

Briefing Note to Communities and Place OSC

Directorate:	Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service
Subject:	Update on Recruitment and Retention of On-Call Firefighters
Date:	8th February 2023

Purpose of Briefing Note

On-Call Firefighters (aka Retained Duty System (RDS) Firefighters) play a critical part in how Northumberland Fire & Rescue Service (NFRS) safely responds to fires and other emergencies. 14 of our 15 stations operate with On-Call firefighters.

It is recognised locally and at a national level there are ongoing problems with the recruitment and retention of On-Call Firefighters. Most of the rural areas within Northumberland, and around the country, are sparsely populated which can make recruitment within these areas difficult. Therefore, there is a need to develop more flexible and innovative approaches to attract potential candidates within these areas.

In recent years, the number of On-Call Firefighters in Northumberland has fallen under the expected levels (up to 45 personnel short of 186 headcount). As a service, we have been continually developing and looking for innovative ways to improve our recruitment strategy to provide operational resilience across the communities of Northumberland.

This briefing note will provide some background and context of how we are responding to the challenges associated with recruitment and retention, along with the progress we have made in the last months.

Background

An Improved Recruitment Strategy

The service has increased its capacity and capability to recruit and train more On-Call Firefighters. In previous years we typically committed to running one or two trainee courses per year. This model would typically deliver a maximum combined candidate number of 16 new On-Call firefighters per year.

NFRS have made a conscious effort to increase this number to three courses per year, which will now deliver a candidate number of 60 On-Call Firefighters per year. In real terms we have increased our overall capacity by 150%. Since introducing this change, we have recruited over 40 On-Call Firefighters.

This change in our recruitment strategy, along with the recruitment cycle now being continuous, will mean our overall number of On-Call Firefighters will continue to increase to meet our retirement and leaver profile.

Enhanced Recruitment Initiatives

In order to ensure we attract and retain the right candidates for our training courses, we have committed a large amount of time, effort, and resources to developing various recruitment initiatives. These newly developed campaigns have improved our On-Call Firefighter recruitment and retention.

These strategies include:

- Investment in recruitment materials.
- Introducing ongoing On-Call recruitment campaigns.
- Increased our catchment areas from 5 to 8 minutes from the station.
- Offering more flexible and attractive On-Call employment contracts.
- Introduction of an enhanced disturbance fee.
- Facilitating a regular On-Call recruitment & retention staff forum.
- Utilising our Wholetime personnel to maintain On-Call availability.
- The recruitment of 2 x On-Call Support Officers * (See below for the roles and outcomes)

Changes to the NFRS Website

We have made significant improvements to our website in order to promote the role of On-Call Firefighters, and to gauge interest in key areas. We now have a dedicated link on the website where potential candidates can express an interest in the role. This not only promotes the role, but it also allows us to forward plan and align potential candidates to where we need them most. In 2022 we had a total of 245 submissions of interest, which is a huge increase in anything we have previously received.

*Introduction Of On-Call Support Officers **

On-Call support officers were introduced approximately 18 months ago. A subsequent 12 monthly review of the role was undertaken in July, with the following outcomes and outputs being delivered:

Operational Cover

- 2,449 hours providing On-Call cover at various locations throughout the service area.
- 112 hours attending operational incidents at various locations throughout the service area.

By utilising the 2 On-Call support officers to provide additional availability to stations where it is required, it can be determined that this additional staffing coverage has increased the overall staffing availability across a wide range of our stations. Additionally, utilising On-Call support officers has prevented the need to send a member of the wholetime duty system to provide cover, and consequently reduce cover in key areas.

Community Risk Reduction Work

In addition to improving the operational cover, the following value has also been gained from the On-Call support officers:

- 50 - Safe and Well Visits.
- 50 - Periodic equipment checks plus input.
- 6 - Appliance changeovers.
- 20 - Hydrant inspections.
- 5 - Site Specific Risk Information Visits.
- 4 - School engagements/visits.
- 15 - Equipment defect reporting and equipment check ordering.
- 6 - Weekly station and equipment check at Holy Island.
- 2 - Transportation of vehicle for exercises/training.
- 4 - Attendance at Exercises as participants & observers.
- Development of station staff (CFRMIS, Redkite, FF development)
- Redkite, CFRMIS, and IRS input.
- Amendment of Weekly, Monthly, and Quarterly test sheets.
- Exercise planning for RDS stations.
- Assist HR with contacting potential recruits for RDS assessments or interview dates.
- Assist Training, Assurance & Safety (TAS) with facilitating training courses.
- Attendance at meetings (Incl. RDS Recruitment and Retention Subgroup, Promotion, and development workshops, Alnwick/Berwick/Prudhoe/Hexham Victim Offender Location (VOL) Meetings, Community Risk & Response Manager Meetings)
- Attendance at On-Call recruitment days.

