

‘Independent Review of Firefighter Conditions of Service’, announced by fire minister Penny Mordaunt, 7 August 2014

Fire Brigades Union submission to the review



26 January 2015

Introduction

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) represents around 40,000 firefighters currently working in all uniformed roles in the fire and rescue service, about 80% of the uniformed workforce in the UK. The FBU has a proud reputation for its professional approach. This document is the union's submission to DCLG's review of firefighters' conditions of service, chaired by Adrian Thomas. Fire minister Penny Mordaunt launched the review on 7 August 2014. The FBU is critical of the **nature, rationale, methods and timing** of the review.¹

First, the review is **not independent**. The terms of reference have been set by DCLG alone. DCLG staff were assigned to the review. Firefighters do not work for central government, but are employed by local fire and rescue services. Firefighters' terms and conditions are determined by the National Joint Council (NJC), which is made up of representatives of employees (the FBU) and representatives of the employers. DCLG decided to launch this review without any consultation or dialogue with either employees or employers within the service.

Second, the rationale for the review is **incoherent**. Launching the review, DCLG said that Ken Knight's *Facing the Future* report 'outlined how improvements could be made to frontline services if firefighters' conditions of service, often barrier to changes, were reviewed'. However Knight did no such thing. He itemised a series of views, expressed by some civil servants and/or by a few individuals within the service –without any original evidence to back them up – and questioned some longstanding institutional arrangements. The terms of reference for the review are incoherent. The purpose is:

To review the conditions of service of chief fire officers and firefighters and the processes by which they are determined to consider whether they present barriers to the reform, improvement and efficiency of fire and rescue services.

However the review is clearly wider than this, including firefighters' pay and pension rights. This is clear from the terms of reference and from any reading of the surveys. Our fear is that the review will be an attack on national bargaining arrangements and a prelude to further attacks on pay and other conditions of service. It is a response to the FBU's campaign to defend pensions, as is clear from the terms of reference, which aim to ensure firefighters work longer, so they 'achieve, or if desired, exceed their normal pension age'. It aims to 'identify any barriers in moving between the Grey and Green Books', an issue on which the FBU has fought a major legal battle. The review may set a dangerous precedent by commenting on the highly-politicised issue of firefighters' right to take industrial action.

Third, the methods of the review are also **highly questionable**. Announcing the review, Penny Mordaunt said this review 'will involve a massive piece of evidence gathering, in particular from firefighters themselves as they have expertise and ideas, to take the service forward'. DCLG sent its surveys of firefighters and employers in great haste on 12 August 2014. The surveys were drawn up without any discussion with anyone within the fire and rescue service – either employers or employees. The surveys appear to have been constructed without taking any advice from survey organisations, nor were they conducted by an independent survey organisation. The questions were clearly drawn up with a view to achieving a pre-determined outcome. They have more than the whiff of a reheated Bain review, designed to attack the FBU rather than to genuinely improve conditions of service for firefighters.

Finally, the timing is **peculiar**. The review was announced just before firefighters' took further strike action to defend our pensions. DCLG stated that 'the review is expected to take around five months with a final report submitted to government by February 2015'. However the chair Adrian Thomas only began work in October 2014. A review of this type and with this scope cannot reasonably be expected

¹ DCLG, Independent review of terms and conditions for operational staff in the fire and rescue service, 2014
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/independent-review-of-terms-and-conditions-for-operational-staff-in-the-fire-and-rescue-service>

to do more than skim the surface of the issues. A review conducted in this amount of time, with so few resources and without significant input from stakeholders, risks degenerating into a hatchet job.

Context

Ministers argue that **fewer fires and fire deaths** justify their interventions into the fire and rescue service. When DCLG announced the review, it stated: 'Official national statistics show that fire deaths in England have continued to fall, with 5% fewer deaths than last year, continuing a trend that has seen nearly a 40% drop since 2004. The figures also show that last year, fire and rescue services attended 170,000 fires, the second lowest number of fire incidents ever recorded'. However the official figures do not quantify an awful lot that needs to be measured – especially for a conditions of service review. They take no account of the increased **costs of fire**, both to individual households and businesses, and to the whole economy. Fewer fires and fire deaths are partly the result of social changes (such as fewer people smoking) and technological improvements (such as improved methods of heating homes). Others result from legislation, such as furniture and building regulations. The FBU also believes that the **prevention work** carried out by firefighters has brought about significant improvements to the safety of the public from the risks of fire.

Ministers put too much emphasis on their own figures, even though there are widespread concerns about whether they really capture the full range of firefighters' activities, never mind the risks involved. Firefighters also complain that some **fatalities** as a consequence of fire are not always counted as fire deaths in certain cases, depending on the cause of the fire or eventual cause of death recorded for the victim. Another example is the widespread **civil disturbances** in August 2011. DCLG's own *Fire Statistics Great Britain* report states that the range of fires started during that period barely register. However subsequent work by DCLG has shown that the work of the fire and rescue service deserves to be recognised. DCLG's *Fire Service Monitor* states that: 'Numbers of outdoor fires (e.g. rubbish or bin fires) are likely to be underestimates. This is because in some cases fire crews attended to these one after another, and so a single incident record may reflect multiple smaller fires.' Similarly, the official figures do not capture the geographical area subject to deliberate fire damage.² The widespread praise for firefighters during that period needs to be matched by recognition that the work done has not been adequately represented in the figures.

The last decade has also seen a huge number of high profile emergencies where firefighters' work has not been reflected in official figures. The 2013-14 winter **floods**, as well as widespread flooding in 2012 and in 2007 involved firefighters carrying out thousands of rescues. No one will forget the **terrorist attacks** in London on 7 July 2005, when 52 people were killed by bus and tube bombers. Firefighters helped rescue 700 injured people and led hundreds of victims to safety on that terrible day.³ Similarly, the **Buncefield** oil storage terminal explosion in December 2005 caused widespread damage and left 43 people injured. More than one thousand firefighters attended the blaze from 33 fire and rescue services across the country, working together as one team in extremely arduous and hazardous conditions to put the fire out and limit the effects on the environment.⁴ It is notable that the number of COMAH sites has remained around the same level (350) since Buncefield. Yet these events barely register with DCLG statistics.

Official figures quantify fires in such a way as to largely erase the vast differences between huge fires (such as Buncefield) and relatively smaller ones. No effort has been made by ministers to distinguish

² DCLG, *Fire Statistics Monitor: April to September 2011*, 31 January 2012 p.15-18
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fire-statistics-monitor-april-to-september-2011>

³ Coroner Inquests into the London Bombings of 7 July 2005
<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120216072438/http://7julyinquests.independent.gov.uk/>

⁴ Buncefield investigation
<http://www.buncefieldinvestigation.gov.uk/index.htm>

qualitatively between these fires and therefore to capture the continued importance of emergency intervention. Neither do historic figures indicate likely future trends in emergency incidents that will result from an aging population, climate change or national security.

FBU participation

The FBU has serious concerns about the nature, rationale, methods and timing of this review. The union **does not endorse** the process. However our national officials have met Adrian Thomas and offered our wisest counsel on how he might make some use of the opportunity presented by the review. Our submission on particular elements in the terms of reference is made in good faith – so that the review at least **avoids denigrating firefighters** in the name of ‘efficiency’ and ‘reform’.

