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To: ALL MEMBERS

Dear Brother / Sister

COVID-19 TESTING: FIRE SERVICE PERSONNEL

On 20 March 2020, I wrote on behalf of members to the relevant ministers responsible for fire, and those for health in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, explaining the necessity to protect Fire and Rescue Service resilience by ensuring that Fire and Rescue Service personnel are amongst the higher priority groups to be provided with early Covid-19 testing. We acknowledge that critical NHS health workers have the highest priority. An example of the letters from the FBU and the replies received to date are attached to this circular.

You will note that the Welsh Government has provided a slightly-guarded but positive response, but the fire minister at Westminster has evaded the issue entirely.

What does WHO say about testing?

On 16 March 2020, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organisation (WHO) said “the most effective way to prevent infections and save lives is breaking the chains of transmission. And to do that, you must test and isolate”. He stated:

*“You cannot fight a fire blindfolded. And we cannot stop this pandemic if we don’t know who is infected. We have a simple message for all countries: **test, test, test**. Test every suspected case.*

“If they test positive, isolate them and find out who they have been in close contact with up to 2 days before they developed symptoms, and test those people too.”

What are the benefits of mass testing?

Health professionals have set out the arguments for mass testing:

- Large-scale testing allows **health services** to quickly identify who has the disease and arrange for care.
- Isolating known cases prevents them from coming into contact with others and slows the rate of **transmission**.
- Effective testing programmes allow governments and health authorities to understand how prevalent the disease is and how it is evolving.
- Tracking positive test results helps governments make **evidence-based decisions** to try to slow the spread of the disease.

- Identifying and isolating those with the virus also helps to avoid a **sudden spike** in new patients.
- Effective testing and quarantine measures help ease the **pressure on health services**, which can quickly become overwhelmed.

Testing regime and key/essential workers

It is also clear that any system of identifying key or essential workers should involve priority testing of such groups. Such workers are required to carry on working and, in some cases (such as Fire and Rescue), are required to continue interaction with the public even if safeguards are put in place.

Failure to test increases the risk of key workers transmitting the virus to colleagues and to members of the public. It also increases the likelihood of avoidable absences due to potentially avoidable self-isolation.

What has the UK government done about testing?

The UK government has carried out fewer tests than many other states. There were some drive-through facilities for those who suspected they had the virus, but this was stopped on 12 March 2020. A week later, the prime minister announced that mass testing would take place.

What is government advice on the use of commercial testing kits?

On 15 March 2020, Public Health England (PHE) stated:

*“Some manufacturers are selling products for the diagnosis of COVID-19 infection in community settings, such as pharmacies. The current view by PHE is that use of these products is **not advised**.”*

Who are ‘key workers’ tackling the Covid-19 crisis?

On 19 March 2020, the Westminster government published *Guidance for schools, childcare providers, colleges and local authorities in England on maintaining educational provision*. It stated:

“If your work is critical to the COVID-19 response, or you work in one of the critical sectors listed below, and you cannot keep your child safe at home then your children will be prioritised for education provision:

- *Health and social care*
- *Education and childcare*
- *Key public services*
- *Local and national government*
- *Food and other necessary goods*
- *Public safety and national security*
- *Transport*
- *Utilities, communication and financial services.”*

Fire and rescue service employees (including support staff) were included under *Public safety and national security*.

No hierarchy or priority is indicated in this list.

How many key workers could need testing?

Workers in these categories account for more than a fifth (20%) of the workforce, more than 6 million workers. **The NHS has 1.5 million employees.** Across NHS hospitals, community and primary care, there are:

- 110,000 hospital doctors
- 34,000 GPs
- 320,000 nurses and midwives
- 21,000 ambulance workers

Around 1.5 million people work in **adult social care** in England alone. More than 1.2 million are classified as independent providers, ranging from charities to self-employed workers. More than 100,000 work for local authorities.

More than one million people work in state **education** in the UK. Similarly, there are more than a million workers employed in the **food sector**.

Why should the fire and rescue service be a priority for testing?

There are approximately 48,000 frontline firefighters and emergency control staff across the UK. In addition, almost 10,000 work in support roles in the Fire and Rescue Service. More than 11,000 Firefighter jobs (almost 20%) have been cut since 2010.

Government	Wholetime	RDS	Control	Support	Total
England	22,801	12,222	1,134	8,028	44,185
Northern Ireland	836	872	59	187	1,954
Wales	1,417	1,829	106	658	4,010
Scotland	3,637	2,953	207	792	7,589
UK	28,691	17,876	1,506	9,665	57,738

Due to the nature of our work, and of those additional activities which might be carried out during this crisis (subject to the national agreement), Firefighters are placed at an increased risk of contracting the virus. Additionally, Fire and Rescue Service control rooms are pivotal to operational response and as a consequence, testing is vital to maximise availability.

Those with mild potential Covid-19 symptoms - a continuous cough or fever - have been told to self-isolate for 7 days, with a 14-day isolation period for households in which someone is more seriously ill. This is already causing significant staff shortages, with much more being predicted. Some Fire and Rescue Services have already reported around 10% of their employees in self-isolation.

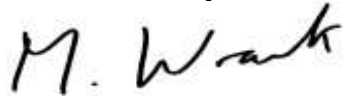
The argument for priority access to tests for frontline Firefighters and Control Staff is clearly a health, safety & welfare priority for FBU members, but it goes beyond this. It is a major issue of public safety - the Fire and Rescue Service must be able to continue operating. Testing will be vital to avoid exacerbating workforce shortages by forcing fire service employees to stay off work, potentially unnecessarily. Not only would our members who test negative be able to safely return to work, significantly reducing the burden on Fire and Rescue Service resources, but it would also significantly reduce the risk of any infected frontline staff potentially transmitting the virus to vulnerable members of the public. Individuals who test positive would be safe in the knowledge

that they would not catch the virus again, making both negative and positive results useful in any emergency planning and resourcing to tackle this crisis.

In summary, to maintain the highest Health, Safety & Welfare standards possible for fire service staff and to maintain resilience for the core functions of the service, requires priority testing. Similarly, in order to carry out the additional work agreed with fire employers and Chief Officers, Firefighters and Control Staff need to be tested as a priority.

Best wishes.

Yours fraternally

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Wrack', with a stylized, cursive script.

MATT WRACK
General Secretary

Attach. X3

MW/jh