NFRS have also invested in the On-Call Support Officer's role by training them to a Level 3 standard in fire safety. This allows them to conduct fire safety inspections of businesses across the communities of Northumberland. This will support our process of gathering accurate and up to date risk information.

Changes To On-Call Contracts

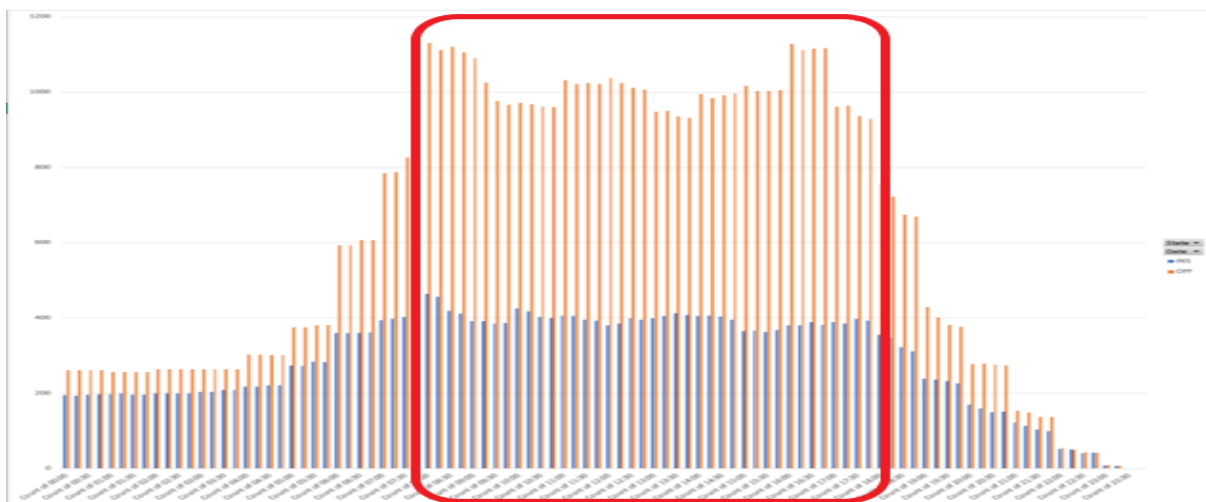
In the past our approach to offering On-Call contracts to prospective candidates has not provided a great deal of flexibility. In line with the National Joint Council "Grey Book" Working Conditions, NFRS offered contracts for either full availability (120 hours + per week), or restricted availability (circa 90-120 hours per week). Both existing contracts represent a significant individual commitment to meet the contract hours, and more importantly did not always reflect the station's availability requirements and the societal changes for that location.

For instance, often stations require daytime/weekday cover and on occasions, the individuals who have been able to offer this, could not commit to a 90+ hour contract per week (See figure 1 below: which shows the availability gap during the daytime hours of between 0800-1800).

We have now changed our approach to contracts, which allows individuals to apply for the role who may be able to provide critical hour coverage, but not necessarily be able to commit to the previous and inflexible hours from previous employment contracts.

This flexible approach means that the role of an On-Call Firefighter is more accessible to a larger and more diverse range of applicants. Furthermore, this will increase our resilience and improve the On-Call appliance availability.

Figure 1



Operational Activity Rates and Establishment Figures

Each single appliance On-Call station has a Full Time Equivalent (FTE) establishment of 10. The two appliance On-Call stations have an FTE of 15. The service will also endeavor to achieve these establishment figures, however there is also a need to be cognisance of other staffing and hourly contracts which may require the need to have bespoke personnel levels for each station.

Therefore, the need to have more personnel at busier stations needs to be considered. Additionally, there may also be a need to increase the number of FTE at an On-Call station if there is a need to increase cover for certain periods of time, which is difficult for the current crew to achieve. By considering the incident data and risk profile we have made a conscious effort to evaluate and where necessary increase the FTE establishments in key locations to support our On-Call availability while providing an effective response to operational incidents or events that may impact the community.

Looking Forward

We will continue to develop more flexible and innovative approaches to the recruitment and retention of On-Call firefighters. As part of our Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP), we will continue to evaluate our service delivery model, including a review of

our fleet and equipment to ensure we are matching our resources in line with the current and emerging risks to the communities of Northumberland.

An integral part of our CRMP is the ability to review our service delivery model, by doing so we can plan to match resources to risk more effectively. Having our staffing models at the correct Target Operating models will provide a modern, flexible, and resilient response model which is ready to deploy safely across the communities of Northumberland.

NFRS will continue to look for new and alternative approaches to how we deliver a safe, efficient, and effective Fire and Rescue Service for the people and communities of Northumberland.

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