



ROYAL BERKSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

Report of Public Consultation on PROPOSALS FOR BRACKNELL FIRE STATION



Opinion Research Services

Spin-out Company of Swansea University

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Acknowledgements

Opinion Research Services (ORS) is once more pleased to have worked with the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS) on the public consultation reported here. The on-line questionnaire was carefully designed and completed responsibly, and 23 participants engaged with the issues and discussed their ideas readily in a deliberative forum, so we trust this report will contribute to the RBFRS's risk management planning.

We thank RBFRS for commissioning the project and we particularly thank Robert Mitchell (IRMP Project Officer) who liaised with ORS and attended the deliberative meeting to listen to the public's views. Such meetings benefit considerably from the readiness of RBFRS' officers to answer participants' questions fully and frankly. Their input was essential in achieving an informed debate.

Above all, we are grateful to the 23 members of the public who took part in the forum and shared their views; they were patient in listening to background information before entering positively into the spirit of open discussions.

At all stages of the project, ORS' status as an independent organisation consulting the public as objectively as possible was recognised and respected. We are grateful for the trust, and we hope this report will be useful in thinking about the organisation and strengthening the RBFRS' public engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Public consultation methods

1. On the basis of our long-standing experience with the UK fire and rescue service, particularly as the provider of research and consultation services under the terms of the Fire Services Consultation Association's National former Framework Contract, ORS was commissioned by Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS) to convene and facilitate public and stakeholder engagement forums and also to design and report an open consultation questionnaire (for completion on-line or by paper version).

FORUMS

Methodology

2. A deliberative forum with randomly selected members of the public from the Bracknell area was held at the Blue Mountain Golf Centre, Bracknell, on Tuesday August 26th 2014. ORS's role was to design, recruit, facilitate and report the meeting – and we worked in collaboration with RBFRS to prepare informative stimulus material for the meeting before facilitating the discussions. The forum was a 'deliberative' meeting in order to encourage members of the public to reflect in depth about the proposals for Bracknell Fire Station while both receiving and questioning background information and discussing service delivery issues in detail, in a meeting that lasted for 2.5 hours.
3. In total, there were 23 diverse participants at the forum, drawn from the Bracknell area. All the participants were recruited by random-digit telephone dialling from ORS's Social Research Call Centre because such recruitment by telephone is the most effective way of ensuring that participants are independent and broadly representative of the wider community.
4. In recruitment, care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by disabilities or any other factor, and the recruitment process was monitored to ensure diversity in terms of a wide range of criteria – including, for example, gender, age, social class, disability and economic activity. The profile of the 23 participants was:

GENDER	
Male	11
Female	12
AGE	
16-34	7
35-54	9
55+	7

SOCIAL GRADE	
AB	8
C1	9
C2	2
DE	4
ETHNICITY	
White	22
BME	1
LONG-TERM LIMITING ILLNESS	
LLTI	3

5. In fact, two forums were planned – one with randomly selected members of the public (as described above) and another with a wide range of invited stakeholders drawn from the voluntary and business communities. However, despite numerous invitations from RBFRS, very few stakeholders attended the relevant forum, which might perhaps be taken to imply that members of the business and voluntary communities were not particularly exercised about the RBFRS’s proposals. This was also implied by the opinions of the small number of stakeholders who attended.
6. This report of the forums has been compiled primarily on the basis of the responses by the 23 randomly selected members of the public – though it is notable that the views of the stakeholder representatives concurred with those of the public.
7. Although, like all other forms of qualitative consultation, forums cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the meeting with members of the public reported here gave a diverse range of people from in Bracknell the opportunity to comment in detail on RBFRSs proposals. Because the recruitment was inclusive and participants were diverse, we are satisfied that the outcomes of the meeting (as reported below) are broadly indicative of how informed opinion in Bracknell would incline on the basis of similar discussions. In summary, the outcomes reported here are reliable as examples of the reflections and opinions of diverse informed people reacting to the information about RBFRS’ proposals.

Discussion agenda

8. The deliberative forum meeting reviewed a wide range of issues, including:
 - Estimates of fire risk and the costs of the fire service in Berkshire
 - Profile of the RBFRS – including its resources, strategic roles and challenges
 - Response times
 - Reductions in risk over the last 10 years
 - The role of prevention and protection

RBFRS budget reductions

Proposal to disband the retained duty system (on-call) fire engine crew at Bracknell fire station

Consequent effects on local response times.

