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TO: All Members

Dear Brother/Sister

Urgent – Employers terminate Covid-19 support agreements

You will probably be aware of the unilateral decision by fire service employers to terminate the Covid-19 support agreements which had previously been so successfully implemented and rolled out across the fire and rescue service. This decision was issued without notice on the evening of 13 January alongside an inaccurate and misleading press release.

To be clear, the decision of the employers to terminate the agreements is **not** supported by the Fire Brigades Union and we condemn this action, which comes at a time of national crisis. This decision is irresponsible and compromises public safety.

Covid-19 is a highly transmissible and deadly disease that has caused an international catastrophe. It has led to the deaths of huge numbers of people and we still do not know the long-term impact on people who have had it and survived.

At the earliest stage of the pandemic, the Fire Brigades Union played our part to ensure that firefighters could play a key role to support communities during this unprecedented time. The FBU worked to deliver unprecedented agreements giving firefighters the ability to volunteer for additional work whilst also achieving safe working practices and protecting contractual rights.

The FBU has never withdrawn from these agreements, indeed we were and remain committed to achieving their continuation. However, the fire service employers have unilaterally announced that they consider the agreements to be terminated.

This decision was set out in a document entitled 'CIRCULAR EMP/1/21' which was sent without any warning or prior discussion with the union on the evening of 13 January 2021.

FBU members will be appalled at the regrettable decision of the fire service employers. To terminate these agreements at a time when the pandemic continues to kill over a thousand people a day and when a further national lockdown is in place is entirely irresponsible.

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Each area of additional activity came with a nationally agreed best practice risk assessment. The purpose of these risk assessments is obvious: Firefighters volunteering to undertake additional work need to have the necessary protections and safeguards in place to ensure the protection of themselves, their colleagues, their families and the public.

This is clearly a very serious situation, and, at an emergency meeting, the Executive Council agreed the following points, which I ask all members to read and note carefully:

FBU Executive Council statement: Employers terminate the Covid-19 agreement

1. Covid-19 is a deadly disease, which has so far killed almost two million people worldwide and almost 100,000 people in the UK. As well as being fatal to so many people, it appears to cause other long-term health conditions for others. New information about the disease, including about new variants, is emerging regularly.
2. In the UK, firefighters and emergency fire control staff, overwhelmingly represented by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), have continued to carry out emergency intervention at fires, floods, road traffic collisions and other core work. Fire service personnel have also taken on numerous additional Covid-19-related activities during the pandemic in order to keep our communities safe.
3. These additional Covid-19 related activities were originally established and agreed through a tripartite mechanism involving the FBU, the fire service employers and the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC). More recently this was renewed via the National Joint Council for Local Authority Fire & Rescue Services (NJC). These agreements ensured that UK firefighters were able to volunteer for additional work, while securing their safety and employment protections.
4. Regrettably, on the evening of 13 January 2021, fire service employers, working with the NFCC, unilaterally terminated these agreements. They announced this decision without any prior notice to the FBU or firefighters. The FBU condemns this decision and demands that fire service employers reinstate these agreements with the FBU, immediately and in full.
5. The FBU has not at any point withdrawn from these agreements and continues to support, facilitate and encourage the UK-wide effort to respond to the pandemic. Firefighters and emergency control staff continue to serve our communities with distinction.
6. The background to this termination was a discussion regarding the safety of firefighters undertaking these activities and the safety of others in fire and rescue service workplaces, as well as the impact of both on wider public safety.
7. The FBU has always been eager to ensure that all the current additional activities, as well as appropriate new ones, should continue – subject to suitable and sufficient risk assessments and with appropriate risk control measures in relation to each activity.
8. The scrapping of the agreement by the employers is a reckless act by them and demonstrates a dangerous lack of concern for the safety and wellbeing of firefighters. Such an approach will do nothing to assist public safety; if firefighters are not kept safe, they will create additional risks for colleagues, for family members and for the wider public.
9. The increasing potential transmission of Covid-19 into fire and rescue service workplaces, if the risk control measures are not adhered to, is highly likely to affect firefighters' availability and response and therefore further endanger the safety of the public.

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10. Serious safety concerns were raised by the union, particularly around the testing of firefighters who have been detached and deployed on (higher-risk) Covid-19 related duties before they return to fire stations and regular duties. The FBU had provided a suite of risk control measures (safety measures) which would enable the activities to continue safely.
11. The particular risk control measure under discussion has been in place in many fire and rescue services for several months: *Firefighters not returning to the FRS workplace following the (higher-risk) Covid-19 related activity pending a negative PCR test result*. It has been clearly shown to have improved the safety of those involved and their colleagues. The employers, at the behest of the NFCC, do not want to implement this risk control measure. It is clear that their decision is based on resource rather than risk. This is reflected in the employers' circular which states that the original safety measure is not 'sustainable'.
12. The FBU was prepared to agree changes to that risk control measure with regular testing throughout the activity and for 10 days following return to the workplace. However, if (for whatever reason) this regular testing is not available, other risk control measures would be required. The FBU made suggestions about how this could be achieved.
13. The employers and the NFCC were not prepared to agree that.
14. The fire service employers, backed by the NFCC, have decided to scrap vital safety measures at a time when we face new and highly transmissible strains of the virus. This is utterly irresponsible.
15. Apart from some tragic exceptions, the number of firefighters contracting Covid-19 has been mercifully low. This is largely due to safety measures implemented by the service, supported by the agreements. Any moves away from prevention and control measures by employers and the NFCC risks increased cases and ill-health.
16. The FBU wants the Covid-19-related activities to continue. They must be carried out safely with suitable and sufficient risk control measures (safety measures) in place. The FBU has set out what these should be. No adequate answer has been provided on this matter by either the fire service employers or the NFCC.
17. Any current difficulties have been created by the unwarranted and unnecessary decision by fire service employers to scrap an agreement, which has provided a sound basis for the exceptional work carried out by firefighters during the pandemic.
18. The FBU seeks to resolve these issues as quickly as possible, either through the NJC or with individual employers. Guidance will be issued to local FBU officials to assist in this.
19. Work is now being done to consult with and advise all FBU members.

I want to ensure all members that the Fire Brigades Union remains committed to trying to resolve this issue as quickly as possible.

Yours in unity



Matt Wrack
General Secretary

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