

ROYAL BERKSHIRE FIRE AUTHORITY REPORT



COMMITTEE	MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE
DATE OF MEETING	22 JULY 2024
SUBJECT	QUARTER FOUR APPLIANCE AVAILABILITY TO MEET CORPORATE MEASURES 14 AND 15
LEAD OFFICER	AREA MANAGER RESPONSE AND RESILIENCE
LEAD MEMBER	N/A
EXEMPT INFORMATION	NONE
ACTION	TO NOTE

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report provides information on quarter four performance with a supporting narrative on the whole-time duty system and the on-call duty system appliance availability.
- 1.2 Whole-time availability across the quarter was 97.8% against a target of 99%. This is a 0.2 percentage point increase in comparison to Q3.
- 1.3 On-call appliance availability through the quarter was 41.5% against a target of 50%. This represents an 8.0 percentage point increase in comparison to Q3.
- 1.4 Against a corporate measure target of 75% of emergency incidents attended in 10 minutes, the Service achieved 70.1%. See supporting narrative.

2. RECOMMENDATION

That the Management Committee:

- 2.1 **NOTE** the 2023/24 quarter four performance of 97.8% appliance availability of the Service's 14 whole-time appliances in line with Corporate Measure 14¹
- 2.2 **NOTE** the 2023-24 quarter four overall on-call appliance availability performance of 41.5%, in line with Corporate Measure 15².

3. REPORT

Response Standard:

- 3.1 The Response Standard during this period was below the target of 75% at 70.1%. In the last Management Committee report we explained that the Response Standard is made up of 3 constituent parts, the **call handling time**, the **turnout time**, and the **travel time**.

¹ Corporate Measure 14: Percentage of wholetime frontline pumping appliance availability (fire engines).

² Corporate Measure 15: Percentage of hours where there is adequate crewing on On-Call frontline pumping appliances (fire engines).

- 3.2 A wide range of data is analysed to understand why performance against the measure has decreased and it is several compounding factors that have attributed to the change. From statistical analysis we identified that 2019 was the only non-Covid year that we met the Response Standard and, therefore, comparisons have been drawn with 2019.
- 3.3 Incident numbers have returned to pre-pandemic levels and have increased beyond this since 2019. The incident profile has also changed, false alarms and special service calls now make up a larger proportion of the incidents we attend. The changes in incident numbers and profile have an impact on both call handling and travel times. When setting the Response Standard, it was a stretching and ambitious target for the Service and performance against it is sensitive to the incident profile and demand.
- 3.4 In quarter four we also faced additional seasonal pressures. In January we experienced Storm Henk and saw increased demand in flooding incidents and associated rescues. When compared to the same quarter over the previous five years, incident numbers were greater in this quarter. The previous highest number of incidents recorded for this quarter was 1,742 in 2021/22, and in 2023/24 was 1,925.
- 3.5 The call handling time pressures explained within the Q3 report remain prevalent as do the increases in call profiles requiring extended call challenge. The aim of call challenge is to prevent unnecessary mobilisations of assets and preserve their availability for genuine emergencies. This process applies predominately to automatic fire alarm activations, which make up a significant proportion of both incoming calls to our control room and of 'incidents' attended by our crews, but also increasingly to calls from other blue light services requesting assistance with other matters (for example, affecting entry to premises and handling bariatric casualties). Noteworthy, is the decision taken by the Fire Authority in July 2024, in relation to the Service's response to automatic fire alarms following the implementation of these changes, the impact will be evaluated with respect to call handling times. This is further supported by improved performance reporting related to call challenge which has been developed to better understand performance.
- 3.6 Within Thames Valley Fire Control Room (TVFCS) following high turnover of staff earlier in the year, a number of new control room staff were introduced into the live control environment. Whilst these staff receive comprehensive training in their role, they still take time to develop confidence in 999 call handling. We would expect this to have less of an effect in the first half of 24/25.
- 3.7 To help ensure call handling times are closely monitored, the TVFCS Joint Coordinating Group has developed a new suite of performance measures for TVFCS, which include a more detailed breakdown of call handling performance. This work has already enhanced our understanding of call

handling performance and is helping us to understand trends with respect to call handling times by incident type.

- 3.8 Our turnout times have remained good and fairly consistent over recent years, and remains an area monitored internally to ensure any fluctuations in performance are appropriately managed.
- 3.9 Positively, travel time performance improved in quarter four. We continue to closely monitor the impact of travel times and, in particular, understand where local works impacting the road infrastructure.
- 3.10 As stated in the report, our Response Standard is an ambitious and stretching measure agreed by the Fire Authority and reports from the time the emergency call is received to the time of arrival on scene. For further context, it should be noted that Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service was the only fire and rescue service in England to improve its attendance times at primary fires over a ten-year period, improving our average speed of response by 22 seconds, as reported in 2022/23. All other fire and rescue services saw increased attendance times in the same period. From looking at the most recently available data, we continue to perform above the average for England for the majority of fire incident types in terms of attendance times. The 2023/24 data will shortly be available, and we will undertake further analysis to understand our performance in a national context.
- 3.11 We will continue to closely monitor and manage our performance against the Response Standard, together with longer-term trends in our incident profile and demand. In addition to the detailed work on call handling, we will continuously review the management of our resources via our internal Response Resourcing Group to ensure we are optimising our ability to respond as quickly as possible and explore opportunities in the longer-term that would support this objective.

