Safe Stronger and Inclusive Communities

THE RECRUITMENT, RETENTION AND AVAILABILITY OF RETAINED FIRE FIGHTERS IN CUMBRIA
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SUMMARY OF THE GROUP’S FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Task Group on the Recruitment, Retention and availability of retained Fire Fighters in Cumbria was established by the Safe, Stronger and Inclusive Communities Scrutiny Advisory Board at the meeting held on 22 March 2011 in order to inform the Safe, Stronger and Inclusive Communities Directorate in their work on the recruitment of retained fire fighters. The Group was established following a debate at full Council on 8 September 2010 regarding the Integrated Risk Management Plan.

The main concerns were around the difficulties in recruitment of retained personnel at particular stations in the county, the lack of female recruits and the availability of personnel.

The findings from this review are described within this report, and key points from this work are detailed below:

- There is a perception of Fire personnel it is a man’s role. Educating the public could change the perception.
- There were challenges with daytime availability at fire stations.
- A two tier remuneration package for fire personnel raised issues (this was a national system).
- A bigger pool of people to draw from would be beneficial.
- An increase in the number of people from under represented groups (particularly females) was needed.
- The biggest hurdle for those from under represented groups was the National Fire fighter Selection Test.
- A switch to using airwaves from pagers to contact personnel would be a big improvement on the current notification system.
- Retained and Whole Time personnel are recruited using the same standards (including fitness) – Whole Time and retained Personnel are equal.
- The increase in the number of dormitory towns means that many people do not live or work 5 minutes of their local Fire.
- Employers are reluctant to release staff for duty during the time they are at work.
- Employing females during the day could resolve day time cover shortages but many failed at the physical testing stage.
- Positive action to help females pass the physical tests is being put in place.
- The recruitment team continue to work with male and female applicants who do not succeed in their applications but whom it is felt will make good fire fighters in the future and who may require additional support before submitting a further application.
- The fact that retained staff feel that they are doing something for the good of their local community is important.

The Task and Finish Group would like to thank everyone who took part in this review particularly Locality Managers, Station Officers and retained Fire fighters who willingly took
part in this research and welcomed members into their stations, and provided their comments on the existing system. The Group would also like to congratulate the officers involved in the 2011 recruitment campaign for the innovations they have used so far which has potentially greatly increased the pool of retained fire fighters for the immediate future and beyond.

The Task and Finish Group recommend that the Scrutiny Advisory Board forwards this report for Cabinet’s consideration.

**Recommendation 1**

Further publicity be undertaken on the role of retained fire fighters (particularly those from under represented groups eg women) in relevant county council publications such as Your Cumbria and school publications

**Recommendation 2**

That secondment opportunities for existing fire fighters to work with under represented groups to encourage more participation continue to be supported, with arrangements for the backfilling of posts where necessary.

**Recommendation 3**

Local employers be advised of the benefits which will accrue to their businesses by allowing staff to become retained fire fighters and consideration be given to the introduction of the award of certificates for all participating employers.

**Recommendation 4**

Local members be assisted and encouraged to become more closely involved with their local fire station as part of their role as community leaders.
1. **Background and Context**

1.1 Cumbria Fire and Rescue Service (CFRS) provides a preventative and emergency response service to everyone living and working in Cumbria and in addition to the 41m or more visitors the county receives each year. The Service currently employs 245 regular fire fighters and managers and 439 retained (part time) fire fighters and managers.

1.2 Retained fire fighters promote safety, save lives and are a vital part of local communities. Each station has a need for fire fighters at certain times of the day/days of the week. They must be able to attend the fire station within 5 minutes when responding to call-outs, have practical ability and be physically fit.

1.3 Over the years the Cumbria Fire and Rescue Service together with other Fire and Rescue Services had been experiencing difficulties in recruiting to the retained roles. The Service has a target of 20% of fire fighters being female and in Cumbria very few women had taken up this role. The National Recruitment Standards which were used in Cumbria required recruits to pass stringent physical and psychometric tests, and despite their potential many potential recruits failed one of these tests and could progress no further. The trend for people not to work close to their home has also served to reduce the number of applicants as does the reluctance of employers to release their staff for work as retained fire fighters.

2. **Link to Council and Community Priorities**

2.1 Cumbria County Council’s Council Plan outlines the Council’s three key priorities, one of which is to “ensure the most vulnerable people in our communities receive the support they need”. Underpinning this is an aspiration for people to enjoy an “independent and healthy life and to be safe from harm.

