

**Ella Stevens**
So yeah, I've given you a quick introduction as at the start. Again.
My name's Ella Stevens and I'm a firefighter on Red Watch.
I'm what's called the dual station firefighter, so I work between the two stations in Carlisle, so obviously we've got one out West of the city and then one on Eastern Way.

I joined the service in 2020, so we were very much dubbed the ‘COVID course’ and myself and Jen, who obviously can't be here tonight, were both on the same course, so we were worried about overlapping with a bit of this information tonight, but that won't be an issue anymore and yeah, so yeah, my initial course is 2020 and to give you sort of an idea cause you guys are a sort of in this position now:
I first saw the advert for the 2020 recruitment in about April of that year and was furloughed from work and saw the advert. So you were looking really almost like a six month process between initially seeing the advert and thinking ‘I'm gonna go for that.’ And then actually starting the initial 12 week course, which was in September.

So what I'll talk to you a little bit tonight and as we go through this is, what you can be doing within that six months because there's a lot of time there between and, there's gonna be a lot of different sort of aspects to the recruitment that you're gonna go through, and what you don't wanna do is leave any of that sort of it too late and be chasing your tails.

So I'll try and sort of wind through with that and give you that info as we go.
Again, if you have any questions for me in case I skim over some bits, and you want a bit more detail in, just pop it in the chat and I'll answer them at the end.

But to sort of to really take you back a bit further, my first interaction with Cumbria Fire Rescue Service was actually in 2018, so that was the first time I applied for the wholetime recruitment, and I did quite a lot of work towards it.
I'd seen the advert. I think the fire service had always been in like my peripheral vision, but hadn't really sort of aligned with a time when they could apply and it wasn't really recruiting very regularly at the time when I was initially looking.
But in 2018 it came up and I thought, right, I'm gonna go for it.
And I went through the process, did quite well.

If you've looked at our website, you'll see those different stages of the processes – I got through all the online sort of assessments got to the practical day and I was unsuccessful, so I took too long going round the confined space test. To give you a really sort of brief overview is a test where you're usually using our Firehouse or our breathing apparatus house, which is at the back of Carlisle East, and you have to manoeuvre and make your way through that building in darkness safely with a BA mask on not connected to air, but just on your face to give you an idea, and you're using guidelines around, you're going upstairs, over various levels, and back out.

And it was a time to assessment, and I took too long.

Now the recruitment processes along this journey are what's referred to as a deselection process. There are thousands of people that apply for these jobs, so it's very black and white whether you've made it through like a certain point of the assessment or not, and I came out of that BA House and I thought, ‘you know, I think that went well’ and then I felt a lot of tap on my shoulder and got told just to sort of take myself aside, had a bit of a chat with the station manager at the time, erm, and was told I took too long. That was it. And I was devastated.
I put a lot of work to get to that point and, you know, was excited to be there and I’d passed the fitness part of it: the bleep test, I passed through the grip strength test, there was an overhead press test, dummy drag, various other sort of aspects to it, like a mechanical build you had to do, and I think I only had two parts of it remaining and obviously, yeah, that took me out and I was gutted.

But the station manager that spoke to me very briefly, who is now my station manager in Carlisle, and he took me aside and I just remember the one thing he sent me was make sure you come back. I felt that we had a nice little chat, and I think that's a big part of this job and a big part of this recruitment process is having that resilience, because it might not go the way you want it to. It is very tough to get through and there's a lot of work involved, but if you for any reason aren't successful, don't write it off. Make sure you are reapplying and coming back to Cumbria and hopefully “us”, and applying again and it's worthwhile; you'll have more insight, you'll already be an advantage, and there's a lot of work you can do between then and obviously applying again, whether that's just personal work, volunteering and things like that, or physical work, whatever you need, just a bit more experienced to come back with is definitely worthwhile.

So after that, as I say, I spent a bit of time sort of developing my understanding of the service, I increased my fitness. I was pretty fit when I came in in 2018. I was *very* fit when I came in in 2020. It's a big part of the job. You can be fast, but you also need to be quite physical, and I think that was a big learning point for me. I've always considered myself quite strong. I'm about 5’11”, maybe 5’10” and I can carry myself well, but yeah, the strength that are needed once you get in, is it's quite significant.

The crew I've got at the moment are fantastic. Like we work out together, we do a lot of training in work time and out of work, whether that's just going hiking in the lakes or whether that's literally spending time in the gym. Yeah, and they’re helpful. I mean, they want all of us just to be as good as we can and be the best watch we can, which is fab.

So when I came back, obviously in 2020 to apply, I felt really ready. It was COVID, I was on furlough, so I definitely had that benefit of being away from work. But I put so much effort in. I was speaking to, as I say, Katie and Ollie, and was talking about really like what I did with my time. So as soon as I decided that I was going to apply for the 2020 intake, I started on my physical training, really sort of getting down into the grit of it. Now there were no gyms open at the time, so my neighbours had this fabulous sight: they looked out the back window, which I'm actually just sat at now, and saw me running up and down the back alley with these 225 gallon drums, backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, and sprinting in between.
Anything I could do to just lug things around and move them I was doing and it definitely benefited me.

