

# Recruitment and retention of retained (volunteer) firefighters in the Netherlands



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## Fire service in The Netherlands



- ▶ Fire service
  - ▶ 24.000 firefighters
    - ▶ 20.000 retained (volunteer) firefighters with or without obligations
    - ▶ 4.000 career firefighters
  - ▶ 953 fire stations
  - ▶ 25 safety regions

Before sharing the insights of our research, I would like to briefly review the context in which this research took place.

Our retained firefighters have another primary job, are required to be present within a predetermined specific proximity of the fire station and receive payment by the hour or incident. Most of our retained firefighters are not obliged to respond to calls, but some are.

Furthermore it is important to know that each fire station has a least one fire appliance. Our fire appliances have 6 seats for 6 firefighters: 2 in the front, 4 in the back. We agreed that each seat must be able to be filled by 3 people. According to our own agreements each fire station has to have at least 18 retained firefighters.

## Program volunteerism



- ▶ Organisation model of the fire service in The Netherlands is not sustainable
- ▶ Program:
  - ▶ Recruitment and retention
  - ▶ Citizens
  - ▶ Other voluntary organisations
  - ▶ International exchange/survey



The Dutch Safety Council (Veiligheidsberaad) has identified several developments on multiple levels (society, individual) that may lead to challenges in recruiting and retaining of retained firefighters, and thereby may impact the vitality of the current organisation model. Societal changes are for instance demographic shifts, legal changes, technical progress and changes in society, such as increasing individualism. Developments regarding individuals relate to personality, ambitions and motives. These developments raise the important question: How can the organisation model of the Netherlands Fire Service keep building upon volunteers in the future and be sustainable and robust at the same time?

1. Focus of this presentation: research into Recruitment and retention of retained firefighters
2. Citizens: possible reasons for citizens, who are not affiliated with the fire service, to become active as fire service volunteers in the future or not. 1000 citizens completed a questionnaire.
3. Other organisations: the experiences of other organizations with recruiting and retaining volunteers largely correspond to the experiences within the fire service. For example the police, the military and coast guard.
- 4a. Exchange of experts: experiences of 14 countries in Europe regarding recruitment and retention of retained firefighters.
- 4b. We did a survey in several European countries regarding the legal position of fire service volunteers

At the moment we are conducting 2 new studies: the first study concerns the question When, why and to what extent retained firefighters quit at the fire service? The second study provides an answer to the question What are possible reasons for primary employers to cooperate or not to a retained fire service by their employees?

Scan for the reports (scroll down):



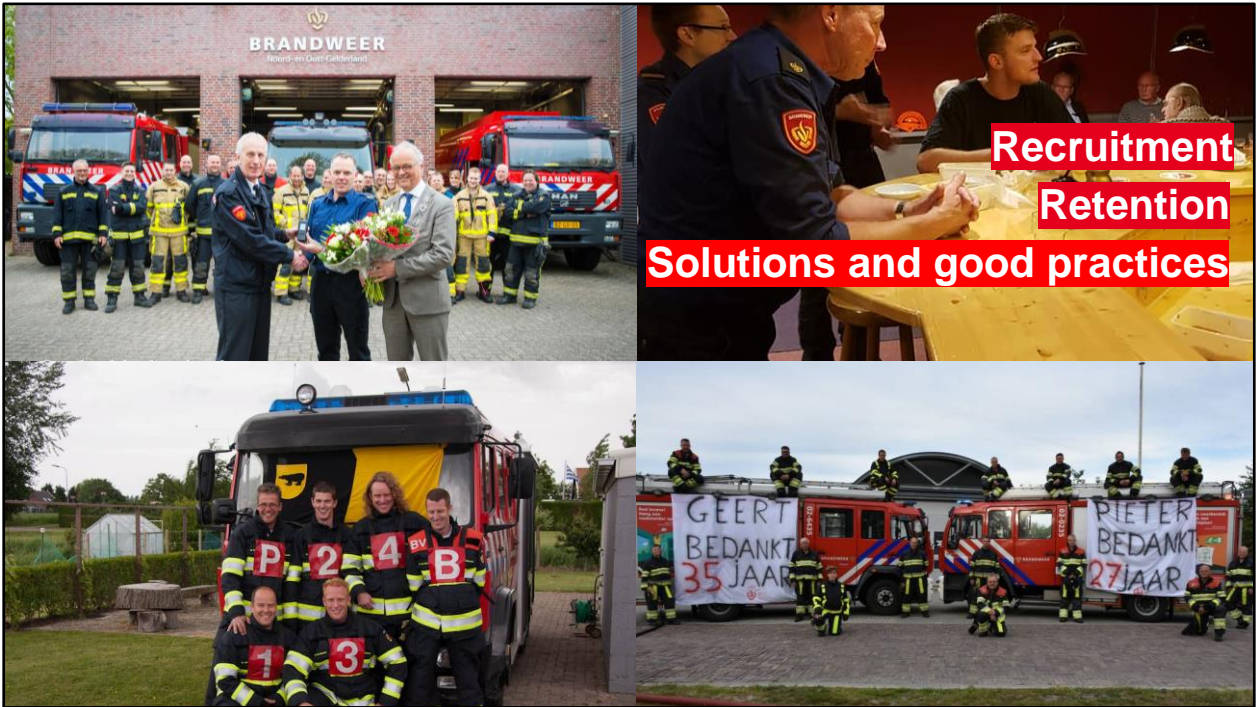
Or if the QR code doesn't work: <https://nipv.nl/vrijwilligheid-bij-de-brandweer/>

