

Combined Fire Authority

16 September 2024

Retained Duty System

Report of the Retained Duty System Member Champion

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. The purpose of the report is to give the Combined Fire Authority (CFA) 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).

2. Background

- 2.1. As part of the approach to developing services and improving engagement with stakeholders, County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Authority (CDDFRA) has sought to 'champion' particular areas of work through the CFA Member Champion roles.
- 2.2. The CFA Member Champion roles provide CDDFRS with an opportunity to work closely with individual members to help develop the services provided and to engage with all stakeholders through a closely aligned officer and member relationship.
- 2.3. Councillor John Shuttleworth has been supported by the Director of Emergency Response in his capacity as strategic lead to support the RDS across the organisation. The RDS is also referred to as the On Call Duty System.

3. The National Picture

- 3.1 The challenges linked to the recruitment, retention and availability of RDS firefighters is recognised nationally within the fire sector. This has been analysed and reported on numerous times by the Fire and Rescue Services Association (FRSA), Fire Brigades Union (FBU), National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) and various Fire and Rescue Services (FRS) across the UK.

- 3.2 Despite these detailed reports and subsequent recommendations, the HMICFRS noted within their annual State of Fire report that almost every FRS with RDS firefighters faces problems linked to recruitment, retention and availability which confirms that these challenges are still prevalent.

4. RDS Project work

- 4.1. In 2023/24 the service commissioned a project purely focused on improving RDS recruitment, retention and availability. Each of these strategic objectives were set out in the Emergency Response and Resilience Strategy 2023/26 with progress against the work monitored through the Service Project Board.
- 4.2. Each of the objectives were accompanied by an in-depth action plan with these actions being delivered by the two RDS liaison officers with support from senior officers within Emergency Response.

5. RDS Firefighter Recruitment

- 5.1. As part of the RDS project, there was a full review of the recruitment process to ensure that it was fit for purpose moving forward. The work undertaken in 2023/24 included:
- CDDFRS website recruitment section was re-designed to streamline the process to make it easier to apply to be an RDS firefighter.
 - The design and purchase of bespoke recruitment banners for each fire station aimed at promoting the recruitment of RDS firefighters.
 - New recruitment videos describing what candidates can expect whilst progressing through the different stages of recruitment.
 - The creation of a SharePoint workflow(s) to manage candidates through the recruitment stages more effectively.
 - A more detailed approach to identifying candidates who will provide availability which will maximise the availability of the appliances.
 - A new booking system for fitness tests, to enable greater flexibility for candidates.
- 5.2. Figure 1 below shows that the recruitment of RDS firefighters has steadily increased in the previous two years. The work undertaken during 2023/24 has assisted in achieving the highest level of recruitment in the last 5 years.

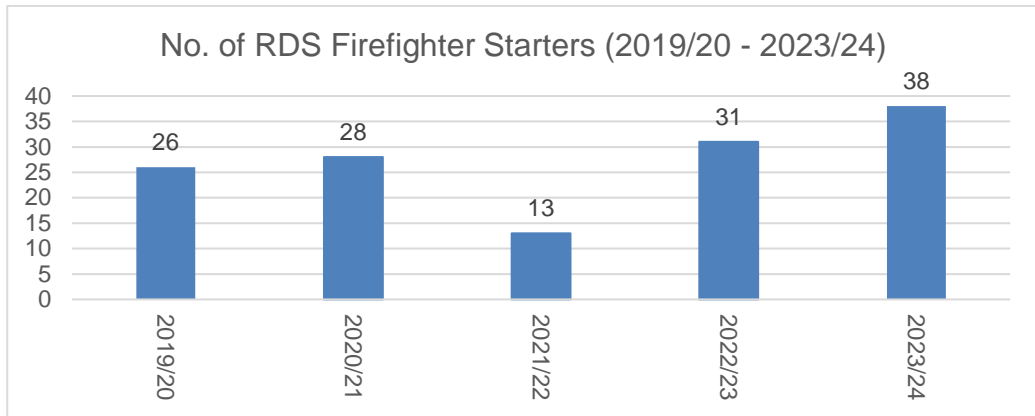


Figure 1 – Total RDS firefighters recruited during 2019/20 – 2023/24

6. RDS Firefighter Retention

- 6.1. Reasons for RDS firefighters leaving vary considerably with the majority stating ‘personal reasons’ which are predominantly out of the control of the Service, for example, changes to full time employment, family circumstances and moving home and in some instances no further information is obtainable to understand this further. There were also small numbers which stated ‘retirement’, ‘alternative employment’ and ‘transfer to another FRS’.
- 6.2. Part of RDS project work during 2023/24 and in within recent months has been to review the measures in place to improve retention. Some of the on-going work includes:
- A continuous review of the exit interview process and evaluation of an improved exit interview to enable greater detail to be captured to assist the Service to understand reasons for leaving and to identify any trends.
 - Engagement with staff to better understand ways to improve retention via the monthly RDS Liaison meetings.
 - The introduction of flexible additional development sessions at Service Training Centre on a bi-monthly basis.
- 6.3. Figure 2 below shows that 2022/23 recorded the highest number of RDS firefighters (38) leaving the Service during the last 5 years. During 2023/24 however this number decreased by over a quarter, down to 24 largely due to the project work undertaken to improve retention.