9. Each part of the meeting began with a presentation devised by ORS to both inform and stimulate discussion of the issues, following which the above matters were reviewed in sequence. Participants were given extensive time for questions prior to full discussion of each topic.

The Report

10. This report concisely reviews the sentiments and judgements of participants about RBFRS and its draft proposals. Verbatim quotations are used, in indented italics, not because we agree or disagree with them – but for their vividness in capturing recurrent points of views. ORS does not endorse the opinions in question, but seeks only to portray them accurately and clearly. While quotations are used, the report is obviously not a verbatim transcript of the sessions, but an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants in free-ranging discussions.

OPEN CONSULTATION QUESTIONNAIRE

Availability and take-up

11. The online survey was available to complete from the 1st of July 2014 until the 22nd of September 2014. The survey was available to residents, representatives from business, public and voluntary organisations and RBFRS employees. However, only a total of 86 surveys were completed (60 online responses, 26 postal responses). Given this low response, the data should be interpreted with caution since it is not necessarily a guide to general public opinion in the Bracknell and Berkshire areas because the respondent profile is not representative of the general population. For example:

76% of respondents were male and 24% female

47% were residents of Berkshire and 41% were RBFRS employees

2% of respondents were representatives of a business and 8% were from public sector organisations

Only 2% of respondents were aged 16 to 24; 17% were 25 to 34; 29% were 35 to 44; 31% were 45 to 54; and 21% were 55 and over.

12. The low response to the consultation questionnaire suggests that the general public and staff did not find the draft proposals for Bracknell alarming – and this is borne out by the findings reported below.

CONSULTATION PROGRAMME PROPORTIONATE

13. Despite this low response to the open questionnaire, and the small attendance at the stakeholder forum, RBFRS's consultation programme was conscientious, in the sense of being open, accessible and fair; and the consultation was proportional to the importance of the issues and size of the area: the consultation programme conforms with good practice, both in its scale and the balance of elements included. The key good practice requirements for proper consultation programmes are that they should:

Be conducted at a formative stage, before decisions are taken

Allow sufficient time for people to participate and respond

Provide the public and stakeholders with sufficient background information to allow them to consider the issues and any proposals intelligently and critically

Be properly taken into consideration before decisions are finally taken.

14. Taken together, these four elements do much to ensure the ‘accountability’ of public authorities, particularly the fourth; but this does not mean that consultations are referenda. Properly understood, accountability means that public authorities should give an account of their plans and take into account public views: they should conduct fair and accessible consultation while reporting the outcomes openly and considering them fully. This does not mean that the majority views expressed in consultations should automatically decide public policy, and the popularity or unpopularity of draft proposals should not displace professional and political judgement about what is the right or best decision in the circumstances. The levels of, and reasons for, public support or opposition are very important, but as considerations to be taken into account, not as decisive factors that necessarily determine authorities’ decisions.
15. For the public bodies considering the outcomes of consultation, the key question is not, *Which proposal has most support?* but, *Are the reasons for the popularity or unpopularity of the proposals cogent?*
16. In this context, both RBFRS and ORS were clear that this important consultation programme should include both quantitative and deliberative elements in order to:
 - Provide many people with the opportunity to take part via the open questionnaire routes
 - Promote informed engagement via the deliberative forums with members of the public and other stakeholders.
17. Given people’s general unawareness of how their fire and rescue services operate and manage their resources and costs, consultation with informed audiences (who in forums have the opportunity to question and test the evidence for particular proposals) is especially valuable. All elements of the consultation are important and none should be disregarded, but in general deliberative forums are particularly worthy of consideration because they explore the arguments and issues in depth. In this case, the outcomes of the forum with 23 randomly selected members of the public are especially important, given the low response to the questionnaire.
18. RBFRS’ consultation programme conformed to good practice by including both quantitative and qualitative aspects, through which people could participate and as a means for the authority to understand the reasons for people’s opinions. As well as providing sufficient information to consider the proposals intelligently, the consultation was done in a timely manner and RBFRS will take account of the outcomes before making a decision.

