

ALERTER

CRUNCH TIME

IS THE RETAINED DUTY SYSTEM
ON THE BRINK OF COLLAPSE?



EDITORIAL

OUR SERVICE IN CRISIS LET'S HEAR YOUR VIEWS

Pete Preston, secretary of the FBU's national retained committee, urges members to contribute to research by the committee on the state of the retained duty system

After something of a hiatus, *Alert* is back. There have been very significant changes since the last issue and we hope to cover some of these points in this new-look issue.

The settlement of the retained duty system pensions case rumbles on. Reports from most brigades indicate that settlement claims are now in progress. However, in no single brigade has the matter been fully concluded. This is very disappointing and the FBU's national retained committee (NRC) will continue to push brigades to complete this work.

I would like to pass on a heartfelt thanks to former EC member Tam Mitchell for his years of hard work, representing retained firefighters. He will continue his good work by representing Scotland on the NRC.

We would also like to congratulate John Catherwood on his successful election to the post of NRC chair following the retirement last year of Harry Cotter.

One of the founding members of the committee, Harry campaigned for retained firefighters for most of his 37 years' service as an FBU member, activist and official.

The pressures of being on duty for long periods of time alongside a decreasing number of call-outs and the difficulty of finding new recruits is a hot topic for retained firefighters at the moment.

Our feature "A Service in Crisis?" on page 4 explores this issue in greater depth. The NRC is undertaking more research into this issue and we would love to hear from you. Check the back pages for your local contacts and get in touch with your thoughts.

Peter Preston



NEWS



Trial shows potential for emergency responding

MIDLANDS TRIAL

Emergency medical responding (EMR) has been a source of huge debate within the FBU. But a trial in the East Midlands is helping the retained duty system to thrive, *writes national retained committee rep Paul Revill.*

In May 2015, 23 RDS units from across the region began the emergency first responder (EFR) trial, in association with East Midlands Ambulance Service.

Its main aim is to get well trained and fully equipped first responders to medical emergencies where life is at risk within eight minutes of a call.

In my own service, when an EMR call comes in, two firefighters are dispatched in a response car with specialist equipment. On board is a suitcase sized bag with a defibrillator, oxygen tank and a bag valve and mask.

The firefighters would also have equipment to check and record a victim's pulse, oxygen saturation,

blood pressure, blood sugars, temperature and respiration rate.

One of the main criteria for carrying out EMR is that it does not compromise regular fire and rescue work. So any emergency first responder vehicle will only operate when a corresponding fire appliance is available and additional crew members are on duty.

The trials have proved positive in our communities and for retained firefighters.

EMR is helping increase the number of call outs our members receive.

This means members involved with the trials are developing new skills and receiving increased remuneration. It is possible that if this work is eventually agreed that EMR will help services with the recruitment and retention of retained duty system firefighters.

Trials have been extended until next February, but if the FBU does not feel there has been meaningful progress on firefighter pay, they may be stopped.

RDS IN CRISIS

FBU national retained secretary Pete Preston on the feared imminent collapse of the retained firefighter system

p4

RISKING EVERYTHING

Retained firefighter Peter Barratt spent a month at sea on the frontline of the international refugee crisis

p6

FRONTLINE

Chris Starkey, FBU retained rep for the South West, explains how and why he got involved with the union

p8



Most of the village of Lazonby turned out to defend its fire station. At the head of the protesters was local MP Rory Stewart (Penrith and The Border)

FIVE RETAINED FIRE STATIONS SAVED FROM AXE

Five retained fire stations have been saved from the axe in Cumbria after the local council saw the stations' vital life-saving role as floods raged through the county earlier this year.

Under proposals that

were being considered, the retained stations of Arnside, Lazonby, Frizington, Walney and Staveley would have all been closed.

Les Skarratts, secretary of the FBU in the north west, said: "The council have

rightly recognised how vital firefighters are responding to major flooding emergencies. Firefighters are dealing with the impact of flooding more than ever and Cumbria is better served by having these stations remain open.

"This was an issue that the local community felt very strongly about. They have been on the receiving end of terrible flooding and were going to see the emergency service that helped them cut back even more."

