

The 2023 pay offer letter which subsequently formed the basis of agreement, contained the following paragraph:

“It is proposed that both parties commit to a joint working group to include review of the retained duty system pay and rewards package.

Membership of the group and a schedule of dates should be agreed as soon as possible once the current pay award negotiations are concluded with the intention of the joint working group concluding its work within 8 months.”

Noting the agreed period, the group established joint terms of reference and quickly established a series of meetings to explore the possibility of identifying recommendations for the National Joint Council's consideration.

The working group had seven formal meetings, sought information directly from Fire and Rescue Services (FRSs), discussed various case studies, and debated the issues in detail. Notes of those meetings are attached in the appendices and this report seeks to give an overview of the work, areas, and statements of consensus. The paper also captures the various considerations where consensus was not possible across the group.

The working group members

Employers' side:

- Sarah Ward
- Gill Gittins
- Huw Jakeway
- Aidan Jennings
- Andy Cole
- Bob Warren
- Liz Barnes

Employees' side:

- Matt Wrack
- Ben Selby
- Riccardo la Torre
- Paul Revall
- Paul Farman
- Tony Curry

The working group met on

- Wednesday 3 May 2023
- Thursday 22 June 2023
- Thursday 27 July 2023
- Tuesday 5 September 2023
- Monday 30 October 2023
- Thursday 30 November 2023
- Thursday 4 January 2024

Understanding the motivation for those who join the RDS

The working group was established to explore pay and reward, but it was felt that understanding what had driven recruitment into the RDS thus far was also an important consideration. Early on the group agreed that it probably wasn't simply a financial transaction in this role – it's not all about money. The employers view is that the majority of RDS personnel join for a wider sense of community contribution, perhaps an historic family commitment and experience of being part of the fire and rescue service, perhaps to improve skills and knowledge. This discussion sits behind the group finding in principle consensus that broadening the role may help recruitment, retention and a greater sense of community commitment.

Recruitment and Retention

The working group looked at recruitment and retention data across the RDS and members accepted that there were growing concerns in most FRSs. It was noted that the average length of service of a retained firefighter was around seven years around a decade ago, data now suggests that it had fallen to around four-to-five years. Not only did this present an obvious retention issue, the significant cost of training a retained firefighter and associated equipment costs for PPE etc. means this can be costly.

The group noted the importance of the RDS model and specifically the extensive coverage provided by on-call stations across the UK. The group also noted the value and esteem in which retained firefighters are held across the sector and their communities.

The following statement was agreed by all:

“The current remuneration arrangements for retained firefighters are not particularly lucrative/generous, considering the time and commitment entailed”.

The working group conducted a survey of FRSs over the summer of 2023 which can be found at appendix *.

Consensus existed within the working group that in noting the demographics and age profile, coupled with recruitment and retention stats that there are problems that need solving.

This is partly what drove the working group to look in closer detail at several alternative models that have already been tried to see what we could learn from those different approaches.

The group also focussed meetings to the three themes of pay, activities and flexibility.

Whilst the role of a retained firefighter is still rightly held within high regard by local communities, the changing nature of how we live, and work has exacerbated recruitment and retention levels. With remote working becoming more prevalent since COVID, and significant changes in shopping and leisure habits, this has meant that communities are more spread out and less centred around one or two central areas (town centres, villages, offices, and business parks etc). In addition, the group felt a sense of changing priorities for families and work/life balance since the pandemic.

Financial context

The working group noted the financial challenge currently facing FRSs. Against that backdrop, members representing the employer side of the NJC argued for evidence-based solutions and felt constrained in reaching joint recommendations that might require any financial investment unless they could be confident of delivering improved recruitment, retention and availability ensuring stability in the longer term among the RDS workforce.

Members of the employee side reiterated their position that while accepting it was part of a broader challenge, they still felt that pay was part of the solution, to that end they urged the employers to address that issue.

Grey Book Annual Retainer Fee

The group considered whether the annual retainer fee adequately reflects the commitment required to be a retained firefighter. The group also explored what role the retainer fee has on recruitment and retention of staff which in turn drives the availability of on-call Appliances.

A significant area of regular discussion was for RDS firefighters to have the ability to earn money (and, in some cases, to increase the opportunity to earn more money) could support recruitment and retention,

The group discussed broadening the banding for the retainer fee. Currently only two bands exist within the Grey Book. If a retained firefighter gives more than 120 hours a week on-call, they are paid an annual retainer fee of 10% (of a wholetime firefighters wage – which currently amounts to £3,623 for a competent firefighter), or for *less than* 120 hours a week on-call 7.5% (£,2716 for a competent firefighter).

By adding further flexibility and increasing the banding, it would be fairer to those offering differing levels of cover. This could be calculated in a pro-rata manner, or could have narrower bands of, for example, 30 hours. An example is set out at the end of this paper.

