

Criminal Justice Committee

Pre-budget scrutiny 2025-26

Written submission by the Fire and Rescue Services Association, September 2024

State of the service

While the availability of Wholetime appliances remains high, the overall On Call 1st Appliance availability is now at its lowest ever figure of 72% (57% daytime, 83% evening, 71% weekend).

There are significant variations across Scotland with overall On Call 1st appliance availability ranging from more than 92% in some areas, to less than 20% in others.

Recruitment of more On Call firefighters and the retention of current firefighters are key to improve fire appliance availability. We have encouraged and supported the Service in developing pilots of Joint Mobilising of crews. While this is not a long-term solution, it is encouraging to see the Service be innovative in its approach to this issue.

The 54 full time On Call Support Watch Commander posts have proven to be a valuable asset and we fully support the development of other full time On Call roles.

Challenges

Terms & Conditions. More than 11 years into a national service and On Call Retained Ts & Cs are still not finalised. So much of what the Service wants and needs to do, is on hold because of this. We are actively engaged with SFRS in negotiations and are hopeful that an agreed On Call Retained Ts & Cs package may be completed soon.

Leavers versus joiners. Recruitment is not keeping pace with the number of leavers.

To keep the current stations open. On-Call stations are not just fire stations they are the Hubs of the community, we need to work with the Service to make sure that the fire service is relevant to their communities and that fire stations do not close.

Mobilisation system. Look at new technology available to make the firefighters role as safe as can be and make best use of any additional funding.

Financial pressures

The SFRS estate will never be fit for purpose, without hundreds of millions of pounds of investment. Significant investment is required to bring stations up to an acceptable level.

Value for money. SFRS must demonstrate value for money in all that it does. We fully support the Service in asking for increases in budgets and we would also support additional targeted funding to tackle station specific issues.

Reform

Broadening of the firefighter role. Firefighters join the Service to respond to incidents and help their communities. Since the introduction of the new UFAS guidelines, station calls have dropped significantly. The result is that, particularly On Call stations, are far less busy. Firefighters are not getting the opportunity to do exactly what they joined to do, this can affect morale within a station which has a knock on effect on recruitment and retention. A drop in operational activity can also lead to skill fade in key competencies, like driving, BA and Incident Command.

The 43 recommendations made by the On Call Improvement Team, and approved by the Senior Leadership Team, need to be funded and supported to bring about the change that is needed in On Call.

SSRP is an opportunity for SFRS to demonstrate innovation and deliver an improved service for all of Scotland.