

## Retained Duty System Working Group

### Report of the Chief Fire Officer

For further information about this report please contact John Redmond, Chief Fire Officer, on 01743 260201 or Mark Donnelly, Group Commander, on 01743 261283.

### 1 Purpose of Report

This report is intended to provide an understanding of the current work streams targeted by members of the Retained Duty System (RDS) Working Group, which was established in June 2015.

### 2 Recommendations

The Committee is asked to note the report.

### 3 Background

During 2014, Area Command embarked on a campaign to seek current opinions on the outcomes of the initial RDS review, conducted in 2005/06. A light-touch review, based on a simple questionnaire, was launched with the intention to assess what, if any, improvements had been experienced by RDS personnel since that time. The aim was to gauge the level of general workplace satisfaction amongst teams in order to identify mutually beneficial improvement initiatives moving forward.

The results of the light touch review were shared with the Senior Management Team and it was agreed that, in order to seek the best future for on-call teams and to ensure resilience towards 2020, a working group would be established. Stakeholders from all four RDS districts were invited to participate, along with Group Support Team personnel, representative bodies and key departments, with meetings held at quarterly intervals since June 2015. Human Resources are represented at each meeting and further inter- department involvement is managed by invitation dependant on work streams.

It is important to note that the Group is not a substitute for RDS Officer in Charge meetings and is not used as a conduit for disseminating information to “on call teams”. However, it is a valuable resource that enables initiatives to be shared, considered and driven forward with complete transparency and with the ‘buy in’ of those, who are most likely to be affected by change.

## 4 Overview

The inaugural meeting, held on 17 June 2015, identified four broad priorities and a lead officer was allocated for each. Initial research on payment, attraction and retention of personnel and engagement with employers, training options and communication generated further discussion at the subsequent meeting, held in October 2015. Ground work was completed in each of the four areas detailed below and members were tasked with conducting further research based on the following guidance.

### **Payment**

The Group agreed that a robust and attractive payment system is necessary to ensure that the Service can continue to attract and retain personnel during these times of austerity, moving forward to 2020 and beyond. Investigation was commissioned with a view to considering options for payment systems with potential for improving current provision. Salary schemes, pay for time on call and pay for actual activity and a variety of models nationwide were reviewed. The advantages and disadvantages of each scheme were considered along with the impact, which any new options may have on current 'goodwill' commitment and it was agreed that further investigation was required, before any judgement could be made.

The responsible owner was tasked with researching the effect each model would have on pay specific to each role on station and also to compare the impact on stations at the extremes of the activity scale.

It was also recommended that Area Command continue to venture into alternative cover arrangements, particularly where recruitment has historically been more challenging. This refers to an acceptance of paying 3/4 cover to individuals, where, despite being unable to provide the standard commitment, their contribution during the working week will significantly improve availability. It was noted that management of expectations with all existing employees at specific stations, where this option is already employed is a major factor, but has so far resulted in a positive response.

### **Attraction / Recruitment and Retention of Personnel**

The Service has seen several successful years, where recruitment has stabilised at a regular thirty candidates per year. The year 2015, however (as reported to the Fire Authority's Audit and Performance Management Committee), suffered a setback, in that it was not possible to run a third course at the end of the year, due to a lack of candidates progressing through the recruitment process. There appeared to be no apparent reason for the shortfall, other than an increase in medical and job-related test failures. There was no indication that the Service creates barriers to recruitment by employing an unrealistic entrance policy.

The Group discussed difficulties faced at a number of stations around the County and, in particular, the inability to attract appropriate candidates, given the ever-shrinking employment market. Many businesses have migrated from the smaller towns and villages, leaving very few opportunities for local residents. Resolving daytime cover shortfalls has become an absolute priority in such locations.

Further discussion reinforced the understanding that, once the attraction and recruitment phase is complete, it is vital to be able to retain those, in whom so much time and energy has been invested. Due to the nature of the role and the extremes of activity on key stations, the retention aspect can have a number of pitfalls. For example, where a station is 'too busy', the pressure on low numbers of covering personnel becomes excessive and, where the station is 'less busy', individuals may become disillusioned with the inactivity versus time available and seek a better work life balance by leaving the Service.

