

Operational Command Review

Report of Councillor Price

For further information about this report please contact Councillor Price on (01743) 440981.

1 Purpose of Report

A major part of the cost reductions being delivered by the Public Value review is the 25% reduction in Operational Commanders employed by the Service. Following concern raised by both officers and Members the Authority tasked Councillor Price to carry out a review of current and future provision and to report to the Authority on his findings and any recommendations.

Although this report is primarily about operational command it will also raise a number of other issues discussed with officers during the review.

2 Recommendations

The Fire Authority is asked to:

- a) Note the contents of this report;
- b) Agree that the current level of officer cover is sufficient for normal operational situations;
- c) Task the Chief Fire Officer to review Executive Officer provision, when the Authority reduces to two operational Executives in 2013;
- d) Task the Chief Fire officer to review the private use costs, charged to some officers now that they are all on a 'recall to duty' rota; and
- e) Note the success of the first subject specific Authority Champion.

3 Background

To put this paper into context it will be useful to explain the role of Operational Commanders and to include a short history of command provision within Shropshire and other relevant issues, such as conditions of service and pay.

4 Role of Operational Commanders

There are currently five levels of commanders required to deliver safe and effective command at operational incidents, which are:

Level One Commanders

These are junior officers (Watch Managers and Crew Managers), who ride as officers in charge of both wholetime and on call (Retained Duty System) appliances. They take charge of all incidents in their initial stages and act as Sector Officers and specialist officers (such as water supply or Decontamination Officers) at all other incidents.

Level Two Incident Commanders

These take over command from Junior Officers at larger or more complex incidents and also carry out specialist functions at any incident ground, including fire investigation, breathing apparatus main control and incident ground safety. This role is delivered by the twelve Station Managers, three on each of the four rota groups. This allows for three to be on duty at all times.

Hazardous Material and Contingency Officers

These are specially trained officers, who are able to manage Hazardous Material Incidents. They also lead on many complex investigations and act as a 'Contingency' to act down to Level Two Incident Command, if the three Level Two Commanders are already being utilised. This role is delivered by the four Group Managers, which allows for one to be on duty at all times.

Principal Officers

These officers take the role of Level Three Commanders, taking charge of larger incidents and acting as inter-service liaison and press liaison at smaller incidents. They manage the daily tactics of the Service and will attend interagency Silver meetings in the County. They are also able to act down to cover Contingency or Level Two Incident Command, if required. This role is covered by four Area Managers, ensuring that one is available at all times.

Executive Officers

These Officers make the day-to-day and longer-term strategic executive decisions surrounding operational matters.

These officers cover various roles:

- **Executive Officer** – who will attend larger incidents to deal with strategic issues, such as media and inter service relations, as well as strategic decisions surrounding maintaining operational cover across the area.

- **Gold Command** – this role attends inter agency Gold Command meetings for wider scale incidents, normally in Worcester. In addition these officers attend other incidents to monitor other incident commanders. This Service currently shares this Gold Command cover with Hereford and Worcester.

They are able to act down to Principal Officer, when required. There are currently three officers on this rota, allowing for one to be available instantly at all times and another (either from Shropshire or Hereford and Worcester) to be available within three hours. This will reduce to two Executive Officers some time in 2013, as part of Public Value cost reductions.

The above means that there are a total of six officers on call 24/7 to cover all roles.

- **'Day Job'** – as well as these command roles the above officers also carry out a 'day job', managing everything from fire stations to training and development.

5 Conditions of Service and Pay

The operational senior officers currently work on two different rotas.

Operational Executive Officers work on a 'permanent on duty' rota, which, in effect, means that they are always available for call apart from three days in each four week cycle (Friday, Saturday and Sunday).

All other commanders work on a 'flexible duty scheme', where the sum of rostered managerial duty hours (positive hours) and the rostered standby duty hours (the latter divided by four) is 48 hours per week averaged over a four week cycle. For this flexible duty system they are paid an additional 20% of their salary.

6 History of Command Provision

Until changes in 1996 there were four officer groups of six and a Chief Fire officer, Deputy Chief Fire Officer and 'Third Officer' (now an Assistant Chief Fire Officer) to fulfil the Executive Officer rota.

Prior to the 2010 officer reductions this Service operated a unique incident command system, whereby there were dedicated Incident Commanders whose primary role was to attend and take charge of incidents. There were six of these officers, who ensured one commander 24/7 cover for this role.

In addition to this there was an Incident Commander specifically for 'New Dimension' type incidents to act as liaison officer for the increasing times our appliances were called to other parts of the UK.

During 2009/10 it was identified that the cuts to grant required a reduction of £4 million in overall budget of £21 million by 2015. Although recognising the difficulties this would present, officers recommended, and Members agreed, a reduction in officer numbers to the numbers in place today. In the report to Members at that time the Chief Fire Officer stated that this would bring officer numbers to the minimum level required to deal with one large and one small incident.

