

Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny Committee 22/04/13

IRMP 2012/13 – Project 5:- A joint review by Officers & Members, of the issues causing challenges in maintaining “On Call” cover at Fire Stations and proposed actions to enhance availability.

Introduction

Oxfordshire Fire & Rescue Service (OFRS) currently has 24 fire stations covering the county and is seen as one of the most cost-effective services in the country – a position it has been able to maintain in the past by its extensive use of on-call firefighters.

In Oxfordshire, 18 of those fire stations are staffed solely by on-call firefighters and the other six have a blend of on-call and full-time resources. As a whole, OFRS employs 243 full time firefighters and operational officers – and up to 375 on-call firefighters and supervisory operational officers. In effect, the on-call duty system is the backbone of the service locally and allows it to continue to innovate and improve, despite the pressures of the government’s austerity programme.

Furthermore, the on-call duty system is seen by central government as a good example of ‘Big Society’ in action and has been the focus of challenge in recent years to larger Fire and Rescue Services who either do not use it or who only use it in a limited fashion - in relation to both their operating models and their planned efficiencies.

However, changes to the system nationally over the last 10 years (such as limiting individual standard cover to 120 hours per week and the increasing impact on budgets of both the Part-Time Workers Regulations and changes to national pensions schemes) – together with local pressures identified below - have created significant challenges in OFRS to maintaining the system effectively.

Therefore, this Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) project looked at alternative options available to provide additional resilience and revised operational models to continue to deliver efficient and effective on-call Fire and Rescue Service resources within projected budgetary constraints.

OFRS on-call personnel are aligned to locality working (i.e. they must live and/or work within 5 minutes of a Fire Station) and provide an effective way of delivering Fire & Rescue Service obligations in a rural environment. Recruitment pressures have caused challenges in availability, particularly as a result of the economic climate, which has resulted in employers being less likely to release their employees to fulfil firefighting duties during their working day.

Additionally, societal expectations have changed and individuals place more value on an effective work/life balance, this has caused difficulties in providing resilient availability, particularly at weekends.

OFRS officers and Safer and Stronger Communities (SSC) Scrutiny members looked

at models currently being utilised by other Fire & Rescue Services (Kent and Derbyshire) that have the potential to maintain the existing Fire & Rescue Service provision, as well as promoting new ways of working and making the best use of our resources, whilst at the same time, supporting an appropriate balance between work, standby and leisure time. This could be supported through implementing a number of options highlighted in the recommendations detailed as part of this report.

Members also visited a number of Oxfordshire's on-call Fire Stations – Witney, Woodstock, Faringdon and Henley. These stations have a number of challenges in relation to recruitment and retention and the ability to maintain availability. Members were able to question on-call firefighters and seek feedback regarding viable options to assist the station's particular needs.

The review of other models, the visits to on-call stations, the advice of officers and feedback from members has been combined and condensed into an executive summary and recommendations detailed below.

This review sets out to examine alternative options that have the potential to provide additional resilience and revised operational models to deliver an effective Fire and Rescue Service response across Oxfordshire particularly in more rural communities - where difficulties are currently being encountered in recruiting and retaining on-call firefighters.

This review builds upon the report by the Community Safety Scrutiny Committee in April 2008, which made recommendations regarding the recruitment and retention of Retained Firefighters (as on-call firefighters were referred to at the time).

Recommendations

- 1.1 **Creation of logo for letterheads for local business** - this recommendation would allow local employers supporting their local Fire Stations to display a logo that indicates their commitment to their local community.
- 1.2 **Review/utilise over the border resources where appropriate** – This is already carried out as part of reciprocal arrangements. But would benefit from a review in conjunction with the Thames Valley Fire Control Project to ensure that the nearest appropriate asset is mobilised to an incident dependent on station availability and irrespective of County boundaries.
- 1.3 **More flexible use of full-time and on-call operational personnel** - This would involve new crewing models with personnel providing additional support to cover all of the County's Fire Stations and maintain availability.

- 1.4 Using core On-Call personnel to maintain cover by combining resources** - this recommendation is based upon a Kent Fire and Rescue Service model. It would mean that On-Call personnel could be paid to work core hours on a particular station. This could be attractive to individuals who do not have primary employment and would result in a pro-rata salary for key individuals who are maintaining emergency response cover.
- 1.5 Review cover locations as part of the Emergency Response Cover Review report** - The report will provide an indication on which to base future planning assumptions.
- 1.6 Create a payment scale based on availability** – Currently there are two levels of remuneration for on-call personnel - one level for those committing to 120hrs per week on-call and another level for those offering 119hrs or less. The intention is to explore the possibility to more effectively reward those individuals giving a greater degree of cover.
- 1.7 Reinvigorate the title 'On-Call' as opposed to Retained Duty Systems** - this is a national issue which has not been widely adopted. This will be re-visited.
- 1.8 Greater engagement with local business/politicians** - engagement with Councillors is already in place via the quarterly updates issued by the Fire Risk Managers. These updates will be simplified with the potential for the document to be circulated to local businesses via local Councillors.
- 1.9 Explore options to further improve staff retention**- this could be improved with the introduction of an incentive based system. Our recruitment challenges would be reduced if we were able to retain existing On-Call personnel. Feedback from the Retained Charter will be used to explore further incentives to increase retention.
- 1.10 Explore future opportunities with the Business Community to release On-Call firefighters** – With the development of the Local Enterprise Partnerships and increasing Central Government funding for local business initiatives there is an opportunity to explore incentives for local businesses to release their staff for Fire and Rescue Service duties.
- 1.11 Increase the added value of On-Call firefighters through specialist skills such as Trauma Care** - this will enhance a valuable asset within the local community and in turn, be of benefit to local employers through enhanced skills. This has the potential to increase the number of calls

personnel are mobilised to and therefore improve morale and thus retention.

Recommendation:-

1. The Committee is RECOMMENDED to note the contents of the executive summary and support the implementation of the recommendations, thus fulfilling the requirement of IRMP 2012/13 Project 5:- To review alternative options available to provide resilience for our on call stations and revised operational models to deliver an efficient and effective Fire and Rescue Service within projected budgetary constraints
2. The Committee is RECOMMENDED to task the Chief Fire Officer with creating and implementing an action plan based on the recommendations within this report

David Etheridge

Chief Fire Officer

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