

# CLIMATE CHANGE STRETCHES FIRE CREWS



**With fire crews working to the point of exhaustion, Government must provide immediate £60 million cash injection to fire authorities in recognition of additional pressures and cost increases they face**

The Government is ignoring the growing pressures placed on fire and rescue services by climate change, says the Fire Brigades Union. The union has called for an immediate end to cuts in personnel and for an immediate cash injection of £60 million to be distributed fairly between fire authorities in recognition of the additional pressures and substantial cost increases they are now facing.

FBU General Secretary Matt Wrack said:

"The dry and warm weather has created the perfect conditions for the huge increase in the number of major fires so far this summer. As soon as we've stopped tackling the fires we've been hit almost

immediately with torrential rain causing flash flooding.

"These incidents often need hundreds of fire crews working for many days to control fires and deal with the other extreme weather. Many of the major grass and heathland fires have been so dangerous and spread so quickly that members of the public have had to be evacuated from nearby homes.

"Whole areas of the UK have been blighted. This includes a significant number of well known sites such as at Ilkley Moor and Arthur's Seat, but there have been many others.

## Fire crews working up to 14 hrs without break

"Fire crews have been working up to 14 hours without a break which is well beyond accepted safe limits. The result has been heat exhaustion and dehydration, with firefighters working to the point of collapse.

"The strain on officers has been severe and emergency fire control operators have also handled

thousands of extra calls and been placed under major pressure. In some areas the fire service has been stretched so much in dealing with these incidents there are almost no crews or fire engines to deal with other emergencies.

### Huge number of incidents caused by changing weather patterns

"In three out of the last four years we have faced huge numbers of incidents caused by changing weather patterns. In 2003 we had 152,700 grassland fires which was a near record and officially attributed to warm weather.

"A year's respite in 2004 was followed by an 80% increase in grassland fires in the third quarter of 2005 compared to the same period in 2004. This was also put down to warm weather conditions.

"Reports from across the UK suggest that 2006 is even worse with fire crews stretched to breaking point dealing with large numbers of major fires and flooding across the UK. These need very large numbers of fire crews to tackle them, leaving precious few to deal with other emergencies.

### Problem UK-wide

"When the weather breaks we have faced lightning starting house fires, followed by torrential rain, thunder storms and flash flooding. This has been happening across the UK for many weeks.

"Those at the sharp end firmly believe the UK weather is already

more extreme, varied and unpredictable. There is no question this is placing huge stress on personnel and adding considerable additional costs for fire authorities.

### Time to shake off complacency

"In prevention terms, steps taken now to tackle global warming will take decades to have any impact. The Government must shake off its complacency and call an immediate halt to all plans to cut the number of fire crews until the huge impact climate change is having on the service has been properly assessed.

"The Government should immediately free up around £60 million to be distributed fairly between fire authorities to assist. This would help with the additional pressures and substantial extra costs faced by local fire authorities as a result of dealing with the effects of climate change."

### **Merseyside: 118% rise in firefighter injuries shows safety concerns justified**

Merseyside fire crews say official figures showing a 118% rise in the number of local firefighters injured at emergency incidents in the last three years is the worst record in the fire service. They say this justifies their concerns for firefighter safety in the face of demands by senior managers for a further cut of 120 firefighters.

A parliamentary answer show injuries at operational incidents in Merseyside from 2001-02 to 2004-

05 rose from 60 to 133, up 118%, the worst record in the fire service over that period. Between 1998-99, when independent records started to be held centrally, and 2004-05, the last year for which these figures are available, the rise was from 79 to 133 - a 68.5% increase and the fourth worst record in the fire service over that period.

Only Hereford and Worcester, Hertfordshire and Northamptonshire show bigger increases from 1998 to 2005, and many authorities show considerable reductions. While the actual numbers injured will vary between brigades, influenced for example, by numbers employed and numbers of incidents, the percentage increase in Merseyside is very clear.

Les Skarratts, Merseyside FBU secretary said: "Merseyside fire crews have seen the biggest increase - 118% - in injuries at operational incidents over the last three years. It is the worst increase in the entire fire service over that period, and it is scandalous.

#### Increase in injuries appalling

"Our concerns about the impact of further cuts on our safety are genuinely and honestly held and these independent official figures demonstrate why. This is not about theory or unfounded anxiety, it is because a 118% rise in injuries in Merseyside in three years is truly appalling."


Local fire crews are holding a strike ballot over plans to cut 120 emergency response firefighter posts - one in ten of the workforce - 15 emergency fire control operator posts and axe four fire engines at night time. There will be fewer rescue appliances, fewer firefighters on fire engines and a longer wait for crews to arrive to all 999 emergencies. The loss of one in ten fulltime firefighter posts - in addition to the 68 posts lost last year - will inevitably damage the overall operational capability of the Merseyside fire and rescue service. Fire crews say this will clearly compromise their safety and the safety of the public.

#### Crews in impossible position

Mr Skarratts said: "The loss of one in ten full time posts - on top of the 68 lost last year - will impact on our safety and the safety of the public. Fire crews could be left at incidents in the impossible position of standing back and doing nothing until more support arrives and risking the public, or ignoring basic safety procedures and risking themselves.

"It is not cost cutting senior managers or councillors who will face that appalling dilemma it is the fire crews at the scene. We have very good reason to have concerns over safety as these dreadful official independent figures demonstrate."

#### **Cleveland dispute - members consulting on proposals**



Fire crews across Cleveland are currently meeting to discuss proposals from the Fire Authority on changes to the local fire service. Representatives from fire stations in Cleveland met on Friday the 28th July and agreed to recommend accepting the new proposals which will see fewer cuts to emergency response.

