windsor section, the comments have been ordered to move from relative pessimism to relative optimism, the route taken by the discussions.

If I was in Windsor, I would be upset – might it be possible to take resources from Reading to Wokingham

We should do something about Wokingham but not jeopardise Windsor

People would rather pay more for the fire service than for other things – so can't we put a new fire engine in Wokingham?

Slough is a busy station and this would put more pressure on the station

What would happen if there was a midnight fire in Windsor and the Slough engines were deployed elsewhere?

What would happen if two of our engines went to Windsor? Who would cover Slough?

Windsor should have its own service

I feel as though we are trying to cut the service – but we have confidence and respect in the fire service – but we are seeming to slice off parts of the service

It surprises me we only have two engines in Slough

Prevention is very important and I don't have a problem with moving the fire crew resources in theory – but will it work in practice?

If the Windsor engine was busy, would [not] Slough cover Windsor anyway?

The big chemical fire needed engines from all over the place!

It looks feasible with reasonable resources in this area

The fire crews are not really needed in Windsor

The Wokingham area is more dense and higher risk – with more people

We need to cover Wokingham – and we shall no longer be covering South Buckinghamshire from Slough – so we could take over Windsor by night

It is better to spend money on overall prevention and lower risk – rather than protecting resources in individual areas

We cannot improve everything perfectly – and we have to achieve good value and face 5% capping – so we have to compromise

You would need to find money to cover Wokingham if you did not do this

There might be a problem in that the RDS crews in Windsor would be less effective than full-time crews.

Balance of Opinion

One group of six was unanimous that the proposal to transfer night-time resources from Windsor to daytime use in Wokingham was positive. A group of twelve people was more divided – with six people in favour and the others objecting on the grounds that Windsor would object to the proposal and/or that Slough station should not have to cover Windsor. In the third BME group with seven participants, the majority in favour was six to one. Several of the participants wanted to stress that they were influenced in their judgements by the financial constraints on the overall fire services budget.

Conclusion

Although one Slough group was divided on the feasibility and desirability of the Windsor proposal, overall the groups were clearly in favour – while recognising that their judgements were influenced by the need to control the overall fire service budget.

3.2.3 Wokingham Focus Groups

Composition

The four focus groups in Wokingham included 32 people from a wide range of backgrounds. Two groups were convened with people in the A/B/C1 social groups and two were convened with C2/D/E groups. The meetings concentrated mainly on the proposal to improve fire cover at Wokingham by redeploying night-time resources from Windsor, but also discussed the fire cover in the Sonning/Wargrave/Twyford areas.

Estimations of Risk

The Wokingham groups tended to only slightly over-estimate the risk of death from accidental fires; a few members of each group displayed an accuracy rarely seen in forums of this nature. Most people guessed between five and 20, although a couple of participants in one group thought the figure would be between 2,000 and 3,000!

Principles of IRMP

All four Wokingham groups discussed whether the RBFA should use its resources flexibly to assess and target risk by balancing prevention, protection and response, while also pursuing value for money for Council Tax payers.

The idea that varying risks should be assessed and targeted with flexible resources was very much endorsed in principle, and there was a great deal of support for preventive measures through public education and Home Fire Risk Assessments:

It's obvious it makes sense isn't it? You don't want to put a fire out, you want to stop it in the first place

It's obviously better to try and prevent the fire...it's less damage to property and people and to the Fire Service, because every time they go out they are at risk too...the more you can do in prevention the better it will be all round

The main gist of it seems to be the Fire Service providing added value to the community.

With specific regard to Home Fire Risk Assessments, very few Wokingham participants had heard of them – which led them to comment on a lack of communication between RBFRS and the general public. This, they felt, leads to a lack of awareness amongst the public of the services offered by the Service, and what they themselves should be doing in terms of fire prevention and protection:

A lot of the problem with these things coming from public services is that the average person doesn't know they exist

We're all saying we're not getting enough information

If they can make people aware of what's dangerous and what's not then they can cut down on accidents and the Fire Service wouldn't need as much money.

In terms of finance, participants generally understood the financial constraints that govern the running of all public bodies, not only the FRS. Although stressing that they are happy to pay for the Service (with several stating that they would be prepared to pay more should costs rise substantially), there was agreement that the RBFA should pursue value for money:

I think if it's possible to provide the service within those boundaries they need to stay within them but supposing costs went up (such as the cost of fire engines) I would be prepared to pay a bit more Council Tax for the service to be maintained...it would depend on how much a bit more was though!

Wokingham on Wokingham

Discussion

As would be expected, the vast majority of participants in Wokingham warmly welcomed the potential improvements to cover in the town - it would be fair to say that no respondent was able to envisage any negatives for their area. Participants were particularly pleased with the proposal for the following reasons:

- Cover, and thus response times, would be improved for Wokingham
 - Most were greatly concerned that 13,800 people are not currently being reached in 10 minutes and

saw improvements in this respect as eminently desirable

- The proposal takes account of the intention to build 22,000 new homes in the Wokingham-Bracknell area
 - There was strong desire for better fire cover given that Wokingham is a growing and developing area
- Crewing problems would be solved
 - The idea that the Wokingham crew is unavailable 70% of the time was unacceptable to participants.

The only real concern expressed with specific regard to Wokingham was that the Windsor crew would be unfamiliar with the area and *with all the little lanes, blocked roads and things you find around Wokingham...our local fire crews will know another way in. How would that be effective with the Windsor crew?*

Typical Views Expressed

Some typical questions and views drawn from each of the meetings are given below. All comments made with specific regard to Wokingham were positive:

Completely selfishly speaking as a resident of Wokingham...I don't see anything negative here for us living in the town

It's common sense isn't it...with the evidence put in front of us it would be daft not to do it

We all live in Wokingham and I can't imagine anyone would want it to stay as it is...

It should be done shouldn't it...we have less cover than surrounding areas so it should be balanced out

It's got to be done...we live in Wokingham so why should we agree with ourselves being at-risk

I don't think Windsor will suffer as much as Wokingham if it's not done

I think it's the right direction...Wokingham is building and this has to be taken into account

If you are talking about 20-odd thousand properties being built then you have to change anyway

It seems to be the logical conclusion...although there are 2,400 people in Windsor that must be taken into consideration, this is an expanding area and under the South East England Structure Plan it's going to be even greater

The population ratio is five to one...what Windsor is losing is mainly in rural areas...in Wokingham it's a pretty compact populated area

If the crew is unavailable 70% of the time then obviously response times are going to be higher...making it 24 hours will solve this problem

There is also the expense of running the station...it's not really justified if the crew are only available 30% of the time.

Balance of Opinion and Conclusions

As would be expected, all 32 Wokingham participants (across the four groups) were in favour of improving their town's fire cover. Indeed, very few concerns were noted regarding the proposed upgrade of Wokingham fire station (although a couple of participants did not endorse the redeployment of resources from Windsor to facilitate the change – an issue discussed further below).

Wokingham on Windsor

Discussion

Despite overwhelming positivity about proposals for their own town, the Wokingham groups acknowledged that they could not be impartial about the changes and that they may not be as positively received in Windsor. Indeed, a small minority were extremely reluctant to endorse improved cover at Wokingham at the expense of that at Windsor. They were of the view that Wokingham should not have to gain at the expense of anywhere else and in an ideal world wanted to see 24-hour cover provided in both towns. However, they did understand the budgetary constraints that would render this impossible.

Despite the misgivings of the minority, the majority of Wokingham participants endorsed the proposal for the following reasons:

- Windsor (particularly the area that will receive a worsened service) is very low-risk and certainly more so than Wokingham
- The Windsor engine is used comparatively infrequently at night meaning that, in their opinion...
 - The impact at Windsor would not be great
 - The lack of use of the engine and crew is a waste of Fire and Rescue Service resources
- The proximity of Slough fire station to that at Windsor
 - This was sufficient to convince most that Windsor would not adversely suffer should this proposal be implemented. Indeed, some were surprised to hear that Windsor had a fire station, assuming that Slough covered it anyway.

The endorsement of the proposal as reported above should not suggest that the Wokingham groups had no concerns about its potential impact. Indeed, several expressed worry about the possible changes, one of these being the impact on Slough should Windsor's night-time cover be provided from the town. Slough was described as a large industrial area that includes Slough Trading Estate - *a huge, massive business area*. Further, in terms of demographics, *everyone is squashed in and there is a lot of head of population in one house...you get people in houses in multiple occupation that you don't get in Wokingham*. As such, there was concern that providing cover to Windsor from Slough could result in the latter's large population having different - some thought worse - cover during the night-time period. However, most recognised that Slough would not have to make the night-time journey into Windsor on a regular basis and that, *although Slough is very busy you also have Langley nearby which could support Slough's cause*.

There were a few further concerns:

- The possibility of future development in Windsor, which could result in different fire cover requirements
 - It was strongly recommended that, if the proposal is implemented, periodic evaluations should be undertaken to ensure that fire cover remains at the appropriate level
- Staff welfare
 - If staff are to be re-deployed from Windsor to Wokingham, participants agreed that it must be done sympathetically and ideally by agreement; that is, the FRS should ask for volunteers, thereby ensuring that those re-deployed are happy with the situation
- The potential for comeback on the FRS if a serious or even fatal incident occurs during the period of reduced cover at Windsor
 - Under such circumstances the Service would, it was felt, be pilloried for implementing the proposal and possibly leave itself open to legal challenge.

With regard to the options for night-time cover at Windsor, the majority chose the provision of cover from Slough rather than a Windsor RDS service for the following reasons:

- The reliability of 24-hour crewing (as at Slough)
- The cost-effectiveness of using an existing set-up (rather than going to the expense of establishing a RDS service at Windsor)

- Good road links between the two towns
- The difficulties experienced by the FRS in recruiting and retaining RDS staff.

Further, the establishment of an RDS crew in Windsor was seen by several as a potential waste of resources given that:

- The RDS crew could be unavailable at certain times, meaning that the Slough engine would be mobilised anyway
- Slough would be able to get to Windsor at around the same time as an RDS crew because of the inherent five minute delay
- The frequency of night calls at Windsor is low.

None of this is to say that participants could not see the value of RDS night-time cover for Windsor – indeed, several opted for such cover, primarily because it would lessen what they saw as the detrimental impact of the other option on cover for Slough and because, if both Slough engines are out elsewhere, Windsor would have its own crew to deal with incidents in the town.

A small number of respondents found it difficult to choose an option.

Typical Views Expressed

Some typical questions and views drawn from each of the meetings are given below. As with the Windsor section, the comments have been ordered to move from relative pessimism to optimism – with participants' views on the possible options for night-time cover at Windsor reported at the end of the section:

How do the people of Windsor feel about losing their 24-hour cover?

It's got to be good for [Wokingham] but at what risk to other areas?

