

Fire Brigades Union press release

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COVID-19: Firefighters to deliver food and medicines, drive ambulances, and retrieve bodies

Firefighters will be able to deliver food and medicines, drive ambulances, and retrieve dead bodies during the coronavirus outbreak in an unprecedented agreement between the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), fire chiefs, and Fire and Rescue Employers.

For the first time, all three stakeholder groups have agreed a joint national approach to the crisis. The fire service organisations say that the measures in the agreement reflect the scale of the national crisis and the urgency of the response required.

Under the agreement, firefighters will be able to:

- Deliver essential items like food and medicines to vulnerable people
- Drive ambulances and assist ambulance staff
- Retrieve dead bodies, should the outbreak cause mass casualties

Firefighters will continue responding to core emergencies, such as fires and road traffic collisions, but under the agreement can now provide additional services specifically related to COVID19. The agreement states that core responsibilities must be maintained throughout the crisis.

The organisations will meet weekly to discuss any additional requests for assistance made by Local Resilience Forums and Strategic Coordination Groups. Any activities considered will be risk assessed with fire and rescue personnel being given any necessary additional training and the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE).

The additional work taken on by firefighters will be temporary to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially in place for two months, the agreement can be extended or shortened if agreed between all parties.

The agreement between National Employers, the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) and the FBU follows measures to limit cross-infection between firefighters and the public, agreed earlier this week.

There are around 48,000 firefighters and emergency control staff in the UK.

Matt Wrack, FBU general secretary, said:

“We face a public health crisis unparalleled in our lifetimes. The coronavirus outbreak is now a humanitarian emergency and firefighters rightly want help their communities.

“To get through this, we must find ways to work together with other emergency services. Firefighters are fantastic at teamwork, are experienced in driving emergency vehicles and, as a service rooted in the community, may be best placed to deliver essential items to the most vulnerable.

“Many fear the loss of life in this outbreak could be overwhelming– and firefighters, who often handle terrible situations and incidents, are ready to step in to assist with body retrieval.

“Firefighters and control staff have always stepped in when the public has been in danger and this crisis is no different. The strain on all emergency services will be great, but we can and will get through it together.”

Roy Wilsher, Chair of the National Fire Chiefs Council, said:

"All fire services are working to protect communities during COVID-19 and they will use their wide-range of capabilities and skills to ensure community reassurance and support; doing what they can to support people through this crisis.

"This joined-up approach is testament to the three organisations working together, to ensure fire and rescue services can be at the forefront of the response to the current situation. I look forward to continuing this joined-up work with the National Employers and FBU."

Cllr Nick Chard, Chair of the National Employers, said:

"We have worked at pace to bring an extra resource to the battle against the impact of COVID 19, working collaboratively with the FBU and NFCC for the benefit of local people."

"Fire and Rescue has always played its role in meeting seemingly insurmountable challenges and this crisis is no exception. We can immediately step up our assistance to support our over stretched public sector colleagues, especially ambulance services, with our can do attitude and sense of community spirit."

Ends

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Notes for editors

- The FBU, NFCC, and fire and rescue service employers agreed earlier this week to cease most home fire safety visits and avoid hospitals and care homes:
<https://www.fbu.org.uk/news/2020/03/24/firefighters-protect-vulnerable-avoiding-hospitals-and-care-homes-%E2%80%9Ccritical-risk>
- The FBU has called for priority coronavirus testing for fire and rescue personnel:
<https://www.fbu.org.uk/news/2020/03/20/covid-19-fire-and-rescue-services-lose-hundreds-firefighters-self-isolation-union>
- The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) is the professional and democratic voice of firefighters and other workers within fire and rescue services across the UK. The general secretary is Matt Wrack
- The FBU is on Twitter: @fbunational and Facebook: facebook.com/FireBrigadesUnion1918
- For national spokespeople contact the press office via the details above. For local and regional spokespeople, please contact officials directly. You can find contact details for each region via this webpage: www.fbu.org.uk/contacts