DELIBERATIVE FORUMS

Introductory section

Two forums

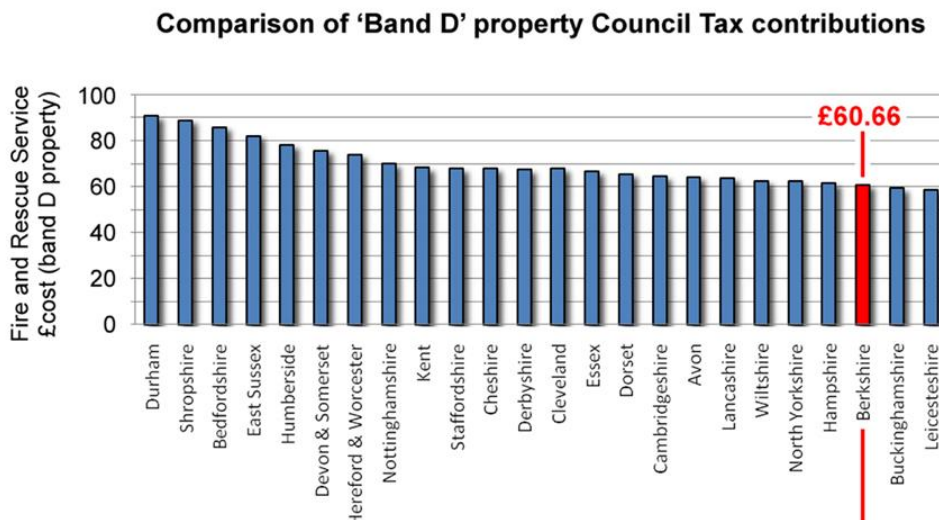
19. In this section, the outcomes of the forum with 23 randomly selected members of the public have been combined with those from the small forum with stakeholders – mainly because the opinions of the two groups were entirely alike. But the stakeholders were not asked about their general awareness of risk and finances (see just below).

Awareness of risk

20. The 23 participants in the forum with members of the public were relatively accurate when estimating the number of annual accidental fire deaths in Berkshire, for most estimated annual accidental fire deaths in Berkshire very accurately at between two and ten (compared with an actual average per year of 2.8 deaths per year). Elsewhere, in other FRSSs, members of the public are apt to guess much higher county-wide death rates – often running into the hundreds and even thousands per year! In this context the Bracknell forum was very well informed.

Awareness of finances

21. When asked how much it costs to crew one 24/7 wholetime fire engine per year people’s estimates were also well informed, ranging from £0.8 million to about £1.2 million – compared with the reality which is about £1.1 million. Estimates of RBFRS’s annual budget ranged from £15M to £40 million – also comparing well with the actual figure of £34.5 million.
22. However, residents were inclined to over-estimate the Band D council tax precept for RBFRS – guessing it was about £140-£150 – when the actual current figure is only £60.66. Therefore, they were pleasantly surprised by the following chart.

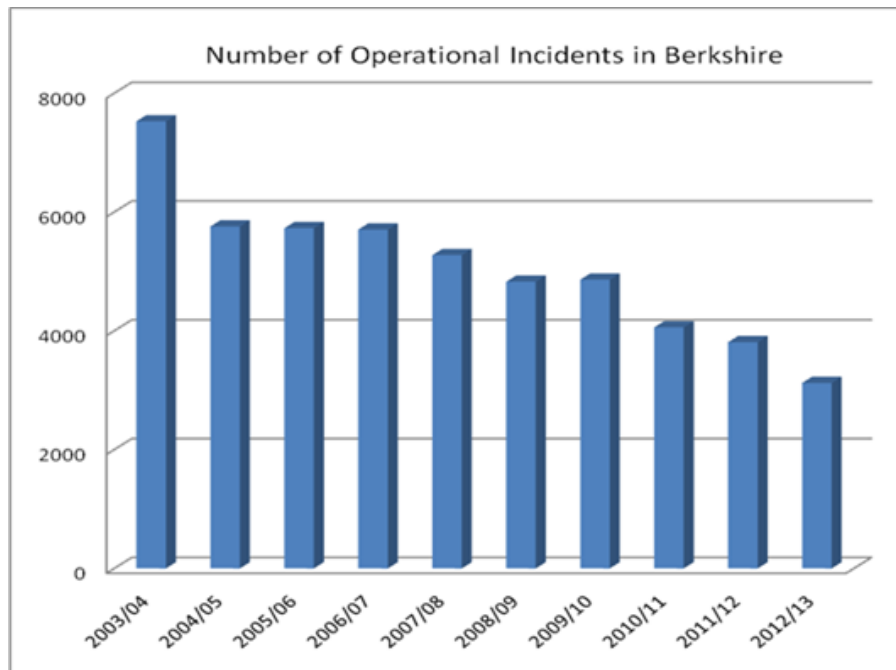


Prevention and education

23. There was a widespread recognition among the members of the public, and in the small stakeholders' forum, that RBFRS does a considerable amount of preventive work through home fire safety checks – and this was valued, for people recognised the importance of having working smoke detectors in their homes.