Hundreds are still waiting for pension settlement figures

PENSION DELAYS

Hundreds of retained firefighters are still waiting for their employers to issue them with final settlement figures for their pension, *Alert* can reveal.

Fire and rescue services should give settlement figures to retained firefighters who were in the service between 1 July 2000 and 5 April 2006 so that they can get the benefit of having had a pension between those years.

SAME RIGHTS FOR PART-TIMERS

Before 2000 only wholetime firefighters were entitled to access the workplace pension scheme.

After the then Labour government introduced new laws that gave

part-time workers the same rights and protections as full-time workers, the FBU immediately launched a test case on behalf of 12 firefighters from Kent and Berkshire.

After years of FBU legal challenges, the courts ruled that the retained firefighters had been treated less favourably than their wholetime counterparts and should be given access to a workplace pension.

It was a huge victory for all retained members, said Tam Mitchell of the FBU's national retained committee, and demonstrated how campaigning and organising through the union can benefit members.

But he warned that employers need to get on and finish the job.

"This case has gone on for years and our members deserve to be issued with their settlement figures," said Mitchell.

"Many retained firefighters have contacted us to ask for specific financial advice. But the law is very clear on who can give out advice like this. We recommend that members seek advice from a qualified financial advisor.

CONSIDER JOINING PENSION SCHEME

"All those who are eligible to join a workplace pension scheme should consider doing so. It's a right that retained firefighters would not have had not long ago. You should contact your fire and rescue service employers in order to get a fair assessment of the costs and benefits of signing up to the scheme."

A SERVICE IN CRISIS

Long, unsociable hours and a real-terms pay cut are forcing retained firefighters out of the job. And fire services are struggling to find new recruits.



The Fire Brigades Union's national secretary for retained firefighters, Pete Preston, has a stark and brutal warning for retained firefighters and the fire and rescue services that depend on them – the retained duty system is in crisis and is at risk of grinding to a halt unless urgent action is taken.

"The long, anti-social hours coupled with the difficulty recruiting and keeping retained firefighters in the service makes me really fear for our future," says Preston. "I think we are really close to being driven over the cliff."

The challenges are numerous, he says. The long, unsociable hours that members have to make themselves available for are particularly gruelling, with the result that many services are

struggling to retain their staff. At the same time, fire services are struggling to recruit people to fill those vacant posts.

Although these problems have always existed in the service, they intensified in the wake of the 2008 worldwide banking crisis.

Businesses that employed retained firefighters struggled to make ends meet and became reluctant to release staff at short notice to respond to emergencies.

To compound the problem, more companies are looking to centralise their workforce, with the result that jobs in rural areas are being relocated to large towns and cities, making it harder to recruit new retained firefighters in the rural areas that most need them.

PAY FREEZES

Infrastructure, the availability of workers and being close to other companies are driving more firms into metropolitan areas, research by the think tank Centre for Cities has found. Nearly 60% of all UK jobs are now in cities.

Even taking these challenges into account, the service might have still looked attractive to potential recruits were it not for the combination of pay freezes and below-inflation pay settlements since 2010.

This has meant, says Preston, that "the attraction of providing exceptionally long hours of cover at the expense of quality time with your family and friends is

becoming harder to reconcile.

"Understandably, many firefighters are becoming less interested in providing exceptionally long hours of fire cover a week on top of working for their primary employer. A lot of retained firefighters are looking to significantly reduce their hours or leave the profession altogether," says Preston.

Pete Jordan, a wholetime firefighter from Humberside who also works retained hours, says being on call for extended hours can be very frustrating.

"I have to be under a mile away from the station, so it's very restricting. I can't go to the beach with the dog for example. I can't really plan much away from home when I'm retained," he told *Firefighter* last year. "It's like being tagged."

Where retained firefighters are reducing their hours or leaving the profession altogether, many services are struggling to recruit new people into the roles.

However, there is hope. Services such as North Wales which, like many others across the UK, has large numbers of retained posts unfilled, is taking pragmatic steps to combat the crisis.

The service has adopted a flexible approach to the number of hours that retained firefighters have to be available for. This, the NRC says, is both helping

recruitment and stemming the flow of firefighters leaving the service.

