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# HM Fire Service Inspectorate

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## Local Area Inspection Western Isles



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**Integrity, Objectivity, and Fairness.**

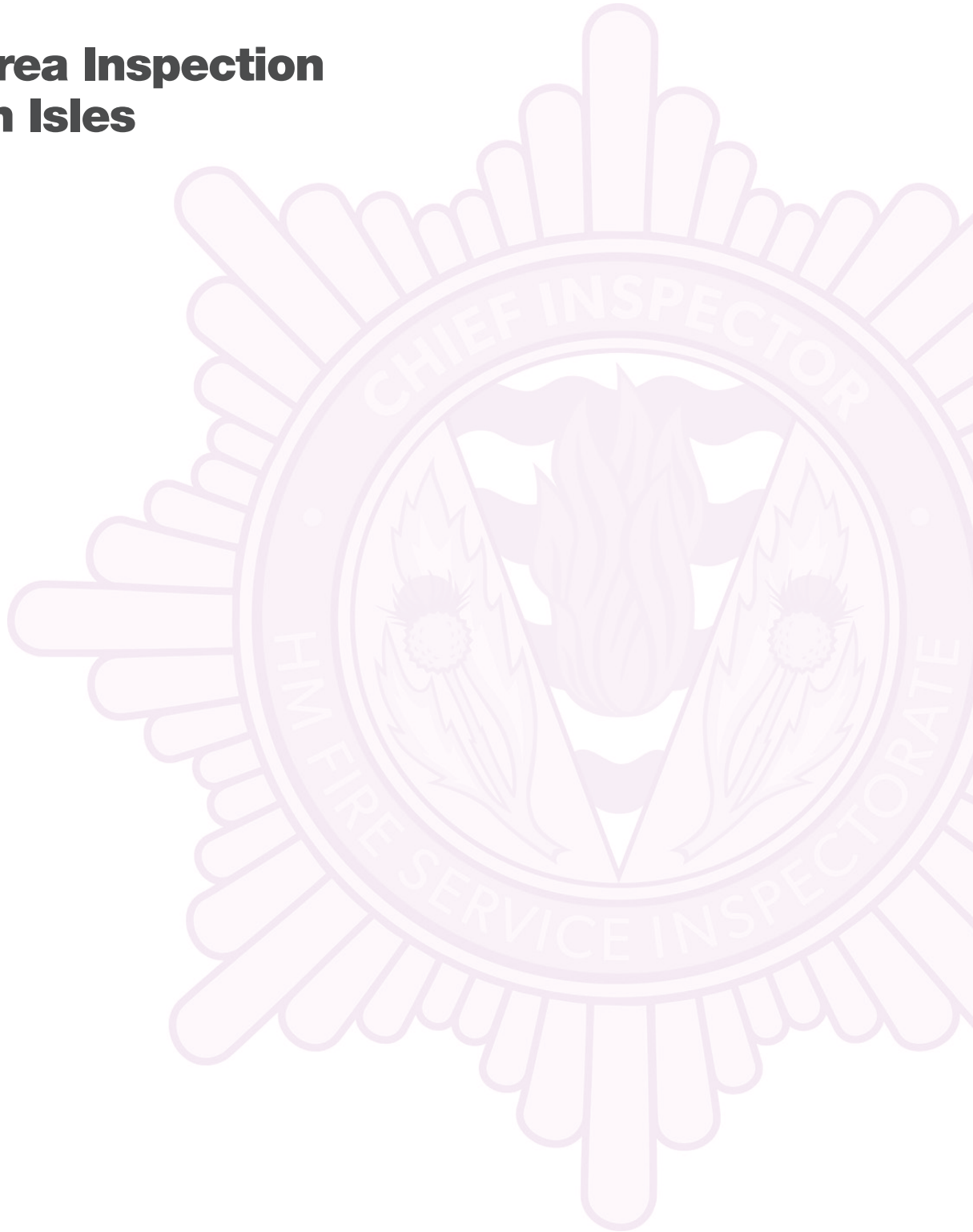


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# Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Billy Wilson, the Local Senior Officer for the Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland Islands, Iain Macleod, Group Manager for the Western Isles, and those members of staff who provided us with information, helped us to organise visits, hosted us and contributed constructively to interviews. We also wish to thank the representatives of partner organisations who agreed to be interviewed and gave generously of their time.

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A quality assurance review of this report was kindly provided by Leon Parkes, Assistant Fire and Rescue Advisor at the Welsh Government. All the members of the inspection team contributed to the development of this report and the quality assurance reviewer provided a professional challenge to the contents, assumptions and conclusions made. However, HM Fire Service Inspectorate takes responsibility for the report, its contents and conclusions.

HM Fire Service Inspectorate December 2015

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# 1\_ The local area inspection programme


The Fire and Rescue Framework for Scotland 2013 sets out how Scottish Ministers expect the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) to operate and how, in part, its effectiveness and efficiency are to be measured. We take the Framework as the starting point for structuring and prioritising our inspection programme. The Fire and Rescue Framework indicates that there should be strengthened connection between the SFRS and communities, which is itself underpinned by principles contained within the Christie Commission report on the Future Delivery of Public Services in Scotland (June 2011).

The Fire (Scotland) Act 2005 requires the SFRS to appoint a Local Senior Officer (LSO) for each local authority area in Scotland for the purpose of carrying out its functions in that area. The LSO reports to the Head of Service Delivery for the relevant SFRS Service Delivery Area (SDA) (North, East or West). The SFRS is also required by the Act to have a Local Fire and Rescue Plan for each local authority area, which will set out the SFRS's priorities and objectives for that local area; why they have been selected; how the SFRS intends to deliver them; and (insofar as is practicable) outcomes by reference to which the SFRS's service delivery in the local authority area can be measured. The fact that the 2005 Act is structured in this way is a clear demonstration of the Scottish Parliament's intention that SFRS service delivery should be considered both at the national and local authority levels.

