

Executive Summary of Mapping the Health and Wellbeing Across the Firefighting Career and Assessing the Current Demands

Summary prepared by Nottingham Trent University

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March 2023

Details

Commissioned and funded by: the National Fire Chiefs Council and the Fire Fighters Charity. Grant funding from the Home Office was used to facilitate the delivery of parts of this project.

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To cite this document: Hill, R., Pickford, R., Abdelmalak, E., Afolayan, S., Nadeem, L., Stock, C. (2023). Executive Summary of Mapping the Health and Wellbeing Across the Firefighting Career and Assessing the Current Demands. Nottingham: Nottingham Trent University. <https://doi.org/10.17631/rd-2023-0009-drep>

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Thank you

We would like to thank all those who have taken part in this programme of work, the participants, the organisations, the steering group and the research team.

Report Designed and Typeset by  Nottingham
Civic Exchange

About the Research

The context within which the Fire and Rescue Sector (FRS) operates is changing, and with these changes comes increasing pressures and responsibilities for staff. It is essential that the understanding of their health and wellbeing and how to best support it also develops to ensure that the most effective strategies possible are being offered.

This research consisted of three key portions: a literature review focussed on both stressors and support offerings; a UK-wide survey targeted to all FRS employees; and stakeholder engagement sessions.

Key Findings from the Survey

The following findings are supported by evidence from the wider literature.

- Mental wellbeing was improved by work engagement, social support, resilient coping, and by both job and life satisfaction.
- Mental wellbeing was negatively impacted by occupational stress, burnout, anxiety, depression, and stress.
- Alcohol consumption was associated to low work engagement.
- Exercise was positively associated to work engagement, job satisfaction, perceived social support, life satisfaction, and resilient coping. It was also associated to lower levels of burnout, anxiety, stress, and depression.
- Increased length of career was associated to experiencing more mental wellbeing challenges. Analysis confirmed that this not attributable to increased age.
- Increased sleep disruption was associated to poorer mental wellbeing.

Key Findings from the Literature Review

- There is a strong bias towards operational staff and traumatic stressors in the FRS-specific literature, with strong gaps surrounding the non-operational roles.
- Reciprocal relationship between general life stressors and work stressors; increase in one makes the other more difficult to cope with.
- There is a need for a wide range of support offerings, particularly focused on prevention and health promotion, to address the different needs of all FRS staff.

The following findings represent key future research avenues as they do not entirely fit with what was expected from the wider literature.

