

## **Title**

Managerial and leadership implications of the retained duty system in English fire and rescue services: an exploratory study

**Purpose:** This paper explores the managerial and leadership challenges faced when managing personnel in the retained duty system (RDS) within English Fire and Rescue Services. It examines the key areas of motivation, commitment, culture, relationships, and practical management arrangements.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This exploratory research, using primary and secondary sources, adopted a deductive approach, incorporating questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis.

**Findings:** The research identified issues agreed upon by both employees and managers, and as well as areas of disparity and conflict. It also highlighted matters that appear to be pivotal to the successful management of a retained duty system, and in particular the importance of how roles are deployed, and managed by senior management, as well as how employees perceive them.

**Practical Implications:** This paper offers recommendations regarding the managerial understanding and appreciation of an RDS as some managers in this research appear to have little or no knowledge of (or indeed a misconception of) key issues in the effective management of the RDS. It suggests recommendations for the wider support and engagement of RDS personnel.

**Originality/Value:** This paper offers a contemporary assessment of the challenges faced when managing RDS personnel. While firefighters and whole-time unionised firefighters in particular, have attracted interest from scholars of Industrial Relations, there has been relatively little academic research from a public management perspective.

## **Introduction**

Fire and Rescue Services in England are provided by firefighters who work within one of two staffing systems: either a whole-time duty system (WDS) defined as “staff whose main employment is a firefighter, regardless of their role” (DCLG, 2015), or a retained duty system (RDS), defined as “personnel contracted to be available for agreed periods of time for fire-fighting purposes, but who could have alternative full-

time employment” (DCLG, 2015), although a small minority of WDS can and do offer on-call provision when off-duty from the WDS.

In 2015, England had 35,958 firefighters, of which 10,828 were RDS personnel. RDS employees are traditionally employed in the more sparsely populated areas of the country. Every one of the 13 county Fire and Rescue Authorities deploys RDS firefighters, but there are relatively few in the six ‘Metropolitan’ Services. The London Metropolitan Fire Brigade employs the largest number of firefighters in the UK, all of whom are WDS firefighters. The table below highlights the number of RDS and WDS personnel across a typical number of fire and rescue services in England (DCLG, 2015).

	Type of Fire Authority	Retained Personnel (FTEs)	Retained personnel %	Wholetime Personnel (FTEs)	Wholetime personnel %
Cumbria	County	318	62%	194	38%
Lincolnshire	County	458	67%	221	33%
Cheshire	Combined	150	26%	430	74%
Derbyshire	Combined	221	38%	355	62%
Hereford and Worcestershire	Combined	253	47%	286	53%
Leicestershire	Combined	161	28%	406	72%
Nottinghamshire	Combined	130	20%	523	80%
South Yorkshire	Metropolitan	77	11%	624	89%
West Midlands	Metropolitan	6 <sup>1</sup>	0%	1574	100%
Greater Manchester	Metropolitan	31	2%	1419	98%
London	London	0	0%	5068	100%

Table 1: WDS and RDS employees in the four types of service in England.

Source: Author, from data compiled via DCLG website

<sup>1</sup> The retained figures have a small minority who are WDS but are part of the retained force in the neighbouring FRS. For example these six listed RDS in West Midlands Fire Service (WFMS) are actually active RDS in neighbouring services

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-communities-and-local-government>) [accessed 2015]

It is not the purpose of this paper to suggest that either the WDS or the RDS systems are 'superior'. It is clear that the use of either system is situationally sensitive and that a mixture of the two systems is necessary in the UK in order to optimise the deployment of resources. Whilst RDS staff seem more cost effective to operate than equivalent numbers of WDS firefighters, the advantages of this may have been overstated. An Integrated Personal Development System was introduced after the national strike in 2003 to reduce the ambiguity around the roles of both WDS and RDS (Andrews, 2010). Although since 2010, and despite the (then) Fire Minister Bob Neill extolling the use of RDS (DCLG, 2010) fire and rescue services across England have seen significant reductions to their funding through a reduction in both central government grants and a cap on local council tax precepts; a real-terms reduction of approximately 28%. Many of these savings have been through a reduction in support staff, RDS and WDS employees with a reduction of 14% WDS personnel in England between 2010 and 2015 (NAO, 2015a).

