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Our Ref: MW/sll

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Rt Hon Theresa May MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London
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Dear Prime Minister

Fire and Rescue Service Emergency Response to Residential Tower Blocks

In the aftermath of the terrible tragedy at Grenfell Tower there is considerable public concern about the safety of those living in residential flats in tower blocks.

Firefighters who respond to fires in such circumstances also have concerns that they should be able to tackle fires rapidly, safely and professionally. To do so requires adequate resources to be available in the shortest possible time.

We had hoped that one immediate response from central Government would be to implement or establish an urgent review to ensure that the appropriate resources are available to firefighters attending such incidents in the future. This would be a way of providing assurance to firefighters and to the public that their safety concerns are being addressed. This appears not to have been done, which causes us concern and alarm.

We are aware that there are greatly differing standards and approaches adopted by different Fire and Rescue Services across the country. There is effectively a postcode lottery whereby fires in identical blocks of flats will receive differing levels of response from their local fire and rescue service. This cannot be considered acceptable.

We welcome the fact that the London Fire Brigade, as a consequence of risk assessing its arrangements in the aftermath of Grenfell Tower, has amended its planning to ensure that any call to a fire in such premises receives a response of 5 fire engines (pumps), plus an aerial (high reach) appliance.

Previous expectation within the fire and rescue service has been that a fire in purpose built blocks of flats will be generally contained within the flat of origin. Firefighting tactics and procedures have been based on this. The experience of the incidents at Grenfell Tower and Lakanal House have both obviously altered this assumption among firefighters. The public also has justifiable concerns on this matter.

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The FBU, representing the vast majority of firefighters across the country, has considered what should be the basis of minimum standards of emergency response to such calls. The London approach is a reasonable starting point since it is based on a risk assessment and recent experience. Other local circumstances elsewhere may require further augmentation to this response.

To be clear, we believe that in order to tackle fires in residential flats in tower blocks, the following minimum initial response is needed:

- 2 pumps (each with a crew of 5) in no longer than 5 minutes from time of call.
- 3 further pumps (each with a crew of 5) in no longer than 8 minutes from time of call.
- An aerial (high reach) appliance (with a minimum crew of 2) in no longer than 10 minutes from time of call.

We are further concerned that significant numbers of high reach appliances do not have a dedicated permanent crew, meaning in reality that they are not permanently available. Of the 125 such appliances across the UK, only 33 (26%) are permanently crewed. Again, this cannot be considered acceptable.

The FBU has warned Ministers over recent years about the scale of cuts and reductions in Fire and Rescue Services and the impact of these on our ability to respond safely and effectively to emergencies when they happen.

I trust you will address this matter with urgency.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Wrack', with a stylized, cursive script.

Matt Wrack
General Secretary