



Matt Wrack General Secretary
Bradley House, 68 Coombe Road,
Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey KT2 7AE
fbu.org.uk | @fbunational
020 8541 1765 | office@fbu.org.uk

Circular: 2021HOC0029MW

To: All Members (Home Addresses)

Date: 22 January 2021

Dear Brother, Sister

HMICFRS report attacks firefighters and targets the FBU

Today Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) in England launched the opening salvo in a biased, politically-motivated attack on the Fire Brigades Union. Members should be in no doubt that our union is under attack – by inspectors, the NFCC, some fire employers and ultimately the Westminster government. Although this is an attack in England it will have serious implications across the UK. It is an attack on all of us. It is an attack the FBU will resist with all our strength.

The HMICFRS report, *Responding to the pandemic: The fire and rescue service's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020*, is a vicious and dishonest attack on firefighters and the FBU. It is launched when thousands of firefighters are once again on the front line of major flood incidents. At the very same time, firefighters have been also driving ambulances, moving the bodies of the deceased and delivering vital supplies to the NHS and care sector and vulnerable people in our communities. In the middle of winter and during a pandemic, their priority is not to improve public safety but to attack our members and our union.

The report lies about the FBU

The HMICFRS report alleges that the FBU “prevented some firefighters from maximising the support they could provide to the public during the pandemic”. This is a lie.

The FBU has done everything possible since the pandemic began to ensure firefighters could play a full part in efforts to respond, protect our communities, our NHS and ourselves from Covid-19. The FBU began taking steps in February before there was a central plan to tackle the virus. In March the FBU reached a UK-wide agreement with employers and the NFCC to ensure that firefighters and the public were safe delivering our core functions during the pandemic.

At the same time the agreement authorised firefighters to volunteer to undertake additional, Covid related work. In all 16 additional activities were agreed over the past nine months, which has meant firefighters made and continue to make a fantastic contribution to tackling coronavirus. We are extremely proud of the work of all our members during the past eleven months. To see that work denigrated in this way is an utter disgrace.

Contd/2...

Until this week, ministers from all four governments, other politicians, health professionals and others in the NHS, as well as many people in our communities have praised this work, clapped for us, and wished us well. The public know what firefighters have done. Yet the inspectorate in England says it's not enough, more should have been done and then heaps blame on the union. That is disgraceful, unwarranted and completely unjustified.

The national agreement

The HMICFRS claim that "Last week the fire and rescue service National Employers and the FBU failed to reach a national agreement for the continuation and expansion of what additional support fire and rescue services can provide their communities during the pandemic." This is a lie.

On 13 January 2021, the fire employers, supported by the NFCC, walked away from a national agreement they had endorsed since March 2020. They refused to continue with risk assessments and control measures that they had repeatedly signed up to for the previous nine months. They refused to agree to measures that were already in place in the vast majority of fire and rescue services and for the vast majority of additional activities undertaken by firefighters. Instead, they insist on downgrading agreed safety measures.

FBU officials across the UK have worked incredibly hard for months to make sure that when firefighters carry out additional work that all the right safety procedures are in place. This meant firefighters could do regular duties and additional pandemic work, while avoiding bringing the virus into fire stations, control rooms, training centres and headquarters.

These procedures have kept firefighters safe during the pandemic so far. Sickness absence and cases among fire service personal have been relatively low and generally contained. Yet with the new variants, more cases in the community, hospitals at breaking point and 100,000 people already dead from the virus, the NFCC and fire employers wanted to downgrade firefighter safety.

Nowhere is this explained in the HMICFRS report. It is casually brushed over. It is not investigated. The HMICFRS did not even ask the FBU about the disagreement over safety measures before they published their report. They have simply reported one point of view. The report is biased and lacking in evidence.

Vaccination

The HMICFRS and the NFCC say that firefighters were also "asked by their union, the FBU, not to volunteer to support the NHS Test and Trace system, and the Covid-19 vaccination programme". This is a lie.