7 Are There Enough Officers?

To deliver safe and effective operations the Service must ensure that there are enough officers for all normal operational occurrences, based on risk and past experience. The first question, therefore, is:

Are there enough officers to provide this?

To explain this one can look at the officers required to deal with one large (ten appliance) incident. Usually this size of incident requires as a minimum of:

- One Executive Officer
- One Principal Officer
- One Incident Commander
- One Breathing Apparatus Officer
- One Safety Officer

This allows for one Hazardous Material / Contingency Officer and one Gold Commander to be available, if required to attend another smaller incident, such as a house fire, as a Level Two Incident Commander. The officer reductions now mean that there are insufficient immediately available officers to ensure that internal incidents can be dealt with and a senior officer sent with crews, should they be called to incidents outside the area. However, recall to duty arrangements will cover this infrequent occurrence.

The Authority has these 'recall to duty' arrangements in place to call officers back to duty, if required for large incidents. For this officers below Executive level are paid at overtime rate.

If further officers are required, the Authority has legal arrangements in place with North Wales, Cheshire, Staffordshire, West Midlands and Hereford and Worcester Fire Authorities to provide up to two officers each immediately and further officers after discussion between Executive Officers.

In summary, therefore, it appears that we do, indeed, have enough officers for current planned operational demands. This is not to say, however, that, if two very large incidents occurred simultaneously, we would not have sufficient local officers but suitable arrangements are in place to provide a balance between risk and the cost of over provision of operational officers.

What is clear is that we now have the minimum number of operational commanders to allow for safety, as recommended by the Chief Fire Officer in his Public Value paper.

It is worth noting that, when compared to other Services, we have one of the lowest officer / staff ratios. Each Shropshire officer manages 22 operational members of staff, whereas in Bedfordshire, for example, they manage just 11.

8 Other Concerns Raised by Officers

During the review a number of other concerns were raised by officers that are worth discussing here.

Reduction in Brigade Managers

There was general concern amongst officers that a reduction from three to two operational Executive Officers could have further impact on command provision and more work being placed on these staff and remaining officers. Members will obviously be concerned by this and it is recommended that the Chief Fire Officer produces a new management structure taking into account the reduced brigade manager numbers in advance of the reduction.

Increase in officer workload

Clearly when the officer cadre has reduced by 25% there will be some increase in workload for those remaining. It should be noted, however, that of the current reductions, six were on a rota, where there was only one on duty at any time. The restructure made to reduce the officer numbers, as well as increases in the numbers of officers working to manage stations, has gone some way to alleviate the extra work but Members will, no doubt, wish to thank officers for taking on this extra work to protect frontline service provision. There was also initial concern that officer incident workload could put pressure on their 'day job'. Clearly this can be the case but with three Level Two Incident Commanders as well as the 'Contingency Officer' available there is ability to share the incidents between this group during busy periods. The Chief Fire Officer should continue to monitor this situation.

Information and data systems

Some officers wanted more access to information and data systems to make their role easier. Members will be aware that, as part of the Service Transformation Programme, these IT systems and hardware, such as rugged computers for operational use, are being planned.

Short term cover for operational rota

Some officers were concerned that with fewer officers short-term illness may force them to work very long hours. The Service has introduced an agreed system to cover these occurrences and most officers agreed that on the few occasions when it has been implemented it worked well.

Payment for private use of vehicles

Some officers pay £5 per week in addition to fuel costs for the private use of their Service vehicles. As all officers are now on a 'return to duty' rota, which requires them to have their vehicles always available, the Chief Fire Officer should review this to see if all officers could be on the same private use payment scheme.

Mobilising local officers

Currently officers are mobilised during the day on the principle of first, second and third call. Many officers suggested that local officers to an area, such as Telford, should be mobilised into that area instead. The Chief Fire Officer agrees that this is an easy system to implement.

9 Financial Implications

The current reductions in officer numbers are part of the Public Value Review, which has saved over £300,000. This equates to the annual running cost of three On Call (Retained Duty System) fire stations.

Implementing the same private use payment scheme for all officers would cost an extra £3,840 per year.

There are no other direct costs identified in this report.

10 Legal Comment

There are no legal implications arising directly from this report.

11 Equality Impact Assessment

Officers have considered the Service's Brigade Order on Equality Impact Assessments (Human Resources 5 Part 2) and have decided that there are no discriminatory practices or differential impacts upon specific groups arising from this report. An Initial Equality Impact Assessment has not, therefore, been completed.

12 Appendices

There are no appendices attached to this report.

13 Background Papers

There are no background papers associated with this report.