All reports have a summary, the report of our international exchange is completely in English.

## Recruitment and retention of retained (volunteer) firefighters

- ▶ Goals:
  - ▶ Describing the positive aspects and bottlenecks with respect to recruiting and retaining volunteers for the fire service, and
  - ▶ What safety regions currently do to solve these bottlenecks.
- ▶ Method:
  - ▶ 78 group discussions with 481 retained firefighters (from 241 stations) and 139 members of the management from 25 safety regions

A great added value of bringing firefighters from different fire stations together is that they can respond to each other, ask each other in-depth questions, complement each other, but also nuance and correct each other. for example, when experiences with regard to a particular theme differ.



These photo's are chosen for a purpose, to give you a little insight in the culture of the retained fire service in the Netherlands.

1. A theme that I will not discuss in this presentation, but which we have researched, is the appreciation of firefighters. The visibility of local authorities, in this photo (left) represented by the major, is important for the recognition and appreciation of firefighters.
2. On the right a photo of the bar in a fire station. Being a firefighter is not only about fighting fires and providing assistance, but also about group dynamics, friendships, joint processing. This does not only apply to active firefighters, but firefighters who have stopped are regularly welcome at stations. They too are part of the culture of a fire station.
3. Some fire stations participate in fire fighting competitions, a combination between fun and professional competence (left bottom)
4. "Thank you for your 35/27 years of service." We know our firefighters are very loyal to their station. But will it stay this way? (right bottom)

## Recruitment – no bottlenecks, why?

- ▶ Three quarters do not experience a bottleneck:
  - ▶ A good atmosphere prevails at the station
  - ▶ Visible locally
  - ▶ Potential volunteers are approached personally (word of mouth)
  - ▶ Continuous attention to recruitment
  - ▶ The youth fire brigade is used as a breeding ground



Good example is good to follow

Visible locally: local market, organizing a training in the centre of the city or village, talking with residents after a fire or other incident

Word of mouth is succesfull because:

- potential volunteers are honored
- according to current volunteer suitable (in terms of availability and social aspect)
- refute prejudices of the fire brigade
- threshold registration less high, knows someone within the post

It takes 2 years before a training is completed, It is therefore important to start recruiting before a problem arises.

Youth fire brigade: 12-18 years old, they get acquainted with activities of the fire service. for some stations, but certainly not always, the youth fire brigade is a breeding ground

## Recruitment – bottlenecks

- ▶ Broad range: from practical to more fundamental bottlenecks:
  - ▶ Lack of suitable volunteers
  - ▶ How citizens perceive the fire service
  - ▶ Closed posture fire station
  - ▶ Not reaching certain target groups
  - ▶ Lack of coordination and cooperation between station and safety region
  - ▶ Duration of training in combination with other obligations
- ▶ Who feels responsible and who is responsible?

As there are more difficulties, the more the responsibility shifts to the management.



## Retention – no bottlenecks, why?

- ▶ Half of the volunteers experience no problems with retention:
  - ▶ Intrinsic motivation to provide help
  - ▶ Financial compensation
  - ▶ Rotation options
  - ▶ Support from home front
  - ▶ Sense of responsibility
  - ▶ Good addition to the main track
  - ▶ Proud of the “red stuff”
  - ▶ Autonomy, ownership and involvement



On the one hand, they don't experience a problem in retention because of the social aspect of the fire service and their involvement  
And on the other hand, the subject matter and gaining new knowledge

Financial compensation in The Netherlands: 25eu per hour per incident, 15-20eu per hour per training.

