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Our Ref: MW/sll

22 May 2020

First Minister - Arlene Foster and Deputy First Minister - Michelle O'Neill
Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister
Northern Ireland Government
GD36 Stormont Castle
Stormont Estate
Belfast
BT4 3TT

Dear First Minister and Deputy First Minister

Re: Investment in the fire and rescue service – a moratorium

I write seeking your support for a moratorium on funding cuts and to call for increased investment in the fire and rescue service, an increased investment which is crucial to the service provided by firefighters.

Firefighters have continued to carry out emergency intervention throughout the lockdown and will do so as restrictions are lifted. Significant numbers of wild fires and other incidents including rescues have been tackled over the past six weeks. As the economy slowly begins to open up again, firefighters will need to resume the protection, prevention and enforcement work that is necessary to keep our communities safe. In addition to this, there are the additional workloads arising post-Grenfell coupled with the backlog of work resulting from the lockdown.

Across the UK, additional areas of work are being undertaken by firefighters to assist the NHS with key priorities and to provide further support for the public during the pandemic. This was the result of the national collective agreement between the FBU, National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) and the fire and rescue service employers. This work has already delivered important results for the health service and the public, and may be needed in case of further waves or future outbreaks.

The fire and rescue service has been subjected to an unprecedented level of cuts over the last 15 years especially since the start of declared austerity in 2010. The Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service (NIFRS) has also suffered continued and ongoing cuts to its level of funding. NIFRS's revenue budget in 2011/12 was £81.6m and in the last financial year 2019/20 it had reduced to £74.1m. This is set in the context of comparable underfunding with Fire Services in GB throughout the preceding decades of the troubles. Essentially NIFRS has been playing 'catch up' in terms of resourcing for many years. The last financial year 2019/20 saw an initial shortfall of £3.2m some of which was later made up in year. However, a number of stations had to remove or reduce wholetime fire cover as a consequence. NIFRS is in urgent need of recruitment to maintain a safe level of firefighters to crew fire appliances. Currently the Service requires around 100 more wholetime and 100 on call firefighters.

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Sadly, in too many fire and rescue services the FBU has had to continue to resist local cuts in order to try to protect both prevention and intervention capabilities during this crisis, while our members have continued to serve the public to deliver core services and an extraordinary range of additional services.

The union is seeking from all fire and rescue authorities/employers a moratorium, so there are no more cuts to the fire and rescue service. Firefighters have played our part in this current phase of the health crisis but we take very seriously government warnings that this pandemic is not over and that further waves are highly likely.

In addition, there is near-universal acknowledgement (formal or informal) that preparedness for pandemic human disease, and other risks identified on the national risk register, since 2008 in the fire service and in other parts of the public sector has been less than sufficient. It is illogical to introduce reductions in fire service cover before any non-pressurised assessment of the gaps in capability are undertaken.

Therefore, we seek assurances from all governments across the UK that not only guarantee sustainable levels of funding but also develop a programme of investment to ensure our fire and rescue service is resilient going forward. That means investment in firefighters, fire stations and appliances.

We are of course always happy to discuss these matters with you at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Wrack', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Matt Wrack
General Secretary

cc: Robin Swann MLA, Minister for Health