

Alerter

The magazine of the Fire Brigades Union Retained Members www.fbu.org.uk

Winter 2007

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to wholetime**

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Editorial



The response to the article on pay protection in the last issue of *Alerter* has been overwhelming. Retained duty system (RDS) pay is very complicated and fire and rescue authorities are unwilling to implement the detailed changes from 2003 in full. But our members are more aware of what should be in their pay packets.

Following the spate of flooding incidents that many regions have experienced, demands on RDS crews have often meant that members have been required to work for unusually prolonged periods that, in some cases, have taken them past 42 hours of work in a seven day period. In such a case, any additional hours worked would need to be paid at overtime rates of time and a half. If you believe you may have qualified for overtime payments or any other aspect of your pay is incorrect, get in touch with your FBU officials.

The New Firefighters' Pension Scheme is now in place and there has been a healthy uptake by RDS firefighters. Our members have been informed of a number of related issues including contribution rates, pensionable pay, the J4 Rule and the impact on past and future service. But by far the largest number of enquires we have received centre on

RDS membership and activity within the FBU is showing signs of increasing

the ongoing legal case to get access to the FPS Pension. Our members have been assured that if they join the NFPS they will not be barred from joining the FPS.

Establishment levels continue to be stretched to the limit because fire authorities are refusing to acknowledge the void left by the provision of annual leave, 120 hours availability and 48 hours free from duty. There needs to be a massive increase in establishment levels to support a duty system suffering from lack of investment and public awareness. If the current situation is to improve, a commitment to invest in the retained duty system is long overdue.

RDS membership and activity within the FBU is increasing if the current retained regional annual general meetings are anything to go by. Attendance is increasing, with more members wanting to have their say on the many issues under the spotlight at present. The FBU's National Retained Committee officials, Pete Preston, Harry Cotter and I have recently attended AGMs in Region 2 (Northern Ireland), Region 3 (North East), Region 8 (Wales) and Region 9 (East Anglia) and were pleased to have the opportunity to speak to members directly. It was pleasing to note an increase in RDS officials from branch level upwards.

Tam Mitchell, Executive Council Member, Retained

FBU Membership:



What's in it for you?

The Fire Brigades Union is the only trade union recognised at national and local level to negotiate working conditions for firefighters and emergency control room operators in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – whatever their duty system.

National initiatives include:

- Securing a reduction from 178 hours to 120 hours a week cover requirement to be entitled to full retaining fees. As a result, very many Retained Duty System personnel have seen their retaining fees go up by £625.00 a year at firefighter level. And that's in addition to agreed percentage pay rises and considerable back pay.
- A vigorous and sustained campaign to win access to the Firefighters Pension Scheme for Retained Duty System personnel. The FBU is committed to pursue this to a successful conclusion.
- Working to break down the barriers between differing duty systems. After all, a firefighter is a firefighter!

Local initiatives include:

- Ensuring that brigades and fire and rescue services keep to nationally agreed rates of pay and that personnel receive the correct hourly rate for all activities e.g. undertaking Community Fire Safety duties.
- Negotiating extra days annual leave for Retained Duty System personnel above the 'Grey Book' provision.
- Negotiating paid administration time for Retained Duty System watch managers and crew managers outside of times allocated for training nights.
- Negotiating payment for FBU branch officials working on stations on the Retained Duty System who attend brigade management and union meetings on behalf of their members. In many places such officials are now paid for missed fire calls.
- Ensuring that no member working the Retained Duty System is adversely affected by any pay rate under the new payments systems.
- Successfully fighting off changes in working practices that would lead to the worsening of our members' working conditions and cuts in their pay for like for like work.

Representation:

In many brigades the majority of FBU work is looking after day to day issues affecting firefighters working the Retained Duty System.

In all brigades and fire and rescue services across the country, we have successfully represented or advised thousands of members on employment issues, including medical appeals, pension appeals and

You and the FBU

FBU WELCOME

The FBU is the only organisation negotiating for RDS firefighters at a national and local level

The FBU remains the only organisation negotiating on behalf of firefighters working the retained duty system at a national and local level, following the refusal of the Retained Firefighters Union (RFU) to take up its seat on the National Joint Council after having lobbied so hard for it. The requirement for this organisation to have a seat was that it showed that it had a membership of one fourteenth of the uniformed fire service – or just 7.1%.