We therefore include some results from our own investigation of conditions of service, including from a recent **YouGov survey** commissioned by the FBU, undertaken in December 2014. With almost ten thousand (9,936) responses from across the UK, this is by far the most representative survey of firefighters’ conditions undertaken in recent memory. At least one in five firefighters in every region of England responded to the survey. We believe that its findings are robust – not least because they have been subjected to YouGov’s scrutiny.⁵ The submission assesses each of the terms of reference and offers the FBU’s considered interpretation of the key issues for firefighters.

1. Staffing and workforce management practices

The terms of reference state that the review should consider barriers to the flexibility and responsiveness of workforce management practices, staffing and crewing arrangements. The central barrier that limits firefighters’ ability to provide a consistently first class service is the scale of **austerity cuts** to the number of operational personnel over many years.

Staffing

The staffing situation is crucial to any conditions of service review. Ken Knight’s report claimed that firefighter numbers ‘have remained relatively stable over the period, only reducing by 6% in the last 10 years’.⁶ This is simply not true, as is demonstrated by publicly available, government-published statistics. DCLG’s own figures for the past decade make stark reading and require careful interrogation. Tables 1 and 2 indicate the number of staff in post every year since 2005, broken down by role/duty system.

Table 1: Fire and rescue service employment in England at 31 March, 2005-2014 (FTE)⁷

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Staff in post (FTE)¹	50,360	50,618	51,286	51,834	51,721	51,652	50,907	48,944	47,338	45,632
Annual change	27	257	668	549	-114	-69	-745	-1,963	-1,606	-1,706
Wholetime	31,097	30,596	30,558	30,580	30,088	29,735	29,018	28,166	27,209	26,176
Retained Duty System ²	11,054	11,321	11,846	11,773	11,867	11,899	12,153	11,703	11,335	10,985
Fire control	1,448	1,470	1,491	1,522	1,543	1,510	1,478	1,371	1,320	1,236
Non-uniform	6,762	7,231	7,390	7,959	8,224	8,509	8,259	7,704	7,474	7,235
Total firefighters	43,598	43,387	43,896	43,876	43,497	43,143	42,648	41,240	39,864	38,397
Annual change	-516	-212	509	-20	-379	-354	-495	-1,409	-1,376	-1,467

⁵ YouGov, Fire Brigades Union Working Conditions Survey 2014, January 2015

⁶ Ken Knight, *Facing the future: findings from the review of efficiencies and operations in fire and rescue authorities in England*, 2013 p.14

⁷ DCLG Annual Returns, Operational Statistics Bulletin 2014. Note 1. In full time equivalents (FTEs) except retained duty system firefighters; 2. In 24-hour units of cover
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/fire-and-rescue-authorities-operational-statistics>

Table 2: Fire and rescue service employment in England at 31 March, 2005-2014 (Headcount)⁸

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Staff in post (headcount)	53,953	54,297	55,034	55,537	55,541	55,654	54,264	52,071	50,520	48,799
Annual change	320	344	737	503	4	113	-1,390	-2,193	-1,551	-1,721
Wholetime	31,053	30,744	30,804	30,824	30,242	29,880	29,136	28,245	27,353	26,289
Retained Duty System	13,543	13,927	14,212	14,166	14,268	14,425	14,224	13,817	13,436	13,177
Fire control	1,520	1,538	1,557	1,597	1,633	1,592	1,556	1,442	1,388	1,307
Non-uniform	7,837	8,088	8,461	8,950	9,398	9,757	9,348	8,567	8,343	8,026
Total firefighters	46,116	46,209	46,573	46,587	46,143	45,897	44,916	43,504	42,177	40,773
Annual change	-274	93	364	14	-444	-246	-981	-1,412	-1,327	-1,404

Overall trends, whether measured by full-time equivalent or headcount, show an overall decline in staff employed by the fire and rescue service over the last decade – down by around **5,000 people** and representing around 1 in 10 of those previously employed. However the greatest reduction has been in **wholetime firefighters** – accounting for around 5,000 fewer jobs over the decade. **Control staff** have also faced an absolute fall in numbers over the decade. The number of **retained firefighters** has now fallen below 2005 levels, having risen for a number of years. The only increase has been in non-uniform personnel. However the picture is even starker when the last decade is assessed in two five-year blocks. The changes are set out in tables 3 and 4.

Table 3: Employment changes in five year blocks (FTE)

	2005-2009		2010-2014	
Staff in post (FTE) ¹	1,360	2.7%	-6,020	-11.7%
Wholetime	-1,010	-3.2%	-3,559	-12.0%
Retained Duty System ²	813	7.4%	-914	-7.7%
Fire control	95	6.6%	-274	-18.2%
Non-uniform	1,462	21.6%	-1,274	-15.0%
Total firefighters	-102	-0.2%	-4,746	-11.0%

Table 4: Employment changes in five year blocks (headcount)

	2005-2009		2010-2014	
Staff in post (headcount)	1,588	2.9%	-6,855	-12.3%
Wholetime	-811	-2.6%	-3,591	-12.0%
Retained Duty System	725	5.4%	-1,248	-8.7%
Fire control	113	7.4%	-285	-17.9%
Non-uniform	1,561	19.9%	-1,731	-17.7%
Total firefighters	27	0.1%	-5,124	-11.2%

These tables indicate firstly that most of the staffing reduction in the fire and rescue service has taken place in the **last five years**. For the earlier period, overall staffing levels actually rose – although this was mainly due to the **ballooning of non-uniformed roles**. More than 800 wholetime posts were removed between 2005 and 2009, but this was matched by increases in retained and control staff. However since 2010 all roles/duty systems have been reduced. In absolute terms, over half the posts cut have been wholetime firefighters, while control staff suffered the largest proportionate reduction. But the whole service has lost more than one-in-nine firefighters during this period.

This is the context within which firefighters' conditions of service should be assessed. The existing body of firefighters has had to shoulder more work than previously, or work more intensively, with a huge impact of physical and mental health –without adequate reward. Any serious review of firefighters' conditions would look at how to improve pay and conditions for these **hard-working professionals**, who have kept the service going despite huge cuts.

⁸ DCLG Annual Returns, Operational Statistics Bulletin 2014

Equality

The drive for more equality and diversity in the fire and rescue service has stalled badly since 2010. The abolition of the **equality and diversity strategy** for England early in this parliament, along with cuts to firefighter jobs (including a recruitment freeze in many brigades) has made the battle for a more diverse and representative workforce much harder. Equality and diversity has been largely ignored by ministers, senior civil servants and others within the fire and rescue service. While progress has been made, the presence of sexist, racist and homophobic bullying and discrimination has not been totally eradicated.

Historically there were very few **women** operational firefighters until the 1980s, although many women served with distinction as far back as the Second World War. At the turn of the century, women represented 1.4% of the firefighting force in England. In the decade following the Thematic Review, the proportion of operational women firefighters almost **tripled**, reaching almost 4% by 2010. Since then the number of women firefighters has barely risen in absolute terms, and the proportion of female to male firefighters has only risen slightly, to 4.3%. These trends have also affected control staff, where there has traditionally been a majority of women employed. Control jobs have been particularly hard hit by the cuts since 2010.