The previous governments' review of the national framework (DCLG 2010) was meant to trigger a fundamental review of how fire and rescue services operate; a desire further promoted by the independent review 'Facing the Future' (Knight, 2013), which estimated that significant savings of up to £123 million per annum could be achieved if authorities increased their use of RDS personnel by 10% and reduced WDS staffing. However, two years later, the National Audit Office (2015b) reported that "not all fire and rescue services have introduced key proposals endorsed by the Department for Communities and Local Government" but that despite the recent austerity measures the "sector has coped well with the financial challenges to date", despite there being "gaps in the Department's (for Community and Local Government) understanding of the impacts of its funding reductions".

The current government's spending review in 2015 outlined further reductions of 21% in Fire Service funding by 2020 (HMT, 2015), and the NAO has since suggested that this continued austerity may well see an increase in the number of authorities starting to show "low-level signs of financial stress" (NAO, 2015) and will undoubtedly also require a greater reliance on the use of RDS employees in order to

meet savings requirements. This view also gained support from the new Minister of State for Policing, Fire and Criminal Justice, Mike Penning (a previous WDS firefighter) who has emphasised that the RDS model is key to “providing a low-cost and effective service” for fire and rescue services in England (Penning, 2009).

The political and managerial consensus on the importance of RDS to the future effectiveness of fire and rescue services operations seems clear, yet many fundamental questions around how to successfully manage an RDS service remain, especially with regard to optimising leadership, staff motivation and securing commitment. Therefore this research posed the question: *‘what are the key issues and challenges that need to be understood when managing a RDS in England?’*

This question was operationalised via an examination of aspects of management, looking at in particular staff culture, management practices, motivation, and commitment and use of the RDS within four fire and rescue services within the East Midlands in England: Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Lincolnshire and Leicestershire. These four counties demonstrate a variety of geographic and demographic circumstances that provide a contrasting mix of challenges and opportunities for their Fire and Rescue Services. Whilst all of these services offer a traditional hierarchical approach to management within their services, they differ in their governance arrangements; Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire report to a Combined Fire Authority whilst Lincolnshire reports to the County Council. The governing council in a ‘County’ Fire Authority consists of indirectly elected councillors drawn from a single local authority such as Lincolnshire County Council. A Combined Authority consists of councillors drawn proportionately from two or more local authorities e.g. Derbyshire FRA has 12 councilors from Derbyshire County Council and 4 from Derby City Council.

As shown in table 1, all four services utilise an RDS to differing degrees – Lincolnshire has the highest dependence on this model of delivery (67%) due to its sparse geographical area and limited financial budget (Lincolnshire FRA, 2015). Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire Services have both recently increased the use of the RDS coupled with a reduction to their WDS whilst Leicestershire FRS<sup>2</sup> have

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<sup>2</sup> Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland Fire and Rescue Authority is referred to as Leicestershire FRA in this paper for the sake of brevity.

recently explored the closure of both WDS and RDS stations through their proposed Integrated Risk Management Planning process, which is the statutory risk assessment process upon which service configurations are based in the UK (Leicestershire FRS, 2016).

## **Previous Studies**

The use of RDS has been shown to be contingent on organisational culture and circumstances. Therefore a review the literature surrounding affective and managerial practices involving volunteers as well as part-time auxiliary staff was carried out.

### *Culture and Relationships*

Fire and rescue service culture has been subject to a number of studies in recent years (Lucas, 2015; Fitzgerald and Sterling, 1999; Fitzgerald, 2005). Most of these studies have concentrated on the effect of a highly unionised workforce (e.g. Fitzgerald and Sterling 1999), which has a significant impact on employee / management relations (Redman and Snape 2006); this has often been expressed as the presence of a divisive and even ‘toxic’ culture between duty systems, management and the workforce (Lucas, 2015).

