

**SAFER AND STRONGER COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
18TH JUNE 2012**

RETAINED DUTY SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT

Report by Chief Fire Officer

Introduction

1. The Retained Duty System RDS is a key staffing methodology within the Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service (OFRS). 18 of the 24 Fire Stations are solely crewed by RDS (excluding supervisory / managerial staff) and the remaining six all have one fire appliance crewed by firefighters conditioned to the RDS.
2. RDS staff commonly devote up to 120 hours per week to be “on call” to respond to their local fire station when summoned for an emergency incident.
3. A small number of RDS staff, supported by their employers provide cover whilst undertaking their primary employments.
4. In recent years it has become increasingly challenging to ensure that all 27 fire appliances crewed by RDS personnel are available 24/7. Clearly periods of non-availability are highly undesirable and strenuous action has been taken to minimise them by a range of increasingly flexible management actions.
5. Overall availability of the 24 fire stations remains exceedingly high at 97%. However, any non-availability is not acceptable to Service management who are determined to offer the very best protection to all of our communities.
6. It should be noted that during any individual periods of non-availability any emergency call immediately receives a full pre-determined attendance from the nearest available resources.
7. The most notable of the management actions taken to reduce non-availability is the introduction of Retained Station Support Officers (RSSOs) who have been made available with the budgetary support of the County Council.
8. 12 of the intended 16 RSSO posts are now filled and actions are underway to fill all posts. RSSOs are wholtime members of staff who are provided to undertake localities work in areas where they can also provide fire cover if needed. Their introduction has been positive with the most notable effect being the reduction in hours of non-availability of the stations at which they have been posted. A reduction of 25% of total hours of non-availability has been achieved in 2011/12.

Previous Scrutiny Committee involvement

9. In September 2007 the former Community Safety Scrutiny Committee were commissioned to undertake a Scrutiny Review of the recruitment and retention of RDS firefighters.
10. The review reported in July 2008 and tracking reports of the close out actions continued into 2009. The last tracking report is referenced in the background papers.
11. The recommendations were wide ranging covering subject areas including:-
 - (a) Funding / resources
 - (b) Publicity
 - (c) Communications
 - (d) Recruitment incentives
 - (e) Retention incentives
 - (f) Selection processes
12. Whilst some areas are no longer particularly pertinent due to Service developments, others remain central to the effectiveness of the RDS.
13. This report does not cover a detailed assessment of the current position against individual recommendations. However, largely they are all being addressed.

Increasing challenges

14. Since the 2008 report there have been a number of increasing challenges to the RDS. These include:
 - (a) The introduction of specific requirements of the Part Time Workers Legislation for RDS firefighters. This has increased the costs of employing staff on the RDS system.
 - (b) Full recognition by OFRS of the Drivers Hours regulations on primary employers resulting in inability to employ RDS staff who are professional drivers due to actual or potential interruption of required rest periods.
 - (c) Continued societal pressures resulting in less willingness by some in society to be tied to a locality for potentially responding to an emergency incident.
 - (d) The continuation of significant “churn” of RDS staff with the average tenure in the RDS now at seven years.
 - (e) Reductions in the overall cost effectiveness of the RDS as a duty system in comparison with wholetime staff due to staff turnover and increasing training requirements.
 - (f) Reductions in the number of fire calls resulting in less likelihood of being mobilised and reducing take home pay (it is recognised that many RDS staff are not primarily motivated by money).

- (g) Reduced social opportunities caused by Service policy of curtailing the presence of social clubs on fire stations.
- (h) Increasing concerns regarding the ability of operational staff, including those on the RDS, to meet the health and safety requirements and expectations of both the organisation and of third parties.

Management actions

- 15. Recent management actions have included amendments to the ICT system to record and monitor the availability of RDS staff. An example includes the ability for individual firefighters, within certain management controls, to receive recognition for periods of cover provided above their contracted hours. This allows firefighters to take time back in lieu rather than use their finite leave. In addition a revised leave system has been negotiated and introduced which standardises the otherwise complex leave systems for RDS staff.
- 16. As of July 2012 RDS staff will be fully recognised in OFRS for equal treatment as a result of the Part Time Workers Regulations and for the first time receive sick pay and a range of other conditions of service enhancements in line with changes to their scheme of conditions (colloquially known as the “grey book.”)
- 17. Other management actions have centred on introducing more flexibility into the cover arrangements for individual fire stations. Examples include the ability for RDS firefighters to provide cover at stations other than their normal stations (without committing to a change of contract) and to the use of RDS staff to crew wholetime appliances as part of a mixed crew. This has the benefit of increasing competence levels and providing flexible support to wholetime crews and the maintenance of “confidence” levels to ensure that the one of the first appliances mobilised to an incident has a crew of five to ensure a safe system of work to be instigated immediately on arrival.

