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To: All Members

Dear Brother/Sister

Coronavirus: Background to the crisis

As the Coronavirus crisis develops, FBU members across the country are among those on the frontline. The FBU is assessing what can be done to assist our communities while at the same time protecting the safety and the conditions of service of our members. This circular does not set out the position of the Executive Council on the questions we are being asked at national and local level. It does however, seek to place them in a wider context.

FBU members will want to do whatever possible to protect our communities. Nevertheless, the current crisis cannot be separated from the long-term problems facing our service after years of fragmentation and underfunding. As a result of government cuts, we have seen some 20% of frontline jobs lost over the past decade alone. This has significantly weakened resilience across the UK. Yet FRSs are now seeking to plan to replace similar numbers of staff as a result of the current crisis.

The failure of emergency planning

Regrettably, fire and rescue services are unprepared for the coronavirus health event. This state of unpreparedness does not seem to be confined to fire and rescue services. It is also clear that other public services do not have adequate arrangements in place to deal with the emerging problems caused by the pandemic.

In 2004 two major legislative changes affecting the fire and rescue service took place. Firstly, new primary legislation for fire and rescue services (in England: the *Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004*) was introduced in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Secondly, the new primary legislation for civil emergencies – the *Civil Contingencies Act 2004* (CCA) was introduced.

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The purpose and impact of the fire and rescue service legislation was that governments adopted a hands-off approach to standard-setting and verifying that fire and rescue services have adequate plans for both local and national resilience. This legislation and the subsequent national framework documents from each government allowed fire and rescue services to introduce major cuts in the number of fire stations, appliances and firefighters. The result was significantly reduced watch sizes on stations and a significant reduction in the ability of the service nationally to respond to major or sustained incidents.

The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 introduced statutory obligations on Category 1 responders (also known as “core responders”) which includes fire and rescue services, to ensure that they have sufficient resources to maintain and provide business continuity that would account and prepare for:

- a. normal foreseen demand; and
- b. adequate additional resources to deal with serious and major local and national emergencies defined (in short) as:
 - *an event or situation which threatens serious damage to human welfare;*
 - *an event or situation which threatens serious damage to the environment; or*
 - *war, or terrorism, which threatens serious damage to security.*

The civil protection duties placed upon Category 1 responders include the requirement to:

- *Assess the risk of emergencies occurring and use this to inform contingency planning;*
- *Put in place emergency plans;*
- *Put in place Business Continuity Management arrangements.*

Risk planning and the National Risk Register

The specific type of emergency risks which Category 1 responders should prepare for are identified and explained in the *National Risk Register of Civil Emergencies* (NRR). The NRR is periodically revised according to the assessment of risk which, since 2010 has been conducted according to the *National Security Risk Assessment* in accordance with the *National Security Strategy*.

There have been five editions of the NRR since 2008 (plus one update published in 2012). The most recent edition was published in 2017. In each iteration of the NRR, **pandemic influenza has been rated as the highest risk** based upon a relative likelihood/relative impact assessment. Significantly, in the 2010 NRR it was re-titled ***Pandemic-Human Disease***. Other high level risks *include*: coastal flooding; inland flooding; attacks on critical infrastructure; attacks on crowded places; severe weather; major industrial accidents.

Whilst the symptoms and other specifics of pandemic influenza are different to those of coronavirus, the measures to achieve preparedness, as far as the fire and rescue service is concerned, are largely identical. Those preparations *include*: sufficient personnel (taking into account that personnel will be affected by an outbreak and the consequent impact upon their availability for duty); sufficient supplies of the appropriate PPE, RPE and other equipment to protect personnel from infection; and suitable arrangements for the replacement, cleaning and disposal of contaminated PPE and equipment.

In other words, there has been a clear requirement under legislation to undertake serious risk-based planning for precisely the type of challenge now faced as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

It is evident that there has been an absence of any such preparation by fire and rescue services for *such events, e.g. to provide for*:

- the additional demands on the service;
- the additional primary resources (including appliances and personnel);

- the additional equipment;
- the requisite operational procedures and
- the planning for the strains upon the availability of personnel.

The position is actually *much worse* than not ensuring there is additional capacity and resource. During the period when such increased resource should have been put in place, fire and rescue services have significantly cut the resources and capacity required for normal times, let alone extraordinary civil emergencies.

As a union we have experienced and challenged these changes e.g.:

- the closure of stations;
- the reduction in overall numbers of firefighters including emergency fire control staff;
- the reduction in the number of managers (officers) required for command and control and FRS-management and planning;
- the reduction in the number of control rooms;
- the reduction in the number of appliances;
- the reduction in crewing levels on appliances and in controls;
- the introduction of small fire vehicles with inadequate levels of equipment;
- the ending of the 'multiplier' applied to the riding positions on each appliance to account for such things as leave, training and sick leave (known as the "ridership factor");
- the introduction of 'lean crewing' (or 'lean staffing');
- the reduction in the availability of personnel on the retained duty system;
- the reduction of watch sizes at whole time stations and controls,
- the introduction of day crewing plus/close proximity crewing which at a stroke halves the number of personnel available at a fire station.

Underfunding; lack of investment, pay cuts

The responsibility does not only lie with Chief Fire Officers or fire and rescue authorities. Long-term government underfunding of our service and the scrapping of standards have created a race to the bottom. Not only are levels of provisions (especially staffing) poorer in 'normal times', they are wholly inadequate to meet the challenges when there are major incidents or a national emergency.

We have endeavoured to break that cycle through making the case for investment in our service, only to be met with a refusal by the Westminster government to address these fundamental issues. We have offered to negotiate the future work our members might undertake only to be dismissed; with government refusing the necessary investment and funding.

This lack of respect for firefighters has been accompanied by the imposition of a swathe of attacks on terms and conditions. These have included the introduction of new shift systems under threat to dismiss and re-engage the whole Grey Book workforce; a massive hike in the already-high contribution rates for fire service pension schemes and the imposition of punitive pension schemes with unworkable pension ages.

Coronavirus crisis: the need for a lasting change of direction

We are mindful that the government's Chief Scientific Adviser, has made clear that his professional view is that the coronavirus outbreak is quite likely "*to become an annual virus, an annual seasonal infection*".

The latest situation has starkly highlighted the crisis in our service, which we have been warning about for a considerable time. Any discussions about tackling the current crisis must take place within the context set out above; of a service suffering from long-term underfunding, under-resourcing and understaffing.

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FBU members will want to play a full part in protecting our communities through the current health crisis. The FBU will therefore continue to discuss all such matters at all levels, led centrally. The approach will be to agree reasonable, deliverable adjustments to work activity and hours of work taking into account that members have contracts and as a union we will not be agreeing to imposed additional hours of work on any members and that performance of additional hours will be voluntary. A further circular will address these issues in more detail.

Best wishes.

Yours fraternally

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

Matt Wrack
General Secretary

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