Similarly, there are a number of studies relating to culture and relationships in other sectors that are strongly resonant with the UK fire and rescue sector, offering the potential for similarities to be drawn and lessons to be learnt. UK police forces operate a role of ‘special constable’ – a part-time volunteer role that undertakes the same duties as full-time counterparts. Gill and Mawby (1990) examined the divide between ‘regular’ and ‘special’ constables, suggesting it can be significant, and how the “motives, competence and effectiveness” of specials is often questioned by other regular officers, thus creating tension within their relationships. In addition to the relationships between the two groups of personnel, Gaston and Alexander (2001) reported the impact that variables such as marital status, parenthood and gender can have, while Cooley et al. (1989), noted that those personnel in volunteer roles were often less bound by the norms and values of an organisation when studying volunteers in family support services .

### *Management in practice*

Brudney (1999) disputes a common misconception that 'volunteers' cannot be managed effectively and provides a number of recommendations around good management in practice. These recommendations focus around the creation of job descriptions specifically for 'volunteers' to incorporate their strengths and limitations (such as exposure and commitment as well as previous experiences and qualifications) as well as offering 'career' progression and close supervision and guidance.

Lockstone's (2004) research on managing the volunteer workforce focused on managerial flexibility, highlighting the need for managers to adopt a more flexible approach to volunteers, who often have to balance a number of commitments. This approach is supported by Gaston and Alexander, who argued that "understanding the motives and domestic and personal challenges is important for managers" (2001), whilst Scott et al., (2010) focused on the wellbeing of employees and the importance of managerial empathy.

Despite the importance of the sensitive management of volunteers, and early literature highlighting how failure to manage them effectively may lead to dysfunctional relationships and increased costs (Moynes, 1966; Twelvetrees, 1991). Wilson and Pimm (1996) found that volunteers were often not managed properly or sometimes not even managed at all, and they highlight the 'fear' of some organisations to utilise volunteers.

### *Motivation*

The motivation of people to volunteer their time and effort has been widely explored across a number of sectors and countries and is clearly significant in understanding RDS staff (Gaston and Alexander, 2001, McLennan and Birch 2012). Pearce contends that motivation declines after the initial decision to volunteer has been made (1983). Gaston and Alexander (2001) looked at the various motivations of special constables, which ranged from 'helping the community' and 'doing something worthwhile' to 'wearing a uniform' and 'having power'. Marx (1999) explored the motivation of volunteers in the health sector and highlights how volunteering can be seen by some as a 'coping strategy' whilst it is also influenced by age, life satisfaction, activity levels, and previous educational achievement. These areas

were also addressed by Fisher and Ackerman (1998) who drew upon a 'social norm' perspective and focused on the 'group need' aspect of volunteering such as the social rewards that are achieved from spending time with like-minded people. This form of recognition is also supported by Choudhury (2010) who suggested that recognition and reward are key motivators for volunteers working within local government.

More recently, as part of the coalition government's localism agenda, both national and local policy has encouraged the deployment of special constables. When investigating the motivations of special constables, Bullock and Leevey (2014) found that many of the participants gave altruistic reasons as their main motivators for undertaking the role. This research is, however, contradicted by Schram (1985) who found that volunteering is 'rarely altruistic' in its motivation; a belief supported by a number of other studies showing that volunteers expect to benefit from their commitment (Moore, 1985; Stebbing, 1996). These findings are tempered by Pearce (1993) who reports that many public-sector volunteers can be classed as 'pro-social'; a middle ground between altruism and self-gain where participants have a desire to do good for society but with a moderation of costs vs benefits.

Bullock and Leevey (2014) noted that one of the motivation for some volunteers to become a special constable is the possibility of full-time employment within the sector. This is an area that a number of fire and rescue services highlight as a point of potential similarity, as they identify 'migration' opportunities between the RDS and WDS – a factor highlighted as an unfulfilled motivation for many RDS and volunteer firefighters in Scotland (Maclean, 2002).