But watch manager Chris Starkey, who also represents South West FBU members on the NRC, warned that a reduced pattern of availability – although welcome in terms of recruitment – could throw up problems elsewhere.

"If the total number of hours provided by retained firefighters does not match the hours needed in order to safely crew a station's appliances, it becomes a safety issue," he says.

INVESTMENT NEEDED

Preston warns: "It is clear that investment in the service is needed. If not, we will soon be in a state of imminent collapse."

"The NRC is consulting members about what changes and progress can be made to improve the service. Over the years we've seen many reports published that have promised the world but have ended up being shelved."

In her first major speech on the fire and rescue service, the then home secretary (now prime minister) Theresa May said that she wanted fire and rescue services to make more use of retained firefighters.

If that is genuinely the case, then the government needs a clear plan of action about how it will tackle the mounting crisis in the service.

As yet, all that can be heard from the government is a deafening silence.

**ALL THAT CAN BE HEARD
FROM THE GOVERNMENT
IS A DEAFENING SILENCE**



Businesses that employed retained firefighters struggled to make ends meet and became reluctant to release staff at short notice to respond to emergencies

REFUGEES RISKING IT ALL

The inside account of one retained firefighter's month-long deployment to the frontline of Europe's refugee crisis

Four days go by without any action. A storm raging over the Mediterranean has interrupted the smugglers' schedule of boat launches. Then, on the fifth day, a deluge. A convoy of 28 tattered rubber boats, their seaworthiness questionable at best, loaded to sinking point with men, women and children, are intercepted by the Topaz Responder, whose crew includes retained firefighter Peter Barratt.

"It was like a war zone," he recalls. "Just when I thought we were done, we'd pick up another vessel." That day, 3,360 people were almost certainly spared a watery grave off the coast of Libya.

Just a couple of weeks earlier Peter, a trained commercial diver, had been at his home in Colwyn Bay, North Wales, surfing the business networking website LinkedIn looking for offshore diving work.

"Ideally, I was after work on oil rigs, but since the worldwide slump in prices, jobs in those areas have been particularly scarce," he says.

However, the search term "off-shore" brought up a recruitment advert for the Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS), a Malta-based charity that

provides search and rescue for people attempting to cross the Mediterranean – predominantly migrants fleeing their homelands hoping to make it to safety in Europe. MOAS was founded in 2013 after more than 400 people, including children, were drowned off the Italian island of Lampedusa. The island was known as an idyllic holiday destination before it became a graveyard.

Peter's skills as a professional firefighter and commercial diver were obviously highly sought after. Six days after making the application, he was in Malta.

The refugee crisis has rarely been out of the news over the past year. Hundreds of thousands of people from countries in the Middle East and from across sub-Saharan Africa have been displaced because of a complex series of wars, the collapse of governments, famines and other disasters. People have been forced to undertake perilous and, in many cases, lethal journeys.

2,700 DEAD THIS YEAR

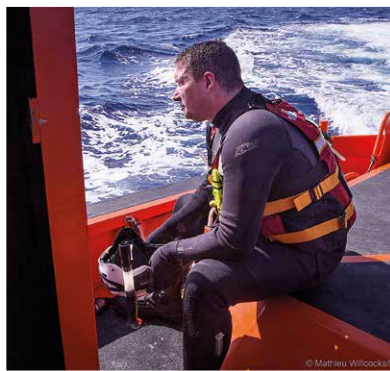
More than 2,700 people have died this year alone attempting to cross from northern Libya to Italy. It was a ship patrolling this route, known to refugees as the central Mediterranean route, where Peter was posted.

The smuggler boats would always be launched at about 2 or 3am. Depending on how much they paid, passengers might be given a life jacket or whistle. The boats would travel for a couple of hours before day break when drones flying overhead would spot them. In most cases the boats, having used up their supply of fuel, would be left drifting in the sea. In the rare case where they still had fuel, the driver would cut the engine and join the rest of the passengers, all of whom had been briefed to say they were stranded at sea after the driver had fallen overboard.





PICTURES:
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When a boat is first intercepted the rescuers must take control of the situation quickly. The passengers are already distressed and if they begin to panic the boat could capsize. The Topaz Responder deploys two smaller craft as near to the refugee boats as possible. Life jackets are handed to the passengers before groups of 30 are transported onto the craft. Known as Alan and Galip, the craft are named after two Syrian toddlers who drowned at sea last year. The photos of their lifeless bodies washed up on a Turkish beach provoked global outrage.