It's quite a lot to ask Windsor to go from being a fully-manned 24-hour station to part-time

I live in Wokingham so I think it's a good trade-off but if I lived in Windsor I probably wouldn't be very happy

You know what will happen...someone will die in a fire in Windsor at night and the Service will get stick for it for taking the cover away

If you take one of the two Slough engines away you could leave more people vulnerable [in Slough] than would be in Wokingham

Out of those two engines that are meant to be serving the huge conurbation of Slough, if one gets called to Windsor how many people are left vulnerable in Slough as they are left with one engine?

Does it take into account new developments...Wokingham and Bracknell are getting over 20,000 new homes but what about Windsor?

To be fair to Windsor, is it going to be growing over the next ten years? As long as [the FRS does] an evaluation every year I think it could be fair to both areas

It's if there are a few cock-ups and they don't cover it in time that people are going to get angry about it. But it's obviously well thought out...

A lot of the area losing out is the Park area anyway isn't it?

If the risk to those 2,400 people is low and none or very few of the three calls per week come from that area...the risk is so low

If you can say that the risk to the people living in the vulnerable area is negligible and you have over 11,000 more people at risk in Wokingham then it's worth doing

The lack of action needed by the Windsor fire engine suggests that it wouldn't be that much of a negative...it's not really a big impact

Sounds like a waste of resources as it is

I think this proposal makes best use of resources if you look at it population-wise

I do think it's a good idea...Slough is under three miles from Windsor

If Slough can cover Windsor and get there within the time then there is no problem is there?

Not only have you got Slough but also Langley and Maidenhead close to Windsor as well

The fire station at Slough is right on the bypass so will be able to get straight into Windsor really easily

It's a really fast road

The RDS have a five minute delay before they get going whereas the others could probably do Slough to Windsor in five minutes

I would have thought that if the Service is having trouble getting retained staff in general then the retained option in Windsor wouldn't work so well

Presumably if the retained crew couldn't get there in time or were not available [the FRS would] have to send an engine

from Slough anyway. If they go for the RDS option they may be putting something there that would be rarely used...it is a waste of money

I can see that to have the retained crew at Windsor rather than involving Slough would be slightly less risky for the population of Slough...if you involve Slough you may not have calculated the risk to those people in Slough whose one engine will be going

It makes more sense to have the retained service crew in Windsor which could be backed up by Slough if they are not available and for Wokingham to have the full-time because it is more at-risk

It's difficult to know which option is best...[the FRS is] taking one engine from Slough or, alternatively, [it] could be paying for this retained service in Windsor and wasting money because they hardly ever do anything.

Balance of Opinion and Conclusions

All groups were generally in favour of the IRMP proposal for Windsor (particularly as it will directly benefit them as residents of Wokingham). In fact, it was unanimously agreed in three of the four groups (one group of nine and two groups of eight) that the RBFA should go ahead with the removal of full-time night cover at Windsor and the transference of these resources to Wokingham.

In the other group of seven participants, one participant was firmly against the IRMP proposal for Windsor (despite agreeing that improved fire cover is desirable for Wokingham). Another was reluctant to endorse the change, but eventually decided that their desire for better cover in Wokingham outweighed the concern they felt for Windsor.

There was full concurrence in three of the four groups (again the groups of nine, eight and eight) that, if the proposed change is introduced Slough should be the source of replacement night-time cover for Windsor, rather than an RDS service. In the fourth group of seven, four participants were of the same view, whereas two opted for a night-time RDS service and one could not decide one way or the other.

3.2.4 Sonning Focus Group

Composition

The focus group in Sonning included 10 people from a wide range of backgrounds and of a wide range of ages – all of whom lived in the village of Sonning. The meeting concentrated mainly on the proposal to close Sonning and Wargrave fire stations and open a new community fire station at Twyford, but the group also discussed the potential changes at Reading and

the proposed improvement of fire cover at Wokingham by redeploying night-time resources from Windsor.

Estimations of Risk

As in Wokingham, the Sonning group only slightly over-estimated the risk of death from accidental fires. Most people guessed between five and 20; 50 was the highest estimate.

Principles of IRMP

Participants at Sonning briefly discussed whether the RBFA should use its resources flexibly to assess and target risk (by balancing prevention, protection and response) and readily endorsed this approach.:

I think it's been shown that prevention is better than turning up and putting the fire out.

Participants commented on a lack of communication between RBFRS and the general public. This, they felt, leads to a lack of awareness amongst the public of the services offered by the Service (Home Fire Risk Assessments for example), and what they themselves should be doing in terms of fire prevention and protection:

The Assessments sound fantastic but need to be better advertised

It's raising awareness of how important it is to know what to do.

Sonning on Windsor

Discussion and Conclusions

The group saw the redeployment of resources from Windsor to Wokingham as a fair means of improving the latter's fire cover problems; although they agreed that *selling it to people in Windsor may be another issue.*

With regard to the options for night-time cover in Windsor, all agreed that it should be provided from Slough given that the full-time crew *can get there that quickly* and that *the great thing about Windsor to Slough is that relief road is straight in...you can drive straight into Windsor town.*

Sonning on Wokingham

Discussion and Conclusions

The general sense in the Sonning group was that fire cover must be improved in Wokingham:

If you live in Wokingham [the FRS has to] send people from Reading and Bracknell to get there...Wokingham isn't a good place to live at the moment

They have to do something in Wokingham...it's not working at the moment is it?

3.2.5 Maidenhead Focus Group

Composition

The focus group in Maidenhead included six people from a range of backgrounds and of a range of ages – all of whom lived in Maidenhead. The meeting concentrated on the potential closure of Sonning and Wargrave fire stations and opening of a new community fire station at Twyford; the possible appliance changes at Cookham and the proposed improvement of fire cover at Wokingham by redeploying night-time resources from Windsor.

Estimations of Risk

The Maidenhead group slightly over-estimated the risk of death from accidental fires; most participants guessed that the figure was between 10 and 50.

Principles of IRMP

Participants at Maidenhead briefly discussed whether the RBFA should use its resources flexibly to assess and target risk (by balancing prevention, protection and response). They endorsed this approach.

Participants again (as at Wokingham and Sonning) cited what they perceived to be a lack of communication between RBFRS and the general public and a lack of advertising in terms of what the Service provides. This, they felt, leads to a lack of public awareness regarding the services offered by the Service and what they themselves should be doing in terms of fire prevention and protection:

Why haven't we heard of the things that are done?

Isn't that quite a flaw that we don't know we can get free smoke detectors?

I'm astonished...I didn't know that!

Maidenhead on Windsor

Discussion and Conclusions

Although endorsing the redeployment of resources from Windsor to Wokingham, the Maidenhead group was well aware of and sympathetic to the Windsor situation – particularly understanding the concerns of the 2,400 people who would have to wait longer for a response. However, it was recognised that those within this zone are at very low risk of fire.

In order to negate the impact of the proposal in the area, it was suggested that it be implemented on the proviso that the

FRS proactively undertake education and prevention work there, as well as ensure that each home has at least one smoke alarm installed.

In terms of other issues, the political and emotional aspects of removing 24-hour fire cover from any area were noted. For example, it was suggested that a serious incident in the affected area could have a very detrimental impact on the FRS.

Finally, it was questioned whether the FRS has factored in *the fact that Windsor is a high probability for terrorist attack*.

There was unanimous agreement at Maidenhead that, if the proposal is implemented, night-time cover at Windsor should be provided from Slough given that appliances would be required so infrequently. Further, it was agreed that using the existing Slough crew would be more cost-effective than using a RDS crew for so few calls.

Typical Views Expressed

Some typical questions and views drawn from each of the meetings are given below, ordered to move from relative pessimism to optimism – with participants' views on the possible options for night-time cover at Windsor reported at the end of the section:

If someone who is affected goes up in smoke and has a go? Is this a scenario that has been factored in?

Some fires have greater newspaper impact than others...if there was to be a big fire in Windsor the Fire Service could get really hammered in the press...

I would think the 2,400 people who are waiting longer would object...

I would think that the only people who will object would be those people within that small area that will experience some diminution of service...but I would think they will still have a very high level of protection because their population is small and low-risk

It's a case of going down the line of educating those who won't get the ten minute response in Windsor

Could [the FRS] not educate them to ensure that the 2,400 population get their free smoke alarms and get them installed?

I would be inclined to deploy from Slough given they would only have a few calls per week...it's a waste of money having a retained crew for that many calls

Using Slough would be less costly...this could be put to better use in prevention and protection activities.

Maidenhead on Wokingham

Discussion and Conclusions

The Maidenhead group was unanimous in its support of improved fire cover at Wokingham; given the increasing population of the town and its surrounding areas, such improvement was deemed essential and the proposal seen to represent *the greater good for a greater number of people*.

Participants viewed the redeployment of resources from Windsor to facilitate improvements at Wokingham as a good use of resources and a move that makes *perfect sense*:

If the budget is constant then it makes sense as a proposal

The Fire Service wins the case...given limited resources and a fixed budget.

3.2.6 Crowthorne Focus Group

Composition

The focus group in Crowthorne included 10 people from a wide range of backgrounds and of a wide range of ages – all of whom lived in the village of Crowthorne. The meeting concentrated mainly on the proposal to trial response to the South of Crowthorne from Camberley fire station, but the group also discussed the potential closure of Sonning and Wargrave fire stations and opening of a new community fire station at Twyford, as well as the proposed improvement of fire cover at Wokingham by redeploying night-time resources from Windsor.

Estimations of Risk

The Crowthorne group was very accurate when it came to estimating the risk of death in accidental dwelling fires. Most guessed that, annually, between five and ten people die in such incidents in Royal Berkshire, with the highest estimate being 26. All agreed that *I would have thought it would be low because you don't hear about it that often*.

Principles of IRMP

The Crowthorne group explicitly discussed whether the RBFA should use its resources flexibly to assess and target risk by balancing, prevention, protection and response, which they very much endorsed in principle:

It makes absolute sense to target risk...there's nothing in it that fills me with horror!

There was also a great deal of support for preventive measures through public education and Home Fire Risk Assessments:

It's obvious from the fact that smoke alarms are so effective that it's an area that needs to be targeted.

With specific regard to Home Fire Risk Assessments, very few Wokingham participants had heard of them – which led some to comment on a lack of communication between RBFRS and the general public. This, they felt, leads to a lack of awareness amongst the public (particularly those who are not considered at-risk) of the services offered by the Service, and what they themselves should be doing in terms of fire prevention and protection:

I've never heard about the services the fire brigade offer before so how do you get at the rest of us who are not target groups? I've never seen an advert in the paper, never seen anything saying 'come to our website', nothing to say the fire brigade is a hell of a lot more than just fighting fires...

I don't consider myself high risk but I have no idea where I should put my smoke alarm.

Crowthorne on Windsor

Discussion and Conclusions

The Crowthorne group accepted the transference of resources from Windsor to improve fire cover at Wokingham, although participants did acknowledge that the residents of Windsor may have a different perspective on the proposal. On the whole, the group believed that *a smaller number will lose out and a bigger number will benefit...that's what risk management is all about.*

In terms of the options for night-time cover in Windsor, most tended to choose cover from Slough over an RDS service because of the proximity of Slough to Windsor (and the speed with which a crew would be able to get between the two), as well as the difficulties being experienced by the FRS in recruiting RDS staff:

Even assuming [the RDS crew] can get to the station in five minutes I still don't think they would be able to respond as quickly as the engine from Slough

Recruiting a retained team for Windsor could prove difficult...and the retention of retained firefighters is poor.

