

Government eventually bowed to political pressure to allow a debate on the fire and rescue service national framework document, although not on the floor of the House of Commons. The work was given to a special cross-party standing committee of MPs, all of whom were given a detailed briefing by the union ...

THE union supports the new risk-based approach to planning fire and rescue service activity and resource deployment.

But this approach needs to be underpinned by a national risk-based standard and comprehensive national fire service strategy policy to replace the 1985 standards of fire cover. This is to avoid the 58 varieties of IRMPs that appear to be developing.

National standards are needed to ensure that both the public and the workforce are protected and that service provision does not degenerate into a postcode lottery for levels of prevention, detection or intervention.

The union believes that such a national standard and national strategy should have zero fire deaths as its central target.

While the commitment to further reduce fire deaths is welcome, the FBU believes that the new targets are not ambitious enough.

In 1988 the report of the community fire safety task group established five-year targets as follows:

- To reduce the number of accidental fires in dwellings by one third
- To reduce the number of accidental fire deaths by 40%
- To reduce serious non-fatal casualties by 5% year on year
- To achieve measurable annual improvement in fire safety awareness, attitudes and behaviour.

But under the government's proposed fire death reduction targets, more people could die in fires than at present, yet brigade targets still be achieved. This is because the fire reduction targets only cover reducing deaths in accidental fires in the home.

Deaths as a result of arson are specifically excluded, but fire statistics for the last 12 months show the number of deaths due to arson are rising.

The FBU believes that a target of zero fire deaths is not simply desirable but is achievable through effective planning and resourcing of preventive, protective and emergency response strategies.

It is also a simpler method of judging whether all fire deaths are being reduced and avoids the temptation of some deaths being attributed to arson simply to help hit the targets for reducing accidental deaths.

No postcode lottery for fire safety



■ A full copy of the document is available on www.fbu.org.uk

It is also of concern that statistics for the last 12 months show an increase in the number of accidental fire deaths. The next set of quarterly statistics need to show a reduction in the number of all fire deaths rather than showing no increase on the last quarter due to fire deaths now plateauing out at this higher level. It is crucial that any long term trend is closely monitored.

The FBU supports the introduction of meaningful national performance indicators to measure progress towards fire death reduction and other targets on a regular basis.

The union is concerned that the current national targets only become 'measurable' in the year 2010 and that no targets or indicators have been set that will require fire authorities to demonstrate that their fire and community safety activities are improving public safety standards and reducing death and injuries from fire before that date.

IRMPS

We have serious concerns about the lack of time allowed for constructing integrated risk management plans, and the failure to pilot the IRMP process.

At national level there has to be a far more integrated and common approach to developing guidance on IRMPs and the setting of targets and best value performance indicators. (BVPIs) for fire and rescue authorities. The government needs to produce benchmark standards that fire and rescue authorities will be both guided and measured by.

COMMUNITY FIRE SAFETY

The four areas of community fire safety need to be placed under the one heading of prevention but this is not a panacea for all fire problems. While undoubtedly important, it is just one element of a fire safety strategy and in itself no quick fix solution to reducing fires in buildings and deaths and casualties from fires.

CFS should not be viewed in isolation nor should it be allowed to siphon off skilled resources from other fire safety factors, notably fire safety enforcement.

ARSON REDUCTION

As with community fire safety, arson reduction programmes have to be developed as part of an overall strategic community safety plan that develops local tactical initiatives to deal with the growing problem of arson.

The proposals for arson reduction in the framework document demonstrate a lack of understanding of what a properly developed and fully integrated arson control programme could achieve when merged with other fire safety programmes under the common title of fire prevention.

It is not purely a fire and rescue service issue. It must be approached in a fully developed partnership flowing from a comprehensive and strategic IRMP process.

Another problem has been the lack of any real co-ordination between the Home Office – which has responsibility for police and criminal matters – and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) which has responsibility for fire matters.

The FBU recommends that the work and planning of the ODPM's arson control forum (ACF) should be combined with other groups such as the practitioners forum and the business and community safety forum

into one common national fire safety body. At a local level these issues should be combined into fire and rescue service IRMPs and fully resourced.

BUILDING REGULATIONS

The building regulations offer a long-term solution to many fire safety problems in the built environment. The government says in the framework document that it is keen to improve fire safety by all reasonable means and that it will consider carefully the role of sprinklers as part of a package of measures in buildings.

We have to ask which part of government this is as not all departments seem so keen to consider sprinklers. The Department for Education and Skills is responsible for school buildings that have one of the highest fire loss rates for any type of building. Yet we understand it is positively hostile to such a proposal.

