

ALERTER



THE REAL WIGHT STUFF



MARCH 2005



In a community that has to rely entirely on its own resources to protect itself, the unique nature of the Isle of Wight fire service recalls more noble times and gives it its great strength and durability

AS A SENIOR manager for Southern Water Richard Cullen has his hands full looking after waste water disposal for the Isle of Wight – and that's before he's answered any alerts from Newport's South St fire station. With the station's average of 40 shouts a month, Richard's time – and sleep – can be very much at a premium.

"Recently, I was going out on a Friday night with my girlfriend, after a long day at work and my bleeper went off – end of night out! The next day we're going into town again – this time to do some shopping – and I got another alert.

"So not only was I tired from the night before but my girlfriend was less than pleased. Couple this with the shouts that come through in the middle of the night – when you've got to get up for work the next day and be out of the house by half six – and you can see how tough it can be."

Such are the attempts to try to balance the sometimes impossible task of doing two jobs and maintain a family life. With the fire service presenting its own challenges in terms of hours on call and the unpredictable and very often unsociable nature of the work, imagine the firefighter who also earns his living in a high-pressure environment during the day.

Richard Cullen has been in management with Southern Water for over 15 years and has responsibility for a team of 13.

"Employers are demanding much more of their employees than they were 20 years ago when I joined the service," he says. "I do 40 to 50 hours a week as a mechanical and electrical section leader and then we're contracted to make 75% of all calls with the average being one shout a day. It is a struggle at times."

Matt Arnell, who's been in the service nine years has three jobs. Trained as a science teacher, he's a supply teacher to middle schools, as well as working part time

THE REAL WIGHT STUFF



for the fire service carrying out operational support. "I find it a very interesting and challenging job and, more importantly, it fits in with the lifestyle I want to lead," he says.

Matt is also involved with the community fire safety department, where he combines his teaching skills with his fire fighting knowledge by visiting local schools to talk about fire prevention.

"Apart from the 3am calls I really enjoy being a retained firefighter. Plus I feel like I'm giving something back to my local community."

The Isle of Wight is different from most other fire services in the UK with nine of the 10 stations on the island being fully retained. As only 5% of firefighters are whole-time the local community is almost totally reliant on men and women like Richard Cullen and Matt Arnell turning out in times of emergency.

But the island relies in large part on seasonal tourism to create jobs, so employment often has to be found some distance from the fire station. Many islanders make the trip to the mainland every day, so earning a living and supporting a family can be hard.

Jackie Mouat, leading retained firefighter and also in charge of admin at the Newport station for her full time job, knows that the main challenge for a retained-based fire service is its ability to give rapid cover.

"How quickly firefighters can get to the station is key. In the old days on the island the retained personnel lived and worked in their villages. Now in order to get work

**The Isle of
Wight is
different
from most
other fire
services in
the UK with
nine of the
10 stations
on the
island
being fully
retained**

people have to travel further afield. It can give us some serious headaches."

Because of the predominance of the retained side of the service – and this should come as some comfort to the local residents – the Isle of Wight has some of the most highly qualified retained firefighters in the UK.

They ride the 100ft turntable ladder, drive and operate not only the sky lift with a hydraulic platform of 80ft, but also the rescue tender and the instant response unit, used for civil resilience against terrorism.

"This brigade has no choice; we have to be ready to crew all the specials. And, bizarrely, I know for a fact that the whole-time station is under review as to whether it remains whole-time. Which would mean the island relying totally on the retained service," says Jackie.

Richard is the FBU representative for the retained service on the island, so he's fully aware of the implications for his members and his community.

"By removing the shift system you obviously increase the risk to the island. We have a very high percentage of elderly residents – with all the implications of requiring speed to get to an emergency.

"So jeopardising this station with its whole-time personnel puts the safety of the island at risk. It would be ludicrous to take it away."