Whole-time Duty System Appliance Availability

- 3.12 This section of the report provides the 2023/24 quarter four performance update against Corporate Measure 14, which is the *percentage of whole-time frontline pumping appliance availability*. Overall availability for the quarter was 97.8%.
- 3.13 RBFRS employ a lean operating model, including the Wholetime Duty System (WDS) provision. Maintaining sufficient minimum numbers of qualified firefighters requires effective management combined with flexibility and commitment to provide additional hours from staff on a pre-arranged overtime (PAOT) basis. Whole-time duty system appliance unavailability can be attributed to several factors, including appliance defects, post-incident activity, training and exercising and primary crewing of specialist appliances.
- 3.14 Whole-time staff sickness levels continue to add pressure to the Service's ability to meet its target for Corporate Measure 14 in relation to crewing. While a significant amount of work is in place to manage sickness across teams in

HR and Service Delivery (monitored through the Strategic Performance Board), we are above the Service's 5% target. Service Delivery teams and HR colleagues work closely to manage and support staff concerning sickness and restricted duties. A series of engagement sessions in February and March 2024 to support managers in fulfilling their responsibilities relating to absence management was completed and it has been pleasing to see a decrease in sickness during Q4.

- 3.15 The leaver profile has continued to present challenges in maintaining consistent establishment levels across our whole-time duty system. Workforce planning and Service Delivery focus on predicting and monitoring leavers, but this has been more volatile over the past two years. The latest apprentice cohort was received on to our fire stations in May and work is ongoing to manage this impact moving forward, including the Fire Authority decision to recruit an additional 10 firefighters to create additional resilience and the Member Working Group established to look at Recruitment and Retention.
- 3.16 By virtue of staff turnover during the past two years, the Service now has a high number of operational staff in development roles. The training and assessment requirements add further pressure to the management of appliance availability. Service Delivery management continues to work closely with colleagues in learning and development to minimise the impacts of training and development on availability by planning and scheduling courses around other demands.

On-Call Duty System Appliance Availability

- 3.17 The report also details performance against Corporate Measure 15, which sets a target of *50% of hours where there is adequate crewing on on-call frontline pumping appliances (based on 24/7 crewing)*. This measure is being applied across the individual and overall availability of the Service's five on-call appliances. The overall availability for on-call appliances in Q4 was 41.5%, an improvement on quarter three.
- 3.18 The Q4 performance reflects some of the fragility of the on-call system. The table below provides year-on-year availability since 2017. Notably, there was a period during Covid when performance was significantly higher than before or after. This is attributed mainly to On-Call staff working remotely (or not working) for primary employers.

Year	Q1.	Q2.	Q3.	Q4.
2023/24	46.5%	38.4%	33.5%	41.5%
2022/23	44.4%	40.3%	35.9%	41.7%

2021/22	59.8%	34.7%	36.5%	43.8%
2020/21 (Covid)	72.4%	60.9%	61.1%	68.2%
2019/20	45.0%	36.2%	42.5%	45.4%
2018/19	37.1%	33.0%	38.3%	47.6%
2017/18	36.3%	33.7%	31.6%	35.8%

Year on year comparison Identifying Covid restrictions in 2020.

- 3.19 Availability in Q4 has improved at Crowthorne, Hungerford, Maidenhead, and Mortimer Fire Stations when compared to Q3 figures.
- 3.20 Lambourn has seen a significant decrease in availability due to the loss of critical members of staff from the station, which was at a high of 26.3% in Q1 2023/24 and its current figure of 1.7%. Even with Lambourn's significant drop in availability from the previous quarter, overall, on-call availability for Q4 has increased by 8.0 percentage points compared to Q3. To support Lambourn, a manager has been identified to assist at the station on a temporary contract, in addition to current arrangements. Positive recruitment work will see two new joiners to the station in Q1 2024/25.
- 3.21 Hungerford availability improved in Q4, this is due to the successful completion of 3 trainees moving from the rank of trainee firefighter to development firefighter and, therefore being able to ride the appliance in a critical role. Additional recruitment work has seen a former firefighter rejoin Hungerford in Q4, with a further trainee firefighter starting in Q1 2024/25.
- 3.22 Mortimer has maintained availability figures above 65% for each quarter of the past year. Recruitment work at the station has resulted in a new candidate that is due to join in Q1 of this year. Crowthorne and Maidenhead availability has increased in Q4, which is attributed to staff undertaking a process of reviewing availability to improve coverage and the use of the WDS detachment policy.

4. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC COMMITMENTS

4.1 Commitment 3 – Response

We will ensure that our people are trained, and resources are located to provide the most effective response and to have a positive impact on incidents in our communities.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The use of pre-arranged overtime (PAOT) continues to be utilised to support a lean crewing model and to mitigate other extractions. Despite the pressures through the quarter with regards an increase in sickness and light duties, Overtime expenditure is continuing to drop in comparison with 2022.

5.2 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 None Identified

6. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

7.1 None identified.

7. RISK IMPLICATIONS

8.1 The provision of sufficient minimum qualified firefighters and appliance availability is listed as a corporate risk under risk 681. It is monitored by the Director of Service Delivery, and, as necessary, treatments are reported to the Senior Leadership Team and the Audit and Governance Committee.

8. CONSISTENCY WITH DUTY TO COLLABORATE

9.1 None identified.

9. BACKGROUND PAPERS

10.1 None.

10. APPENDICES

11.1 None.

11. CONTACT DETAILS

12.1 Katie Mills, Assistant Chief Fire Officer/Director of Service Delivery
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