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Lord Greenhalgh
Minister of State for Building Safety, Fire and Communities at
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and Home Office
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

[By email]

Dear Lord Greenhalgh

Thank you for inviting us to yesterday's launch of the White Paper. Unfortunately I could not attend due to contracting Covid but I sent FBU national officer Riccardo La Torre in my place. I just wish to set out the concerns he raised for the record.

We were disappointed to find we only had sight of the paper two hours before the launch event. For a lengthy consultation document this is not sufficient for important stakeholders to digest its contents and respond. We understand the protocols involved, which were also explained to Mr la Torre by your officials. However, it is widely known within the service that others have had a significant role in the work of preparing the White Paper. The FBU has been entirely excluded. That is a significant error which we hope you will now address.

Mr la Torre raised the exclusion of the FBU voice from the process. You have met with myself and Andy Dark, but infrequently and without follow-up. As the professional union representing the vast majority of UK firefighters the FBU has a unique voice and should have been more involved. We have consistently offered such dialogue and input. I assume you have decided not to take up such offers.

Our members are disappointed again that the authors of the paper have pointed to Tom Winsor's HMICFRS reports as their basis, since these are not evidence-based. Winsor attacked our trade union throughout his tenure, and as such the paper unfairly describes industrial relations as "cumbersome" and "painstaking". As the FBU has repeatedly stressed, the credibility of Winsor's HMICFRS reports are undermined by the lack of evidence in local inspection reports. In fact, the FBU enjoys positive relations with the majority of employers and this can be clearly evidenced.

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The false narrative, created by Winsor, around the fire and rescue service response to the Covid-19 pandemic, is further pushed in this paper: “the tripartite agreement...process slowed down – and in some places, stopped – services fully supporting their communities.” This is categorically untrue. The agreement ensured proper health and safety assessments were conducted before deploying firefighters to additional activities, as part of virus control, which enabled thousands of firefighters to carry out extra tasks, as praised by the Home Secretary in her foreword. These arrangements provided firefighters with the confidence to volunteer in large numbers to assist with additional pandemic related work. We are proud of them for doing so and of our role in assisting. It is disappointing that - after the event - we are subject to such unfair and inaccurate criticism, which was not raised at the time by yourself or others.

The FBU has voiced objections to mandatory takeovers of fire governance by PCCs, so we are glad to see that this is not to be mandated. However, we have concerns about the proposed scrutiny panels and what exactly this would entail. Detail on these panels is lacking in the document. Nick Chard of the LGA echoed these concerns at today’s launch, asking how PCC panels as they currently stand could incorporate fire. This needs to be fleshed out, to ensure that such panels are actually ensuring accountability as promised.

The paper also perpetuates the falsehood that the National Joint Council (NJC) is a barrier to pay progression, calling it a “sluggish national negotiation system for pay and conditions”. As Mr la Torre stated, the NJC has been attempting to expand the role of firefighters linked to pay for decades – seeing successful outcomes agreed with employers – and the Home Office and the Treasury have been the barrier. It is your department and your predecessors which have been “sluggish” on these matters, not the FBU or the NJC.

Now, with inflation hitting a record high today of 9%, our members are seriously worried about making ends meet during this cost of living crisis. Firefighter pay needs reviewing and this can be done through the NJC. Indeed, such discussions have already been initiated by the two sides. Mainly, however, firefighters need immediate investment by your government to allow pay to be increased significantly in July. I trust you will make that case to your colleagues at Treasury.

I would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you and discuss these concerns more thoroughly. If you are happy to do so, please liaise with my office as to when is convenient to us both.

Yours sincerely

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

Matt Wrack
General Secretary