



Safest People, Safest Places

Combined Fire Authority

15 December 2020

UPDATE ON RETAINED DUTY SYSTEM (RDS)

Report of Councillor John Shuttleworth, Member Champion - RDS

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of the report is to give Members an update and insight into the business areas and performance of the Retained Duty System (RDS) within County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service (CDDFRS).

Background

2. CDDFRS is committed to supporting those who work the RDS, they make a valued and significant contribution to their local communities and contribute to the Service vision of Safest People, Safest Places.
3. The RDS comprises of teams of firefighters and operational supervisory managers for each designated fire appliance. RDS appliances are not normally crewed by personnel present on a station, as RDS staff have a pager and respond to emergency calls when required. They also regularly train together each week, test operational equipment, conduct station administrative duties and proactive community safety work in their station areas.
4. An RDS firefighter is trained to the same standard as a wholetime firefighter and will generally have the same range of risk critical competencies. The criteria to become RDS and wholetime firefighters are the same, however RDS firefighters must be able to respond to their station within five minutes.

5. An RDS firefighter is paid a retaining fee based on the average number of hours cover they provide each week; they also receive an hourly rate when responding to emergency incidents or conducting routine duties. RDS firefighters are expected to attend a weekly training night on station and appropriate training courses to maintain their knowledge and competence.
6. The Service currently has 15 RDS crewed appliances which provide emergency cover throughout the Service area, and from September 2020, two RDS Support Officers provide assistance to the recruitment, retention and management of performance for RDS staff within the North and South divisions of the Service.

Recruitment

7. During 2020, improvements have been made to the recruitment process which now follows a 15-week chronological pathway, where the RDS Support Officers assess the candidates and manage the steps from the initial application to the medical stage and the final appointment phase.
8. In support of the Service's commitment to the recruitment and retention of RDS firefighters, new candidates will follow a specific foundation course workbook. The RDS firefighters will attend the Service Training Centre to undergo a final assessment (these assessment days will occur every three months) enabling them to achieve the development phase on their route to competence.
9. Since September 2020, the number of RDS firefighters the Service has recruited is shown below:

Station	Number of RDS firefighters Recruited
Bishop Auckland	4
Barnard Castle	1
Durham	1
Seaham	1
Wheatley Hill	2
Stanhope	1
Total	10

Table 1 Summary of RDS Recruitment since September 2020

10. The recruitment process now follows the key stages described below:
 - Initial applications are made through the Service website. Modifications to the RDS recruitment portal now sift out unsuitable candidates at this initial phase, making subsequent stages of the process more efficient;

- As part of the sift and suitability process, the candidate will be sent a link to a series of online tests, which includes literacy, numeracy, and mechanical judgement. These tests must be completed within a specified time frame;
- Having completed the online tests successfully, applicants are invited to take the role related tests at Crook fire station;
- Successful candidates are then invited for an interview by the RDS station's Watch Manager and Support Officer;
- Candidates are then required to pass their fitness test and a medical assessment;
- On successful completion of the fitness test and medical assessments, security checks and references are requested by Human Resources;
- Finally, accounts are created for all information technology systems, identification badges, uniform and fire kit are issued.

Station Establishments

11. The variation of the staffing establishment from 1 November 2019 to 1 November 2020, for all RDS stations, is shown below, with significant progress evident in Stanhope, Newton Aycliffe and Barnard Castle:

Station	1 November 2019	1 November 2020	Variation
Consett	15	13	↓
High Handenhold	14	13	↓
Seaham	15	15	↔
Wheatley Hill	15	15	↔
Durham	10	10	↔
Stanhope	11	17	↑
Crook	17	16	↓
Spennymoor	17	16	↓
Sedgefield	11	12	↑
Newton Aycliffe	12	15	↑
Bishop Auckland	12	12	↔
Middleton-in-Teesdale	14	13	↓
Barnard Castle	16	19	↑
Total	179	185	+6

Table 2 Variation of the RDS Station Establishment from 1 November 2019 to 1 November 2020.

12. The current annual increase in the RDS establishment in comparison to previous years is shown in table 3 below. This shows that in previous years there has been a net deficit in the variation between the numbers of RDS starters and leavers during 2017 and 2018, however, within the last year there has been a net increase, showing the positive contribution of the RDS Support Officers. This analysis includes the transfer of three RDS firefighters to the wholetime duty system.

Time period	Total new RDS starters	Total RDS leavers	Variation
01/11/2017 – 01/11/2018	19	28	-9
01/11/2018 – 01/11/2019	20	27	-7
01/11/2019 – 01/11/2020	29	23	+6

Table 3 Variation in New RDS Starters and Leavers from 1 November 2017 to 1 November 2020

RDS Appliance Availability During Covid-19

13. An assessment of the availability of RDS appliances from April 2019 to September 2019 in comparison to April 2020 to September 2020, highlights the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on RDS appliance availability. An increase in the amount of time staff had available from their primary employment saw an increase in the RDS appliances availability, as shown below:

Time period	Target availability	Overall availability	First appliance against target	Second appliance against target
2019 April to September	90%	70.7%	75.8%	37.9%
2020 April to September	90%	79.9%	85.2%	45.7%

Table 4 Summary of RDS availability from April/September 2019 to April/September 2020.

Current RDS Action Plan Areas of Focus

14. The CDDFRS online recruitment portal has been reviewed to introduce an initial filter where candidates who are not eligible due to their home locations are sifted at the start of the process. This also ensures that those candidates who provide availability at specific times to increase the availability of RDS appliances are recommended for the selection process.

15. The RDS firefighter application information pack has been rewritten to reflect the new divisional structure and current pay scales. This is available from the RDS recruitment webpages to all candidates.

16. The Recruitment and Employer Handbook is currently being rewritten and contains revised information for RDS candidates, including testimonials from existing RDS staff. The handbook also highlights to employers the rewards and benefits of their employees becoming RDS firefighters, including leadership development, first aid, health and safety, manual handling and driver training.
17. Awareness days for potential RDS firefighters have been delivered at Barnard Castle, Middleton-in-Teesdale and Newton Aycliffe fire stations. The awareness days have specifically been targeted to attract candidates who can provide availability during the times of limited RDS cover and address a shortfall in appliance availability at these stations.
18. In response to the unforeseen circumstances from the Covid-19 pandemic, the Service implemented changes to provide RDS staff with greater flexibility around their annual leave, at the same time as optimising RDS staffing to maintain appliance availability.
19. A foundation training course has been developed and introduced to standardise the phase one initial acquisition of skills and knowledge of RDS firefighters, the course includes firefighting techniques, such as pump operating, hose, ladders and the safe person concept. This enables phase one RDS firefighters to progress to phase two of their route to competence and wear a green spot helmet marking that enables them to attend emergency operational incidents.
20. Areas of the RDS action plan being progressed are:
 - The review of the current RDS engagement and communication processes;
 - The development of enhanced flexible arrangements to improve on-call availability;
 - Engagement with local businesses to encourage their support and enhance their corporate social responsibilities;
 - Review and revise the RDS employment handbook to include changes to working arrangements.

Recommendations

21. Members are requested to:
 - a) **Note** the content of the report.

Report of Cllr John Shuttleworth Member Champion for RDS

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