



**Matt Wrack** General Secretary  
Bradley House, 68 Coombe Road,  
Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey KT2 7AE  
fbu.org.uk | @fbunational  
020 8541 1765 | office@fbu.org.uk

---

Circular: **2019HOC0545MW**

5 November 2019

TO: **ALL MEMBERS**

Dear Brother / Sister

**Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase 1 Report: FBU Update #2**  
**Do Not Scapegoat Emergency Fire Control Staff, Incident Commanders and Firefighters**

This is the second in a series of circulars which will address the issues arising from the Phase 1 report of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry (GTI).

The Phase 1 report will be the subject of much debate in the coming period. However the union is already putting on the record our concerns at the excessively personalised and individualised criticism contained within the report – particularly aimed at emergency fire control staff, incident commanders and firefighters attending the incident.

The FBU stands full-square in solidarity with our control staff, firefighters and officer members. They did not clad Grenfell Tower in flammable materials nor install the faulty doors, windows, lifts, ventilation system or the other failing safety measures. They were not the owners or managers, those legally responsible for safety in the building. The inquiry has not subjected ministers, politicians, councillors and construction bosses to this kind of scrutiny.

The union is disappointed that the GTI report finds fault with those actually saved lives on the night, but says little about those who made the decisions that caused the fire to spread in such a disastrous way. Of course, lessons must be learnt, in London and across the UK, but the Inquiry's findings point to "systemic failures" of organisations and policy makers. These failings must be addressed at the very top, within the fire and rescue service but also by government. The report must be a turning point for fire and building safety across the UK. Many of the factors identified in the report reflect warnings the FBU has made for many years, including specific warnings we made on the issue of flammable cladding twenty years ago.

**Emergency Control Staff**

Emergency control staff are always the first point of contact between the public and the fire and rescue service in an emergency. On the night of the Grenfell Tower fire, 11 LFB emergency fire control staff were on duty at Stratford, the back up control room.

Throughout the night, control staff undertook their duties diligently and professionally. They took hundreds of calls on the night, including more than 150 fire survival guidance (FSG) calls, unprecedented for any incident in the history of the UK fire service. Control staff in North West Fire Control (NWFC), Essex, Kent, Surrey and Merseyside played an invaluable role. Members of staff in these controls provided enormous support and comfort to residents trapped in the building and helped save lives.

Even the report recognises this. It states:

*29.1 It cannot be doubted that CROs saved the lives of many, and some of the residents of Grenfell Tower have been able to express their gratitude to the CROs who helped them. (Page 635)*

However the report, particularly chapter 29, constantly names and personally scrutinises every word they uttered, right down to the micro level phrases and expressions used in hours of conversation. It itemises what it believes to be individual mistakes and decisions made in a highly pressured, real time situation. It does this without having consulted any fire professionals. This is clear from their consistent reference to “North West FRS”, which does not exist (they mean North West Fire Control). Such mistakes undermine the credibility of the report with fire professionals.

Despite 50 pages of criticism, the report accepts that they could not “reach any conclusive findings” about whether the failures “led to adverse consequences for any particular individual, let alone materially contributed to any death” (29.92 page 665). It is therefore unclear why the GTI has seen fit to personalise the issues down to individual control room operators. The emphasis should have been on failures of policy, planning and training higher up the chain of command and on the politicians who oversee the service and who failed to take account of earlier warnings.

### **Incident Commanders and Firefighters on Scene**

The report undertakes a forensic criticism of incident command, especially in the first hour. It makes an unrealistic claim about fire ground strategy:

*219.b. Once it was clear that the fire was out of control and that compartmentation had failed, a decision should have been taken to organise the evacuation of the tower while that remained possible. That decision could and should have been made between 01.30 and 01.50 and would be likely to have resulted in fewer fatalities. (Page 14)*

Chapter 28, volume 4 of the report (pages 597-98) contains some key facts about the fire:

*28.14 By 01.30 the following principal events had occurred:*

*a. The fire had broken out of the flat of origin on floor 4 and into the cladding by 01.09.  
b. It had reached floor 5 by 01.13 and had spread with increasing speed and ferocity to the very top of the building by 01.26, i.e. in under 20 minutes...*

*f. The lobbies as high as the top floor (floor 23) were either smoke-logged or beginning to be affected by smoke and firefighters were experiencing smoke as high as floor 16.*

*g. The LFB control room had received 29 calls about the fire, of which 12 had been received from occupants in various locations up to the top of the tower at a considerable distance above Flat 16. At least two were FSG calls properly so called (where the caller had said they were trapped). A number of the calls had reported the whole building on fire. The CROs were already overwhelmed with calls.*

*h. The stairs were beginning to be affected by smoke to different degrees at different levels but remained passable to evacuating residents.*

*j. A total of 112 people had left the tower in the 35 minutes that followed Behailu Kebede's first 999 call at 00.54.29, representing some 38% of the total of 297 people present in the building on the night of the fire. Of those, 84 had escaped between 01.15 and 01.29.59.*

The report claims that, at this point, incident commanders should have considered “whether an alternative strategy to firefighting should be adopted, and specifically, whether the building should be partially or wholly evacuated and, if so, how”.

Nowhere in the thousand-page report does it explain how such an “evacuation” would have been carried out. It briefly mentions that at 01:30 there were six pumps – only 30 firefighters – on scene. It ignores the main expert it appointed – Barbara Lane – who said the window for an evacuation was between 01:26 and 01:40. It takes no account of the practical difficulties of such an operation, which it expects would be made up on the spot.

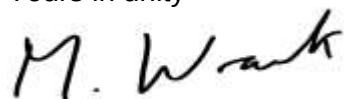
There is substantial evidence provided to the GTI by survivors and firefighters inside the building at the time that conditions for a mass rescue were extremely hazardous. To have made a decision at that time, against every procedure and every prior element of training – would have been a huge gamble. It is unfair to criticise officers on scene when even today, 28 months after the fire, nobody – ministers, their advisors, to chief officers and the NFCC – has come up with a credible mass evacuation/rescue strategy for high rise residential buildings.

The FBU called for a review of ‘Stay Put’ in 2007 after the Harrow Court fire. The coroner at Lakanal house wrote to ministers in 2013. The FBU called for a national review a year ago. The report does at least make this recommendation – but there needs to be a proper national structure and real consultation with the FBU if any changes are to be made.

### **Back to Front**

The FBU has said from the beginning that the Grenfell Tower Inquiry has proceeded back to front. Its Phase 1 report attempts to explain the events on the night without first examining what led up to it. Inevitably this ignores vital elements of the context for the fire. It is right that the report contains criticism of policies of the London Fire Brigade, some of which they have already accepted. But to focus on those who did their best to assist on the night of the Grenfell Tower fire means failing to put the blame and responsibility where it really belongs. The union will make these arguments publicly and to the GTI as it moves into Phase 2.

Yours in unity

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Wrack'.

**MATT WRACK**  
**General Secretary**

MW/mr