

By: Assistant Director, Community Safety  
To: Planning and Performance Committee – 27 April 2015  
Subject: VARIABLE CREWING PROJECT  
Classification: Unrestricted

**FOR INFORMATION**

**SUMMARY**

This report provides Members with details of work being completed under the 'Variable Crewing Project'. This work ranges from alternative ways of crewing fire appliances, to actions taken to improve fire cover in rural locations; all with the view of improving our service to the communities of Kent and Medway.

**CONCLUSION**

Members are requested to:

1. Consider and note the contents of the report.

LEAD/CONTACT OFFICER: Assistant Director, Community Safety – Martin Adams  
TELEPHONE NUMBER: 01622 692121 ext 7750  
EMAIL: martin.adams@kent.fire-uk.org  
BACKGROUND PAPERS: None

## COMMENTS

### Background

1. The Authority continues to meet the challenges of reduced demand, financial constraints and the changing nature of the service. As a result it needs to continue to examine alternative ways of crewing fire appliances and the introduction of alternative duty systems in order to reflect a reducing establishment, whilst being able to maintain the very best fire cover possible. This work is encompassed within the 'Variable Crewing Project'. Members have previously received reports on this project and this paper provides the latest update.
2. The following sections describe the work taking place within the scope of the Variable Crewing Project.

### Variable Crewing Project

3. **The 'Flexible Rostering Duty System'** - A considerable amount of research into different duty systems employed throughout the country has been conducted, looking at other fire and rescue services as well as organisations in the private sector such as the *Automobile Association* and *Tesco*, who all provide service on a 24/7 basis. Following this research, the 'flexible rostering duty system' was designed for use within the Authority.
4. As the name implies, the system has been designed to be flexible. Fire stations effectively become self-sufficient, covering sickness, training courses and annual leave themselves. By operating a more efficient model, the total number of firefighters on stations can be reduced, delivering financial savings for the Authority whilst still maintaining existing levels of service.
5. Under the new system, individual members of staff are allocated a set amount of shifts which they are required to work throughout the year. Within certain parameters staff select the days and nights that they are available to work, and it is the responsibility of local managers to ensure that their fire appliance is crewed with the appropriately qualified personnel.
6. Because only four personnel are required to be on duty at any one time, this creates a number of excess shifts, which are known as 'banked shifts', which are not required on a day-to-day basis to crew the fire engine. They are effectively 'held in a bank' for when the Authority needs to use them.
7. Some of the positive advantages provided by the new system with the banked shifts includes stations and Groups now being able to bring all of the station personnel together to receive training on a set day. An example of this is where first aid training can be provided to all personnel on one day at their home station location. Personnel

can train and exercise together, so they get to work with different members of staff every day, rather than being assigned to a Watch where they would only work with the same few individuals.

8. The nine day-crewed fire stations and the Channel Tunnel are all operating the new 'flexible rostering duty system' model and the new Chatham and Rochester Fire Stations will also move across to this system upon opening.
9. **The 'Fifth Watch'** - As the wholetime establishment of the organisation reduces, the Authority will be required to explore more creative and innovative methods of covering crewing shortfalls throughout holiday periods, or on stations that may experience periods of long-term sickness.
10. The 'Fifth Watch' was introduced in late 2014 to provide county-wide resilience when crewing numbers fall below the required levels. The team of six personnel operate under a flexible system, and are able to cover shortfalls at short notice anywhere in the county. They are highly skilled individuals, who have the necessary qualities and attributes to operate effectively within any team throughout the county.
11. It is anticipated that, as the wholetime establishment decreases over the next few years, the Fifth Watch will grow in size in order to fill any shortfalls in crewing as and when required.
12. **Annualised hours contracts** - In January 2012, a number of wholetime and on-call personnel were awarded secondary contracts to provide additional cover on their days off. These hours are then used to move personnel to on-call stations where there are crewing shortfalls.
13. Over the coming months this system will be replaced by Additional Voluntary Hours (AVH), where personnel will receive a payment for the hours they have worked rather than an additional fixed contract. Using AVH allows more effective planning and use of resources throughout the year, as and when demand requires. This will prove to be a more cost-effective and efficient use of already trained and experienced firefighters.

#### **Attendance Time Improvements**

14. With a view to constantly reviewing performance, and looking to improve the levels of service provided to the community, local attendance times are continually examined. Data analysis has highlighted a number of stations where attendance times to incidents could be improved by crewing them pro-actively during the day. From January 2015, it has been a priority to send personnel on annualised hours contracts to certain stations where detailed analysis has shown improvements can be made. As a result, the Authority has seen overall improvements in the time it takes to reach incidents in these areas.

15. An example of this in practice is on the Isle of Sheppey, where a significant increase in the number of fires in prisons was experienced. By ensuring that on-call fire cover was maintained throughout the day, the Authority was able to improve its attendance to these incidents.
16. As a further example, Swanley was identified as an area of high demand, but where the on-call crew was unavailable during the daytime. As a result, one of the two fire engines at Dartford has been moved to Swanley between 09:00 – 17:00hrs each day. This has already led to attendance time improvements in the area, where the fire appliance has dealt with several incidents within a few minutes. Previously the same fire appliance would have had to be sent from Dartford, some ten minutes further away.

### **Improving Fire Cover in Rural Locations**

17. **Review of the on-call service** - It has been four years since the service moved from 'retained' to 'on-call', following the introduction of the 'Part time Workers (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment ) Regulations 2000'.
18. Whilst the Authority is now able to guarantee fire cover based on fixed contracts, it has always been a problem, both locally and nationally, to recruit and retain on-call firefighters within rural communities.
19. As part of the first phase of the review of the on-call service, a consultant was appointed to examine the reasons why recruitment and retention was proving more challenging. The report highlighted the following:-
  - (a) Demand on the service has reduced significantly over recent years. The perception of a new recruit on-call firefighter was that they would be operationally busier;
  - (b) Some personnel join the on-call service with the idea that it will be a route to the wholetime service. As the wholetime establishment continues to reduce, this route will no longer exist.
20. These two factors alone have significantly impacted the potential for recruiting new firefighters and subsequently retaining them in the service.
21. A review of on-call recruitment has been conducted as part of the first phase, and has identified a number of ways in which the process can be streamlined and improved for the future. Some of the recommendations of the review are in the early stages of being implemented, whilst others will require a longer term view when the Safety Plan 2016 is developed.
22. The second phase of the review will examine future duty systems for the on-call service, including improved county resilience.

## **IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

23. Aside from future financial constraints, it is clear that the reduction in demand and the changing nature of the services the Authority provides will necessitate a much more flexible approach to crewing arrangements.
24. The models described in this report have been carefully developed, in consultation with representatives of the Fire Brigades Union. Effective industrial relations with accredited representatives have greatly assisted the Authority in improving the way it meets the needs of communities and businesses.

## **CONCLUSION**

25. Members are requested to:
  - 25.1 Consider and note the contents of the report.