

Environment, Communities and Fire Select Committee
13 January 2020
Fire and Rescue Service Task and Finish Group
Report by Chairman of the Task and Finish Group

Summary

In September 2018 the Committee appointed a Scrutiny Task and Finish Group (TFG) to scrutinise and make recommendations on two projects brought forward under the Integrated Risk Management Action Plan 2018-22 - Recruitment and Retention of on-call (OC) Firefighters, and Response Times Standards. The Group was able to complete its work only in respect of the recruitment and retention project, meeting twice to consider the issues. TFG members attended OC fire stations and spoke in person to OC firefighters to gather further evidence.

The Group recognised that it would likely require investment to improve the prospects of the OC service, but that it represented excellent value for money, and it was felt that a relatively modest, targeted, increase in its funding could yield significant positive outcomes.

It was clear to the Group that there was no single immediate and obvious solution to the problems faced by West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service (FRS), in common with fire services around the country. Rather than make specific recommendations, based on the evidence it heard, the TFG made suggestions for consideration and exploration by the FRS. These covered areas such as compensation, Retained Liaison Officers, work/life balance, benefits for employers, utilisation of the OC service, and crewing levels, and were initially passed to the FRS in spring 2019.

The FRS has been asked to provide a response to the recommendations at the 13 January meeting.

The focus for scrutiny:

The Committee is asked to

- a) Consider and endorse the measures suggested by the Task and Finish Group to address the recruitment and retention issues.
- b) Assess the risks of a failure to address recruitment and retention issues
- c) Consider whether the FRS has responded fully and effectively to the TFG suggestions.
- d) Consider whether further scrutiny should be carried out of the areas of work the TFG was unable to complete.

Proposal

1. Background and Context

1.1 At its meeting on 21 September 2018, the Committee agreed in principle for a Scrutiny Task and Finish Group (TFG) to be established, to scrutinise two projects forthcoming under West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service's (FRS's) Integrated Risk Management Action Plan 2018-22, namely:

- The Recruitment and Retention of On-Call (OC) Firefighters
- The Response Times Standards

The full terms of reference are included as appendix 1.

1.2 The membership comprised:

Andrew Baldwin
Ann Bridges
Michael Jones
Simon Oakley (Chairman)
Francis Oppler
Carol Purnell

1.3 The TFG met twice in respect of the OC project. However, due to changes in Service priorities, the Response Times project was delayed. Rather than correspondingly delay their work indefinitely, the Group instead decided to informally issue an interim set of ideas and recommendations to the FRS, on the OC element of its terms of reference alone. This was done in spring 2019.

1.4 Having learned that the response time project would not be forthcoming in the immediate future, the TFG Chairman subsequently determined that the Group should publish a final report based upon the work it was able to undertake.

2. Discussion

2.1 The Group met in November 2018 and in January 2019. The first meeting considered background information and data on the recruitment and retention challenges facing the Service in West Sussex, and the impact of OC staff shortages on the crewing and availability of appliances. The Group also considered a dissertation on the retention of OC firefighters, to provide information on the national picture.

2.2 The Group learned that lack of "shouts" (ie calls to an incident, which have fallen 40% in the last decade), flexibility and pay are key issues, moreover that these were national issues, and not a situation unique to West Sussex. Although pay was set at the national level, there was some flexibility and members discussed broad ideas for improving the compensation package – albeit that this would be challenging in the present financial climate.

2.3 Social change in the decades since the OC model was first introduced had eroded the effectiveness of the OC service, and impacted negatively on

recruitment to the service. For example, it was now rare for people to work in the community in which they lived, particularly so in rural areas. The flexibility required of OC firefighters could be challenging for employers to accommodate (something to which employers had to commit as part of the employee's application process).

- 2.4 The Group discussed the role of Retained Liaison Officers (RLOs). RLOs supported the retained section leaders with support on recruitment and retention, administration tasks and crewing. Whereas there had once been 12 in West Sussex FRS, they had been reduced in number to nine, then three, to none. There were currently three once more, though they now had additional responsibilities on top of their core role.
- 2.5 Following consideration of the background information at the first meeting, the Group decided to gather evidence first-hand from OC staff, through visits to their local OC fire station, timed to coincide with their weekly drill night.
- 2.6 Because senior managers did not attend the visits, OC staff were reassured that their input would be treated confidentially, with the hope that more honest and helpful discussions would be forthcoming as a result. Feedback from the visits was discussed at the second TFG meeting. The following emergent themes were considered at the second meeting:

Recruitment

- 2.7 Remuneration: Money was clearly the most significant issue. The disturbance fee while on-call was currently a flat fee of around £4. Generally, members considered that sacrifice required to perform the role was not commensurate with the financial package.
- 2.8 Employers: Members recognised the significant commitment required of employers, and discussed ways of enhancing the benefits accruing to them.
- 2.9 Catchment Area: The requirement to be within four minutes travel distance of the fire station while on call was a significant impediment – for both recruitment and retention.
- 2.10 Expectations of the Role: Some OC firefighters had seen it as a route to ultimately becoming whole time (WT) and the Group questioned how well such aspirations been sufficiently understood and accommodated.