The cash-strapped nature of the local fire authority and the particular demands on the fire service on the Isle of Wight have thrown up another issue which is occupying Richard's time.



Richard Cullen (left) and Andy Wren at work for Southern Water

Since the dispute – with retained firefighters now having the option of working 120 as opposed to 168 hours a week – the island's fire service is facing the dual problem of shortage of manpower and retained personnel not hitting their 75% of shouts.

"It's very difficult to hit your percentages, particularly if the calls come on your days off or – as we had this week – no calls for six days and then seven on one day," says Richard.

Discussions are on going between the brigade, the local authority, retained firefighters and the union.

Mark Deacon, the FBU chair on the Isle of Wight, has been working with Richard to progress the talks, the results of which are now going to be voted on by the membership.

Richard says the local fire authority expressed disappointment with the communication between the FBU, the brigade management and its employees. They consequently felt they couldn't make a ruling on the issue.

"Particularly on the Isle of Wight, with our unique conditions, we feel the fire service hasn't done enough to understand the retained firefighters – how they interact with the community they serve and the pressures of finding the correct work balance," he says.

"We often feel that we're being taken for granted as they know we love our community. They know when the bleeper goes off we'll turn in."

Richard says the retained personnel on the island may be leaning towards opting to work the 168-hour system which pays firefighters extra for the hours above 120 and believes that there is scope for local agreement to commit to 168 hours.

"We do 35 to 40 shouts a month on the island. Someone has to take those calls. If we all worked to 120



Proud to serve their fellow islanders: Matt Arnell, Richard Cullen, Jackie Mouat and Andy Wren
(all pictures William Raynor)



Retained staff ride the 100ft turntable ladder and drive and operate not only the sky lift with a hydraulic platform of 80ft, but also the rescue tender and the instant response unit used for civil resilience against terrorism



***Always on duty:
Richard Cullen (left)
on parade at the
South Street station
in Newport and with
Andy Wren (right)
his Southern Water
working clothes and
(below) Matt Arnell at
the station and about
to use his teaching
skills by talking to a
local school about fire
prevention***



hours I think there'd be problems."

However, one of his colleagues, Andy Wren, who also works with Richard at Southern Water and has been in the service 16 years, begs to differ. "I believe working to 120 hours gives us more flexibility. I'm hoping it will be less restrictive on my social life and give me a little more freedom to take time off."

The talks are as yet unresolved and the service to the Isle of Wight remains unchanged. In this close-knit community where the majority of retained firefighters are 'Caulkheads' (the term for a born and bred Isle of Wight local), the dedication to friends, relatives and

fellow islanders is strong.

With jobs ranging from florist, council worker and taxi driver to teacher, the retained fire service provides one of the main social safety nets for islanders.

It's a community that has to rely entirely on its own resources to protect itself and the unique nature of the Isle of Wight fire service recalls more noble times and ultimately gives it its great strength and durability.

"I enjoy doing the job," says Richard Cullen. "I'm proud to wear the uniform and I'm passionate about the fire service. Always have been and always will be. I'd run through a brick wall for our third officer."

The 120 hour myth

THE general message being put out by many chief fire officers is that they have had their retained station establishments cut by the introduction of the 120-hour maximum requirement for cover from fully retained fire-fighters. This is a misrepresentation of the facts. The following points need to be recognised by all officials who are involved in dealing with retained issues, especially with regards to establishment levels.

FACT: A single unit of cover on a retained station equates to 168 hours. This used to be achievable by employing one retained firefighter on a fully retained contract per unit of cover.