In terms of the motivations of volunteers as opposed to auxiliary or retained personnel, Haddad (2006) explored the patterns of volunteering in a range of national settings and suggests the differences are a function of individual and collective attitudes to responsibilities for caring. Thus in Japan, for example, where traditional forms of volunteering are enduring (Haddad 2007), citizens believe government should deal with social problems, whereas in the USA citizens believe individuals should take responsibility. This leads her to suggest that citizens' attitude to individual and collective responsibility "are best able to explain the prevalence of

different types of volunteer organisations found in different countries” (Haddad 2006 p1220).

Thompson and Bono’s earlier survey of volunteer firefighters in Ulster County, New York, suggested that individuals engage to “struggle against the pervasive alienating nature of productive activity in capitalist economies in an effort to achieve self-actualization” (1993 p.323). Although a more recent study by Carpenter and Myers (2010) in Vermont, uses data on volunteer firefighters to show how volunteering is positively correlated with altruism, as well as a concern for social reputation or image.

In Australia where volunteer firefighter numbers have declined, and there is a concern about the ageing volunteer firefighting workforce, McLennan and Birch (2012) found a mix of community-safety concerns, community-contributions and self-orientated motivations predominate, while in rural New South Wales, Baxter-Tomkins and Wallace (2009) found the strongest inducements to be based upon personal relationships.

### *Commitment*

The motivation to join or volunteer and continuing commitment to volunteer are often inter-related and studied alongside each other, but they are not synonymous.

McLennan et al’s study (2007), for example, of women volunteer firefighters found few differences in the initial motivations between women and men, but did find significant differences in women’s experiences after initially being welcomed and accepted.

Understanding what drives the commitment of volunteers is therefore also a key managerial aspect to their effective use, and has been explored by a number of studies (e.g. Taylor et al., 2006; Hilltrop, 1995; Cnaan and Cascio, 1998). Taylor et al. (2006) explored the psychological contract as a key to commitment whereby the individual, despite not always having a physical contract, is committed to the cause through a psychological commitment to the ideals of the role. Guest and Mackenzie-Davey (1994) reported the importance of individuals having ‘realistic job expectations’ even if they are ‘unpalatable’, the lack of which is highlighted by Sparrow (1995) as being a key contributor to lower commitment, absenteeism and turnover; a comment reiterated by Rousseau (1990). This focus on the



psychological contract of volunteering is also researched by Hiltrop (1995) who explored the effects on employees who have less job-security and stability than long-term employees. Hiltrop offers suggestions such as prioritising reward and recognition, managing career expectations and providing systematic training as key elements to building this 'unwritten' contract and maximising commitment from personnel.

Bussel and Forbes (2002) report that volunteers operate on a 'risk vs benefit' basis; considering the benefits that they will achieve from volunteering their time compared to the efforts, impacts and risks that they have to expend. Bullock and Leevey (2014) highlight how, 'in lieu of pay, feeling 'valued' is very important' to maintaining the commitment of volunteers; an approach which is supported by McGee (1988) and Hager and Brudney (2004) who detail the significance of recognition and reward in maintaining commitment.

Despite this attention across the volunteering literature, little consideration has been given to fire and rescue in terms of these issues for managing a RDS. However, the scholarship does identify a number of studies that provide insight into similar considerations in other sectors, notably with volunteers and part-time workers. Exploring these concepts formed the basis of the primary research for this study.

### **Method and Methodology**

The primary research for this project adopted a 'mixed-method' deductive approach in an effort to incorporate both qualitative and quantitative research (Neuman, 2005, Saunders et al. 2012). Primary research included an on-line, semi-structured survey utilising a questionnaire distributed across fire and rescue services within the UK through social media, direct emails to Services and through the Chief Fire Officers Association communities' websites. In total, 551 questionnaires were completed; 157 by managers and 394 by RDS personnel. These returns provided quantitative data as well as some qualitative data through the narrative responses of participants.

12 in-depth, elite and workforce interviews were undertaken following purposive sampling. The interviews were complemented by focus groups undertaken with managers, RDS and WDS employees. The interviews and focus groups followed a similar semi-structured approach with the same four areas of questioning and questions adapted to suit the participants of each group.

