



FIRE BRIGADES UNION

CONFERENCE 2023

**EXECUTIVE COUNCIL POLICY
STATEMENT**

**The Fight for Equality in the Fire and
Rescue Service**

The fire and rescue service has a significant crisis of discrimination, harassment, bullying and other forms of oppression. This includes mistreatment of significant sections of the workforce. This Executive Council (EC) statement is intended to call ministers, fire employers, chief fire officers and principal managers to account for these failures. The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) and its members will also put our own house in order. The union is committed to an immediate and fundamental change in how matters relating to equality, diversity and inclusion are addressed in the fire and rescue service.

FBU current position

The FBU has a long history fighting for equalities, including fighting for equal pay for men and women in the same roles, fighting the 'colour bar' and demands for equal opportunities. The Executive Council formed an Equal Opportunities Committee in 1986 and launched its first equal opportunities policy booklet the following year. This has included organising our NWC, B&EMM and LGBT+ sections to ensure better representation and voice for members.

The FBU's Rule Book (2022) is clear:

A2(3) To secure that the numbers of uniformed employees of fire brigades, members of the Union and appropriate post holders within the Union, are as far as reasonably practicable, representative of diversity in regards to our society.

A2(8) To support and promote working class unity through the Trade Union and Labour movement and therefore to oppose all forms of discrimination whether on the grounds of race, creed, sex, sexual orientation or otherwise.

B3 (3) It shall be the duty of every member to treat others with dignity and respect and to challenge offensive behaviour of any kind.

G1 (1) A member of the Union commits a disciplinary offence if that member: (iv) Discriminates against, harasses or bullies another whether on the grounds of race, creed, sex, sexual orientation or otherwise.

The FBU's All Different All Equal policy (2022) states:

Discriminating against individuals, harassing or bullying them because of their disability, age, race or sex, because they are gay or lesbian, because you think they are attractive or unattractive, because they have an accent, or a different religion, political opinion in Northern Ireland or because you simply just do not like them, is not acceptable behaviour. It is the politics of the playground, which have no place in a modern, professional fire service and no place in the Fire Brigades Union. Employers are also legally responsible for preventing discrimination, harassment and bullying behaviour. It is in their interest to make it clear to everyone that such behaviour will not be tolerated.

The National Joint Council (NJC) Grey Book states:

Section 2.1. The NJC expects fire and rescue authorities to set out and communicate the principles and strategies that are fundamental to developing an organisation which values all. These should encourage continuous improvement to identify and implement best practice. In this context, the NJC strongly encourages fire and rescue authorities to:

- a) develop equal opportunities and work/life balance in employment;*
- b) ensure that equality is a core principle that underpins service delivery, training and development opportunities and employment relations;*
- c) remove all unlawful discrimination; and*
- d) take a positive approach to the development of a diverse workforce.*

In 2015, the NJC established the Inclusive Fire Service Group (IFSG). It consists of the FBU, fire service employers and chief fire officers. The IFSG has gathered evidence of the situation, published comprehensive reports and set standards. In 2017, the FBU and fire service employers signed a Memorandum of Understanding committing the fire service to take action to create a more inclusive workforce and culture.

The IFSG delivered the only sector wide developed equality, diversity and inclusion recommendations. However these have been largely ignored by chief fire officers and the inspectorate in England, even though they relate directly to the issues fire and rescue services face now.

In 2022, FBU conference passed further policies to tackle misogyny, homophobia and racism. Conference agreed an EC statement against sexual harassment and established a working group to tackle the issues. The FBU's equality sections have huge experience tackling all areas of discrimination, supporting members and fighting for equality.

London Culture Review

On 25 November 2022, the London Fire Brigade (LFB) published the Independent Culture Review report, carried out by Nazir Afzal and his team. It took evidence from more than 2,000 current and former staff and the public. The report found that LFB is "institutionally misogynist and racist", as well as evidence of homophobia and disability discrimination.