Inspections of SFRS service delivery within local authority areas, that examine the development and delivery of Local Fire and Rescue Plans, help to provide assurance about the way in which the SFRS is meeting this intention. By undertaking inspections of SFRS service delivery within local authority areas, HM Fire Service Inspectorate:

- can provide assurance to Scottish Ministers and the public that the SFRS is making adequate provision for local service delivery and that local areas have access to specialist national resources, and make suggestions for improvement if necessary
- can take a detailed look at the nature and quality of service provision, including working with partner organisations, within local areas and can draw attention to significant matters and areas of good practice
- can co-operate with other scrutiny bodies to provide collaborative, 'place-based' scrutiny of government service provision (the possible development of a place-based approach to Shared Risk Assessment is stated in the *National Scrutiny Plan for Local Government 2014-15*<sup>1</sup>)
- maintains a good level of awareness of the Service's functions and builds a record of how the Service is functioning
- can gather intelligence that may inform, or cause to be undertaken, more strategic, thematic inspections of the SFRS.

<sup>1</sup> Local Government Scrutiny Coordination Strategic Group, June 2014  
[http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/docs/local/2014/as\\_140603\\_scrutiny\\_plan.pdf](http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/docs/local/2014/as_140603_scrutiny_plan.pdf)



Our local area inspections are intended to be closely tied to the Fire and Rescue Framework. For this reason we have adopted a structure for them which follows the structure of the Framework itself:

- the Local Fire and Rescue Plan and Single Outcome Agreement
- improved service outcomes and protecting frontline services
- more equal access to specialist resources and national capacity
- strengthened connection between SFRS and communities.

We look at a broad range of matters relevant to fire and rescue service delivery within the area being inspected, including any issues arising from thematic work carried out in that area; and in our inspection report we give an opinion on the manner in which the SFRS is carrying out its functions in the above respects.

In our local area inspections we aim to visit as many service delivery locations as we can, and speak to managers and a range of uniformed and non-uniformed staff. We look at premises and equipment, and view a sample of records to enable us to understand the way in which business within the area is conducted. In this way we aim to cross-reference the SFRS's written plans, and what we are told about the local area by SFRS managers, with our own observations and discussions with staff on the ground.

We do not, however, carry out our local area inspections as a comprehensive audit. The SFRS has a programme of internal station audits that involve a detailed look at station activity and records, and we do not want to duplicate that work. The sampling methodology that we adopt cannot be guaranteed to identify all potential areas for improvement: we intend that it should be a proportionate activity that provides an overview of the area, comparable with other local area inspections that we carry out.

## A summary of our findings

- The Western Isles present unusual challenges to the SFRS through their geography. Outside Stornoway, the population is distributed sparsely over numbers of remote island communities. This means that, arguably, to provide a meaningful response capability across the area, larger numbers of fire stations per population are required than would typically be found in mainland Scotland. Although, as is common across the country, the siting and distribution of stations has evolved over a long period of time rather than being the product of strategic planning.
- Consistent with our Local Area reports to date, we have made some comments on the Local Plan and have suggested some points which might support improvements in the next version.
- There is an effective targeted approach to fire safety enforcement by dedicated staff, and this is a substantial improvement when compared to the lack of focus that had existed within the predecessor service.
- Communication is a significant issue in the islands. Our view was that training and record keeping systems that had been developed on the understanding that broadband connectivity would be available were not functioning, owing to the lack of good broadband access. It appeared to us that the SFRS had not made arrangements for those areas without broadband access and so some online-based functions could not be carried out.
- The dedication of crews in maintaining appliances on the run was notable, given that many fire stations have unfilled firefighter vacancies. The recruitment problems common within the Retained Duty System and Volunteer Duty System (R/VDS) in Scotland are found in the RDS stations of the Western Isles as well, exacerbated in places by the challenges of recruiting from small and widely scattered communities.
- With this in mind, it is our view that current protocols for station availability and appliance response are unnecessarily restrictive. Staff are currently required to book 'unavailable', potentially making a station or appliance unavailable, if they are more than six to eight minutes from the station. We suggest that a new category of 'delayed availability' should be introduced for staff and stations, to recognise that it may take an extended time to assemble a crew at some times of the day, but it is still much quicker to do so than to wait for an appliance from another station to attend.
- Additionally, we think there is scope for the SFRS to consider how personnel from neighbouring stations might be aggregated to form a full crew and maintain response capability, even when individually those stations are unable to muster a full crew. We recommend that SFRS introduces a greater flexibility in the way it staffs and crews emergency appliances in line with thinking which is evolving from the RDS and Volunteer review.
- Some personnel located a distance from Stornoway reported a perception of limited contact with flexi-duty managers, and told us that they would benefit from having more frequent visits. Speaking with managers in Stornoway it was clear that there were geographical challenges involved in travelling to distant stations, while at the same time it was felt that there was no operational justification for having more flexi-duty managers on the islands. In our view the SFRS could give thought to having flexi-duty managers from locations such as Glasgow share the load in respect of stations like Barra and Benbecula, as the transport links may actually be better than the links to Stornoway.



- The initiative of the SFRS (involving significant financial investment), in partnership with Highlands and Islands Airports Limited (HIAL), to provide hot fire training facilities at Stornoway is to be welcomed. This will make it easier both to train and maintain the skills of firefighters on the islands. We understand that similar initiatives are being rolled out elsewhere and we welcome this move to bring realistic training closer to these communities.
- However we note the lack of any formal MoU with HIAL over the issue of arrangements for assistance, which on islands with a single SFRS station such as Barra could be a significant issue and seems an obvious thing to do in remote areas. It appears to us that the question of whether and in what circumstances HIAL assets could be deployed in support of an SFRS response does not have a clear answer and would be left to ad hoc arrangements. We think that the issue should be formally codified between SFRS and HIAL at a national level, to assist both incident commanders should the need arise, and SFRS district staff in their contingency planning.
- The same point about transport links made above is also relevant to training. It might be easier for personnel from Barra and the Uists to travel to Glasgow than to Stornoway in some cases. We understand that there has been an element of flexibility shown in nominating training locations for Western Isles crews which takes transport links and travel times into account, and we encourage that to continue.
- We received feedback from the large majority of stations that we visited that they wanted to become involved in broader community resilience and emergency response work, moving away from traditional narrow conceptions of the firefighter's role. An involvement in medical response was highlighted to us as an area where stations thought they could add real value to their communities. We encourage the SFRS to continue to think broadly about its response role in the context of remote rural communities such as these.
- Although it is recognised that there are comparatively few higher risk premises within the Western Isles, in comparison to more urban environments, there are still a number spread across the islands. Although mobile data terminals are installed on fire appliances, we were not made aware of any process for ensuring that operational risk information is made available to all crews across the area, and reviewed and updated regularly.

