

ALERTER



MEET THE NEW RECRUITS



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Despite a lack of help from government, a number of brigades have recently decided to grasp the nettle and launch recruitment campaigns to tackle scandalous shortages in the retained service.
Alerter reports



Luke Hawkins (left) and Steve Riding – visited at their workshop

Closing the employment gap

THE recruitment of firefighters working the retained duty system has long required special attention and last autumn the FBU threw down the gauntlet to government by challenging it to provide additional funding and take national action to tackle a massive nationwide shortage.

We are still waiting for the government to assume its responsibilities. Doing nothing is not an option. With UK society changing at a rapid pace, particularly the longer hours at greater distances from their homes that people work, the service is struggling to maintain the optimum employment levels of many fire stations.

The service has not in any way declined as a result. But existing personnel have had to pick up the slack if there are not enough retained firefighters on call. This is particularly telling in areas such as Cornwall and Oxfordshire where the percentage of the retained personnel to wholtime is significant.

Two thirds of firefighters in Cornwall are retained and in Oxfordshire 18 out of 24 stations are entirely staffed by retained personnel. Traditionally, retained firefighters were recruited by a method of osmosis, whereby sons followed fathers into the service or communities that were a lot more closeknit generated a steady flow of applicants.

Those days are long gone and it's only now that certain brigades are making moves to institute a structured and proactive approach to recruitment. Tony Whiting, the recruitment officer and a retained station manager in the Oxfordshire brigade, has grasped the bull by the horns and in the last six months has carried out a whole series of integrated measures that have reaped huge rewards in bringing in new blood to his brigade.

"From my experience gained in working in the media I understood how we could reach the right type of person," he says. "I was looking for individuals who at some stage had thought 'maybe I could be a firefighter'. So

I started approaching our local TV, radio and press outlets, but I didn't do it all at once. I wanted to find out how effective each branch of the media was in bringing people in so I gave different stories to the TV, radio and newspapers, at different times – so I could quantify the response. I set up my own system of point awarding so I could see where my efforts were bearing most fruit."

Six months down the line and Tony has recruited 60 retained firefighters from all walks of life. Oxfordshire has 18 totally retained stations out of 24 so it was paramount that the recruitment process improved in order to keep pace with their high turnover of staff.

John Hurren, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer, says they were determined to approach the matter of retained recruitment in a modern and progressive way: "I've worked in several brigades, and I've been here six years, and I can safely say this brigade is easily the most modern and forward thinking in its approach," he says. "We took the retained recruitment model first developed in South Wales and adapted it for ourselves. We realised society – and particularly our county – had changed and we had to be more proactive in the recruitment of retained personnel. No longer were they just going to walk in the door.

"So now we aim to provide as much help as possible to potential recruits and to encourage as broad a section of the community as possible to consider the retained service.

"For example, in order to encourage women to become retained personnel we help with childcare and I fully expect in the future we may well establish station creches. Such understanding of the needs of the community means that we have one team of retained firefighters that is entirely female.

"In addition, we've changed the way the retained personnel are paid. No longer are they

Oxfordshire, Cornwall,

Devon, Hampshire and

West Yorkshire have all

launched recruitment

campaigns in the last year

paid on how many shouts they attend. We now work on a 108-hour week and firefighters are paid by the number of hours they are on call. It's very much a new model which is working for us ... as our retained staff prefer this new scheme as it guarantees their pay and makes the job more attractive. We know other brigades are watching to see how it goes."

The county of Oxfordshire benefits from almost full employment and is a relatively wealthy area of the UK. The demographic of the population shows a high degree of mobility



John Hurren – society has changed

and income and this has presented problems in attracting retained personnel.

"High employment levels, people living in dormitory towns and commuting to London and all doing reasonably well-paid jobs has made it harder to attract retained firefighters," says Vivien Trafford, who as community safety and human resources manager for the brigade, well understands the problems that Tony Whiting faced.

"We were suffering from a very high turnover of personnel as people enjoyed the benefits and the flexibility of a successful local economy. So people either worked too far from the station or were changing jobs and moving out of the area. It was a major problem."

Tony Prosser, the personnel and development manager, who Tony Whiting reports to was directly responsible for finding a solution.

"Prior to Tony Whiting we had an external consultant with a sales and marketing background and it didn't really work out as she didn't have the knowledge of the retained service. Whereas Tony is not only a retained firefighter but has the experience necessary to generate the media campaigns that draw people in."

So far it's been a huge success. Tony's campaign has not only garnered the media coverage that is essential to drawing in potential new recruits. He has also pursued other avenues such as approaching schools to get the kids to take home leaflets to their parents. While head teachers were initially surprised to see him, once he'd explained what he was about they were only too glad to help their local community.