Retention:

- 2.11 Utilisation of OC Crews: At stations manned by both whole time and on-call firefighters there was a perception among OC staff that WT crews got to undertake more of the school visits, for example, because this worked out cheaper for the Service. However, using an OC crew for local prevention work would serve to raise their public profile within the local community (see 2.15). Members also reflected that there might be more types of jobs that OC crews could attend, such as animals in distress. OC staff felt a reduction in the West Sussex minimum crewing level (from four to three) would result in more shouts for OC crews.
- 2.12 Prestige of the Role: For on-call firefighters, an important aspect of the role was the sense of delivering a vital service for the community, and Members

considered the extent to which this community service, together with the sacrifice of families and employers, was celebrated/acknowledged. OC staff felt there was limited awareness of their work within the wider community.

- 2.13 Work/Life Balance: The constraints of the current on-call system had a significant impact on family life.
- 2.14 Training: there appeared to be limited capacity for on-call firefighters to train to become drivers. The role of driver did not attract additional compensation, but came with an associated degree of kudos, and a significant amount of additional responsibility. Drivers had to have an HGV license, but there was a significant waiting list for driver training.

There appeared to also be a significant lag between the completion of an OC firefighter's training and their first posting, which caused a significant loss of momentum for the newly-qualified.

- 2.15 Retained Liaison Officers: On-call staff placed great importance on the RLOs, yet several remarked that "they never see them" (the number of RLOs had been reduced, and they now had additional duties/responsibilities on top of their notional role).

3. Recommendations:

- 3.1 The Group's view is that the recruitment/retention issues had to be solved, or the County Council's role would otherwise be to manage the demise of the OC service. The Group recognised that it would likely require investment to improve its prospects. However, the OC service represented excellent value for money, and it was felt that a relatively modest, targeted, increase in its funding could yield significant positive outcomes.
- 3.2 It was clear to the Group that there was no single immediate and obvious solution to the problems faced by West Sussex FRS, in common with fire services around the country. Rather than make specific recommendations, based on the evidence it heard, the TFG makes the following suggestions for consideration and exploration by the Fire and Rescue Service. These were initially passed to the FRS in spring 2019 (see 1.3):
1. Relating to the financial compensation for the role the Group suggested that the retaining fee (an annual fee broken down into monthly payments) be increased in line with the hours OC staff made themselves available, and/or that a higher fee be offered for being on-call during "anti-social" parts of the week, such as weekends. Another suggestion was that OC staff receive free parking permits.
 2. Considering concerns about work/life balance and the realities of modern life, additional categories of on-call duty should be offered – for 50 hrs and 30 hrs, for example.
 3. Given the importance OC firefighters attach to serving their community, the wider community should be made more aware of their role. FRS should look more closely at recognition schemes/events for staff/family/employers – perhaps with the involvement of local civic leaders.

4. Considering the gain accruing to employers, FRS should look for more ways for employers to benefit from the skills acquired by their OC firefighters.
5. FRS should continue to identify and publicise good local stories, with a view to better "selling" the service to potential applicants.
6. The lack of driving instructors was a concern, albeit one which applied across all the blue light services regionally. However, any influence the FRS could bring to bear with partners to help alleviate the situation would be of benefit.
7. Many OC staff joined the service as a means to eventually becoming whole-time, but this ambition was often not realised. The FRS should examine and address the impediments to this career path.
8. If OC crews could be used more often for local preventative work, in addition to improving job satisfaction, this would also enhance their profile within the community.
9. Efforts to recruit more (non-FRS) WSCC staff based in the Chichester and Horsham campuses should continue.
10. To increase the number of shouts, OC firefighters could support the ambulance service more (for example, in work such as "lift assist") and could undertake more animal rescue work.
11. Although there could presumably be an impact on response times, the potential pool of eligible on-call firefighters would be widened if the turn-in time increased from four minutes to six minutes.
12. Views were mixed among TFG members as to whether or not West Sussex FRS should consider crewing with a minimum of three firefighters. The TFG did not consider the detailed evidence underpinning such a proposal, and did not agree a preliminary view. However, it appeared that OC crews would be available more often were it to be the case, and that other fire and rescue services routinely crewed with a minimum of three firefighters.
13. Is there scope for greater responsibility at station level for managing individual's availability, including flexibility in on-call hours?
14. In the eyes of on-call staff, Retained Liaison Officers clearly had a significant role in improving mentoring, recruitment and retention. Although their partial reintroduction was welcomed, evidence suggested more could be achieved with increased resourcing in this area.
15. Increased contract flexibility would potentially help retain staff as they got older – for example, graded fitness standards could prolong service.