Crowthorne on Wokingham

Discussion and Conclusions

It was generally agreed at Crowthorne that fire cover must be improved in Wokingham, particularly given the growth of the area and the difficulties involved in recruiting and retaining RDS fire-fighters there:

It's a growing area

Most of the people who live in Wokingham don't work there...it's a commuter town now so it's no wonder they can't recruit retained fire-fighters in the area.

The only question posed about the upgrading of Wokingham fire station was whether it is adequate *in terms of access and facilities*. That is, the group enquired as to whether the station is in the right place and whether its facilities would need improving to accommodate 24-hour crewing.

3.2.7 Reading (Caversham Road) Group

Composition

The focus group in Reading (Caversham Road) included four people from the immediate vicinity of the Caversham Road fire station. The meeting concentrated mainly on the proposals for Reading (Caversham Road and Dee Road), but also included discussion on the proposed improvement of fire cover at Wokingham by redeploying night-time resources from Windsor.

Estimations of Risk

When asked *'how many people die in accidental fires in Royal Berkshire in the course of one year?'* participants' lowest estimate was five and the highest was 38.

Principles of IRMP

The Reading (Caversham Road) group agreed that the RBFA should use its resources flexibly to assess and target risk by balancing, prevention, protection and response, which they very much endorsed in principle as *common sense*. There was again a great deal of support for preventive measures through public education and Home Fire Risk Assessments (which none of the group had heard of).

In terms of finance, participants generally understood the financial constraints that govern the running of all public bodies, not only the FRS. Although stressing that they are happy to pay for the Service (with one stating that they would be happy to pay even more), there was agreement that the RBFA should pursue value for money:

If the money is capped they have got to look for alternative means of using that money better

Moving services around to where they are most needed has got to be the best option

Finances are being cut, but if it's making [the Service] look at more effective ways of deploying its staff that's got to be a good thing...

There probably has to be some sort of boundary otherwise they could end up wasting money because it's not being kept an eye on...there has to be a cap on it.

Reading (Caversham Road) on Windsor

Discussion and Conclusions

The group at Reading (Caversham Road) was in favour of the redeployment of resources from Windsor to improve cover at Wokingham. Indeed, although understanding that the people of Windsor may have concerns, participants were of the view that the affected area in the town is at low-risk of fire. Nevertheless, it was suggested that the FRS proactively undertakes Home Fire Risk Assessments in the area to ensure that residents are prepared for the changes.

When discussing the night-time options for Windsor, participants generally opted for cover from Slough because of:

- The proximity of the two towns to each other and the good road links between them, full-time fire-fighters from Slough are likely to get to Windsor faster than an RDS crew (factoring in the five minutes for the latter to get to the station)
- The difficulties involved in recruiting RDS personnel may render it difficult to establish such a crew in Windsor
- As the full-time system is already set-up in Slough, it would be the cheaper option for the FRS.

Typical Views Expressed

Some typical questions and views drawn from each of the meetings are given below, ordered to move from relative pessimism to relative optimism – with participants' views on the possible options for night-time cover at Windsor reported at the end of the section:

It's understandable that the people of Windsor are concerned

I'd say the area that is going to be losing out is a very low risk area anyway

We know that area is a low risk area but it's a case of providing support for that area, be it free alarms or whatever, to make sure they are kitted up and ready for the changes

Slough is 2.8 miles away so what would be the time difference...RDS are going to take 5 minutes to get to the station anyway...I would imagine you would be able to go faster in 2.8 miles than you can in the five minutes it will take to get to the station

It's a good road between the two stations

If [the FRS is] having problems recruiting RDS, how would they secure a crew in that area?

I would probably go for the Slough option because it's set up there.

Reading (Caversham Road) on Wokingham

Discussion and Conclusions

The Reading (Caversham Road) group was strongly of the view that Wokingham is in need of better fire cover and accepted the redeployment of resources from Windsor to assist this improvement. They described the proposal as *the greatest good for the greatest number*:

You're going to be protecting nearer 14,000 as opposed to 2,400

It does make sense...they've got to cater for the majority of the population...in everything there are bound to be a few losers who are going to get a slower response time.

3.3 COOKHAM PROPOSALS

3.3.1 Cookham Focus Group

Composition

The focus groups in Cookham included eight people from a wide range of backgrounds – all of whom live in the Cookham area. The meeting concentrated solely on replacing Cookham's single fire engine with two off-road vehicles that can offer support elsewhere in Berkshire when required.

Estimations of Risk

When asked *'how many people die in accidental fires in Royal Berkshire in the course of one year?'* participants at Cookham were typically very accurate. Their lowest estimate was zero and their highest was 30, with most believing the figure to be less than ten.

Principles of IRMP

The Cookham group accepted the principles of IRMP and agreed that the RBFA should use its resources flexibly to assess and target risk by balancing prevention, protection and response. As one participant stated, *there is no way of doing it otherwise*. Further, group members were of the view that the FRS represents *excellent value for money for what they provide*.

A couple of participants expressed concern regarding elected members making decisions about issues such as fire cover and resources:

I feel very concerned that elected individuals who do not know about this are making the decisions about what the Fire Service gets.

These concerns were allayed to some extent when it was explained that the risk assessments are undertaken and proposals drafted by experts from the FRS based on what is required by the Service.

A minority of participants were of the view that the process by which proposals such as those for Cookham are formulated is done behind closed doors:

When they decide on these things they don't ask anybody...like with Cookham it's not been made a general thing for people to comment on it's just 'this is what we're doing'.

Cookham on Cookham

Discussion

After a long debate on the issues, participants at Cookham were broadly supportive of the proposal for their area (although a minority had some important objections).

Several had heard rumours in the press that Cookham fire station was to close and were relieved to hear that a presence would remain in the village – which was unanimously agreed to be important. Indeed, having an active Fire and Rescue Service presence in Cookham was so important to a couple of participants that they would prefer local firefighters to attend should they have an incident, even if the response from another station would be faster than that from Cookham.

It should be stressed that the other members of the group disagreed with the above, putting a higher premium on faster response times than having firefighters deployed from the Cookham station. However, respondents did question whether the existing RDS crew would remain, and all were very supportive of the fact that they would.

Aside from the retention of the existing RDS crew, the majority of the group believed that the main benefits of the proposal for Cookham were as follows:

- Having the specialist off-road vehicle at Cookham will not only cater for the needs of the area (which can flood), but will also provide flexibility across Berkshire
- Cookham could become somewhat of a Centre of Excellence for the entire county of Berkshire
 - It was suggested that, as the FRS is looking long-term at basing specialist vehicles at Cookham, the station may be less vulnerable to closure in the future

- A smaller, lightweight fire engine would provide firefighters with better access to certain parts of Cookham
- If the cost of running Cookham fire station is reduced by providing the two smaller vehicles, *it is more likely that the station will stay. A station that is heavily costly could be more of a target when looking at cutting resources...*
- The cost savings associated with the proposal would allow a redeployment of resources into areas such as prevention and protection – particularly in the high-risk built-up areas of Reading and Slough for example. Further, although it was acknowledged that need may be greatest in those areas and that Cookham is low-risk, participants suggested that some of the money must be spent on such activities in their area to ‘soften the blow’ of losing the large appliance.

It was noted at the beginning of this section that acceptance of this proposal resulted from a significant and lengthy debate on the issues, during which a number of important objections were highlighted. It was certainly clear that a minority of participants were resistant to the changes, stemming from the fact that they are extremely happy with the service currently provided from Cookham fire station.

The main concerns highlighted by the Cookham group were:

- The lightweight engine will be inadequate in the event of a large fire
- Back-up appliances from Maidenhead will have to come to Cookham on a more regular basis to provide cover for the lightweight engine. The primary worry was that, if both Maidenhead engines are at another incident, Cookham would have to wait longer for back-up and, although acknowledging that this could happen with the current situation, they saw it as potentially more serious because of the reduced capacity of the lightweight appliance
 - However, after discussion and clarification, there was at least an understanding that should a house fire be reported, the Cookham appliance would routinely be given cover by another appliance, which appeased some of the concerns expressed
- The perceived loss of Cookham’s ‘local’ service
 - In terms of the appliances themselves, one participant expressed the view that *our current engine is for us...it’s for Cookham. These other two are not for Cookham, they are just being housed here to help everybody else.*

Overall, for the participants that expressed the concerns reported above, this proposal represents the 'thin end of the wedge' in terms of cover for Cookham. That is, they saw it as the first step towards the total removal of fire cover from Cookham.

Finally, one participant questioned whether it would be possible for the FRS to develop a compromise proposal and *replace one of Maidenhead's engines with these two smaller engines?* The participant argued that *they can get to Cockmarsh easily with the off-road vehicle, the smaller engine can go to smaller fires and the Cookham engine can help them out if they need to.*

Typical Views Expressed

Some typical questions and views drawn from each of the meetings are given below, ordered to move from relative pessimism to optimism:

The Cookham brigade is very much community based and are part of the village...it would be terrible for that to disappear...

You don't realise you are going to miss something until it is gone...I don't want the situation to happen that all of a sudden the fire brigade has gone from Cookham

It's important to have Cookham firefighters attend because it's our fire station

I think having local staff must have advantages because of their local knowledge and interest

I'm selfish, I'm greedy. I personally like what we have in Cookham and don't want it to change

If it's not broken don't fix it...if everyone is happy with our lovely Dennis engine, why do we need two other vehicles that aren't going to help our village if there's a fire?

It's no use if I have a fire and it can't put my fire out is it?

When we've got the two smaller vehicles, how long is it going to be before [the FRS says] 'it would be much easier if those two vehicles were housed at Maidenhead because Maidenhead is only a few minutes away from Cookham and they can come out in almost the same time as your men would take to get to the station and to the incident'

I feel that this proposal is a stepping stone to us losing the fire brigade in Cookham...I think in another five years we would be very lucky if we have a fire station in Cookham

I'm happy with what we've got but I'd rather us maintain some sort of fire service than none whatsoever

I came here after hearing rumours that the fire station was going to be sold off and the land sold for development so I'm really pleased about what I'm hearing...

If it was true that the retained crew from Cookham could get there no quicker than a crew from Maidenhead we would be no worse off if the engine came from Maidenhead

It's not important to me at all...if you're in the middle of a fire you're not going to think about where they are coming from too much are you?!