Increasing the diversity of the ethnic composition of the workforce has also stalled. At the turn of the century only 1.5% of firefighters defined themselves as from a **minority ethnic** community. By 2010 this had more than doubled, to 3.7% of the workforce. Although still falling far short of representing the diversity of the communities we serve, it was a step-change. However since 2010 there has been an **absolute fall** in the number of firefighters identifying themselves as from an ethnic minority community, while the proportion of ethnic minority firefighters has barely risen at all. This is a damning indictment of equality policy across the service. The FBU will continue to advocate a **robust equality and diversity strategy** for the fire and rescue service, drawn up and monitored in consultation with stakeholders and equality representatives. This issue has been almost entirely ignored by central government since 2010.

Workforce management practices

The terms of reference state that the review should consider barriers to the flexibility and responsiveness of workforce management practices, although these are not defined or spelt out. In employment relations theory, workforce management is centrally about assigning the right employees with the right skills to the right job at the right time. Ken Knight's report lauds a 'flexible' workforce, boosting examples of annualised hours, self-rostering, 24-hour shifts, strategic reserves, secondary contracts, different types of response vehicles and attacks minimum crewing levels.⁹

The FBU is not opposed to improvements in workforce practices, providing they make the service better for the public and are not to the detriment of **firefighters' safety** and welfare. The central problem with many workforce management practices imported into the fire and rescue service is that they increase the risk to the public and worsen the conditions of firefighters. They are often cost-cutting fads dressed up as 'reforms'.

Firefighters are clear that getting the job done safely, effectively and professionally involves collective action, cooperation and solidarity. In the YouGov survey, 96% of respondents said the **watch system** is crucial to teamwork, while 93% said the watch system is crucial to safety. Working alongside colleagues, training together and going through the same experiences has built the fire and rescue service into a formidable emergency response organisation. This is not something to be tampered with lightly.

⁹ Knight 2013 p.30

Firefighters are also adamant they do not want so-called 'high-flyers' parachuted into management roles without having had first-hand experience of firefighting. Some 97% of respondents to the YouGov survey said **promotion** should be awarded only to those 'competent and experienced' in the job. Firefighters are also rightly concerned about the quality of training they receive to do the job safely. However opinion was evenly divided about recent training, with 36% believing the quality of training had worsened, 31% saying it had improved and the remaining third suggesting it was about the same. This indicates an important point – any investigation of firefighters' conditions needs to discuss proposals thoroughly with those on the frontline, rather than imposing top-down 'solutions' without consultation.

The FBU has some legitimate concerns about the industrial relations climate in many local fire and rescue services and this was reflected in the YouGov survey. Two-thirds (66%) of firefighters said that principal managers in their brigade were not committed to good industrial relations. More worryingly, two-in-five (40%) said they had been **bullied at work** in recent years. Of those who had been bullied, the majority (60%) attributed the bullying to **senior managers**, while a third blamed corporate management policy and similar numbers said it was their immediate line managers. The vast amount of bullying recording by this survey is management bullying of employees lower down the hierarchy.

Another contrast was the view of various agencies for tackling bullying in the service. Three-quarters (76%) of respondents said that the FBU had been helpful in tackling the bullying they had faced. However, three-quarters (74%) also said that fire and rescue service managers had not been helpful.¹⁰

Crewing

Ken Knight's report argued that crewing arrangements are somehow a barrier to change in the fire and rescue service. Beyond the clichéd jargon, this is a dangerous argument.¹¹ **New shift systems** such as day crewing plus (or similar) and other changes have reduced the establishment in many fire stations. For example, only crewing fire stations during the day means that night cover is vastly reduced - at precisely the time when more fire deaths occur. In other cases, **riding** four firefighters instead of five on an appliance reduces the numbers of firefighters available to tackle incidents, particularly in the early stages of a fire. It also creates a terrible dilemma for firefighters – to follow accepted procedures or to act quickly, undermining safe systems of work.

The number of appliances claimed as being available ('on the run') – particularly special appliances (including 'national assets') – is difficult to accurately assess as a consequence of lean-crewing, double-crewing and a plethora of other euphemisms for the institutionalised under-crewing of fire stations. The buildings are there, the doors are red, and the appliances might be lined up in the bays - but there are no dedicated crews rostered to ride them.

Knight ignored significant **accident investigation findings** carried out within the service on recent firefighter fatalities, as well as coroners' inquests into fire deaths. Similarly he did not consider the failings identified in the HSE consolidated inspection report of fire and rescue services. One common feature in all these reports is that there have been problems with command and control at incidents, which has a direct correlation with the number of officers employed and available to attend incidents.

Knight gave examples of change, but provided no impact assessment on outcomes. There is no evidence to support that statement that changed crewing arrangements equate to providing 'more effective crewing'. Changed is not synonymous with 'more effective'. Attempts to worsen the conditions of

¹⁰ YouGov 2015

¹¹ Knight 2013 p.27-29

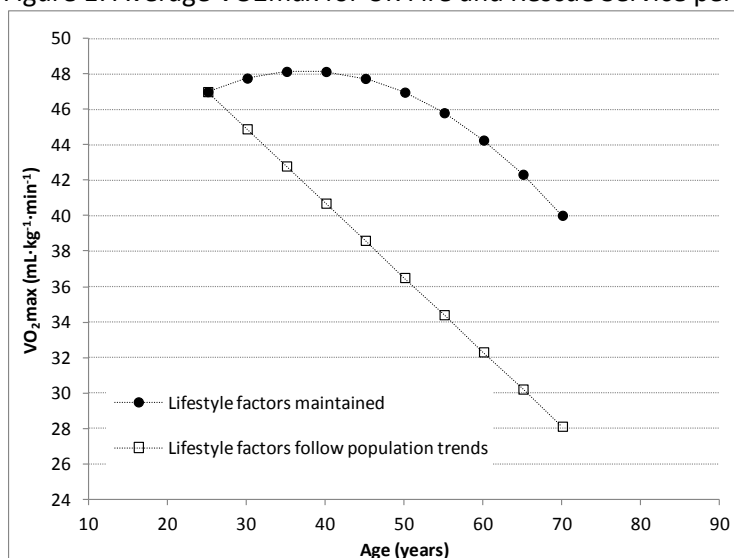
firefighters will not improve the service to the public. More likely, they will hit morale and upset industrial relations within the service.

2. Working longer

The terms of reference state that the review should consider barriers to people working longer, and ensuring they achieve, or if desired, exceed their normal pension age (NPA). The barriers to people working longer are a function of their occupation and the decline in fitness due to age. The nature of the job and the physiology of human beings set the parameters for this discussion. The relationship between firefighters' fitness and the normal pension age was exhaustively investigated by Dr Tony Williams for DCLG only two years ago.¹² His report, published in January 2013 still awaits an official government response. However the issues he raised are material to this review and indicate why it is wrong to pose the investigation as 'removing barriers' to firefighters working longer.

Williams' report refers to **VO2max**, a measure of minimum **aerobic fitness** for safe and effective firefighting. His report uses a VO2max of **42 mL·kg⁻¹·min⁻¹** for firefighting as a minimum standard to work out if firefighters can work beyond the current NPA of 55. Figure 1 from Williams' report shows what can happen to a firefighter's VO2max.¹³ Notice it declines for everyone with age.

