



FIRE BRIGADES UNION

CONFERENCE 2019

EXECUTIVE COUNCIL POLICY STATEMENT

GRENFELL TOWER: NEVER AGAIN

Conference notes that since FBU conference 2018 there have been significant developments regarding investigations into the Grenfell Tower fire. Last year the Grenfell Tower Inquiry (GTI) heard evidence from firefighters, from experts and from the bereaved, survivors and residents (BSRs). Public hearings began in May and continued until December. The inquiry sat for nearly 100 days. FBU officials and our legal representatives attended every day of proceedings.

The inquiry received 668 statements from firefighters. Most were from the London Fire Brigade (LFB), but some were members from other fire and rescue services and North West Fire Control (NWFC) who assisted on the night. It heard oral evidence from 88 firefighters, control staff, officers of the London Fire Brigade and other fire and rescue services/NWFC. Statements from another 262 individual fire and rescue personnel were read into the record.

The GTI received 307 witness statements from 275 BSRs. Some 35 BSRs gave oral evidence. A total of 266 witness statements were read into the record. The inquiry also received statements from others present on the night. The GTI also commissioned expert witnesses, who provided the inquiry with very long and detailed reports containing their findings and opinions. Some also gave evidence in person.

The inquiry is unprecedented, because of the number of core participants and the scope and complexity of the evidence it has to consider. There are currently over 600 core participants, of whom 576 are individuals, 20 are commercial bodies and seven public bodies. The FBU is the main trade union core participant in the GTI.

Conference notes that the inquiry is divided into two parts, despite concerns raised by the FBU regarding the order of the matters to be considered. Phase 1 aims to establish what happened at Grenfell Tower on 14 June 2017, while phase 2 focuses on the critical circumstances and decisions that enabled the fire to occur. Much of the phase 1 investigation was completed over the last year, while work on phase 2 has begun. Over the last year, the GTI disclosed more than 20,000 documents.

The GTI is expected to produce a report in Spring 2019 describing in detail what happened. In the light of the conclusions reached in the phase 1 report, the GTI may make some urgent recommendations without waiting for the final report of phase 2. Phase 2 involves examining the context and identifying the causes of the tragedy. The inquiry expects to disclose more than 200,000 documents to the core participants by autumn this year. It is unlikely that phase 2 hearings will start before the end of 2019.

During 2018 the FBU made opening and closing statements for phase 1 (with three further written submissions), along with several procedural interventions and three substantial submissions at the request of the GTI for phase 2.

Conference supports the continued campaign to expose the shortcomings of the whole fire safety regime which goes back decades and the deregulation drive by successive governments which has been a contingent part of the fragmentation of the fire and rescue service.

Conference supports the FBU's objectives in the inquiry:

- Defend firefighters and the fire and rescue service
- Justice for the bereaved, survivors and residents (BSRs)
- To hold culpable business people and politicians to account.

Conference is concerned that the inquiry has had narrow terms of reference from the outset, something the FBU has raised with the GTI and in public debate. Conference opposes the singular focus on the LFB, to the exclusion of scrutiny of the fire safety regime imposed by central government at Westminster. Conference is appalled at the tone and line of questioning of some firefighters during the proceedings.

The FBU has been clear from the start that absolutely no person or organisation should be immune from criticism. The union has never been afraid of criticising individual fire and rescue services, including the London Fire Brigade, who have questions to answer in relation to their preparation for a fire such as this.

Conference is also unhappy about the division into phase 1 and phase 2. This has meant a focus on the failings on the night before there is any real scrutiny of those responsible for the state of Grenfell Tower before the fire broke out. It is clear that these factors are crucial in examining why the fire spread in the devastating way it did. So far there has been very little examination of those who owned and managed the building, those businesses that sold the materials or conducted the refurbishment, or those politicians who passed the laws that allowed such an atrocity to happen.

Conference is appalled that almost two years on politicians and business responsible for the Grenfell Tower fire have still not been held to account. Conference notes previous high rise cladding fires across the globe (such as in the Middle-East) and in the UK (such as Knowsley Heights and Garnock Court). Conference further notes the union's warnings about fire safety before the Grenfell Tower fire.

Conference notes that the final Hackitt report, published last year, does not go far enough in banning flammable cladding or in revising building regulations and guidance. The Hackitt report still proposes a high degree of construction industry self-regulation. It also does not resolve how fire authorities and local authority building control should work together.

CAMPAIGNING

The FBU has consistently raised the wider issues of Grenfell Tower outside of the GTI. This has included the regular briefing of MPs and others on developments. FBU officials have often been the only voices to speak up for the fire and rescue service and as the professional voice of firefighters.

Conference supports the strong relationships the union has established with the bereaved, survivors and residents and with the wider local community. This has included participation in the monthly silent walks, lobbies of Westminster, public meetings in the community and support for local organisations. The Firefighters 100 Lottery has continued to provide funding for local community initiatives.

The delay to phase 2 of GTI until later in 2019 or 2020 has resulted in a situation where the true cause of the catastrophic spread of the fire will only be examined two and a half years after the fire itself, at best. This means there will be a significant amount of time before the start of phase 2 and therefore a significant period where questions have only been asked of firefighters, while key causal issues have not been addressed. We need to ensure that all of the complex issues surrounding Grenfell are at the top of the political agenda. To ensure that the union continues to advocate on behalf of firefighters and seek justice for the bereaved, survivors and residents during the inquiry's silence, conference agrees to further develop a public facing campaign around the theme of **Grenfell: Never Again**.

The FBU will therefore seek to engage with the local community and other campaigners around the following themes:

1. The removal of all combustible cladding and a ban on the use of all such combustible materials in such circumstances.
2. A national review of the 'stay put' policy, involving the FBU and the representatives of tenants' organisations from across the country.
3. The strengthening of tenants' rights and support for a democratic and independent tenant organisation.
4. New national accountability structures for the fire and rescue service and for the fire safety regime (to tackle the power of corporate interests).
5. An increase in the number of trained and specialist fire safety officers in fire and rescue services.

THE NEXT STEPS

Conference resolves:

1. To represent our members at every opportunity, to ensure that the Grenfell Tower fire becomes a turning point for firefighters and for public safety;
2. To ensure that the Public Inquiry addresses the concerns of bereaved, survivors and residents as well as firefighters and other workers who responded to the fire;
3. To demand the Westminster government convene a representative stakeholder body (including the FBU at every level) to advise on fire safety standards across the UK.
4. To fight for investment from central government, to ensure more operational firefighters, emergency control staff, fire safety inspectors and other uniformed fire professionals.
5. To develop further policy in conjunction with sectional committees on areas affected by the Grenfell Tower fire, such as building regulations and guidance, sprinklers and other technical matters.
6. To develop and build a public facing campaign, around the themes set out above and in alliance with the local community, other trade unions and other allies.