



**NOTTINGHAMSHIRE**  
**Fire & Rescue Service**  
*Creating Safer Communities*

Nottinghamshire and City of Nottingham  
Fire and Rescue Authority  
Community Safety Committee

# ON-CALL DUTY SYSTEM UPDATE

Report of the Chief Fire Officer

**Date:** 15 March 2024

**Purpose of Report:**

To provide Members with an update on the achievements of Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service's On-Call Sections in 2023/24 and the measures being taken to support their success in the future.

**Recommendations:**

That Members note the contents of this report.

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## 1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 On-Call firefighters are those who live or work within a short distance of their fire station and usually have alternative employment away from Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service (NFRS) (although some also have another role with the Service on a dual-employment basis). They carry an 'alerter' which activates when they are required to respond to an emergency incident and provide up to 120 hours of availability each week. In addition, they maintain their operational competence by attending weekly training sessions and completing learning events.
- 1.2 16 out of the Service's 24 fire stations host an On-Call crew. Most of Nottinghamshire's 30 fire appliances are crewed by On-Call firefighters (16 during the day, and 17 at night).
- 1.3 On-Call sections are vital for NFRS in the delivery of prevention, protection, and response activities to communities. As of 17 February 2024, On-Call sections had attended 1,554 incidents and delivered 1,196 safe and well visits (SWVs) and 39 business safety checks (BSCs) during 2023/24.
- 1.4 Nationally, fire and rescue services (FRSs), are struggling to recruit and retain On-Call firefighters. Changes in society, such as people travelling further to work, house prices, general cost of living and busy lifestyles have all impacted On-Call firefighter recruitment and retention figures.
- 1.5 Several FRSs are currently consulting, or have recently consulted the public on removing or replacing aspects of their On-Call delivery model. Warwickshire FRS is considering the replacement of all their 120 On-Call firefighters with new part-time, and additional wholetime duty system (WDS), roles. Cheshire FRS has proposed the conversion of four On-Call crewed fire appliances to WDS appliances during weekdays. Hereford and Worcester FRS is seeking approval to remove eight On-Call fire appliances and change the cover model of a ninth to night-time only.
- 1.6 Over recent years, NFRS has taken considerable steps, and continues to implement measures, to ensure the sustainability of the On-Call model. These have resulted in recognition from the Home Office in a meeting with its representatives to discuss On-Call challenges and best practice on 8 February 2024.

## 2. REPORT

- 2.1 The key metric by which NFRS measures the success of its On-Call is appliance availability. The Service targets On-Call availability to be above 85%, with each individual section being available no less than 70% of the time.
- 2.2 As of 17 February 2024, NFRS On-Call appliances have collectively been available 86.2% of the time during 2023/24. This places the Service in fourth

place nationally when it comes to On-Call availability. Only Southwell fire station, at 69.8%, has fallen below the individual 70% minimum target.

- 2.3 Attending operational incidents is a key motivator for On-Call firefighters. Maintaining appliance availability therefore plays a significant role in their retention.
- 2.4 An innovative approach to maintaining appliance availability has been the introduction of the Service's On-Call Support Team (OCST). The team's primary function is to mobilise members to crew On-Call appliances where they would otherwise be unavailable. When fully established, the team consists of five WDS employees, all of whom have appropriate incident command and driving qualifications to enable them to fulfil any role on a deficient On-Call crew. During 2023/24 this team has contributed 1,452 hours to On-Call crewing.
- 2.5 Another innovation to maintain On-Call appliance availability in Nottinghamshire has been the introduction of alternative crewing over several years. This relates to the crewing of standard fire appliances with three On-Call firefighters at times when the section is unable to maintain the traditional minimum crewing level of four. This has enabled On-Call appliances to remain available to attend operational incidents as an additional resource at the most serious, or as part of a pre-determined attendance at those that are less significant. The ability to alternatively crew appliances has contributed over 6.5% to On-Call appliance availability in 2023/24.
- 2.6 As mentioned in Paragraph 1.1 above, some of the Service's On-Call firefighters also have another role within the Service on a 'dual employed' basis. There are currently 69 WDS firefighters who also perform an On-Call role. Not only does dual employment support the availability of On-Call appliances, but it also has many other benefits, including the sharing of knowledge and experience, and the breaking down of cultural barriers which had once existed between the On-Call and WDS.
- 2.7 Whilst the OCST, alternative crewing and dual employment have increased On-Call appliance availability, the sections that have the highest establishment numbers always perform better in this area. Targeted recruitment remains a real focus for On-Call sections and the OCST. In 2023/24, the delivery of local recruitment campaigns, 'have-a-go-days' and primary employer liaison have resulted in 24 new On-Call trainees beginning a career with NFRS. The ability for new trainees to now undertake modular ('safe-to-ride') initial training that has removed the potential barrier of a 13-week initial course, which has been cited by many as a key enabler to On-Call recruitment.
- 2.8 The success of On-Call recruitment in 2023/24 has meant that NFRS will end the year with up to 14 more On-Call firefighters than it had at the end of 2022/23. This bucks the national trend of reducing On-Call establishment numbers.

