



COMBINED FIRE AUTHORITY

24 SEPTEMBER 2018

STAFFING UPDATE

REPORT OF HEAD OF WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Purpose of report

1. The purpose of this report is to inform members of the strategies for maintaining operational ridership levels in the short to medium term.

Background

2. Operational staffing levels and the potential options and recruitment methods available to the Service to maintain them are monitored and reviewed regularly by the Workforce Planning Team and reported to the Service Leadership Team (SLT) by exception on a monthly basis. Consideration is given to: planned retirements; leavers; and sickness absence.
3. The Service has seen a rise in sickness absence in July and August, mainly long term, due to personnel who are awaiting surgery (or recovering from surgery) which has had an impact on staffing levels. A rise in short term absence during August further impacted this and on occasions, caused some difficulty for the Service staffing front line appliances to our minimum crewing levels.
4. A number of staffing model trials are currently ongoing as a result of the Emergency Response Review. These trials, if successful and implemented permanently, result in reducing staffing levels at Bishop Auckland and both of the Day Crewing Plus stations at Newton Aycliffe and Seaham. To this end, we are holding vacancies in the establishment to ensure if implemented in April 2019, posts can be removed, and the Service will not be over staffed. We are also holding vacancies for the first cohort of apprentices who, if successful in achieving the required standard on completion of year two of their apprenticeship, will be offered a Wholetime (WT) Firefighter (FF) position on the establishment in June 2019.

Our Recruitment Strategy

5. As the Service continues to plan for future possibilities, it needs to maintain operational ridership levels but also retain a degree of flexibility to implement further transformation options in response to possible budget reductions. In order to facilitate a supply of suitable candidates for WT roles, the Service utilises a number of different recruitment methods which offer both short term flexibility as well as longer term solutions.

These include:

- Apprenticeships;
- WT recruitment;
- Retained Duty System (RDS) to WT transfers and;
- External transferees from other Fire and Rescue Services (FRS).

6. It is important we consider all of these options in our planning to ensure not only we select from the widest possible pool of talent, but we recruit from all sections of society, everyone is given an equal chance of success and we can optimise opportunities to increase the diversity of our workforce. The four recruitment methods and their current positions are outlined below.

Apprenticeships

7. Firefighter (FF) apprenticeship recruitment offers the Service a longer-term strategy for recruitment to WT FF posts. The ten apprentices who started with the Service in May 2017 are now in the second year of their apprenticeship. They are currently working towards the Business Fire Safety Trailblazer standard whilst working across the Service area providing front line services. The apprentices work day shifts only and are supernumerary to the establishment but this gives us some flexibility in terms of staffing numbers during the day. Any gaps in staffing numbers for night shifts are covered by operational cover contracts (OCCs) utilising operational employees from across the Service.
8. Our second cohort consisting of 11 FF apprentices started their apprenticeship on 10 September 2018. Much like the first cohort, they will spend their first year primarily in Training and Headquarters and on successful completion of all the necessary gateways will provide front line services from September 2019.

WT Recruitment

9. In January 2017, the Service embarked on its first WT recruitment process in seven years. From this process, a course of 12 firefighters started their training in May 2017 and commenced front line service in August 2017. Other successful candidates were advised they would remain on a list until March 2018 and at this time, if not contacted, would need to reapply for the next available process.
10. In July 2018, in collaboration with Tyne and Wear FRS and Northumberland FRS a further WT recruitment process was undertaken. 4520 applications were initially received, 130 of those reaching the final interview stage which concluded on Friday 31 August 2018. 59 candidates were successful and have now been placed on a list which the three FRS's can select from should they be in a position to run a trainee course. At present, the Service does not have any plans to run a trainee course in the immediate future, however, we will carefully consider our workforce planning needs over the next 12 months and act accordingly.

RDS to WT Transfers

11. At the end of 2017, the Service commenced an RDS to WT transfer process to refresh the list of employees available to fill vacancies on both a temporary and permanent basis as per the needs of the Service. To date we have offered 9 RDS employees a temporary WT

contract which is fixed term until 31 March 2019. Start dates for the successful candidates varied from July through to September.

12. These contracts have been offered to cover vacancies on a temporary basis until the outcomes of the Emergency Response Review staffing model trials at Bishop Auckland, Seaham and Newton Aycliffe are known. At this time, consideration will be given to offer permanent contracts should vacancies become available. There are still a number of employees available for transfer both on a temporary and permanent basis, should the need arise.

Transferees

13. The Service also has available to it a number of potential transferees who were successful at a recruitment process in 2017. However, this option requires permanent contracts to be offered and so does not offer the flexibility required at present to maintain operational staffing levels on a temporary basis. This option does however remain available should the need arise.

Other Operational Staffing Options

14. To further support all of the above recruitment methods we also offer additional shifts to our current employees through the use of Operational Cover Contracts (OCCs) or RDS Detachments. These have been in place for a number of years and proved successful in providing a flexible option for maintaining ridership levels when WT strength is reduced. These can either be pre planned longer term or offered at short notice. Employees working in day duty posts are also available to cover shifts where required.

Summary

15. The numbers required to maintain operational staffing levels will be subject to change depending upon confirmed actual retirements, projected leavers, availability of employees for alternative contracts and the uptake of OCCs and RDS Detachments, with each option being interdependent of each other.
16. The Service will continue to monitor closely the operational ridership levels against the establishment to ensure we have the correct number of staff available on appliances. There is a significant amount of uncertainty in relation to the required staffing numbers in the longer term. This uncertainty is driven from the outcomes of the Emergency Response Review trials and continued uncertainty around some of the assumptions in the medium-term financial plan (MTFP). Maintaining the careful balance between having sufficient staffing available in the shorter term and flexibility around delivering savings required to reduce the current deficit is challenging, especially if sickness levels increase.
17. The four recruitment methods contained within our recruitment strategy will be monitored closely along with the use of OCCs, RDS Detachments and temporary contracts. Looking ahead, sickness levels have started improving into September and we expect to see a significant improvement in long term absence by October as a number of employees are due to return to work. This will ease some of the pressures the Service has faced over the last few months.

Recommendation

18. Members are requested to:

- (a) **note** and comment on the content of the report.

Katherine Metcalfe, Head of Workforce Development, Ext.5665