

# **On-call firefighters**

## **Information for employers**



# ON-CALL FIREFIGHTERS

On-call firefighters provide emergency cover to over 90% of the UK. There are over 14,000 on-call firefighters in England, protecting our towns and rural communities and they are responsible for operating 60% of all fire engines. In many fire and rescue services on-call staff may also form a large part of the joint response to larger incidents anywhere in the area.

On-call firefighters make up an invaluable part of the team, heading to their local fire station only when needed in an emergency. They are paid and trained to deal with a wide range of emergency situations ranging from extinguishing fires in buildings to providing immediate emergency care to those who are suffering as a result of an emergency incident.

On-call firefighters are recruited from all areas of society and could be full-time parents, office staff, manual workers or any profession you can think of. Whilst on-call firefighters are ordinary men and women, they do an extraordinary job for the UK fire and rescue service and they are integral to keeping their local fire stations crewed and protecting their local communities.

Across the UK, at any one time the majority of firefighters providing emergency cover are on call. This means that they don't work full-time at a community fire station but have normal jobs and can respond promptly to emergency incidents from their full-time employment or everyday lives when they are available.

Some on-call firefighters are in full time or part time employment with employers who are keen to support their community. They are just like any other employee, other than they may be available to be called out to emergency incidents from their workplace for some or all of their working hours. This means that they could be called out at any time of the day or night to protect the community.

On-call firefighters who are planning to respond to incidents while at their place of work may be required to have a signed agreement from their employers confirming that they can be released from work when called. Therefore, it is important that employers understand exactly what the role involves, and the commitment required. On-call firefighters are usually only called out two or three times a week at any time of the day or night, usually for about an hour. Your local service will be able to supply data to support this.

## **Could you release an employee to become an on-call firefighter?**

We know that releasing an employee to become an on-call firefighter is an important decision. It could not happen without your agreement and you need to know how it would work for you to make an informed decision and feel confident about supporting your community in this way.



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It may be the case that, as an employer you have sufficient flexibility to enable staff to be released to attend emergency incidents at any time when someone is at work. However, we do realise that some employers do not have the capacity to commit to consistent hours for release of their staff. Your local fire and rescue service will be able to discuss the alternative possible options available to support on-call firefighters in your employment. For example, flexibility to enable on-call firefighters to attend scheduled training.

This information guide aims to provide you with enough information to decide if this is something you could consider doing for your community. Your local fire and rescue service is available to discuss this further if you need more information.

They are first and foremost your staff member, but are available on-call, to help and protect the local community when needed.

## Work-Life Balance

For most on-call firefighters, the best part of the role is combining an exciting and rewarding contribution to their community with the challenges of their primary role.

UK fire and rescue services are committed to offering on-call firefighters flexible contracts and working hours wherever possible to ensure a healthy work and life balance.

They would get some important personal benefits too. In return for their commitment, they will:

- Be paid an annual retainer and call-out fees – many on-call firefighters earn between £5000 and £7000 per year
- Receive a wide range of training in how to problem solve, assess risk, and work systematically as part of a team and individually
- Receive first aid and trauma care training
- Can also be trained in risk assessment and health and safety
- Forge important links with the community
- Have opportunities for further educational qualifications and skill sets

## Bringing You Value

On-call firefighters are highly trained professionals who can bring added value to your organisation at no cost to you. They gain many useful transferable skills which could be useful in any workplace.



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These can include:

- **Personal skills:** such as leadership, team work, quick thinking, problem solving, taking responsibility, communication skills and keeping calm in difficult situations. Being a firefighter also requires commitment and self-discipline.
- **Emergency skills:** including incident command, first aid and trauma care, which will assist your business on health and safety, first aid and fire related matters. They are trained on an on-going basis to maintain and develop these skills.
- **Educational qualifications and skill sets:** on-call firefighters are encouraged to gain nationally recognised qualifications and to maintain up-to-date skills, appropriate to their role. These can benefit employers through better productivity levels and improved motivation.
- **Improved fitness health and wellbeing:** fire and rescue services are committed to supporting their staff in both physical and mental health, giving the employer of an on-call firefighter an employee who should be fitter and healthier in both workplaces.
- **Motivated, committed employees:** on-call firefighters tend to be committed to the community they serve, which means that they are more likely to be dedicated, caring and long serving members of staff.
- **Employees able to fulfil their ambitions and potential** are usually happier and more productive in the workplace. Firefighters must be highly motivated to take on the tasks and this motivation will help them in everything they do.
- **Highly trained and skilled employees:** on-call firefighters must be able to deal with a whole range of situations. They never quite know what they might find when they respond to an emergency, so they are more likely to be able to cope with the ups and downs of working life.
- **Large Goods Vehicle Training:** many on-call firefighters are trained to drive fire engines, which includes obtaining a Large Goods Vehicle (LGV) licence. They also receive Emergency Fire Engine Driver training this is like an advanced driving test in that it raises their awareness of road conditions.



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## **Additionally....**

Businesses have found that the benefits offered by allowing their staff to be on-call have far outweighed any inconvenience caused by their employee responding to an emergency.

Because on-call firefighters aren't based at fire stations but operate on standby, they're only called out when needed.

They are first and foremost your staff member but are available on-call for the fire and rescue service, to help and protect the local community when needed.

For more information about the role of on-call firefighters please see – on-call firefighters -Information for employees which can be found on [www.oncallfire.uk](http://www.oncallfire.uk).