## 2 About the area

The geography and demographics of the Western Isles presents significant challenges in terms of their remoteness, significant land area, scattered population, and climate. The Western Isles are often described in terms of the four districts of Lewis (in which the largest town, Stornoway, is situated), Harris (principally a single landmass with Lewis), the Uists and Benbecula (which are connected by causeway), and Barra.

The severity of winter weather is such that ferry transport cannot be relied upon to transport additional resources in the winter months, and so planning for fire cover has to proceed on the assumption that no support will be available except from areas connected by land. Further to that, in severe storms it may not be possible to cross the causeways linking the Uists, Benbecula and Eriskay.

There are 14 fire stations in the Western Isles, which on the face of it is a large number for a population of around 27,250<sup>2</sup>. However the distances between settlements, and the nature of the road network in the islands, explains why the fire station network developed in this way.

Up until the 1990s, many fire stations in the Western Isles were organised on a volunteer basis, with often limited access to training, buildings and equipment. A decision was taken by the former Highland and Islands Fire and Rescue Board in the early 2000s to convert all such volunteer stations to the Retained Duty System, which, while this change was intended to open the door to higher standards of training and equipment, has had some significant and possibly unintended effects that we discuss later in this report.

Communities in the Western Isles tend to be close-knit, and issues that might be of significance elsewhere in Scotland – such as identifying and reaching out to people who are vulnerable to unintentional harm – do not tend to figure so largely in community planning and joint agency work, because community knowledge and close working relationships between individuals makes such work, at a formal level, less important. We found a greater focus in joint-agency working towards building community resilience in the face of severe weather events than might be the case elsewhere. That said, work targeting vulnerable groups and individuals is still a priority for agencies in the Western Isles and a data sharing project is under way to enhance this.

### **A look at some key statistics for the Western Isles**

As may be expected, incident activity is relatively low when compared to urbanised local authority areas across Scotland. Although the individual numbers are low, when making a comparison of the incident type rates there are some points of note. In 2013-14 provisional figures showed that there were 11 dwelling fires across the islands: this equates to a rate of 76 per 100,000 dwellings and compares well to the all-Scotland rate of 185.7. As might be expected from a mostly rural environment the rate for chimney fires, at 222.6, is over 10 times the national Scotland figure of 20.5. The total number of Special Service incidents at 33 is equally relatively low. However, within that number the figure for road traffic accidents of 16, a rate of 58.4 per 100,000 population, is above the all-Scotland rate of 40.1.

<sup>2</sup> Mid-2014 population estimates Scotland, National Records of Scotland, 2015

## 3 Our findings

As discussed in the introduction to this report, we have structured our findings to be directly referable to the Fire and Rescue Framework 2013. The Framework sets the strategic direction for fire and rescue in Scotland, and has sections on governance and accountability (including planning and reporting); protecting and improving local services; equal access to specialist support and national capacity; and strengthening the connection with communities. The way in which we have reported our findings follows this structure – with an initial discussion of the Local Fire and Rescue Plan and Single Outcome Agreement, which are the key planning documents for SFRS in each local authority area.

### 3.1 The Local Fire and Rescue Plan and Single Outcome Agreement

In the reports of our previous local area inspections of Aberdeen City and East Renfrewshire, we made comment on the similarities in the way that the 32 Local Plans across Scotland are structured, and the absence of benchmarking and targets. Our comments here about the local plan for the Western Isles broadly follow the comments on the Local Plans that we made in our previous reports. And similarly, our comments about the generic nature of parts of the Local Plan should not be read as a criticism of the Western Isles management team or the specific authors of this plan.

As with other Local Plans in Scotland, the Western Isles Local Plan contains some useful background information on the area and the challenges it faces. In some respects, particularly in relation to the importance of faith communities on the islands, this information is relevant and tailored to the local area. But in others, the information was of uncertain relevance and it was not explained how it related to the communities of the Western Isles. An example is the text on hate crimes: while an important issue nationally, it was unclear from the Local Plan what the scale of this problem is in the Western Isles and why it needed discussion in this Local Plan.

We gained the impression from reading through the body of the Local Plan that it addressed generic issues that had been identified centrally, not locally. To illustrate that, all of the ‘Priorities, Actions and Outcomes’ in the Western Isles Local Plan also appear in the Local Plans for Aberdeen City and East Renfrewshire. We would not expect, given the completely different topography, demographics and climate of these areas, that there would naturally be such a marked overlap in the subject matters covered.

There is a valuable commitment in the Local Plan to community planning and local engagement, although we might have expected to see some discussion of how local engagement in the Western Isles (where there is a very strong sense of community and close working relationships on a personal level between partner agencies) differs from other locations. The Outer Hebrides Single Outcome Agreement 2013-2023 (the SOA) is also referenced at multiple places in the Local Plan, and particular challenges relating, for example, to the effects of alcohol consumption in the community, are referenced. But beyond that, some specific discussion of how the SOA discusses the unique characteristics of the Western Isles, and accordingly how the SFRS can adapt to address those unique characteristics, was in our view lacking from the Local Plan.

