

Sounding the alarm: *the future of our fire and rescue service*



Fire Brigades Union

The professional voice of your firefighters
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Executive summary

1. Central funding to the fire and rescue service has been cut by **more than a fifth** during this parliament and further cuts of 7.5% are planned for 2015-16, an unprecedented reduction. These cuts will cost lives, destroy homes and businesses, drive up insurance premiums and damage the environment. The FBU wants investment in the fire and rescue service, not cuts.
2. New FBU analysis estimates that more than **5,000 frontline firefighter** jobs have been cut in the UK over the course of this parliament so far. More than 1,500 jobs were cut last year 2013-14 – around three quarters of those were wholetime firefighter posts, while fire and rescue service control staff were hardest hit. The FBU wants more professional firefighters to guarantee local, regional and national resilience.
3. The equality agenda in the fire and rescue service has stalled. The FBU wants governments to instigate and implement a new equality and diversity strategy, developed in consultation with key stakeholders,
4. Fire station closures and the axing of pumping appliances damage the service to the public. The FBU wants a moratorium on fire station closures. The FBU also wants national standards for appliances and equipment.
5. Fewer fires and fire deaths do not justify these cuts. New FBU research shows a consistently high level of rescues carried out by firefighters every day, reinforcing the vital role of emergency intervention. Around **40,000 people** were rescued by firefighters in the UK last year 2013-14 – **over one hundred rescues a day**. Firefighters still make a significant intervention at fires – over **4,000** people are rescued annually at fires by firefighters – similar to levels a decade ago.
6. The average response time to dwelling fires in England is now almost **two minutes slower** than two decades ago. Response times to road traffic collisions have also slowed substantially. The FBU believes that the effects of cuts are the central reason for the slowdown in response times. National standards are needed to ensure a consistent service.
7. The UK faces increased risks and uncertainty, now and in the future from terrorism, climate change, the ageing population and the housing crisis, as well as other hazards and threats. The FBU wants a national risk assessment that includes fire and rescue service capability.
8. The value of the fire and rescue service to our communities is enormous. For **£50 per person**, per year, firefighters prevent and tackle a wide range of emergencies. Firefighters also contribute to wider social goals. The FBU wants governments to recognise this wider contribution and fund the service accordingly.
9. Fires and fire deaths have been reduced with the active intervention of firefighters, better regulation, and social changes. But the risks are still there, still high – including for firefighters' safety. Emergency intervention is still an absolute necessity. The FBU wants fire and other emergency **risks to be fully assessed**, fire and rescue services to be fully resourced and firefighters properly trained and equipped to tackle fires and other emergencies and the whole range of risks faced by communities.
10. Firefighters have responded magnificently to major floods in recent years, as the public rightly expects. New FBU research has found that during the winter floods 2013-14, the fire and rescue service recorded nearly **7,000 incidents** and effected almost **2,000 rescues** across the UK. Flood risk has risen and will further increase with climate change. Flood defences alone are not sufficient to protect communities. The FBU wants a **statutory duty on the fire and rescue service to respond to major flooding**, providing the necessary powers and resources to carry out this work safely and professionally.

11. Firefighters already respond to some medical incidents, working alongside our colleagues in the ambulance service. The FBU has always been prepared to discuss with government and our employers the expanding role firefighters could play at serious medical emergencies. However, many issues need to be resolved including liability, training, protection of our ambulance service and the impact on fire cover.
12. Privatisation in all its forms must be opposed in the fire and rescue service. Attempts to **mutualise** the fire and rescue service would worsen the service to the public and open up the service to greedy privateers who would try and make profit from people's misery. That's why 97% of Cleveland firefighters opposed mutualisation plans in a YouGov survey. Governments should introduce measures that clearly prevent such threats from emerging.
13. There are significant threats to the **democratic governance** of the fire and rescue service. Some police and crime commissioners want to run fire and rescue services, despite having no mandate to do so, little expertise in the field, and few resources to offer. The mayor of London wants to increase his own appointees on the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA), reducing the number of elected representatives, as a prelude towards a rubber-stamp body. The FBU stands for democracy, accountability and transparency in the fire and rescue service, as well as in wider society.
14. There is much speculation on the future governance structure of the fire and rescue service. The FBU believes the priority is a common approach to local, regional and national resilience, ensuring the service is fully funded and that public and firefighter safety is protected. The union is willing to discuss serious proposals for reconfiguring the service, as long as these improve the service to communities and the conditions of the professionals who deliver the service.



