

The Thomas Report - Executive Summary and Key Findings

Executive Summary

Conditions of service underpin the employment of the workforce. As employment costs typically make up a significant (and usually the majority) of any organisation's resources and budget it is unsurprising that focus should fall on the effectiveness of the workforce in delivering the strategic intent. If change needs to happen it usually needs to happen quickly so that systems and processes can be improved and benefits realised.

Conditions of service also affect people directly. Most people end up living, organising their life and spending in alignment to their work and income. Any change to this can be felt not just by the worker but their family as well. As such there is sensitivity, and much legality, around how conditions of service are deployed and any desire to change them.

In this report I have followed conditions of service and the areas of the employment and operational relationships that they impact. I have come to conclusions, findings and recommendations that impact on:

- The working environment
- Documented conditions of service
- Industrial relations
- Duty systems
- Management of the fire and rescue service

These conclusions, findings and recommendations are contained within the commentary of the review and extracted below. First, however I have extracted what I believe should be the initial priorities. These are: -

I. There is much re-building to be done around **culture and trust**, including addressing the concerns around bullying and harassment. This also has an obvious relationship with equality and diversity. Everyone deserves a work place free from bullying where employment and progression is on merit and free from bias. The fire service needs inspirational leaders able to deliver a high performing, engaged workforce. Where I found these leaders during my fieldwork visits I also found positive industrial relations. Understanding and surfacing the differing levels of industrial relations culture and trust is vital to moving forward in these areas. A service wide engagement survey focused on culture, equality and trust should be conducted on an annual basis. Management performance objectives should be 'hard wired' into this survey. Whilst embedding changes in management culture may take time, I believe the implementation of employee engagement surveys and amendments to management objectives could be taken forward by each fire and rescue authority and implemented relatively quickly.

II. The **retained duty system** offers significant opportunity to align resources to risk at a significantly lower cost than maintaining full time cover at times of low level risk and activity. However the difficulties in recruiting retained duty system fire fighters were repeatedly communicated to me. In addition to supporting a national recruitment and communication programme Government should bring forward legislation that extends employment protection (as enjoyed by military reservists) to fire fighters engaged on retained duty systems and part-time contracts.

III. Conditions of service are currently documented in the Green, Grey and Gold books. My review makes no recommendation as to the Green Book. However, I find very little value in capturing conditions of service in the **Gold and Grey Books**. I found the Gold Book to be redundant, unread and unused in virtually every authority I visited or which responded to my questionnaire. I recommend that the Gold Book is discontinued and that the employers and representative bodies implement this recommendation as soon as is reasonably practicable. The Grey Book is held by fire fighters as a key foundation or anchor for their conditions of service, even though in most fire and rescue services there are local derivations away from the national provisions contained within it. Employers repeatedly pointed out to me either that the Grey Book was a barrier to alignment of conditions of service with local delivery or that they had managed to change locally the conditions of service despite the Grey Book. Either way it appears to me that the Grey Book should be slimmed down. Consideration should be given by the employers, in consultation with representative bodies, as to replacing the Grey Book with a contract of employment at the local level, supported by an employee handbook. Base Pay (see section on training) should remain national but all other conditions of service should have a more regional/local flavour and I recommend that the national joint council takes action to explore how such a system could operate in practical terms.

IV. The description of **role maps and duty systems** in the Grey Book creates inflexibility in the deployment of fire fighters in support of the local Integrated Risk Management Plan. Roles maps are too restrictive and duty systems within the Grey Book in many fires and rescue services do not reflect the changing activity from response to prevention. Both the list of role maps and the pre-determined duty systems should be removed from the Grey Book by the employers, in consultation with representative bodies.

Key findings

These key findings are lifted from the end of each section and listed here for convenience and ease of reference. The evidence and context behind the recommendation is provided in the relevant section.

The working environment (section 4)

1. Culture and trust are at the centre of many of the changes required to create a high performing service aligned to the needs of the people it serves. A consistent employee engagement survey should be developed and deployed across the service (allowing inter authority comparisons) and 'hard wired' into management objectives.
2. Early engagement with employee representatives at the earliest opportunity should be a feature of all change programmes.
3. Fire and rescue services should deploy training in effective change management, leadership and employee engagement in addition to Industrial Relations.
4. Increased importance should be placed by fire and rescue services on employee communication - appropriate management training and processes (direct to employee) should be implemented.
5. Fire and rescue services should instigate audits of the flow of management information reaching the workforce with the aim of improving the flow of information to the frontline firefighter.
6. Management performance objectives should be hard wired to the results of an annual employee engagement and communication survey.
7. Unconscious bias training should be rolled out across the fire and rescue service.

8. The leadership of the Fire and Rescue Service (represented by the Local Government Association and Chief Fire Officers Association) and the employee representatives together with special interest groups representing woman and black and minority ethnic firefighters should publish a memorandum of understanding as to how people will be treated.

9. Research should be directed at how the cadet scheme could be utilised to widen the diversity of the service and how the interest in supporting the fire service can be maintained when the cadets leave the scheme (impacting both equality and potentially the retained duty system).

10. Each fire and rescue service should maintain an active register of firefighters with second jobs. A refusal or failure to declare a second job should be treated as a serious disciplinary matter.

11. Implement a single technological/equipment evaluation facility.

Documented conditions of service (section 5)

12. The fire and rescue services in conjunction with the Government should create a national communication programme highlighting the range of activities and skills beyond fighting fires currently undertaken by firefighters. The aim of this would be to raise public awareness that creating a flexible fire and rescue service aligned to prevention is key to increasing safety in the local community.

