

# SUFFOLK FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE



## Supporting Information for the Retained Policy Development Panel

### *The Selection, progression, retention and training of Retained Duty System Firefighters*

# **Contents**

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>National Fire Service Selection Tests</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Retention of RDS firefighters</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Training &amp; Development of RDS firefighters</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Summary of Areas for Exploration</b>	<b>9</b>

## Introduction

This document has been prepared to provide an overview regarding the selection, progression, retention and training of RDS firefighters, within the context of the review's Terms of Reference. It identifies suggested 'areas for exploration' for the Policy Development Panel to discuss with the Expert Witness Group, and other attendees, at its meeting of 20<sup>th</sup> January 2009.

The terms of reference agreed by the PDP for examining the role of RDS firefighters are as follows:

1. To assess the impact on selection rates, from potential recruits, of the recently introduced National Firefighter Selection Tests
2. To examine whether the National Firefighter Selection Tests should be used as the mechanism to recruit staff into the retained service
3. To review selection practice employed in other Fire & Rescue Services
4. To examine arrangements for promotion in the retained service and, in particular, the extent to which they support having adequate numbers of staff to fill managerial posts
5. To review arrangements for promotion selection employed in other Fire & Rescue Services
6. To examine the distribution of Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service retained staff across various primary employment groups: Self-employed, primary employment with Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service, primary employment with public service employer (other than Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service), primary employment with private sector employer, no primary employment
7. To examine reasons why staff decide to join the retained service in Suffolk
8. To quantify the number of staff leaving the retained service
9. To examine reasons why staff decide to leave the retained service. This issue should be considered within the context of CLG Fire Research Technical Report 8/2008: *A survey of current and ex-firefighters in England*
10. To identify good practice in other Fire & Rescue Services, associated with retention of retained
11. To quantify the amount of training 'contact time' Retained staff have with Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service
12. To compare the amount of training 'contact time' in Suffolk with that for retained firefighters in other, similar Fire & Rescue Services
13. To examine the training requirements for retained firefighters
14. Examine the extent to which the Integrated personal development system has impacted upon training and development of retained staff in Suffolk
15. To assess whether retained staff have sufficient training 'contact time' with Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service

## National Fire Service Selection Tests

The current recruitment process of RDS firefighters is managed by the individual stations and relevant District Manager, with recruitment taking place on a demand basis. This disjointed approach gives potential for inequality, duplication and increased costs.

It was agreed at the previous meeting that to overcome the inconsistency of approach to recruitment and to improve efficiency that specialist HR support and

centralise responsibility for establishing, and maintaining, an RDS recruitment framework would be introduced as a PDP recommendation.

There are certain personal attributes that are needed to help fulfil the role as a firefighter. These include confidence, resilience, adaptability, ability to communicate effectively, integrity and have a commitment to diversity. These are commonly referred to as Personal Qualities and Attribute's

The National Firefighter Selection process tests whether people have the potential to work as firefighters across all duty systems.

National Firefighter Selection Tests consist of;

- An application form, based on Personal Qualities and Attribute's
- A series of written/numerical tests
- Physical Tests
- Formal interview, again based around Personal Qualities and Attribute's

National Firefighter Selection Tests were introduced to the fire service as the role of the firefighter is continually changing as new techniques and equipment is introduced. As well as responding to emergencies, RDS firefighters must work closely with the community;

- To prevent fire and accidents from starting in the first place.
- Educating the community by visiting schools, community centres and people in their own homes.
- Advising people about planning escape routes within their own homes in case of a fire.
- Actively seeking to understand and to value diverse individuals and groups.

Recruitment of RDS and Wholetime Duty System must also be similarly undertaken whilst application of the National Fire Selection Test for Wholetime Duty System personnel is robust and rigidly enforced; there is no similar test for RDS staff in Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service.

The National Framework Document 2008-11 directs that the National Fire Selection Test must be applied across all duty systems.

The National Firefighter Selection Test is administered locally but all tests are then sent to a central administration point where they are marked so as to ensure consistency.

The current failure rate of those taking the National Firefighter Selection Test is 80%. Application of the tests, as they stand, will generate a risk that very few people interested in joining as retained firefighters in Suffolk, from a limited recruitment 'pool' i.e. within 5-minutes of the station, are likely to be successful.

There is no historical evidence that we have been recruiting unsuitable people into the retained service. On that basis, the very low success rate associated with the national tests raises questions about the tests themselves. This has been identified as an issue and a review of the tests is being undertaken by Chief Fire Officers Association at a national level.