As with other Local Plans we have seen, the Western Isles Local Plan does not contain numerical targets by which success may be gauged. The Fire (Scotland) Act 2005 requires Local Plans to include, insofar as is reasonably practicable, outcomes by reference to which delivery of the priorities and objectives in the plan can be measured. We are not convinced that the Local Plan achieves this, and we recommend that the next version of the Local Plan should identify a few well-chosen, locally specific targets for the SFRS to aim towards.

It was our impression that the Local Plan was not well known to front-line service delivery staff. This may not be unreasonable, given that it is a document pitched at a somewhat higher strategic level than the sorts of policies and procedures that would have everyday operational relevance. Given the close connection between RDS staff in fire stations across the Western Isles and their communities, we would however urge that continued efforts be made to engage local stations in the development of the next iteration of the Local Plan.

## 3.2 Improved service outcomes and protecting frontline services

In the course of our inspection we met with managers from the Prevention and Protection<sup>3</sup> and Service Delivery functions, spoke with staff who are responsible for carrying out community safety activities, and visited each of the fire stations in the Western Isles, where we had the opportunity to speak with firefighters. We also spoke to other staff members such as the HR adviser and Health and Safety adviser, and to local trade union officials.

### Prevention and Protection


Prevention and Protection is delivered across two LSO areas – Highland, and Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland Islands, as a single entity under a single planning regime. There is a single Group Manager responsible for Prevention and Protection, and that person reports to both relevant LSOs.

Reporting to this Group Manager are two Station Managers (P&P) who are nominally allocated to one of the LSO areas but who describe the performance of their role as working together across both LSO areas.

There is a single Community Safety Advocate (CSA) in the Western Isles, based in Stornoway, who is responsible for driving community engagement and the Home Fire Safety Visit (HFSV) programme across the area.

Our discussions with operational crews at fire stations showed that the CSA is well-regarded and provides significant support to stations in carrying out HFSVs. Many stations that in the past had targets for carrying out HFSVs reported that a more flexible arrangement now existed, with HFSVs being carried out if requested by the CSA, but with the CSA also carrying out many visits himself. This was felt by some crews to be a valuable arrangement, particularly in areas where community members and the fire crews were well-known to each other, so that it was preferable for an independent third party to carry out domestic visits.

<sup>3</sup> Prevention and Protection refers to the responsibility of the SFRS for Fire Safety Enforcement and Community Safety Engagement; Service Delivery relates primarily to operational response to incidents



We were advised that the HFSV target of 270 visits per year across the area was being exceeded, and indeed some stations reported that every property in their area had been visited at some point.

We discuss one notable feature of the HFSV programme under the heading ‘Knowing the community’ overleaf: in short, the consistent advice we received from the CSA and operational crews was that community ties were so strong, that there was a good level of confidence that people with particular vulnerabilities to fire were known about.

One matter that was mentioned to us was the road safety education programme supported by the SFRS in partnership with others to high school students, ‘Driving Ambition’. The feedback was that this programme did not seem to engage students or provide the level of impact seen in other similar programmes. We have observed the ‘Safe Drive Stay Alive’ programme delivered by the SFRS and partners elsewhere in Scotland, which in contrast is widely praised as being highly engaging to students and providing a significant level of impact. It may be useful for SFRS to send representatives from the Western Isles and the North SDA more generally to observe the ‘Safe Drive Stay Alive’ programme to see whether it might be better received than ‘Driving Ambition’.

Fire Safety Enforcement (FSE) is delivered across two LSO areas – Highland and Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland Islands – by a single enforcement team which is based at Inverness Fire Station. While FSE staff conduct audits throughout this area, individual officers have a geographical responsibility as a dedicated point of contact. One team member undertakes this role for the Western Isles.

There are six members of the team; all are Enforcement Officers (EOs). This total is less than the numbers originally planned in the P&P structure. The team benefit from some local administrative support in Stornoway to assist with arranging visits and issuing of letters.

The number of non-domestic premises on the Western Isles within the SFRS criteria for annual audit sits at 33: this is 7% of the annual audit workload of the FSE team, in terms of number of premises. The EOs advise that each has an individual audit target of 86 audits per year, which has been determined taking into account the travel time required to conduct audits in rural and island areas and the extended time to resolve issues. The remoteness of the Western Isles, the restricted access to competent specialist contractors, and the generally higher cost of remedial works all contribute to the length of time it takes to get some fire safety issues resolved.

The audit programme for the Western Isles is undertaken by a team of two EOs making stays of four days at a time during which the EOs carry out a series of audits on an individual basis. In addition to scheduled audits, post-fire audits are also conducted when necessary.

All the EOs joined the FSE section at the same time, January 2014, which initially meant that there were limitations to peer support. The EOs describe themselves as being operational staff temporarily assigned to FSE, so the maintenance of operational and command competence is clearly an important issue and it seems to us that in the longer term some or all of the EOs would expect to move on to a different function. Accordingly forward succession planning is a matter for the SFRS to consider.

One of the challenges recounted to us by enforcement staff is that they are having to address the issues of having poor levels of fire safety measures in premises as a consequence of what was described to us as an historical absence of robust enforcement.

We thought that enforcement staff were enthusiastic and well-motivated and that there was good leadership. While the remit of our report is the Western Isles, in terms of FSE generally across the two LSO areas, we contrast the current targeted focus on enforcement by dedicated and motivated staff very favourably when compared to the reported<sup>4</sup> situation prior to 2012 when there was a perceived lack of focus.

### **Service Delivery**

The immediate impression gained by travelling around the area visiting the 14 RDS fire stations that provide local fire cover is of the challenges posed by the geography of the Islands. Fourteen fire stations for 27,000 people might be considered a high ratio on the Scottish mainland: the logic of how this situation developed is readily appreciable when it can take 45 minutes to drive from a fire station to the next closest resource. The fire station on Barra has no other resource that can reach it by land and, although not unique in this, must depend on ferry or air links for any required SFRS reinforcements in the case of a significant incident.

In the section on 'Capacity within the area' below we discuss some of the challenges faced by the retained duty stations particularly in remote parts of the area in maintaining fire cover across their own and neighbouring areas.