Firefighters campaign against cuts to the fire and rescue service

Introduction

Matt Wrack, FBU general secretary

The fire and rescue service is an irreplaceable public service and an essential national strategic asset. It is ready and willing to tackle every kind of emergency, **24 hours a day, 365 days a year**.

Firefighters – through our emergency controls – receive the first call people make when it matters most and are the last line of defence when things go wrong. Firefighters shield people from jeopardy and help them avoid harm. The Fire Brigades Union is proud to represent the vast majority of firefighters across the UK.

The UK fire and rescue service can mobilise 10,000 firefighters in a matter of minutes to tackle almost every emergency imaginable. In total we have **50,000 specially-trained firefighters** capable of deployment in the event of major incidents, from fires to floods, terrorist attacks or industrial explosions. The arrival of professional firefighters swiftly and with appropriate numbers at an incident is vital to public safety.

Firefighters continue to do a fantastic job, serving our communities, protecting people, saving lives. Altogether, fire and rescue services across the UK rescue **over one hundred people a day**, every day, at a wide variety of incidents. These are people who would otherwise be seriously distressed, injured or killed. Whether it is tackling fires in homes, businesses or in the countryside, evacuating people from floods or protecting the environment, dealing with chemical hazards or road, rail and aircraft emergencies, traffic collisions, building collapses, lift rescues or people's health, we are there to make a difference.

The current emphasis on the falling number of calls creates a perverse incentive to minimise or ignore risks. Instead of weighing up the full range of risks faced by firefighters, some politicians prefer to wish away very real hazards to justify their thirst for short sighted cost cutting. Over **5,000 frontline firefighter jobs** have been cut in the last four years – this is a disgrace and cannot be allowed to continue.

The fire and rescue service has reached a crisis point in its history. The next five years will determine what kind of service it will be for decades to come: either a first-class, professional fire and rescue service; or an increasingly threadbare, fragmented and piecemeal sticking plaster.

The FBU will step up our **campaign to defend the fire and rescue service**. Firefighters want investment, not cuts to our service. But we are not Neanderthal defenders of the status quo – the fire and rescue service can do more to help communities remain safe and can improve the conditions under which firefighters work. The FBU is willing to **discuss serious proposals** for improving the service with both government and our employers.

The twenty-first century has been the best of times and the worst of times for the fire and rescue service. Firefighters have saved more lives, prevented more injuries and reduced fire damage like never before. But we have faced malevolent cuts dressed up as modernisation, and retrogression on standards dressed up as reform. The fire and rescue service should have seen the springtime of hope, yet instead it has often faced a winter of disappointment.

Firefighters are trusted professionals, enthusiastic advocates for our fire and rescue service and absolutely committed to serving our communities. Firefighters are confident we have the skills and experience to revitalise our service. Give us the tools and let us get on with doing the job.

Since 2010

20%

**central
funding
cuts**

5,000

**frontline
firefighter
jobs cut**

39

**fewer
fire
stations**

1. The state of the fire and rescue service

Key messages

- The fire and rescue service has been cut in absolute terms since the economic downturn began
- The UK now has 5,000 fewer firefighters than it did in 2010, increasing risks and reducing resilience
- Progress on equality and diversity within the service has stalled
- Fire station closures and fewer appliances mean the public receives a poorer service
- Speed of response has slowed significantly in recent years – due to cuts, not simply traffic levels
- Weight of response (the number of fully-staffed appliances) is now consistently and dangerously below safe levels
- Cuts and poorly conducted risk assessments mean the fire and rescue service is now fragmented and resilience is imperilled.

1.1 Unprecedented cuts to central and local funding

The fire and rescue service is recognised as an efficient service. There was **no “golden age”** of profligate expenditure. Since the turn of the century, spending on the fire and rescue service barely kept up with inflation. The service has experienced a prolonged period of budget cuts, which started before 2010 but has accelerated since then.