The research also used secondary data in the form of ‘exit interviews’ and disciplinary data from fire and rescue services as well as ‘grey literature’ in the form of previous RDS reviews, middle manager development programs and Service’s Integrated Risk Management Plans (IRMPs). One of the authors was also an active participant at local, regional and national meetings and working groups relating to the future of the RDS in England. All participants, in the interviews and focus groups were made aware of this, and although arrangements were design so as to minimise reactive bias or social desirability influencing the results, this cannot be fully eradicated in these circumstances.

## Findings

### a. Culture, relationships and the historical ‘divide’ between WDS and RDS

The relationships between WDS and RDS firefighters was discussed throughout the primary research and elicited a range of responses. The response to the initial survey is shown in table 2.

		Completely Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Unsure (%)	Agree (%)	Totally Agree (%)
I think that there is a difference between the way WDS and RDS need to be managed	Employees	2.54	7.38	3.82	43.77	42.49
	Managers	1.27	6.37	0	38.22	51.14
Managers have empathy with the RDS regarding their role.	Employees	11.68	34.26	28.17	23.35	2.54
	Managers	1.27	2.55	2.55	37.58	56.05
Management understand the domestic and social challenges to being a RDS employee	Employees	21.28	39.23	16.41	20.51	2.56
	Managers	0.64	0.64	1.92	40.38	56.41
The relationship between WDS and RDS personnel is positive and there is no divide	Employees	16.37	35.29	23.27	21.99	3.07
	Managers	5.10	42.68	23.57	24.20	4.46
Management understand the culture and relationships between WDS and RDS	Employees	8.95	35.29	29.41	23.79	2.56
	Managers	0	5.13	5.13	66.03	23.72
Pay and reward drives commitment in the RDS role	Employees	31.71	38.62	8.95	17.14	3.58
	Managers	15.48	43.87	16.13	21.94	2.58
People are motivated to join the RDS by wanting to join the Wholetime Fire Service	Employees	25.06	23.36	2.84	26.87	18.86
	Managers	7.05	54.49	16.03	19.23	3.21
Management give sufficient reward and recognition by the RDS role	Employees	21.74	37.60	16.62	20.97	3.07
	Managers	13.38	33.76	16.56	35.03	1.27

Management understands what drives commitment to being RDS	Employees	14.54	32.65	34.69	15.56	2.55
I have sufficient knowledge and understanding to manage a Retained Duty System	Managers	0	5.16	1.94	40.65	52.26

This shows some commonality in the responses to the questions but also highlighted some areas of difference between the responses from managers and RDS firefighters. Whilst there was a common recognition that there is a difference between the way that the RDS and WDS should be managed, managers and employees' opinions differed significantly when broaching the subject of whether managers understood the social and domestic challenges of being on an RDS, or showed sufficient empathy with RDS personnel.

Another significant area of difference was in relation to management understanding the culture and relationships between WDS and RDS. There appeared to be areas where the opinions of managers and employees are strongly polarised. This suggests significant differences between personnel and their managers and presents potential challenges for services in that personnel are clearly not engaged with the actions of managers and there is a risk that management believe that they understand a duty system which it would seem, they may not. These concerns are compounded by the fact that the majority of managers feel that they have sufficient understanding and knowledge in order to manage a retained duty system effectively.

In summary surveys found a significant majority of retained personnel believed that there was still a 'divide' between the duty systems, although further comments and the interview data suggested that this was often 'pockets' of division that resulted from individuals or watches that still held 'traditional' views of the RDS.

The latter was reaffirmed by the managers who reported that they were aware of areas where a 'divide' still existed and this was common to all four services reviewed. When asked why this 'division' occurred, responses ranged from competence to Trade Union membership and industrial action. When explored further, it was clear that many of these perceptions were based on the experience of previous decades, with the 'pockets' of division often occurring where personnel

were still present who had been present through these times, and newer personnel did not necessarily hold the same perceptions. There were cases, however, where some newer personnel had seemingly 'inherited' these same perceptions from exposure to the views of longer-serving colleagues.