The FBU and the fire employers signed an agreement on 9 December 2020 stating that if a request to assist with vaccination work was made, the two parties "will move quickly to support such a request". This is stated in a publicly available NJC circular (NJC/9/20), sent round by the FBU through our usual channels, including our website.

The inspectorate knows that the FBU and employers were discussing the possibilities of firefighters doing vaccination work in December, over Christmas and into the New Year. The FBU wants a national agreement on vaccination. But any such work must be undertaken safely, protecting all concerned. The union's officials are ready, willing and able to negotiate an agreement **today**. It is the NFCC and the employers who walked away. Any blame for delays lies with them.

Contd/3...

Safety failures uncovered – but brushed aside

The HMICFRS report uncovers safety and equalities failures by fire employers and chief officers, yet makes no demands on them to fix it. The report says “more could have been done in a third of services to make sure staff who may have been at greater risk, such as those from a black or ethnic minority background, were identified and correct provisions put in place to offer them relevant support”. The FBU wants every service to prove to our officials that they are doing to everything possible to keep staff safe.

The HMICFRS report also claims that “Eleven services didn’t have a bespoke pandemic flu plan to begin with, so also hadn’t tested or rehearsed it, putting them at an immediate disadvantage”. This is a **quarter** of fire and rescue services in England. Inspectors did not probe deeper into IRMPs for plans to tackle other diseases, even though the national risk register has long highlighted the dangers. Employers and chief officers did not plan or prepare centrally for this pandemic, despite ample warnings. Yet the report concentrates on blaming the FBU.

HMICFRS recommendations

The HMICFRS says that “some fire services were unable to maximise this support due to outdated and restrictive working practices within the sector”. They suggest that central government scraps the collective bargaining arrangements in the fire and rescue service. They recommend scrapping the NJC, where the FBU negotiates on pay and conditions, and replace it by a review body of ‘experts’ (excluding the union). They want to tear up the Grey Book, which establishes a national framework for firefighters’ conditions, including hours, safety, maternity, discipline and grievance. They want chief officers to determine these conditions and have “operational independence”.

These recommendations are familiar because HMICFRS made them last year in their “State of Fire” report. They had no evidence then, so they concoct something else this time. These are the same attacks made on other public sector workers, who have lost collective bargaining rights and seen conditions downgraded. They propose these measures to worsen the pay and conditions of firefighters. They do not want firefighters to have our own voice.

The FBU is the firefighters’ union, built by firefighters, led by firefighters and the best guarantee firefighters will have a voice at work. That is what the inspectors, as well as some chief officers, some employers and ministers in London want to destroy. They want to marginalise and exclude the FBU because the union stands up for our members. They want firefighters to shut up and follow orders without question.

Behind this report stand the same people who have cut our pay and damaged our pensions for a decade. These are the people who deregulated building safety, which led to the Grenfell Tower fire. They have cut 20% of the firefighting workforce and now say safety agreements are “unsustainable”. They don’t like the FBU because the union has consistently defended our members and challenged their attacks.

The FBU fully expects these attacks to continue. The FBU will not be deflected from our mission to support firefighters and defend our service. This report is not evidence, it is merely a rationalisation to attack the FBU. The FBU expects our members will see through it as simply an excuse to attack them and our union. Firefighters have a voice, should be listened to and will have our say. The FBU will not be silenced.

Contd/4...

We are all under attack.

We stand together.

Best wishes.

Yours fraternally

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. Wrack". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "M." and the last name "Wrack" clearly distinguishable.

Matt Wrack
General Secretary

MW/sll

Note:

Please ensure you stay informed about these matters.

In coming days, the FBU will host Zoom meetings to address these matters. Register for the FBU's Zoom meeting on the HMICFRS report and what our union is doing to respond, by following this link - bit.ly/FBUHMICFRS.

During these times we are going to have to stick together and so it is vital that you stay in touch with the union. If you don't already, please follow our official Facebook and Twitter accounts which deliver regular updates on our vital work.