The responsible owner was tasked with investigating areas for improvement, including how the relationship with employers may be improved and consolidated and what the Service can offer the local employers and community as a whole. Work conducted by Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service was shared and a number of options relating to identifying and broadcasting the benefits of working in partnership with employers and other emergency service colleagues have been raised for further investigation.

## **Training**

The inaugural meeting raised the issue of exploring the potential for developing a training and development process that would better suit the "on call" service. The consensus was that the structure of training delivery and needs of the wider organisation could be improved by de-centralising much of the current input, allowing teams to train locally, rather than at the central hub. It was reported that personnel can find current arrangements difficult to fit in with other commitments and family life. It was reported that personnel from the rural community often find it particularly challenging to commit to weekend training courses.

The responsible owner initially engaged with the Training Delivery Manager and was advised that there would be no fundamental change to the training calendar until 2017. It was later revealed that planning for a similar approach to that being proposed by the Group was being considered but was in an embryonic stage.

The Group Commander had previously requested a review into the current training process with the emphasis on developing a wholly structured approach with pre-planned training sessions throughout the year, whilst still ensuring the flexibility to adapt according to local circumstances and risk. Further research would be undertaken but an initial draft was to be made available for the next meeting with the possibility of commencing a selective pilot.

## **Communication**

The Group initially championed the idea of utilising an e-forum to enable all RDS Watch Managers to communicate, share and engage without any perceived barriers that may or may not be experienced in terms of middle management involvement. This was not seen as a derisory initiative, rather more a positive move to gain greater involvement across the Service. The general consensus being that during existing Brigade-wide Officer in Charge meetings, a number of key issues are lost, because of time constraints and, in some cases, a reluctance for individuals to contribute.

The three-month period between initial meetings harvested little interest and the proposal was withdrawn by unanimous consensus. The responsible owner proposed two further RDS Officer in Charge meetings per annum, where there would be no officer presence. Despite some scepticism, the initial meeting went ahead as a precursor to the second bi-annual official RDS meeting of the year.

This process has resulted in a greater degree of engagement amongst the peer group and enabled all rural and central communities to have representation behind closed doors and, significantly, without officer involvement. Feedback at this early stage has encouraged an extension of the initiative, which sanctions two informal meetings per annum, synchronising the rural group with Shrewsbury, Telford and Wellington, with four gatherings per annum, albeit under an alternative format. Issues raised and considered for further discussion are escalated to the Working Group and also to formal meetings, as appropriate. The additional meetings incur a cost, which has been considered and is currently absorbed by the Area Command budget.

## **5 Moving Forward**

The meetings held in October 2015 and January 2016 enabled the Group to further consider the four key areas, identifying and proposing a suitable way forward, based on the needs of 'on call' teams and the wider organisation. The focus of the Group remains on attraction and recruitment, retention and development and creating a better work life balance for all employees.

### **Payment**

Findings on three working models from Oxfordshire, South Wales and Staffordshire and the rates of pay received by a Watch Manager, Crew Manager and Firefighter at three types of station, depending on incident activity were shared with the Group. Payment levels, dependant on cover provided, were also considered in relation to role and station activity. Despite considerable discussion and varying opinions, the overall consensus resulted in a decision to maintain the status quo, pending receipt of any additional information. This was based on a recognition that all options offered some advantages and disadvantages and providing a 'cover-all' policy with no one disadvantaged would require a number of models in combination.

Further investigation will be conducted by the responsible owner in relation to why particular systems work for some Services, why Services are moving away from their current model and also looking into the potential for adopting different models at different stations.

The Group was reminded that the Service is not currently in a position to manage such a process and a significant amount of work is required on current availability and performance management systems, before this option, if appropriate, can be considered viable. All findings will be reported at the next meeting in April 2016.

## Attraction / Recruitment and Retention of Personnel

The responsible owner conducted initial research, which, in summary, tended to reflect the activities and initiatives currently used by Area Command. For example:

- Employers' evenings at local stations;
- Liaising with local schools and businesses to aid with recruitment;
- Open days;
- Targeted recruitment for specific cover periods;
- Taster sessions;
- Social media engagement; and
- Engagement with representative groups and their publications, such as Chambers of Commerce, local authority newsletters etc.

