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To: All Members

Dear Brother/Sister

Access to Covid-19 Testing: Fire & Rescue Personnel

The Westminster Health Minister, Matt Hancock, has today announced to a commons health committee that access to Covid-19 antigen swab testing is to be extended to fire service staff, along with police, prison staff, critical local authority workers, the judiciary and the DWP.

You will be aware that the FBU has been lobbying governments in all parts of the UK on this matter, including the relevant ministers with the responsibilities for health and fire as well as all members of parliament. Progress on this and the case we have put forward has been reported to members in previous circulars.

We are pleased to see that the Westminster government has listened to the FBU and has agreed to extend access to some testing to key workers, including fire and rescue personnel. We note, however, the late stage at which this has become available, with thousands of firefighters and control staff already self-isolating. We are awaiting further details but it is clear that there are questions around the testing scheme that still need to be answered, particularly around capacity and accessibility.

Government guidance states that assistance in arranging a test is a matter for the employer and workers should refer to their line manager. We shall be liaising with employers on this matter.

It is also clear that, due to the eligibility criteria, this testing strategy has its limitations in that it will only identify the virus in those individuals presenting symptoms or living with others who are. Many fire service staff and other key workers who have been exposed through their work will have contracted the virus yet remain asymptomatic. Frequent and accessible testing of key workers who are at high risk of exposure, tailored to the role they perform, is also needed to reduce the risk of spread in workplaces.

Nevertheless, we welcome the steps taken today by government. Access to early testing has obvious benefits for the health, safety & welfare of FBU members as well as to protect the resilience of FRS core functions and any additional FRS activities being undertaken by way of the national tripartite agreement.

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The union remains clear in our position that to ensure vital services can continue to operate in this crisis and to protect those working within them, we must see an urgent increase in testing, both of key workers and the wider public.

Best wishes.

Yours fraternally

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

Matt Wrack
General Secretary

MW/sll