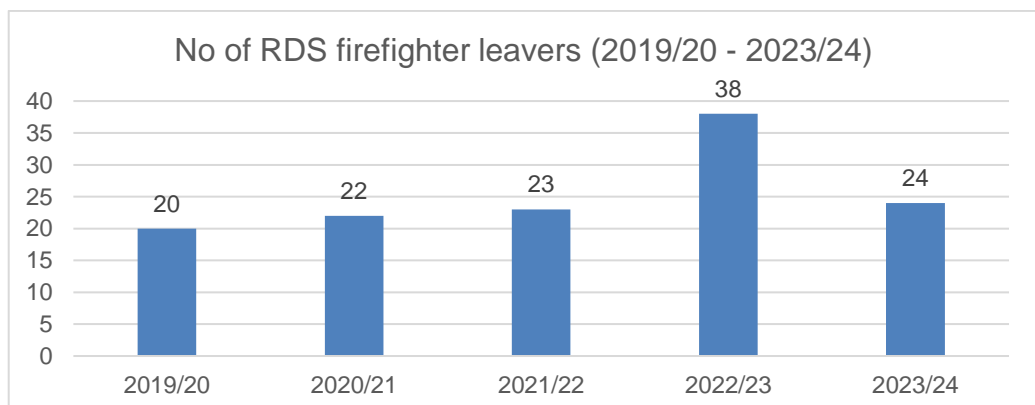


Figure 2 – Total RDS firefighters leavers during 2019/20 – 2023/24

7. RDS Firefighter Availability

- 7.1. RDS fire appliances availability is monitored through the Performance Board via performance indicator 'PI 16a Availability of on call appliances – 1st pump'.
- 7.2. Overall RDS availability decreased year on year between 2020/21 and 2022/23.
- 7.3. In order to prevent the continuous decrease in availability significant work was undertaken during 2023/24 to assist in increasing availability which included:
- Utilisation of the Special Rescue Unit (SRU) and Targeted Response Vehicle (TRV) crews to staff RDS fire appliances.
 - Utilisation of Flexible Duty Officers (FDO) and Day Duty staff to staff RDS fire appliances.
 - Introduction of an electronic reporting system to measure RDS fire appliance availability with and without the use of additional staffing controls.
 - Creation of RDS Watch dashboards which provide information to help RDS Crew / Watch Managers and Station Managers manage RDS firefighters.
 - Review of the current procedures and practices for booking on / off call.
 - Review of RDS policies and procedures to ensure RDS firefighters are fulfilling their contract.
- 7.4. Figure 3 below shows that the project work undertaken during 2023/24 had a positive impact on RDS firefighter's availability seeing it rise to 72.3.

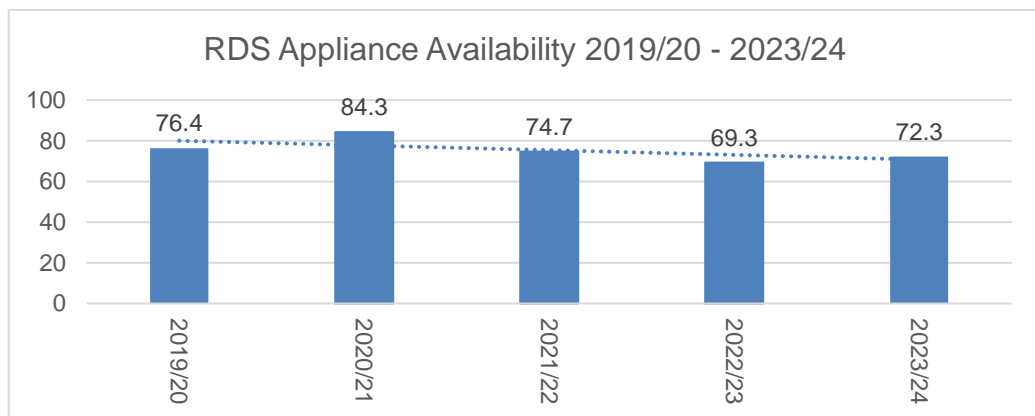


Figure 3 – Total RDS firefighter availability during (2019/20 – 2023/24)

- 7.5. It is envisaged that the RDS availability will continue to increase in the short and long term as a result of these actions.

8. Next Steps

8.1. To ensure the continuous improvement of RDS availability, recruitment and retention much of the good work undertaken during 2023/24 has continued into 2024/25 whilst the RDS Liaison officers are also focusing their efforts on several new workstreams ensuring we continue to invest in our On Call Fire Fighter provision.

Two of the most prominent workstreams are:

- A review of rest periods which involves a reduction in the number of hours an On Call employee must have between periods of availability. This will be offered on a voluntary basis to ensure alignment to the working time directive.
 - A review of annual leave allocation periods. This will include On Call employees being allocated leave blocks throughout the calendar year to ensure a more structured and planned approach to the number of employees being unavailable to provide fire cover at any one time.
- 8.2. All current and future workstreams linked to the On Call duty system are included within the Emergency Response and Resilience Strategy 2023/26 with progress against the key initiatives continuing to be monitored through the Service Project Board.

Recommendations

9.1 Members are requested to:

- a) **Note** the content of the report.

Rob Cherrie, Director Emergency Response, Ext. 5596