After several round trips all of the refugees are safely aboard the Topaz Responder. On one occasion Peter remembers coming across a woman who was nine months pregnant and in the middle of contractions.

TESTING FOR EVERYONE

The next leg of the journey, to refugee camps in either Sicily or Lampedusa, could be testing for all on board. Already suffering from seasickness, dehydration and a lack of food, the passengers often squabbled with each other – a natural result of fear and exhaustion.

The political questions surrounding the refugee crisis are hard to reconcile. If you do nothing thousands of people will end up drowning in the middle of the ocean. But by providing rescue services, you invariably drive up the demand for smugglers and more desperate people will agree to the drastic travel plans.

So what's the answer? "That's one for the politicians to decide on," Peter says. "But as a firefighter, I am a humanitarian first and foremost. And just like when there is a fire, we rescue everyone we can, regardless of who they are. It's the same principle here."

THE DAY TOPAZ RESPONDER SAVED 3,000 LIVES, THE SMUGGLERS MADE OVER £1.5m

Peter gives an intriguing insight into some of the more light-hearted moments of his time on the frontline in a diary he kept. Whether it was the crew laughing after seeing him wash down the decks with a firefighting hose (you could tell he was a firefighter, they said) or how the Germans saved the day by delivering very much needed (and appreciated) bottles of beer to the ship after a challenging few days.

However, Peter says he could not do any of the worthwhile work without the support of his wife Denise, who followed the progress of his mission closely on Twitter and Facebook.

On the day where the crew of the Topaz Responder saved over 3,000 lives, smugglers were estimated to have made over £1.5m in trafficking fees. Luckily, there are people out there like Peter Barratt willing to risk it all, personally and financially, to help them.

■ **MOAS, the charitable organisation Peter volunteered with, relies on donations to continue its lifesaving work. To donate, visit www.moas.eu.**

FRONTLINE VIEW SOUTH WEST



Chris Starkey: a great sense of pride and achievement to know I have been able to help people

“I will never forget being able to save a co-worker’s job”

Chris Starkey, retained rep for the South West, explains how and why he got involved with the union

“Unity first and always.” That’s my motto and the reason why I joined the FBU. It was the easiest decision I’ve ever made and it has proved invaluable at various points during my career.

My first union role came after I was elected as a station rep in Cornwall. It really helped form the basis of the industrial knowledge I have today.

I was able to engage and help influence consultations with the brigade locally and I could help my colleagues with problems that they were having in the workplace. I’ve always wanted to help both employer and employee reach fair and amicable solutions to any problems. More importantly, I want to provide a strong voice for retained firefighters.

I will never forget being able to save a co-worker’s job. One of the guys on the station was having trouble putting the figures onto the entry control board (ECB) and had ended up on disciplinary. None of us could understand – his maths was perfect.

We came to the conclusion that maybe he

was dyslexic. The union paid for a test and it turned out that was the problem. Alterations were made to the ECB that helped him input the correct figures and as a result he was able to thrive in the workplace.

FBU members deserve the best support and representation whenever they need it.

It gives me a great sense of pride and achievement to know that I have been able to help people.

It is really difficult to persuade people to become reps. Sometimes it can be a really thankless job, especially in the retained service.

But if you are the sort of person with a general interest in the service, in the well-being of your work colleagues and someone who wants to make a difference – it could be the best thing for you. But, of course, you’ll need a strong work ethic.

If this sounds like you, why not check if your station has a union rep. If it doesn’t, then put yourself forward to be that rep and stand for election. It’ll be the start of an amazing journey that, I promise, you won’t regret.

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Change of address or next of kin

Advise your brigade organiser of any change of address and head office of changes to next of kin or nominations for benefits.

FBU FREEPHONE LEGAL ADVICE LINE

0800 100 6061

England, Wales and N Ireland

0800 089 1331

Scotland

The line provides advice for personal injury, family law, wills, conveyancing, personal finance and consumer issues.

For disciplinary and employment-related queries contact your local FBU representative.