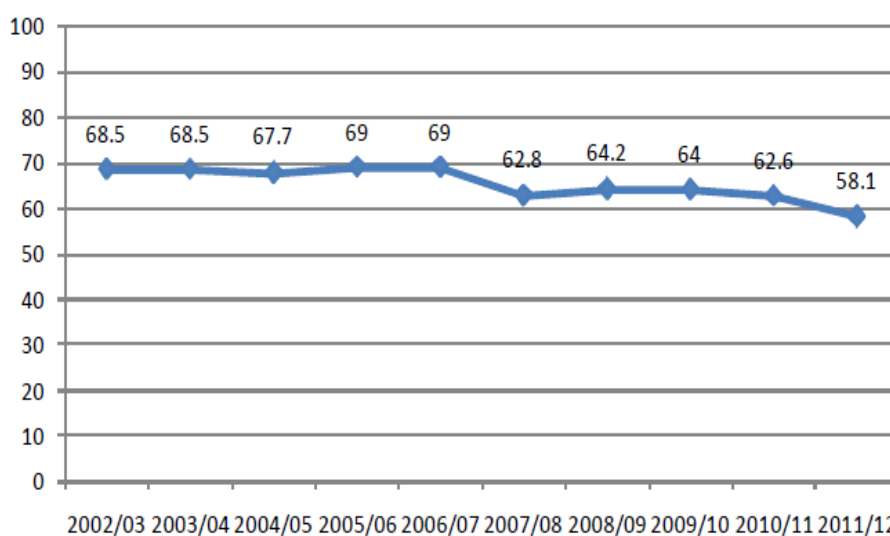
Profiling RBFRS and its performance

24. The informative introductory section also outlined the resources and operation of the RBFRS – including the organisation and role of retained (RDS) fire-fighters compared with their wholetime (WDS) colleagues – and the reducing number of emergency incidents each year, as illustrated in the following chart covering the last ten years.

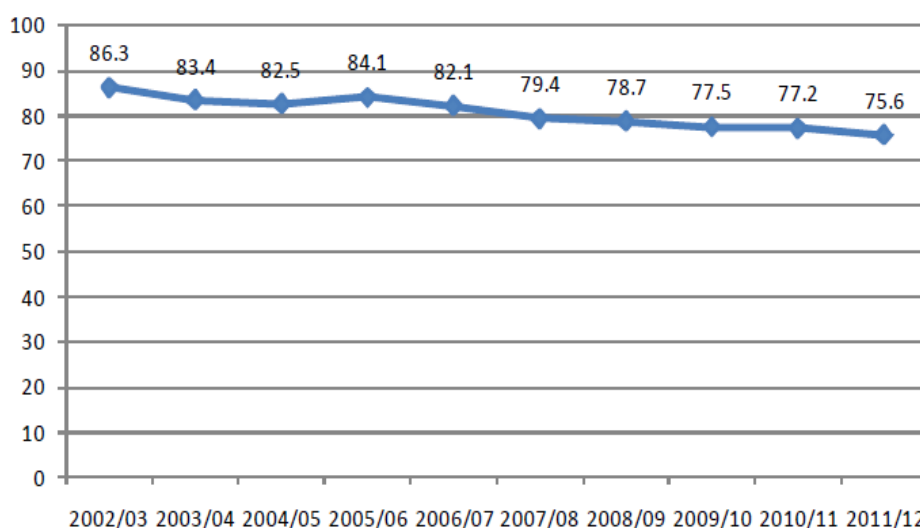


25. The public was also very interested in the response time performance of RBFRS fire engines for dwelling fires, as shown in the two charts on the following page.

Percentage met 1st pump in 8 mins/2nd in 10 to dwelling fires 2002/03 - 2011/12



Percentage met 1st pump in 10 mins/2nd in 12 to dwelling fires 2002/03 - 2011/12



26. When the above response time standards for RBFRS were explained, the forums readily accepted that RBFRS' standards and performances are satisfactory and clearly expressed in a way that makes sense to the public. There was some discussion of why response times have slowed slightly over last 10 years, but the meeting appreciated that the trend is due to traffic conditions rather than front line service reductions.