2.2 This review directly supports the council’s delivery of both this priority and aspiration, as it focuses one of the Council’s key services to our communities. The services that the Fire and Rescue Service provides are integral to safety within Cumbria, and the use and involvement of retained fire fighters within the service not only provides essential capacity and support, but also strong links into the local community.

2.3 In addition, the use of retained firefighters within the service also supports the Council’s underpinning aim of being as effective and efficient as possible, by making the best use of resources to deliver services as effectively as possible for the people of Cumbria.

3. **Role and Membership of the Task and Finish Group**

3.1 It was agreed that the aims of this review would be

- To ensure that the standards used to recruit retained fire fighters will not be reduced in order to ensure there are enough personnel to carry out the responsibilities of Cumbria Fire and Rescue Service.
- To determine the level of involvement needed to maintain the necessary skills.
- To research other shire Local Authorities to ascertain whether Cumbria Fire and Rescue Service could utilise good practice examples and/or use additional methods to attract retained fire fighters into the Fire Service.
- To ascertain what keeps retained fire fighters in the service and learn what their experiences of recruitment are.
- To establish what the barriers to recruitment are and whether they can be overcome.
- To find out whether there are any specific issues pertinent to Cumbria which make it difficult to recruit retained fire fighters.

3.2 Membership of the Task Group was as follows:

Councillor Bill Bleasdale
Councillor Kevin Lancaster
Councillor Martin Stephenson
Councillor Val Tarbitt

Councillor Bleasdale served as the Chair of the Group. The group were supported by Nicola Phillips and Linda Graham (Scrutiny Officers).

3.3 The group met on 4 occasions between May and December 2011. Members interviewed Fire Service personnel who currently deal with the recruitment of retained Fire Fighters (including an officer on secondment dealing exclusively with the recruitment of female personnel), the Portfolio Holder and the Corporate Director – Safe, Stronger and Inclusive Communities. Members of the Group met with retained personnel at their local fire station to interview staff to obtain their views and experiences. Concurrently to this process, the Scrutiny Officer attended meetings of the Cumbria Fire and Rescue Service retained Recruitment Project Group. This was a group of officers tasked with looking at the current process of selection and devising actions to overcome or address any barriers to recruitment within the Directorate.

3.4 This final report has been drawn up as a result of the Task Group’s investigations and details of who they met with and the evidence gathered are shown below.

4. Evidence Gathered and Witness Interviews

4.1 The Task Group met with a series of witnesses to provide them with a range of evidence these were:

Councillor Gary Strong – Cabinet member for Community Safety and Local Services – to provide the Cabinet members viewpoint.

Dominic Harrison – Corporate Director Safe and Stronger Communities - to provide a high level understanding of the broad service issues facing the service in this area.

A Station Manager project lead for the Cumbria Fire and Rescue Service retained Recruitment Project Group and a female firefighter on secondment to the project - to discuss initiatives being utilised to improve the recruitment of under represented groups to Cumbria Fire and rescue Service
Head of Service Delivery – to update members on the outcome of the 2011 recruitment campaign

4.2 A summary of each witness session is given below

4.3 Councillor Gary Strong – Cabinet member for Community Safety and Local Services

Gary Strong spoke to members about difficulties in attracting a large enough pool of applicants and advised that additional advertising was now being carried out.

He advised members that the Cumbria service performed very efficiently on a much smaller budget than other fire and rescue services. He was also keen to increase the pool of retained fire fighters as he feels this is the only way for the service to continue with its high level of service to the public.

Whilst the situation in Cumbria is not as bad as other areas availability of successful applicants was reducing and needed to be addressed.

4.4 Dominic Harrison – Corporate Director Safe and Stronger Communities

Dominic Harrison advised members that prior to 2003 retained fire fighters and whole time fire fighters were very different and both had their own route into the service. The service now is very different with little difference between the classifications of fire fighters. A trained retained member of staff is now perfectly capable of carrying out the whole time role, and retained applicants now have to complete a much more stringent application process. This is however leading to recruitment difficulties.

He advised that the main difficulties in recruitment are to day time cover which is affected by people working away from their home base. The situation is worse in the south of the county where there are more dormitory towns/villages.

It was hoped to increase the numbers of fire fighters from under represented groups including females. As the service is aware that women are more likely to remain in the home during the day attempts are being made to attract more members of this group into the service by offering physical training courses to increase levels of fitness as this has been identified as one of the main factors with many women failing this part of the application process.

Dominic also advised the group of the contacts made with local employers to encourage them to release their staff to become retained fire fighters. In some areas this is being successful with problems being eased by big employers, but releasing staff is becoming a greater difficulty when businesses were cutting back in the current economic climate.