Overall we were impressed with the dedication showed by RDS staff across the islands in making themselves and their appliances available for response. Many of the stations we visited were quite new, and all were well-maintained by their crews. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was generally maintained to a good level, although in a number of areas we were advised that it was only laundered after hot fire training or an incident where it was significantly contaminated. Not all the PPE we saw was clean and it might be beneficial for there to be a regular schedule for PPE laundry regardless of the use it has received.

In our report on Emergency Medical Response and the SFRS<sup>5</sup> we noted that defibrillators had not been provided on appliances by the former Highlands and Islands Fire and Rescue Service although appliances from other predecessor services were so equipped. Defibrillators are still not available on appliances in the Western Isles and more than one crew we spoke to expressed the wish to be provided with this equipment. While a matter for the SFRS more broadly rather than specifically the Western Isles, we would encourage early consideration of how an equitable distribution of defibrillators across the SFRS can be achieved.

The record keeping we sampled at the stations we visited was generally satisfactory although the quality did vary somewhat. This was partly influenced by the unavailability of broadband, which was a consistent message to us when visiting stations outside Stornoway. Many of the SFRS's systems, including the PDRPro system for recording training and operational activity,

<sup>4</sup> The Audit of Best Value Highland and Islands Fire and Rescue, Audit Scotland, March 2012  
Report on an Inspection of Highlands and Islands Fire and Rescue Service, HM Chief Inspector of Fire and Rescue Authorities,  
Nov 2012

<sup>5</sup> HMFSI, 2014



assume access to adequate broadband facilities, and instructions were apparently given to use the online systems in preference to legacy handwritten records.

It became clear to us that broadband is simply not functionally available to the large majority of stations in the Western Isles, and there is no set date for this to be remedied. While some stations had responded to this by maintaining careful written training records, not all had: and in any event, the additional benefits of the PDRPro system such as detailed recording of operational incidents and their learnings for individuals were not supported by paper records.

We also heard of the challenges of accessing and using the SFRS Learning Content Management System (LCMS) which again is practically impossible in some locations. We take the view that the SFRS needs to think about how training resources can be delivered to stations that lack broadband, and whether the distribution of video training on DVD ought to be an option for locations without access to good internet connection speeds. We were advised that this matter is on the agenda of the SFRS digital steering group and we would encourage progress in this area. An additional benefit of improved connectivity would be the potential to introduce video links, which would help to address the issue of improved contact with managers discussed below.

Maintenance of records of training activity is in our view important to an effective training and skills maintenance regime and consequently, firefighter safety. It is not the SFRS's fault that broadband services in the Western Isles are inconsistent. But we consider that the SFRS has not taken into account that some fire stations lack good connectivity, and there is just an assumption made that everyone in the SFRS can get access to broadband. We think that that assumption needs to be reviewed, and instructions issued to stations as to what recording is required, and how it is to be carried out, in the absence of access to online facilities.

While regular telephone and email contact is maintained by flexi-duty managers, a number of stations told us that they had insufficient face-to-face contact with them. At the start of this inspection we had detailed conversations with flexi-duty managers who advised us of their detailed plans for travelling to visit remote locations, while at the same time acknowledging the challenges of geography and ferry and air timetables involved. We do not therefore think that the perceived lack of contact is because of any lack of will on the part of flexi-duty managers to make it happen.

We know, though, that there are only two flexi-duty managers in the Western Isles, both based in Stornoway. There is a wish to involve them more in community partnership work, which would reduce further the time available to them for visits to remote locations. And no-one we spoke to suggested that there was any operational justification for more than two flexi-duty managers to be based on the Islands, when the number of incidents responded to is taken into account.

We think that there is scope for the SFRS to consider alternative arrangements for providing additional flexi-duty manager capacity to the Islands. Specifically, both Benbecula and Barra have good air links to Glasgow. There is no reason why the SFRS could not consider giving responsibility for some locations to flexi-duty managers in the West SDA, allowing for more frequent contact and visiting than is now the case.

One initiative that has been put in place locally is the appointment of two retained temporary Watch Managers on 10 hours per week contracts, one for Lewis and Harris and the other for Benbecula, the Uists and Barra, assisting with activities such as conducting station audits. This additional resource provides capacity for routine management functions and may in the long run assist in alleviating some of the pressures on the flexi-duty managers based in Stornoway.

## **Workforce**

### **Staffing generally**

Across the Western Isles, we found that the obstacles to providing staff training and skills maintenance that are common to remote and island communities in Scotland were in evidence. These include the difficulties inherent in RDS staff travelling for up to a day each way to reach training locations in mainland Scotland, with maximum compensation for doing so of four hours' pay; connectivity issues preventing the use of online training facilities (on which we have commented above); and courses being fixed without regard to the availability of staff to attend them: for example it is difficult for many in the Western Isles to take time off to attend courses in the summer months due to the seasonal economy.

We heard evidence of the practical difficulties caused by some of these issues. Staff were being told they could no longer respond to emergency calls because their BA competency had expired, even if they had other attributes such as being a driver. This places increased pressure on other members of the crew at that station, who somehow have to cover for that staff member's absence.

We have encountered this issue in the course of previous inspections we have carried out, and understand it to be national policy. It is our view that disqualifying firefighters from all response activity because one element of their competency has expired is unnecessary and an inefficient use of resources. As well as considering additional support for remote staff who may find it difficult to attend the mainland for BA refresher training, there seems no reason why staff whose skills maintenance is out of date in respect of one aspect of operations, for example breathing apparatus, cannot remain available for other duties, for example driving, if their watch manager is content for them to do so.

Additionally, more focus could be given to ensuring that staff do not go out of competency in the first place. Staff going outwith competency is not an issue exclusive to the Western Isles; however, we were made aware of local core skills courses being cancelled due to lack of numbers. It would seem sensible to us that the management of course attendance, to avoid as far as possible cancelling or running courses at less than capacity, should be an area of focus.