I think our Cookham crew is very dedicated...they are part of the community and it's very nice to see people meeting them...I think they do a good job

I think overall that Berkshire will be better served by having the two vehicles...it will give greater flexibility

I think if anything having the off-road vehicle at Cookham is a good thing...they are obviously thinking that they need to base it somewhere and having Cookham as that base for specialist vehicles might make it less vulnerable in the future

They are obviously looking ahead and they must think that Cookham is a good place to locate something like this

We are looking ahead...we are seeing so much change in Cookham with roads getting blocked and access is quite a big issue here. If you come down certain roads at certain times of day the fire engine probably couldn't get through...the smaller engine probably would be able to

I can see a situation where there is more traffic on the road leading to more problems with access that the smaller engine would do a better job in getting around

The money saved could go into areas like education and protection with smoke alarms and escape routes...the money saved at Cookham could go back into areas, particularly more built up areas to do this work...also as it involves making a change to Cookham [the Service] will need to visibly seen to be spending a proportion of that money here...otherwise there would be a huge outcry

Home Fire Risk Assessments would be a very good way of spending money that is going to be more effective in the long term than having a big machine that isn't used very often.

Balance of Opinion and Conclusions

Of the eight participants, two remained firmly against the IRMP proposal for Cookham at the end of a lengthy debate on the issues. The remaining six approved the RBFA proposal to replace Cookham's single fire engine with two off-road vehicles that can offer support elsewhere in Berkshire when required.

3.3.2 Slough Focus Groups

Composition and Estimates of Risk

The Slough focus groups and their estimates of fire death risk have been outlined in the Windsor section (3.2) above.

Slough on Cookham

Discussion and Conclusion

Two of the three Slough focus groups discussed the Cookham proposal to replace the current single fire engine with two off-road vehicles (including one light-weight fire engine) that can also provide support elsewhere when needed. Both groups approved the idea – though some members had reservations about the desirability of basing both off-road vehicles in eastern Berkshire. They asked:

Could you not manage with just one off-road fire engine there – do you need two if it is such a safe area?

Cookham is not very central in Berkshire – so why keep them both there?

The Slough respondents were happy with keeping the fire station, using existing resources and keeping a mobile vehicle in Cookham, but they stressed their reservations about the location of the two specialist vehicles for Berkshire.

3.3.3 Maidenhead Focus Group

Composition

The Maidenhead group and its estimates of fire death risk have been outlined in the Windsor and Wokingham section (3.2) above.

Discussion and Conclusions

For participants in Maidenhead, the proposal for Cookham is an economical and practical solution that offers greater flexibility across Berkshire and a more appropriate rescue facility for the Maidenhead/Cookham area:

The fact that these two smaller vehicles can be deployed to other incidents in the area is good

This idea seems more practical than having a big heavy vehicle because of the nature of the area...we do flood.

3.4 READING (DEE ROAD) PROPOSALS

3.4.1 Dee Road Focus Group

Composition

Eight diverse people attended the focus group drawn from the immediate vicinity of the Dee Road station.

Estimates of Risk

Like residents elsewhere, the Dee Road group hugely over-estimated the risk of accidental fire deaths. Indeed, their estimates ranged from 30-40 to 400-500!

Principles of IRMP

The Dee Road area residents were relatively enthusiastic about prevention/education as a way of reducing risk in the community. For example, they said:

We need to reduce the risks of kids being malicious

We need to solve the problems of ignorance and bad intent

Community education is vital – especially for the young.

They also accepted that value for money is a legitimate concern of the RBFA – though they were concerned that the response service should not be eroded in the long run. They were against any real cuts in the fire service overall – while accepting that the current proposals do not reduce the scale or activities of the fire service in general. Some said they felt suspicious of the government's agenda and that developing changes should be kept under review.

Dee Road on Dee Road

Discussion

The Dee Road area residents were cautious about approving the closure of their very local fire station. They were concerned about a range of issues:

- Where alternative cover might come from for West Tilehurst – and how quickly?
- Value for money
- How real would be the benefits to the rest of Reading?
- How the Dee Road site might be used if vacated by the RBFRS?

Several residents perceived that the general reason for the proposals was to more accurately target risk in the general Reading city centre area – and they accepted that the move to Caversham Road would achieve this.

Typical Views Expressed

Following are some of the typical views expressed in the meeting:

Is the government making you do this?

Will the Pangbourne station be kept?

What would the response times be to West Tilehurst (about 5 minutes)?

Do these proposals worsen response times to motorways?

Dee Road is central for Burfield and Ufton and it has been refurbished – so it seems a shame to lose it now

Dee Park has a lot of housing and gets secondary fires

Caversham has difficult traffic problems – is that a good place to put a fire station?

I don't want to see other properties built at Dee Road

We are used to it but it may not be the best for risk

[Dee Road] is not really that central – except for us

What if you had a major fire in Reading?

It is a pity to change a reliable local service and centralise it

I live behind the station and I don't want longer response times

I just like to know the fire engine is there – even if it's selfish

We'd all like more fire stations, but it is not rational to spend so much money and have them do nothing

I'd like to cover all eventualities, but we can't do that

I have a young family, but we have smoke detectors fitted – so I don't feel so at risk; and we've had no fires in our street. It won't make a difference to us, but I'll be sorry to see it go

I like it where it is, but the change is for the good of Reading – and Pangbourne is not far away.

Balance of Opinion and Conclusion

On the basis of the comments above, it will not seem surprising that the members of the focus group were equally divided about whether it was reasonable to close the Dee Road fire station while moving the appliance to Caversham Road. Four were opposed, but four found the idea acceptable. In other words, the outcome was not clear-cut. The evidence is that many informed respondents would remain opposed to the

proposal; but about as many could be persuaded that it is a reasonable outcome – given the balance of risks in different parts of Reading.

3.4.2 Caversham Road Focus Group

Composition

The Caversham Road group and its estimates of fire death risk have been outlined in the Windsor and Wokingham section (3.2) above.

Caversham Road on Dee Road

Discussion and Conclusions

The changes to the situation at Dee Road were accepted by the Caversham Road group; participants were comfortable with the proposal because they perceived it to have been developed by the 'experts'.

With specific regard to the Tilehurst area, participants recognised that *a lot of it is not built-up area anyway...it's not densely populated in the way Reading is*. However, they also acknowledged that those living in the area may not endorse the proposal so readily. As such, it was suggested that all 6,600 residents who will no longer receive a response in ten minutes may benefit from a Home Fire Risk Assessment – participants believed that this would not only be an excellent preventive measure, but would also go some way to negating what they saw as the adverse effects of the proposal for those living in the area.

Typical Views Expressed

Some typical questions and views drawn from each of the meetings are given below, ordered to move from relative pessimism to optimism:

If it was a reduction in service to your area that was being proposed you might feel a bit concerned about it...

As long as the Fire Service is happy, I'm happy...they are the ones who know what they are doing and where they need to be

It makes sense and sounds reasonable

If I lived in that area I would make a point of having a visit and making sure everything was absolutely perfect and that I know where I was going if there was a fire

[Having a Home Fire Risk Assessment] *would probably be a way of convincing people in that area.*

3.4.3 Sonning Focus Group

The composition and background views of the Caversham Road area focus group have been outlined above, in the Windsor and Wokingham section (3.2).

Sonning on Dee Road Proposals

Discussion and Conclusions

Whilst recognising the potential concerns of those living in Reading's Tilehurst area, participants at Sonning were of the view that *you can't argue with the maths...more people will benefit and the Fire Service is supposed to serve the whole community not just Tilehurst:*

It all goes back to risk assessment doesn't it?

They were very positive about the potential developments in Reading, acknowledging that Tilehurst is *a low-risk area...responsible people live there*. As noted above, Sonning group members understood that those living within the Tilehurst area would probably be more reluctant to endorse this proposal:

If you lived in Tilehurst it might be an issue I think...I would want to know what the response time would be.

As such, it was suggested that residents be proactively offered a Home Fire Risk Assessment by the FRS in order to reduce the impact of longer response times.

The people there should be offered a risk assessment...in that area the Service should knock on people's doors and offer it to them.

3.4.3 Twyford Focus Group

Composition

The focus group in Twyford included seven people from a range of backgrounds and of a range of ages – all of whom live in the village of Twyford. The meeting concentrated mainly on the proposal to close Sonning and Wargrave fire stations and open a new community fire station at Twyford, but also included discussion on the possible changes at Reading and the proposed improvement of fire cover at Wokingham by redeploying night-time resources from Windsor.

Estimations of Risk

The Twyford group over-estimated the risk of death in accidental dwelling fires. Although one participant, when asked *'how many people die in accidental dwelling fires annually in Royal Berkshire?'* guessed at a relatively accurate 11, others estimated at 100 and even 1,000!

Principles of IRMP

Participants at Twyford generally agreed that the RBFA should use its resources flexibly to assess and target risk by balancing, prevention, protection and response and endorsed preventive measures through public education and Home Fire Risk Assessments.

In terms of finance, participants generally understood the financial constraints that govern the running of all public bodies, not only the Fire and Rescue Service. Although stressing that they are happy to pay for the Service (with one stating that they would be prepared to pay more), there was agreement that the RBFA should pursue value for money:

I see that side of it...in my job I'm constantly having to look at Best Value and using the resources I've got to do more...I don't get extra money to take more people on and we're expected to get the same result

It's about doing more of this and less of that

I agree with the point about spending money wisely

It's like the Police and the Health Service isn't it? Everybody wants the services but nobody wants to pay for them...I would be happy to see my Council Tax go up.

Twyford on Dee Road and Caversham Road

Discussion and Conclusion

Participants at Twyford fully endorsed the proposals to redevelop the Reading (Caversham Road) fire station. Furthermore, the closure of the Dee Road site and the relocation of the appliance to Caversham Road was also acceptable to the group; they described the central location of Caversham Road as ideal to provide fire cover for Reading and were pleased to see – as they perceived it - the majority of the town benefiting from enhanced cover.

There was, however, some discussion about Tilehurst – the area of Reading that will, under the proposal, wait longer than ten minutes for a response. The group understood that they were offering detached, objective views, but that residents in that area may be somewhat uncomfortable with the change. Nevertheless, the general view was that the changes represent an overall improvement for Reading.

In order to negate the potential impact of longer response times to Tilehurst and the possible negativity towards the proposal of those living there, it was suggested that the FRS offer Home Fire Risk Assessments to the 6,600 affected residents.

Typical Views Expressed

Some typical questions and views drawn from each of the meetings are given below, ordered to move from relative pessimism to optimism:

When you stand back from it it's perfectly logical but if you are sitting in that area you would be a bit uncomfortable

Having the resources at Caversham Road makes sense...it's a central location...it's right in the middle of the town

The larger proportion of the town seems to get a better service

You've got to look at the greater number of the population that will be better served as opposed to the risk to the people in the smaller area

Being a realist it's got to be acceptable...it's all about how [the FRS is] going to better serve the larger proportion of the population

[The FRS] could also say that 'you might be getting a worse service but we will come around and do a HFRA for every house in the area'

If [the FRS] could target them it would soften the blow.

3.5 READING (CAVERSHAM RD) PROPOSALS

3.5.1 Caversham Road Focus Group

Composition, Risk and IRMP

The composition and background views of the Caversham Road area focus group have been outlined above, in the Windsor and Wokingham section (3.2).