Further research indicated that a number of organisations have sought more radical solutions, including the following:

- Rewards for extra or premium hours' availability;
- Extension of the 5-minute response time;
- The possibility of re-location expenses being paid to existing staff in over-subscribed stations to move to stations, where recruitment is difficult.

Research was undertaken in respect of the type of engagement the Service currently has with employers and what the current benefits are and what the Service may be able to offer in the future.

It seems that first aid and trauma care training, along with LGV driver status, some management skills and the inherent professionalism instilled by the culture of the Service are all that is offered. Based on recent information, options for consideration may be as follows:

- Accredited use of employer to use the Service's image and logo ("in partnership with....");
- If an RDS employer provides a service to the Service or local authority, they could be identified as a preferred supplier;
- Ensure better engagement and communication, so that employers know they do not have to pay the employee (as the Service will be paying them), when they are on Service duties and also, if off sick due to Service activities;
- Waive any special service charges and perhaps offer occasional services, if required, such as pumping out or high-level access; and
- Accurately profile the historical and predicted call volumes and commitment for each potential RDS employee, to create a detailed planning tool that can be left with the employer. Awareness of a flexible approach to not responding to Service duties during peak times should also be considered.

The responsible owner will initially investigate the proposal of shared stickers / crest / mutual collaboration and report back at the next meeting in April. Wider issues will be discussed further and any appropriate and serviceable options passed to senior management for consideration.

## Training

The Group agreed in principle to the concept of an annualised training schedule and it was proposed that a pilot be arranged in collaboration with the Assurance Team during 2016, with a small number of stations invited to participate. The responsible owner, with support from Group Support Team, has been tasked with arranging a meeting with the Training Delivery Manager to ascertain the viability of this option, given the indication that there may be plans to revolutionise the modular training structure in the near future. The Group would like an appreciation of the vision for the future and an indication of how this supports its aims and objectives in respect of reducing centralised training and encouraging an increased local focus.

Topics associated with the above were also discussed, including the following:

- Alternative means of dealing with monthly / quarterly routines, ranging from Group Support Team assistance to additional time available, leaving all drill nights free for core competency activities;
- Greater use of satellite stations as mutual training venues;
- On-line training modules – The E-Learning Administrator is currently working on rolling out the programme;
- Associate trainers – underused with potential for greater co-ordination and engagement, easing difficulties in specific core skills; and
- Increased engagement with local employers, with a view to utilising appropriate training venues and possibly increasing the potential for exposure and enhancing recruitment opportunities

Progress will be reported at the April meeting.

## Communication

Positive feedback from the recent 'Officer in Charge only' meeting assured the Group of its relevance and associated benefits. The responsible owner described the positive and structured nature of the forum, providing assurance that it would not become a 'talking shop' and stressing that important issues would be fed into RDS Officer in Charge meetings for wider circulation.

The views of the Group were unanimous in that the value of the forum included a sense that the Service was giving something back to the teams for their commitment and loyalty. The financial impact was considered a minor complication, on the basis of the benefits generated by the creation of a more connected workforce. Issues that would not necessarily be tabled in an open forum can be raised and resolved through discussion or escalated to middle management and onwards.

The pilot will be extended to include two further meetings during 2016. The first one to be scheduled in May and the second in October / November. Other communication topics were discussed, which included:

- The creation of an RDS Watch Managers' email group;
- Twitter training and the potential scheduling conflict; and
- Firefighter Group Support Team communication with Fire Control and their allocated station deployment and communication with the Officer in Charge.

The Group would very much like to thank the organisation for commissioning what is considered to be an exciting opportunity to promote and develop a positive future for RDS teams and local communities. It will be important to ensure that the Group has the autonomy to help in shaping the organisation moving forward, with front line personnel having the opportunity to spearhead initiatives and influence decisions.

## **6 Financial Implications**

There are no financial implications arising from this report other than that described in **Communication** above.

## **7 Legal Comment**

There are no legal implications arising from this report.

## **8 Initial Impact Assessment**

As this report is for information only, setting out merely statements of fact / historical data, an Initial Impact Assessment is not required.

## **9 Equality Impact Assessment**

There are no equality or diversity implications arising from this report. An Equality Impact Assessment is not, therefore, required.

## **10 Appendices**

There are no appendices attached to this report.

## **11 Background Papers**

There are no background papers associated with this report.