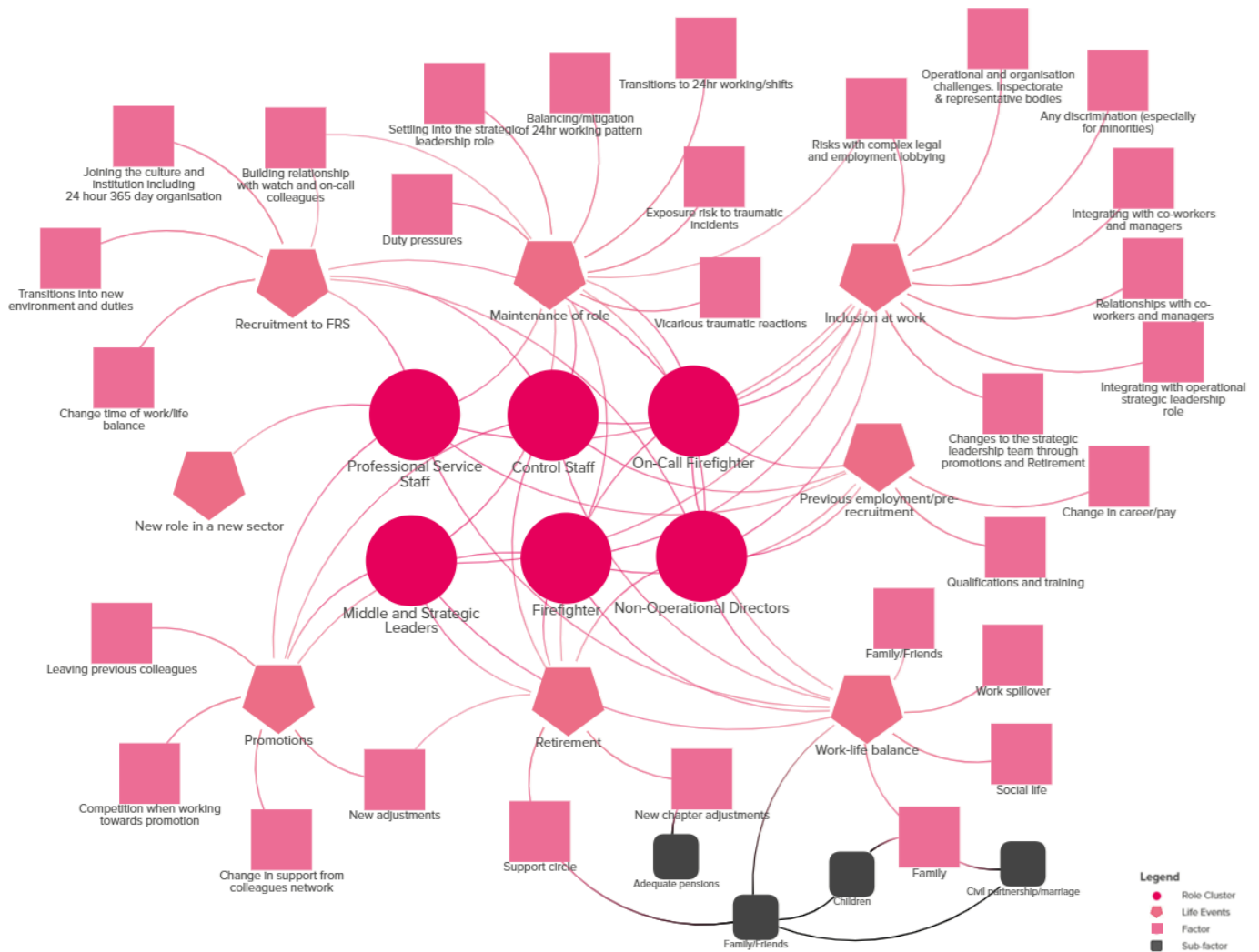
- Intention to quit was not directly associated to poor wellbeing.
- Traumatic reactions were not directly associated to poor wellbeing.
- Awareness of support at work had a non-significant effect on wellbeing.

The report explored six role clusters that the report defined as:

- Non-operational senior managers/directors,
- Professional services staff,
- Control staff,
- Middle and senior leaders,
- On-call operational firefighters,
- Full-time operational firefighters

Each cluster experienced a set of cluster-specific health and wellbeing factors alongside a set of population and fire and rescue service factors that impact on staff and volunteers. The representation on the next page highlights the interconnected nature of these wellbeing experiences in the sector and indicates the need for a holistic and joined up approach to support everyone with their wellbeing needs.

Role Clusters, Life Events and Stress Factors



Future Work and Recommendations

31 recommendations developed cover a range of topics to support FRS. They have been clustered under five themes identified using a gap analysis. They are intended to support FRS to develop and be integrated with the 13 priorities outlined in the accompanying strategy which is detailed after the recommendations.

Governance

Recommendation 1: The fire sector, with support from the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC), should consider implementing the recommendations contained within this report by recognising and supporting health and wellbeing within each Fire Standard.

Recommendation 2: The NFCC and Fire Fighters Charity should develop a health and wellbeing strategy for the sector, with a holistic approach including physical, psychological and social

health. The framework and associated policy should be designed to support the staff's ability to engage positively both inside and outside the workplace. This can be supported by the associated 'recommended key priorities' document which synthesises the findings of this report into actionable future delivery and evaluation mechanisms.

Recommendation 3: The design of workplace support and policies within fire services and the

Fire Fighters Charity should be built as a mixed ecology of provision and the design should use this evidence base in their creation to ensure staff have pathways to support for a range of stressors/transitions/ challenges that they may face in their adult lives.

Recommendation 4: The strategy and framework developed for the sector should prioritise a holistic offer for all staff and volunteers that includes a health promotion approach.

Recommendation 5: The NFCC, Fire Fighters Charity and other stakeholder governance structures within the health and wellbeing strategy should establish and maintain a two-way communication process with all staff to capture what is and what is not working in the strategy and framework. This should include an annual wellbeing survey built from the one used in this report alongside reporting channels through services or engagement approaches.