But it's not just about getting them through the door. Tony's approach has been totally inclusive and always presented with a human face. During every aspect of the recruit-

ment process, from the initial first meeting through the series of mental, physical and psychometric tests, he sticks closely to the potential firefighters.

"I realise that for some people – while they may want to become a firefighter – they may need help in adjusting to the culture, which can be very different to their work environment. Also, we find that some people need a little encouragement in order to get through what they initially see as quite a rigorous recruitment process."

A case in point is 20-year-old toolmaker Luke Hawkins from Aylesbury. He was attracted to the service when one of his local firefighters dropped in to his workshop looking for potential recruits. He, and his colleague, 41-year-old Steve Riding both thought it sounded good and applied. However, Luke is dyslexic and failed the written tests. But Tony felt he was the kind of guy he was looking for and believed that Luke had the ability and the temperament to succeed in the retained service. So he followed him up and persuaded him to come and take the tests again – but this time Tony

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spent half an hour just explaining how the tests were set, what they were trying to achieve and suggested some alternative ways for Luke to approach some of the psychometric problems. And it worked. Luke passed and is now in the heart of the recruitment process and expects to join the service in a couple of months.

"When Graham Turner came to the workshop and started explaining the job I thought it sounded really exciting ... and it would fit in with my current job. The recruitment process has been very interesting so far. I look at it as a challenge – as I've had to work hard to get my standards up."

As for Steve Riding – he's fulfilling a lifelong ambition. He always wanted to be a firefighter but when he came to leave school was encouraged to get a trade and so became a toolmaker. Now, in his early forties, he's finally got to where he always wanted to be.

"It was what I wanted to do when I left school. But it got drummed into me that you've got to get a trade ... do an apprenticeship before you do anything ... and so it sort of went by-the-by until Graham Turner, one of the



Tony Whiting – I understood how we could reach the right type of person

local firefighters walked through the door of this workshop ... and then I got thinking about it again.

"I enjoyed the whole recruitment process and I can't wait to get out there ... I wish I'd done it sooner. Everyone I've met in the fire service has been fantastic – and particularly Tony. It's exceeded my expectations. And I don't know how much we get paid ... It's not why I'm doing it. I'm doing it for my own satisfaction and for the good of the community."

Steve's just waiting to do his safe to ride test ... he'd been a firefighter for two weeks when we spoke to him and said it feels great.

Tony's proactive and very often pastoral

methods have undoubtedly paid dividends not only in nurturing talent that might have fallen by the wayside, but also by reaching all corners of the county. As Tony Prosser says: "By September this year we will have 100 per cent availability. It'll be the highest crew levels this brigade has ever had."

Similar results have been achieved in Cornwall where regional roadshows have been staged in which the public has been invited into the local stations to have a go at basis drills such as hose running, maybe do some physical tests and generally talk through the nature of the job in a relaxed and informal manner.

Davinia Grist, the publicity manager, who's

been at the heart of the campaign, says that existing retained personnel play a key part in finding the new recruits.

"We're not getting any guidance nationally so we just set up our own system. We did posters, flyers and postcards which we got the local stations to give out. The retained stations then went out into the community to talk to employers emphasising the value of having retained firefighters on the staff – they bring skills into the workplace such as first aid and fire prevention knowledge.

"We then encouraged members of the public to come to the stations ... and for those that were seriously interested we assigned them mentors amongst the retained personnel."

Derek Walker, Assistant Divisional Officer responsible for retained recruitment, became involved in giving presentations to the people who turned up at the roadshows and set the tone for the campaign.

"We encouraged retained station managers to be proactive in the community. The local stations are encouraged to get the word around in their village.

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"In Mullion we got lucky – one of the local postmen is a retained firefighter ... so he helped us target the leafleting. For example, he'd say there's no point in dropping one in there because they're pensioners or definitely do that house as they're a young couple and we had a very good response. We got three really good people from that one mailshot. This is one of the most effective methods. We've had at least 12 people per roadshow as result of these mailshots."

Davinia, as part of her role, targets the local media, who have been very receptive to the campaign.

"We had West Country TV and Pirate Radio on the last campaign. One lad turned up at a station 20 minutes after he'd seen news of the campaign on TV. The newspapers particularly are very responsive as they realise that this is a key issue for the local community – in other words their readers."

So although approached in a slightly different manner, the Cornwall campaign has been as effective as that in Oxfordshire, in that 100 per cent availability will be achieved, the brigade says. Not only was Derek delighted



Davinia Grist and Derek Walker – encouraged members of the public to visit stations

with the response but the cross-section of applicants was satisfyingly diverse.