This extremely low threshold was granted – it was previously one twelfth – following heavy lobbying by the RFU and backing for it by employers. The employers also demanded that the RFU obtain a seat on the NJC prior to any count of membership being made. Both demands were agreed by the FBU.

The first meeting of the newly constituted NJC took place Friday 28 September. The RFU was invited to attend, subject to its agreement that it would submit its membership to a count by a reputable and independent body.

The RFU informed the employers that it would not be attending as it wished to concentrate instead on "organising brigade and regional structures".

But the Union believes the RFU did not attend because it

disciplinary hearings resulting from both on duty and off duty incidents. With the resources and expertise of our solicitors, Thompsons, who specialise in dealing trade union work, we can ensure that members get the best advice available.

Only recently, the FBU overturned a management decision to enforce a firefighter working the Retained Duty System to retire on grounds of ill health. The union's officials worked very hard to ensure that they proved our member was fit enough to remain operational.

In 2005 we achieved a resounding victory for the sacked 'Stornoway 8' – all Retained Duty System firefighters in Scotland. They all got their jobs back following our appeal to the Secretary of State who found in favour of the FBU.

Winning accident claims:

We have been particularly successful in winning personal accident claims for members and their families. Examples include:

- Securing £250,000 compensation and a pension for a firefighter working the Retained Duty System who was injured at an incident which had resulted in this member being medically retired from both the brigade and full-time employment.
- Successfully representing a member working the Retained Duty System, who was injured on the second day of initial training. Although the member had not even paid the first monthly subscription to the FBU, the union invested £70,000 in legal fees to support this firefighter. Without the help of the FBU our member would not have been able to fight the case.
- Pursuing an industrial accident claim for a firefighter working the Retained Duty System, whose injuries were sustained in this member's primary employment.

The FBU will represent both you and your family on personal injury claims, charging no fee and taking no part of any compensation award.

For further details please visit our website www.fbu.org.uk and click on the **Legal Services** link.

Accident and Injury Fund:

If you suffer an accident at work or elsewhere, the FBU Accident and Injury Fund (AIF) provides generous cash benefits on top of those we have negotiated with the fire and rescue service.

Death benefit equivalent to a year's pay is payable upon the death of a member which does not have to arise from on-duty activity.



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A new leaflet shows benefits of being an FBU member

FOR EVERYONE

cannot prove that it has even the extremely low number of members now required to have a seat.

Firefighters working the retained duty system have rejected the RFU because they know that it is an extremely divisive organisation that does not represent their best interests.

Following the 2002/2003 pay dispute, senior figures in Government and the fire service were determined to undermine the FBU's negotiating role by ensuring that other organisations were represented on the NJC.

This included the demand that the RFU be given a seat. It has always been the view of the FBU that workers should have the right to choose their own unions and that it is a matter for the workforce, not the employers, to decide who represents them. Therefore any organisation seeking a place on the NJC would need to demonstrate that it represented a viable section of the workforce.

The FBU has consistently said to the employers that it has nothing to fear from a full audit of members and that it was not convinced the RFU would ever be able to meet the requirements for joining the NJC. Whatever the reason given, we feel certain that we have been proved correct again.

This latest development brings to an end the attempt to undermine the FBU and the unity of firefighters to defend and improve our service and an end to this effort to create divisions between wholetime and retained firefighters.

We are stronger when we work together, regardless of duty system. Most people working within our service understand that. That is why the vast majority of firefighters – wholetime and retained – are members of the FBU.

The FBU is against divisions created on the basis of where people work or on what duty system. Every firefighter – wholetime, retained, officer, control – who wants to defend our service and work within our democratic structures, is welcome in the FBU.