Financial constraints

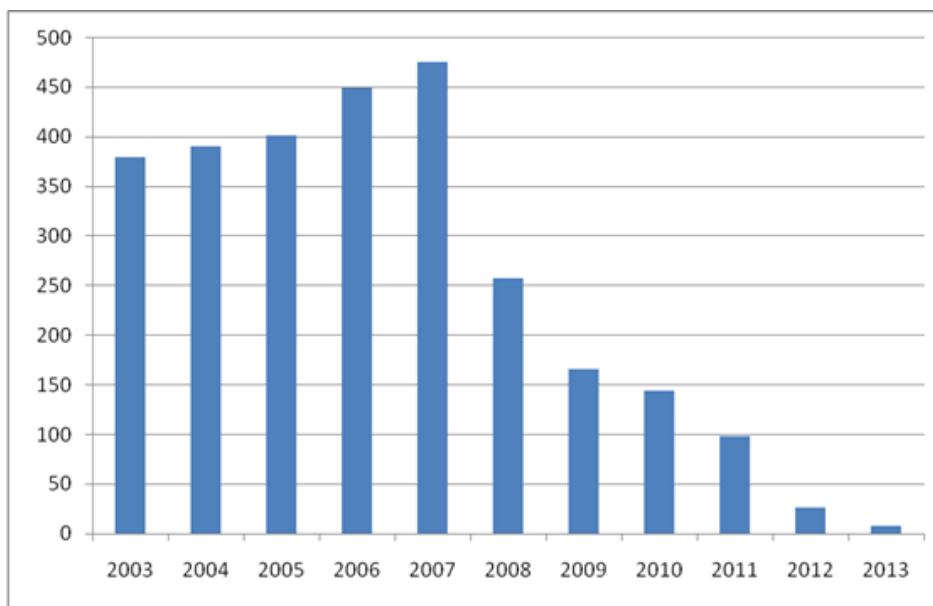
27. The reductions in central government funding since 2010-11 and the restrictions on council tax increases were briefly explained in order to indicate the challenging context in which RBFRS operates and has to plan for future budget reductions.

Bracknell Fire Station

Station Profile

28. The 23 forum participants were given a concise summary of the emergency cover available from Bracknell fire station and also the number of occasions on which the retained (RDS) fire engine has been used.
29. In summary, Bracknell has two fire engines currently, one wholetime and one RDS/on-call. In 2013 the wholetime engine attended 691 incidents while the RDS/on-call engine attended only 5. At the same time, the upgraded fire cover at Wokingham (since 2011) means that its wholetime fire engine can get to most incidents in the Bracknell area quickly – so as a consequence Bracknell’s RDS/on-call fire engine is required less often. The recent data was illustrated with the following chart.

Bracknell RDS/on-call fire engine – incidents attended 2003 to 2013



30. The participants were also informed that RBFRS cannot recruit enough on-call firefighters in Bracknell and that the number has declined to six compared to usual 13 (despite advertising campaigns) – an unsustainable position meaning that the crew was about 87% unavailable in 2013. In this context, RBFRS has used fire engines from other stations rather than Bracknell’s – and incident response has not been materially affected.

Proposal to disband RDS/on-call fire engine crew

31. In the above context, the 23 forum participants discussed RBFRS’s draft proposal to disband the RDS/on-call crew at Bracknell fire station – on the grounds that the engine and its crew are strictly unnecessary in the context of current risk and other resources readily available.
32. They were told frankly that the removal of the RDS/on-call fire engine would have a small effect on response times – in that the average response time for the first fire engine would increase from 6 minutes 6 seconds to 6 minutes 12 second; and for the second fire engine from 9 minutes 38 seconds to 10 minutes 24 second. It was made clear that some specific local response times would lengthen rather more, depending on their location and relative to the station.

33. The forum was also told that, of the six on-call firefighters at Bracknell, two work for RBFRS as wholetime firefighters (dual contract) and that an attempt will be made to provide alternative employment within RBFRS for the remaining four firefighters.
34. Finally, participants were told that most of the calls answered by the current RDS fire engine would be covered by Wokingham fire station – and that there would be a saving of £120K per annum if the proposal was implemented.