## **The impact on your business**

On-call firefighters are usually only called out two or three times a week at any time of the day or night, usually for about an hour. This commitment will vary around the country. Of course, we are unable to predict exactly how often an individual firefighter might get called out and it also depends on their hours of availability. They can choose an on-call rota for example, during the evening, daytime or weekend. However, the system can be flexible so should a busy week at work arise, or urgent deadlines loom, then your business takes priority.

Your employee might have to rush off to attend an emergency at very short notice and contractual arrangements may need to be recorded to reflect this in accordance with current employment legislation. The additional skills on-call firefighters bring to your workplace will make this worthwhile and what's more, as an employer you can feel proud that you have played a vital role in making the local community safer.

There are a range of businesses both small and large across the UK who currently release employees to be on-call firefighters. These include Sainsburys, Tesco, Royal Mail, local schools, farms, local small businesses such as accountancy and solicitors, as well as county, district and local town councils and central government.



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## Bringing you value – FAQ's

### **Do I have to release staff to attend emergencies if it doesn't suit the company on that day?**

No. Employees are only available for duty when they book on-call as available. If they say they are available, they will be expected to respond to the call. Therefore, it is essential to agree when you have capacity to release staff before they log in as available. Your needs as the primary employer will always be a priority.

### **What will it cost me?**

There are no direct costs to supporting an employee to be an on-call firefighter. However, there may be some indirect costs to your business. It's up to you how you deal with the on-call firefighter absence, some employers do not pay the employee when they are absent, others expect them to make their hours up later. For example, if you have to fill in while your employee responds to an emergency call out or attends training; but we hope the benefits will outweigh the inconvenience.

### **Will training take place in working hours?**

Most training takes place on weekday evenings and at weekends. However, initial training may be a consolidated period encompassing weekday daytimes. Any training that must be completed during business hours is planned well in advance to allow employees to make arrangements with employers.

### **What support is available should I have any questions?**

Each on-call station has a management team who will be your point of contact and help support you through the early days of appointing your employee, as well as providing ongoing support and assistance as and when required.

### **What happens if my employee has been at an incident all night, will they still be in work the next day? If not, am I expected to give them paid leave?**

We would not expect this to be a frequent issue, but this is something you would need to clarify with your employee before you agree to release them for on-call duty. If you don't want to pay them for any absence due to the fire and rescue service, then that is your decision.



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## **How long will my employee be away when called out on duty?**

Typically, on-call firefighters are called out two to three hours per week, usually for about an hour (over 24hr periods, some calls may be when they are not working for you). Your local fire and rescue service can provide specific advice but essentially, it's a flexible arrangement, depending on the needs of your business. On-call firefighters can work with the fire and rescue service to agree the cover they wish to provide. They could opt for evening, daytime or weekend cover, your employee will be able to provide you with their on-call rota. Firefighters working the on-call system agree to be available for a certain number of hours. They carry a pager or alerter device and must be able to get to the fire station within a specific time following an emergency call-out during their available hours. Rest assured your needs and requirements as the primary employer will always have priority.

UK fire and rescue services are committed to offering on-call firefighters flexible contracts and working hours to ensure a healthy work/life balance.

## **What sort of training and development will my staff undergo as part of their role as a firefighter?**

All firefighters go through a rigorous training and development programme which is provided by all UK fire and rescue services. They will develop skills in risk management, communication, team working, leadership, self discipline, first aid, trauma care, health and safety, and much more, and they will bring this training and experience back to their workplace.

## **How long will my employee be required to take time away from work for training?**

Firefighters must be well trained if they are going to work safely and effectively in the wide range of operational incidents they have to tackle. The fire and rescue service recognise that some on-call firefighters might need to take time off from their primary employment to undertake training. UK fire and rescue services aim to keep the impact on the primary employer to a minimum by providing basic training at fire stations on drill nights and during weekends, reducing the time required for training during weekdays. However, during the first two years of employment on-call firefighters will have to attend essential training of which some will be during weekdays.

## **What if my employee gets injured while at an incident?**

On-call firefighters are trained to a high standard before they become fully operational, so this is a rare occurrence. In the event this does happen, the fire



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and rescue service offer support services to help firefighters get fit again if they do get injured. For example, local occupational health services and comprehensive physical and psychological rehabilitation arrangements with the Firefighters Charity.

All firefighters undergo regular fitness and medical assessments to assure their continual health, safety and wellbeing.

## **Are there any implications for me or my business as a result of employing an on-call firefighter?**

Like all employers UK fire and rescue services have to comply with current legislation such as the Employment Rights Act 1996, the Health and Safety at Work Act and the Working Time and Road Transport Regulations. Depending on the number of hours they are contracted to their primary employer, on-call firefighters may have to sign an Opt-Out agreement under the Working Time Regulations. If you are a haulage company or your employee drives a truck for work, both you and your employee should be aware of the implications of the EC Drivers' Hours and Tachograph Rules for Goods Vehicles (Regulation 561/2006). Details of any legislation and its impact can be obtained from your local fire and rescue service.

## **What benefits do I get as an employer for releasing a member of staff to be an on-call firefighter?**

The main benefits for employers are listed above. However, many find the biggest reward is the knowledge that their company is undertaking a vital role in protecting the local community. By allowing one of your employees to become an on-call firefighter you know you'll have made a difference every time they respond to an emergency, help save lives and protect people in your community.



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