He also advised that the current paging system could be improved as currently on occasion more retained staff than were required responded to the page and attended. These staff are then entitled to be paid for turning out. He also advised that there is a possibility that call times could be extended in some rural areas, however he assured Members that standards would not be reduced.
Members were also advised that Dominic hopes to be able to continue the secondment of staff to assist in the recruitment programme but this was dependent on the services budget.

4.5 **Station Manager, project lead for the Cumbria Fire and Rescue Service retained Recruitment Project Group**

The Station Manager met with members on 11 May 2011 and informed them that a project group had been analysing the data relating to successes / challenges of the recent recruitment drive for retained fire fighters. The results had been positive in that more recruits had been identified this year than last year. He confirmed however that recruitment to retained staff has been more challenging since the introduction of similar recruitment standards to that of a Whole Time Fire Fighter. Retained fire fighters can be from any walk of life and many people have applied, however since the introduction of the standards he feels that this has changed for the better.

He advised that training was now provided in a more flexible manner: it was given in modules, in 2 week courses and could be undertaken at weekends or during the evening to fit in with other commitments.

An additional suggestion he made was that employers could be educated through a public relations exercise to explain what would be expected of a retained fire fighter in order to avoid any incorrect perceptions of level of commitment. Another option is to make the employment of a retained fire fighter more beneficial to employers, which may in turn encourage employers to increase the availability of their workers to become retained fire fighters. Examples of this could include providing them with a fully trained first aider free of charge. Explaining the benefits and kudos that comes from employing a fire fighter should be emphasised and a further possibility may be to publicise the companies who employ retained firefighters, as an additional incentive to employers.

A lot of Fire Fighters were self employed which resulted in problems with day cover and as there are a lot of commuter villages in some areas of Cumbria, and some officers are employed as retained fire fighters in the areas in which they worked rather than lived. He noted that approximately 10 stations were short of personnel at the time.

Certain barriers to recruitment had been identified as follows:

- **Physical tests:** 11 out of 12 females had failed at the bleep test. To address this, more support needed to be given for the physical test for females.
- **Demographics:** Commuter towns meant that people did not fulfil the 5 minute response time. Additionally, some areas had a higher density of older people in their community.
- **Education:** Work needed to be undertaken on educating applicants to the appropriate standard and would be need to be done prior to application form completion.

He explained to members the calculation of staffing levels and advised that the recruitment of one additional officer could make a significant difference to providing cover. He emphasised the need to successfully recruit to ensure the county was safe. In discussion with members he highlighted that he feels that local member
involvement would be a positive input into the recruitment process and that station managers would welcome this collaboration.

He summarised that more support was needed for positive action methods such as working with potential recruits to raise their fitness levels. Additionally there needed to be positive action for under represented groups (particularly women).

4.6 Firefighter on secondment

The Firefighter also met with members on 11 May 2011 and advised that she had been seconded to help with retained Fire Fighter recruitment. As part of this role she had organised open days at fire stations, visited schools, gyms, pre school groups and libraries, local businesses and Young Farmers groups. Retained Stations have also been kept informed of events as recruits often attended sessions via word of mouth.

There have also been visits to takeaways in an attempt to attract under represented groups in the community and articles in local papers to publicise the open days. Sue was responsible for putting recruitment packs together, providing banners and flyers etc for open days. There had also been face to face sessions, open evenings and retained personnel had given referrals.

One of the key things that she has found is that a lot of people don’t understand what the retained fire fighter service was and how vital it was to local safety.

She advised members of new initiatives which had been introduced, including:

- Utilising ‘Pinpoint’ a marketing tool to target groups of people in the community. This was used at grange – Pinpoint was used to identify sections of the community to leaflet drop rather than a flyer drop of the whole area due to the demographics of the community.
- A session before and after the main open day was held so females could train/try out the physical tests without being watched

4.7 Head of Service Delivery

The Head of Service Delivery met with the group on 5 December to advise members of the response to this year’s recruitment campaign and to discuss the lessons learned from previous years and in addition to the lessons that would be carried forward to future years.

In relation to female recruits he advised that there had been 54 applicants in 2011 compared to 21 for the previous year. Of those, 15 females passed the physical test and would be sitting the psychometric test shortly. This was in direct contrast to the previous year where only one female applicant had been successful in passing the test. He attributed some of this success to a physical training programme which had been offered to under represented groups to support them in working towards the test. Only

The psychometric tests are now being held at a later stage in the process (ie not immediately following the physical test.. The results of the tests would be known before Christmas and it was hoped that not only would more people, and especially
more women, be available to the service but that officers would also have a pool of potential candidates to work with to try and support them to get them through the process next year.