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. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) funding settlements have imposed the following cuts:

Table 1: Formula grant cuts for metropolitan and combined fire authorities in England¹

Cut	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
£m	-61	-7	-75	-68
%	-5.8	-0.7	-7.6	-7.4

Metropolitan fire and rescue services have been particularly hard hit, because they depend on central funding for as much as two-thirds of their income. However every fire and rescue service in England, whatever its risk profile and character, has seen significant cuts over the last period. Central funding for county fire and rescue services in England, as well as the service in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is more difficult to quantify over time, as it is subsumed in other central grants. Firefighters in Northern Ireland do not expect to be exempt and cuts are expected over coming years.

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.²

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.

1.2 Reduction of firefighter numbers below resilient levels

Since the coalition government came to power over **5,000** frontline firefighter jobs have been cut across the UK, threatening national resilience. More than **4,000** wholetime (full-time) firefighter jobs have been lost, and over **1,000** retained (part-time, on-call) jobs have gone. Control room jobs received the hardest hit, with **one-in-seven** (14%) cut in just four years.

Table 2: Firefighter job cuts since 2010 by country (headcount)³

	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	Total
England	-497	-1,449	-1,334	-1,388	-4,668
Scotland	-207	-62	17	-252	-504
Wales	-25	-171	-39	-14	-249
Northern Ireland	-39	-7	-33	37	-42
UK	-768	-1,689	-1,389	-1,617	-5,463

Overall, around **one-in-ten** firefighter posts have been reduced since 2010 across the UK, with the overall reduction in England the highest of the four administrations. By March 2014, the fire and rescue service across the UK had been reduced to just over 50,000 wholetime, retained and control firefighters.

These job cuts have affected all roles and duty systems. More than three-quarters of the job cuts have been **wholetime** firefighter jobs. But **retained** posts have also been reduced substantially, with many services having recruitment and retention problems as longer “on-call” availability has been demanded, training cut and unreasonable demands made on retained firefighters. **Control** jobs have been particularly badly hit, with control room closures, mergers and other reductions in recent years.

Table 3: Firefighter job cuts since 2010 (headcount)

UK	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	Total
Wholetime	-948	-953	-955	-1,222	-4,078
Retained	215	-635	-371	-326	-1,117
Control	-35	-101	-63	-69	-268
Firefighters	-768	-1689	-1,389	-1,617	-5,463

Firefighters in all roles have seen job cuts since 2010. However **officers** have been especially harshly hit, with those at station manager or above suffering one-in-nine job cuts during that period, compared with just over 8% for crew and watch managers, and nearly 7% of firefighters. This is bound to impact on operational incident command and on the safety of the public and firefighters, with accusations that firefighters are now “risk averse”.

Last year was the **second worst in living memory** for cuts. Every fire and rescue service has suffered some job cuts. Although metropolitan brigades have been adversely affected, combined and county fire and rescue services such as Devon & Somerset, Staffordshire, Lancashire and West Sussex had the highest proportion of wholetime firefighter cuts in 2013-14, at least twice the UK average.

Last year, firefighters working the **retained duty system** also suffered, with Buckinghamshire and Berkshire experiencing the biggest reductions. The number of **control staff** has also dropped again, with Staffordshire, Lancashire and Buckinghamshire losing around **one-in-five staff**.

On a regional level, last year London faced the worst firefighter job cuts overall, closely followed by the North West of England and the Southern region. Drastic wholetime cuts were imposed in London and the South West, while the Southern region and the North West saw the biggest proportion of retained jobs lost.

In control, the South East and the North West fared worst. Only in Northern Ireland has the establishment remained broadly the same as in 2010.

In addition, support roles have been cut severely. Nearly two thousand support roles have been cut in the last four years (17% of those posts), which means that as a whole, over 7,000 jobs have been lost across the service since 2010.

