

NATIONAL STANDARDS

The union moved to shape a key aspect of the fire and rescue service agenda with a seminar in the House of Commons on February 28 that brought together a variety of stakeholders to consider the union's IRMP strategy and fire safety policy

FBU throws down IRMP gauntlet to stakeholders

THE "Local Standards – A National Issue" seminar was sponsored by the all-party parliamentary fire safety group. It provoked lively debate and highlighted concerns about the direction of the new integrated risk management process.

The one-day event involved presentations from government, insurers, business and experts in risk management and law in the morning. An afternoon debate was led by FBU General Secretary Andy Gilchrist and Ken Knight, Commissioner for the London Fire and Civil Defence Authority, and chaired by Labour's Mick Clapham, a joint chair of the all-party Parliamentary Fire Safety Group.

A wide range of national and local politicians attended, including members of fire and rescue authorities. From the union, in addition to the general secretary, assistant general secretary Mike Fordham, national officers and a number of executive council members took part. It was clear from the day that there was broad agreement on the benefits of risk management of fire. But views varied widely on how it was being implemented.

The new vulnerability of fire and rescue authorities to legal action, due to the many new responsibilities devolved to them, was highlighted. Some important commitments from the government were made on the implications of the Building Disaster Assessment Group (BDAG) research survey (*Firefighter* March 2005). The union, meanwhile,

threw down the gauntlet to other stakeholders to get on board the FBU's campaign for national standards for risk-based emergency response planning.

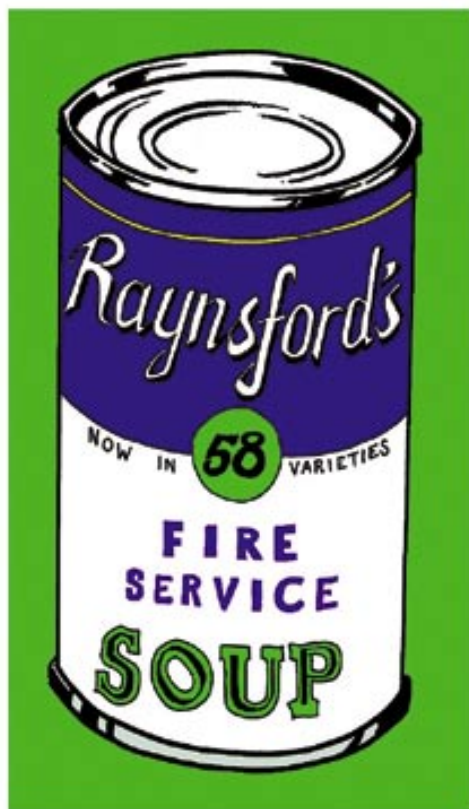
Some of the key points made on the day were:

Chris Hanks, General Manager, Allianz Cornhill Commercial (insurers):

- "It is not the time to withdraw fire coverage."
- "Insurers fear that as budgets are squeezed that cuts are made."
- "IRMPs are good, 58 different versions are bad."
- "Make changes and we become extremely concerned."
- "We need good fire protection and response to big risks."
- "You may find fire (insurance) cover at today's competitive and attractive premiums withdrawn"

Denis O'Brien, Fire Safety Advisor to the Confederation of British Industry:

- "Before we start looking for savings, let's make sure we get it right."
- "It is important for government to listen to the fire service and those who work in it."
- "The government needs to let the fire service make the decisions."
- "The fire service does offer a high quality service, it is authoritative and it is successful."



NOT 58 VARIETIES

Sir Graham Meldrum CBE, HM Chief Inspector of Fire Services:

Commenting on BDAG research, which shows that assumptions about what is 'humanly possible' – and upon which current standard operating procedures and emergency response planning are based – are wrong, he said:

- The importance of research is that “you cannot put it back in the bottle.”
- “It (the BDAG report) simply cannot gather dust.

Martin Seaward, barrister:

- “Massive responsibilities have been delegated to fire and rescue authorities.”
- “(In the past) the ODPM had a supervisory role helped by the fully staffed HMI and access to the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council (CFBAC). The fire inspectorate has been reduced in size and CFBAC abolished. By and large, elected councillors who take decisions don't have the benefit of that (expert) knowledge.” Hence a real concern about a “significantly reduced level of experience (of fire service issues) at a local level

- “Financial savings drive decisions at local level
- “Statistics and targets are disguising a drop in standards
- “Changes to fire cover without sufficient evidence
- “With the safety blanket of the national standards removed, legal challenges (to Fire Authorities and their leaders) could be round the corner if somebody dies or property damaged (following cuts under an IRMP).

John Cronin, Arthur D Little, (risk management experts) :

- Under the new IRMP process, “it is essential to avoid situations which could motivate or pressurise fire-fighters to act unsafely in the interests of saving life.
- “These situations can be avoided by ensuring that

arrival times of fire engines are considered as part of the response planning process – and that the arrival time includes the relative arrival time of different appliances

- “Research has found that there is a statistically robust relationship between fire and rescue service attendance times at dwelling fires and fatality rates at those fires.
- Experience of other industries using risk management, such as rail and offshore, suggests fire and rescue service may move back to national standards.

Andy Gilchrist, FBU General Secretary:

- The ODPM has promoted the new risk-based system but it is a system that is today in far too many places around the country geared towards cuts, turning one of the UK's finest public services into a fire and rescue service by postcode lottery.
- “New targets introduced by the government exclude fire deaths where the fire is judged to have been started deliberately at a time when we see a significant rise in the numbers of fires which have been started deliberately, and rising deaths from these fires. The real danger is that as a result of these narrow targets, response planning will not take place in any meaningful way.
- “While we work with other agencies to reinforce the principles of citizenship in the UK, we must also ensure that we are able to deal effectively with the fallout of anti-social behaviour and deliberate fire-setting.
- “The time it takes the fire and rescue service to get to these incidents will always be the first critical factor in our ability to limit the destructiveness of fire – and the number of firefighters sent is the other critical factor.
- “The way forward for the 21st century fire and rescue service in the UK is risk-based response planning which supports risk-based preventative and protective activity – against a nationally agreed standard.”

A note for our younger readers: The number 57 has mystical significance to the US-based food company Heinz. Its '57 varieties' slogan was invented by the company's founder, Henry J. Heinz, in 1892 and was used so extensively in its advertising in the last century that it became part of everyday speech. Today, the firm says it produces more than 57,000 products.