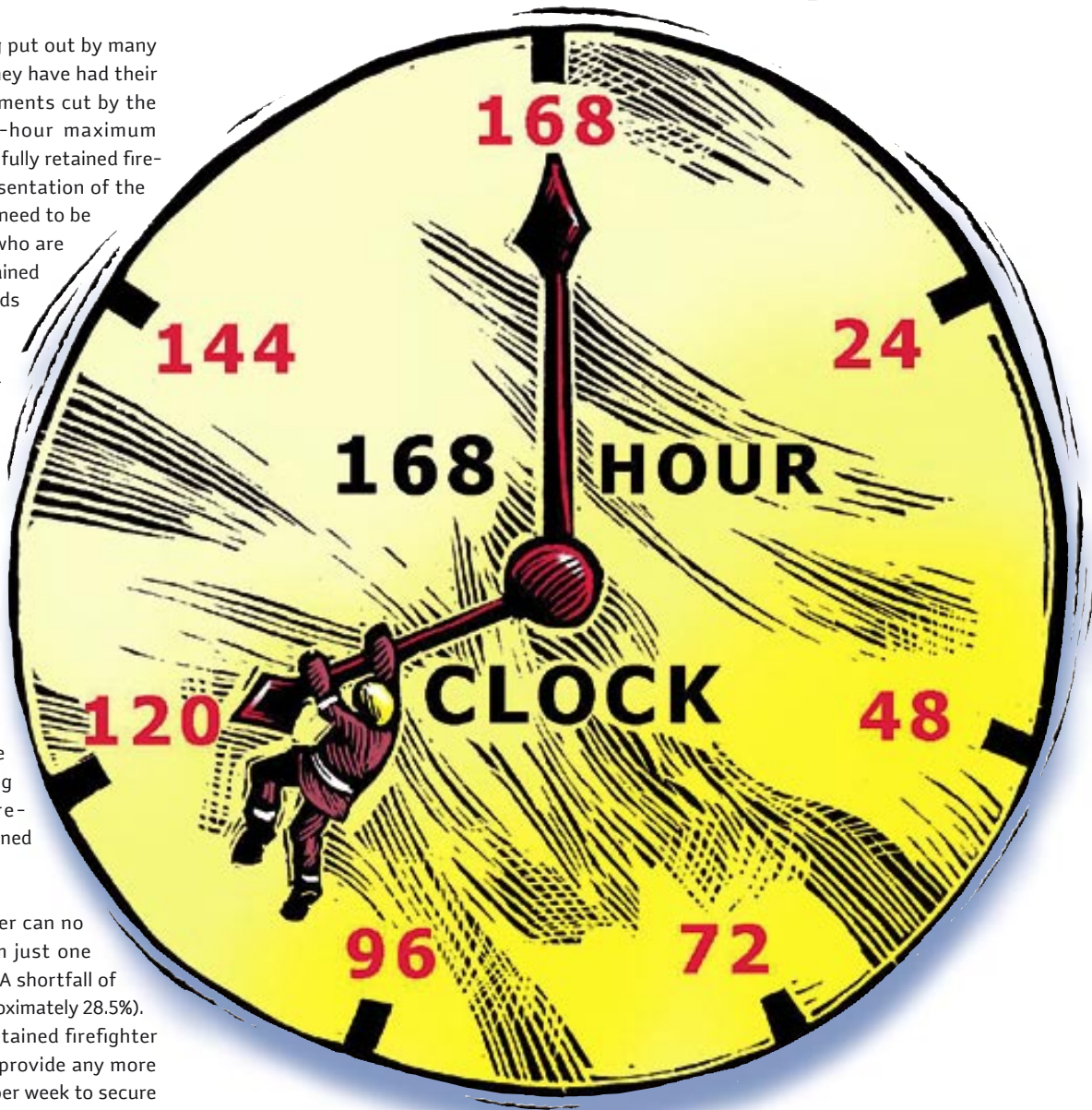
FACT: A single pump station requires 12 168-hour units of cover to maintain its full establishment. This used to be achievable by employing 12 fully retained fire-fighters each on fully retained contracts.

FACT: A single unit of cover can no longer be achieved from just one fully retained firefighter. A shortfall of 48 hours now exists (approximately 28.5%). This is because a fully retained firefighter now no longer needs to provide any more than 120 hours of cover per week to secure the full retaining fee.