We also understand that there may be concerns about existing fire safety standards. It is a simple equation: if business saves money by lowering building fire safety protection standards, then fire and rescue authorities and the taxpayer may have to pay more to increase intervention response levels to deal with the increased risk.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

The service still needs to improve its health and safety record and the FBU needs to continue to play a full role in the improvement of health and safety standards across the whole of the service.

The union expects the fullest use and provision of facilities for worker health and safety representatives in meeting this challenge.

NEW DIMENSION

The FBU would like to see included in the framework document a more specific explanation of how the government intends to ensure that fire authorities can meet the additional resource requirements as envisaged in the New Dimension initiative.

While the capital investment in equipment is significant and welcome, there are clear resource implications for personnel and training. Any major incident or incidents will need the response of a number of entire brigades over what may be considerable periods of time.

We have major concerns that there will simply not be enough personnel to deal properly with either the incidents themselves or their aftermath.

Continuing to seek a reduction in the numbers of the frontline service which will have to deal with such incidents will, in our view, seriously undermine the ability of the service to properly respond to such incidents. We believe such an approach is self-defeating.

We recommend an increase in wholetime personnel in the region of 2.5% (around 1,000) as the minimum needed and that the number of retained personnel be brought up to at least the full establishment.

If this does not happen, entire understaffed brigades are likely to be tied up dealing solely with such incidents as best they can with far fewer (if any) left to deal with what may be other serious incidents such as fires or flooding.

The union would also like to see significantly larger sums than currently earmarked spent on training all personnel in New Dimension incidents. We recommend a serious rethink of the current approach to both personnel and training with a view to increasing both.

FBU AND RAYNSFORD AGREE, FOR ONCE!

THIS was fire minister Nick Raynsford's answer to parliamentary question last month:

Nigel Waterson (Con, Eastbourne; Opposition spokesperson on Economic Affairs): To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the implications for tackling domestic fires if regional control centres are established; and if he will make a statement.

Nick Raynsford: The technology to be used in the regional control centres for the Fire and Rescue Service will automatically locate callers from the telephone network, detect the appliance with the appropriate skills and equipment which can be most quickly mobilised to the incident and direct it along the most effective route to the incident. This will help the fire and rescue service to reach all incidents, including domestic fires, quicker and so save more lives.

No we don't agree with you on regional controls Mr Raynsford, but we applaud the fact that as fire minister you finally acknowledge, quite correctly, that reaching any emergency incident quicker, and not just fires in people's houses, will save more lives!

Wider FBU parliamentary group meets for first time

A WIDENED FBU parliamentary group was due to hold its inaugural meeting in March as Firefighter went to press.

General secretary Andy Gilchrist was set to attend, along with John McGhee, national officer responsible for the union's political work. Andrew Dismore MP (Lab, Hendon) is chairing the group, Michael Clapham MP (Lab, Barnsley West and Penistone) will be vice-chair and John McDonnell MP (Lab Hayes and Harlington) is expected to be secretary.

The group was to be fully briefed by Andy Gilchrist and John McGhee on our key workplace campaigns – pensions; regionalisation of emergency fire controls; retained firefighter recruitment and equality; and attacks on firefighters.

MPs in this new group have already sent letters requesting urgent talks with deputy prime minister John Prescott on the issue of FBU members' pensions and the need for a new national standard for fire and rescue service emergency response planning (see page 20).

"An effective parliamentary voice for firefighters and emergency fire control staff is greatly needed as we approach the Government's planned changes for the Fire Service," said Andrew Dismore.

"The FBU parliamentary group will be invaluable for the FBU to have an effective and co-ordinated parliamentary group consistently raising the union's concerns with Ministers and fellow MPs and using every available parliamentary channel to advance our cause. I am very honoured to be an active member of the new group."

John McDonnell said the establishment of a parliamentary group of MPs on behalf of the union provided firefighters and emergency fire control staff for the first time in the history of the FBU with an organised voice in Parliament to represent the union and its members. "We will be standing up for the rights of FBU members and the future of the Fire Service," he said.

David Drew, Labour and Co-operative MP for Stroud welcomed the development, saying he greatly valued his links with the FBU. "The previous group brought us together during the very bitter and painful pay and conditions dispute," he said.

"I was pleased to be able to make representations on behalf of that group during the path of the legislation and by lobbying government.

"I hope that this group can further bind us together so that we can make sure that the future of the fire and rescue service is properly debated and that there is better understanding of the needs of firefighters and emergency fire control operators in parliament."