Figure 1: Average VO2max for UK Fire and Rescue Service personnel with ageing



The normal population drops below 42 mL·kg⁻¹·min⁻¹ before the age of 40. On this 'worst case scenario', **85% of firefighters** would not have a VO2max of 42 mL·kg⁻¹·min⁻¹ by 55 years of age. Even someone who exercises regularly, has a BMI of 20, doesn't smoke and eats only healthy food will still see their VO2max decline. This is the 'best case' in the report. Still 15% of firefighters would not have a VO2max of 42 mL·kg⁻¹·min⁻¹ by 55 years of age and **23% by aged 60**. Notice the starting point for both cases is **47 mL·kg⁻¹·min⁻¹**. The National Firefighter Selection Tests equate to 42mL·kg⁻¹·min⁻¹. There has never been a minimum standard for recruits on entry as high as 47 mL·kg⁻¹·min⁻¹. But even starting at this (currently hypothetical) level and with some lifestyle changes, most will not be fit to work beyond 55.

The report also states, based on actual data from four fire and rescue services, that **half (51%)** of those currently aged 50-54 are below the fitness standard of 42 mL·kg⁻¹·min⁻¹; while **two-thirds (66%)** of

¹² Tony, Williams, Normal Pension Age for Firefighters: A review for the Firefighters' Pension Committee, January 2013
<http://www.fbu.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/NPA-Review-12-Jan-2013.pdf>

¹³ Williams 2013 p.51 Figure 4.8

those aged 55-60 are below it. The only way to get the majority of firefighters to work longer is by lowering firefighters' fitness standards. But such a step would put both firefighter safety and public safety at risk. Nobody requests a crew 60 year old firefighters to rescue them in their hour of need.

3. Collaboration and integration

The terms of reference state that the review should consider barriers to collaboration and integration with other emergency services. Firefighters routinely cooperate with other emergency workers, but the demand for collaboration and integration goes much further: driven by austerity cuts, central government is pressing local fire and rescue services to combine resources to save money.

Collaboration

Ken Knight stated in his review that 'national level changes to enable greater collaboration with other blue-light services, including through shared governance, co-working and co-location, would unlock further savings'.¹⁴ The Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA), the Association of Ambulance Chief Executives and the Association of Chief Police Officers issued a joint statement in February 2014 stating that 'Ambulance, Police and Fire services should have the freedom to integrate and collaborate in a way that meets local needs'. They also pledged to 'remove barriers to change'.¹⁵ Remarkably, this statement was drawn up without consultation with the workforce – principal managers appear to believe they can speak for their services without having to discuss matters with those who actually carry out the work on the front line.

The current government has made a £30m resource fund and a £45m capital fund to support 'transformational' change such as collaboration between blue light services and to deliver other 'efficiencies'.¹⁶ Fire and rescue services included Surrey, Lincolnshire, Suffolk and Cheshire, Cornwall and Northamptonshire had bids 'blue-light integration' accepted as part of a local authority transformation fund.¹⁷

Ad hoc schemes could potentially create the same **chaotic bidding** and merger process seen in control, after the scrapping of the FiReControl project. **Control rooms** have been closed in Suffolk, Isle of Wight and Cumbria. Staff in the control room in West Sussex have been transferred to East Sussex. In the North West, the regional control room in Warrington (incorporating Greater Manchester, Lancashire, Cheshire and Cumbria) has gone live – unfortunately dispatching fire engines to the wrong places on certain occasions. Staffordshire control has closed, with calls taken by West Midlands. This amounts to a 15% reduction in control rooms in just four years. Forced mergers of control rooms with no geographical logic and which axe essential control staff have already begun to alter the landscape of the service.

Integration and 'blue light mergers'

An extension of closer collaboration has led some politicians to advocate partial or total **integration** of the fire and rescue service with the ambulance service and the police. A report by Tobias Ellwood MP proposes a more dramatic overhaul of all three emergency services.¹⁸ These suggestions are at least aimed at promoting national resilience, cross-border cooperation and planning, which is preferable to the laissez-faire localism and fragmentation, where the government abdicates its responsibilities for the fire and rescue service. The FBU does not accept all the report's conclusions, particularly if they were imposed top-down without consultation. But the union is willing to discuss **serious proposals** for

¹⁴ Knight 2013 p.45

¹⁵ CFOA, AACE and ACPO, Blue Light Services Working Towards Future Collaboration, 6 February 2014

¹⁶ DCLG, Fire and Rescue Authorities Transformation Funds for 2015 to 2016: bidding process, December 2013

¹⁷ DCLG, Transformation Challenge Award: Successful Bidders, October 2013

¹⁸ Tobias Ellwood, Improving Efficiency, Interoperability and Resilience of our Blue Light Services, 25 June 2013

reorganising the fire and rescue service, as long as the aim is to improve public and firefighter safety through better coordination and control, common approach to risk and transparent delivery.

Police and Crime Commissioners

There are also a range of threats from Home Office funding for 'blue-light collaboration', driven especially by **Police and Crime Commissioners** (PCCs). In November 2013, the government announced a precursor Innovation Fund available to PCCs in the following financial year. It also launched a Police Innovation Fund. The announcement said the fund 'will incentivise collaboration, including with other emergency services, and enable PCCs to invest in other innovative delivery approaches that have the potential to improve policing and deliver further efficiency'.

There are numerous examples of efforts by PCCs to attach themselves to the fire and rescue service. The PCC for Northamptonshire has been the most high-profile advocate of 'taking over' the running of the service, with the Humberside PCC making similar claims. Other steps have been taken in Hertfordshire, where the chief fire officer is also chief executive for the Hertfordshire PCC; in North Yorkshire, the PCC has been awarded money for police and fire shared services and joint work with vulnerable people; in Merseyside, where police and fire control will share the premises (though not systems); and Warwickshire, where the PCC wants a joint control room and other collaboration.

A report by Lord Stevens for the Labour Party called the PCC model 'systemically flawed as a method of democratic governance' and recommended it should be discontinued at the end of the term of office of the 41 serving PCCs. This is due to poor elections and turnout; composition (only six women, none from a visible ethnic minority, eight recently serving police officers); invisibility; appointment of staff (16 PCCs are believed to have appointed their own friends as deputies on salaries up to £65,000); relationships between the PCCs and chief constables and scope of role/size of 'constituency'.¹⁹

The FBU is fundamentally opposed to police and crime commissioners taking over the governance of local fire and rescue services. PCCs have **no democratic mandate** to administer the fire and rescue service, nor the expertise or resources to improve our service.

A national fire and rescue service?

A more radical proposal that has been aired is for single or national fire and rescue services. This is already a reality in Scotland and Northern Ireland has long had its own single fire service governance. Wales has three services at present, although there is not a groundswell for integration. The case for an English national fire and rescue service is more complex, given the geography and numbers of people involved.