## Retention – bottlenecks

- ▶ Various bottlenecks are experienced:
  - ▶ Lack of knowledge main employers
  - ▶ “Taking away” material
  - ▶ An increased workload
  - ▶ Reduced availability and readiness
  - ▶ Change in financial compensation
  - ▶ Lack of autonomy, training places and career opportunities
  - ▶ Dealing with change
  - ▶ Social problems at the post



Social aspect compensates (to some extent). Firefighters quit because of an accumulation of reasons. The station manager knows when someone is leaving and a bottlenecks arise. Not predicting the course: fault lines (a divorce, new job elsewhere, etc.) and maximum age limit released.

#	Recruitment challenge	Countries
1.	Volunteering takes too much time	BE, EE, FI, IE, NL, NO
1.	Decrease of turnouts.	BE, EE, IE, NL, UK
1.	Not recruiting inclusively (e.g. few women, ethnic minorities etc.)	BE, DK, IE, NL, UK
1.	Entry standards too high or procedures too long	BE, FR, NL, UK
1.	Aging	EE, FI, NL

#	Retention challenge	Countries
>	Increasing turnover	AT, DE, NL, NO, UK
>	Incompatible with other activities or family with regards to time	AT, BE, FI, NL
>	Growing reluctance primary employers	CZ, NL, UK
>	Too few (valid) calls	DK, FI, NL, UK
>	Too many demands regarding training, practice and/or availability	BE, IE, NL, UK
>	Missing/ unhealthy group spirit	BE, NL
>	Incompatible with primary job	BE, NL

In April 2019, 14 European countries came to Amsterdam to discuss the topic of recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters.

In this table you see the challenges or bottlenecks we collected. We like to complain in the Netherlands since we recognize all the challenges ;-)

These tables illustrate that challenges (currently) experienced in the Netherlands are also experienced in other European Fire and Rescue Services and specifically in Ireland.

## Solutions and good practices

- ▶ Support from the station manager
- ▶ Performance appraisals
- ▶ Flexible workplaces at the post
- ▶ Increase fees
- ▶ Adjusting (unwritten) selection requirements
- ▶ Approaching main employers
- ▶ Delivering customization
- ▶ Learning from stations where no problems are experienced
- ▶ Encourage word of mouth
- ▶ Adjustments in training duration and places
- ▶ Better use of steppers
- ▶ Combining local, regional and/or national campaigns
- ▶ Increasing control space
- ▶ Rotate when turning out
- ▶ Offering a progression perspective
- ▶ Involve the home front

Good practice = proven effective solution or activity, not found.  
Combination of activities works best

It is quite a list, but it is especially important to understand that a solution is not experienced as such for all stations. It is important to understand why a bottleneck is experienced so that it can then be determined what a solution is.

## Main conclusion

No generic problem, no generic solution

- ▶ Not a single bottleneck described in the field of recruiting and/or retaining is experienced at all fire stations in the Netherlands
- ▶ Whether a fire station experiences a bottleneck and, if so, which one, differs per station and per moment



It can be concluded that the basic assumption that the Dutch fire service has only one generic problem with finding and retaining volunteers and that, accordingly, one solution will be sufficient, is incorrect. On the contrary, none of the bottlenecks mentioned is present at all posts, and a way to deal with a specific problem is only considered a solution, when the volunteers experience that specific problem at their post. This implies that not all solutions are applicable in every situation at every post, that often have to deal with a unique set of problems. However, the large number of solutions show that there are plenty of opportunities to retain volunteers for the fire service in the future.

## New insights

- ▶ Deeper understanding of the mechanisms behind local voluntariness
- ▶ Large diversity in problems and solutions: local differences
- ▶ Uniformity is underlying problem
- ▶ New leadership, management and organisation and new thinking is necessary: make way for pluralism within the uniform organisation

This research shows that most members of staff focus on uniformity. It is possible that this view can be identified as one of the most important challenges for the Dutch fire service. Having to deal with diversity in organisations and society as a whole is a modern issue that asks for a new type of leadership, not only regarding its philosophy, but also with respect to the corporate culture within different parts of the staff. Accordingly, it can be stated that individual members of staff are not the problem, but the system they are part of. The most important recommendation is therefore, to reflect on the required type of leadership and on the skills, changes in the organisation and culture within the staff that are necessary to create a healthy way of managing volunteers now and in the future. Management and leadership need to be flexible and allow for local differences, but also set boundaries and look for a type of uniformity within which a certain diversity is possible.



The volunteer fire services in Europe differ. For example regarding the organisation, the position in society and training.

In addition to the differences, you can also see in this photo collage that there are similarities.

## Questions?

1. What is needed to maintain volunteering in the fire service in the future?
2. How can fire services in Europe work together and learn from each other when it comes to retaining and recruiting fire service (on-call) volunteers?

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Although there are specific aspects per country, in our case tulips, bicycles, cow ans mills, there are, in our opinion enough opportunities to work and learn from each other.

If you have questions or comments, please contact. I look forward to receiving your response.