Table 4: Support jobs in the fire and rescue service – reductions since 2010

UK	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	Reduction
Support	-282	-715	-292	-443	1,732

The FBU has been accused of “scaremongering” when our representatives have highlighted the threat these jobs cuts make to national resilience. However even chief officers are now warning that any further reductions to fire and rescue service funding will compromise our ability to resource the national resilience requirements. The Chief Fire Officers’ Association (CFOA) estimates the ability to cope with four simultaneous critical national infrastructure incidents: large-scale flooding, a bomb incident, a chemical incident and a train derailment would require almost 60% of the entire English firefighting force, along with one-in-six appliances.⁴ This confirms FBU warnings that cuts are threatening national resilience.

1.3 Equality and diversity stalled

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 entirely ignored at Westminster, by 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. This needs addressing across the UK.

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 ethnic minority composition of the workforce has also stalled progress. 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 wants a **robust equality and diversity strategy** for the fire and rescue service, drawn up and monitored in consultation with stakeholders and equality representatives.

1.4 Fire station closures

The number of fire stations has fallen since 2010, after many years of virtually no net losses. There were **39 fewer fire stations** across the UK in 2014 than in 2010. Some 68 fire stations closed, while 29 were opened – mostly in England. There was a fall of 23 in **retained fire stations** in England, mostly in shire areas. In addition, 18 volunteer stations closed in Scotland.

Table 5: Fire station closures since 2010 by government⁵

	Change in wholetime stations 2010-14	Change in retained stations 2010-14	Change in fire stations 2010-14
England	-10	-23	-33
Scotland	-2	-3	-5
Wales	-4	3	-1
Northern Ireland	0	0	0
UK	-16	-23	-39

These figures do not adequately represent the scale of changes over the last four years. Many chief officers have preferred to maintain the veneer of the service – the **big red doors** remain steadfastly visible in most communities. But there are now fewer firefighters and appliances behind the façade.

New shift systems, day crewing and other changes have reduced the establishment in many of those 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 moral dilemma on firefighters to act quickly – despite inadequate resources – undermining our safe systems of work.

The impact of closures has been most acute in control. **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, while in the North West, the regional control room in Warrington (incorporating Greater Manchester, Lancashire, Cheshire and Cumbria) has gone live. Staffordshire control has closed, with calls taken by West Midlands. This amounts to a 15% reduction in control rooms in just four years. After the Scottish fire and rescue service was formed in April 2013, plans have been made to close five control rooms. The Mid & West Wales fire and rescue authority plans to close Carmarthen fire control room.

1.5 Fewer pumping appliances

The number of **pumping appliances** has fallen sharply since 2010. Across the UK, there were 145 fewer frontline pumping appliances in 2013 than three years earlier. This represents 1 in 20 fewer pumping appliances in just four years. The number of other fleet vehicles has also fallen sharply.⁶

Increasingly, more and more appliances are simply not available for emergency calls. With jump crewing/double jumping many appliances are unavailable for large periods because the appropriate firefighters are crewing another appliance. The FBU has often been accused of alarmism about job cuts, fire station closures and appliance losses. Now there is growing consensus between fire and rescue service professionals warning of disaster.

Many fire and rescue services now routinely skeleton crew their fire appliances. The public see a **big red fire engine** responding to an emergency, but do not realise that the crew will be very limited in what it can achieve. Fire and rescue authorities are ignoring methods to determine speed and weight of response. Research undertaken on risk-based response has been ignored. Comprehensive research in the USA has shown the importance of robust task and resource analysis to achieve the efficient weight of response.

Many chief fire officers now acknowledge that cuts will severely reduce resilience, with CFOA predicting over 4,000 job losses, 60 fire stations closed and 150 fewer appliances. In metropolitan brigades, 2,500 jobs, 31 fire stations and over 100 appliances were threatened by 2015.⁷ Professionals from across the service are warning of the dire consequences of cuts to the fire and rescue service. Politicians should take heed. The FBU wants a common and transparent approach to task and risk analysis, to determine the most effective and safe delivery.