One area of specific note is the current joint development of a hot fire training facility at Stornoway airport, which will be used by staff of Highlands and Islands Airports Limited (HIAL) Fire Service as well as the SFRS. This development, along with a redevelopment of Stornoway fire station, represents a significant investment into the Western Isles by the SFRS, and a good example of partnership working in order to provide enhanced training facilities. We will discuss joint working between SFRS and HIAL in some more detail below. We welcome and encourage the development of these local training facilities as they will represent a significant lessening of the travel burden on staff in Lewis and Harris for hot fire training. We encourage



the SFRS to keep in mind that staff from the Uists, Benbecula and Barra do not have as easy a journey to Stornoway as those from Harris and Lewis, and the option for those staff of travelling to Glasgow for training should not be discounted.

Our impression was that there were adequate managers in place to deal with the operational and prevention and protection workload. We have mentioned above a particular issue in relation to the availability of middle management staff to forge links with fire stations in this area.

It is fair to say that the population of the Western Isles is relatively ethnically homogeneous, meaning that the RDS staff recruited locally tend to reflect that community. We did note, however, that there were few female firefighters in the Western Isles stations. A view was expressed to us that poor welfare facilities at some stations was a barrier to the recruitment of female firefighters. We have not conducted any detailed analysis as to whether the situation differs from elsewhere in Scotland, or the reasons for low representation: but it is a theme to which we may return in future reports.

We comment overleaf under the heading of 'Capacity within the area' on the general issues facing the SFRS in relation to the recruitment and retention of RDS staff.

## **Health and Safety**

As might be expected, the relatively low levels of operational activity in the Western Isles are reflected in a low level of injury or near-miss incidents. Any such incidents are reported through Operations Control and the district office in Stornoway. Our conversations with managers and crews alike led us to the conclusion that there is a good health and safety culture in the area and that incident reporting does take place appropriately. We noted that there is a low number (five in the past three years) of near miss reports and we heard some anecdotal evidence that people were put off near miss reporting by perceptions of the bureaucracy involved: we continue to encourage crews to think about near miss reporting and act upon near misses when they happen, in order to promote future safety.

We came across at least one good example of debriefing taking place at station level and outcomes from operational debriefs being relayed to managers. Our impression was that this is not consistent across all stations that we attended and we would encourage attention to debriefing processes and ensuring that lessons from debriefs are shared. We did not hear of structured debriefs taking place after significant incidents, and although fortunately the number of such incidents is low, we invite attention to whether the structured debrief process is fully embedded in the Western Isles.

We have commented in previous inspection reports<sup>6</sup> on the importance of adequate and up to date operational risk information (ORI) being made available to fire crews. While in principle we accept that ORI can be provided in paper or electronic form, we note that, following a staged roll-out, mobile data terminals (MDTs) have now been fitted to all appliances in the Western Isles and the concept is that the MDTs should be the holding point for all ORI so that it can be readily sourced on the move or at an incident.

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<sup>6</sup> *An Overview of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service*, HMFSI, 2013; *Equal Access to National Capacity*, HMFSI, 2014

We did not see evidence of the MDTs being put to the use that was intended. In practice we found that the ORI on MDTs tended to be limited to procedural documents, and there was no site-specific information available to crews through the terminals. When terminals were switched on for us, the mapping defaulted to a location in Inverness. We were told by some crews that they had sent ORI in the form of plans to be loaded onto MDTs but this had not happened. Hard copy site-specific ORI was available to crews in nearly all stations, but this ranged in quality from comprehensive, laminated sheets that were easy to access, to folders of A4 paper that would not readily lend themselves to reference at the scene of an incident in the dark or adverse weather conditions.

This is a subject that we have reverted to repeatedly in our inspections both local and national, and this is because we consider it to be an important safety issue. In our view, the MDTs on fire appliances should have access to locally relevant, up-to-date, and accurate ORI for specific risks. Recognising that there are fewer major risks in the Western Isles than elsewhere, there are still undoubtedly a number of significance and we recommend that in the Western Isles and beyond, the SFRS should take targeted measures to audit ORI, ensure it is comprehensive and up-to-date, and available through MDTs and that crews are well versed in drawing information from them. We think that the MDTs would be better defaulting to the location of the vehicle in which they are, rather than a location in Inverness.


### **3.3 More equal access to specialist resources and national capacity**

#### **Capacity within the area**

Historically, many of the smaller fire stations were organised as volunteer units, with only basic equipment and training, and with at times very basic accommodation. In the early 2000s the then Highland and Islands Fire and Rescue Board decided to convert all the volunteer units to be RDS stations. This had beneficial effects in terms of improvements to the equipment and training available to these locations. However, the more rigid employment conditions applicable to the RDS did not necessarily work in the favour of the former volunteer stations. In a previous inspection<sup>7</sup> we saw the volunteer model operating in the Inner Hebrides, and our impression is that the flexibility it offers is much more suited to providing fire and rescue services in remote areas. We are not, to be clear, advocating removal of retaining fees or any other changes to remuneration, but are simply commenting on the practicalities of service delivery and we know that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is considering these things within its strategic review of the R/VDS.

Recruitment for fire stations in remote areas is always a challenge, and particularly so in locations such as one we encountered where there are fewer than 300 local residents within a five-minute radius of the station. But these challenges are made greater when recruits are required to make themselves available for up to 120 hours per week, pass fitness tests designed for wholetime urban firefighters, and live or work within five minutes of a fire station.

<sup>7</sup> *Equal Access to National Capacity*, HMFSI, 2014



Station availability is also compromised by SFRS policy imposing a condition that the appliance needs to be able to turn out to a fire call within 6-8 minutes of an alert being received. This is not a sensible restriction where the next closest appliance is over half an hour away or more, and is not logical at all where the appliance is the only resource on an island.

One example was given to us of a fire where, of the five appliances that could potentially reach it by road, only one was showing as available on the resource availability system but four were required to suppress the fire. By contacting crew members by telephone it was eventually possible to crew the four appliances required – the reason their crews had not been showing as available is because they were working distant from their home fire stations.

