

Report from the National Women's Committee to the Fire Brigades Union reference changes to the 2/2/3 shift system

23rd February 2003

During the period that we had to compile this report, regional women's representatives managed to contact and receive responses from over 100 women members. Women who are currently in the Fire Service who really know how the shift pattern works and its advantages and potential disadvantages in terms of childcare and family responsibilities. The National Women's Committee has been the main link to women workers in the Fire Service for many years, and as such are an acknowledged group who can and do speak on behalf of women in the fire service

Having conducted a survey of FBU Members from London to Tayside the National Women's Committee can conclude that contrary to arguments made in Bain the current 2/2/3 shift system is far from a blockage to equality, diversity and the recruitment and retention of women and by asking members who have a family, childcare or caring commitments we would argue that the 2/2/3 shift system is conducive, if not promotional, to a good family life. Parents/carers currently working this shift system say that it enables them to fulfill two roles:

- 1) Taking care of the family **and**
- 2) Concentrating on a full and active career within the fire service.

The current shift system allows parents to regularly be with their children and/or families for unbroken, meaningful periods of time, inclusive of weekends and weekdays. In addition, the current shift pattern means that they know well in advance, when they are working. This type of stability is an important factor when organizing and planning childcare, and balancing the needs of the family.

Bain and the employers' use of the 'Equality angle' and 'Women' to promote the removal of the 2/2/3 shift system actually work against good relations between men and women. In particular, such an argument is **divisive** and **unfounded**.

Divisive: in that the use of women and family friendly policies will be viewed by male firefighters as something that women have brought upon the Service, thus creating a huge backlash on women.

Unfounded: because the reality is that women in this survey and through their regional women's representatives have, time and time again argued ***in support*** of the current shift system, and against any changes.

Used properly the 2/2/3 system is more likely to encourage rather than dissuade women applicants. The duty system is not one of the areas that stop women from considering the Fire Service as a viable job; ***on the contrary it is a positive aspect of Fire Service working life which enables parents to consider the service as a realistic career.***

We have extracted some of the comments provided by FBU members during this survey and presented them below, many of them were repeated throughout.

The main reasons that members feel that the current shift pattern is conducive to good family/work life balance are:

- The need for child-care is kept at a minimum,
- The way the 42 hours are distributed means you can spend more quality time with the family than a 9 to 5, Monday to Friday job or disjointed shift patterns.
- Larger involvement with family e.g., school outings, dentist visits, doctor visits, parent / teacher visits etc. Most of which occur during the week.
- Time off during the week to arrange personal appointments without taking time off work.
- Time to care for elderly or disabled relatives without outside nursing care.
- Allows further education courses to be undertaken, enhancing skills and benefiting yourself and your brigade.
- Encourages primary carers, within the family to take a full part in their career and to properly look after the children/relative at home
- The current system due to its regularity enables families to plan ahead. You know when you are working well in advance. This maintains continuity within the family and the children have a consistent routine.
- During recruitment, outreach workers have found that women who have a family, or are considering a family, usually react positively when the shift system is explained to them.
- Encourages and allows for men to take a full part in family life and would enable their partners to work, should they wish to. (Maybe even in the Fire Service!)

Reasons why our members felt it would not be a positive change to replace the current 2/2/3 shift system with the new proposed system.

- Would mean more childcare is required, thus incurring more costs to primary carers and less time at home with the family.
- Would mean more commuting time spent and increased travel cost, thus reducing annual income. (Particularly in areas where the cost of living is so high that our members are commuting long distances) This would also mean spending less time with the family.

- No-one knows when they are working, creating an unbalanced family life, with no routine.
- A requirement to take time off from work when doctors or dentist appointments etc. are required
- Members would not be able to participate in any extra skills or learning within the Fire Service if they wish to spend quality time with the family.
- Primary carers would not have blocks of time to spend with the family, therefore not creating a good family balance.