The Executive Council initial response stated that the union was "saddened and angered to read the details of incidents of discrimination, bullying and harassment highlighted in the London Fire Brigade independent culture review". The FBU said:

The behaviour and attitudes towards women; Black, Asian and minority ethnic; LGBT+; and neurologically diverse staff, reported within it, have no place in the fire and rescue service, the Fire Brigades Union or in society as a whole...

The Executive Council stands in full solidarity with our equality section members. Racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia and related discriminatory behaviour, bullying and harassment will not be tolerated by the Fire Brigades Union.

Following this report, there were various press reports of incidents of harassment and discrimination in various fire and rescue services across the UK. The FBU will not sit on the fence in the face of such allegations. We are on the side of members who experience any kind of discrimination. We are against those who perpetrate such behaviours, even if they are members of our union. Such behaviour is contrary to the principles, rules and practices of our union and may be grounds for exclusion from the FBU.

Government failure

The Westminster government and its ministers carry heavy responsibility for failures on equalities in recent years. The 2010 Cameron government scrapped equality targets. It also cut central funding, hampering new recruitment. Successive governments gave no priority to equalities within public services, provided no new legislation or guidance.

Fire employers and chief fire officers also bear responsibility for these failures. They have implemented the agenda of governments, failing to fight for the policies needed to tackle inequality. The National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) has done very little in the realm of equalities, providing a dented shield for ministers and senior civil servants instead of consulting with the FBU and driving change.

HMICFRS, the fire inspectorate in England since 2017, has also failed. Although it has carried out local inspections examining equality, diversity and inclusion, it has mostly given individual fire and rescue services and chief fire officers a clean bill of health. In some cases, this has happened not long before a major equality scandal has emerged.

The FBU response

Conference believes that the best mechanism to advance the equalities agenda is through collective bargaining. This means the NJC's IFSG must be central to negotiations about new regulations, standards and guidance. It means the FBU's voice must be heard around the table with ministers, employers and chief fire officers.

Conference further believes that meaningful action on equalities requires FBU representatives to be given time off during work time specifically to carry out equalities work, undertake training, convene committees, listen to members and feed back to management. Issues of equality, diversity and inclusion must be addressed formally, systematically and regularly through agreed specific structures established on the principles of collective bargaining. FBU reps must be negotiated and consulted with, be fully informed and given the resources to make improvements in every fire workplace across the UK.

Conference believes the FBU has to get its own house in order. The union and its members have to do better in the fight for equalities.

Conference supports the Executive Council's working group on the culture review, which includes representation from our equality sections, as the key driver of new work in this area.

Conference recognises the urgency of this work and mandates the Executive Council to:

Internal FBU

1. Develop the union's work on disability, including neurodiversity and mental health, to widen support for members facing discrimination in these areas.
2. Review our fairness and work representation and strengthen equality structures.
3. Create a more diverse union structure, including measures to increase the size and diversity of conference delegations.
4. Review regional and brigade structures to consider how they may be made more inclusive.
5. Carry out an independent review of cases of Internal Union Discipline and All Different All Equal.
6. Review the processes for dealing with complaints for matters of discrimination, harassment and victimisation.
7. Continue to develop our education programmes to best be able to utilise such issues as equality impact assessments and public sector equality duty requirements.

Fire and rescue service

8. Work with our equality sections and brigade committees to identify and establish best practice standards for the fire and rescue service, against which they can be tested and measured.
9. Carry out a review of all services – inspecting every service and rating them against such equality standards.

Some in the fire and rescue service hold attitudes that are outdated, offensive and discriminatory. There are also long term failings from politicians and from chief fire officers in addressing such matters. We will not stand for this. The FBU reiterates its determination to create a working environment free of bullying, harassment, victimisation and unlawful discrimination, promoting dignity and respect for all. Our values are based upon the need to build working class unity, as set out in our rule book. Diversity and equality are fantastic strengths in our workplaces, in culture and in wider society. They will be central to guiding us as we address these issues and build better workplaces and a more united and inclusive union.