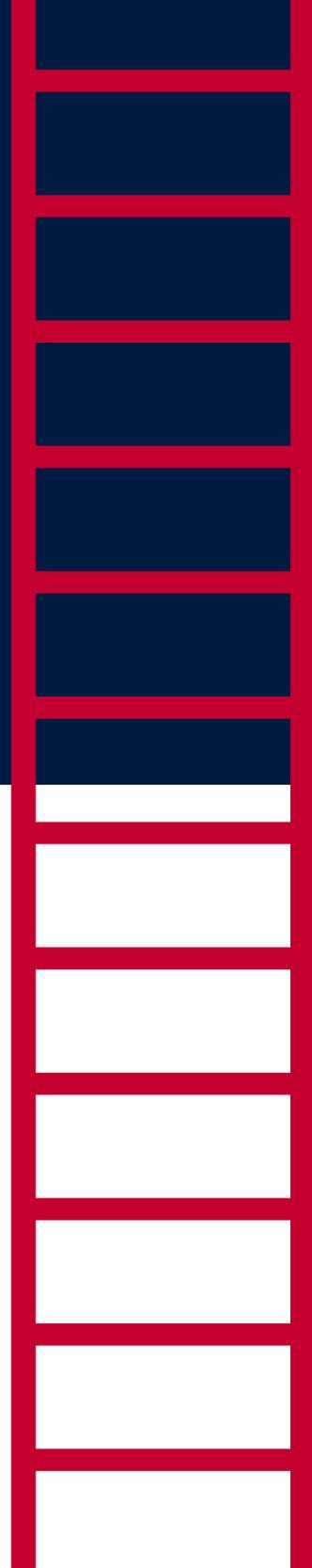




**FIRE BRIGADES UNION**

**DECEMBER 2015  
FLOODS REPORT**



The FBU is the authoritative, professional voice of firefighters across the UK. The union represents the vast majority of firefighters in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, including wholetime (full-time) and retained (part-time, on-call) operational firefighters and control staff.

## SUMMARY

- In December 2015 parts of the north of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland experienced major flooding
- The fire and rescue service was the primary emergency responder to these floods across the UK
- Firefighters rescued more than two thousand people, assisted with temporary flood defences, protecting homes, business and critical national infrastructure, and helped communities begin to recover
- The FBU has serious concerns about the resources available to the fire and rescue service to ensure resilience against flooding
- These include the number of firefighters, boats and equipment available
- There are issues of staffing, technology and resilience in fire control rooms
- The FBU believes a statutory duty on the fire and rescue service in England and Wales, along with investment in the service, provides the best guarantee of resilience to flooding going forward

## INTRODUCTION

During December 2015 Storms Desmond, Eva and Frank brought heavy rainfall and major flooding to the north west of England, Yorkshire, Scotland, North Wales and Northern Ireland. In early December, Cumbria was worst-hit, with more than a month's rain falling on Saturday 5 December and rivers all across Cumbria exceeding the highest levels ever recorded.

On Boxing Day hundreds of people in Greater Manchester, North Yorkshire, West Yorkshire and Lancashire were evacuated from their homes after flooding hit. Further storms, severe gales and flooding occurred at the end of the year and into January, leading to more homes being evacuated, especially in Scotland. The government at Westminster has confirmed that around 16,000 properties in England were flooded.<sup>1</sup> For some communities, what was described as a 'once-in-a-hundred-years' event was the latest episode in an ongoing flood threat to their lives and work.

## FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE MOBILISATION

During December 2015 the fire and rescue service was the primary flood emergency responder across the UK. Over the month, 34 fire and rescue services across the UK rendered some form of mutual aid assistance to the areas worst affected by flooding. Some 24 fire and rescue services sent personnel and equipment to Cumbria, while 12 helped North Yorkshire and 9 sent firefighters to Lancashire. South Wales and Mid and West Wales assisted North Wales, as well as brigades in England.<sup>2</sup>

Firefighters again provided invaluable assistance to a wide range of people and to communities affected by flooding. Data collected by the FBU from individual fire and rescue services suggests firefighters responded to at least 1,400 flood incidents across the North West of England, 450 incidents in Yorkshire, 350 in Scotland, nearly 200 in Wales and over one hundred in Northern Ireland.<sup>3</sup>

Firefighters rescued people from hazardous situations, evacuating vulnerable people prior to the onset of flood water as well as numerous high-profile emergency interventions. Greater Manchester fire and rescue service reported a thousand people rescued by firefighters on 26 December alone.<sup>4</sup> In Scotland, a thousand people were evacuated from their homes in the Scottish borders following river flooding. Official figures from Cumbria estimated that firefighters carried out 360 rescues, while 144 people were rescued in West Yorkshire, 91 in Lancashire, 80 in Northern Ireland, 55 in Northumberland, 42 in Wales and 36 in North Yorkshire.

The FBU believes that these figures almost certainly underestimate the rescue work firefighters carried out. Some fire and rescue services told the FBU they could only provide approximate figures for those saved, while others pointed to problems recording this information.<sup>5</sup>

TABLE ONE  
FLOOD RESCUES AND INCIDENTS, DECEMBER 2015

<b>Service</b>	<b>Incidents</b>	<b>Rescues</b>
Scotland	350	1,000+
Northern Ireland	103	80
Wales	184	42
Northumberland	118	55
North Yorkshire	263	36
West Yorkshire	169	144
Cumbria	1,095	360
Greater Manchester	101	1,000+
Lancashire	206	91

Source: Freedom of Information communications to the FBU, January-February 2016

At least ten fire control rooms experienced spate conditions during major flooding periods. North West fire control, which covers Cheshire, Cumbria, Greater Manchester and Lancashire, received over one thousand calls on 5-7 December and over 1,200 calls on 26-27 December.

In the latter case, it had to draw upon primary and secondary back up arrangements, which included control rooms in London and the West Midlands fielding calls because of high volume. The hard work and professionalism of control staff in deploying resources ensured anxious members of the public received assistance and a life-saving service.<sup>6</sup>

Some politicians ignored firefighters, instead championing volunteers and the army. Subsuming firefighters under the general ‘rescuer’ label does a disservice to these well-trained professionals and to the communities they live and serve in. The fire and rescue service has resources to tackle flooding, with firefighters, equipment and appliances best suited to leading this work and making communities resilient in the face of flooding.

Defra figures provided to the FBU in February 2016 indicate that of the 130 boat teams in England, over 70% come from the fire and rescue service. For Type B (powered boats) the proportion is even higher, with more than three-quarters (77%) provided by the fire and rescue service. Worryingly, there were fewer boat teams in 2015 than in 2014, with the drop out from non-fire organisations most noticeable – almost one in four of their boats were lost to the national asset register. The boats are set out in tables 2 and 3.

TABLE TWO

THE NATIONAL ASSET REGISTER LISTS TYPE B (POWERED BOAT) AND TYPE C (NON POWERED BOAT) TEAMS ONLY

Year	Fire and rescue service		Non-fire and rescue service		Rescue craft
	Cat B	Cat C	Cat B	Cat C	Total
2015	74	18	22	16	130
2014	76	19	27	17	139

Source: Defra, Freedom of Information communication to the FBU, 18 February 2016

During the December floods, CFOA figures indicate that 11 high volume pumps (HVP), nine HVP double hose boxes, 21 flood rescue boats as well as other equipment was deployed.<sup>7</sup>

TABLE THREE

BOAT TEAMS BY ORIGIN, DECEMBER 2015

Organisation	Cat B	Cat C	Total
Fire and Rescue Service	74	18	92
Life guards	2	1	3
RNLI	7	0	7
Search and rescue	13	7	20
Mountain rescue	0	2	2
Police	0	1	1
RSPCA	0	5	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>130</b>

## CUMBRIA

Record levels of rainfall and river flow in Cumbria led to terrible flooding in the first week of December. Over 341mm of rain fell at Honister Pass on 5 December. The River Eden was recorded as having the equivalent of 41-Olympic-sized swimming pools of water glowing past the measuring gauge every minute – enough to fill the Royal Albert Hall.