4. Issues for consideration by the Select Committee

The Committee is asked to

- a) Consider and endorse the measures suggested by the Task and Finish Group to address the recruitment and retention issues.
- b) Assess the risks of a failure to address recruitment and retention issues
- c) Consider whether the FRS has responded fully and effectively to the TFG suggestions.
- d) Consider whether further scrutiny should be carried out of the areas of work the TFG was unable to complete.

5. Consultation

- 5.1 TFG members gathered evidence from representatives of the FRS before making their recommendations. The members of the TFG were consulted in the preparation of this report.

6. Risk Implications and Mitigations

- 6.1 On Call firefighters deliver an essential part of the fire and rescue service delivered to the County's residents and businesses. Threats to the long-term viability of the on-call service risk diminishing the Council's ability to deliver its statutory responsibilities in this area.

7. Other Options Considered

- 7.1 This report sets out the findings and recommendations of a Scrutiny Task and Finish Group, which are not binding upon the Cabinet Member.

8. Equality Duty

- 8.1 There are no duties under the Equality Act arising directly from this report. In the event the Service takes forward any of the recommendations, any duties arising will be addressed at that time.

9. Social Value

- 9.1 There are no issues under the Public Services (Social Value) Act arising directly from this report. In the event the Service takes forward any of the recommendations, any duties arising will be addressed at that time.

10. Crime and Disorder Implications

- 10.1 There are no issues under the Crime and Disorder Act arising directly from this report. In the event the Service takes forward any of the recommendations, any duties arising will be addressed at that time.

11. Human Rights Implications

- 11.1 There are no issues under the Human Rights Act arising directly from this report. In the event the Service takes forward any of the recommendations, any duties arising will be addressed at that time.

Simon Oakley

Chairman, Fire and Rescue Service TFG & Vice Chairman, Environment, Communities and Fire Select Committee.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Terms of Reference

Background Papers

How to improve the retention rate of On-Call staff by considering the reasons people leave the Fire Service and analysing feedback from current On-Call staff, to make recommendations to improve in the future – Dissertation by Laura Walker.

Appendix 1

Fire and Rescue Service Scrutiny Task and Finish Group

Terms of Reference

1. Scope

At its meeting on 21 September 2018, the Committee agreed in principle for a Scrutiny Task and Finish Group to be established, to scrutinise two projects forthcoming under the Fire and Rescue Service's (FRS's) Integrated Risk Management Action Plan 2018-22, namely:

- *The Recruitment and Retention of on-call Firefighters*
- *The Response Times Standards*

The project to develop a strategy for on-call recruitment and retention is ongoing.

The project on response times is due to commence in January 2019.

The purpose of the Task and Finish Group is, for the two projects in turn, to act as a critical friend to the Cabinet Member and Service as the proposals are developed and implemented. It is hoped that, by virtue of their involvement in the TFG, TFG members will gain additional insight and knowledge on the work of the FRS, which in turn will benefit the wider Committee whenever formal scrutiny of the Service is undertaken.

The TFG will produce a final report of its recommendations back to a formal meeting of Environment, Communities and Fire Select Committee (ECFSC) for consideration and adoption.

2. Methodology

It is planned to hold two meetings of the TFG for each project. In considering the proposals arising under the projects, The TFG will consider:

- *The safety and security of our communities*
- *Firefighter welfare*
- *The capacity and resilience of the Service, in the face of forecast demand*
- *Value for money*
- *The reputation of the FRS, and public perception.*
- *Best/alternative practice adopted by other fire services*
- *Stakeholder consultation on any proposed changes to services*

The work of the TFG will be informed by FRS officers. The TFG may also wish to consider evidence from external witnesses.

3. Timetable

The TFG will run alongside the two projects, and will formally report its recommendations to a meeting of the Committee in time to influence the projects, while not causing delays to either project.

The Group will inevitably make suggestions and proposals based on the evidence presented to them, during the course of its meetings. So long as there is consensus among the Group, FRS officers and the Cabinet Member will consider these suggestions as they arise, and act upon them where they are accepted (rather than waiting for the Group's recommendation in its final report). Any such interim suggestions will be mentioned in the Group's final report.

4. Membership

The Chairman, as agreed by the ECFSC Business Planning Group, is Simon Oakley.

The agreed membership of the TFG is:-

- *Andrew Baldwin*
- *Ann Bridges*
- *Michael Jones*
- *Simon Oakley (Chairman)*
- *Francis Oppler*
- *Carol Purnell*

5. Reporting arrangements

The TFG will report to the Environment, Communities and Fire Select Committee.

18 November 2018