The consequent discussion

35. Faced with what were described as modest potential savings of £120,000, one participant in the forum quickly estimated that the cost of keeping and using the RDS engine is currently about £24,000 per incident attended! That said, there were some important issues raised about the proposals – in particular the following:

Possible increases in future risks due to housing developments in Bracknell

The area covered by Bracknell station

The significance of longer response times (particularly in relation to the second fire engine)

The qualifications of RDS crews

Whether the RDS use data is reliable

Travel times from Wokingham to Bracknell

The level of resources at Wokingham

The level of demand on the Wokingham resources

Ascot's future resources

How resilient the cover would be in the context of a major incident

In what circumstances two or more fire engines are required.

36. Some typical questions raised were:

Will Wokingham remain a wholetime station?

What's the difference in response times for the W/T and RDS crews?

How long does it take to get to Bracknell from Wokingham?

How many full-time crews are there at Wokingham?

How many times is the Wokingham fire engine called out each year?

How would you deal with bigger serious incidents – and if there were more than one?

Will you put a full-time fire engine in Ascot? If so, it could help to cover Bracknell

Can Wokingham cope with the increased demand following the removal of Bracknell's RDS crew?

What are the qualifications for the RDS crews?

Why can't the RDS crews attend from their workplace? Release from work is not statutory like it is in the TA?

How crucial is the 46 second difference for the second fire engine

When do you need two fire engines to the same incident?

Is it the fire engine or the crew that you do not need? Are you proposing to dispense with the fire engine and the crew – so you have three engines over three sites rather than four?

How many times have all three units been out at the same time? How many times have you had to call out another unit because you could not crew the RDS fire engine?

How long does it take to back-fill for a fire engine?

What will happen to the fire engine?

How many stations have and RDS and W/T fire engine? What will happen to the Maidenhead RDS engine?

Will we have to rely on fire engines from outside the county and is there a charge for that?

37. While many of these comments express natural concerns and curiosity about the consequences of a novel change, it should not be supposed that the participants were negative overall about the draft proposal – for they understood the issues and were able to accept the evidence in the context of the full discussion. For example, some observed that:

In fact, you've increased your capacity even though demand has reduced – so you need now to reduce capacity in some ways

If the Bracknell RDS is unnecessary, why would you keep it if you could?!

What would happen if you do not do this? Would you have to save the £120,000 by another means?

Are there any safety issues if this does not happen – could there be unsafe consequences?

The current cost is about £24,000 per incident attended by the RDS crew!

Proposal accepted

38. Having had a detailed discussion of the evidence briefly listed above, and having had their questions answered fully by RBFRS officers, the 23 forum members, and the stakeholders, were **unanimous in accepting the draft proposal as reasonable and sensible in all the circumstances.**
39. Indeed, it was clear that many did not see the proposal as simply a 'necessary evil' driven by financial constraints – but instead saw it as the sensible outcome of a 'normal review' of resources against risk.
40. The overwhelming view of the forums was that RBFRS should implement the proposal.

OPEN CONSULTATION QUESTIONNAIRE

Introduction

Response level and presentation of data

41. As we have said, there were only 86 questionnaires completed, so the data should be interpreted with caution. In the following charts, the colours have been standardised with a 'traffic light' system in which:

Green shades represent positive responses

Beige and purple/blue shades represent neither positive nor negative responses

Red shades represent negative responses

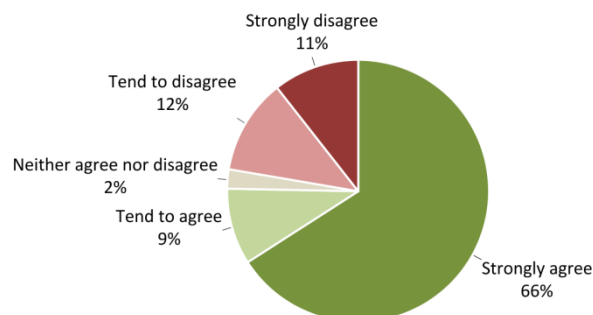
The bolder shades are used to highlight responses at the 'extremes', for example, 'strongly agree' or 'strongly disagree'.

Questionnaire findings

42. Three quarters of respondents (75%) agreed that RBFRS should reduce some resources to match reductions in the number of incidents and risk levels. Just over a fifth (22%) disagreed.

