

A blurred, high-angle photograph of a fire truck, showing red and yellow panels. The word 'READING' is visible on a yellow panel. The image is motion-blurred, suggesting speed and action.

Get The Full Picture...

A guide to common questions about working for
Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service

Working for Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service

When we talk to people about working for Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS), it sometimes seems as though there are a lot of myths and misunderstandings out there! Which is a shame because we work for you, the people of Berkshire. So we've put together this little booklet of the questions we get asked most often.

If the question that you want to ask isn't here... email us at recruitment@rbfrs.co.uk, or phone us on **0118 945 2888**, and ask away!

Please visit our website www.rbfrs.co.uk to find out more about working for us.



What do Firefighters actually do apart from putting out fires?

Firefighters actually spend only a small percentage of their working time putting fires out. Other emergencies that they deal with include rescuing people who are trapped, (in car accidents, floods, lifts, under building debris etc.), and dealing with chemical spills or other environmental hazards. They also sometimes rescue trapped animals - but cats in trees almost never actually need rescuing!

A lot of a Firefighter's time is spent in training and checking equipment. They also do a lot of safety education work, (eg visiting schools and community events), and carrying out safety checks in people's homes. And then there are unfortunately a few really irresponsible people who make hoax calls or set off fire alarms, which wastes a lot of time and money and means that Firefighters aren't available to respond to real emergencies.

Do I need any school or college qualifications to become a Firefighter?

No, we use our own recruitment tests which are geared towards what a Firefighter needs to do. These tests do include Working with Numbers and Understanding Written Information – example test papers are on the RBFRS website so that you can see the level of ability that's required.

Are there any age restrictions for becoming a Firefighter?

The minimum age is a bit of a grey area. It used to be 18, but under the age discrimination legislation it's debatable whether this can be justified. However it's a bit academic because we have never met anyone under 18 who had enough life experience to get through the selection process. We tell people that they can apply – if they did get through we'd have to decide what to do then. At worst, actual entry would be deferred until their 18th birthday. There is no rigid upper age limit, but as the training is very lengthy and expensive we would have to be convinced that someone was not intending to retire within a very short time of joining.

Do I have to be super-fit / a bodybuilder to become a Firefighter?

Not really. Fitness is important because the job can require a high level of physical exertion – wearing several kilos of protective fire kit and a breathing apparatus cylinder in hot conditions. The most demanding time actually is the recruit training course because a lot of activity is packed into a short time, so you should be aiming for a fitness level equivalent to at least 9.6 on the 'bleep test' (any fitness instructor should be able to explain this to you). Muscle strength is important, both in order to do the job and to protect you from injury, but the required levels are not extreme – women often find that they have to do more work on their upper body strength than men, but the level required is achievable by most people within a few months.

Do I have to have perfect eyesight to become a Firefighter?

No, you can wear glasses and become a Firefighter – but your uncorrected eyesight does have to meet certain standards, including requirements for colour vision. If you have had laser surgery, you have to wait for at least a year before you can apply.

Is there a minimum height requirement for Firefighters?

No.

I have a disability – could I be a Firefighter?

Some disabilities can be accommodated. Dyslexia is fairly common within the fire service and we do our best to minimize its impact. With conditions like diabetes and epilepsy, it really depends on how well it's under control – obviously a sudden seizure or hypoglycaemic episode could pose a severe risk to you or your colleagues. In the UK today there is a serving Firefighter who has an artificial leg, and some who use hearing aids. However it's unlikely that we could employ someone with a serious visual or mobility impairment as a Firefighter, for safety reasons.

I am not a UK resident / citizen - could RBFPS sponsor me to be a Firefighter under the points-based programme?

The UK Border Agency requires that before sponsoring a Tier 2 (Skilled) migrant worker under the points-based programme, an employer must demonstrate that they have been unable to fill the vacancy from the resident labour market. As we have plenty of Firefighter applicants from within the UK / EU, we could not sponsor an applicant under the Tier 2 scheme. If you qualify under the Tier 1 (Highly Skilled) category, or you have permission to work in the UK because of the kind of visa you hold, you don't need us to sponsor you - you can just apply.

I have a criminal conviction – does this mean that I couldn't become a Firefighter?

It depends – we look at each case individually. However, Firefighters do need to be people in whom the public can have complete confidence, as the work involves visiting the homes of elderly and vulnerable people. They also need to be very responsible people with a high level of self-discipline and a sensible attitude to risk, and in most cases a current conviction is evidence that an individual doesn't have those qualities yet. If a conviction is 'spent' under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act then you don't need to declare it. Firefighters are required to undergo a Criminal Records Bureau check as part of the recruitment process.

Do I have to have been in the armed services to become a Firefighter / Do you give preference to applicants from the armed services?

