



Matt Wrack General Secretary
Bradley House, 68 Coombe Road,
Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey KT2 7AE
fbu.org.uk | @fbunational
020 8541 1765 | office@fbu.org.uk

Our Ref: MW/sll

17 January 2022

Sir Thomas Winsor WS
Her Majesty's Chief inspector of Fire and Rescue Services
HMICFRS
6th Floor
Globe House
89 Eccleston Square
London, SW1V 1PN

Dear Sir Thomas Winsor

Re: HMICFRS State of Fire and Rescue 2021 report

Thank you for your letter on 15 December 2021 regarding your final *State of Fire and Rescue 2021 report*. From the very start, the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) has tried to engage constructively with the inspectorate and has offered to meet in person to discuss your assessment of the state of the fire and rescue service. The FBU notes in your letter that *"if you have any observations about the work we are doing, or suggestions as to how we might improve it, I shall be glad to hear from you."* We therefore, welcome this opportunity and have detailed the union's observations below.

The FBU has on numerous occasions raised the issue of the variation of standards from service to service. For years, there has been a patchwork approach to the provision of fire and rescue service cover in our communities, putting firefighters and the public at risk. The union believes it is unprofessional and unacceptable that our communities are subjected to a postcode lottery in which the geographical location of a person or property determines the response time and weight of response they receive. Firefighters believe that every single one of our communities and firefighters deserve the provision of equally high standards regardless of location. That is why the union has stressed the need to introduce national standards of fire cover that are fit for purpose, underpinned by research and place firefighter health and safety and the highest standards of emergency service provision as a priority.

Your report includes an attack on firefighters' right to democratically organise, including a recommendation to consider removing firefighters' right to strike. The union is dismayed by this political attack, which seems designed to silence the voice of firefighters and would do nothing to protect the public. Furthermore, there is no evidence in the latest and previous local tranche reports that suggest industrial relations are a significant problem. Our members like others in the public sector have the ability to withdraw their labour and this right should continue to be protected.

The FBU rejects the misrepresentation in your report of the position on marauding terrorist attacks (MTAs) and the assertion that industrial relations have impeded the ability of services to serve the public. It is entirely legitimate for firefighters to raise questions of safety, pay and conditions with regard to new risks and roles. The FBU has conducted constructive negotiations with various fire and rescue services through our collective bargaining structures to reach agreements on MTAs. The report should evaluate those efforts seriously, rather than seek to undermine them.

Contd/2...

The FBU rejects the conclusions drawn in the report regarding the performance of the National Joint Council (NJC). The NJC continues to do irreplaceable work, as acknowledged by the independent chair and retains the support of employers and the FBU. The HMICFRS local tranche reports do not provide evidence to support your conclusions – if anything they show how the sector works to resolve many difficult issues. The FBU has consistently argued that the current failure to reach an agreement on pay is less to do with the structure of negotiations, but rather the Westminster funding environment. The fire and rescue service has suffered a sustained period of limited investment and central government austerity cuts.

The inspectorate acknowledges the issue of current funding. However, the report ignores the severe cuts to the fire and rescue service workforce that have taken place over the last decade, with 10,000 firefighter posts in England being cut. If the inspectorate was serious about addressing funding inconsistencies and ultimately improving the fire and rescue service, it would add its weight to the FBU's campaign for sustained investment from the Westminster government.

The report also concludes that some services have misallocated resources particularly with an overreliance on dual contracts and overtime pay. The FBU has previously raised concerns about the growing casualisation in fire and rescue services for over a decade. The union again points to the serial lack of investment and failure to listen to the NJC.

The FBU has always sought to work constructively and positively with the inspectorate and this stance will continue with your successor. The FBU represents the vast majority of wholetime, retained and control firefighters across England and the UK. The union is the democratic voice of our frontline professionals in the fire and rescue service. The FBU therefore, urges a change of direction on the inspectorate's part towards a more constructive, evidence-based approach, which would properly respect the courage and professionalism of those on the frontline.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Wrack', written in a cursive style.

Matt Wrack
General Secretary