The Retained Duty System Charter Initiative

- 18. The RDS Charter is an initiative instigated by the Chief Officer (DCO) and endorsed by the Chief Fire Officer. It is designed to create a set of actions and principles, largely derived from the views of members of the RDS, with the intention of securing the longevity and effectiveness of the RDS system within the OFRS. Put simply it is designed to encourage and facilitate the OFRS to become the most supportive and effective employer of firefighters conditioned to the Retained Duty System in the Country.
- 19. Initial meetings between the DCO and members of the RDS “Forum” (a periodic meeting of interested RDS members designed to examine employment and operational matters from an RDS perspective) led to an “ask the principal officers question and answer” session for the RDS Forum members led by the deputy and assistant chief officers.
- 20. Another proposal was to develop a RDS “Charter”. A small RDS Forum working party met twice to define what this might include and create an information gathering exercise. This was supplemented by a number of

“Routine Order” communications entries reaffirming commitment to the RDS as an integral part of the OFRS.

21. The schedule comprised of four “listening events” facilitated by a recently retired and well respected officer who was now providing RDS cover supported by a nominated RDS forum member and a wholetime middle manager.
22. Proformas based on three questions were provided to all stations who were asked to consider their responses and send a representative to one of the four events. 75% of stations attended which is considered a positive outcome. FRS forum members facilitated attendance of other stations by providing operational cover if it was necessary and requested.
23. Four written sets of feedback were collated and these were further refined into a report that was presented to the Strategic Leadership Team by the Forum Chairman.
24. The report contained positive feedback on recent management actions and provided innovative ideas and suggestions for further development of the RDS. Some of the suggestions echoed the general content and recommendations of the earlier Scrutiny Review report.
25. The report is now being turned into an action plan with inclusion of all stakeholders from within the Service including Human Resources, Customer Services, Training, payroll, fleet, ICT etc.
26. Some “quick wins” – e.g. formal appointment of a RDS Champion at Principapl Officer level and amendments to the availability and controlled accessibility of the secure areas of the OCC intranet to external computers have been identified and actioned.
27. Development of the action plan and its implementation is envisaged as an activity which may extend into the medium term.

Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) Project 5

28. The IRMP 2012/12 action plan includes a specific project to review the RDS particularly in relation to selection, recruitment, retention, crewing arrangements and support from wholetime resources. This will include areas such as potential revised crewing arrangements for both RDS and wholetime resources. By carrying out this review and implementing any proposals, we intend to ensure that the Retained Duty System in Oxfordshire meets the local needs and circumstances of the individual RDS firefighters, Oxfordshire Fire & Rescue Service, Oxfordshire County Council and the local communities that they serve.
29. As part of the Charter Initiative action plan members of the RDS will be involved in the IRMP project to ensure that they influence the outcomes in a way that is fully supportive of the RDS.

Potential opportunities for Scrutiny Members

30. As mentioned in paragraph 25 the Service is developing its RDS Charter Initiative action plan and is also progressing the above IRMP project. Service management recognise that there are opportunities and benefits in inviting Scrutiny Members to become involved in both of these initiatives.
31. This paper has been provided to give members an insight into current challenges and activities and to encourage discussion regarding further Scrutiny involvement in the development of the RDS in Oxfordshire.
32. It is envisaged that Members may undertake activities that would seek information from other similar FRSs and in particular identify best practice concerning Elected Member involvement and support to RDS staff in other Services.
33. In addition Members may wish to review the previous Scrutiny review and bring it up to date with further wider recommendations.

Financial and Staff Implications

34. The RDS system remains cost effective but will only be sustained by continual management actions to innovate and meet the increasing challenges faced by the organisation and those conditioned to the RDS.
35. Financially a member of the RDS is still approximately six times more cost effective to the organisation than a comparable wholetime resource. Historically this was previously considered to be a factor of ten times and this narrowing of the ratio is indicative of the challenges being faced.
36. It must be recognised that wholetime members of staff provide guaranteed cover, often have larger skill sets and have the ability to respond immediately reducing turn out time and facilitating the attainment of attendance standards. Wholetime staff remain an essential part of the overall staffing arrangements in the OFRS.
37. The creation of the RDS Charter Initiative is in part recognition of the unique challenges faced by the OFRS “part time” employees (although it is acknowledged that they are far from “part time” and may better be described as “on call”).
38. OFRS management remain wholly committed to the continuation of the Retained Duty System and RDS employees within Oxfordshire. Equally management recognise the constant need to review and innovate to ensure that the RDS meets the needs of Oxfordshire and its Communities and that RDS firefighters continue to enjoy the support of the system and the wider organisation. The Charter and the IRMP project evidence this continued approach.

RECOMMENDATION

39. **The Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny Committee is RECOMMENDED to:**
- a) **Note the contents of the report**
 - b) **Discuss the potential for Scrutiny Members to support the Integrated Risk Management action plan concerning the RDS Availability Review and the RDS Retained Charter Initiative.**

David Etheridge
Chief Fire Officer

Background papers: Community Safety Scrutiny Committee Scrutiny Review of Recruitment and Retention of Retained Fire Fighters – Commissioned September 2007 available from:

[http://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/Data/Community%20Safety%20Scrutiny%20Committee/20080428/Agenda/SubIndex\\$Agenda.htm](http://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/Data/Community%20Safety%20Scrutiny%20Committee/20080428/Agenda/SubIndex$Agenda.htm)

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