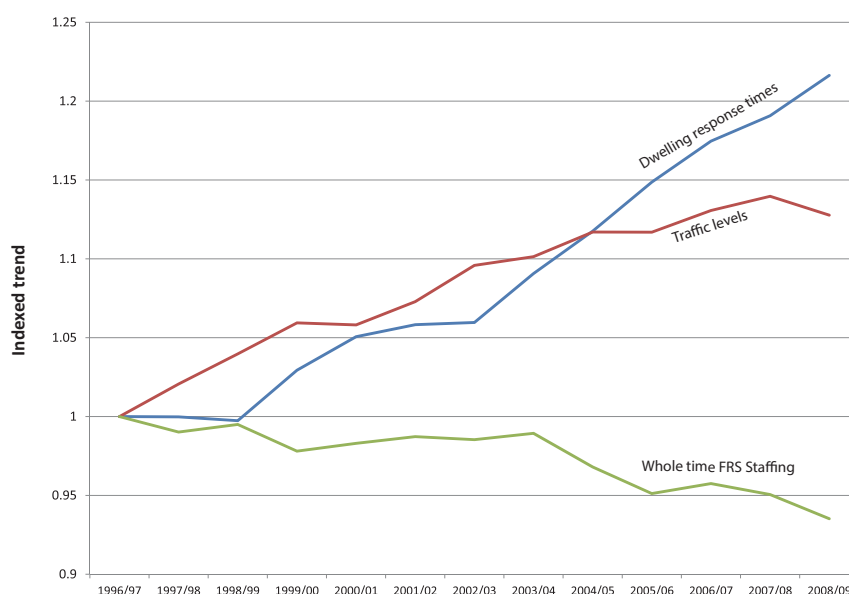
1.6 Response times slowing

The average time it takes for the first fire engine to arrive at an incident (known as response times) has been **slowing for more than a decade**. A Greenstreet Berman report for DCLG found that response times to dwelling fires have slowed from 5.5 minutes in 1996 to 6.5 minutes a decade later.⁸ The report predicted the effects of slower response times:

- **13 additional fatalities** in dwelling and other building fires each year
- Possibly **65 additional deaths** in road traffic collisions (RTCs)
- An £85m increase in other buildings fire damage.

Greenstreet Berman updated their research and included both traffic levels and wholtime firefighter staffing, as set out below.

Figure 1: Dwelling fire response times (all English fire and rescue services)⁹



DCLG now report response times annually.¹⁰ The last report found that average response times to dwelling fires in England slowed over the past decade from 6.1 minutes in 2003-04 to a peak of 7.4 minutes in 2013-14. Although dwelling fire response times for a first appliance appear unchanged in the last four years, they are still a long way from the norm when there were national standards. The average response time to dwelling fires in England is now almost **two minutes slower** than two decades ago. Response times to other building fires, including workplaces and businesses, have also fallen substantially.

DCLG previously attributed the slowing of response times to increased **traffic levels**.¹¹ However traffic levels peaked in 2007, but attendance times continued to increase. Evidence suggests that the effects of **cuts are the central reason** for the slowdown in response times. Fewer firefighters, fewer fire stations and fewer appliances have led to a worsening of the speed and necessary weight of emergency response.

Another cause is the increasing number of occasions when a shortage of staff has meant that appliances and crews are taken off the run due to staff shortages or for training and to deliver community fire safety. Sadly, DCLG does not consider the impact of cuts. Instead worsening response times are blamed on control staff for longer call handling times, policies on “drive to arrive” and firefighters for time spent putting on personal protective equipment.

There are also possible accounting differences, which make comparisons with older figures difficult. The figures since 2010 are calculated from the electronic reporting system and are given weights, unlike the old paper system. Some incidents are excluded such as late calls, heat and smoke damage-only incidents, responses over an hour and other cases. These account for a quarter of incidents.

Behind the figures, other issues lurk. Response times are defined as the time from the call to the arrival of the first appliance. Some fire and rescue services have begun distinguishing between time of call and time of mobilisation. It is not clear whether some fire and rescue services are reporting the use of Targeted Response Vehicles (TRVs) and other smaller vehicles, which might arrive swiftly but cannot deal with bigger incidents. The statistics are increasingly open to question as like is not being compared with like.

In contrast to the previous requirements of the national standards of fire cover, the current figures do not record the arrival of **second or other appliances** and therefore do not indicate whether sufficient resources are available at the right time for bigger fires. The single average figure for the first appliance only masks wide variation in response times.