- 2.9 Whilst On-Call recruitment is crucial, the Service also recognises the importance of similar efforts being placed on the retention of existing On-Call firefighters. Currently, 85 of the Service's On-Call firefighters have between 10 and 40 years' experience in the role. This commitment and dedication to serving their local community cannot be understated, especially when considering that many of these On-Call staff provide over 120 hours of availability each week for those years.
- 2.10 As highlighted in Paragraph 2.3 above, attending operational incidents is a key motivator for On-Call firefighters, however, nationally the number of operational incidents attended by FRSs is reducing. It has therefore been important to enhance the role of the On-Call firefighter with additional opportunities to attend operational incidents. One way this has been achieved is to have special appliances such as the welfare unit, water and foam bowser and high-volume pump crewed by On-Call sections and special attributes such as marauding terrorist attack capability provided by them.
- 2.11 Another way of increasing opportunities for the On-Call to attend operational incidents, has been the introduction of 'short-crewing'. This enables an On-Call firefighter to volunteer to undertake shifts on a WDS watch when there are shortfalls in the WDS ridership, and when it does not affect the availability of their On-Call appliance. The concept of short-crewing was introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic, but has been retained as it has proved to be very popular and provides flexibility and resilience for the Service.
- 2.12 Retention has also been enhanced by providing On-Call firefighters with the opportunity to undertake the full firefighter role. Whereas other FRSs may not enable On-Call firefighters to undertake prevention and protection activities, this is encouraged in NFRS wherever an On-Call firefighter has the capacity to do so, and the benefit for communities can be evidenced.
- 2.13 For some, the potential for progression within the On-Call is a key factor in their decision to remain in role. Whilst dual employment (as described in Paragraph 2.6 above) has been beneficial in terms of enhanced appliance availability, an unintended consequence has been the proportion of dual employees who have successfully achieved On-Call supervisory manager roles. To counter this, every section is permitted to recruit to an additional temporary crew manager role for the development of their firefighters who are solely On-Call employees.
- 2.14 National research has shown that alongside attendance at operational incidents, another crucial factor in an On-Call firefighter's decision to leave their role, is the feeling of being under-valued. In 2023/24, NFRS has taken several steps to address this. At Christmas, the OCST facilitated arrangements for each On-Call section to have a 12-hour period free from providing availability so that they could celebrate with family and friends. Social media promotion of the achievements of On-Call sections has increased, and a letter of appreciation will be sent to On-Call firefighters from the Chief Fire Officer at the end of 2023/24.

- 2.15 Removing complexity from the On-Call role is also important. The introduction of Fire Service Rota for the start of 2023/24 has improved an On-Call firefighter's ability to access real-time insights into the availability of their section, and to arrange their periods of unavailability at any time that suits them. It is now far easier for On-Call firefighters to be on call when needed, but also free when possible.
- 2.16 To ensure appropriate support can be provided, during 2023/24, District Manager responsibilities have been reviewed and realigned to provide them with more capacity to be available to support and attend the On-Call sections for which they are responsible.
- 2.17 In 2024/25, NFRS will continue to focus on the On-Call. Initial training courses are planned for August and September so targeted recruitment campaigns have begun. To support the OCST's decisions regarding the mobilisation of team members to improve On-Call appliance availability, the upcoming Fire Cover Review will consider the impact on attendance times when each On-Call fire appliance is unavailable. Opportunities to attend operational incidents will be further enhanced by the introduction of three rural firefighting vehicles which will each be crewed by On-Call sections. More opportunities to undertake prevention and protection activities will also be provided with the increase of achievement targets for both SWVs and BSCs, and the 'community befriending' scheme (that was cited as one of NFRS's strengths in its recent EDI Progress Review) will be rolled out to On-Call sections too.
- 2.18 In addition to this local work, throughout 2024/25, NFRS will remain committed to supporting national On-Call working groups at both practitioner and strategic levels.

### **3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The financial implications relating to this report have all been considered and agreed during 2024/25 budget setting meetings.

### **4. HUMAN RESOURCES AND LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT IMPLICATIONS**

The human resources and learning and development implications relating to this report have been considered and agreed in 2024/25 priority setting meetings.

### **5. EQUALITIES AND ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 The information in this report aligns with the Core Code of Ethics and in particular the principles of putting communities first, and dignity and respect.

5.2 An equality impact assessment has not been undertaken because the information contained in this report does not relate to a change in policy or procedure.

## **6. ENVIRONMENTAL AND SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS**

There are no environmental and sustainability implications arising from this report.

## **7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

The Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 places a duty on NFRS in respect of the delivery of its services to communities.

## **8. RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS**

To mitigate the corporate risks of workforce sustainability and unavailability of resources, it is important that NFRS supports and develops all areas of its workforce.

## **9. COLLABORATION IMPLICATIONS**

NFRS works effectively with other FRSs on national strategic and practitioner On-Call working groups to share ideas and best practice.

## **10. RECOMMENDATIONS**

That Members note the contents of this report.

## **11. BACKGROUND PAPERS FOR INSPECTION (OTHER THAN PUBLISHED DOCUMENTS)**

None.

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