A survey of our neighbouring Fire and Rescue Service's showed that only one Fire & Rescue Service has introduced National Firefighter Selection Tests for RDS, that

being Luton and Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service. Their experience mirrored that of other Fire & Rescue Services, with a very high failure rate (80%), which was primarily attributed to the application form and written tests. Luton & Bedfordshire Fire & Rescue Service have now introduced a tuition course and obtained permission to mark the written tests internally, which has reduced the failure rate to 60%. Within Suffolk current failure rates for people applying to join RDS are approximately between 5-10%.

The Assessment Development Centre processes test the potential of people to work in a wide range of managerial roles. The process involves participants taking part in a variety of role related and job simulation exercises whilst being observed by a team of trained assessors.

National Firefighter Selection Tests and Assessment Development Centre's are objective and accurate and assess an individual's potential to perform safely and effectively in any particular role.

National Firefighter Selection Tests and Assessment Development Centre's help to ensure that recruitment and progression is relevant to the role, open and fair and reflects the fire & rescue service core values as expressed in the National Framework.

The RDS firefighter has determination, self motivation and above all a desire to serve the community in which they live and work. They come from every walk of life; they include shopkeepers, builders, plumbers, farmers, secretaries, engineers and directors of companies, together with people who are not currently employed.

Recruitment primarily is via word of mouth within the local community; with many of our fire stations having a history of family members providing service to the community over a number of years. There is no current evidence that current methods have recruited unsuitable people to carry out the role of an RDS firefighter.

Due to the amount of useable information being inadequate further information will be sort from the expert witness group to support the area for exploration at the PDP meeting.

## **1 Area for exploration: What motivates people to join Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service as retained firefighters?**

### **Retention of RDS firefighters**

The RDS has a far higher turnover rate of staff annually than the Wholetime Duty System, a loss which it can far less easily absorb through a successive influx of new entrants.

65 RDS staff left Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service in the past 18 months (14%), 74% firefighters and 26% who operate at a managerial level within the RDS.

Exit interviews carried out by those leaving the RDS identified the most likely reasons for leaving the service were; Family (14%) and dissatisfaction with terms and conditions (5%), however 31 (48%) persons rejected the opportunity to have an exit interview thus any conclusions drawn from this data are questionable.

Due to the amount of useable information being inadequate further information will be sort from the expert witness group to support the area for exploration at the PDP meeting.

## **2 Area for exploration: What factors motivate retained staff to resign from Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service?**

Periodic reviews carried out by central government of the issues linked to the RDS have tended to concentrate on recruitment and retention, with the focus primarily on how to recruit sufficient numbers to compensate for the high turnover of personnel. The reality is that, despite much well-meaning work and numerous recommendations for remedial action, to date there is little evidence available nationally to demonstrate change.

The demands of modern society make the provision and maintenance of RDS cover increasingly difficult to sustain. Many and varied pressures strike at the fundamental viability of the way in which the retained duty system currently operates. Pressures from employers; the needs of the family and balancing demands on free time; the requirement to be available, if possible, for as much as 120 hours a week, and the need to reside and/or work within a specific time/distance radius of the fire station are dominate factors.

Due to the current process for analysing leavers information being inadequate further information will be sort from the expert witness group to support the area for exploration at the PDP meeting.

## **3 Area for exploration: What steps can be taken to improve the retention of retained staff?**

### **Training & Development**

The Fire Services Act 2004 and the Health & Safety at work regulations place a statutory duty to provide and adequately train its personnel for the tasks Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service expect them to undertake in their day to day activities.

The incident ground can present a wide range of hazardous situations which firefighters must overcome in a safe manner so as to ensure a successful resolution to an incident.

This is achieved through continuous training and assessment of the firefighter's skills and knowledge of risks, operational procedures and equipment over time, providing a safe person/crew available to resolve operational incidents and address community safety issues.

RDS staff work against three of the Role Maps: Firefighter, Crew Manager and Watch Manager. Each of these Role Maps includes a number of National Occupational standards, which reflect both the proactive and reactive aspects of the role to which they relate. For example, the Firefighter Role Map includes the following national occupational standards:

1. FF1 Inform and educate your community to improve awareness of safety matters
2. FF2 Take responsibility for effective performance
3. FF3 Save and preserve endangered life
4. FF4 Resolve operational incidents
5. FF5 Protect the environment from the effects of hazardous materials

6. FF6 Support the effectiveness of operational response
7. FF7 Support the development of colleagues in the workplace
8. FF8 Contribute to safety solutions to minimise risks to your community
9. FF9 Drive, manoeuvre and redeploy fire service vehicles

The Standards are underpinned by Personal Qualities and Attribute's, which firefighters are expected to possess in order to demonstrate their suitability for the role.

Previous meetings identified that RDS firefighters were expected to attend the full range of operational incidents and carry out community safety, consequently training covering this requirement must be applied.