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JUSTIN TALIS/REPORTDIGITAL.CO.UK

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Retained crews put in 40-hour weekends as the floods hit this summer. And they learned the hard way about the need for better kit – from waders and boats to radios

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Published by the Fire Brigades Union, Bradley House, 68 Coombe Road, Kingston upon Thames, KT2 7AE
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CAMPAIGN NEWS

In short

◆ A detailed report by Warwickshire chief fire officer William Brown on the implications for services of a possible merger with Hereford and Worcester fire and rescue service is expected to be completed by December 6. Any merger could potentially lead to station closures – particularly along the borders – in the two brigades. Both fire and rescue authorities have a substantial number of retained duty system firefighters. The FBU has said that it will not accept any job losses or cuts to services. A thousand names have been collected in a petition against any cuts to services by Conservative-controlled Warwickshire county council.

◆ FBU reps began a tour of the 60-plus newly created retained duty system fire stations in the Highlands and Islands in October. There have been a number of requests for the FBU to visit from firefighters at the stations, which were previously volunteer. “Following the change in their status to retained, the Union will be campaigning to ensure they get proper facilities, appliances and equipment,” said brigade chair Fraser Parr, who will be visiting stations along with Billy Sanderson, an FBU officers rep. The upgrading of the stations has been welcomed by the FBU as boosting the safety of local communities.



◆ Courses for firefighters working the retained duty system and other staff of Yorkshire and Humberside Fire and Rescue Service will start on 16 October. They include the iTQ computer skills qualification. RDS learners are already signed up with East Riding College and ready to start at Bridlington, Hornsea, Goole, Driffield and Beverley fire stations and many more will follow. CFO Frank Duffield recently signed a learning agreement with the FBU, Unison and Amicus representatives (pictured above with Hull MP Alan Johnson (centre), then Secretary of State for Education) to ensure that all personnel get access to the learning opportunities offered by the FBU Union Learning Fund Project.



100 per cent – (l to r) Firefighters Mark Jones, Stuart Parker, David Elliott, watch manager Keith Harrison, crew manager Steve Tyler, and firefighters Martin Cook and John Wilson at Pickering fire station in North Yorkshire

Big increase in RDS members

BUILDING THE UNION

Firefighters working the retained duty system (RDS) are joining the Union in growing numbers in a number of brigades across the country.

In North Wales membership has topped 800, a rise of 300 compared to 10 years ago and the highest proportion of total RDS establishment in the country.

Brigade official John Purser said the increase follows a concerted effort by local officials to visit retained stations to highlight the benefits of membership and to encourage the maximum involvement of RDS members in the Union's democratic decision-making processes.

“We take retained issues as seriously as those affecting all our other members be they wholetime firefighters, officers or emergency fire control staff,” he says.

“Open” brigade committee meetings are part of the success story. All members are invited to join in the discussions at them.

In North Yorkshire, the Union has seen over 60 RDS firefighters join since April thanks to an ongoing tour by brigade membership secretary Bryan Barrett explaining why it's good to be in the FBU. As *Alerter* went to press Bryan had visited half of the 30-odd stations where he plans to talk to firefighters. Pickering fire station, for example, had just one member and is now 100% FBU.

Crew Manager Stephen Tyler says: “We took advice from him on local issues, but after a presentation on the benefits of being an FBU member by the brigade membership secretary, we all joined as we hadn't realised how many benefits there are.”

Pickering crew manager and control operator Stuart Moss says his main reason for joining the FBU was after he got the job in control. “With all the uncertainty going on with regional control centres, I needed someone that would watch my back and give me advice and support when required. The other benefits were the free will service and the legal helpline.”

Watch manager Keith Harrison, speaking on behalf of the Pickering crew, said: “We all joined because we all felt that we needed support.”



FBU North Yorkshire membership secretary Bryan Barrett (left) and Keith Harrison, Pickering watch manager.

New selection process 'not appropriate' for RDS recruits – NAU

TRANSFER TO WHOLETIME

The new national selection process of applying for wholetime firefighter posts is not the correct or appropriate way to bring RDS firefighters into full-time positions, according to the fire service's National Assessment Unit (NAU).

Sue Evans, head of the unit, said that there was no need or requirement for RDS firefighters to sit initial selection tests. She also said that the application form should not need to be completed in its entirety because any RDS firefighter employed by a

fire and rescue service was already demonstrating that they had the qualities required to be a firefighter.

