



FIRE BRIGADES UNION

**COVID-19 THE RESPONSE BY FIREFIGHTERS
AND THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION**

Conference notes that over the last 18 months, the Covid-19 virus has made around five million people sick, put almost half a million in hospital and led to more than 150,000 deaths in the UK.

The hazards posed by epidemics and pandemics has consistently been identified as a major risk in each iteration of the National Risk Register since their inception. Conference is appalled by the mismanagement of the Covid-19 crisis by all governments across the UK but in particular the Westminster Government which has overall responsibility under the Civil Contingencies Act.

The lack of preparedness despite warnings in the national risk register includes: the austerity cuts that weakened public services before the pandemic; the failure to procure reserves of sufficient PPE for workers; their failure to provide sick pay at a living level for workers; their expensive and inefficient use of private contractors for test, track and trace instead of public health authorities; and the cronyism demonstrated in the awarding of contracts to private sector providers.

Conference applauds the tremendous work of firefighters, emergency control and support staff in serving our communities during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Conference congratulates firefighters and all fire staff for continuing to provide our irreplaceable emergency service, tackling a wide range of hazards and keeping our communities safe over the last year from domestic, business and vehicle fires, floods, wildfires and other hazards.

Conference further applauds the tremendous additional work carried out by firefighters and emergency fire control staff to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic. This has included:

- Delivering essential items to vulnerable persons
- Delivering PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities
- Face-fitting masks to be used by NHS and clinical care staff working with Covid-19 patients
- Packing/repacking food supplies for vulnerable people
- Ambulance driving
- Moving bodies of the deceased
- Delivering training packages for care homes and care home staff
- Driving ambulances not on blue lights for outpatients or samples
- Training non-service personnel to drive ambulances
- Transferring patients to and from Nightingale hospitals.

Conference endorses the Fire Brigade Union's (FBU) constructive engagement with fire employers and the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) in negotiating a tripartite agreement to keep regular emergency intervention functioning, while enabling firefighters to safely volunteer for additional activities by ensuring that strict safety measures were in place.

Conference supports the approach taken by FBU officials at national, regional and local level, to insist on comprehensive risk assessments and control measures to keep the public and firefighters and their families safe.

Conference believes that the low levels of sickness absence and fatalities from Covid-19 in the fire and rescue services at the height of the pandemic were due to these safety measures. This ensured that fire and rescue services were able, in the main, to maintain service delivery and provide additional resources to the health and care sectors. Despite the low level of sickness absence and fatalities from Covid-19 within fire and rescue services, Conference notes the sad passing of FBU Members and mourns their loss.

Conference notes that there were serious Covid-related emergencies in a number of fire and rescue service establishments because of the failure of the relevant service to observe the relevant control measures.

The breakdown of the national agreements

Conference notes the health and safety regulations, central government Covid-19 guidance and Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) evidence on transmission, which all require fire and rescue services to maintain strict safety measures in order to avoid the spread of the virus at work and in our communities.

Conference notes that during autumn 2020 a small number of chief fire officers no longer wanted to maintain the risk control measures, despite the rising number of Covid-19 cases and deaths.

Conference condemns the excuse given by those chief fire officers that these safety measures were “unsustainable” and criticises the NFCC for its failure to ensure that chief officers stuck to those nationally agreed safety measures.

Conference welcomes the FBU efforts to further extend the fire and rescue service national Covid-19 agreement with fire employers in December 2020, which would have included further additional activities and a planned national agreement to assist with the roll out of vaccination.

Conference notes the intensive negotiations which the FBU engaged in over the Christmas holiday, as the second wave hit and third UK-wide lockdown was implemented.

Conference condemns the unexpected decision of 13 January 2021 by fire employers, encouraged by the NFCC and the Home Office, to walk away from talks that centred on ensuring that there could be an extension of the national agreement.

Conference opposes the NFCC’s decision to water down risk assessments and reduce the control measures to control the spread of Covid-19 that had been previously put in place and had so successfully protected the fire service and enabled the additional work.

Conference is alarmed that the national employers took the decision to mimic the NFCC stance on the control measures and then to unilaterally end the national agreement. This provided the excuse for the HMICFRS to launch their attack on the NJC and the FBU.

Conference applauds the intensive efforts of FBU Officials nationally, regionally and locally to renegotiate further agreements.

Conference thanks Members who continued to work on regular duties and additional Covid-19 work during the second wave.

Conference resolves to campaign for:

- The maintenance of national standards of Covid-19 risk assessment and control measures agreed with the FBU
- Testing and vaccination priority for firefighters including emergency fire control staff as key frontline workers
- Sickness absence policies in FRSs to reflect the national agreement that fully protects firefighters and emergency fire control staff to allow for isolation and paid sick leave when firefighters are isolating in accordance with guidance, including that sick leave from Covid-19 is not counted for aggregated sick leave. Furthermore, there will be no financial detriment from absences related to Covid-19
- Further research on long Covid including the implications for reasonable fire and rescue service sickness absence control policies
- Investment in the fire and rescue service to prepare for national risks, and in particular epidemics and pandemics. This must include further waves and new variants and other diseases
- Preparation at government level for all identified foreseeable risks including adequate resourcing and funding.