On reviewing appliance availability statistics for 2014-15, we noted that a number of fire stations were apparently available less than 75% of the time during the day – including the single island resource on Barra which was available only 50% of the time during the day. However, we were advised that these figures were affected by crew members booking off as unavailable because they could not reach the fire station in five minutes, not because they could not get there at all.

The crew on Barra explained to us that they would be alerted even if their appliance was not showing on the system as available, and we understand that a similar arrangement applies to other remote locations in the North SDA. This seems to us to be a sensible approach, and allows for the possibility of recalling crew members who might be able to get to the fire station to help make up a crew, although outwith the generally permitted timeframe. It also permits a measured decision to be made by duty officers to permit, for example, a crew to respond with a non-standard skills mix.

We think that there are a number of initiatives that should be considered by the SFRS in locations such as the Western Isles to include the following. We know that the SFRS is currently reviewing the Retained and Volunteer Duty Systems and it may be that some or all of these suggestions are already under consideration.

- Recruitment to be permitted beyond a five-minute radius from the fire station, to take account of the fact that a response beyond that limit might well be significantly quicker than waiting for the next-closest appliance to attend.
- A status of ‘delayed availability’ to be added to the appliance availability system, to show that an appliance could potentially turn out by recalling crew, but not within the six to eight minutes currently required. A ‘delayed available’ appliance could be dispatched to an incident within its area along with the next closest appliance, potentially meaning that the ‘delayed available’ appliance still got there first.
- Recruitment of crew who cannot offer as much as 90 or 120 hours a week cover to be permitted, at the discretion of relevant managers: someone who can only offer 40 hours might be a vital resource if those 40 hours include week days during the day time.
- The possibility of combining stations to form a crew: so if two crew members are available at one station and two at the next, they could combine to respond jointly to an incident if between them the right skills mix is present.

- Along the same lines, to facilitate greater use of staff who might be in various locations across an island (during the daytime in particular) to be used as a ‘whole island asset’ – maximising flexibility.
- In appropriate cases, and with appropriate control measures, allowing a response with a crew of fewer than four: a number of fire and rescue services in England and Wales respond to minor incidents with a crew of two and they may be able to deal with the incident effectively before it grows, or before another crew from a more distant location could attend.

We referred previously to the current joint venture between HIAL and the SFRS to provide a hot fire training facility at Stornoway airport. We commend this initiative as being a sensible example of joined-up working, with financial savings and efficiency benefits for both organisations.


As with other island locations in Scotland, there is an obvious connection between the firefighting capabilities of HIAL resources at airports, and SFRS resources. The SFRS will attend incidents at airports in the Western Isles, and we think that there is scope for the reverse to be true. The Fire (Scotland) Act 2005 allows such arrangements where the Chief Officer is satisfied regarding the knowledge, skills and experience of assisters, and this may have application to airport firefighting resources. This is particularly so in Barra where there is a single SFRS fire station, and HIAL also has resources available to it which only have to cover a limited number of aircraft movements each day.

Our understanding is that, on an ad hoc basis, HIAL resources might be released to support SFRS at an off-airport incident if the need arose. This possibility is complicated by HIAL’s operational needs, and the requirement to maintain fire cover at airports when aircraft movements are taking place. In our view it would be sensible for the SFRS to enter into talks with HIAL with a view to a formal arrangement within the scope of the 2005 Act about when, and subject to what conditions, HIAL resources may be made available to assist SFRS at off-airport incidents.

### **Specialist resources**

The provision of specialist resources presents a challenge in the Western Isles owing to their geographical remoteness from major population centres, where they tend to be based. We were advised that fire investigation resources could be readily accessed from Aberdeen, and the Local Senior Officer was very positive about this development which he identified as delivering a tangible benefit of reform. In relation to other specialist resources, we recognise that it would not be cost-effective to base these on the islands. There may be some possibility of using Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) helicopter resources to fly specialists over where necessary, although we understand that this would be subject to availability and of course weather-permitting. Otherwise, staff with specialist skills would have to make their way to the Western Isles using existing transport links.

A typical response to a specialist incident might involve a locally-based crew responding and undertaking some initial actions to manage the incident and prevent it escalating whilst they await the arrival of more specialist resources, but planning for the islands obviously has to take into account the greater response times for specialist attendance.



Because crews on the Western Isles are well-equipped with resources such as cutting gear, and the MCA also provides water and rope rescue resources that could potentially be called on in an emergency, we do not think that there is any obvious gap in the provision of resources on the islands, and the national resources of the SFRS would be available in the event of a need being identified, with the inevitable delay in moving them from their home location, similar to other remote and island locations across Scotland.

We were advised that there are relatively few multi-agency exercises, and those that do occur are often based on local relationships rather than central organisation. In part this is mitigated by the fact that the managers and crew members of partner agencies are generally known to each other and to SFRS staff, overcoming the issues that can arise when people who have not met and have had no opportunity to build up levels of trust, have to work operationally together. However, it may be worth giving some thought to embedding joint training and exercising on a regular basis to ensure that existing relationships are maintained and strengthened.

## **3.4\_ Strengthened connection between SFRS and communities**

### **Knowing the community**

Our impression travelling throughout the Western Isles and speaking with SFRS staff, partner agencies and representatives of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar was of a community where there were often close personal relationships between staff members of different agencies and across to elected representatives.

The reliance on an RDS workforce means that service is delivered to the community by people who are members of the community themselves. We formed the view that it could be said with confidence that SFRS not only knows the community in the Western Isles but is an embedded part of it.

A striking example of this was in relation to the identification of individuals who through their personal circumstances might be at increased risk from fire. We are often told, even in rural parts of Scotland, that there is an underlying concern that not all such members of the community are known to the SFRS. In the Western Isles we were told, and in our view with credibility, that local firefighters and the community safety advocate working out of Stornoway were confident that they were aware of vulnerable persons in their area of responsibility.