Cumbria fire and rescue service said it responded to 162 incidents on 5-6 December. Firefighters helped with 3,500 flooded properties, the blocked A591 and with the collapsed bridges of Coledale, Fitz and Pooley. Firefighters from London reported rescuing people from flooded properties and other buildings, including a care home.<sup>8</sup>

Firefighters in Cumbria reported being immersed in deep flood water up to their necks for two hours and many complained of being so cold it took them hours to thaw out. One described being unable to hold a cup for hours afterwards due to being 'cold to the bone'. They told the FBU this was because there weren't enough 'fresh' firefighters to take over, so they were forced to work for 13 hours on the trot, which was extremely fatiguing. Cuts mean that they were working in a fatigued state, which could have been unsafe for the public and themselves. In spite of these challenges, firefighters managed to rescue and evacuate 50 families from one street from 50 different homes, using ladders and ropes to get people out of top floor windows into boats to safety.

Firefighters also told the FBU about other safety issues, such as the danger of manhole covers lifting up and sucking people under. Sharp objects such as spiky railings, trees and vehicles under water are also hazards – for which they require poles and training. And when the drains back up there is raw sewage in the flood water. In terms of infrastructure, a fire station was inundated with water at one point – although firefighters managed to get the fire engines out and onto the main street. At one station there were just two dry suits between a crew of 11 firefighters. Crews had to borrow rowing boats and oars because they didn't have any powered boats available after cuts.

Cumbria fire and rescue service invested some resources after persistent flooding over the last decade, so full time firefighters have had some training. However the swift water training they receive is different to working in actual real life flood scenarios, because water behaves very differently in the open compared to an urban environment. Also, Cumbria like many brigades relies on retained (part time, on call) firefighters during floods and they don't have the time to train.<sup>9</sup>

David Cameron, on the eve of the 2010 general election, spoke at Carlisle fire station and promised to protect frontline public services. But between 2011 and 2015 Cumbria fire and rescue service lost one-in-eight firefighters. Five fire stations were earmarked for closure in Cumbria before the flooding in December. During February 2016 the local council cited the floods as a key reason to keep the stations operational. However the FBU fears they will be under pressure with further cuts in the pipeline from the local government settlement.



## GREATER MANCHESTER

Water levels rose so rapidly on Boxing Day in Greater Manchester that entire estates were cut off, with hundreds of homes evacuated - 300 calls for assistance to Greater Manchester fire and rescue service were flood-related. In Lower Broughton 50 people were rescued from a caravan site affected by rising water and four from a car stranded in flood water. A dozen people were led to safety in Platt Bridge in Wigan after an electrical substation was flooded. Firefighters intervened when The Waterside pub collapsed into the River Irwell. In Radcliffe, Bury, 40 homes were evacuated by the fire service's boat team and mountain rescue, while nearby 100 people stranded in waist-high water had to be led to safety.<sup>10</sup>

Firefighters who tackled flooding in Littleborough near Rochdale in Greater Manchester told the FBU that on Boxing Day they were chest deep in water wearing just regular fire kit. Two care homes were also affected, where residents were too frail to be evacuated and had to be moved upstairs to safety by firefighters. Some members of the water rescue unit had to don North West Ambulance Service water suits because theirs had been taken to Cumbria.<sup>11</sup>

Firefighters in Radcliffe had to wade waist high through water to rescue a pregnant woman, children and older people in care homes. Off duty firefighters put their Christmas holidays on hold to relieve colleagues who had worked long shifts.<sup>12</sup> At its peak, two thirds of the service's firefighters were dealing with the floods, but it was also having to monitor a canal collapse next to the Valero fuel storage site in Trafford Park.<sup>13</sup>

## LANCASHIRE

On 26 December homes were evacuated in Ribchester and Whalley in Lancashire. Firefighters from Cheshire, Hereford and Worcestershire and Shropshire pumped around 80 million litres of water in two days while tackling flooding in Lancashire.<sup>14</sup> Between 2011 and 2015 Lancashire fire and rescue service cut one-in-six firefighter jobs.