The new proposals significantly amend the original plans. A remaining key area of concern is the loss of immediate availability of one of the fire appliances at Hartlepool which would lead to the loss of 24 frontline fire fighter posts.

Steve Watson, brigade secretary of Cleveland FBU said: "Fire crews across Cleveland voted to take strike action in opposition to the cuts in the original plan. We always wanted our concerns to be properly addressed without the need for strike action.

"There have been serious and constructive talks with senior managers and we have new proposals which may be acceptable to local fire crews. If they are not then we would have to consider announcing strike dates although we would always be available for further talks.

"Representatives are recommending acceptance of this new package. But serious concerns remain around the loss of 24 frontline fire fighter posts and the loss of 24 hour availability of the third fire appliance at Hartlepool."

The new proposals being considered include:

- Improvement in the level of attendance and emergency response to property fires in high risk areas; The third fire appliance at Hartlepool will not be permanently staffed but will be available for use in special circumstances;
- The high reach appliance at Stockton will be available for operational response whilst being staffed differently than at present. Appropriate staffing levels for all fire appliances to meet safety concerns of the public and fire crews.
- Marine fire station to have a fire appliance available for emergency response 24 hours a day, 7 days a week; Introduction of Community Safety Teams to deliver prevention and protection initiatives, whilst maintaining a safety net for emergency response provision;
- An agreement of joint assessment, review and evaluation of present and future initiatives so that the Service is well placed to balance the demands on community safety and emergency response.

## Three Grampian members suspended for speaking out over cuts

FIREFIGHTERS are prepared to consider strike action following the suspension of three colleagues who spoke out about a decision to cut back on 999 responses, union leaders said last night.

Firefighter Alan Paterson and two unnamed colleagues in Aberdeen had temporary bans imposed on them after writing to politicians saying lives of elderly care home residents were being put at risk.

Their action follows a policy change by Grampian Fire Brigade introduced on 1 April to stop firefighters taking more than one engine to any automatic alarm following a rise in false call-outs.

The three said it is essential two engines are sent to any blaze at an old folks home - given difficulties in getting elderly people out. But the protest was met with anger by fire chiefs who sent the men home on Friday.

Kenny Ross, secretary of Fire Brigade Union Scotland, said: "If this situation develops and is not resolved soon then we will consider taking action."

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## Select Committee - retained and diversity

In our last installment of the Select Committee report, key points on retained and diversity:

- We recommend that the Government provide a clear indication of the reforms it intends to be implemented affecting the Retained Service, including target dates for key benchmarks and completion. (Paragraph 101)
- We are disappointed and dismayed at the lack of progress that has been made on diversity within the FRS and particularly at the Government's half-hearted and ineffective leadership on the issue. We recommend that the Government immediately (i) establish support groups for the Diversity Happens forum; (ii) reappoint a national adviser of equality and diversity for the FRS; and (iii) implement the long-promised new selection tests for firefighters. We further recommend that the Government conduct a thorough review of its diversity policy and initiatives relating to the Fire and Rescue Service, reporting within the next 18 months. We also recommend that the Government, within two years, publish and promulgate a nationwide strategy for promoting diversity within the Fire and Rescue Service that takes into account the experiences and expertise of all stakeholders. (Paragraph 92)

## New Dimension - where are resources to back it up?

Government funding for New Dimension will be drying up in 2007, despite mounting evidence

that there is already a major shortfall of funding for the fire and rescue service to tackle new risks such as climate change and terror attacks.

Some fire and rescue authorities have already refused to accept New Dimension equipment and this is believed to be because they don't have enough resources to deploy staff or train them to use the equipment.

A recent survey of FBU members revealed that more than 80% said the service was understaffed and under-equipped for New Dimension work. This survey of FBU members was part of the evidence considered by the all-party parliamentary Select Committee looking into fire service issues.

The committee recommended in its report that the Government "conduct a review of civil resilience equipment requirements across England in light of the experience of the July 2005 attacks on London."

#### FBU to raise issue

The issue will be raised by John McGhee, national official responsible for health and safety, at the next meeting of the New Dimension sounding board - a forum organised under the auspices of the Department for Communities and Local Government - on September 6.

For information on the Union's health and safety work visit: [www.fbu.org.uk/workplace/healthsafety/](http://www.fbu.org.uk/workplace/healthsafety/)

#### **Fire engines to Iraq**

The FBU has secured 2 fire appliances to deliver to Iraq later this year from Cambridgeshire fire authority which has also donated a full set of ladders on each and a full set of Clan Lucas Hydraulic cutting/spreading equipment. The hope is to take out as much kit as possible. Members/officials can help by approaching your individual brigades for donations of unused kit. We need anything that you would expect to find on your appliance, including both suction and delivery hose, collecting heads and strainers to allow the pumps to work. Because of time constraints, any equipment would need to be delivered by the end of August. It should be sent to:

Adrian Clarke  
Stanground Fire Station  
Belle Vue  
Stanground  
Peterborough  
Cambridgeshire

#### FBU solidarity work features in new book on Iraqi union movement

The Union's solidarity work with Iraq features prominently in a new book commemorating assassinated Iraqi trade unionist Hadi Saleh. The book provides a wealth of information on the country's new democratic trade union movement as well as information on the solidarity work of other UK unions. *Buy Hadi never died: Hadi Saleh and the Iraqi trade unions at [www.tuc.org.uk/publications/viewPublication?frmPubID=479](http://www.tuc.org.uk/publications/viewPublication?frmPubID=479) - profits go to the TUC Aid for Iraq Appeal.*