Caversham Road on Caversham Road Proposals

Discussion and Conclusions

The redevelopment of the Caversham Road facility as a community fire station was warmly welcomed by participants in the area. They were certainly of the view that the building itself is in need of renovation, although they did suggest that the FRS should attempt to incorporate some of the original building's features into a new station. In addition, they were pleased that the station is not to be relocated, as the original site was deemed an excellent place from where to provide emergency cover.

The concept of a community fire station was positively viewed by participants. Such a facility would, it was felt, be ideally located in the area and would be well-used, providing it is sufficiently advertised to the community. Also, the layout of the

facility was thought to be important in enticing people in; it was suggested that *the community bit of the station will have to be a different layout...it would need to look like a public building you can go in and out of.*

Despite the positivity described above, the group was of the view that people tend to view their local fire station as a 'closed shop', a place they would not think of visiting because such serious work is done there. As such, a shift was thought to be required in the way these facilities are viewed by the public before they will be prepared to use them. Further, participants were adamant that the facility should not interfere with firefighters' daily activities in any way.

Typical Views Expressed

Some typical questions and views drawn from each of the meetings are given below, ordered to move from relative pessimism to optimism:

You think [the fire station is] a barred area...you might be interested to know what goes on in there but you would feel like you were invading

Because they've got such an important job you wouldn't want to interfere or interrupt and get in their way

I think people have an attachment to their local station...they should keep some of the historical features of the station

That's fine...it does look like it's falling apart

It seems a sensible place to keep it...it's central, and it's close to the railways and the motorways...thinking of the layout of the area it seems to be one of the most sensible areas to have a station

It should stay where it is...it's a very good site

It's in a good location [for the community station]...you will have lots of people passing both ways

People would use it...if it became widely known that these facilities were available and accessible...by word-of-mouth...people will come to use it

It's all about education to overcome the barriers that have been there before where they perhaps haven't come to speak to the Fire Service...it would also have to have access to it so that it doesn't interfere with the firefighters coming out.

3.5.2 Dee Road Focus Group

Composition, Risk and IRMP

The composition and background views of the Dee Road area focus group have been outlined above, in section 3.4.1.

Dee Road on Caversham Road Proposals

Discussion and Conclusion

A few of the Dee Road area residents were opposed to the proposal to expand and 're-brand' the Caversham Road station as a community fire station. They justified this view by saying:

We know what to do about fires – so you don't need more education.

However, the great majority of respondents approved of the Caversham Road changes, saying:

We do need to educate the public more – especially the children in schools

*Education and prevention will save money in the long run
Caversham Road will serve the public and the town*

The fire station should be more interactive with the public – it should publicise home safety by fire-fighters (who are good role models); and it will improve working conditions for the fire-fighters.

Overall, then, only one person out of seven was opposed to the Caversham Road changes.

3.6 SONNING AND WARGRAVE PROPOSALS

3.6.1 Sonning Focus Group

Composition, Risk and IRMP

The composition and background views of the Sonning focus group have been outlined above, in the Windsor and Wokingham section (3.2).

Sonning on Sonning and Wargrave

Discussion and Conclusions

The group at Sonning accepted the closure of its local fire station as well as that at Wargrave, especially given that...

- The appliances are not always available,
- The buildings themselves are in need of renovation
- Twyford is very close to both Sonning and Wargrave
- *A large percentage of retained staff at Wargrave come from Twyford anyway.*

The group also agreed that, of all three areas, Twyford is the most appropriate location for a new fire station – particularly because of the good road access in and out of the village. As regards location within Twyford, participants suggested *West or North because otherwise you've got to get through the centre of Twyford which is a nightmare these days, especially in rush hour.*

Although recognising the merits of the changes and accepting the rationale behind them, a number of participants expressed regret about the loss of their local station. It was thought to be part of the history and character of the village, as well as a feature that provides a sense of safety and security for the residents of Sonning. However, despite expressing these views, participants accepted that they do not form a strong enough argument to warrant rejection of the changes. The Fire and Rescue Service's proposals, they felt, were based on hard facts whereas *the merits I'm talking about are a bit fluffy round the edges!*

The only other concern – as expressed by one participant - was that the retained staff living in Woodley (who currently cover Sonning) would no longer be eligible for RDS duty at Twyford because of the five-minute rule.

Participants were positive about the introduction of a community fire station at Twyford, particularly noting the potential of such a facility in fostering closer relationships between the FRS and the community.

However, the group highlighted a few issues that must be surmounted in terms of attracting people to a fire station if facilities, activities and services are to be provided there. First and foremost it would seem that people still see fire stations as 'closed shops' – a perception that must be overcome if people are to feel comfortable visiting their local station. This, it was felt, will be a long-term process. Also, participants sought reassurance that, if additional activities and facilities are to be provided at fire stations, they will not detract from or impede the work of operational staff in any way and will be kept entirely separate from emergency response activities.

Finally, participants believed that any new fire station, and the facilities that could potentially be included in it, should be adapted to local need. That is, the FRS should not go to the trouble and expense of providing facilities that are already available within the community.

Typical Views Expressed

Some typical questions and views drawn from each of the meetings are given below, ordered to move from relative pessimism to optimism:

I must admit I've got mixed feelings because we've lived with it for twenty years and I've known people who work there...you can't argue with the economics and the logistical arrangements, it makes sense, but what I feel sad about as a resident of Sonning is that it's part of the character of the place

I'd be kidding myself if I didn't say it's something that we value just for its own sake...there is an element of feeling safer when you've got [a fire station] on your doorstep...it's that sense of having your own little fire brigade on your doorstep and the kind of character that goes with the quaint English village...from that perspective it's sad to lose it

[The community fire station is] a fantastic idea but it will take a while to feed through...you just wouldn't go to your fire station would you?

It will probably take a bit of work but if it's instilled in people, especially young people now I think [community fire stations] could work in the next 10-20 years

I think you just have to look at the statistics really...it will be sad to see it go but you just have to look at the times it's unavailable

I drive by regularly and it always looks closed up

It makes sense doesn't it...it's not as if we are losing a great facility there...it looks tired doesn't it?

Twyford is the best location of the three without a doubt...it's got good road access from three or four different areas

All public institutions have become a bit removed from the public they serve haven't they? Not so much in reality but they come over as 'them and us'...so [the community fire station] is very positive in closing the gap

I think the fire service gets a positive public response...[the community fire station] would be something people would want to be involved with

Does Twyford already have any of the things they would put in the new fire station? If they put something in and people are already going somewhere else anyway it would be pointless.

3.6.2 Twyford Focus Group

Composition, Risk and IRMP

The composition and background views of the Twyford focus group have been outlined above, in the Reading section (3.4).

Twyford on Sonning and Wargrave Proposals

Discussion and Conclusions

Expectedly, all of those who attended the group at Twyford were in favour of the possible building of a community fire station in their village. The proposal was described as *sensible* and it was generally agreed that *we're getting the good end of the deal...we seem to be getting the most out of it.*

The location of a new station in Twyford (as opposed to Sonning and Wargrave) was thought to be ideal – particularly because of the area's infrastructure and its proximity to both Sonning and Wargrave. Indeed, it was argued that *if you were starting from scratch you wouldn't put a fire station in Sonning and Wargrave...you'd put it in Twyford.* The proposal was certainly believed to reflect the fact that Twyford is a developing area, whereas Sonning and Wargrave have remained rather static over the years.

In agreeing with the proposal in principle, participants could foresee the following benefits for the Twyford community:

- An enhanced feeling of safety and security would result from having a fire station in the village
- *Having a community fire station actually in Twyford could do a lot of good in terms of prevention.*

Few concerns were raised during the Twyford focus group. Indeed, with specific regard to the building of a new fire station in the village, the only worry was that noise levels would rise in the vicinity, leading to NIMBYism amongst those close to the chosen site. However, all were of the view that the enhanced feeling of safety and security that would result from the establishment of a station in Twyford would outweigh any concern people may have about noise, particularly if the station is situated in a sensible location.

The group did discuss the implications of the proposal for Sonning and Wargrave and acknowledged that people living in those areas may not be as comfortable with the proposal as they were. However, if the FRS properly and fully explains the reasoning behind the changes – particularly the fact that both engines are unavailable for a significant percentage of the time – it was believed that objections could be overcome.

As has been noted, all participants were pleased that the new fire station at Twyford will be a community facility; they particularly highlighted the benefit of such a station in disseminating the safety message. However, they also sought reassurance that the community side of the new station would be kept entirely separate from emergency response activities and would not detract from or impede the work of operational staff in any way. Furthermore, it would seem that people still see fire stations as unwelcoming to the community - 'closed shops' in effect. In overcoming people's reticence, a culture change could, it was felt, be facilitated by the interest a new station will generate.

To capitalise on this natural curiosity, it was strongly suggested that the FRS further 'break the ice' by *going out into the community in the first instance rather than expect the community to come to them...then the community probably would come in because they will be more aware of the services.* The personalisation of the service will also assist the process according to participants. Although recognising that RDS staff have other commitments aside from their role as firefighters, it was strongly suggested that they make themselves known to the community so that people feel comfortable in developing stronger links with their FRS.

Typical Views Expressed

Some typical questions and views drawn from each of the meetings are given below, ordered to move from relative pessimism to optimism:

You might have people complaining about noise

Noise would be a concern for me if the station was nearby...fire engines going up and down the road all the time

There is more likely to be concern up at Sonning and Wargrave

If I was in Wargrave I'd look at the statistic to say the engine is not available 35% of the time and think I'd rather have it next door 100% of the time...if I didn't know that though I'd probably object

A lot might see [a community fire station] as a hindrance to the guys doing their jobs

It seems a bit strange having a social thing going on in a fire station

In terms of location Twyford is pretty good...it seems much more central in terms of the structure of roads and stuff

Sonning and Wargrave would only be literally two minutes away for a fire engine

It recognises the shift towards where the houses are around here

I think we would feel safer and the general population in Twyford would feel good about it

In terms of deaths and injuries it's probably not going to make a huge difference in our actual safety but the perception of people around here will be that it will

It depends exactly where it goes...as long as it is sensibly placed for the village I don't think there will be a big concern about it

I think there's a big opportunity when they put a new fire station in to really get some messages across

It would be bringing the community in and by doing this the Fire Service can spread more information

It's the ice-breaker problem...they need to get that going...the fact that there is a new fire station and that the service has an opportunity to create some excitement around it...there's an opportunity to get people's attention

It's about going out into the community and spreading the message and telling people the facility is available...

If the firefighters become familiar to the community people will be like 'that's so and so, he's our local firefighter'. My daughter goes on about the local lollipop man every day because he's part of the community and if you can do that it can only be beneficial to the Service

If firefighters can become familiar to the youngsters they can influence them...they won't do anything wrong because they know someone who may be affected by it.