There was widespread agreement however that the situation had improved, over recent years. A number of explanations were given including:

- a. the increase in dual-contract personnel (those personnel who serve on a RDS during their days off from the WDS);
- b. the greater prevalence of day-crewing stations (stations which are a WDS in the day and a RDS at night),
- c. the awareness of the greater demands placed on the RDS personnel in terms of training and maintenance of competence as well as
- d. individual Service initiatives such as joint training and exercising.

WDS and RDS managers consistently referenced retained watch managers – the 'local fire chief' who runs the local station and is known locally, as key to developing improved levels of commitment, perception of ownership and a more positive culture. Similarly, one strategic manager emphasised how the culture of a station is highly dependent on the local socio-demographic make-up of the area. Retained personnel are all drawn from within the local community and therefore they tend to be much more representative of the local demography, and better aware of local history and local influences. RDS personnel often brought skill-sets from their primary employment – which was often quoted as one of the strengths of the RDS – but it was also noted how this affected the culture of the station,

“[...] you can often find that some retained firefighters will hold managerial roles or own businesses and do the firefighting as a bit of excitement on the side. These people clearly bring a very different outlook to the role than at other stations where, maybe at more remote or rural stations, the majority of the crew are local farmers; very practical, hands-on people, but very different in their approach, their perspectives, their culture” (M4).

The geographical influence on retained stations, especially in more remote or isolated areas, was focussed upon by a number of participants, as this not only affected the frequency of 'management' visits but also generated a different culture

to those RDS sections attached to a WDS station, where there was often felt to be less 'ownership' of the patch.

### Practical Management

There was a clear consensus from survey responses, interviews and focus group participants that personnel on the RDS and the WDS need to be managed differently; the vast majority of respondents appreciated the need for a different approach, style and attitude towards managing retained employees. Interviews with strategic managers found that whilst many of their corporate expectations of the RDS were similar to that of the WDS, there was a clear, consistent awareness of the limitations around the RDS model, and hence the achievable outputs from these personnel.

These differences revolved around the main theme of management's ability to engage with staff. This was a consistent area highlighted by managers; focussing on the difficulties that this produced when trying to manage individuals or coordinate and deliver tasks. One senior manager stated "you have to be available in their time and at their place, not vice-versa – you cannot expect them to be there for you" (M3). The lack of contact with management was regularly highlighted by retained firefighters with comments about only seeing management when something was wrong being common. One RDS firefighter called the scenario a 'double edged sword' because not seeing managers very frequently meant that they were often the "last to know anything" but that their absence also meant that "things must be going ok" (E5).

It was overwhelmingly agreed that RDS personnel require managing differently because, for many, their firefighter role was additional to primary employment and social commitments. This was coupled with a consistent focus on the potential for many in the RDS to leave the role if they became dissatisfied. Managers consistently highlighted this as an area of difficulty in the practical management of personnel, especially with regard to holding staff to account. It was found that this was a key area of difference to how some managers approached the handling of issues with RDS personnel; adopting a 'lighter' approach that depended more on communication around issues rather than sanctions or punitive measures. This was something that RDS personnel were very aware of and admitted to using this as

leverage – “they know if they push me too far then I can just walk out the door...” (E6).

As mentioned above, a primary characteristic of the RDS model is the fact that all RDS personnel live or work in the area of the station – as a result of the operational response model – and yet this often presented challenges. One manager felt RDS personnel were “colloquial and insular” (M4), commenting on how family feuds and local disputes often affected the working environment, with problems transferring from the community in to the workplace – something highlighted as rare for the WDS.

The ‘hands-off’ approach adopted by some managers facilitated issues around the establishment of local practices at some more remote stations. Alternative practices were being adopted by employees and even improvised equipment produced to deal with local incident types, occasionally done outside of organisational policy and without approval.