Base: all respondents (86)

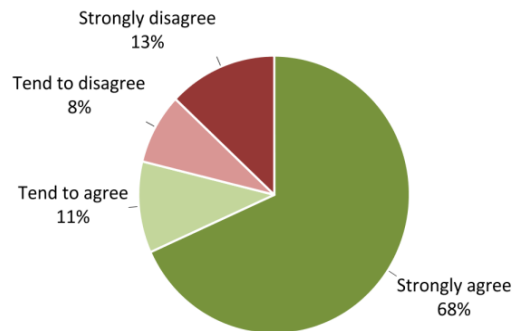
To what extent do you agree or disagree that the RBFRS should reduce some resources to match reductions in the number of incidents and risk levels?



43. Almost four fifths (79%) of respondents agreed that it is reasonable to remove the on-call engine from Bracknell, while just over a fifth (21%) disagreed.

Base: all respondents (86)

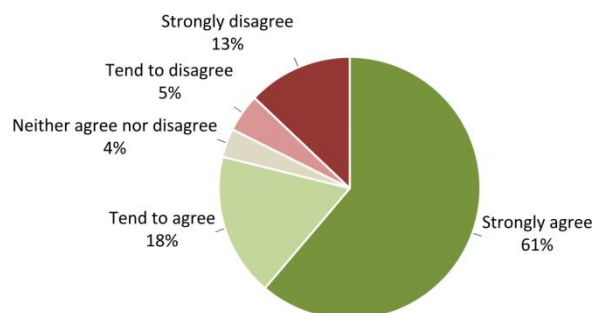
To what extent do you agree or disagree that it is reasonable to remove the On Call engine from Bracknell?



44. Just under four fifths (79%) of respondents agreed that adequate cover could be provided from the neighbouring upgraded Wokingham station and other stations. Almost a fifth (18%) disagreed.

Base: all respondents (86)

To what extent do you agree or disagree that adequate cover could be provided from the neighbouring upgraded Wokingham station and other stations?



Comments made in the questionnaire

45. A number of respondents made comments in the questionnaires objecting to the proposed changes to fire cover in the Bracknell area. For example:

Retained is proven to save brigades lots of money it works in every other county and it worked in Berkshire for many years, but for some reason RBFRS do not want this

Can someone please explain how on earth shutting the retained unit in Bracknell fits in with the recent published commitments on the new fire authority strategy? The strategy is meant to be increasing the resilience of the retained duty system

The retained section worked well for many years in this area and was a cheap resource... the recent floods stretched the RBFRS, so keeping retained pumps in the area is a good cost effective way of keeping Berkshire safe

Retained is a cost effective way to protect Bracknell and its surrounding areas, so why are we changing the cover? Surely it must be cheaper to use retained pumps than paying the cost of full time pumps?

Both the Bracknell and Wokingham areas will be experiencing the development of large numbers of new dwellings in the coming years. There will be over 11,000 in the area of Bracknell Forest alone, with building having already started. Is it correct to be considering the reduction of resources when the number of incidents is likely to rise again due to all the new dwellings and the resulting substantial increase in traffic movements?

With an ever increasing population in Bracknell and plans to increase housing in the next couple of years, plus a regeneration of Bracknell town, it seems ridiculous that we are looking at reducing our fire service. I understand that incidents have reduced – which is great, but I can't believe that the risk factor or likeliness has reduced.

46. However, others expressed emphatic support for the proposal:

At last you have realised you are wasting taxpayers' money on resources you do not need!

It is good to see you are taking decisions based on research, risk and saving the public money. Well done!

It's about time! This money has been wasted for many years!

This is a very good decision, which is well thought out and evidenced. At last, common sense for the use of public money

I am from the Bracknell retained section and I agree with this decision we are not needed with the Wokingham pump being so close and it is a good saving

Providing Wokingham can provide the cover needed, then I think it makes sense to remove the Bracknell on call fire engine.

OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

Emphatic support

47. Both the deliberative forums and the open questionnaire show emphatic support for the Bracknell proposal.
48. Between three-quarters and four-fifths of the questionnaire responses supported all aspects of the proposal – usually ‘strongly supported’ them. Three-quarters felt that resources should be reduced to match reduced risk levels; almost eight-in-ten thought it is reasonable to remove Bracknell’s on-call fire engine; and the same proportion believe adequate cover is available from other stations.
49. After detailed and lengthy discussions of the issues, the forums were unanimously in favour of the same three points – and they unanimously agreed that the draft proposal was entirely reasonable.
50. In the experience of ORS, these findings amount to an unusually emphatic endorsement of RBFRS’s proposals and its evidential case.