

**Hampshire Fire and Rescue Authority****HR Committee****30 January 2012****Firefighter Recruitment Plans for 2013/2014****Report by the Chief Officer**

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**1 Summary**

- 1.1 This paper presents the plans prepared by the Establishment Board for the maintenance of the required staff levels for the for the recruitment of Wholetime Firefighters in to Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service (HFRS) during 2013/14. This is based on our predicted future requirements, allowing for our assumptions on future grant settlements. The point at which we will start to recruit again is an important step as we have not done so since 2010. At that point a recruitment freeze was imposed as part of our plan of action to meet our financial challenge created by the expected reduction in funding within the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR). Further reductions are a real possibility and therefore we have constructed contingent plans which allow us to flex to meet our operational requirements.

**2 Recommendation**

- 2.1 That the HR Committee supports the plan prepared by the Establishment Board to manage the authorised establishment levels of wholetime firefighter roles and endorses the multi-faceted approach to fill vacancies in both the short and long term.

**3 Introduction and background**

- 3.1 This section focuses on the current assessment of when we will be required to utilise the arrangements for Wholetime Fire-fighter selection. The Service has not recruited any trainee firefighters since January 2010, when it took on 20 trainees. Similarly there have been no opportunities for RDS employees to take up a full time role through direct transfers since December 2009/January 2010.
- 3.2 The Efficient and Flexible Crewing project had an agreed objective to reduce the number of firefighters by 40 full-time equivalent (FTE) posts via the natural turnover of staff. This has been achieved through retirements and/or leavers for other reasons. The original expectation was that we would achieve this reduction in our staffing number over a four year period, i.e. by April 2014.

3.3 HFRS has achieved the reduced crewing levels for each station 15 months earlier than initially predicted. Each wholetime station and watch is now operating within the new set authorised establishment of 588 FTE. This crewing model allows for regular extractions for normal sickness/absences, maternity leave, paternity leave, temporary secondments, career breaks and training requirements. These are referred to as normal extractions from the watches and the model allows for a total of 24 FTE for these purposes. As at 4 December 2012 HFRS is operating extractions from watches above that level which would require additional support for watches from the Staff Bank on a regular basis. The planned approach is to provide additional resources back in to the watch arrangements for a fixed term period to cover specific secondments, maternity leave and other extractions of a duration of six months or more that have a fixed end date.

However, the extraction profiling does not allow for future permanent reductions in substantive numbers that will result from normal retirements and permanent leavers for other reasons. Therefore, a resumption of recruitment activity will be required to maintain these numbers at some point in the future.

3.4 The actual authorised number of permanent staff members on wholetime stations is continuing to drop through natural turnover and is currently 1.5 FTE below the 588 FTE operating level.

3.5 Due to recent legislative changes and amendments to both the Firefighters' Pension Scheme (FPS) and New Firefighters Pension Scheme (NFPS) there is no longer a normal retirement age for employees. Each individual may remain in post and within the pension scheme for as long as they wish. It is no longer a requirement for Firefighters to retire on their 55<sup>th</sup> birthday. Consequently, the Service is only able to determine the number of staff that would be eligible to retire in the next 12 month period, not those who will actually leave.

3.6 For the period 1 April 2013 – 31 March 2014 the following are key planning assumptions:

- There are 20 wholetime employees eligible to retire. This figure covers all roles from Firefighter to Area Manager.
- Based on our experience over the past couple of years, we would anticipate that 85% of this number would retire during this period i.e. 17 retirements.
- In addition we have a regular number of individuals who leave HFRS and either transfer to another FRS or leave the Service altogether. The average number is 6 per annum.

3.7 Allowing for the reduction of posts at Watch Manager, Station Manager and Group Manager level as a result of Staff Review changes in years 3 and 4, a level of natural turnover in these roles is still required. To reduce the numbers in these roles the Service would not intend to backfill or replace people in these roles on a permanent basis until our numbers have reduced to the required levels. However, we are filling some of these positions on a temporary basis, which, in a number of cases, has a knock-on effect on the number of

extractions at Firefighter level.