He explained that if there were more successful candidates that vacant positions it was possible to change the hours of some staff to ensure that newly qualified staff could be offered at least a few hours work a week with the promise that there would be more hours available in due course. This was important to encourage the retention of staff. Prospective applicants were also being encouraged to visit their local fire station and meet with the station manager who could help guide them through the application process and also familiarise themselves with candidates. In relation to the female firefighters as more women were taken into the service they would become role models for others.

4.8 Member visits to fire stations

Members of the Task Group agreed to visit their local fire stations to speak to the fire fighters about their experiences and details of these visits are attached as appendix A.

5. Findings and Recommendations

The Group were pleased to find that due to taking on board lessons learned from previous years, and the innovative developments introduced by the CFRS the recruitment campaign for retained fire fighters had been much more successful this year than in previous years.

A good deal of thought and time has gone into improving the campaign, in particular by supporting candidates during all stages of the application process. As has been outlined above this has been done in a number of ways including assisting with completion of the application form, increasing fitness levels and preparing applicants for what should be expected in the psychometric test. In addition the team will continue to work with applicants who they feel would make good fire fighters in the future but who require more support before they submitted a further application.

The Group were extremely impressed with the initiatives that have been introduced and the work that has been carried out by all officers involved, particularly by the secondees, and they hope that this secondment system could be supported to continue during forthcoming difficult budgets for the Council.

The Task Group would therefore like to refer the following recommendations for consideration by Cabinet

**Recommendation 1**

Further publicity be undertaken on the role of retained fire fighters (particularly those from under represented groups eg women) in relevant county council publications such as Your Cumbria and school publications.

Recruitment of retained fire fighters requires as much publicity as possible as many members of the public are simply unaware of the nature of the role and its importance to local communities, especially now that many stations are more and more reliant on retained staff.
Further publicity needs to be undertaken to try to get the message to as many people as possible that a job as a retained fire fighter is not only of great benefit to local communities and provides immense personal satisfaction, but that it also provides the individual with life and professional skills that they can build on either in the CFRS or in other areas of their lives.

Visits to schools by CFRS staff to inform young people of the opportunities available in the Fire and Rescue Service should also be encouraged.

**Recommendation 2**

That secondment opportunities for existing fire fighters to work with under represented groups to encourage more participation continue to be supported, with arrangements for the backfilling of posts where necessary.

The importance of the work carried out by the seconded staff should not be underestimated. Without their support for the recruitment campaign and their commitment to improving the number of candidates there could well have been little difference in the potential recruitment levels. Members feel that the secondees have provided excellent role models for applicants throughout the application process and this has helped candidates to feel more comfortable in their new environment. This is particularly true in the case of female applicants who have been supported to increase their fitness levels to pass what is a very stringent fitness test and have been helped to feel more comfortable by having female retained fire fighters as mentors.

Members very much hope that the funds can be found to continue this arrangement, possibly with the need to provide funding to backfill for staff who are released from smaller stations.

**Recommendation 3**

Local employers be advised of the benefits which will accrue to their businesses by allowing staff to become retained fire fighters and consideration be given to the introduction of the award of certificates for all participating employers.

The task group feel that more public relations work needs to be carried out with employers to encourage them to release staff to become retained fire fighters. The group accepted that in the current economic situation employers may be reluctant to allow staff this opportunity, but they agree that they should be advised of the potential benefits to their business, such as obtaining a fully qualified first aider at no expense to themselves.

Their employee would also have more wide ranging skills that they could bring to their employment, in addition to the company gaining the respect of the general public for their contribution to the Big Society aims. In order to further this aim it was suggested that participating employers be presented with a certificate by the Chief Fire Officer for them to display on their premises to illustrate their contribution to society.
Recommendation 4

Local members be assisted and encouraged to become more closely involved with their local fire station as part of their role as community leaders.

Members found that when visiting their local stations their visits and discussions were extremely welcomed by the staff there. Officers also reported back that the staff were pleased to see the members and welcomed any involvement they could offer.

Councillor Val Tarbitt advised that she was closely involved with her local fire station paying regular visits (by appointment) and helping to liaise between the service and the general public. Members felt that under their new Local Champion powers this was an area in which many more members could become involved to the benefit of both sides. The Corporate Director and senior staff would be asked to assist in the smooth start to this relationship.
APPENDIX A – DETAILS OF ELECTED MEMBERS VISITS TO FIRE STATIONS

Val Tarbitt – Longtown Fire Station

RECRUITMENT

Longtown retained fire fighters team currently experiences difficulties in recruitment. The Recruitment Drive [2010 / 11] recruited 2 retained fire fighters who are now ready to join the team. However, the team is still 2 Fire fighters short of target.