No. Some Firefighters do enter the service from the military, but it's certainly not a requirement, and no preference is given to armed service applicants.

What other jobs are there at RBFRS?

We have about 170 staff who support the work of our operational staff. These include people who work in finance, supplies, personnel, IT and technical support, and quite a large team that works with people in the community to improve safety. We also have Control staff who answer 999 calls, although these posts are due to move to Southampton in a couple of years.

Do you give preference to job applicants who already have family working for RBFRS?

No, and family members of applicants are strictly excluded from any selection decisions involving the applicant. It is true that a lot of Firefighter applicants have family members who are, (or were), Firefighters, but that's just a result of them knowing more about the job and how much their relative enjoys it.

Would I have to wear a uniform if I work for RBFRS?

That depends on what job you do. All Firefighters and Control staff wear uniforms. Some Support staff wear a uniform most of the time because the nature of their jobs means that they need to be clearly identified as an RBFRS employee – these include Fire Safety Inspectors, Community Fire Safety Advisors, and workers in the Youth Team.

The uniform is not suitable for me - could adjustments be made?

Yes. Possible adjustments could include long sleeves, or a longer blouse/shirt that can be worn outside the trousers. Firefighters need to be able to put their fireproof leggings and tunic over their uniform so there are limits on how far it could be adjusted, but for Control or Support staff it would be possible to have a long skirt or a salwar kameez outfit. Different fabrics can be obtained if the standard fabrics cause a skin reaction.

Could I wear a hijab?

For Control or Support staff, there are no problems in wearing a hijab. For a Firefighter there would be some safety concerns about a hijab and it might get in the way of breathing apparatus, but that really depends on the style of the hijab – a style that fits closely around the head could work. We'd have to talk about it.

Could I keep my beard?

For Control or Support staff, there are no problems in having a beard. However Firefighters must keep most of their face free of hair or stubble because it affects the seal of their breathing apparatus. Breathing apparatus is not just there to supply oxygen, it's there to keep out smoke because smoke from many fires is extremely toxic (many fire victims actually die from cyanide or other poisoning). We cannot allow anything that makes breathing apparatus less effective, so Firefighters can only have a moustache or a small goatee beard that doesn't interfere with the seal.

Could I wear a turban?

For Control or Support staff, there are no problems in wearing a turban. A Firefighter would have to remove a turban in order to put on their fire kit.

Could I keep my dreadlocks?

Yes, provided that, if you are in a uniformed role or you deal with members of the public, they are kept neat and tidy, and if you are a Firefighter they don't interfere with wearing fire kit – these are the same rules that apply to all employees' hair.

I'm a Muslim – would I be allowed to pray at work?

Yes, but depending on what job you do we might need you to be flexible about when you pray. As a Firefighter, you would not be able to pray when involved in operational duties or drills – you would have to delay your prayer time. Likewise if you were a Control operator and the switchboard was very busy, or if you were a Community Safety Advisor attending an event at a school – some jobs just don't have a regular activity pattern and stopping to pray might not always be practicable or fair to your colleagues. We will try to adjust around your prayer times as far as we can, but we could not promise always to accommodate a rigid schedule.

I'm a Muslim – would I be able to keep Ramadan?

This would only be an issue for Firefighters. Operational incidents and training drills can be very demanding on the body. Wearing full protective kit is very hot even when there isn't a fire, and it is very important for your health that you don't become dehydrated – heat exhaustion is a real possibility and in a fire situation it can kill. It's unlikely that you could function effectively as a Firefighter if you were not willing to drink water during incidents and training drills. During long incidents you might also need to eat in order to keep your blood sugar up – otherwise there is a risk that you could become dizzy and faint. You could request to take all your annual leave over Ramadan, but this might not always be possible as we have to maintain minimum crewing levels, and we also have to be fair in the allocation of leave to other staff.

If Firefighters eat together, does that mean I would have to eat or cook foods that are forbidden or offensive to me?

We can work around most dietary requirements – lots of Firefighters have restricted diets. Strict kosher would be impossible to accommodate within cooking rota arrangements, and you would need to bring all your food ready-prepared from home.

Could I work at my local fire station?

We try to take Firefighters' preferences into account, but we provide a service to the whole of Berkshire, and have to ensure a balance of skills and experience at each station. You must therefore be prepared to work at any station in Berkshire. Most non-operational roles are based at our headquarters in Reading.

My religion means I'm not supposed to work on the Sabbath, could I have every Saturday/Sunday off?

Firefighters and Control staff are on an 8-day rota, so you would be required to work on every day of the week at some point. Voluntary duty swaps can be arranged but it's unlikely that someone will want to work an additional Saturday or Sunday on a regular basis, and it would not be fair for us to insist that they do – most people value these as days off to spend with their family. You must therefore be prepared to work on those days if no alternative arrangements can be made.