3.6.3 Slough Focus Group

Slough on Sonning and Wargrave Proposals

Discussion and Conclusion

Two of the three Slough focus groups discussed the related Sonning and Wargrave proposals to close Sonning fire station while providing cover from Reading's Wokingham Road and building a new RDS Community Fire Station at Twyford before closing the Wargrave fire station. They had some questions – for example:

What distance is Reading's Wokingham Road from Sonning, and how long does the journey time take?

What will happen to the Sonning RDS if Sonning closes?

The proposals were generally very readily approved:

Twyford seems a more central place and there is higher risk there – with RDS locally

It seems to make sense!

However, some participants pointed out that the proposals could be interpreted as transferring some fire service resources away from higher risk areas rather than relying on RDS crews in low risk areas. In this context, one person declared:

I would rather have more permanent fire-fighters working than pay for more RDS staff who are not working – this would be the ideal solution overall.

3.6.4 Wokingham Focus Groups

Composition, Risk and IRMP

The composition and background views of the Wokingham focus groups have been outlined above, in the Windsor and Wokingham section (3.2).

Wokingham on Sonning and Wargrave Proposals

Discussion

Three of the four Wokingham groups (and the majority of members of the fourth) were in full agreement with the proposals to close Sonning and Wargrave fire stations and open a new RDS community fire station in Twyford. Sonning and Wargrave were both described by participants as very low-risk areas, and so close to Twyford as to fall comfortably within the FRS's response standards. Further, the fire stations themselves were no longer thought to be fit for purpose.

In terms of benefits, the proposed changes will, it was felt, assist in solving the area's RDS crewing issues. Also, the locating of a new station in Twyford was thought to better reflect the area's changing risk pattern. Indeed, it was noted that whereas Sonning and Wargrave have remained rather static in terms of development, Twyford has grown considerably and is more likely than the other two areas to expand in the future. In all, the proposals were thought to represent a better use of FRS resources – offering an opportunity for savings to be redeployed to areas where improvements are necessary.

The Wokingham participants recognised that theirs was a detached viewpoint and that Sonning and Wargrave residents may have a somewhat different perspective on the proposal. However, it was hoped that *once it is fully explained and the people are fully educated they may take it on board.*

Most also endorsed the development of the new fire station in Twyford as a community facility. Such a resource would, it was felt, greatly assist the FRS in developing relationships with the

community in Twyford and in disseminating the safety message widely and effectively.

Although participants were positive about these new facilities, they highlighted a few perceptions that must be overcome in attracting people to a community-based fire station. As has been mentioned by other groups, it would seem that people still see fire stations as 'closed shops' and are reluctant to visit them for fear of interrupting what they see as the extremely important work of the FRS. Related to this last point, participants sought reassurance that, if additional activities and facilities are to be provided at fire stations, they will be kept entirely separate from emergency response activities.

Finally, that the FRS must work on attracting all sectors of the community to the facility – and not only the low-risk groups – was deemed imperative in ensuring its success in achieving its aims.

Although dissenters were in the minority, it should be noted that a couple of participants in one of the Wokingham groups were very reluctant to endorse this proposal. Although not in any way disagreeing with the establishment of a fire station in Twyford, they did not feel that the closure of the two fire stations in Sonning and Wargrave was acceptable. Their primary concern was that the physical removal of the stations may not only negate residents' sense of safety and security, but could also lead to an increase in malicious fires in the area.

Those who disagreed with the closure of Sonning and Wargrave stations suggested building a more basic fire station at Twyford, whilst keeping the FRS presence at Sonning and Wargrave – and using the money saved at Twyford to upgrade these facilities.

Typical Views Expressed

Some typical questions and views drawn from each of the meetings are given below, ordered to move from relative pessimism to optimism:

It's not our fire station being closed!

It's part of their history so people living here may have a different point of view

I can't imagine the people from Sonning being very pleased!

You don't feel like you can go into Wokingham fire station and say 'can I have a look around?' It's like an isolated place, you wouldn't go there

Building a new station at Twyford is a good idea but closing stations down is not a good idea because it would give people, especially kids, a licence to burn things and it takes away people's security

I'm not saying that opening one at Twyford is a bad idea because it's clearly needed but closing the ones at Sonning and Wargrave, irrespective of whether they are empty buildings and crewed by retained staff, will take the security away

In Sonning and Wargrave you've got basically little garages...can't they just build another station like that at Twyford?

The same people who would use [community fire stations] are the same kinds of people who would use libraries and so on...you would only get a certain sector of the community there...maybe not the high-risk groups

For this particular area it seems sensible

I guess the buildings that they use for the fire stations are very old and a modern one would be better

Because you have both the Sonning and Wargrave firefighters based near Twyford surely it will be easier to get a crew together?

Sonning is an old, small community isn't it? It hasn't grown for years and neither has Wargrave...you've got to move the station because Twyford is now a much, much bigger populated town and there are a lot of people moving into there

Twyford is a more developed area than Sonning and Wargrave and probably more likely that the other two to have more houses built in the future

These are all efficiencies...it wouldn't make sense to keep them on just for the sake of it would it?

They are able to redeploy the resources and the money to places that need improving

I would have thought that [the community fire station] is in general a good idea to follow because it will increase the number of messages they can get across to people...it's about prevention and protection as well now and from that point of view I would have thought opening up and increasing the flow of people into the fire station and interaction has got to be a positive thing

If [the FRS gets] the right people in to the new station...a mix of people...then yes it will be a good thing.

Balance of Opinion and Conclusions

Three of the four Wokingham groups (groups of nine, eight and eight) were fully supportive of the IRMP proposals pertaining to the closure of Sonning and Wargrave fire stations, as well as the establishment of a community fire station at Twyford. This

was also the case for the majority of the fourth Wokingham group; two of the seven did not endorse the proposal, whereas the others were very much in favour of its implementation.

3.6.5 Crowthorne Group

Composition, Risk and IRMP

The composition and background views of the Crowthorne focus group have been outlined above, in the Windsor and Wokingham section (3.2).

Crowthorne on Sonning and Wargrave Proposals

Discussion and Conclusions

The proposal to close Sonning and Wargrave fire stations and establish a new community fire station at Twyford was believed by Crowthorne respondents to make a great deal of sense, not only because *Sonning and Wargrave Fire Stations are very old and the cost of repairs and upgrades would be high*, but also because the potential to recruit RDS firefighters will, it was hoped, be greater:

If it increases the availability of firefighters then it's got to be a good thing...what's the use of having fire engines if there is no-one available to drive them?

Long-term they could help in addressing recruitment problems if the Service can foster better relationships with the community

It would enhance recruitment of retained fire-fighters.

The recruitment of RDS firefighters in Twyford was, in fact, the only issue of concern amongst participants at Crowthorne. Although appreciating that it may be easier to recruit retained staff in the area at present, *how can they be sure that they will still be living in Twyford 5, 10 or 15 years from now? You were saying earlier how people's work patterns and lifestyles have changed...I was just wondering if [the FRS has] done any work on that because what may be true now may not be 5, 10, 15 years from now.*

The proposal to build the fire station in Twyford as a community facility was generally praised, particularly insofar as increased contact between the FRS and the community may attract some people to RDS firefighting. Participants did, however, highlight the fact that people still see fire stations as 'closed shops' and that a change in attitude is required in the way people view their local fire station if they are to be enticed there for activities or advice:

It is going to be a long-term thing...people have no contact with fire-fighters unless they come into schools or workplaces or call them out to an incident.

3.6.6 Maidenhead Group

Composition, Risk and IRMP

The composition and background views of the Maidenhead focus group have been outlined above, in the Windsor and Wokingham section (3.2).

Maidenhead on Sonning and Wargrave Proposals

Discussion and Conclusions

Participants at Maidenhead expressed general agreement with the proposal to close Sonning and Wargrave fire stations and establish a new community fire station in Twyford, providing the changes are made in a timely fashion so that the residents of the villages are not adversely affected in any way:

I have some concerns about timing and closure and re-opening...that would be my concern for residents...the actual time taken to do it all.

The group also sought clarification on *who would respond when Wokingham Road is busy.*

3.7 CROWTHORNE PROPOSALS

3.7.1 Crowthorne Group

Composition, Risk and IRMP

The composition and background views of the Crowthorne focus group have been outlined above, in the Windsor section.

Discussion and Conclusions

Several members of the Crowthorne group had read press reports on the imminent closure of Crowthorne fire station and were, as such, relieved to hear of the proposal to trial response from Camberley to the south of the town.

Encouragingly, the group endorsed the trial, even questioning why such cross-border response is not already in place. However, the trial was accepted on the proviso that it is regularly reviewed and assessed to take account of issues such as new development in the area, and whether or not it is actually yielding success.

Although there was no concern about the trial per se, there were reservations about the potential implications should it be successful. That is, participants saw such success leading to an extension of the trial further into Crowthorne – leaving Crowthorne more vulnerable to closure (particularly if the FRS

achieves its ultimate aim of providing 24-hour crewing at Wokingham – a station that could cover Crowthorne).

It should be noted that several members of the group were not averse to the closure of Crowthorne fire station in the future if it could be proved that adequate fire cover could be provided from elsewhere – and were comfortable with the fact the FRS would ensure that cover will remain at an appropriate level.

Despite the above, discussion on the potential closure of Crowthorne led to the expression of concern regarding what some participants saw as the centralisation of services. Looking long term and assuming Wokingham fire station becomes 24-hour crewed, there was concern that the removal of the station at Crowthorne could leave the town isolated in the event of a large incident.

A couple of other issues were raised with regard to the trial – although they were not sufficiently important to respondents to lead them to reject the proposal. Firstly, it was recognised that, in reducing the number of call-outs for existing RDS staff at Crowthorne, their remuneration will decrease. Secondly, there was some concern that Council Tax payers in Surrey may have an issue with their fire and rescue resources being used across the border in Berkshire.

Typical Views Expressed

Some typical questions and views drawn from each of the meetings are given below, ordered to move from relative pessimism to optimism:

The danger to me is the more you centralise the more, when things do go wrong, they will go seriously wrong. You might well be able to plot averages and so on but a system where it is more local is more robust...if you have a combination of unfortunate events, having a local presence means that you will be less likely to have a problem...if there were a series of major accidents then Crowthorne could be like an island with no-one able to get into it but if there was a station here that would not be an issue.

What about the retained firefighters...by reducing the area they cover you are reducing the amount of money they earn

Is it a problem going across the border...presumably Surrey Council Tax payers pay for Camberley...would they expect some sort of reciprocal arrangement?

If the trial is a success does that mean that Crowthorne becomes even more vulnerable or likely to be closed?

Assuming the trial period is considered successful...if Camberley can deal with this and Wokingham becomes

whole-time, what is the justification for Crowthorne in the longer-term?

Once you turn Wokingham into a 24-hour station, are you then going to shut down Crowthorne?

Does the risk assessment take account of likely new build?

What would the failure criteria be? Say [the FRS is] one year into the trial...I would presume there would be an assessment then...what would make them change their mind to abandon this trial?

