

‘A Job I’ll Do Free of Charge’: The Fire Service Beyond Fires

The Crew Commander of one of Surrey’s busiest fire stations says Union’s call for pay rise is “unimportant” in comparison to his love of his job.



Joe Reynolds has been in the Surrey fire service for decades. Source: RHS

Joe Reynolds apologised for being late to our interview with a warm smile that spread across his entire face. “We had a child stuck in a car. We went out to a small car fire as well. So we’ve been busy.”

Cutting a child free from a car crash might not be a common occurrence in many people’s careers, but for the Crew Commander of Surrey’s largest fire station, it’s just another day at work.

Three years into his 31 year service in the fire brigade, Reynolds became Crew Commander at Guildford Fire Station in the early 2000’s. Speaking with a childlike giddiness, he explained his role lets him “ride up the front of the fire engine.”

When asked if he’d like to be promoted to Watch Commander, he said with chagrin that it would entail moving to a quieter station. Reynold’s smile lines deepened when he playfully explained that “it sounds a bit crass, but I like being at the sharp end”.

Reynolds was quick to establish that the role of the fire service went beyond tackling flames, with attendances of non-fire incidents [being almost double](#) the attendances of fires in 2024 according to Gov.UK.

“We get out and about, rescue things or help people” he said, his voice casual, “whether that be floods, road traffic, collision, fires, chemical incidents, animal rescues, you name it.”

But with the excitement of his role comes hardships, as Reynold’s cheery demeanor began to falter when he recalled his most memorable calls, starting with a recount of a fatal building collapse in South West London in 1998.

“That was the first time I’d sort of dug deceased people up,” he said, “which is pretty harrowing because they don’t look like people.”

The list continued, his voice ever so slightly beginning to waver.

“We had a guy who had gone into a tree and as I was getting him out, he took his last breaths and died in my arms and it’s just little things like that you don’t really forget”, he noted.

“That can’t not affect you,” he said, “it sort of upsets me just thinking about it.”

There was undoubtedly an emotional toll dealing with countless fatalities, yet Reynolds quickly reminded himself of why he remains in the force.

“If I go to a fatality, I’m kind of pleased I am there to just give that person some dignity”, he explained, “and on several occasions hold their hand just to sort of say some things to them and to look after them.”

When the topic turned to the Fire Brigade Union’s general secretary [calling for a sector wide pay rise](#) on 30 January, Reynolds was candid.

“It’s unimportant”, he affirmed without hesitation. Despite the emotional toll saving countless lives has had on Reynolds, he affirmed that it is “a job I’ll do free of charge.”

When I ask more into why money isn’t the main inspiration behind his career, he smiles again, though this time, it’s a smile of satisfaction from helping those in need. “Any time where we leave and people say thank you, we know it’s made a difference, that’s amazing. I’m trying to make a difference.”