"From the six roadshows in Penzance, Redruth, Camborne, Perranporth, Mullion and Liskeard we found 40 people and I'm confident we'll fill all 10 vacancies. Plus we'll have a database of people that we can draw on in the future.

"We've had all sorts of people mechanics, students, lifeguards, graphic designers, ex-military – a really wide range of people. Oh, and supermarket workers, as we targeted the large supermarket chains. Their management was very responsive."

Cornwall's Deputy Chief Fire Officer Steve Webster is equally happy with the results but feels more could certainly be done to improve the recruitment of retained firefighters.

"In the past we've found it very difficult to recruit retained firefighters, mainly because people can't meet the conditions of employment such as proximity to the station and availability. Our new campaign was designed to encourage people to come and have a look at us and see if they might fit in.

"We've tailored our campaign to the needs of Cornwall, but a national campaign would certainly help in explaining to the general public what exactly a retained firefighter is. The majority of people have no inkling that the role exists. When we turn up at a fire the public



just see firefighters and if the word retained ever comes up many people assume it's some kind of voluntary work!"

A handful of other counties have also grasped the nettle and gone in search of new retained recruits. Devon, Hampshire and West Yorkshire have all launched similar campaigns in the last year.

Pete Lavine, the retained liaison manager for West Yorkshire, says there are certain areas where it's extremely tough to find new recruits. "Hebden Bridge is a nightmare. It's become a very affluent area with people actually commuting to London on a daily basis, which seems madness to me, but of course rules them out from ever working in their community.

"We have more luck in the less affluent areas, to be honest. We've done leaflet drops, radio and newspaper PR campaigns, open days and awareness days and so far the response has been pretty good.

"We've got 14 retained stations that pretty much all need new retained recruits, so we're still recruiting heavily."

With little or no direction coming from the government – despite the on-going campaign from the FBU – the UK's brigades are having to adapt to the fluid nature of the current labour market, and the reduced ties many people now have with their local community. It's a challenge the best of them are meeting head on.

SEDGLEY first had a station in the 1940s, located in a small garage just outside the village. On one of the first appliances, the pump and the cab were separate units: two rode in the cab and four on the pump. To house them in the station, the pump had to be disconnected from the cab. Apparently, the cab used to leave the station without the pump. Those were the days!

In 1972, a new single-storey station was built just down the road with facilities to hold two appliances plus the usual offices and stores.

Sedgley is now the only retained station in the West Midlands and has been for the past 15 years. There had been a few other retained crews, but they were connected to full-time stations.

In the late 1990s, West Midlands fire and rescue service employers decided to close the station. There appeared to be several reasons behind this; the brigade wished to be considered as a "professional" service and that did not include the retained; a new full-time station was to be built nearer to our station; and to consider retained procedures within the predominantly full-time environment was causing problems.

During the consultation on the closure we collected a great number of signatures from the public to keep the station open. Together with many FBU members, we gathered at the fire service headquarters while councillors deliberated our fate. When they emerged from their meeting, they announced the good news: we were to remain open.

The battle may have been won, but the war was not. Our station area, approximately



Sedgley firefighters – answering 700 to 800 calls a year

Alone – but far from forgotten

Graham Blunt tells of the ups and downs of Sedgley, the only retained station in the West Midlands

three miles square, was to be broken up. Some of our area went to the now built new full-time station and some to existing stations. This left us with a very small station area.

This had a devastating effect on our calls, which went down from 800-1,000 a year to 350.

Times change and with the introduction of new full time rotas, training programmes and other station initiatives, appliances are being taken off the run to accommodate these practices. Consequently, this has increased our calls and we are once again hitting the 700 to 800 calls a year mark.

We have recently been given some further good news. We are to have a brand new Dennis Sabre appliance in the next two months. This replaces our K-reg Dennis Rapier which has been an excellent appliance.

We manage to keep the appliance on the run 24/7 with 11 members of the crew. As is typical in retained stations elsewhere in the country, we have a wide variety of trades represented across the crew, with five of us solely doing retained duties.

Our drill night falls on a Wednesday – 19.00 to 21.00. Anybody wishing to say hello please call us on 01902 676510.

GRAHAM BLUNT is a leading firefighter at the fire station

Professionals on their drill night



The FBU is promoting lifelong learning in a £1.2 million partnership project

Lifelong learning strides forward

OVER the last seven years the TUC and its affiliated unions have been encouraging members to come forward for learning, through the introduction of union learning representatives (ULRs).