If Bain and our employers seriously wanted to encourage women to join the Fire Service then they may have done better to address some of the issues mentioned below.

Currently women firefighters are forced to

- wear uniform that doesn't fit,
- wear fire kit that has not been tested on a female form mannequin,
- work on fire stations without adequate toilet and shower facilities.
- arrange maternity provisions as and when they get pregnant because employers have not faced up to their responsibilities,
- work in areas where there are no childcare provisions
- travel long distances to and from work due to cost of living and low wages
- Have to train at residential training schools when they have family commitments and no adequate childcare being provided.

What follows are a sample of responses that the National Women's Committee has received, from both men and women, which reflect the position of members in the Fire Brigades Union.

RESPONSE 1:

Firefighter: IM

Service: 6 months

Family: 2 children under 1 year old

IM joined the fire service for the shift system. His primary aim is to spend more time with his young family. He has left his trade and own business as a joiner, with a significant drop in pay in order to become a firefighter. His wife is planning to return to work but any changes to the current shift system will mean that this will have to be reviewed, as childcare arrangements will be changed. IM says that the current duty system allows him to work a 42 hour week and still have quality time with his family. Disadvantages of the system are that he has to work over Christmas and Public Holidays, which he has not had to do before. He is also away from his family 2 nights out of 7, which he says is bearable but not ideal. He has no problems with childcare

at present, as his wife is not working. IM commented that if a 5 day from 7 system were introduced, he would leave the Fire Service and seek alternative employment that is conducive with a family friendly environment. He does not agree that 5 early's, 5 lates and 5 nights is going to help him.

REPSONSE 2:

Leading

Firefighter: IK

Service: 20 years

Family: 3 children school age, 1 post school

IK has recently separated and is getting divorced from his wife. One of his children has a serious medical condition. IK lives apart from his family. He commented that access to his family is limited at present but if the system was to change that it would make the situation unbearable. Even with his length of service and the implications of shift work, his quality of life with his family would change completely if the system was to alter. He has worked the 2/2/3/ system for the entire length of career and the upset to this would consider him to seek alternative employment, as access to his family would be impossible. He commented that the current system is family friendly, why change something if it works. It is flexible to the point of reason.

Response 3:

Firefighter: JM

Service: 5 years

Family: 3 school age, 1 baby expected Early April

JM is an expectant mother. She is currently working a 9 day fortnight for her Brigade. They give her the time that she requires to attend medical appointments, etc and also allow her flexibility to be home to pick her children up from school. JM is completing Brigade Operational Plans and is also working from home once her family is in bed. JM commented that the current shift of 2/2/3 is easy to work out, you know months in advance when you are going to be working which is very advantageous for organising childcare, which she says causes her less stress. She is able to plan a routine, which the children enjoy and are now used to. JM has commented that if the shifts are changed then she is doubtful if she would be able to see her children at all. She has to commute to her work. She said that it would be doubtful that there would be another job that would give her the same opportunities as she has had with the Fire service. JM is a career motivated Firefighter and has passed promotion exams. She has found that the shift system encouraged her to progress and has become empowered by this. JM wants to return to work full-time. She will be able to do this under the present system and also look after her baby. However, any changes to this and the only alternative to staying in the Fire Service is to consider Job Share. This is not an option that she would enjoy, as she is a committed firefighter. As she is working essentially day-duties at the moment, she finds that even though she sees her family in the evening that she is too busy running the house in order to spend quality time. The 9 day fortnight does not suit her very well and she would not like to follow that system indefinitely.