FACT: The effect of this on retained stations across the board, and without exception, is that they are now understaffed by two sevenths (or around 28.5%) when operating at their previous full establishment levels. (This could be likened to the shortage in staffing created by the 1977 pay agreement which resulted in an additional watch being created on shift stations.)

FACT: Nationally this equates to an increase of well over 5,000 new jobs at a required investment cost of over £20,000,000 plus annually. This is in addition to what was intended by our employers in the June 2003 pay agreement.

FACT: Some (if not most) CFOs are already



RATE FOR THE JOB

On the right is a sample wording for contesting a brigade's refusal to pay full retaining fees to anyone giving 120 hours of cover or more. If you encounter further obstacles in securing the right rates of payment please contact your brigade retained representative or one of your brigade officials.

SUBJECT: Eligibility for Full Retaining Fees – 120 Hours Availability

Dear (Name of Payroll Officer or Brigade Officer)

I have noted that you intend to reduce my Retained Fees by 25% and claim back the full fees paid since the November pay increase and feel I must protest about this issue. The grounds for this are as follows:

1. My weekly availability prior to the November Pay Agreement was:

Monday: _____

Tuesday: _____

Wednesday: _____

Thursday: _____

Friday: _____

Saturday: _____

Sunday: _____

This adds up to a total of : _____ hours availability and as such equates to/exceeds 120 hours of availability per week.

2. This availability remains unchanged.

Please acknowledge receipt of this letter and list of my availability and advise me of your intentions. I await your reply.

kind regards

Rank, Full Name

Service Number

Station

Date

aware of this but are reluctant to raise this issue with their fire authorities.

FACT: As this part of the pay deal was negotiated with and agreed by our employers as part of the new pay agreement, it would be reasonable to expect them to provide their fire and rescue services with the additional funding now required in order to maintain their current establishment levels. If CFOs are not putting this to fire authorities then we must make sure that they are informed of this change so they can budget accordingly.

FACT: Due to establishment shortages on retained stations, many brigades have been operating with the benefit of a surplus of cash from their retained budget which they have used to prop up other shortages and deficiencies. This has now been all but wiped out in the majority of brigades where this money now has to be used to pay our members' wages as originally intended.

FACT: This significant change in retained conditions recently won for our members by the FBU has benefited many retained firefighters by ensuring that they now qualify for full retaining fees as opposed to semi-retaining fees. This is because of now fitting the new 120-hour model and has resulted in additional payments of up to £625.00 per year for those currently in the role of firefighter.

Do not doubt that they have at least some of the money available. For years there has been a lack of will or motivation in many brigades to recruit to the retained duty system.

It is one reason why there are so many vacancies at stations throughout the country. It may help us understand why if we look at the following points.

If a fire brigade has, for example, a retained establishment of 500 (the figure they ought to have) the fire authority will provide the money to pay for full retaining fees, all training, drills etc for all 500 required firefighters.

If however, there is a shortage of, say, 100 retained firefighters the fire brigade will end up with a surplus of cash in its retained budget. This money does NOT get returned to the fire authority.

It does NOT get paid to firefighters working the retained duty system. It does NOT get used to conduct a recruitment campaign for stations that are short crewed.

It IS however often used by chief fire officers and their managers to pay for other pet projects or deficits that arise in other areas of their brigade's budget. We are demanding that this practice cease immediately.

It is no wonder that there is no will to recruit to fill the shortfalls in our establishments when these slush funds exist to deter such initiatives. Now that is a perverse incentive!

Union fights off 'payment by salary' scheme in Wales

THE second draft IRMP from Mid and West Wales Fire Authority included a proposal to put all retained stations onto a salary scheme that would have been "banded" according to the number of calls a station responded to.

This scheme was promoted by management as rewarding firefighters for commitment and not deed and was pushed as a fairer method of payment. But it was also a requirement that the scheme was cost neutral so that no new money would be made available to pay for it.