- 3.8 However, at Firefighter level this is not the case as the establishment levels are effectively balanced. If no further reductions were needed, new recruits in to the Service would be required to maintain the required operating levels. If that were the case, our prediction is that 15 FTE would be required at Firefighter level throughout the year for 2013/14. However, further changes to the workforce are possible. As a short term solution to maintain our level of operational cover, we are placing competent Retained Duty System (RDS) firefighters on to fixed term wholetime contracts. This provides the immediate expertise required to fill these roles whilst we finalise the details of the staff plans based on the constraints of the latest financial settlement. The Establishment Board will continue to closely monitor the position.
- 3.9 A critical decision point is the financial settlement for the second half of this CSR. This was received at the end of December 2012, and is being considered at present. Based on the financial settlement for HFRS, the Service will make a decision about its future staffing needs. The detail of this is being worked through to determine whether the establishment of 588 posts for firefighters on front line appliances needs to be reduced further.
- 3.10 When we do need to recruit we have some flexibility in the way we fulfil our operational requirements. The options open to us include a contingent injection of experienced and trained personnel in to the establishment by bringing in Retained Duty System (RDS) firefighters into the wholetime workforce permanently as required by the Service Delivery Directorate (SD). This option allows us to bring in small numbers of people and will be a real aid in re-balancing watches once we have reached any revised establishment level. This contingent arrangement can be subsequently augmented or replaced by the open recruitment approach. The Service is preparing to revert to a position where it can regularly recruit into wholetime firefighter posts. Whilst this may still be some time away and is dependant upon operational requirements and affordability, we will have our revised processes available by the end of 2013. We are refocusing our recruitment activity to ensure we attract a diverse pool of good candidates. We are always well over subscribed with candidates applying for the position of firefighter and we will limit the number of applicants to a maximum of 1000. We would then need to apply a range of selection processes to reduce the candidate pool to a manageable number of appropriately skilled candidates who would then complete additional testing at Service Headquarters prior to the final selection checks. This activity is resource intensive and requires a number of months to complete the process entirely.

#### **4 Interim Arrangements**

- 4.1 The Establishment Board reviews the crewing numbers on a six weekly basis and was able to predict earlier in the year that we would meet the full Efficient and Flexible Crewing Projects ( EFC) firefighter reductions a year ahead of its predictions. The Board therefore proposed a number of interim arrangements be put in place to bolster numbers as required. Due to the Comprehensive Spending Review funding arrangements for HFRS remaining an unknown factor until December 2012, the Service did not feel it could commit to permanent firefighter appointments before this information was clear. It

therefore set out its contingent arrangements as follows:

- Fixed Term Contracts for existing HFRS RDS competent Firefighters. This enables the Service to have experienced staff in post quickly, whilst it undertakes either permanent recruitment activities or to cover key periods of absence between 6 and 11 months.
- Substantive appointment to Wholetime Firefighter vacancies for existing HFRS RDS competent Firefighters.
- Offer the inter-service transfer option to applicants from other FRSs to fill substantive Wholetime Firefighter vacancies.
- 'Direct entry' recruitment and selection for Wholetime trainee firefighters.

4.2 Fixed Term Contracts (FTCs) for RDS firefighters is a new innovation for HFRS. The Service has worked with the Representative Bodies in making suitable provisions for offering existing RDS competent firefighters fixed term contracts. These may be for any vacancies that occur as a result of secondment, maternity, acting up arrangements, long term sickness, restricted duties, or similar for a fixed term period. This will be monitored in relation to the maximum number of extractions of 24 FTE. The Service has communicated this arrangement and had 74 expressions of interest from eligible RDS candidates. We currently have 7 fixed term contracts in place to cover temporary vacancies including maternity leave and secondments out of the Service. These appointments commenced at the end of December 2012/ beginning of January 2013 and will end by December 2013.

4.3 The other three options all require some form of recruitment and selection processing to permanently fill posts. This will be picked up by the Recruitment Team as required by the Service.

4.4 A small project group has been reviewing the future arrangements for the recruitment and selection of Wholetime Fire-fighters. The aim would be to also use some of these elements for the recruitment and selection of RDS fire-fighters, as well as for transferees from other FRSs. The Project has focused on several key areas:

- Attraction of a wider pool of candidates.
- Use of a 'strengths-based' approach to selection tools.
- Minimising the disruption to potential candidates through using online tools where practicable.
- Reduction of the resources and 'hidden' costs associated with completing a recruitment campaign 'in-house'.
- Ensuring that we recruit future firefighters that are committed to delivering a high quality service to the public, whilst understanding the changing nature of the role.
- Consideration of joint working opportunities as part of the 'Shared Service' agenda.

Considerable progress has been made and the group has been tasked with putting arrangements for direct entry in place by 1 April 2013, so that the Service may initiate the plan at any point beyond this date. Similar arrangements for RDS transfers are to be available from February 2013.

## **5 Supporting our corporate aims and objectives**

- 5.1 The recruitment of the right employees in to the role of firefighters underpins all our future corporate aims and objectives.

