

THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION

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Ambushed, bricked, stabbed, shot at, spat at, threatened and abused: the modern face of firefighting with 40 attacks on fire crews every week

There are 40 attacks on fire crews every week in the UK according to new research. But under-reporting could mean the true figure is much higher than the 2,000 attacks recorded last year.

Attacks recorded by fire authorities in England and Wales are four times the official figures issued by Government. Attacks in England and Wales are in fact **up 15%** year on year, while the official Government figures show a dramatic **fall of 68%**.

In England and Wales, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) claim that attacks have fallen by 68%, from 1,300 in 2005-06 to only 400 in 2006-07. Figures obtained directly from fire services using the Freedom of Information Act show the actual numbers of attacks rose from 1,300 in 2005-06 to 1,504 in 2006-07, an increase of 15%.

Scotland, unlike England and Wales, publishes the official figures for attacks in the Annual Report of the Her Majesty's Fire Service Inspectorate. These official figures show that in 2005-06 there were 324 attacks on firefighters, while in 2006-07 there were 316 attacks. These figures correspond closely with figures supplied following FoI questions which record 329 attacks in Scotland in 2005-06 and 309 in 2006-07.

Northern Ireland collects figures in a different way with the total number falling from 342 in 2005-06 to 285 in 2006-07. These figures exclude a large number of civil disturbance and other calls at which fire crews face the threat of attack.

Fire crews report being threatened, intimidated and abused, and being pelted with bricks, bottles, and stones as they fight fires. Other incidents include ambushes, booby traps and being attacked with lumps of wood, knives and a petrol bomb.

In some areas abuse, threats and attacks are so frequent they are no longer reported. One fire authority, Tyne and Wear, has distributed 'spit kits' to fire crews to collect DNA from those abusing and spitting at them.

FBU general secretary Matt Wrack said: "These figures alone would be cause for concern but we know that incidents of intimidation, threats and abuse are simply not being reported. These attacks are a major cause of concern for firefighters.

"It is almost beyond belief that fire crews are attacked and abused while fighting fires and trying to save lives. Yet in some areas attacking fire crews has become a recreational activity with very serious consequences.

"It cannot be part of anyone's job to face abuse, threats or attacks. It cannot be the job of an emergency fire control worker to face abuse while trying to help those who call 999.

"While fire crews and appliances are the direct targets the victims those who live in these communities. A delay getting to a 999 incident can result in death or more serious injury.

“The consequences can be grave for the fire crews and emergency fire control staff involved. Physical injury is an obvious danger but the threat of attack or persistent verbal abuse can demoralise, cause anxiety and increase stress.”

The independent report – Easy Targets? - published today, was conducted by the Labour Research Department for the Fire Brigades Union. The FBU accused Whitehall of neglecting the problem and called for a detailed and funded Government-led strategy aimed at significantly reducing attacks.

The report found that some fire and rescue services have well developed policies for tackling violence towards all fire service personnel. But others don't, and often fire crews who are assaulted and injured are treated in the same way as any other sickness absence.

Said Matt Wrack: “Frustration, boredom, alcohol and drug use can all fuel the problems of youngsters living in communities and on estates they feel are on the margins of society. The outcome can be recreational violence aimed at whatever represents the wider society these youngsters on these estates feel excluded from.

“The highest numbers of attacks are in areas characterised by poor housing, poverty and few or no facilities for young people. Understanding why attacks happen is not to condone or accept them as part of the job, but to help us address the problem.

“Most fire authorities are struggling to deal with the problem and good practice does exist but it is patchy. There needs to be a Government-led and funded national strategy with fire authorities required to put plans in place to tackle violence against their staff.

“This would replace the existing wish list of nice ideas and ‘good practice’ which don't have to be implemented. At the moment fire authorities are being left to deal with the problem on their own without the necessary support and funding.

“Government needs to take a lead rather than sitting on the sidelines ignoring the problem as it is doing in England. It is a different story in Scotland, Northern Ireland and increasingly in Wales when the parliaments and assemblies are playing a more direct and active role.

“We need dedicated national funding to support the fire service community initiatives which we know work very well and have wider community benefits. The fire service can reach youngsters and communities that others struggle to make an impact on.”

Key parts of a national strategy:

All fire authorities being required to put in place plans to tackle the issue of attacks on fire crews;

Statistics: competent collection of standardised statistics on attacks.

Training: If incidents cannot be avoided then an appropriate level of ‘conflict resolution’ training - similar to that provided for the police – should be provided for fire crews paid for by dedicated national Government funding. There needs to be more widespread back up and support for all staff including emergency fire control operators.

National campaigns: public awareness advertising campaigns that challenge attacks on firefighters, similar to those run in Northern Ireland and Scotland.

Fully trained and fast police response: the deployment of police community support officers should be replaced with fully trained officers with the powers of arrest.

CCTV: no further extension of its use on fire appliances until an independent assessment of its effectiveness and use has been completed. Most camera footage is unsuitable for prosecutions and what may help in one area may harm in another.

Resources – training and initiatives with schools and the community need to be maintained over the long term and need dedicated and long-term funding.

A low-resolution pdf of the full report is available from annaz@fbu.org.uk

National media contact: Duncan Milligan Office 0208 541 1765 Mobile 07736 818100