## WEST YORKSHIRE

On 26 December firefighters assisted with evacuations in Mytholmroyd, near Halifax in West Yorkshire. Todmorden was effectively cut off on Boxing Day and firefighters rescued 20 people and provided general assistance to the community throughout the day.<sup>15</sup> Between 26 and 29 December West Yorkshire fire and rescue service reported a range of incidents that firefighters responded to, including 53 persons reported stuck, five water rescues, a houseboat on land and 76 reports of flooding. The driver of a HGV stuck in flood water due to water getting into the engine of his vehicle saw water rise to around 4ft, almost entering the cab. Castleford and Wakefield crews used a boat to release the driver and transport him to dry land.

Fire crews also assisted ten properties flooded to a depth of three feet after flood defences were breached in Collingham, Wetherby. Pumps from both Moortown and Wetherby were mobilised to assist along with a high volume pump from Stanningley. In a widely reported incident, a man was rescued after being pulled through the sunroof of his submerged Land Rover in Mytholmroyd - a crowd of onlookers applauded the fire crews. Firefighters also assisted the ambulance service with patients during the flooding.<sup>16</sup>

## NORTH YORKSHIRE

On Christmas Day firefighters had dealt with 35 flooding incidents in Skipton, Hawes, Harrogate, Knaresborough, Easingwold, Scarborough and Malton. North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue's High Volume Pump from Harrogate was used at the Melrosegate electrical sub station to keep it going, preventing 55,000 people from losing power. Water rescue teams in breathing apparatus went into the flooded basement of the Foss Barrier to retrieve the electrical cabling, to accelerate the repair work. The emergency services evacuated 250 people from their homes and 150 placed in rest centres overnight."<sup>17</sup> Between 2011 and 2015 North Yorkshire fire and rescue service cut one-in-ten firefighters.



## SCOTLAND

In total, the Scottish fire and rescue service (SFRS) received 350 flooding-related calls between 30 December and 5 January. Around a thousand people were evacuated from their homes in Hawick in the Scottish borders as a result of the River Teviot flooding. The north east and Tayside areas were very badly affected and multiple incidents occurred in Aberdeenshire and Dundee.

On 30 December in East Ayrshire, firefighters rescued residents from flooded homes and ensuring vulnerable people received additional support. Firefighters deployed 1,600 sandbags to protect homes and responded to medical emergencies including assisting a pregnant woman during the incident. On 30 December Aberfoyle's main street was flooded. Firefighters rescued people trapped at home or stranded at the shops, with many taking shelter in the fire station itself until the water receded. In Stirlingshire, firefighters rescued a family at a caravan park in Stratheyre. In Peeblesshire, firefighters rescued a woman and two men swept 200 metres downstream in the Lyne Water near Romano Bridge.

Ballater fire station in Aberdeenshire suffered extensive flood damage putting it out of action, yet Balleter crews returned to active duty within days. On 4 January, fire crews

evacuated residents from the Allachburn care home in Aboyne and then pumped out water away from the area.

Firefighters removed occupants and pets from a farm at Bridgehaugh, Coupar Angus, working with a coastguard helicopter. The SFRS reported incidents in Dumfries and Galloway, where every appliance was utilised to assist. They intervened in a village on the Casephairn area, checking properties, rescuing people and pumping out flooded areas.<sup>18</sup>

## WALES

On 5 December as Storm Desmond battered North Wales, firefighters worked for more than 20 hours to stop a castle moat overflowing and flooding the historic Anglesey town of Beaumaris. Residents were put on standby to be evacuated as crews battled to bring rising water levels under control.<sup>19</sup>

On Boxing Day firefighters pumped thousands of gallons of water from a flood-hit Conwy village, after North Wales was battered by torrential rain. The fire and rescue service worked through the night to protect properties in Llanddulas.<sup>20</sup>

## NORTHERN IRELAND

On 5 December, Storm Desmond caused flood water to sweep through a shopping complex in County Tyrone, Northern Ireland. Londonderry and Fermanagh were also badly affected, with a number of roads closed due to flooding and fallen trees. The fire and rescue service said it dealt with 31 flooding incidents. Most of those rescued were in vehicles that were stranded in flood water.

