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TO: All Members

Dear Brother/Sister

Grenfell Tower disaster: a momentous challenge to our service

All members of the Fire Brigades Union will have watched the developments of the past few days with a mixture of horror, anger and pride. The appalling tragedy at Grenfell Tower is already the worst UK fire disaster of recent times – and the full death toll is not yet known. It is appalling to think that a fire on this scale and with this loss of life can take place in the richest borough in the capital city of one of the richest nations in the world. A key task for us now is to identify how this was able to happen.

The response of the London Fire Brigade

Despite the horror of that night, all of us can be immensely proud of every single member of the service who responded to the calls on that terrible night and subsequently. Everyone who watched the response to the Grenfell Tower fire will have been immensely moved and impressed by the actions of our members on the scene. This was a fire on a scale we have not seen and which they could have not expected. Yet they did everything possible to save lives. Without any doubt, this meant putting their own lives in great danger. I know that our members on the ground were well aware of the scale of this risk. Yet they continued to do whatever they could to rescue people from the inferno. Despite the appalling loss of life, they did save many. This incident will go down as a remarkable intervention by firefighters into an almost impossible situation. All those involved – the control members who were the first to respond, the first pumps on the scene, the officers who took the most difficult of decisions, the crews who attended from across the capital, the support from Surrey – every single person who played a role at whatever stage deserves the thanks and respect of all of us. The response was, in every sense of the word, heroic. We have not seen a fire incident affecting people on such a scale in the UK in recent history.

I was able to visit the scene of the incident on the Thursday and would like to thank the LFB Commissioner and management team for assisting in this. It enabled a small FBU team to speak to our members at the scene and to start to make an initial assessment of the site, the incident and the building.

The victims and the survivors

I know that all FBU members will have shared the feelings of sorrow and horror at the loss of life on such a scale. Our condolences go to the families of those killed and our thoughts are with those who survived. The union stands in solidarity with the tenants and residents of Grenfell Tower and we will work with them to uncover why this terrible fire occurred and what could have been done to prevent it. We have spoken to the local MP and to local councillors and we have begun to make contact with the tenants and residents and their representatives. We will seek to work closely with them in the coming weeks.

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You will be aware of the launch last November of the Firefighters 100 Lottery. One of the five aims of the lottery is as follows:

Humanitarian assistance: to support humanitarian initiatives and appeals, including internationally, which are aimed at assisting those affected by fire or disaster and where there is a particular need for the support of skilled fire and rescue service intervention.

Therefore the Lottery Distribution Panel agreed an immediate donation of £20,000 toward the support and relief of the victims of the Grenfell Tower disaster. This is an immediately and practical way in which FBU members, friends, families and supporters have made a contribution to this relief effort. Please look at the lottery and the five aims set out for it.

FBU investigation

The union has already started to pull together the key facts and issues surrounding this incident. As in all such cases, we will make a thorough investigation as to what happened and why. The most obvious question is how an incident on such a scale can even take place in 2017 in the capital city of a wealthy country.

Our investigation will address all factors which will have impacted on this incident. This includes the issue of the building itself (including any alteration made to it), fire safety issues and the operational planning and response. The union employs a specialist fire safety and risk planning advisor, Dave Sibert, who is well known and respected in the wider fire safety sector. Mr Sibert was able to attend the site as part of our visit and has begun to make an initial assessment of factors which may have contributed to the scale and spread of the fire as well as the fire protection and planning issues which will need to be considered.

Please note that the full investigation of this incident is likely to be a lengthy process and will also rely on the direct experience of those who attended.

Inquest and public inquiry

The Prime Minister has announced a public inquiry into the fire. Clearly, the FBU will be central to any such process and we have participated fully in such inquiries as well as in numerous inquests in the past. We have begun to discuss the issue with our legal advisors. A separate circular will be issued setting out our initial position on the issues raised so far.

Conclusion

This has been, and continues to be, a traumatic event for all concerned. Much further information will follow and I am sure all members of the Fire Brigades Union will follow developments closely. I ask everyone also to participate fully in this work – work which may well shape our service and our profession for the coming years. Finally I draw your attention to the words of my predecessor, our former General Secretary, Brother John Horner speaking at our conference in Rothesay in 1960. They sum up what faced our members in London the other night:

“When all is said and done, at the end of it firefighting comes down to this; that a small number of people will go into a darkened, smoke logged building not knowing what they are going to meet, having faith in each other, in the long run prepared to risk their lives to save the lives of other people. In the long run, no matter what transformation we effect in the fire service, firefighting in its final stages remains just that. And we do not forget it.”

Indeed. We do not and will not forget.

Yours fraternally



Matt Wrack
General Secretary

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