I must admit...having heard and read bits about them selling off Crowthorne fire station and building another one elsewhere because it's a prime site...the night has been reassuring

My views before I came were that Crowthorne was up for closure in the next few years so it's not as bad as I thought

[They have] got to try it to see how it works

I'm surprised this isn't being done already...it seems to make complete and total sense

I came thinking it was going to be primarily a financial argument but I'm going to go away thinking that it's actually an operational argument...it doesn't matter to me if Crowthorne closes because what I'm interested in is 'if I've got a problem how quick can you get to me?'. It looks like this exercise has been developed from that point of view.

4. Elected Member Forums

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Having planned to hold two forums (at Reading and Slough) for elected members, the RBFA decided to hold a third (at Cookham) because a total of only four members attended the first two meetings. In the event, three Windsor members who had previously attended the Slough forum also attended the additional Cookham meeting, alongside two members who had been unable to attend previously (and also two members of the RBFA). In summary, then, one member (from Bracknell) attended the Reading members' forum; three (from Windsor) attended the Slough forum; and five members (including the same three from Windsor) attended the Cookham forum.

This chapter reports the discussions of the forums under the same headings as previously, starting with the Windsor and Wokingham proposals. Because of the substantially overlapping attendance at the Slough and Cookham forums, the next section reports both forums together.

4.2 WINDSOR AND WOKINGHAM PROPOSALS

4.2.1 Reading Elected Members' Forum

The single elected member who attended the Reading forum meeting was impressed by the approach the RBFA has taken to risk management planning:

Overall, I am reassured now that the principles and proposals have been explained. It has been a bit of an eye opener – I would have guessed there are a 100 fire deaths a year in Berkshire!

It is good that the consultation is being done in advance of any of the actual closures.

In relation to the Windsor proposal the member observed:

This sounds like common sense!

In relation to the Crowthorne proposal the member said:

The Crowthorne proposals could benefit Bracknell.

4.2.2 Slough and Cookham Members' Forums

Windsor Proposals

Discussion

The five members who attended the Slough and Cookham forums were very critical of the Windsor proposal. They had considered the issues before attending the meeting and came along to listen to the RBFRS case before expressing their opposition. The main points made were that:

- There is no justification for using the council tax from one area to benefit another
- Windsor should not have a reduced service in order to benefit Wokingham
- Wokingham is a developing borough and should generate council tax sufficient to pay fully for its own fire service
- The marginal cost of keeping full night cover at Windsor could be raised from the council tax precept
- Windsor has special needs as a result of its royal status, tourism and late evening events – and also has areas of relative deprivation
- The road connection from Slough is subject to frequent congestion and fire engine journeys might be delayed
- Windsor is beneath the Heathrow flight-path
- Windsor is a target for terrorism.

The members also rejected the 'intermediate' option of replacing the Windsor night-time crew with a Windsor-based RDS service – on the grounds that it would have a longer response time than the current crew.

In order to retain Windsor's night time crew while still releasing resources, the members attending the Slough forum proposed that one of the two Slough fire station pumps should be based at night at Windsor instead of Slough; and, alternatively, they suggested that Slough's second night-time pump could be converted to an RDS crew if that would mean Windsor keeping its night-time crew. However, the members accepted RBFRS' observation that this would mean worsening the service to Slough, which is a much larger and higher risk area.

The members also said that the Fire Authority should examine the marginal cost of keeping night cover at Windsor in order to consider increasing the council tax precept to yield the required funding.

Typical Views Expressed

Wokingham is expanding and will raise more council tax revenue in the fullness of time – they have the capacity to generate more income whereas Windsor does not

We don't want to be the means to benefiting Wokingham with whom we have no connections

There is no justification for taking the services we pay for from our council tax precept and using them elsewhere

How much money does a full-time appliance cost per year? What is the marginal cost of keeping night cover at Windsor? The Fire Authority should consider this cost and think of increasing the precept to yield the funding

Keeping Windsor's night cover would delay the improvements in Wokingham, but need not negate them in the medium term

There can be congestion on the Windsor-Eton relief road

The 2.8 miles distance could be obstructed by any accidents on the road from Slough – due to the river crossing and the fact that there is only one main road

We have a lot of evening meetings that might require FRS attendance – and a lot of late evening visitors

We are a prime target for terrorism and this needs to be taken into account

Windsor also has a high level of older hotels, guest houses and HMOs – so the risk is higher than in most residential areas – because it is a top tourist town

Windsor has pockets of deprivation in some areas – and some potential social/ethnic problems that could cause disorder

Are there any proposals to relocate the Windsor fire station within Windsor – and what is the value of the current site? Would it be cost effective to move to another site and realise the value of the current site?

Emergencies are also about property and the economic damage that might be done – we cannot afford not to have emergency services close to the Castle – and at Legoland

The cover from Slough is not reassuring enough – when we have race nights in Windsor

We have to ensure effective night time cover in Windsor if both the Slough tenders are busy

The average of three night-time incidents per week (in Windsor) is an average – it might be much higher some weeks than others

An RDS night crew at Windsor would have a longer response time – it's not even a plausible solution

Another option would be to locate the Slough pump at Windsor during the night – this would be reassuring

You could have one RDS crew at Slough and keep the whole-time crew at Windsor

You could keep one whole-time pump at Langley, Slough and Windsor, but move one of the current Slough night crews to Windsor – but replace the second Slough night crew with an RDS crew. The reduction of out-calls to southern Buckinghamshire will help do this

This is a big issue in Windsor because people remember the Castle fire so vividly

Windsor is a high-profile place and there could be recriminations if changes were followed by a disaster.

Conclusion

The five members who attended the Slough and Cookham forums clearly rejected the Windsor proposal. They attended the meeting to listen to the RBFA proposals before expressing their opposition.

Wokingham Proposal

Discussion and Conclusion

The elected members focused on Windsor rather than Wokingham, but they were not unsympathetic to the lack of effective cover at Wokingham – they just did not want Windsor to suffer any changes. On one hand they said that there is no justification for using the council tax from one area to benefit another; but on the other hand they said that the Wokingham day cover should be achieved on the basis of savings achieved at Slough (by removing one night-time crew from there). Perhaps their most settled view was that Windsor would be in jeopardy unless Wokingham provides for its own cover:

Wokingham is a developing borough and should generate council tax sufficient to pay fully for its own fire service.

4.3 COOKHAM PROPOSALS

4.3.1 Reading Members' Forum

The member who attended the Reading forum approved of all the IRMP proposals.

4.3.2 Slough and Cookham Members' Forums

Discussion and Typical Views Expressed

The elected members also discussed the proposal to replace Cookham's single fire engine with two off-road vehicles (including one light-weight fire engine) that can also provide support elsewhere when needed. They raised a number of interesting points – particularly about the overall distribution of the county's off-road vehicles:

Cookham is at the eastern end of the County – so is it the best place to share a resource with the whole County?

Are there cross county arrangements? Cookham could be well served by Buckinghamshire

This could give more flexibility with two vehicles. When one is attending a heath fire, the other is still free – this seems an advantage.

Conclusion

Despite the above reservations, the elected members readily agreed that the RBFA proposal for Cookham should be endorsed as a reasonable solution.

4.4 CROWTHORNE PROPOSALS

4.4.1 Slough and Cookham Members' Forums

Discussion and Typical Views Expressed

The members also discussed the prospect of using Surrey FRS' whole-time fire engines (from Camberley) to cover southern border areas (Yorktown, College Town and Sandhurst) of Crowthorne for two-year trial period. They were concerned that this change might lead to the closure of the Crowthorne station in the longer term, but they did not oppose the change.

Does this mean Crowthorne might be closed?

I wouldn't care where the engine comes from – if it gets there quickly – the quickest one should go there, wherever it comes from

There is no reduction in service.

Conclusion

The members readily endorsed the two year trial period – *as long as it's a genuine trial period (and is reversible if it goes wrong)*.

4.5 OTHER PROPOSALS

4.5.1 Reading Members' Forum

The member who attended the Reading forum thought all the IRMP proposals had been properly thought-through and were reasonable.

4.5.2 Slough and Cookham Members' Forum

The Slough and Cookham forums discussed only the issues outlined above.

5. Stakeholder Forums

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Two stakeholder forums were held with members of the business, voluntary and statutory sectors, one in Reading and one in Windsor. Despite the many invitations issued by the RBFRS, only four people attended the Reading meeting – representing the Hindu Temple, Age Concern, the Thames Valley Police Force, and the Crime and Disorder Partnership; and a London Fire Brigade fire-fighter resident in Reading also attended. At Windsor 15 attended the meeting. This chapter reports the discussions of the forums under the same headings as previously, starting with the Reading proposals.

5.2 READING PROPOSALS

5.2.2 Reading Stakeholders' Forum

Caversham Road Proposals

Discussion and Conclusion

There was a general acceptance that Caversham should become a community fire station – on the general grounds that preventive work is valuable and the fire station *needs bringing into the 21 Century*.

The proposal for an additional fire engine at Caversham was also accepted readily, subject to some reservations about city road congestion possibly slowing response times.

But the one-way system may be a threat to Caversham's viability as the strategic location – that's the only problem I can foresee

The station is in the right place but the road system may interfere with its effective operation.

Dee Road Proposal

Discussion and Conclusion

There was a general acceptance that moving the Dee Road fire engine (closing Dee Road) would:

- Improve response to Reading centre, a higher risk area
- Not jeopardise west Tilehurst – given that it is a low risk area and has alternative cover available from Caversham Road, Whitley Wood and Pangbourne.

Typical Views Expressed

Some typical questions and observations were:

Can Pangbourne RDS provide effective cover to west Tilehurst?

If two pumps go from Reading, do you have effective alternative cover?

You have to put the personnel where they are needed for greatest risk – that is a basic principle

What do the Dee Road crews think of the proposal?

Caversham Road needs two pumps – but I've got reservations about covering West Tilehurst from Pangbourne, in relation to the housing expansion in the area

Caversham Road will be a busy station due to the levels of risk in the central area – and the traffic congestion can be substantial in the central area – and historical trends might not be a perfect guide to traffic flows in future

Conclusion

Three of the four participants were satisfied with, and accepted, the Dee Road proposal, but one person was very sceptical and wanted to retain the local resources to *cover the west Reading area*.

Sonning and Wargrave Proposals

Discussion and Conclusion

The stakeholder forum also considered the related proposals to close Sonning RDS fire station, provide cover from Reading's Wokingham Road station, and then build a new RDS Community Fire Station at Twyford before closing Wargrave RDS fire station. The participants were keen to know if anything had been done to try to solve the RDS availability problems, but their overall view was that the new station will be:

Very close to Wargrave – so it could almost be called 'Wargrave' – because the likely location is right next to Wargrave school.

The three related proposals were all accepted.

Windsor Proposal

Discussion and Typical Views Expressed

The stakeholder forum also considered the proposal to end night-time crewing at Windsor. While recognising local sensibilities, the four forum members thought the proposal is broadly reasonable on the grounds that:

- Windsor is a low risk area
- Strategic decisions should take account of varying risk levels to target resources most effectively
- Ending cross-border responsibilities into South Buckinghamshire increases Slough station's capacities.