Competence to undertake the role of a firefighter is achieved by the development of skills, knowledge in the safe environment. This is achieved via simulation on the drill ground, theoretical input in the classroom or via the application of skills and knowledge at the incident ground/work place with regard to community safety.

Some RDS staff have difficulty in gathering naturally occurring evidence from the incident ground which can be used to demonstrate competence due to them being based at operationally quiet stations. Lack of incident based evidence places a greater importance and increased regularity on training provided in a realistic training environment.

After basic training, all Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service firefighters are required to pass a probation period and thereafter attain competence in role within 3 years of appointment, in line with national standards.

Once staff have been signed off as competent, then a cycle of skills maintenance will (i.e. station and risk-critical training modules), if completed within specified time frames, facilitate maintenance of that competence by default.

Additional elements such as breathing apparatus and compartment fire behaviour training are essential components of the maintenance cycle.

RDS staff are not currently required to prove competence against all 9 role map elements. There is, however, an argument that, whilst the overall retained/wholetime role differs in terms of community involvement, the operational elements are the same and therefore all that is required of RDS to fill their role.

### ***Time to train***

Recruit training courses for RDS personnel are run quarterly at the Service Training Centre at Lowestoft. Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service currently runs one of the shortest initial recruits' courses in England: this course incorporates a later 'Development Phase' of training modules into the initial recruits' course to create a more holistic and concentrated training package.

The basic training course requires significant commitment from RDS recruits and any further increase in course length may preclude some potential firefighters from joining Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service.

Upon successful completion of their recruit's course an RDS firefighter is required to attend their local fire station on a weekly basis for 2 hours where ongoing training either practical or theoretical input provided by local and or dedicated training staff.

Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service has migrated from a position where routine training delivered on, and available to, retained stations was largely uncoordinated, sporadic and haphazard, to a position where a resolved programme of risk-critical and generic training modules is being delivered in a controlled manner, largely within a given timeframe and capable of being audited, recorded and subject to quality control. The programme as delivered is based on the firefighter/junior officer role map and is designed to cover all relevant role issues within a two year period.

Other routine, risk-critical training is fundamental to the attainment and maintenance of operational competence in role: firefighters, whether RDS or Wholetime Duty System, are required to undertake (e.g.) breathing apparatus and compartment fire behaviour training at set intervals. Additionally, in order to provide for a safe firefighter, dependant on local risk, RDS staff are required to attend training courses such as:

- Road traffic collision
- First aid
- Marine firefighting
- Crew Manager Managing Incidents
- Hazardous materials

Attendance on training courses outside of their main employment can be a huge burden for staff in terms of time and it should be recognised that the burden of training requirement on RDS personnel (in order that Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service meets its obligations in the provision of a safe and competent firefighter) is ever-increasing.

There is potential for RDS personnel leaving Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service because they are either unable or unwilling to make the (training) commitment demanded of them. In addition, the financial burden to the Service for payment of loss of earning is significant (at c£150k p.a.).

#### **4 Area for exploration: Should more flexibility be introduced into mechanisms for delivering training to RDS staff?**

There is view that the current 2 hour weekly training period available to RDS staff is inadequate due to the physical amount, complexity and the recording of training required by the training programme. A simple extension to the drill period would partially alleviate some pressures but would have the negative effect with regard to commitments outside Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service.

The estimated cost for a 1 hour extension to the drill period would cost £660K per annum.

#### **5 Area for exploration: Should more training time be made available to RDS staff?**

It is accepted that the Station/Risk Critical Training Programme is not fully resolved and requires further development and consideration of additional factors before a completed package is seen. A review of the training delivered highlighted a number of issues for retained staff:

- Relevance of training topics delivered when considering local risk
- Adequacy of time available for training

- Adequacy of time remaining available for other core training issues such as probationary firefighter training
- Lack of time available for preparation of training delivery
- Inadequate support and training for retained crew and watch managers required to deliver training modules
- Difficulty of running simulation/confirmation exercises with limited resources

**6 Area for exploration: Should greater emphasis be placed on “core, practical skills” training?**

**7 Area for exploration: Should the training programme for RDS staff be tailored on the basis of the types of emergency they are most likely to attend?**

## **Summary of areas for exploration**

**1. Area for exploration: What motivates people to join Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service as retained firefighters?**

**2. Area for exploration: What factors motivate retained staff to resign from Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service?**

**3. Area for exploration: What steps can be taken to improve the retention of retained staff?**

**4. Area for exploration: Should more flexibility be introduced into mechanisms for delivering training to RDS staff?**

**5. Area for exploration: Should more training time be made available to RDS staff?**

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