Recommendation 6: To reflect the nature of all wellbeing needs of different groups within the fire sector, and the need to embed wellbeing approaches through all areas of policy development, a review should be undertaken across the existing documentation of key stakeholders (including the NFCC, the Fire Fighters Charity and all fire services) to ensure wellbeing and inclusion are woven through all areas of activity.

Recommendation 7: The NFCC and Fire Fighters Charity should coordinate their knowledge and resources to review, identify and quality assure good or leading practice to help services build psychological resources such as job satisfaction, connectedness and belonging into their policy and practices. This should be in the form of guidance, or a compendium of resources.

Recommendation 8: Fire services, the Fire Fighters Charity and other stakeholders should ensure that any support incorporated in their offers which were originally designed for the general population are reviewed by an appropriately qualified and experienced practitioner, in consultation with external support and evaluation, to ensure its appropriateness for the fire community. Where changes are necessary these should be recorded appropriately on risk registers or policy audits.

Recommendation 9: Any national stakeholders (NFCC, Fire Fighters Charity, Home Office and others) should ensure that current and future developments across the health and wellbeing of the fire sector recognise the key differences between the bluelight services and ensure that any shared work responds to the needs of the fire sector.

Recommendation 10: The NFCC should ensure there is a mechanism to update the knowledge across the sector relating to health and wellbeing such as an annual survey. Through this the understanding of health and wellbeing needs should be updated annually. In due course this would also create a longitudinal evidence base to inform strategic priorities and highlight where support offers or structures need reviewing.

Review

Recommendation 11: The NFCC, Fire Fighters Charity and fire services should complete a mapping exercise to capture the offers of support available from the local to national levels for those working or volunteering in the fire sector. This would be for each cluster of jobs detailed in this report to ensure both individuals and services are easily able to find and access support for the wellbeing of their people. This

This would be for each cluster of jobs detailed in this report to ensure both individuals and services are easily able to find and access support for the wellbeing of their people. This would then feed into a strategy for health and wellbeing in the Fire and Rescue Sector.

Recommendation 12: Fire services and the Fire Fighters Charity should consult the analysis in this report to complete a review of the support offer for their staff within each organisation. This should be completed alongside an evidence base of identified good or leading practice and co-produced with staff groups to develop future support offers.

Recommendation 13: Fire services and any other stakeholder groups who include external support providers in their offer should keep an open dialogue and regular review, to ensure the offer continues to be a good fit with the needs of the sector and its workforce. Transparent quality assurance mechanisms should be built into this.

Recommendation 14: Fire services and the Fire Fighters Charity should review their development, design, threshold triggers for access, and targeting/communicating of wellbeing support offers to ensure that increased length of service (not age) is considered appropriately in policies and practices.

Recommendation 15: Fire services and the NFCC should review their guidance, policies and practices of supervisor induction and training. This review should ensure that supervision training and delivery incorporates and promotes the health and wellbeing of all staff as a consistent approach throughout. Training delivery needs to review in the context of the 'recommended key priorities' document and include effective support of supervisors.

Recommendation 16: Fire services and the Fire Fighters Charity should implement the recommendations from the 'Understanding the transition to retirement for Firefighters: A social identity approach' report completed on the UK fire sector in 2020.

Data

Recommendation 17: The strategy that implements the findings and recommendations should be flexible and fit into existing systems and practices. It should also have mechanisms to ensure that it keeps current and is updated to reflect the changing social and political context. This should include a bi-annual mapping exercise against the academic literature base or good or leading practice as defined by national or international health bodies such as the World Health Organisation. This should also ensure it continues to develop evidence for changed approaches to wellbeing support.

Recommendation 18: A structure and process should be developed for recording, sharing and aggregating health data (physical, psychological, and social) so that role, service, and national health profiles can be understood across time. Fire and rescue services, Fire Fighters Charity and other providers should contribute and use this data to inform their own health and wellbeing offer, identify changes in need, evaluate and guide policy development.

