



FIRE BRIGADES UNION

CONFERENCE 2022

**EXECUTIVE COUNCIL POLICY
STATEMENT**

GRENFELL TOWER

Conference notes the imminent fifth anniversary of the Grenfell Tower fire, the worst domestic fire deaths incident in living memory in the UK. In those five years, no justice has been delivered and no prosecutions have held the perpetrators to account. Flammable cladding still adorns thousands of high-rise buildings, exposing but not resolving the building safety crisis across the UK.

The FBU's aims

Conference underlines that the FBU warned for decades before the Grenfell Tower fire that deregulation, fragmentation and austerity would lead to disaster. The union warned at parliament about cladding after the Garnock Court fire (1999) and produced numerous serious accident investigation reports and other publications pointing out the need to learn lessons from fatalities involving both the public and firefighters.

Conference reaffirms the FBU's campaign to:

- win justice for the bereaved, survivors and residents
- defend firefighters from blame and unwarranted criticism
- hold ministers, councillors, construction firms, directors and chief fire officers accountable for their failures.

Conference recommitments the FBU to building alliances with the Grenfell community and with others campaigning for decent homes for all. The union will continue to expose the failings of the fire and building safety regimes and to make the case for genuine improvements.

Conference notes that the FBU has committed considerable time and resources to advancing our aims. FBU members from across the UK respectfully joined the monthly silent walks, met with local campaigners, joined their protests and attended numerous public meetings and events. The union has made links with safety campaigners, cladding and tenant's groups. FBU officials have spoken at Westminster, briefed MPs about proposed legislation and provided our own commentary on how to make homes safe for all.

The Grenfell Tower Inquiry

Conference notes that the FBU has been a core participant in the Grenfell Tower Inquiry (GTI) since it was established in 2017. The union warned from the beginning that the GTI's terms of reference were too narrow. The FBU also criticised the GTI's decision to deal with the events on the night (Phase 1) before looking at what caused the fire and the scale of death and destruction it caused (Phase 2).

Conference believes that the GTI's organisation of the inquiry has led to a very long series of hearings and slow progress with the proceedings. It meant firefighters and emergency control staff were questioned during 2018 about matters that should have been put to ministers and their advisors, including the NFCC. Firefighters and emergency control staff were not responsible for the cladding or other building failures, yet did their professional best in what was an impossible situation. For this they received unfair criticism, while politicians, business people and the NFCC were able to avoid scrutiny.

Conference notes that the GTI's Phase 1 report, published in October 2019, claimed that mass evacuation was possible early on in the fire, despite the lack of procedures, personnel and guidance to do so. Neither the GTI nor ministers (or their advisors in the NFCC) have yet formulated a robust and safe set of procedures for fully evacuating high rise residential buildings during a fire. Yet some lawyers and 'experts' continue to claim that it could have been done on the night with only 30 firefighters on scene.

Conference believes that the FBU has participated professionally in the GTI, making scores of submissions, questions and other interventions to assist with its work. Despite criticism of the union by some lawyers, the inquiry has so far failed to call senior FBU representatives to answer these points. The FBU will continue to engage with the inquiry, but reserves the right to criticise the GTI and to reject its conclusions based on our interpretation of the evidence.

GTI Phase 2

Conference notes that since January 2020, the GTI has moved onto Phase 2 of its work, which has been subdivided into modules. The evidence given by the key companies involved in the refurbishment - such as Rydon (the project managers) Studio E (the architects), and Harley (the cladding designers) exposed their failures to consider fire safety in the selection and installation of the materials used to clad the tower.

Conference notes that the evidence from the tenant management organisation (TMO) responsible for Grenfell Tower shows that they did not carry out a proper procurement exercise and key TMO employees did not even read the fire safety report. After the fire, some TMO employees had disposed of their work diaries covering the project. The inquiry also revealed how austerity cuts to RBKC's building control meant the refurbishment was not properly monitored or inspected.

Conference notes that during 2021, the GTI examined firefighting matters before the fire, including 7.2.d familiarisation visits, inspections and LFB policies. The inquiry called a small number of principal managers as experts or as witnesses. However, none were questioned about the obvious, systemic and widespread failures of chief fire officers working through CFOA and the NFCC, or as appointed CFRAs, who were the principal advisors to ministers in the years before the fire. None were questioned about their failure to consult with the FBU, or their support for fragmentation and austerity, which weakened the resilience of the fire and rescue service in the decades before the Grenfell Tower fire. Moreover, none were questioned about the scandalous lack of fire service preparation; audit and inspection; failure to flag up the deep-seated shortcomings in building standards and regulation; or their failure to bring concerns to the attention of government.

Conference further notes that the inquiry has exposed failures to the building safety regime. This has included the Building Research Establishment (BRE), which was privatised in 1997 after years of cuts and commercialisation, and which failed to warn of the risks of cladding. Witnesses and experts have shown the folly of the part-privatisation of local authority building control, the lack of a government testing and research facility and the lack of genuine oversight to warn of newly emerging risks and to take action to prevent incidents.

Final stages of the inquiry

Conference notes that the GTI is entering the final stages of its inquiry. After five years, the inquiry is at last calling ministers to give evidence and to be questioned about their decisions. The FBU expects GTI lawyers to demonstrate the same zeal and hostility shown to earlier witnesses when it calls ministers and their advisors to account. This should include questioning chief fire officers and their representatives about their role in creating the existing – and broken - fire safety regime and failure to avert this disaster.

Conference expects that over the next year, the GTI will conclude its hearings and then publish its final report. The FBU will carefully consider the findings and recommendations of the report. The inquiry has the opportunity to signal a turn away from 40 years of deregulation and cuts to the fire and rescue service, and the return to statutory consultation with the FBU over fire safety and related policy matters. Only thorough consultation with the fire professionals – operational firefighters and emergency control staff – will ensure a world class fire safety regime in the future.

Conference is not optimistic about the likely outcome of the inquiry. The FBU does not expect more than minimal changes. The union has repeatedly explained to the inquiry about the damage done by the private sector to our service and warned that privatisation in any form should not be part of any programme of change. The FBU does not expect ministers to deliver the necessary improvements. Therefore the union is likely to have to criticise proposals made by the inquiry when it eventually concludes its proceedings.

Conference instructs the executive council to prepare the FBU's response to the GTI and the Westminster government's response. This includes:

- continuing to engage in the GTI, but to challenge where necessary
- continuing to challenge the role of governments and ministers
- continuing to challenge the role of chief fire officers and NFCC
- set out the case for public safety and a completely new building safety regime
- to campaign
 - for decent safe homes for all,
 - to end the role of the private sector in building safety and inspection,
 - for investment in the fire and rescue service
 - and investment in local authority building control
- campaign for local government direct labour organisation to carry out repairs, maintenance and construction of local authority homes and public buildings to ensure high standards of work and accountability.

Conference instructs the Executive Council to prepare the FBU's involvement in the fifth anniversary meetings, campaigns, commemoration events. The FBU will urge all members to get involved in the campaign: Justice for Grenfell. Decent and safe homes for all.