I went online, so I couldn't really get into the stations during COVID to, you know, speak to the crews, there weren't really proper open days because we couldn't do it.
So there are resources online. The one I used, I'll probably pop a link to it in the chat at the end, but Fire Service Forums, and it's run by senior fire service management across the country and it's just really useful. You can ask good questions, you get nice, accurate answers, and people share their experiences on there. There might be a fee for that on the recruitment end but haven't been on in a couple of years now. It's definitely worth having a look if you want that extra sort of little insight.

Yeah, so came through the process. Definitely felt sort of fitter and better, and I was successful. The biggest part of that sort of gap, though, between let's say that application and the initial course for me was working on my interview. So the interview process is a really full on day, I think my interview started at about 1:00 PM and it went on to like 5:00 or something like that. It feels like it's a full day, but you know, you're constantly working, and you are being constantly assessed, similar to the practical day. When you arrive, you are being assessed from the second you are on premises, so it's not just being, you know, a tick box saying ‘yes, you can run the loop test to 8.8’, it is how were your manners, are you stood with your used hands in your pockets, or are you stood to attention. Every bit of what you do, you know.
Are you a team player or are you just out for yourself?
Are you encouraging other people or just not interested in what's going on?
Same on the practical day, you've got a lot of verbal stuff that's going on, but your entire manners, mannerisms, and attitude are always being assessed.
So that day I went onto these forums. I've been sort of researching. I've been thinking about questions I might be asked. I was writing out answers. That [approach] might be a bit full on for a lot of people, but I was pretty determined after having not through once that I wasn't gonna have any gaps, you know, when I came through to this process.

But if you start that sort of work early, you're not gonna be chasing your tail as you come, you know, right to the end of it.
So my advice is don't wait and to find out if you pass your practical assessment to start prepping for your interview, you can start having a look at that stuff now.
If you're gonna go for it and know that you're ahead of the game, it's certainly the way I would do it.

I'll talk just a bit about my initial course as well.
So the course started in September 2020 and my course will be a bit different to what you did because we spent the first two weeks exactly as we are now, we were on teams and doing a lot of other sort of lecture work, and then we started at Penrith HQ and doing our, what was then ten weeks, after our initial two at home. I'm not sure if it's still 12 weeks or not…It might be slightly longer than that now, maybe 14, I think…Ollie is nodding at me…and those 12 weeks are unbelievable.
I wrote down here, I was trying to think about how to describe them, so I put: you're constantly challenged and constantly put out of your comfort zone, which for 12 weeks sounds like a lot, but that just then becomes the norm. The norm is being outside of your comfort zone and, you're not pushed over the edge, but you're pushed right up to your limit quite frequently. I think you learn a lot about what you can actually do, you know what I mean. In the past, you sort of back up a bit and have a look at things, but actually you know, you're learning sort of what your limits really are and you're in a very controlled environment, so it's the best place to really, you know, sort of push up to those limits and you know, learn a bit. It's exactly what you're there for.

So my tips for like coming into the initial course, if you get to that point, are: if they're offering to do something, so they're wanting someone to go up to the top of the ladder, just be the first person up to that ladder, you know? Don't be the one that, maybe on the day you run out of time, and you end up saying oh you can do it tomorrow. Be the person that gets now up, in the front, and just be excited about it because it's the best 12 weeks you'll have like, yeah… it's the best twelve weeks I'd ever had. You know, we were down on rivers in Kendall like, you know, in our like, Swift water rescue gear, like, you know, throwing ourselves in and you’re just doing stuff and you think ‘I'm being paid to do this.’ It's unreal, so being grateful and, I think, excited about what you do is fantastic.

On the flip side of that, as much as I would say, you know, be the number one and be in there and keen as muck, it's a team effort. So we were on a, I think, a group of 15 of us that were initially on that course. They split us down the middle into two squads, so that you know if one of us got COVID, the other group could carry on and, but our group was so well gelled, and me and Jenn, as I said she's not here unfortunately, but we are still great pals now. We came through that course as a proper team. There is absolutely no, you know, nothing to gain from trying to be like above everyone else or, you know, trying to deliberately sort of stand out as number one. You know what I mean, it's not gonna get you anywhere. You're gonna land on a watch, which is a team environment where you're gonna work as a group.
You know, I mean, you want to have that, and you'll enjoy the course more as well. You know, if you come through that course and you are well gelled, everything just seems to work better. If you're struggling on something, someone will be like, how can I help you? You don't wanna be that person that thinks ‘they're not doing very well at that, but I'm good at this.’, there's no need for that. It's about coming through that process together and working really hard, working as a team.

Another note I made was be prepared, if you get to that 12 week point, to actually like…my other half was a like fire service widow for that 12 weeks. She was very much just in the background while I went to work, came home, and then spent the next 4 hours studying because all this information is so new and it is full on, but it's fantastic fun and you'll be assessed on a weekly basis. You get the practical assessments as you go and then you'll get, sort of, written assessments each week just to confirm your knowledge. And it's not super black and white, you know what I mean, if there's something that you're not getting, speak to someone and say ‘this is just not sinking in’ and they’ll find a way to sort of make it, you know, make it understood for you.
But yeah, it's it's a lot of time, a lot of energy, when you're out all day coming back, sitting down, revising all night, and then going back in the next day to do it again.
But it is fantastic and that 12 weeks is some of the best 12 weeks, you’ll have to be fair, like it's brilliant.