In principle, a **single or national fire and rescue service** might help restore and extend consistent national standards, which have been diminished or lost in recent years. It could allow for greater national resilience, planning and integration – as part of a national assessment of new and emerging demographic, climate, industrial and other risks. It would complement existing national structures such as the NJC, support more national guidance on safety and other matters, bringing greater consistency across the service. It might entail oversight by a different government department and better maintain central funding. It would certainly be preferable to a gradual and fragmented slide into potential disintegration that is foreseeable in current arrangements.

A principal concern with a national model is that it offers **no guarantees** of protection on cuts, firefighter jobs or further attacks on firefighters' conditions. A national model could have an adverse

¹⁹ Lord Stevens, Policing for a Better Britain: Report of the Independent Police Commission, 25 November 2013

effect on some areas, such as control and officers, as well as on support roles. It could potentially end up like the failed regional control model under the last government, or slip into an integrated emergency service expected to do everything but without the resources to properly or professionally do anything. A wider concern is with the democratic governance and **local accountability** of the service. At present, fire authority/boards members are mainly councillors elected for smaller local council constituencies, who are then assigned by their respective parties in proportion to the overall political composition of the fire authority in question. This is an indirect, often distantly democratic form of governance, but it does allow for some local accountability. Any national model would have to incorporate mechanisms for oversight by councillors and local communities, as well as by firefighters.

4. 'On-call' firefighters

The terms of reference state that the review should consider 'barriers to the increased use of on call firefighters'. Ken Knight claimed that 'increasing the use of on-call staff by just 10% could [save] up to £123 million per year'.²⁰ The FBU represents the majority of firefighters working the retained duty system (RDS) in the UK, and it is a misnomer to regard them as 'on-call', since this implies a permanent and continuous availability that simply does not exist. Retained firefighters do an outstanding job in providing fire cover for many communities throughout the UK. However there are a number of significant barriers to substituting retained firefighters for wholetime posts:

- **Response times** for retained crews are generally significantly slower than for wholetime crews because retained firefighters are mobilised and must travel to the fire station from their homes or their places of main employment. This inevitably and significantly slows 999 emergency response times.
- **Recruitment** of retained firefighters is problematic, partly related to the fact that in most cases, firefighting is a second job for retained firefighters and they have other employment and domestic commitments
- Appliances crewed by retained duty staff are frequently '**off the run**' as a consequence of the **non-availability** of retained personnel. This is not as the fault of retained personnel - it is because the requirements of the retained duty system pose severe limitations upon effective availability.

Ken Knight's review did not collect any new evidence on the problems in recruitment and retention of retained personnel. Although there are some professional and personnel- based surveys that identify these problems, there is no robust England-wide data on the current shortages of retained personnel compared to wholetime personnel and how many 'retained' appliances are off the run across the country. Changes to the terms and conditions for retained firefighters essentially aimed at reducing earnings will do nothing to solve these problems but would in fact exacerbate an already unsustainable situation.

The views of retained firefighters deserve to be heard in this debate. In the recent YouGov survey, retained firefighters made the following valuable points:

- 90% said that if the **minimum retainer** was reduced, it would have an effect on recruitment
- 85% believe that people don't work in the same communities where they live and so aren't able to commit to the retained as they were in the past
- 78% perceive that their **primary employer** is reluctant to give release for employees to undertake retained duties
- 72% believe the situation with the primary employers is exacerbated when the scope of work and number of call-outs increases

²⁰ Knight 2013 p.31-2

- 66% said the prospects for **self-employment** are limited when the scope of firefighting work and number of call-outs is high.

Interestingly, some 42% believe that retained firefighters are treated well by fire and rescue services and so encourage others to apply. Similarly, nearly half (46%) felt that becoming a retained firefighter is not difficult for the self-employed.²¹

FBU officials have highlighted a range of these problems, which deserve to be thoroughly investigated. On **recruitment**, the union is aware of fire and rescue services where there are over one hundred vacancies for retained firefighter posts. In Dorset, the retained establishment in autumn 2014 was 334 full cover equivalents, with the service carrying 57 full cover equivalent vacancies (a 17% vacancy rate), including seven watch manager vacancies. This had occurred despite considerable time and money invested in numerous recruitment campaigns.²² Recruitment problems may result from geographical or labour market factors beyond the control of the fire and rescue service concerned. A survey conducted across England and Wales in 2006 found that 48% of all retained firefighters travel six or more miles to their primary employment, making it impossible for them to be on-call from their place of work.²³ But clearly the pay and conditions offered to retained firefighters matters too.

Retention also remains a huge issue in many brigades. FBU officials have a great deal of evidence of problems. For example in one fire and rescue service with a very small retained complement reported that over a 12 month period (some 8760 hours in total), a retained appliance was not available for almost two-thirds of that time, almost entirely due to staff shortages. In Dorset, an unacceptably high number of frontline fire appliances are off the run on a regular basis. Between 1 January and 28 September 2014, the combined total of hours where appliances were off the run was 30,745. If averaged across the retained duty system appliances, this equates to 40 days that each fire appliance is not available to serve their community in a 9 month period.

Another issue is the number of wholetime firefighters performing retained duties (as ‘**wholetime-retained**’). There are an estimated two thousand personnel doing wholetime-retained contracts across the UK, around one-in-ten of the retained. In one fire and rescue service, the number of retained personnel on the retained stations who were wholetime firefighters performing retained duties (as ‘wholetime-retained’) ranged from 8% to 55% and averaging at 35%. Two clear conclusions can be drawn from this. First, changes to the duty systems or other arrangements of the wholetime employees will affect their ability or willingness to fulfil the retained contract. Second, adverse changes to retained terms and conditions are likely to have the same impact. The net effect would have a huge impact on the availability of retained units in that brigade.

In the YouGov survey, retained firefighters were asked why they might have **shorter service** than wholetime firefighters. These were their responses:

- 61% believe that retained firefighters just get tired of so much **commitment**
- 55% said that people don’t work in the same communities where they live and so realise that they aren’t able to commit to retained duties as they thought they might when they applied
- 55% believe that after recruitment FRSs put **too much pressure** on retained firefighters to increase their commitment (i.e. hours)
- 51% said that their primary employers becomes reluctant to continue agreeing to release for employee to retained duties
- 46% believe that the impact on **childcare** or other dependent becomes too much
- 44% said that retained firefighters do not get treated well by fire and rescue services

²¹ YouGov 2015

²² Dorset FBU, Response to Dorset Fire Authority consultation “Strengthening our Fire and Rescue Service” 2014

²³ Paul Young, A Review of the Retained Duty System in the Fire and Rescue Services of Wales, July 2010
<http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dsjlg/publications/fire/120320rdsreviewen.pdf>

- 42% believe that the situation with the primary employers is exacerbated when the scope of work and number of call-outs increases
- 33% said that the situation for the self-employed is exacerbated when the scope of work and number of call-outs increases
- 31% believe that once a self-employed retained firefighter has joined they experience a tension because retained commitments compromise delivering services on time.²⁴

These issues directly impact on service provision. In Northumberland, FBU officials have reported retained shortages has meant pumps off the run due to staff shortages. However even in other parts of the county where there are sufficient numbers of retained firefighters, pumps are still often off the run due to the availability problems explained above. This means that fire cover is extremely taut, with wholtime appliances covering much larger areas and having less back up in the event of major incidents. FBU officials say that DCLG civil servants have visited the county and have been made aware of these problems – and the issue has been raised with senior management on regular basis. Similarly, Cambridgeshire fire and rescue service recently reached an agreement (through the NJC Joint Secretaries) that sees wholtime firefighters being sent to cover shortages at retained stations as an attempted remedy for their retained availability retention problems.