What was required instead was the completion of an abridged version of the form that focused on the personal qualities and attributes (PQAs) required by the role applied for, she said. Applicants should then pass straight to the PQA interview stage of the process along

with external applicants who had passed the selection process for non-FRS employees.

Sue Evans was speaking at a recent seminar to share examples of good practice in the recruitment retention and management of firefighters working the retained duty system.

She also discussed the new promotion process using assessment and development centres (ADCs). She said both the initial test of potential and further ADC assessments had, so far, proved very positive with respect to RDS

firefighters. In the latest available figures they were scoring 5 to 10% higher than wholetime colleagues.

Sue Evans' remarks got a mixed response from the senior managers at the seminar organised by Shropshire FRS at RAF Cosford in July.

Those who claimed that her conclusions did not reflect the performance within their own service conceded this could be because it was the first time they had run the ADC process.

Some brigades, such as North Wales, reported very positive progress. It had seen a number of

RDS personnel come through the ADC procedure to assume crew manager positions on both RDS and wholetime watches.

Positive progress on recruitment and retention was reported by Oxfordshire, Shropshire and South Wales.

In Shropshire and South Wales this was attributed, in part, to a focus on pay, even though two entirely different

approaches had been adopted.

South Wales is using a salary scheme of payment, while Shropshire has continued with the nationally agreed payment system but has focused on other changes such as additional training time and community fire safety activities.

FBU Executive Council Member for RDS Tam Mitchell and NRC Secretary Pete Preston attended the event, which was a follow up to the practitioners forum in Leicestershire in September last year. (See Comment, right)



Windsor, Berks, firefighter Mark Jones is now full-time but he had to apply 'as if I was a member of the public'



PETE PRESTON

Secretary, NRC

Recruitment and retention

The recent seminar in Shropshire (see left) did manage to highlight and share some instances of good practice. What it failed to highlight, though, was the absence of a national coordinated campaign to promote the role of RDS firefighters in their communities, the difficulties of attracting people to the role and the difficulties in retaining many of those who do join. Nor did it make any efforts to address these issues.

The current situation in many brigades is that often as many as 50% of RDS-crewed appliances are still off the run during weekday normal working hours. And with many people now demanding a degree of quality time for family commitments and other work-life balance issues, a growing number of RDS stations are also experiencing difficulties maintaining weekend cover.

This is not due to a decrease in commitment by RDS firefighters but, in most cases, due to brigades only recruiting at stations when they go off the run due to RDS staff leaving.

It is also apparent that the change to the requirement for RDS firefighters classed as fully retained to only provide 120 hours of availability – as opposed to 168 – has been completely overlooked or ignored by brigades. This change in itself has produced a shortfall in establishment of 28.5% and, coupled with the existing shortfall, has done little to help the situation.

Also of concern is the apparent absence of any serious effort to address diversity issues in areas with large RDS establishments. In many brigades, the demographic make-up of women to men, for example, is at least 50/50. But attempts at recruitment seem to be far way short of coming anywhere near to addressing this.

Unless some form of national funding and coordinated effort is forthcoming, then any progress on these issues will be, at best, very slow. This will ultimately put lives at risk in many rural communities.

Comment

How do full-time employers approach RDS firefighters on their payroll?
Alerter reports

Supportive: Gwyn Williams, RDS firefighter at his workplace at Hotpoint/Indesit, with Will Pritchard, a Health and Safety Officer, who was his line manager for a long time



GOOD PRA

There are many challenges for retained firefighters but one of the hardest is undoubtedly the constant tension between the day job and the other job of being a firefighter. In the same way that the families of RDS firefighters are alternately proud and understanding – while sometimes feeling neglected – employers, too, can be hesitant about employing someone who can be whisked away at a moment's notice with no fixed time of return.

It's a growing concern for retained firefighters as society changes and employers become less local and more global in their priorities.

Pete Preston, Secretary of the FBU National Retained Committee, says employers often think that when a retained firefighter goes on a shout he or she will be gone for hours.

"Overall there's a general reluctance to release employees who are retained to respond

to calls. The perception is that they will be away all day. The reality is that it will be only an hour or so and often will be less. A lot of the resistance is down to the ignorance of employers of the benefits of having firefighters on their staff."