13. Slim down and modernise the Grey Book, removing duty systems and reference to role maps and national occupational standards and replace with contracts of employment.

14. Minimum night time shift hours should be removed from the Grey Book.

15. Disagreements regarding additional payments, collaborations or implementation of new technologies and working practices should be resolved locally without resort to the national advisory panels.

16. The national employers, government and employee representatives should, in support of establishing a changed culture (as detailed earlier), meet and agree a re-defined national joint protocol on industrial relations.

17. The ability to compulsorily move an individual from the flexible duty system should be introduced.

Industrial relations (section 6)

18. The National Joint Council should be retained for the purposes of national pay bargaining for basic pay whilst reforming itself to represent employers and employees on a more local basis for all other conditions of service including incremental pay for acquiring competences beyond 'safe to ride'.

19. The National Joint Council should consider operating regionally to reflect the requirements of the different fire authorities whilst retaining a national umbrella with respect to basic pay.

20. Remove Technical Advisory Panels and Resolution Advisory Panel and replace with a direct to ACAS approach. Fire and Rescue Authorities are undertaking a significant amount of local negotiation as they agree positions out with the Grey Book locally and this will not significantly increase workload or cost – in fact the Knight review suggested that local negotiations save money.

21. The Government should recognise the increasing view that the current right to withdraw labour (take strike action) is incompatible with the expectations that the public has of an emergency service. As such Government should bring forward appropriate legislation to remove the protection afforded under the Act to unions when their collective strike action, or action short of strike, impedes the fire and rescue service from making an emergency response. The right to strike being retained for non-emergency activities.

22. If the Government determines not to bring forward legislation to restrict the right to strike then Government should instigate consultation with a view to agreeing with employees impacted a no strike agreement in emergency situations. The right to strike being retained for non-emergency activities.

23. The chair of the National Joint Council should instigate an independent review of the structure and representative make-up of the National Joint Council to enable it to perform effectively at both a local and national level – noting that a number of contributors, from both the employers and the representatives, felt that they were excluded from the council.

Retained Duty systems (section 7)

24. Fire and Rescue Authorities should adopt duty systems and staffing which align fire fighter availability to the planned work load (e.g. community safety) whilst providing response cover appropriate to the Integrated Risk Management plan should be encouraged.

25. Fire and rescue authorities should be required to provide an annual statement on the use of retained firefighters. Any decision not to use or to cease to use retained firefighters should be communicated in this statement and underpinned with operational evidence provided by the fire and rescue service.

26. As part of the annual statement fire and rescue services should be required to provide an annual commentary on the number and use of retained firefighters. And in particular to report on the level of mixed crewing or co-working with wholetime personnel.

27. Legislation should be brought forward to provide employment protection to fire fighters employed on the Retained Duty System. This legislation is already in place for other groups (military reservists, magistrates and so on).

28. A national awareness programme for retained duty system personnel should be produced.

29. Trial and evaluate, in a limited number of fire and rescue services, the use of an annual bounty payment for employers of retained firefighters.

Management of the Fire and Rescue Service (section 8)

30. Fire authorities should keep the number and level of commitment of fire authority elected members under review. The right number may differ by authority but should be large enough to allow scrutiny without becoming burdensome on operational delivery.

31. Recruitment and selection academic standards should be immediately raised.

32. Fire and rescue services should create critical mass by collaborating in recruitment including lateral recruitment into 'fast track' management programmes.

33. Fire and rescue services should explore a collaborative approach to the creation of succession plans and senior leader programmes with more cross authority developmental moves.

34. Where collaboration could lead to more formal mergers, Government should find transformational funding to support the creation of larger fire and rescue services that offer critical mass in areas of technology introduction, recruitment, succession and development.
35. Fire and rescue services should maintain an up-to-date strategic workforce plan.
36. Fire and rescue services that cannot offer promotional opportunities away from the original place of work/watch then preparatory management training should be available as part of a strategic workforce development plan.
37. The expectation that all fire fighters attain the same, maximum, level of competency should be removed. The wide and increasing range of roles and activities undertaken by fire fighters calls for a more sophisticated alignment of capability with the activity required in support of the local Integrated Risk Management Plan than can be provided by the view that 'a fire fighter is a fire fighter'.
38. Training and pay should reflect a 'safe to ride' measure – basic core skills and core pay followed by competency based increments as required (which in the event of losing that competency means that the fire fighter retains their job albeit without that competency).
39. To create and maintain (in the face of decreasing numbers) a cadre of managers capable of becoming future fire and rescue service leaders, a standardised industry wide approach to leadership development should be adopted.
40. Fire and rescue services not using the Executive Leadership Programme should reconsider doing so.
41. A lateral, industry wide, recruitment scheme should be created. This will fast track managers through the experiential requirements and into senior roles.
42. The Gold Book (conditions of service for principal officers) should be removed along with that for Brigade Managers. With pay and conditions of service agreed locally subject to the introduction of a more sophisticated job evaluation programme that better reflects job size, role complexity and other duties in a way which allows inter authority comparison.
43. All fire and rescue services and fire authorities should review the accessibility of their pay policy statements.
44. The Chief Fire Officers Association should consider increasing the term of office for the role of president from 1 year to 2 or 3 years – to provide increased stability of leadership.
45. Finally all participants in the fire industry should adopt the principal of: - "Where change is **common sense** it should become **common practice**".