

CHESHIRE FIRE AUTHORITY

MEETING OF: PERFORMANCE AND OVERVIEW COMMITTEE
DATE: 16th NOVEMBER 2016
REPORT OF : HEAD OF SERVICE DELIVERY
AUTHOR: ALEX WALLER

SUBJECT: ON CALL AVAILABILITY

Purpose of Report

1. This report follows on from the previous report of 13 April 2016. It compares on call performance for the first half of 2015/16 with the same period in 2016/17 and includes information for all on call pumps and a brief explanation of the key issues affecting performance.

Recommended: That

- [1] Members note the report.

Background

3. On call teams provide more than half of the Service's operational capability, this includes the operation of 19 fire appliances, 1 Hydraulic Platform, 2 Rapid Rescue Response Units and 1 Animal Rescue Unit. During the first half of 2016/17, average availability across all on call stations was 66%. (Appendix A, Table 2, Row 56) Whilst this is below the 85% target, the on call teams have delivered excellent service and value for money. For example, the cost of providing five on call pumps is less than the cost of providing one full time pump, and each year on call pumps attend around 20% of operational incidents attended by the Service. Despite these operational and economic benefits, there remains ongoing challenges, which hinder success against the 85% availability target. In the main, these include recruitment, retention, daytime cover, and the provision of adequate numbers of competent firefighters and supervisory managers.
4. During recent months, officers have been working on all of the above challenges, building the foundations and implementing improvements. This work has achieved swift positive outcomes across most metrics that underpin on call availability, for example, the number of on call staff, drivers, supervisory managers and competent firefighters has increased. However, it will take time for these successes to translate into improved on call availability. This is due to the nature of the issues and challenges affecting performance, as outlined below.

Information

5. **RECRUITMENT** – recruitment and retention is challenging in some areas but overall things are progressing well and during the last 6 months, the headcount has increased by nine staff. (Appendix A, Table 3, Row 28) This number is the balance after accounting for the 18 staff that have left the on call system during the same period.
6. **RETENTION** - Even when recruitment is successful, retention of staff presents further challenges. During the last 12 months 33 on call staff have left the organisation. Recent surveys highlight that pay, reward and job satisfaction play an important role in retention. Therefore, the massive decline in call volumes over recent years affects retention.
7. Fewer incidents means less pay for on call firefighters. The financial benefits of working as an on call firefighter is a significant motivator, with 24% of those surveyed indicating the income from the on call role as a primary reason for joining the Service.
8. The Service has already improved pay opportunities for on call staff by providing 25% more training hours than most other services across the UK. This approach boosts regular earnings and ensures that the on call staff can maintain the same skills and competencies as their whole time counterparts.
9. To further improve pay and link it directly to performance, officers have recently (1 October 2016) introduced a new On Call Availability Reward Scheme (OCARS). This scheme will mean a financial reward of between £550 and £1000 for staff working at stations that achieve the on call availability target of 85%. Furthermore, officers have also introduced a pilot at two on call stations, which requires the on call staff to respond to incidents involving cardiac arrest, thus increasing opportunities for more pay and improving job satisfaction.
10. **DEVELOPMENT FIREFIGHTERS** - The success of recruitment campaigns over the last year means that there are a high numbers of development firefighters working towards competence. Whilst in development, firefighters cannot be counted as fully functioning crewmembers and without a full crew the pump cannot be made available.
11. To speed up the journey to operational competence, officers have introduced the 'Shadow Pump' concept. This innovative approach is exclusive to Cheshire and it means that new and developing on call teams are mobilised in a supernumerary capacity to a wide range of incidents where they can gain experience and on the job training/coaching. For example, so far this year Alsager has responded to 56 incidents as a supernumerary resource.
12. Over the last six months the number of competent firefighters has increased by four. (Appendix A, Table 3, Row 28) This number is the balance after accounting for the 18 staff that have left the on call system during the same period.

13. **SUPERVISORY MANAGERS** are vital to both managing the on call teams and commanding operational incidents. Progression to supervisory level requires competence at firefighter level, so the current high number of development firefighters means we have fewer firefighters that are ready to step up to supervisory level. To address this officers have recently introduced a pilot at a few stations which means those stations can employ an extra supervisory manager on a temporary basis. In addition, officers are about to release a job advert relating to a pilot for a new 'Whole-time On Call Watch Manager' role. This new role will oversee two on call stations, providing both managerial capacity and operational daytime cover, thus helping to improve fire appliance availability.
14. Finally, over the last six months officers have been working with competent firefighters to develop them into supervisory roles. This has resulted in an increase of six supervisory managers. (Appendix A, Table 3, Row 28) This figure is the remainder after deducting the number of supervisory managers that have left the organisation during the same period.
15. **DAYTIME COVER** consistently proves difficult to achieve on many stations, mainly because most on call firefighters work outside of the five-minute catchment of their station so cannot provide cover from their workplace during the daytime. To address this, officers are considering the possibility of using technology to allow the on call fire appliances to be available - in certain circumstances - but on a delayed turnout. Whilst this will not assure a rapid response, it will mean the difference between the pump being available or not. The pump can then be mobilised as a support pump to larger incidents or as relief crews for longer incidents, thus maximising capacity and capability. This in turn will mean more turnouts for on call crews therefore leading to improved job satisfaction and retention.
16. Furthermore, officers have also piloted a recruitment event at a local school, specifically focusing on mothers/fathers that may be available during the daytime once they have dropped the children at school. The model proved successful and is being rolled out across other locations.
17. **RESULTS** All of the above demonstrates that a wide range of targeted actions and initiatives is achieving positive results. Things are progressing positively even though 18 on call staff have left during the last 18 months. New firefighters are being recruited to fill vacancies; more firefighters are moving from development to competent; and more are taking on supervisory roles. New initiatives that improve rewards are being implemented including the OCARs and Cardiac Response, and new approaches are being developed and implemented to improve daytime cover. All of this means that when compared with last year the headcount is up, the number of drivers and supervisory managers is up; and the number of competent firefighters is up. The only thing that has not yet improved is the on call availability. Officers are confident that with perseverance towards the longer-term plan, the availability will improve during the second half of the year.

Financial Implications

18. Due to the high number of vacancies, the on call cost for 2016/17 is likely to fall within the budget allocation. This includes the cost of the new pilots for Responding to Cardiac Arrest, OCARS, the new Wholetime On Call Watch Manager Role, and additional temporary supervisory manager posts.

Legal Implications

19. There are no direct implications for the Authority.

Equality and Diversity Implications

20. There are no direct implications for the Authority.

Environmental Implications

21. There are no direct implications for the Authority.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS: NONE