### **Working in partnership**

Our impression of partnership working in the Western Isles was that it operated in a different context to many areas we have visited in mainland Scotland. This is because of some of the factors already noted in this report: the close-knit nature of Western Isles communities, and the fact that RDS service delivery staff are members of the community themselves, mean that there is generally a high level of understanding and engagement with the needs of the community.

We also remarked on the personal relationships which existed between staff from different agencies, and elected representatives, which tended to help with the exchange of information and views.

Having said that, the sort of formal information and data sharing which is now commonly encountered in Scotland had perhaps been eclipsed somewhat by these factors, and we encountered a recognition that formal data sharing was also important in ensuring the best service delivery to the Western Isles communities. Community Planning Partnership agencies have developed a new data sharing platform called 'LINC' which will assist with sharing information about vulnerable persons and will provide another avenue for home fire safety visit referrals to the SFRS. This initiative should carry further benefits for the community and strengthen what we already assessed as a good level of targeting of SFRS resources at higher-risk individuals.

One theme that was frequently discussed with us by operational crews was the possibility of increasing 'all-hazard, all agency' working in the context particularly of the remoter communities in the area. A frequent issue raised was that SFRS was not notified of road traffic accidents until it was confirmed someone was trapped – and on occasion, it might only be after a wait of 45 minutes or so that another agency would arrive on scene and be able to send that confirmation. In one case, two people had been injured when hit by a car and a nearby SFRS station was not mobilised, with a delay of 50 minutes occurring before the ambulance could attend.


Particularly where resources are as thinly distributed as they are in the Western Isles, we think that there is merit in making a careful assessment of how emergency service agencies could support and complement each other's work. The focus should be on the best outcomes for communities, which may mean re-thinking the traditional roles that the separate emergency service agencies have traditionally played, and ensuring that where an emergency situation exists, all assets such as emergency service agencies can play a part in providing service to the public.

### **Local scrutiny arrangements**

We had the opportunity to discuss local scrutiny arrangements with officers and members of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, and to meet with members of the Environment and Protective Services Committee which undertakes the scrutiny and engagement function. We also attended a public meeting of the Environment and Protective Services Committee as observers.

The model for local scrutiny and engagement within Comhairle nan Eilean Siar is that, while Environment and Protective Services committee members take a lead on asking questions, any member of the Comhairle can attend and ask questions with permission of the chair. This led to what we observed to be a well-attended session with an open feel to it, where Comhairle members had a good opportunity to receive the reports given by the SFRS and to ask questions.

The questions we heard asked were well-informed and directed to local issues of interest. We considered that the quality of the written and oral presentations to the committee were high,



and in meeting with committee members we received confirmation that they felt they received appropriate information to support them in their scrutiny role. A notable piece of feedback from committee members was that under the predecessor Highlands and Islands Fire and Rescue Service, two members of the Comhairle would travel to participate in meetings of the fire board. Under the new arrangements all members of the Comhairle were able to attend and ask questions and it was considered that this increased the level of local engagement with the fire and rescue service.

The committee reflected on the Local Plan and expressed the view that it had something of a 'top down' feel to it, and that the next edition might benefit from increased local focus. That said, credit was given to the SFRS for having taken on board feedback about the importance of faith communities in the Western Isles, and specifically referencing this in the Local Plan as being relevant to community engagement.

Overall, we were particularly impressed with the session – which demonstrated very good engagement between the Council, local and strategic Service management and the Board (which was represented at the meeting by an individual member).

## **4 Conclusions and recommendations**

The immediate impression we received on travelling through the Western Isles was of the geographical challenges that face the SFRS in operating there. Overall we considered that those challenges were being met; the SFRS has more work to do, however, in ensuring that the RDS remains viable for the future to ensure continued service delivery on the islands.

SFRS staff show significant dedication in maintaining the availability of RDS stations across the islands, and the SFRS should continue to work to develop innovative ways of supporting them.

We observed that the SFRS was making notable investment into the Western Isles in terms of training and station facilities and this is to be welcomed. But an ongoing focus on the training difficulties faced by staff, both in relation to geographical location, and access to broadband services, will be required into the future.

Strong local partnerships based on community connections are being supplemented by an increased focus on formal data sharing, and the Comhairle feels effectively engaged with the fire and rescue service.

The 2005 Act requires that the SFRS must have regard to this report and, having done so, must take such measures (if any) as it thinks fit in relation to the report. We are therefore confident that where we have expressed a view on particular issues, SFRS will consider what we have said and will take into account in its forward planning.

In relation to certain significant issues that we encountered in the course of this inspection we **recommend** as follows:

1. The SFRS should take steps to ensure that comprehensive, tailored and up-to-date site-specific operational risk information is available to crews through their mobile data terminals.
2. The SFRS should take account of the lack of access to broadband in remote island communities and should provide guidance as to the manual record-keeping to be undertaken in these circumstances, as well as support to overcome, as much as possible, the problems caused by lack of broadband.
3. The SFRS should introduce a greater flexibility in the way it staffs and crews emergency appliances in line with thinking which is evolving from the RDS and Volunteer review.
4. The SFRS should enter into talks with Highlands and Islands Airports Limited with a view to a formal arrangement about when, and subject to what conditions, HIAL resources could be made available to attend incidents.



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## Glossary and abbreviations

An explanation of abbreviations and terminology used in this report can be found below.

CSA	Community Safety Advocate
EO	Enforcement Officer
HFSV	Home Fire Safety Visit
HIAL	Highlands and Islands Airports Limited
HMFSI	HM Fire Service Inspectorate in Scotland
LSO	Local Senior Officer
MCA	Maritime and Coastguard Agency
MDT	Mobile Data Terminal
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
ORI	Operational Risk Information
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
Predecessor organisations	The eight fire and rescue services in Scotland, and the Scottish Fire Services College, that were combined into SFRS.
RDS	Retained Duty System
SDA	Service Delivery Area
SOA	Single Outcome Agreement
SFRS	Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
VDS	Volunteer Duty System
2005 Act	The Fire (Scotland) Act 2005







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