



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

«NameLine1» «RegionBrigade» «StationCode»
«OtherName»
«Address1»
«Address2»
«Address3»
«Address4»
«Address5»
«Address6»

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Date: **02/08/2024**

To: **All Members**

Dear Brother/Sister,

UK Covid-19 Inquiry Module 1 report

On 18 July, the public inquiry into the Covid-19 pandemic published its Module 1 report, confirming that the Westminster government failed to prepare for such a crisis. Although the report did not refer to the failure of ministers and their advisers to ready the fire and rescue service for the pandemic, it nevertheless pointed to several themes which the FBU has raised over many years.

Emergency preparedness in the FRS

Since 2008 the Cabinet Office, which is responsible for civil contingencies, has published the National Risk Register, which set out the range of different risks that may directly affect the UK. In 2008, out of the 12 main risks assessed, an influenza pandemic was assessed as having the largest relative impact and fifth greatest likelihood. The National Risk Register also highlighted the risks from new diseases. It stated:

“Over the past 25 years, more than 30 new, or newly recognised, infections have been identified around the world. The pattern of known infections also changes constantly, as the areas where disease is constantly present expand beyond traditional limits. Most of these cases are zoonotic infections, in other words, they are naturally transmissible, directly or indirectly, between vertebrate animals and humans.”

Between 2007 and 2011, the FBU participated in the Fire and Rescue Service Health and Safety Group. The group was made up of representatives from the FBU, the fire employers, the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA) and other fire professionals. The group discussed pandemic flu as a priority. The Department of Health and Health Protection Agency published Pandemic Flu: Guidance for the Fire and Rescue Service, in 2008.

The agenda in fire and rescue changed dramatically when the coalition government took power in May 2010. The imposition of austerity cuts, the attack on pay and pensions, and the Fire Futures project and other attacks, cut across these early efforts at national resilience.

The FBU wanted the inquiry to examine the records of fire ministers, CFOA and its successor, the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC), the chief fire and rescue adviser's unit and the fire inspectorate in England, HMICFRS to draw out what they did for pandemic preparation from 2011 to 2020.

The FBU was excluded from any discussions that may have taken place behind closed doors. The FBU was not sent any policy documents from principal managers or their organisations. The union is not aware of any publication by ministers or chief fire officers on pandemics published in the decade before the Covid-19 pandemic. There was no advisory body that the FBU could attend, where emergency preparedness could be discussed.

The failure to prepare the fire and rescue service for the Covid-19 pandemic and other similar emergencies lies squarely with the Westminster government and its closest advisers, the CFOA/NFCC, the chief fire adviser and the inspectorate.

The FBU raised our unhappiness with emergency preparedness for many years. The union wrote to the Home Affairs Select Committee inquiry on emergency preparedness in April 2020. The FBU also published a pamphlet on Covid-19 in July 2020. The union also made representations to the TUC, the core participant in the inquiry for the labour movement. These are attached to this circular.

Early response to the pandemic

In February 2020, it became clear that the world was facing a devastating pandemic, in the shape of Covid-19. The next report of the public inquiry will cover those early months of 2020, when the UK government failed to take the necessary steps to protect our health and safety.

The FBU took some important steps at the beginning of 2020 to protect both the public and firefighters.

On 21 February 2020, the FBU and the fire employers working through the National Joint Council (NJC), the UK-wide collective bargaining body for firefighters pay and conditions, issued circular NJC/1/20 Novel coronavirus: Covid-19.

On 15 March, the FBU issued its position on minimising non-essential outside activities, which meant reducing or ceasing certain activities, in order to assure emergency response. This became the basis for fire and rescue operations as the pandemic took hold.

On 20 and 23 March, the FBU wrote to ministers about emergency preparedness and the need to put special measures in place to safeguard the public and firefighters during the pandemic. This included demands for testing, vaccination and PPE. These letters are attached.

On 24 March, as the lockdown began, the FBU, fire employers and NFCC published the tripartite agreement on additional activities carried out by firefighters during the pandemic. The first activities were ambulance service assistance, delivery of essential items to vulnerable people and assistance with mass casualties.

This agreement, which included safety protocols to protect firefighters from contracting the virus and spreading it to other workers and the public, was remarkably effective in protecting people for the first nine months of the Covid-19 pandemic. Sadly, the NFCC and then the fire employers walked away from the national agreement, just as the FBU agreed to assist with the vaccination roll out.

The failure to prepare and the first year of the pandemic underline the need for a statutory advisory body at Westminster to advise ministers on these matters. Unlike many other sectors, the Cabinet Office, Home Office and MHCLG does not have a forum to obtain the views of the workforce, via the FBU, along with other fire professionals.

Nearly five years after the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, the Westminster government has still not prepared the fire and rescue service for the next major emergency. The FBU, representing the vast majority of firefighters across the UK, must behave a central role in a statutory advisory body, in order to learn the lessons from Covid-19, the Grenfell Tower fire and other disasters, while preparing for climate change, the aging population, the building safety crisis and related risks.

The Module 1 report

The Covid-19 public inquiry published its Module 1 report on 18 July 2024. The report acknowledges that the UK was spared worse by the individual efforts and dedication of a wide range of workers, including firefighters and others in the emergency services. It highlighted the same arguments the FBU has made about warnings in the National Risk Register.

The Module 1 report made ten recommendations:

- Recommendation 1: A simplified structure for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience
- Recommendation 2: Cabinet Office leadership for whole-system civil emergencies in the UK
- Recommendation 3: A better approach to risk assessment
- Recommendation 4: A UK-wide whole-system civil emergency strategy
- Recommendation 5: Data and research for future pandemics
- Recommendation 6: A regular UK-wide pandemic response exercise
- Recommendation 7: Publication of findings and lessons from civil emergency exercises
- Recommendation 8: Published reports on whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience
- Recommendation 9: Regular use of red teams
- Recommendation 10: A UK-wide independent statutory body for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience

These are broadly recommendations the FBU can support. Clearly, the union wants the fire and rescue service to be properly represented in the existing and new structures. This means giving the FBU, as the main representatives of the workforce, a key role. It definitely cannot be left to the NFCC to represent the service. The NFCC was asleep at the wheel of the Covid-19 pandemic – it cannot be left in sole charge if a more resilient system is to be put in place.

FBU officials should play an active role in local negotiations on any changes. FBU officials should report any Covid-19 lesson learning to their Executive Council member and head office officials, so the union can develop a joined up, UK-wide response.

Yours in unity,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Wrack', written in a cursive style.

Matt Wrack
General Secretary