## **6 Risk analysis**

- 6.1 There is no risk associated with RDS staff undertaking fixed term contracts for a short period of time as they do not acquire full employment rights until they have undertaken a full time role for two years. Therefore this will be carefully managed.
- 6.2 The process we have developed for permanent recruitment is reliant on the initial assessment of the role strengths being correct. We are confident that the research undertaken both at HFRS and Kent FRS has been sufficiently robust to ensure that any recruitment undertaken linked to these arrangements would produce candidates who are able to complete the role safely and effectively. We expect this new process to result in a wider diversity of successful candidates than has occurred in the past. This is as yet untested and the Service will therefore monitor the results to understand the impacts of the changed approach.

## **7 People Impact Assessment**

- 7.1 The proposals in this report are considered compatible with the provisions of the equality and human rights legislation.
- 7.2 A full people impact assessment will need to be completed in advance of the scheduled of the recruitment event (whenever this occurs).

## **8 Environmental and Sustainability impact Assessment**

- 8.1 There are clear environmental benefits from the changes proposed for direct entry and other permanent recruitment activities. We will be utilising the HCC recruitment portal and other on line facilities. These options include less use of natural resources (paper, petrol, etc) as the majority of candidates will have completed their application and initial testing on line. We would anticipate that we would have reduced the applicant pool of 1000 candidates down to approx 100 successful candidates by the time we reach the third stage when they will be required to undertake physical testing and an interview at SHQ facilities in Eastleigh.

## **9 Resources**

- 9.1 The work to bring RDS staff into the organisation through both fixed term contracts and permanent contracts will be met within existing arrangements.

The details of the full resource and financial implications for the revised direct entry arrangements will not be fully known until the detailed work has been progressed further. The following indicates our assessment at this time.

## 9.2 Human Resources

HFRS are looking to undertake a joint working approach on some elements with HCC recruitment team to assist in the ongoing management and facilitation of some of the steps in the process. There will be a cost associated with this approach which will be met from within existing budget arrangements.

HR (Workforce Planning) team will continue to manage the arrangements from start to finish, and will require the support of the Training Centre Instructors for practical testing sessions and Service Delivery line managers for the final stage interviews. The actual number of applicants reaching each stage will dictate the number of days that will be required.

## 9.3 Physical Resources

There is a cost associated with issuing an additional set of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to each RDS member who undertakes a fixed term contract.

For the formal selection processes for the direct entry, there is likely to be some costs associated with the purchase of PPE (e.g. gloves/boots for candidates undertaking the practical tests) together with Kevlar covers for the dummy used in the 'casualty drag'. All other pieces of equipment are in place at SHQ and in use on a monthly basis for RDS recruitment.

## 9.4 Information and Communications Technology Resources

There have been no implications in relation to progressing the options. Internal communications have been utilised to cascade the information on the RDS to Wholetime fixed term option. Work on the requirements for direct entry and other permanent selection options is on-going within the development work.

The HCC e-Recruitment Portal is likely to need some development work. We would expect there will be costs associated with the initial set up of an on-line application form. This is currently being progressed by HCC in order that they may provide accurate costings. External consultancy development work on strengths tests has been commissioned and the cost of these is being met from Departmental budgets.

## 9.5 Financial Implications

The full costs of the direct entry recruitment process are currently being finalised. Estimated costs are expected to be in the region of £106k. This will be covered from within planned budgets for recruitment activity. This estimate is based on the following breakdown:

- Development of new strengths based tests and interview - £30k. This figure includes the annual fee for testing 1000 candidates.
- Staff Training in new assessment techniques - £20k.
- Adaptation of HCC recruitment portal for HFRS and completion of

on-line testing by HCC - £18k.

- HFRS Micro-site development - £8k.
- Recruitment Advertising - £20k.
- Replacement PPE and testing equipment (gloves/boots, Kevlar covers for dummy, etc) – £10k.

## **10 Consultation**

- 10.1 Formal consultation meetings with the FBU and RFU have been conducted in relation to the fixed term proposal. Both parties are supportive of the option outlined.
- 10.2 Some consultation with the key stakeholder, Service Delivery, has occurred on their requirements for formal and permanent recruitment activities. This will be expanded to a wider group of representatives and include the FBU/RFU after our financial settlement is published and the impacts fully understood.

## **11 Conclusion**

- 11.1 A multi-faceted plan to meet the Service's future needs for wholetime firefighters has been established. It can help achieve the staffing levels required to meet operational needs, whilst retaining a high degree of flexibility for the Service in terms of its future financial challenges. The integration of a fixed term option allows the Service to bring in additional skilled staff at relatively short notice with permanent options, providing the ability to plan for the longer term. This contingent approach is a prudent and effective solution to the uncertainty that the Service currently faces.

## **12 Background papers**

- 12.1 The following documents disclose the facts or matters on which this report, or an important part of it, is based and has been relied upon to a material extent in the preparation of the report:

None

Note: The list excludes: (1) published works; and (2) documents that disclose exempt or confidential information defined in the Act.