Yet there are exceptions. 54-year-old Gwyn Williams, from Colwyn Bay station, is a driver. His day job is making metal drums for washing machines. He says his employer, the multinational company Hotpoint/Indesit, has been brilliant with him.

Everyone was quite receptive

"I came to the service late," he says. "I was 46 when I joined and I've been working for Hotpoint for over 22 years now. I talked to them before I started the training and I think that, because they knew me well, they were fine with it. I went to my immediate boss and everyone was quite receptive to the idea.

"There's quite a few times I've been out all night and seen fatalities and we come back to the station and we talk about it and I haven't gone into work and my boss understands.

"One of the managers has a son who's a retained firefighter at another station and he's been very good with me. Recently the company have been after me to join their own fire crew, which makes sure everyone is out of the building if the fire alarm goes off."

Will Pritchard, a Health and Safety Officer for Hotpoint/Indesit, who for a long time was Gwyn's line manager, could not be more supportive. "We understand we have a responsibility to the community. You never know when you're going to need the fire service, so we give the retained firefighters great respect. It's about team working. We respect what Gwyn does and I got more out of him at work."

Gwyn, too, acknowledges that being a fire-



COLIN McPHERSON

production store supervisor at Morgan, says: "We don't mind about the time – one day it could be you needing help. It's a community thing. Morgan don't have to do it, but they do. Everyone appreciates that one day they may have to call on the fire service."

But not everyone is quite so lucky. Geoff Lennon, a facilities officer for an outdoor education centre run by Conwy County Borough Council in Wales, is allowed to go on shouts, but with a totally different *modus operandi*.

Constant and difficult balance

He's been a retained firefighter for over 20 years and worked for the same employer all that time. His experience is slightly different. "It's a constant and difficult balance, juggling two jobs and a family and my line manager is pretty tolerant."

"The council releases employees for fire calls, however it never comes up in conversation. I just get on with it. My line manager trusts me to be sensible, as long as it doesn't interfere with the running of the centre."

Geoff is obviously highly trusted. But within the council there is little or no discussion of his role, as he fears others may become resentful of the time he has away from his job. He says everything is fine – but no one talks about what he does. "Some of my colleagues take an interest in what I do but it's a very delicate balance and my role outside my job goes almost unregistered in many ways." Consequently, he asked *Alerter* not to talk to his line manager.

Yet, in spite of some positive stories of aware and considerate employers, Pete Preston says the last 30 years have seen a marked decline in the number of employers willing to release firefighters to help their community. But he says that if the positive benefits can be explained, employers might be more receptive.

"Employers don't appreciate the advantages of having firefighters on the staff, so we need to communicate with them. Shropshire fire service are putting up statistics on their website revealing the amount of time, on average, a retained firefighter is away from their job. This is good as it is exploding myths."

Engage with employers

"We need to engage with local employers, particularly those with variable shift patterns. Centralisation of labour and its inevitable insensitivity to local issues and people, is a feature of our age and presents very real challenges for retained firefighters, the fire service and the FBU."

"A national campaign – like the Territorial Army had – to highlight the vital role of the RDS firefighter would help raise the public awareness and educate potentially supportive full-time employers."

CTICE

fighter has developed him as human being: "I feel more confident now I'm a firefighter. It's developed me as a person. My family have noticed the difference."

Equally harmonious

Nick Robinson, 36, based at Malvern station in Worcestershire has had an equally harmonious relationship with his employer, Morgan, the family-owned iconic UK car manufacturer.

"It was a factor when I took the job six years

ago," he says. "I told them at the interview and asked if it was a problem and they said no. It was a major factor for me. I wouldn't have moved to Morgan without that attitude."

"They asked questions about how long I'd be out on a shout and about the number of brush fires we have in the summer here. But they've got no problems with it. Lots of guys at my station get docked time but I don't. I'm one of the fortunate ones."