Participants asked or said that:

How many calls and fires are there in Windsor?

There is very little need/risk in the Windsor Great Park area

The Castle does not have its own fire service – but they have fire wardens and breathing apparatus training

This is difficult for the local people to accept – but from a strategic viewpoint it is justifiable

It is desirable to reduce the commitment to South Buckinghamshire

The main aim is to direct resources to prevent loss of life.

Conclusion

The Reading stakeholder agreed with the proposal to end night-time crewing at Windsor – adding that it is desirable (but not essential) for Slough's cross border commitment to South Buckinghamshire to cease. The participants agreed that it would be preferable for Windsor's alternative cover to come from Slough rather than from a Windsor RDS crew.

5.3 WINDSOR PROPOSALS

5.3.1 Windsor Stakeholders' Forum

Background

ORS' conduct of the stakeholder forums has been criticised by one Windsor area resident because they were staged events rather than open public meetings. However, public meetings tend to be poorly attended and unrepresentative; and the outcome of the Windsor forum, and its report here, demonstrate that the meeting was conducted fairly and openly.

Discussion

Most of the attendees at the Windsor forum had considered the issues in detail before attending the meeting and came along to express their opposition. Some influential people spoke strongly against the proposals – including the Chief Executive of the Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead who criticised the views of the RBFRS Chief Fire Officer while (like many others present) criticising the RBFA proposals.

The Windsor forum expressed overwhelming support for the retention of night-time cover at the Windsor fire station. The main concerns expressed about the proposal to remove night-time cover were that Windsor:

- Will have slower response times because of congestion on the link road from Slough
- Has a unique historical and cultural heritage
- Has many older hotels and guest houses
- Is at risk from terrorist attack
- Lies beneath the Heathrow flight path
- Should not suffer in order to benefit Wokingham.

One participant argued that the response data published by RBFRS is misleading in understating the calls on the Windsor pump.

In contrast, a small minority expressed the view that the proposal is both reasonable and safe, and that the RBFA has a duty to make the best use of its resources.

Typical Views Expressed

You are fighting against the suspicion caused by the previous proposal to close the fire station totally – that has caused a lot of indignation and disbelief – so people don't trust this proposal

How much would it cost to retain the service as now – we would be happy to pay for more if the cover could be retained as now?

West Windsor Residents' Association finds the IRMP document unconvincing in terms of its data and reasoning. Shropshire's document sets out its risk-assessment evidence very clearly by using FSEC, but the RBFRS plan is more obscure. The downward trend in deaths is not yet established. Why is FSEC not used and what will be the change in crewing if the changes happen?

There is no place for an RDS fire-fighter in an urban area – we should aim to have wholetime cover

The outlying villages around Windsor are concerned about a worsened night-time service

Risk assessment should take account of the types of building in each area

The proposals are not convincing – we could surely afford the extra pump

An 8% rise in the Fire precept is only a small rise in the County precept

But the Fire Authority would be capped – so it does not seem practical

Under current circumstances, we are uncovered when the Windsor engine is deployed

Public confidence in the service is vitally important

I accept that but we have to be aware of costs and benefits – value for money

The question is, are we being made more unsafe in reality?

Windsor is developing rapidly

There has been a rise in HMOs in Slough – we want to be sure that this has been taken into account

I don't have confidence in the 8 minute response time – in one hotel fire here the Windsor crew was quicker and Slough was slower

Dynamic mobilisation after 15 minutes seems reasonable

Perceptions need to be in tune with reality – the death rate is very low – and we are proposing to make the best use of the current resources – with the possibility of increasing the costs if this does not work properly having been tried

If the night-time cover goes, I feel the risk is not unjustifiably high – the 8/10 minute standards are reasonable – and there is adequate support cover after 15 minutes in the area

Conclusion

When the balance of opinion was assessed at the end of the meeting, the majority against the proposal was 11 to 2 – with 13 people voting (out of 15 attending).

6. Questionnaire Consultation

6.1 INTRODUCTION

RBFRS distributed copies of a consultation questionnaire (designed by ORS in collaboration with the RBFA) within the covers of the IRMP draft plan. It is not possible to be sure exactly how many people saw or had access to the questionnaire, but the number would have been in the thousands. The questionnaire was distributed to members of the public during the 12-week consultation period and the cut-off date for returned questionnaires was 11th May 2007.

A total of 453 completed questionnaires were returned, of which 308 were returned by post and 145 were completed online. The response varied by local authority area – with only 5, 18 and 32 responses from Slough, Bracknell Forest and Wokingham areas respectively, compared with 136, 123 and 123 from Reading, West Berkshire and Windsor respectively.

6.2 QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

The following tables summarise the survey results by giving the proportions agreeing and disagreeing with each proposal – first for all-Berkshire and then for the relevant local authority area. 'Net scores' are derived for each option by subtracting the percentage disagreeing from the percentage agreeing with any proposal. Where more people disagree with a proposal than agree with it, the resultant net score is a minus figure.

IRMP Principles – Table 6.2.1

ALL-BERKSHIRE	% Agree	% Disagree	Net 'Scores'
RBFRS should target risks	68	8	+ 60
RBFRS should provide value for money	38	28	+ 10

Almost seven in ten respondents think RBFA should target its resources towards risk areas in principle; and only one in twelve disagrees. The division of respondent opinion on the principle of achieving value for money is much closer, but there is still a majority in favour of this principle. The table is based upon 451 respondents to the questionnaire consultation.

Wokingham Proposal – Table 6.2.2

Replace RDS crew with whole-time	% Agree	% Disagree	Net 'Scores'
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crew			
ALL-BERKSHIRE RESPONDENTS	83	6	+ 77
WOKINGHAM DC RESPONDENTS	90	9	+ 81

There is overwhelming support from respondents for improving fire cover to Wokingham by moving to whole-time crewing – both at the all-Berkshire and Wokingham District Council levels. It should be noted that the Wokingham-level results are based upon only 32 respondents from the district.

Cookham Proposal – Table 6.2.3

Replace single fire engine with two off-road vehicles	% Agree	% Disagree	Net 'Scores'
ALL-BERKSHIRE RESPONDENTS	32	56	- 24
WINDSOR AND MAIDENHEAD RESPONDENTS	58	9	+ 49

Respondents in Windsor and Maidenhead support the Cookham proposal with an absolute majority, but across Berkshire the position is almost exactly reversed – probably due to reservations about locating both off-road vehicles in eastern Berkshire (a point that also came up in the focus groups). It should be noted that the Windsor and Maidenhead results are based upon 121 respondents from the borough – a surprisingly low figure given that one Windsor area resident (a dedicated critic of the Windsor proposals) obtained 100 copies of the questionnaire for his distribution.

Crowthorne Proposal – Table 6.2.4

Cover parts of Crowthorne from Camberley for 2-year trial period	% Agree	% Disagree	Net 'Scores'
ALL-BERKSHIRE RESPONDENTS	31	56	- 25
BRACKNELL FOREST DC RESPONDENTS	71	24	+ 47

An absolute majority of respondents across Berkshire disagree with the proposal to cover parts of Crowthorne from Camberley for a trial two-year period. However, more than seven in ten of

the Bracknell Forest area respondents agree with the proposal. It should be noted that the Bracknell Forest results are based upon only 18 respondents from the district.

Wargrave, Twyford and Sonning Proposals – Table 6.2.5

Close Wargrave fire station and replace with CFS at Twyford	% Agree	% Disagree	Net 'Scores'
ALL-BERKSHIRE RESPONDENTS	36	40	- 4
WOKINGHAM DC RESPONDENTS	74	20	+ 54

Across Berkshire, opinion is broadly split on the Wargrave, Twyford and Sonning proposals. However, almost three-quarters of Wokingham area respondents agree with the proposal. It should be noted that the Wokingham results are based upon only 32 respondents from the district.

Sonning Proposals – Table 6.2.6

Close Sonning fire station and provide cover from Wokingham Road and build new fire station at Twyford	% Agree	% Disagree	Net 'Scores'
ALL-BERKSHIRE RESPONDENTS	57	29	+ 28
WOKINGHAM DC RESPONDENTS	74	23	+ 51

Across Berkshire an absolute majority of respondents support the closure of Sonning fire station and the associated proposals. Almost three-quarters of Wokingham area respondents agree with the proposal. It should be noted that the Wokingham results are based upon on 32 respondents from the district.

Reading Caversham Road Proposal – Table 6.2.7

Replace current fire station with Community Fire Station on same site	% Agree	% Disagree	Net 'Scores'
ALL-BERKSHIRE RESPONDENTS	83	4	+ 79
READING BC RESPONDENTS	94	5	+ 89

Across Berkshire more than eight in ten respondents support the replacement of Caversham Road fire station, and in the Reading borough area the proportion in favour is more than nine in ten. It should be noted that the Reading results are based upon 136 respondents from the borough.

Reading Dee Road Proposal – Table 6.2.8

Close Dee Road fire station and move fire engine to Cavesham Rd	% Agree	% Disagree	Net 'Scores'
ALL-BERKSHIRE RESPONDENTS	23	63	- 40
READING BC RESPONDENTS	5	95	- 90

Across Berkshire nearly two-thirds of respondents disagree with the closure of Dee Road, and in the Reading borough area the proportion in against is more than nine in ten. The Reading results are based upon 136 respondents from the borough.

Windsor Proposals – Table 6.2.9

Remove night-time crew and cover with Slough whole-time or Windsor RDS	% Agree	% Disagree	Net 'Scores'
ALL-BERKSHIRE RESPONDENTS	14	87	- 73
WINDSOR AND MAIDENHEAD RESPONDENTS	8	91	- 83

With respect to the Windsor proposals, the results across Berkshire and in Windsor and Maidenhead are very similar – with nine in the borough disagreeing with the removal of the

night crew. It should be noted that the Windsor and Maidenhead results are based upon only 123 respondents – and that one critic of the Windsor proposal managed to obtain 100 copies of the questionnaire for his own distribution locally.

6.3 ANNEX: RESPONDENT PROFILE

Section 7.2 above provides the key findings from the questionnaire consultation. For completeness, this shows the respondent profile. (An * denotes a number less than 1%; and figures may not always sum to 100 due to rounding errors.)

Gender – All Respondents	Number of cases	Valid %
Male	312	71%
Female	130	29%
Not Known	11	-

Table 6.3.1: Gender – All Respondents

Age – All Respondents	Number of cases	Valid %
16 to 24	15	3%
25 to 34	69	16%
35 to 44	131	30%
45 to 54	69	16%
55 or over	151	35%
Not Known	18	-

Table 6.3.2: Age – All Respondents

Ethnicity – All Respondents	Number of cases	Valid %
White	379	88%
Mixed	29	7%
Asian or Asian British	14	3%
Black or Black British	8	2%
Chinese or other ethnic group	2	*%
Not Known	21	-

Table 6.3.3: Ethnicity – All Respondents