Response 4:**Emergency Fire Control Operator: MR****Service: 15 years****Family: 2 school age**

MR has 2 children at primary school. Her husband works full-time having evenings and weekends off. He provides childcare at these times. MR commented that if the duty system was to change then instead of having 2 days to find childcare for then she would require 5 days for 2 weeks instead of 4 days over the same 2 weeks as provided by the current duty system. She is also concerned at the nightshifts and the disruption that would cause to the family. MR said that changes would be detrimental to her ability to interact and socialise with her children. She is presently able to plan and participate in activities and events with her children and feels that any changes would severely restrict her family. Some activities would have to be curtailed and some removed. During school breaks, her children attend out of school clubs and holiday clubs. Some of this closedown for breaks through the year. She has found that childcare at this time is of great strain and pressure to her and her husband. The current cost of childcare is 1/3rd of what it would be if proposals were to go ahead. She says the current system is very family friendly and why do they feel they need to change it. Other employers are actually resorting back to the 2/2/3 system. Why change a system, which works? MR is able to plan and attend medical appointments both for herself and her family, which she says, are often difficult to come by. The sheer financial cost of a duty change would make her seriously consider her ability to continue employment in the fire service.

Response 5: JT**Emergency Fire Control Operator:****Service: 13 years****Family: 2 children**

I am currently an LFCOp with Strathclyde Fire Brigade. I have been with the Brigade for almost 13 years. I have always worked the 2-2-3 shift pattern. This system has been of great benefit to me especially where family life is concerned. My husband is a serving Station Officer and he also works the 2-2-3 shift pattern.

When I first joined the Brigade my sons were aged 7 and 4 years and as my husband and I were on opposite shifts at that time, we required very little in the way of childcare. The 2-2-3 system meant that our children were able to stay within their own home environment with little disruption to their routine. It was also very useful when they required attending hospital or doctor's appointments.

I also suffered a spell of ill-health in my initial years with the brigade and again the 2-2-3 system worked well as my husband was there 4 days per week to care for both my children and myself.

We later moved on to different watches again whereby we had 2 days off together – this not only meant that there was somebody there for the children every day but we were also able to spend more time together as a family unit.

The 2-2-3 shift system has also enabled me to attend external courses at the Fire Service College at Morton-in-Marsh, again this was only possible because my husband also worked the 2-2-3 shifts and was available 4 days per week to care for our children, which meant there was again less disruption for them and again we did not require too much in the way of childcare.

Response 6: JF
Emergency Fire Control Operator
Service: 20 years
Family: 3 children

In response to the issue of making the fire service more “family friendly” and specifically altering the current 2-2-3 shift pattern to address this issue, I feel my views as an employee may be of use to those discussing the above subject. I have worked in this brigade for nearly two decades and have always been on the 2-2-3 shift pattern. I have also worked in private industry on the 3 shift pattern (dayshift, backshift, and nightshift) and 9 to 5 Monday to Friday. I am a parent of three young children and my wife is employed part-time.

I can say without doubt, that the current shift pattern is by far the most “family friendly” system than any other I have worked.

It allows me to have good quality time with my children, both midweek, weekends, and during the school holidays. In addition, it is easier for my wife to work part-time with little or no childcare costs and obviously allows us to supplement our family income.

I have recently had a family member suffer from illness over the long term and found that my shift pattern lent itself to me being able to spend time at home when needed, whilst not impinging on my employer too much.

I appreciate that domestic / parental leave is now available to me but this could be “without pay”. It would be far better to keep the current shift system **and** use domestic / parental leave than to have to rely solely on possibly unpaid leave to cope with domestic issues and a possible financial burden as well as causing my employer to give me more time off.

On day to day issues, a change of shift pattern would likely result in more periods of time at work albeit for less hours. This being the case I would incur a significant increase in travel costs and just as importantly in traveling time.

The roles we perform within our brigade command and control centre lend themselves to the current length of shift and adds significantly to the working relationship between members of staff and **helps the team bond and perform our task more efficiently as a team** whilst we are at work.

In my opinion, you will be hard pressed to find many staff members with domestic/family responsibilities who would advocate a change from the current set up. Surely it is the views of those who work in the system that should be your guide as to what changes need to be made.

