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To: All Members

Dear Brother/Sister

Covid-19 – Tracing and Isolation in the FRS

The FBU has issued guidance to members in previous circulars on the matter of testing, tracing and isolating in the FRS.

- In England on 22 September 2020 the Public Health England (PHE) Guidance '*Covid-19: guidance for first responders*' was updated. The guidance sets out very specific circumstances in which an FRS worker may be exempt from being considered a close contact for the purposes of contact tracing and isolation whilst providing frontline duties.
- In Wales critical workers guidance is provided by Public Health Wales (PHW) and signposts to the PHE UK government guidance on isolation.
- In Scotland *Test and Protect* guidance allows for specialist risk assessment support for complex cases. The Scottish FRS have issued a specific Covid-19 General Information Note.
- In Northern Ireland specific trace and isolate guidance for the FRS is as yet unclear.

It has been brought to the attention of the Executive Council that trace and isolate guidance is being applied differently in different FRSs, sensibly in some circumstances, complacently and dangerously in others. There are particular issues around how the updated PHE guidance is being interpreted by employers and FRS managers.

Given the varied way in which FRSs are interpreting and applying trace and isolate guidance, the Executive Council agreed the following statement which applies in all parts of the UK: **(for ease of reference where the statement reads 'Tier 1 tracer' this should also be understood to mean any devolved equivalents).**

Firefighters during the course of their employment during the Covid pandemic come into close contact with their colleagues in the workplace and with members of the public.

Whilst we are pleased that many fire and rescue services are taking a sensible approach when firefighters are notified that they have been in close contact with a Covid infected person through contact trace and isolate initiatives, it is extremely worrying that some fire and rescue services are taking a very complacent and damaging approach.

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Some fire and rescue services are insisting that firefighters continue to attend the workplace and to attend incidents whilst awaiting to discuss their movements and activities with a Tier 1 tracer in order to be advised on the correct course of action.

The central purpose of the fire and rescue service is to protect safety and reduce risk and not to jeopardise public safety and introduce or increase risk. These fire and rescue services are turning that ethos on its head.

These fire and rescue services include some which seek to substitute themselves for the firefighter in the discussion which should be undertaken between the Tier 1 tracer and the firefighter himself/herself for an accurate and safe decision to be made by the Tier 1 tracer.

The FBU take the positions set out below:

- 1. If operated effectively, NHS Test and Trace can help to control the rate of reproduction, reduce the spread of the infection and save lives.*
- 2. The FBU understands that current PHE guidance allows for very specific circumstances where an FRS worker may be exempt from being considered a close contact for the purposes of contact tracing and isolation whilst providing frontline duties.*
- 3. These circumstances are strictly limited to times where the appropriate clinical grade PPE can be confirmed to have been worn for the duration of the contact and the appropriate IPC training has been delivered and maintained.*
- 4. An FRS worker will be considered a close-contact for the purposes of contact tracing and isolation if they have had close contact with a COVID-19 case in all other circumstances.*
- 5. Any decision to exempt an FRS worker from being considered as a close contact for the purposes of contact tracing and isolation, can only be made by a local health team Tier 1 contact tracer (or equivalent outside of England) and never by self-assessment or FRS managerial assessment.*
- 6. The process of escalating decisions to Tier 1 contact tracers, including the provision of information, should be agreed jointly through local joint safety committees.*
- 7. Following escalation to the Tier 1 contact tracer by the employer, any information provided to inform the decision of the tracers should be done so directly by the individual involved, not relayed second hand by an FRS manager. The member should immediately seek contact with the Tier 1 contact tracer and **remain isolated** until they are satisfied that all the required information has been provided and an exemption has been confirmed on this basis. Members should be free to do so without any fear of reprisal by employers.*
- 8. Any decision to exempt should be taken on a case by case basis and no 'blanket approaches' should be adopted.*
- 9. Periods of isolation will be recorded separately and not count towards any absence management policy triggers.*
- 10. In circumstances where local FBU Health & Safety officials are satisfied that suitable and agreed risk assessments have been implemented, and provide for the correct level of clinical grade PPE and appropriate IPC training, it is acceptable that mobile phones containing a tracing app are not taken onto the incident ground or are turned off, effectively 'pausing' the app for the duration of the activity for which the individual is wearing the correct PPE.*

11. *The app is to be reactivated once the individual has left the incident ground.*
12. *Whilst the app is not being used, all other methods of contact tracing and any notifications received must be adhered to.*
13. *It is intolerable that any fire and rescue service employer would seek to abuse the guidance for first responders.*
14. *Accordingly, in order to protect the health and safety of fire service personnel and the public alike, the FBU will provide full support to all members who are confronted by a hostile and unprofessional managerial approach or any other failure to safely and adequately apply the protections within the test, trace and isolate regime.*

Best wishes.

Yours fraternally

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Wrack', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Matt Wrack
General Secretary

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