Most Support jobs are weekday attendance only, but some do require attendance at weekends, either to ensure continuity of operational service or because they involve community activities. For those jobs, weekend working is an essential part of the role and it cannot be avoided.

As a female Firefighter, would I be expected to cook for the watch?

Kitchen duties are done on a rota and female Firefighters are not expected to cook any more often than male Firefighters.

As a female Firefighter, would I be kept away from potentially dangerous situations?

No – you would be treated exactly the same as a male Firefighter.

As a female Firefighter would I have to have physical contact with male colleagues?

This is inevitable as there are some tasks that require Firefighters to work in very close contact. For example, a fire hose at full strength can only be controlled if the Firefighter holding it is braced by another Firefighter standing right behind them, using their body to support them.

Are there facilities for female Firefighters in fire stations?

There are separate shower and toilet facilities at all fire stations in Berkshire. Fire kit is worn on top of trousers and T-shirt, so changing in or out of this is usually done in an open changing area. Male Firefighters tend also to use this area to change into PE kit, so you may encounter men in their underwear. Some female Firefighters are happy to do the same, others change into PE kit in the shower room.

Dormitories are unisex but some Firefighters take their mattress off elsewhere just to avoid a snoring colleague – you could do the same if you want to sleep in private, or it might be possible to have a curtain around your bed. Firefighters don't get fully undressed to go to bed because they may have to get dressed quickly - most male Firefighters sleep in their underwear (maybe T-shirt too). Some women do the same, some wear shorts or cropped leggings under their uniform trousers, and sleep in those, some sleep in their trousers.

Is it true that Firefighters play practical jokes on each other?

Probably not as much as they used to do, but it still happens. Firefighters have to deal with some horrible situations sometimes, and pranks can be a way of letting off steam. They are almost always intended in a spirit of camaraderie, not malice. A humiliating 'initiation ceremony' would be treated as a disciplinary offence, even if you didn't complain about it.

Is it true that Firefighters have nicknames?

Many Firefighters do have nicknames. They might relate to their real name, or something they've done, or a famous person that they resemble – the possibilities are limited only by Firefighters' imaginations, which are pretty far reaching. Some are so obscure that everybody has forgotten their origin. If you were unhappy about a nickname then you would only have to say so.

How dangerous is being a Firefighter?

Probably not as dangerous as you think – certainly the death and injury rate is nothing remotely like it was portrayed in London's Burning! High levels of training and risk assessment mean that risks are made as low as possible – Firefighters are not expected to try to rescue people regardless of the risks to themselves.

Sadly Firefighters do occasionally die while on duty, and when they do it makes the news headlines, so everybody hears about it. In fact there are other jobs that are more dangerous, but deaths in those industries don't make the news, so public perception of the risk is skewed. Statistically you are about as likely to be killed working as a Firefighter as you are if you work in the construction industry, and about half as likely as you are if you work in some jobs in the agriculture, fishery and forestry sector. 17 UK Firefighters have been killed on duty since 1990 – no RBFRS Firefighter has been killed on duty since 1977.

Is it true that most Firefighters have two jobs?

A lot do, yes. The shift pattern means that Firefighters, (and Control staff), who previously learned another trade have the opportunity to work on some of their days off. RBFRS has Firefighters who also work in a range of building trade jobs (plumbers, plasterers etc), or as a gardener, car mechanic, fitness instructor, taxi driver, chiroprapist, homoeopathist... Very handy if you need some work done!

What career opportunities are there for Firefighters?

At the moment we don't have a 'graduate entry scheme' or direct entry to officer posts in RBFRS, so every one of our officers started as a Firefighter, including our Chief Fire Officer. Once you are fully qualified as a Firefighter, which usually takes 2-3 years, you can apply for a Crew Manager post, then after that become a Watch Manager. You could be the manager of a fire station within about 12 years, especially if you are prepared to move around the country a bit. There are also opportunities to move into specialist areas such as fire investigation and technical fire safety. However many Firefighters choose to stay as Firefighters because they prefer that role – and that's fine.

How do I apply?

Recruitment for Wholetime Firefighters usually only takes place once a year, and the process takes several months. Application forms are only available at the start of the recruitment campaign. However if you are interested in becoming a Retained Firefighter you can apply at any time, and we usually have vacancies, (you need to live or work close to a Retained station, and be able to respond immediately to emergency calls). Other posts are advertised on our website and in local papers etc.

Where can I find out more?

Visit our website at www.rbfrs.co.uk. Another useful and informative website is www.fireservices.co.uk which is run by some fire service staff – however it is an unofficial site so is not guaranteed to be 100% accurate. If you still can't find the answer, talk to us.

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