This distanced relationship and procedural frictions meant that the majority of RDS employees felt that managers had little or no empathy for RDS personnel and that they did not understand the social and domestic challenges facing RDS staff. This view was in stark contrast to the survey responses and interviews with managers of the RDS. The majority of managers felt they did have a thorough understanding of the social and domestic challenges and that they showed empathy in their approach. Many managers suggested they could empathise because of their flexi-duty role, which meant carrying a pager, however in the words of one RDS employee “they (managers) think that being flexi is the same as retained, but after a weekend on-call they have two days off, and can’t wait for those days, whereas for us it is a way of life, we don’t get a day off” (E3).

Those who did express empathy had often worked on a RDS (previously in their current service or contemporaneously by volunteering in a neighbouring service) or had been exposed to the duty system through dual-staffing roles or multi-appliance, mixed crewing stations. However, this previous experience was also highlighted as a potential problem; one RDS employee stated concerns that some managers had served on a RDS 20 years ago and still applied those experiences to today, even though the service, and society, had changed significantly. Other managers detailed

how they had developed a knowledge and experience over time, yet many of these highlighted how they had learnt 'the hard way' and would have done things differently if they had known then what they know now.

### Motivation and Commitment

The motivation for people to join a RDS varied across participants, as Bullock and Leevey (2014) suggest. The difference in opinion between managers and employees, however, was remarkable. Many managers felt the financial incentives were a major motivator, whereas employees unanimously claimed that this was not the case. One RDS employee summed it up "the money we receive, I call it compensation as it isn't pay, it can't be classed as pay for the amount we receive. It is a small compensation for the time we give up" (E1).

Many RDS employees cited the opportunity to serve the community or through being enticed by friends or family, already in the role, as the most common themes. There were also some areas of commonality where both managers and employees agreed on motivators such as, for some, the possible opportunities to join the WDS, the local pride in holding a role of high accolade in the community and the perceived excitement of the role.

The commitment of individuals to the retained system largely fell in to two categories; those who join and serve up to five years but leave the role relatively soon, and those who stay with the role for a significant number of years.

For those firefighters who remained in the role for a significant period, commitment was derived from a number of areas including the camaraderie and relationships established, the 'buzz' from attending incidents, a feeling of not wanting to 'miss out' and, for some at least, a reliance on the financial income. Other sociological factors such as a psychological contract with their community, a sense of guilt for not providing a local response, and peer pressure from colleagues were also quoted.

For those who left, reasons highlighted in exit interviews often related to a 'change of circumstances', either relating to the individual's personal life or primary employment. This was however, seen by both managers and employees as often a 'smoke screen' for those who had the "realisation that the dream (of being a firefighter) is not the reality".

Activity levels were referred to by both managers and employees as a primary contributor to retention, commitment and motivation; however the rationale was found to be different for each group. Employees suggested that the large commitment of time to being 'on-call' was seen as worthwhile if they were 'rewarded' with activity, however a number of managers linked the role of activity to financial compensation, accepting that the 'retaining fee' was minimal, but pointing out that this could be significantly increased during periods of high activity.

One area of consistently disparate views was recognition for their role. RDS employees viewed this was poor, yet the majority of managers believed it was satisfactory. A number of RDS employees felt "undervalued" by management with one survey respondent stating "we are cheap to run and treated cheaply". This was clearly contradicted by the managerial focus groups and interviewees that highlighted a belief that managers suitably recognised people's commitment; however the additional comments for the survey results found a number of managers who considered this was still an area for improvement and that it "needs more work" and "it depends on the experience and understanding of the manager" and "listening to my peer group, this varies greatly".

The final issue that emerged during the primary research was the importance of strong leadership. Where services had a successful RDS – measured by availability, retention and staff survey reports – staff considered senior management to be "RDS friendly". One strategic manager highlighted this importance "if I show empathy for them (RDS personnel) and put the focus on them, then other managers see that that is what success looks like, and they will do it too.....people say we need to make them feel valued, but that is wrong, we need to actually value them!" (M1).