Nick's immediate boss, Stuart Webb, the

GOOD PRACTICE POINTS

- ◆ Good communication is key to getting a good employer
- ◆ Flexibility on both sides is the key to building a good relationship
- ◆ Work colleagues can provide valuable support in getting the message across
- ◆ Myths about the number of hours spent on shouts should be demystified
- ◆ Retained firefighters bring unseen benefits to any organisation
- ◆ Employers need to be made aware of their role in the community
- ◆ Fire stations' work in the community can help explain the role of the RDS firefighter



JUSTIN CRIMPLIN, MALVERN FIRE STATION Retained crews put in 40-hour weekends as the floods hit this summer. And they learned the hard way about the need for better kit

Retained crews proved invaluable in the second wave of summer floods that inundated parts of Britain. Justin Crimplin, 27, has notched up ten years as a retained firefighter at Malvern station. He had an exhausting three days as the floods struck his part of the world.

He found himself working more than 40 hours over one hectic weekend alongside other Malvern retained members. First he was involved in frontline flood rescue work in the Malvern area. He was then co-opted to help as Gold Command swung into action at Malvern station and floods struck Upton upon Severn.

"It was pretty tiring," says Justin, who was first called out on Friday 20 July to a garage where flood water was threatening to disperse 100

A mini-disaster was averted because the crew members acted speedily

litres of oil stored in open-topped containers in a garage pit. "The water was flooding down the driveway and we had to act fast otherwise the oil would have got into the drains and water system.

"We managed to put an environmental boom across the garage front to stop the water creeping into the garage and reaching all that oil." An environmental mini-disaster was averted because the crew members acted speedily.

But firefighting kit is not waterproof – Justin and his fellow crew members got pretty wet and the water was soon filling their fire boots and drenching their clothes.

"Waders would have been a good

idea – and it would be good to have had waterproof clothing," says Justin. "By the time the oil job had finished, my boots and suit were wringing wet and really heavy. Firefighting kit holds water – so it soon gets soaked.

"On the way back to the station we got called to rescue a woman and some children from a car stuck on an A road in a torrent of water. But there were so many cars parked up that we couldn't get to it, so another appliance approached from a different direction. It was all very manic."

Justin and his colleagues then moved on to the next job, soaked yet intent on rescuing people marooned in their vans in a water-logged caravan park. Engines were no good for this job: the crew had to use trailers and tractors to rescue people – a brook had burst its banks and the water was up to six feet high.

"A member of the public offered to lend us a small motor boat, which helped as the fire engines couldn't get through. The rescue went well. We got dozens of people out using the trailers, tractors and boat and there were no casualties."

At the end of a hectic weekend, the call came for all retained crew members to get themselves down to Malvern station, where Gold Command was now based, busy dispersing appliances, crews and boats to Upton upon Severn where the floods were teeming.

Justin's colleague, Paul Brownhill, Malvern retained crew manager for the West Midlands, points out the floods highlighted not only the lack of waterproof clothing and footwear for fire crews but also that radios from different emergency services involved in rescue did not "cross match".

FBU Contacts

Executive Council Member

Tam Mitchell
thomas.mitchell@fbu.org.uk
07715 994200

Secretary

Pete Preston
peter.preston@fbu.org.uk
07971 086990

Chair

Harry Cotter
nrcc@fbu.org.uk
07718 637251

Region 1

Contact Executive Council Member
Tam Mitchell

Region 2

Noel Jordan
noel.jordan@fbu.org.uk
07775 633391

Region 3:

Mick Jones
mick.jones@fbu.org.uk
07734 871049

Region 4

Rick Arrand
rick.arrand@fbu.org.uk
07970 010275

Region 5

Miles Parkinson
miles.parkinson@fbu.org.uk
07834 465107

Region 6

Contact Harry Cotter/Pete Preston

Region 7 (acting)

Paul Brownhill
paul.brownhill@fbu.org.uk
07764 155 658

Region 8

Lyndon Jones
lyndon.jones@fbu.org.uk
07952 451 983

Region 9

Kevin Kiddell
kevin.kiddell@fbu.org.uk
07967 041013

Region 11

John Haizelden
john.haizelden@fbu.org.uk
07717 571726

Region 12

Bob Dewis
robert.dewis@fbu.org.uk
07966 754522

Region 13

Leigh Redman
leigh.redman@fbu.org.uk
07971 484039