Response 7: LW
Firefighter
Children: wants to start a family

My thoughts on part of the report are connected with starting a family. Soon I hope to start a family with my partner but am worried & a little put off due to the fact I will have to go on a 9 day fortnight & leave my watch. I live 38miles outside London due to our low pay not allowing myself and my boyfriend to live close to London. It would financially cripple me to have to travel into London every day, also using the M1 each day there & back would not be good for stress levels in a pregnant woman. Where the brigade would post me during my pregnancy god only knows. I would like to stay with my watch system which is ideal, but am told you're not allowed to be left alone at night, well if my partner is on nights I will be left alone at home anyway. The shift system we have I feel is very family friendly, if my partner & I are on opposite watches our child will always be with one of its parents, which in my mind is perfect.

Response 8: SC

Police Officer:

Service: 4 years

Family: Nil

The following is a statement from an Officer SC, a police constable within Tayside Police, currently working the 5/2 duty system.

Officer SC hates her shifts. She commented that she never has time to see her family or have much of a form of social life out with her work. She spends a great deal of time having to commute to and from her place of work, which is financially draining. Even though she has no children she does not enjoy her hours of work. She commented that the nightshifts are particularly draining and the changeover between the times of shifts leave her disorientated and she can feel ill as a result. This contributed to her sickness level. She would not recommend anyone who has a family or a partner to work these shifts. Gaining quality time is a huge problem and she cannot venture too far from her place of work, as she has to be back at work for the start of her shift. Other officers within her constabulary work a different system. They actively avoid being transferred to the area that works the 5/2 system as they say it is too restrictive and not suitable for family or relationships.

Response 9: IN

Firefighter

Service: 12 Years

Family: One on the way

My wife is a nurse and we are currently expecting our first child. Trying to arrange any time together is already difficult enough because my wife's Rota is arranged only one week in advance with no continuity. With my present shift system we will both be available to parent our child and can plan our time so we need not pay for child care. Having a shift system in place that you can plan around is invaluable to parents who both have to work. Losing our present shift system will not only cause us financial difficulties but will mean a significant reduction in our family time. Thank you Mr. Bain for your well thought out new family friendly shift idea's, I'm sure it will be to the detriment of many families in our position.

Response 10: ST
Sub Officer
Service: 17 years
Family: 2 children

When I joined in 1985 I was a single parent of a 4 year old and the most difficult time for me was being at training school but once at station my childcare needs were less demanding and apart from having to sort out 2 nights care every week (the most difficult but I had space for an Au-pair - very cost effective) it was so much better than a conventional job. I was able to see my son everyday and spend a significant amount of time with him, much more than if I were working everyday. Also when I had my second child in 1996 I was able to rejoin my watch relatively smoothly because of the shift system and the fact that my husband was also in the job meant our childcare needs were minimal. I have also found that should either of my children fall ill I very rarely have to take time off to look after them because one of us is always about. This Governments view is very short sighted and should any of this be introduced any small gains made in the area of diversity will very quickly be eroded. I personally would seriously think about an alternative career even though both me and my husband have invested and awful lot of time and effort into the fire service.

Response 11: AF
Firefighter

I am forwarding this to you for your information.

I am very concerned that the adverse impact of the Bain report and of all the current media circus on women firefighters.

As you are aware, women firefighters struggle on a daily basis to be recognised in their role as firefighters. Comments from John Prescott, Tony Blair, Nick Raynsford and Sir George Bain have not assisted this at all. When the author of a report as supposedly important as the Bain review cannot even use the term firefighter, then it is no wonder women feel as demoralized as they do.

We are all extremely worried about the backlash from suggestions about changing of the shift system and the links to recruiting more women. Several of our current operational women firefighters have said that they will be forced to leave the job if the shift pattern is altered to their detriment.

As we speak, yet another woman firefighter has tendered her resignation from LFEPA over the way she has been treated.

How much longer does this have to go on before we start recognising and supporting our women firefighters publicly?