The importance of strong local leadership and management was summarised by one who stated:

"the local supervisory management makes all the difference, if they are good then the station is good, if they are weak or lazy then the station is poor, weak and lazy....the culture of one person influences everything' (M3).

Others gave examples of how this sometimes fails to occur such as where managers from fire services without a strong RDS tradition are promoted to senior roles in services which are dependent upon the RDS.



“You often see people who get on well within a met but don’t get to chief in a met until they have served somewhere else, so they come to a shire service without an appreciation for the retained. And then the wheels fall off” (M7).

## **Summary and Conclusions**

This research suggests that the clarification of roles between RDS and WDS that resulted from the introduction of the IPDS system in the UK in 2003, has been hampered by a slow and incomplete understanding and uneven integration of the two systems. Despite recent assertions of the need for greater use of RDS and the potential resources to be saved (DCLG 2010, Knight 2013, NAO 2015a, 2015b) there is still little hard evidence justifying these individual views.

There are wide variations in the deployment of RDS (see table 1) and in spending by fire and rescue authorities (NAO 2015a), which suggests potential improvements in economy, efficiency and/or effectiveness are possible, although no in-depth comparative study exists to show where and how this has been done. We are not arguing that this evidence doesn’t exist as authorities and services have developed their use of RDS in relative isolation, rather than having a coherent strategic framework and robust evidence base to guide and assist them.

Whilst recent initiatives such as ‘dual-contracts’ have served to reduce the divide between WDS and RDS personnel, there are still pockets of division in the four services investigated for this paper. This ‘divide’, albeit reducing, still presents a continuing issue for managers in areas where both systems co-exist, and these are likely to operate for the foreseeable future. There is a clear need to challenge behaviours and attitudes but also ensure that opportunities are explored to eradicate this antiquated and unproductive divide.

This research explored the factors that influenced the culture on a RDS station and the particular differences in RDS as opposed to WDS stations, such as societal and demographic influences, local relationships and even family history. These in turn suggest specific differences in the way RDS might need to be communicated with, managed, or accessed. The need for flexibility and awareness of the primary employment / social / personal / RDS balance in employees’ lives was considered

crucial although the findings showed that 'successful' managers balanced their expectations and approach with the demands and limitations of the duty system, as well as adapting their approach to manage the situation they faced whilst demonstrating empathy, effective communication skills and often patience.

There were clear differences of opinion in relation to the role that finances play as a motivating factor. Middle managers from WDS tended to over-focus on pay as a key motivator, yet the opposite view prevailed from the majority of RDS personnel, and from strategic managers, who instead focussed on other aspects, many of which had an altruistic nature. Many RDS personnel felt under-valued and unrecognised for their work and, despite some managers stating that they did give due recognition when it was due; either recognition is being not given or it is not given effectively.

Many factors appear to affect an individual's desire to join and remain in, or leave, a RDS; this emphasises the importance for managers to understand their employees individually if they are to sustain staff motivation, especially given that motivation may vary over time. It also highlighted the importance of managing expectations at recruitment, especially for members of the public who may wish to join the RDS. Realistic expectations are vital to the long-term sustainability of motivation and commitment. Recruitment and induction should include increased awareness of the role and the demands, expectations and rewards that it brings.

The role that both middle and senior management leaders play is vital to the successful development of an RDS. This was reflected at all levels within services. 'RDS friendly' strategic managers tended to ascribe greater prioritisation to RDS personnel and set an example to other managers within the organisation. These managers understand the challenges and nuances of the RDS and RDS personnel, and allowed appropriate support, effort and consideration to be given.

This paper has highlighted clear policy and practice implications for 'shire' and 'combined' fire and rescue services in England if they wish to improve the effectiveness of the retained duty system. This is particularly significant given the reliance on RDS staffing models to help meet nationally imposed savings targets. There may also be lessons for metropolitan services or for other sectors deploying part-time or volunteer workers.

In any country or service that requires the use of both whole time and auxiliary firefighters, as in the UK with the WDS and the RDS systems, it is vital that they are co-ordinated and integrated if they are to optimise the service to the public.

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