The result was that although some stations and individuals could benefit from the change, there would also be a number that would be worse off. Many complaints about this were raised with management along with numerous requests for further details of the scheme.

Despite these protests and requests, no further information was forthcoming. Some officers suggested the FBU had endorsed it as a way forward for payment for the retained duty system of work.

This was categorically untrue and a series of meetings were organised to inform members. As it was only a draft document it was being released to be consulted upon, therefore it would be a good idea for the union to write back with its views on this issue.

A form of words was agreed and it was also suggested that any letters be targeted at the

chief fire officer and IRMP department. It was also suggested that a copy of the letter go to the fire authority as well. A discussion ensued on whether to send the letter from the stations or fire fighters.

It was clear from management's treatment of its workforce, that its style was inclined towards the dictating rather than negotiating.

There had never been a previous occasion when retained personnel had actually contacted the authority directly to complain about anything.

The letter writing and further meetings started, no small feat if you look at this geographical spread of the brigade. Some members travelled over 100 miles. Eventually we had hundreds of protest letters signed and timed to arrive just before the deadline for the consultation period and a few days before the fire authority met.

The end result though was as just as we had hoped. The authority overruled the brigade's plan to implement the banded salary scheme as there was 'far too much opposition to give it further consideration'.

This is, in the great scheme of things, perhaps only a small victory.

But it is a victory none the less and as such has resulted in a great boost to the morale of FBU members there who were beginning to

feel that there was little that could be done to combat management's often dictatorial style.

What members have gained from this experience is that they can influence change and potential change when they act in unity. This is a message we all need to keep uppermost in our minds when dealing with proposals of change that we believe are not in our members interests or the interests of the public we serve.

Building from this we got the branches to engage in dialogue with their authority members, councillors and MPs and invite them into stations, especially on a drill night, so that they can see for themselves what it is that they require from firefighters working the retained duty system.

This has proved very successful and has gained us many new supporters and allies. We will not win over the hearts and minds of all with this strategy but it will give them a clearer understanding of our role and the commitments and pressures we operate under.

Thanks are due to Rob Sheehan and Chris Howells, the brigade officials, for the huge amount of time they put into the campaign. They also go to John Purser Region 8's vice chair for his assistance in developing the tactics and strategy employed by the branches which ultimately was so successful.

FBU National Retained Committee

EC Member	Morris Butterfield	07718 159223	mbutterfield@fbu.org.uk
Acting Secretary	Pete Preston	07971 086990	peter.preston@fbu.org.uk
NRC Chair	Harry Cotter	07718 637251	nrcc@fbu.org.uk
Region 1:	Tam Mitchell	07801 047617	thomas.mitchell@fbu.org.uk
Region 2:	Sean McMillen	07074 779999	sean.mcmillen@fbu.org.uk
Region 3:	Mick Jones	07734 871049	mick.jones@fbu.org.uk
Region 4:	Bernard Clarke	07970 010275	bernard.clarke@fbu.org.uk
Region 5:	Miles Parkinson	07870 847070	miles_parkinson@yahoo.co.uk
Region 6:	Steve Reeve	07768 996511	steven.reeve@lineone.net
Region 7:	Ray Price	07881 914589	ray.price@fbu.org.uk
Region 8:	Grant Mayos	07970 475153	grant.mayos@fbu.org.uk
Region 9:	Kevin Kiddell	07967 041013	kevin.kiddell@fbu.org.uk
Region 11:	Richard Potter	07810 012122	richard.potter@fbu.org.uk
Region 12:	Bob Dewis	07966 754522	robert.dewis@fbu.org.uk
Region 13:	Leigh Redman	07971 484039	leighr@fbu.org.uk

Morris Butterfield: 07718 159 223

**Contact FBU Head Office on 020 8541 1765 or office@fbu.org.uk
for contact details of the members of the National Retained Committee**