Women residents were targeted in the recruitment drive but no women reached the final stage.

The Local Member, who is a Trustee of Longtown Community Centre, arranged that applicants could use the Gym facilities at the Centre without charge. This facility certainly has helped prospective fire fighters raise their fitness levels. However, it is the Psychometric Test that is the stumbling block. Fire fighters interviewed stated that as there was no chance to have a preview of the kinds of questions that would feature in the paper, applicants were nervous and unprepared. For some applicants written examination papers were not part of their professional lives.

A further Recruitment Drive was planned for summer 2011.

STANDARDS

Much discussion around National Standards took place with all the fire fighters interviewed. Everyone agreed that there could be no concessions for retained fire fighters in terms of fitness levels or knowledge base. On the job there could be no ‘dead weight’. This was also relevant when gender issues were discussed.

5 MINUTE RULE

This is a major recruitment concern. In Longtown there are now fewer employers in the town. Those that remain need to be persuaded that a retained fire fighter offers indirect, real benefit to their company. The Recruitment Team needed to make appointments rather than ‘cold calling’ potential employers. They needed to really sell the advantages of having a qualified First Aider / First Responder on their books. Community commitment was also a selling point which needed to be emphasised. The Fire and Rescue Service could highlight community involvement by holding Award Ceremonies / Seminars so that companies did get publicity because of their involvement.

All Fire fighters agreed that extending the 5 Minute Rule would produce real difficulties in emergencies.

THE FUTURE

A further Recruitment Drive began in Longtown in August 2011.

The free use of the Gym at The Community Centre is again on offer.
To support the work of The Fire and Rescue Service the Local Member has asked that the Station Manager is invited to the Quarterly Meeting of Arthuret Parish Council Chair and Clerk, Elected County and District Members of Longtown and Bewcastle Division and the Brampton Police Inspector.

**Martin Stephenson – Appleby Fire Station**

1. **Deputy Location Manager.**

**Recruitment:**
- Daytime cover is definitely a problem in certain of the station.
- The National standards which now apply to all firefighters has made it more difficult for those who apply to get through the rigorous selection process.

**Retention:**
- The person interviewed thought that the overage age for retained fire fighters was in the 40s.

**Other Issues Raised:**
- Technology is a bit of an issue, considered things were better before Agilisys took over.
- Availability of computers at stations (There is normally one per station) can be an issue as the RFF have to input in all their training information which often means that this cannot all be done on the training evening and they then have to get access onto the system from home.
- Training courses did take quite a bit of the RFF time at weekends.

2. **Long Serving (38 Yrs) RFF:**

**Recruitment:**
- He joined to serve his community.
- The social side is important.
- The entry requirements are much higher now than when he joined.
- The Station Manager should have some input into the selection process in order to put in local knowledge of candidates.

**Retention:**
- The social side helps to generate a team spirit, wives get involved, a lot of good will is required to make the cover system work, the members have to work together to make sure they can provide the best cover (Appleby has a good record of availability).

**Other Issues Raised:**
- The pay rate for making home safety visits was recently cut.
- Computer availability is a bit of a problem, the younger members of the team pick up the technology faster than the mature team members.
- Need training on the PDR pro.
- The five minutes call out time is generally attainable at Appleby.
- The team work together to make the station work the best it can.

3. **Recently Recruited RFF:**
Recruitment:
- The entry requirement is tough these days, not only the physical test but also the other aspects of the process. Those members of the local community which would have made good local RFF may well not get through the entrance process these days as the bar is too high. Some good training before the entrance process would be very beneficial.
- No objection to women joining but the physically test is very hard for them, a man of average physical fitness should get through the physical test.
- The PQA section of the entrance testing is difficult to know the right answers to, preparation is most important so that you know what answers they are looking for.
- Self employed candidates are usually more flexible on their availability, useful to fill rota gaps.

Retention:
- Privileged to be in the RFF service, you get to do things which you would not normally get chance to do.
- The payments received are adequate.
- You feel that you are serving your community.
- The pay for making Home Fire Safety Visits has recently been reduced.

Other Issues Raised:
- One computer is somewhat of a restriction though you can log in at home.
- More training would be useful.
- Had a problem with his pager not working in certain locations.
- Had concerns that the move to a regional control centre might cause problems with operators have no local knowledge.
- Mobile data terminal on the Engine very useful.

Bill Bleasdale – Dalton Fire Station

Bill paid a visit to Dalton Fire Station and reported verbally back to the Task and Finish Group who took his comments into account during their deliberations.