Recommendation 19: Following recommendation 18, the key stakeholders should identify direct or proxy measures of impacts on wellbeing to evaluate support and interventions across services and the sector. These should be incorporated into the data and digital future planning of Fire and Rescue Sector.

Recommendation 20: Future research commissions (such as from the Home Office, Fire Fighters Charity and NFCC) should seek a deeper understanding of the complex indirect relationship between staff awareness of support pathways available and their wellbeing. There is a need to understand this relationship across all job roles as their needs, support and awareness, as reported in this report, is nuanced and different.

Implementation of leading practice

Recommendation 21: The NFCC and Fire Fighters Charity should coordinate their knowledge and resources to create a resource pack and compendium of practice for services to implement a positive resource ecology that facilitates work engagement and enhances shared psychological resources across organisations (for example drawing on mutual aid arrangements). This should be captured and supported through the development of a strategy, framework and future national workstreams, directed by the 'recommended key priorities' document developed alongside this report.

Recommendation 22: Fire services, the Fire Fighters Charity, and sector specific recruitment websites should include resources and information packs for the family to increase their knowledge of the role and the stressors within them. Clear communication on transition points across FRS roles and pathways to appropriate support should support family members to recognise needs and proactively engage with support if required. Similar material should also be developed for trainee firefighters, new starters in professional services, those who move on to a flexi-duty rota and those who come into the fire sector through the direct entry schemes.

Recommendation 23: Fire services should provide a formal peer support offer which is accredited, peer-led and has a robust governance framework, within which onward referrals to professional support are signposted and supported with clear triggers and thresholds for onward referral.

Recommendation 24: The NFCC, Fire Fighters Charity and Home Office should come together with other key stakeholders across the fire sector to create a work stream to address the lack of evidence regarding the risk and support available to those transitioning into a flexi-duty rota.

Recommendation 25: The NFCC should work across the sector with all stakeholders to create policies and processes for the provision of mutual aid to provide capability and capacity to meet surge demand for health and wellbeing support for a high number of staff after a significant major incident.

Necessary enhancement

Recommendation 26: Fire services, the Fire Fighters Charity and the NFCC should work with staff groups to ensure the needs of different clusters of job roles are included in the offers of support, including nuanced communication methods to enhance engagement with support services for different groups.

Recommendation 27: The support offered by providers to alleviate potentially traumatic reactions should ensure a mixed ecology of support is offered. This support offer should be provided to all staff following potentially traumatic experiences to meet their needs regardless of role and whether the experience occurred in or out of work and should reflect the needs of both individuals and groups.

Recommendation 28: Fire services should consider the inclusion of the family of staff members in their practices and education/health promotion activities through the Fire Fighters Charity and/or themselves.

Recommendation 29: Fire services and NFCC guidance should advocate for the provision of clear feedback to all unsuccessful promotion candidates to help them understand the decision and to engage in meaningful goal setting and professional development to increase their chances of succeeding in the future.

Recommendation 30: Fire services should facilitate access for all their staff to the NFCC

coaching programme Home - NFCC Coaching (<https://nfcccoaching.mye-coach.com/>).

Recommendation 31: Fire services and the NFCC should consider the recommendations of the Levin (2020) report with a view to revising onboarding and training practices to include virtual methods (where possible) and include health promotion education. This should ease the transition into the service for new starters and promote knowledge of the role to them and their family. This also increases the accessibility and inclusion for all staff, recognising diverse needs such as ethnicity and neurodiversity.

The Strategic Priorities

To support [the report](#) a set of [strategic priorities](#) have been created which sets out a way forward outlining thirteen priorities needed to promote health and wellbeing in the FRS over the next five years. The priorities set out here:

- Supporting individuals to own their own wellbeing
- The holistic approach from new starter through a career and into retirement
- Applying our prevention talents to ourselves
- Making it everything we do
- Creating shared language across the sector
- The measures of impact
- Scaling data to identify and support our future needs from local to national
- Flexibility of approach
- Social return on investment
- The framework
- Governance structure
- Sharing of resources
- Tasking groups

Each of these priorities is supported by evidence from the full report and shares a positive way forward to ensure that everyone who works and volunteers within FRS can lead a positive and fulfilling life. They will take time and commitment to achieve but should ensure that the sector can create a positive health and wellbeing environment for all.

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March 2023