Over the last two years the FBU in Scotland and the North East has been involved in pilot projects following successful bids for funding from the government's Union Learning Fund.

A major achievement in the North East has been the opening of a union learning centre whose staff offer information, advice and guidance on learning opportunities. Most of the courses taken have been IT ones which have been followed from the centre or at home with support from the centre's staff.

Around 400 members – including members working the retained duty system – have benefited from the two projects with such diverse learning opportunities as sign language, Spanish, orienteering or even forklift truck driving qualifications.

A new £1.2 million national ULF project is to build on this success and that of many other trade unions by creating a network of union learning representatives (ULRs) who can help all members and their families to access learning, not just for work but for fun too.

With over seven million adults unable to read and write to the level of an 11-year old and computer skills needed in 97 per

cent of all jobs, the union's decision to become involved in the lifelong learning agenda can only bring further benefits to FBU members and enhance their lives and employment opportunities both in and out of the fire service.

The union is working to highlight the benefits of the ULF for firefighters, including those working the retained duty system. Maxine Laughner, Region 7 ULF co-ordinator and Region 7 national retained committee rep Ray Price are visiting retained stations in Hereford and Worcester.

After one such visit, firefighter Becky Valder and her colleagues at Pershore fire station decided to join the union. Becky, now the FBU rep at Pershore, said: "The opportunity of improving skills and furthering our education through the FBU's Union Learning Fund was an important factor in the decision of my colleagues and I at Pershore to join the FBU."



E-LEARNING PILOT KICKS OFF WITH 12 RETAINED MEMBERS

TWELVE FBU members working the retained duty system have volunteered for an e-learning pilot that is being offered by the union in partnership with the Scottish Fire Services College.

The pilot, which aims to assess the accessibility, support and learning requirements of retained firefighters by e-learning, began in May and will be completed by 25 July.

The SFSC will provide online support for participants doing the command and control module through the college's e-mentor application. An evaluation will take place on completion.

The SFSC has been at the forefront of developing a virtual college that will provide online courses that meet the requirements of learners as they progress through the fire and rescue service role maps.

E-learning may prove to be a key initiative in supporting the retained service in the integrated personal development system, workplace development schemes and vocational qualifications.

■ For more information contact Trevor Shanahan or 0141 221 2309.

To find out how to get access to lifelong learning or to become a Union Learning Fund rep, contact your regional co-ordinator:

Region 1	Kenny Munro	ULF01@fbu.org.uk
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Region 10	Trevor Shanahan	ULF10@fbu.org.uk
Region 11	Bob Fitz-Gerald	ULF11@fbu.org.uk
Region 12	Harry Williams	ULF12@fbu.org.uk
Region 13	Bill Hendy	ULF13@fbu.org.uk

FBU Wales (Region 8) is currently bidding for ULFs. For information members should contact Nigel Williamson

Shoulder to shoulder

BIG CHANGE is upon us once again in the union and in the world around us.

The general elections returned a Labour government with a sharply reduced majority as voters expressed their anger with a range of policies, not least the war in Iraq. No doubt at the forefront of FBU members' minds as they cast their vote was New Labour's disgraceful behaviour towards firefighters and emergency fire control staff during our national pay dispute and its current proposals on pensions and controls.

In the FBU, elections have produced a new general secretary, Matt Wrack, who defeated Andy Gilchrist.

Andy played a leading role in raising the profile of our retained members internally and in the fire service, as well as helping deliver important advances towards equality. I congratulate Matt on his election and look forward to working with him on retained issues and hope retained firefighter members continue to receive the attention and support they deserve.

For while the achievements in recent years have been many, there are great challenges ahead.



Morris Butterfield, EC member for retained members, says it's time to unite and go forwards

As you will read elsewhere in *Alert*, some brigades are starting to tackle the problem of recruitment, but there is still no lead from central government.

We have to pursue our legal battle to obtain pension rights while simultaneously pushing in the forthcoming negotiations with government over reforms to FBU members' pensions to have retained members included in the Firefighters Pension Scheme.

Indeed, all FBU members need to work together on the issue of pensions as they do to stop cuts under the integrated risk management process and the potentially lethal plans to regionalise emergency fire controls.

That was the message of delegates at our annual conference in Southport.

So let's put behind us the debilitating internal divisions of recent times and go forward, shoulder to shoulder.

P.S. Steve Reeve has resigned from his position as Region 6 rep. On behalf of the National Retained Committee, thanks for all your hard work over many years and best of luck for the future!

FBU National Retained Committee

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for contact details of the members of the National Retained Committee