5. Pay for chief fire officers and fire officers

The terms of reference state that the review should consider barriers to clarity of process in the fair recruitment and remuneration of chief fire officers and fire officers. The FBU would draw a sharp distinction between principal managers (particular chief officers), whose pay has risen dramatically over the last decade, and the pay of middle managers and firefighters, which has barely risen and in most cases has been cut in real terms in recent years.

Chief fire officers

An FBU investigation found that by 2010, almost every chief fire officer in the UK was paid more than £100,000 a year, with pension and other benefits on top.²⁵ At the time, some chief officers received £200,000 a year for their post. Figures are hard to obtain with the union forced to resort to Freedom of Information requests to get historic data. However, for those fire and rescue services that did respond, chief officers pay went up by 31% on average over the five years between 2004 and 2009. This works out at 5.4% a year – around double the rate of inflation.

This means that chief fire officers were earning as much as **six times** the pay of a regular firefighter, and at least three times as much. The gap has also grown. Over the same period (2004-2009), both a competent firefighter and a watch manager's pay went up by 12.8%, or 2.6% a year – not much more than the rate of inflation. From the available figures, chief's pay increased twice as fast as that – further widening the gap between those who do the work on the front line and those that oversee it.

A subsequent investigation by the FBU has confirmed that chief officers' pay remains high and continues to outpace firefighters' overall income.²⁶ Chief officers' nominal pay rose by 3% between 2010 and 2014, but this can be attributed to accounting changes. Where there have been actual falls in CFO pay levels these can in some cases be attributed to a change in personnel; or to CFOs being re-engaged or entering into flexible retirement on lower basic salaries. Where pay scales are in use a change in personnel could be expected to result in a lower salary, but spot rates are the norm in the national agreement and have certainly been adopted by some authorities.

²⁴ YouGov 2015

²⁵ FBU, Pay: Mind the Gap, *Firefighter* magazine, July 2010

²⁶ FBU, The two-tier service – pay cuts for most but big pay rises for the few, *Firefighter* magazine, October 2014

Any account of chief officers' pay also has to factor in **allowances** for telephones and the internet, clothing and especially lease car arrangements of other benefits arising from access to a car. Performance-related pay and management allowances (including geographical and 'market supplements') add significantly to a chief officers' disposable income.

The rates of pay for chief fire officers are not quite as high as those found across other parts of the public sector. However the public sector is increasingly infected with a **culture of self-enrichment**, in which astronomic rates of pay are given to run down the welfare state and open the road to further privatisation, deregulation and casual labour. This is a culture which many chief fire officers have regrettably bought into. It is a culture that does much to undermine the good name of the fire and rescue service in the eyes of the public. That's why it should be a scandal that public servants like chief fire officers receive exorbitant salaries or are frequently able to retire and immediately negotiate their own re-employment in the same role.

Middle managers

The first important distinction the FBU would draw is between the numbers of operational managers and non-operational managers. Operational managers provide command and control at incidents, and that whilst fire and rescue services have been reducing the numbers of these managers, the HSE has consistently highlighted the inadequacy of command and control on the incident ground. Ken Knight's review claimed without any evidence that 'up to £17 million per annum could potentially be saved if each fire and rescue authority moved to the staff to management ratio of the leanest in its governance type'. The review made no impact assessment or risk assessment to substantiate and justify this assertion.

Over the last five years, middle managers' pay – like the pay of competent firefighters – has remained **below inflation** and at levels prescribed by the Treasury's austerity agenda. Such remuneration is inherently unfair. Firefighters did not cause the crisis, yet have been expected to shoulder the cost of it in the recent past – and it seems from the recent autumn statement – for the foreseeable future. This has reduced firefighters' income by at least 13% in real terms over the past five years.

But all firefighters face additional constraints on pay because of the limited **banding** within each role, which makes progression within each band very slight. Whilst some other public sector workers have been able to gain some additional income during this period of austerity by progressing within their own pay bands, that option has hardly been available to firefighters.

6. National arrangements

The terms of reference state that the review should also consider the national arrangements for agreeing conditions of service, in particular:

- whether a UK-wide process remains appropriate
- whether there is sufficient independent advice and expertise in the process
- whether there are sufficient mechanisms to ensure that conditions of service keep pace with the rest of the public sector
- consider the current usefulness of the Grey and Gold Books, and the present arrangements for dispute resolution within the Grey Book
- consider the arrangements for agreeing remuneration of senior officers in fire and rescue authorities
- identify any barriers in moving between the Grey and Green Books

- the impact on services by the undertaking of activity, by firefighters, outside of normal working hours/shift systems.

Ken Knight's report made a completely **unjustified attack** on the National Joint Council Scheme of Conditions of Service for Local Authority fire and rescue services (the Grey Book), claiming that it 'stands as either a perceived or actual barrier to change' and concluding that 'it is timely to review whether the current Grey Book is fit for purpose a decade after the last significant revision'. He also adds that 'it is now appropriate to remove the national role maps from the Grey Book'.²⁷ His report completely ignores the fact that conditions of service are regularly subject to review and discussion. Each side of the NJC is entirely free to bring proposals to negotiations.

Knight's review fails to mention that national role maps (and resultant job descriptions for every post within each fire and rescue services) arose as a consequence of **firefighter fatalities** and the subsequent HSE improvement notices, which addressed failings recognised as commonly found within the sector and probably within all fire brigades at that time. The negative view of the NJC and the related national industrial relations framework reflects the outdated prejudice of some civil servants, based on fractious relations in the 1990s, rather than the actual experience of the body in recent years. The NJC is fit for purpose.

UK-wide process

The terms of reference of this review ask whether a UK-wide process remains appropriate. The **valuable** role played by the NJC and its surrounding industrial relations processes – particularly the Resolution Advisory Panel (RAP) and Technical Advisory Panel (TAP) is clear from all the recent reports by its independent chairs. The NJC's current independent chair, Professor Linda Dickens, wrote in her most recent annual report that *'The Joint Secretariat has a very good record of assisting the parties to either reach agreement at the time of conciliation or to develop the basis of an agreement which leads to a resolution following further discussion shortly afterwards at local level'*.²⁸

The previous independent chair, Professor Monojit Chatterji, also **praised** the work of the NJC. In his last annual report, he wrote: *'The NJC can be proud of its success in a fraught economic and industrial relations climate. Both sides are to be congratulated for continuing to use the negotiating machinery and the Joint Protocol even when initial positions appeared quite disparate'*. Professor Chatterji highlighted the agreement on pay and that on the equal treatment for part time workers and thanked both Joint Secretaries and their support teams *'for their excellent work in facilitating these outcomes'*.²⁹ In an earlier report, he stated that *'the two Sides remain respectful of each other and I am confident that we will continue to move forward with good industrial relations at national level which produces successful outcomes for both sides'*.³⁰

The record of the NJC in recent years in progressing vital industrial relations matters has been impressive. Over the last year the NJC considered issues such as the 2014 pay award process; ongoing work on terms and conditions; a fitness agreement; implementing the part-time workers settlement agreement; amending the Grey Book sections concerned with maternity, childcare and dependency; and the Grey Book sections relevant to health, safety and welfare. **National bargaining** provides stability, is cost-effective, strategic and efficient, providing both the necessary competence and capacity that cannot be reproduced locally, particularly with small services.