In one incident in Strabane, County Tyrone, 10 people were rescued from flooded properties at a housing development using ladders and inflatable rescue sleds.<sup>21</sup> In the last days of the year, firefighters were called after heavy rain and winds of up to 80mph from Storm Frank caused floods or fallen trees. The fire and rescue service said it took 35 weather-related calls, with some 18 people rescued from their vehicles after driving into flood water.<sup>22</sup>



## JOBS AND CUTS

Around 7,000 frontline firefighter jobs were lost between 2011 and 2015 – and around eight thousand since the major flooding in 2007. Those brigades most affected by the recent flooding, the reduction represents a serious diminution of resilience.

Earlier this year DCLG confirmed cuts of almost 21% for central funding allocated to fire and rescue authorities in England over the next five years, in its final local government finance settlement published on 8 February 2016. For England as a whole, fire and rescue service funding from Westminster will be cut from £1.09bn in 2015-16 to £864m in 2019-20. The main source of funding, the revenue support grant, will be cut by almost half over the five years.

Local authorities will claw some money back through the ‘baseline funding level’ – but not enough to compensate for the reduction in the revenue support grant. The Westminster government claims local fire authorities will plug the shortfall with revenue from council tax and business rates. This is unrealistic given the wider cuts. Similar central funding cuts will also impact on the devolved administrations in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

TABLE FOUR  
FIREFIGHTER JOB CUTS, 2011 - 15

Fire and rescue service	Firefighter jobs losses	%
Cumbria	87	-12.6
Greater Manchester	468	-24.4
Lancashire	241	-18.3
North Yorkshire	78	-10.0
Northumberland	31	-8.0
West Yorkshire	314	-19.2
Wiltshire	77	-13.6
<b>England</b>	<b>5,969</b>	<b>-13.3</b>
Scotland	449	-6.0
Wales	53	-2.7
Northern Ireland	269	-7.2
<b>UK</b>	<b>6,740</b>	<b>-11.6</b>

Source: Freedom of Information requests, government statistical releases

## THE LESSONS

Firefighters responded magnificently during the December 2015 floods. Politicians queue up for photo opportunities and lavish firefighters with praise, only to forget the crucial issues they have witnessed when they return to Westminster.

The FBU believes the fire and rescue service in England and Wales should have a statutory duty to respond to major flooding. The need for such a duty was underlined by the Pitt Review in 2008. A duty was introduced in Scotland over a decade ago. Although the FBU has concerns about cuts in Scotland, at the level of strategic planning the duty has made a difference at the strategic planning level. Northern Ireland introduced the duty in 2012 and reports suggest this has improved resilience.

In Wales, FBU officials have held meetings with AMs and Welsh government fire branch civil servants about a flood duty. The Fire and Rescue Consultative Forum, which includes senior civil servants, chief fire officers, employers' representatives and the FBU have discussed the issues. The FBU believes progress is likely in Wales.

A **statutory duty** would add significantly to fire and rescue service resilience when faced with flooding. Such a duty would:

- Underscore the need to resource fire and rescue services specifically for flooding
- Assist with strategic planning, not only between fire and rescue services and local resilience forums, but also between different fire and rescue services across England
- Ensure firefighters play a full part in the temporary construction of flood defences, as they do in Sweden
- Help ensure fire and rescue services have sufficient, professionally trained firefighters available to tackle flood emergencies
- Ensure sufficient boats of the right quality are available
- Help ensure sufficiently trained and equipped boat teams are available
- Ensure sufficient control staff are available to take calls from distressed members of the public and deploy resources where they are most needed
- Make resources available to communities during the clear up, ensuring premises are secure to hazardous substances testing and clear up

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