Some members of the group highlighted that introducing bands for retainer payments to offer improved flexibility should not be at a punitive financial cost to the employee, others argued that to maintain the same bands for less commitment was simply unaffordable and unfair. There was concern that lowering the bands could undermine the commitment of those receiving the same pay, but for fewer hours of commitment.

The group all agreed that there should be further consideration given to incremental increases in the annual retainer fee and paying staff an hourly retainer, or within a band of availability, rather than a fixed retainer.

Exploring other models

The group reviewed examples of increased retainer fees that have been applied in some FRSs including Dorset & Wiltshire, Lancashire and a salary scheme adopted over 20 years ago in South Wales.

It was noted that the FRS' who have increased the retainer fee did not feel they could conclusively say they had seen an improvement in recruitment, retention, or availability. However, employer members of the group acknowledged retention challenges were less stark in these services, and that the evidence was not conclusive enough to say it had not (improved recruitment and retention).

South Wales FRS had seen improved availability but is now also seeing a reduction in availability. A competent firefighter on a 100% contract (105 hours availability) receives an annual salary of £14,765, although it was acknowledged the salary scheme would be unaffordable to introduce now.

South Wales FRS offer a flexible approach to contracts ranging from 30% to 100% contracts, the level of remuneration is commensurate with the contractual hours.

Increase the activity levels of RDS Firefighters

It was identified that an immediate way to improve RDS Firefighter pay is to increase earning potential by way of a broader role and an increased offer of community protection and response to those they serve. As discussed in our sessions exploring motivation, the group agreed that pay is not the sole motivation of RDS Firefighters. Noting the desire to serve their communities and the altruistic sense of public service being a fundamental driver for many, therefore the broader role fitting with this sense of public service. It was argued that this could bring further positive benefits to recruitment, retention and availability could be achieved by exploring this recommendation.

In addition to the broader role the group also discussed potential activity categories to increase activity as a means of additional remuneration for RDS Firefighters in some Services and those examples are listed below – all of which would require further discussion to understand how consistently all Services use these activities:

- Training (an increase to training time)
- Standby / Relief Crews
- Incident admin
- Non-emergency special services
- Specific specialisms/specialist crews
- Equipment Checks – Appliance routine / Inventory Fire safety/prevention
- Community safety
- Protection audit/inspection
- Site Specific Risk information
- Recruitment/awareness activity / Positive Action
- Transport – Appliance moves

Future roles

Noting discussions taking place across the sector, the group reflected that there are FRS's that are utilising in some way or exploring some form of emergency medical response (EMR).

This work has featured in discussion around the future development of the role of a firefighter. With a focus on supporting a greater emergency response to members of the community (in relation to their health) there are potential opportunities here for greater collaboration between the Ambulance service and FRSs.

Historically attempts to reach agreement on these issues have not succeeded, often due to funding/pay, but it was noted that part of growing legitimate activity for retained firefighters could be from this work – should the detail of how this could be achieved be subject to an NJC agreement.

Other ways of developing the role could also be explored, but EMR was the most obvious example that came up within the working group deliberations. Being mindful of future risks and demands and in supporting the UKs resilience capability.

Improve Flexibility within the Retained Duty System

While Services need improved flexibility, the group discussions captured that balancing work, life and families, was identified as a potential obstacle to recruitment and retention of retained firefighters. It was acknowledged that modern life and how we work and live now has not helped this challenge.

In addition to reviewing the way a retainer is paid, the group recommend further research is conducted to consider whether RDS firefighters are trained and the competencies they maintain are aligned to risk.

The case for investment

Further to all these discussion points, all parties represented at the RDS Joint Working Group recognise the requirement for investment in the Retained Duty System to continue to deliver improvements and the need for central Government funding to provide this.

It is strongly recommended that the NJC and relevant stakeholders continue to explore ways to underline this point.

Summary of final statements of consensus

At the final meeting of the working group, wrestling with these conflicting and long-standing challenges, the group were able to agree the following statements, to provide some in principle summary positioning:

- Acknowledge that there are growing recruitment/retention/availability problems regarding retained firefighters in many areas.
- Remuneration arrangements not particularly generous.
- Accept that other factors, community, changing nature of work, society etc impact the long-term stability of the current model.
- Discussions elsewhere, e.g., pay progression are likely to overlap and may also have an impact on the earning potential of retained firefighters.

- Discussions around future role of the FRS would have an impact on the earnings of retained firefighters.
- Retaining fee - this could be re-designed with a view to addressing banding related to availability, and experience?

Example illustration to capture potential starting discussion for the retainer be adjusted to incorporate more bands:

Up to 30 hours	5%
Up to 60 hours	7.5%
Up to 90 hours	10%
Up to 120 hours	12.5%
Over 120 hours	15%

This paper is intended to be the starting point for a more detailed conversation with the sector.