²⁷ Knight 2013 p.27

²⁸ Dickens, NJC Annual Report 2013-2014

²⁹ Chatterji, NJC Annual Report 2011-2012

³⁰ Chatterji, NJC Annual Report 2010-2011

The YouGov survey also showed that firefighters value the **national arrangements** for negotiating their pay and conditions. Five out of six (87%) said they were in favour of a national pay structure. This is not surprising, considering the amount of cross border and collaborative work that takes place between firefighters in different brigades, much of it on a daily basis. There is no appetite within the fire and rescue service for cumbersome, duplicative and bureaucratic local or regional systems of pay – particularly as these are likely to lead to further reductions in pay for the majority concerned.³¹

The NJC has also been working on five significant workstreams:

- Environmental challenges – flooding, inland water safety, snow, wild fires
- Emergency medical response – co-responding, falls, on-site trauma care, provision of community training
- Multi agency emergency response – MTFA, joint working, any issues falling out of JESIP
- Youth and other social engagement work – arson reduction, working with risk of offending youth groups
- Inspections and enforcement – schools, illegal homes, crown properties, expansion of unregulated business use, related fire safety advice.

This is a positive, engaging schedule to transform and bring genuine improvement to the fire and rescue service. Bringing these workstreams to fruition through the NJC will undoubtedly improve the service to the public whilst progressing firefighters' conditions of service. This is a '**win-win**' programme of change, underlining the virtues of a national system of employment relations.

Independent advice and expertise

The terms of reference ask whether there is sufficient independent advice and expertise in the process. The NJC's independent chair brings substantial autonomous advice and expertise to the process. The FBU is committed to providing expert advice and **independent research** to the NJC, which can be seen from the reports we have commissioned in recent years on firefighter fatalities, floods and climate change, pensions, fitness, the future of the fire and rescue service and of course the **independent polling** data from YouGov. The union is committed to supporting the NJC workstreams through our own resources, which includes providing independent material to clarify vital matters.

The rest of the public sector

The terms of reference ask whether there are sufficient mechanisms to ensure that conditions of service keep pace with the rest of the public sector. It should be noted that firefighters do a 42-hour working week – longer than most in the public sector. Firefighters' pay and conditions should be evaluated on their own merits. The fire and rescue service is widely regarded as a lean and efficient public service. It has, for example, led the way in introducing groundbreaking preventative work in local communities; work which is often seen as a model for other parts of the public services. It is therefore not clear what is meant by 'keeping pace' with the rest of the public sector when fire and rescue is often described as a frontrunner, **pioneer** and model. The fire and rescue service must not be the testing ground for badly conceived and poorly implemented fads dreamt up by consultants or 'special advisors' with little knowledge of the sector. Nor do firefighters (or the public) want their service privatised, mutualised or outsourced in any way.

³¹ YouGov 2015

The current usefulness of the Grey Book

This review is asked to consider the current usefulness of the Grey and Gold Books, and the present arrangements for dispute resolution within the Grey Book. The NJC's record in this respect is highly impressive. Over the last year, nine fire and rescue services have referred a total of nineteen issues to the Joint Secretariat for formal conciliation. However in the last year, neither RAP nor TAP were required to meet. Over the last decade, the NJC has met on 28 occasions, approximately three meetings per year. Since it was established in 2008, the Middle Managers Negotiating Board has met 19 times. Over that decade around 100 issues have been resolved by the NJC, with six cases sent to RAP and 9 to TAP.

In 2007 the NJC introduced a **national joint protocol** for good industrial relations, intended to develop and improve upon industrial relations in the UK fire and rescue service as a whole. The contents of Grey Book have been reviewed and amended on a number of occasions since the publication of the sixth edition in 2004. The FBU is committed to the continuous improvement of firefighters' pay and conditions and therefore to the **progressive amendment** of the Grey Book. We believe it sets a vital national framework for firefighters, while facilitating local application.

Remuneration of senior officers

This review is asked to consider the arrangements for agreeing remuneration of senior officers in fire and rescue authorities. This matter was discussed in depth in the earlier section. The FBU believes that chief officers pay should not exceed **three times** the wage of a competent firefighter.

'Barriers' in moving between the Grey and Green Books

This review is asked to identify any barriers in moving between the Grey and Green Books. The main constraints on firefighters moving to Green Book pay and conditions are twofold: firstly the **reduced pay and pensions** this would involve; and secondly, the fact that Green Book staff are not eligible for the firefighters pension scheme. Current pay includes the following rates for wholetime firefighters.³²

Table 5: Pay for firefighting roles

Firefighting Roles - Pay Rates from 1 July 2014	Basic annual £
Firefighter Competent	29,054
Crew Manager Competent	32,211
Watch Manager Competent B	36,021
Station Manager Competent B	41,324

Local government pay is set by the National Joint Council for Local Government Services.³³ From 1 January 2015, rates range from the lowest (scale point 5) of £13,500 a year to the highest (scale point 49) of £42,957. Only pay rates above scale point 33 are comparable with firefighters' rates of pay.

However even a cursory look at current vacancies within the fire and rescue service shows that green book roles pay significantly less than firefighters' current salaries:

- Humberside: Community Safety Advocate - £19,048 to £20,253
- Cheshire: Equalities & Inclusion Officer - £22,937 - £24,472
- Essex: Workforce Information Officer - £25,440 to £27,123

³² NJC, Pay settlement: 2014, Circular NJC/03/14, 7 August 2014

³³ National Joint Council for Local Government Services, 2014-16 Payscale & Allowances, 14 November 2014
<https://www.unison.org.uk/upload/sharepoint/Toweb/LGS%20Pay%202014-15-16.pdf>

Similarly, a firefighter retiring at present would receive a **substantially reduced pension** if they were members of the local government pension scheme, as opposed to the firefighters' pension scheme. For example a wholetime competent firefighter retiring now after 30 years service would receive just over £19,000 a year pension at age 55, whereas a competent control firefighter with 30 years service would receive just under £14,000 at age 65. These are real financial constraints faced by real firefighters who may be forced from Grey Book to Green Book roles. But the situation is far worse contractually for those who start in a firefighter scheme and then transfer to the LGPS. A firefighter who makes this move would have their firefighters' pension deferred (until 60 or, in the newer schemes, to state pension age), while having to work at least a decade longer than previously planned before they could receive their LGPS pension. There is no positive incentive for firefighters for firefighters to Green Book roles.

'Second jobs'

This review is asked about the impact on services by the undertaking of activity, by firefighters, outside of normal working hours/shift systems. This appears to be about the so-called 'second jobs' that firefighters are often taunted about in the media.

