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The Retained Duty System: A survey of local employers

Issued by:

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Addressed to:

The Chair of the Fire and Rescue Authority
The Chief Executive of the County Council
The Clerk to the Fire and Rescue Authority
The Clerk to the Combined Fire and Rescue Authority
The Commissioner of the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority
The Chief Fire Officer

Please forward to:

Summary

This circular announces the publication of the findings from the survey of employers of Retained Duty System firefighters

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The Retained Duty System: A survey of local employers

1.0 Introduction

1.1 In November 2006 the Department for Communities and Local Government commissioned a survey to examine engagement between the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) and the business community concerning the release of employees for the Retained Duty System (RDS) in England.

1.2 Research was undertaken to investigate:

- the experiences of current or former employers of RDS firefighters to measure their satisfaction with the system, barriers encountered and willingness to release staff
- awareness and perceptions of RDS among 'non-employers', i.e. who do not have RDS staff, to identify ways to encourage them to take on RDS firefighters or allow current staff to volunteer.

1.3 The majority of RDS staff have other occupations and their work for the Fire and Rescue Service is often a secondary source of income. The support given to the RDS by the business community, in terms of releasing employees for emergency response, is therefore vital. An earlier study¹ focused on the primary employment of RDS firefighters. While that generated a great deal of information about their employment patterns, it did not reveal much about the primary employers themselves, or the Service's engagement with the business community to encourage its support for the RDS. This latest survey was designed to fill that information gap.

1.4 The survey examined the factors that prompt local businesses to release employees for RDS duties; what benefits they gain from employing RDS firefighters; what support and recognition local employers want to see in return for releasing staff, and why employers may be unwilling to release employees. This research is the first of its kind at national level to explore the motivational triggers that encourage or discourage support for the RDS within the business community. The enhanced understanding gained by this study will help Fire and Rescue Services in designing strategies to attract further support from their local business community. The additional information will also help the Service to provide appropriate support for RDS staff.

2.0 The findings

2.1 The findings from the survey are based on over 1,000 interviews with local businesses based around RDS stations.

2.2 In general there appear to be no insurmountable barriers to releasing staff for the Retained Duty System. Most current and former employers were enthusiastic when they released their first employee for RDS duties and were largely happy with the experience.

¹ The Primary Employment Status of Retained Duty System Firefighters. Findings from a survey in England and Wales. Department for Communities and Local Government (2006)

- 2.3 Employers who currently release staff acknowledge the challenges but appear willing to try to work around them. Relatively few had turned down an employee's request for release. Among former employers, in most cases, RDS firefighters were no longer employed because of changes in the circumstances of the individual rather than as a result of a change of policy on the part of the organisation to preclude its employees from release. The majority of current and former employers would consider requests from staff for release for RDS duties in the future.
- 2.4 The survey revealed that generally there appears to be limited contact between employers and the Fire and Rescue Service and/or their local fire station. Employers have said that they would welcome better communication. Suggestions from them include providing more specific guidance on expectations, data on typical call-out frequencies/patterns and updates on any local developments.
- 2.5 The survey's main findings have been shared with the key stakeholders on the RDS Task and Finish Group. Communities and Local Government proposes to hold further stakeholder discussions to explore how Fire & Rescue Services could strengthen their links with the business community and improve their communication with local employers.

3.0 Copies of the report

- 3.1 The survey report will be published on the 20th December 2007 and will be made available on the department's website at: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/fire/fireandresiliencestatisticsandresearch/socialresearch/humanresourcessocial/>
- 3.2 A small number of printed copies will also be produced for those who would like a hard copy of the report. If you wish a hard copy please contact Mark Dunn at mark.dunn@communities.gsi.gov.uk

4.0 Enquiries

- 4.1 Please contact either Mark Dunn on 020 7944 4400 x15436 (about the survey) or John Dackombe on 020 7944 5707 (about RDS issues).

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