The first point is that firefighters have faced an effective **pay cut** over the last five years. Between 2009 and 2014, inflation rose by 16.4% (CPI) or 19.0% (RPI), while competent firefighter pay since rose by 3.3%. Double digit pay cuts – amounting to at £1,500 per person are a principal reason why firefighters, like many other workers, have sought additional employment. With politicians promising more pay cuts in years to come, it is little wonder firefighters find other means to maintain their standard of living. Further, the current structure of the firefighters' pay spine allows from only limited movement within **pay bands**. This means there is less scope for firefighters to earn additional income through progression, as is often the case elsewhere in the public and private sectors.

The second point is that the 'second job' slur is particularly offensive to **retained firefighters**, whose fire service role is indeed their additional employment, which they have to fit around their primary career. Constant demagogic criticism of firefighters' second jobs delegitimises the irreplaceable work retained firefighters do in serving their communities. As already outlined, several thousand wholetime firefighters undertake retained duties in their own or adjacent brigades, making a contribution to their communities and making greater use of their professional training. Many local fire authorities using these arrangements argue it allows them to provide flexible fire cover.

Third, the evidence on additional employment outside of the fire and rescue service is far from the media stereotype. The YouGov survey found that only a **third** (34%) of wholetime firefighters had a second job, meaning that two-thirds do not. Of those who do have a second job, less than half (47%) do regular work when not on duty in the fire and rescue service – leaving more than half undertaking **occasional, casual and irregular** employment. It is difficult to believe this work has much effect on firefighters' ability to perform their roles. In the main, fire and rescue services have policies on second jobs, so senior managers are aware of the situation and are able to manage it.

The YouGov survey found that the overwhelming majority of wholetime firefighters (89%) said they would give up their second job if they could **afford to**. A genuine investigation of firefighters pay and conditions would note that firefighters pay is now only fractionally above the national average for skilled/craft workers and below the average weekly earnings figure for all workers. If politicians want firefighters to concentrate entirely on their career in the fire and rescue service, then they should pay rates commensurate with a decent standard of living.³⁴

³⁴ YouGov 2015

Cost constraints

The terms of reference state that “The Review should also have regard to the government’s wider fiscal and public sector pay policies and recommendations from the Review should not increase total costs’. This caveat effectively undermines the opportunities presented by the review to improve conditions of service for firefighters and indeed to improve the service.

Even if the review chair found that more resources were needed to **augment** existing conditions of service, this is effectively ruled out in advance by ministers, further undermining the claim of independence in relation to this review. Even if the review had proposals to enhance the service, but with some initial cost implications, this is effectively ruled out in advance by DCLG. Firefighters will rightly ask what is the purpose of a review that cannot recommend improvements if they cost money. These arguments also completely ignore the contribution made by the fire and rescue service to the economy or the possibility for additional contributions as is being discussed, for example, through the NJC workstreams mentioned above.

The cost envelope also ignores the recent context of **savage cuts** to the fire and rescue service. The Comprehensive Spending Review 2010 pledged to cut central funding to the fire and rescue service in England by 25% over four years. These central cuts are compounded by council tax freezes, which further reduce local revenue. DCLG funding settlements have imposed the following cuts:

Table 6: Formula grant cuts for metropolitan and combined fire authorities in England³⁵

Cut	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
£m	-6.1	-7	-75	-68
%	-5.8	-0.7	-7.6	-7.4

The level of expenditure by the fire and rescue service is still lower in **absolute** terms at present than it was in 2010, and is significantly lower in real terms, with RPI inflation running at 3% on average over the last four years. CIPFA estimates UK fire and rescue service expenditure at £2.7bn for 2013-14, still below the peak expenditure of £2.8bn in 2008-09. The fire and rescue service has suffered a real terms cut every year since the economic downturn.³⁶

With the economy recovering, house prices up and unemployment coming down, some might believe that the **austerity** that has dominated for the past five years is coming to an end. But whoever wins the 2015 election, spending cuts in the next parliament are threatened to be more severe and more devastating than those of the recent past. Less than half the austerity cuts have been implemented so far, and only two-thirds will be implemented by March 2016.³⁷ Politicians have warned that further public expenditure cuts and public sector pay freezes are planned until at least 2018.³⁸ The Spending Review (June 2013) pledged further **fiscal tightening**, which included cutting fire and rescue service funding by a further 7.5% for 2015-16.

The strain on budgets cannot be sustained indefinitely by running down reserves. Funding cuts are threatening not only emergency response, but also prevention and enforcement work, and overall national resilience to a wide range of emergencies. The FBU believes cuts cost lives and ruin communities. The union wants long-term, strategic investment in the service, not cuts – and a fairer funding formula that better reflects the wider contribution made by the fire and rescue service to society.

³⁵ DCLG, Local Government Finance Settlement 2011/12 and 2013/14; CFOA, Fire and Rescue Service Spending Review Submission, 2015-16, May 2013

³⁶ CIPFA, Fire and Rescue Service Statistics, 2013

³⁷ Institute for Fiscal Studies, Green Budget 2014, February 2014

³⁸ George Osborne, Budget Speech, March 2014

Conclusions

The fire and rescue service has suffered unprecedented cuts to central and local funding in the last decade. The FBU wants **investment, not cuts** to the service going forward. The reduction of firefighter numbers is now below resilient levels for normal and serious incidents, putting public and firefighter safety at risk. The FBU wants a new generation of firefighters recruited to complement the existing professional workforce. Improving firefighters' conditions of service is crucial to this process – but this review appears to have been established for one reason alone: to worsen firefighters' conditions, to make us work longer harder - with lower levels of safety and for less money.

The fire and rescue service is unique among services delivered by local authorities, in that the demands on and operations of the service are not limited by administrative boundaries. Firefighters cross borders on emergency calls every single day and carry out work in areas covered by other fire and rescue services. Major incidents requiring large number of firefighters from many services are a regular occurrence. In these circumstances, national bargaining arrangements through the NJC provide a mechanism for addressing terms and conditions issues for sound organisational and operational reasons. They reduce costs and by avoiding the unnecessary duplication and they ensure that firefighters facing the same risks at incidents enjoy broadly the same conditions of service.

The fire and rescue service has been plagued for a number of years by an absence of strategic discussion or vision. This is largely the responsibility of central government, which has gradually attempted to wash its hands of any such role. The result has been short term-ism and fragmentation, which serves neither the public nor those working within the service. Both the Knight review and the current review are examples of this piecemeal approach.

A genuine review of our service would survey the changing risks facing our communities at local and national level and assess how the fire and rescue service might plan and prepare for these risks. Such a discussion would address issues of planning and preparation. It would genuinely engage from the start with all stakeholders – including the workforce who deliver the service on the frontline. Conditions of service matters and bargaining arrangements would flow from such a debate, rather than be the starting point. Instead, we have an agenda that is simply about short term cost cutting – at the expense of those who regularly place themselves in danger on behalf of society.

Significantly, such a strategic debate has not commenced through DCLG. Rather it has started on the National Joint Council – where those who employ firefighters on behalf of local communities meet and discuss with those representing firefighters. It is ironic (but unfortunately not surprising) that DCLG appears to have been completely oblivious to this important discussion about the future of the fire and rescue service.

The Fire Brigades Union has always been interested in genuine discussion about the future direction of our service and our profession, as even the slightest familiarity with our history demonstrates. We seek such a debate today, based on a serious assessment of changing risk and the need to properly plan for these changing circumstances.