Breaking down the figures further, ten years ago firefighters were able to reach **more than half** of primary fires in five minutes or less. In 2013-14, **only one-in-six** primary fires were reached in less than five minutes. At the other end of the scale, the latest figures show that 15% of incidents take 10 minutes or longer before an appliance arrives. This slowdown has occurred despite far fewer incidents being attended overall compared to a decade ago.

The impact of cuts is well illustrated by response time figures revealed last year in London. The mayor and brigade managers claimed the cuts would increase response times by only 15 seconds for the arrival of the first fire engine at an incident across the capital. However, when the figures were broken down into local wards, the picture told a very different story, with the response times in many areas significantly affected, even doubling in places where the local station was earmarked for closure. The number of wards which would find themselves outside of the brigade’s own targets for the arrival of the first and second engines (six and eight minutes respectively) would also rise by 40 to 307. This accounts for around half the total number of council wards in London.

Further cuts will have a massive impact on the real response times to 999 emergencies actually occurring in local communities. With fewer firefighters, fewer appliances and fewer fire stations the quality of service is likely to worsen. With slower response times, more people, property and workplaces are put at increased risk.

1.7 Fragmentation

The FBU supports the concept of integrated risk management planning (IRMP) when it is undertaken correctly. However since its introduction, IRMP has suffered from a lack of support and development so that what is seen on the ground today bears very little resemblance to the original concept. The Westminster

government's IRMP Steering Group has only met once in the last three years. Its management has now been handed over to CFOA. As a result of the lack of guidance, support and accountability in fire and rescue services, IRMPs have fragmented in many different directions. The complete lack of any kind of consistency in presentation, content, selection of performance measures and even naming of the IRMP document, means that it is impossible for anyone to compare their local fire and rescue service with another. This utterly undermines local democratic accountability.

In reality, local fire and rescue service IRMPs have almost exclusively concentrated on life risk, to the exclusion of concerns about property, infrastructure and the environment that also affect communities and people's lives. Of course saving lives is the key priority – and many IRMPs fail to quantify the full range of life risks they are responsible for, while most chief officers have failed to fight for the resources necessary to manage those risks safely.

Rather than assess the risk, evaluate policies, determine standards and then determine resource requirements, fire and rescue services today determine their resources first, and then develop policies and standards that are achievable with those resources. As finance is cut, the only policies that can be afforded are those critical ones that are focussed on life risk with wider issues being ignored. Many fire and rescue services do not have attendance standards that are designed to deliver the optimum speed and weight of response to mitigate and control the different risks and incident types assessed in different places within their territory. They have instead introduced blanket standards across their entire area set at the base level achievable for the response resources they can afford. This implies that they think that the risk to people, property, business, the environment and heritage are identical from one end of their jurisdiction to the other.

The FBU wants a **national oversight body** responsible for the development of national standards, codes of practice, guidance and standard operating procedures to level up standards across the fire and rescue service.



Firefighters will stand up to defend the fire and rescue service

2. Possible futures for the fire and rescue service

Key messages

- Society faces increased risks from climate change, the ageing population, the housing crisis and other trends. The fire and rescue service is crucial to managing those risks.
- The worst case scenario – of a privatised, fragmented, diminished fire and rescue service – is evident from the experience of firefighters around the globe
- The FBU has an alternative vision of a first-class, professional, publicly-owned and democratically-run fire and rescue service fit for the 21st century.

2.1 Increased risks and uncertainty, now and in the future

The UK faces ever-changing risks and the fire and rescue service plays a vital role in managing these risks. It is there tackling climate change, dealing with an ageing population, and the effects of the housing crisis. The fire and rescue service is also available, for individuals and for governments, ready to tackle rare, often random but high-impact events, the so-called “black swans”.¹² Accounting for uncertainty as well as risk is a vital part of resilience planning.

Climate change

Many parts of the UK have been affected by extreme weather and climate change in recent years:

- In 2003, around 2,000 excess deaths were recorded in England and Wales during the summer **heat wave**
- In 2007, **summer floods** affected England, Wales and Northern Ireland, costing the economy more than £3bn. The **winter floods** 2013-14 and widespread flooding during 2012 also had huge impacts on many communities
- In 2009 and 2010, **prolonged cold** caused wide-ranging problems for UK transport and water infrastructure: thousands of households in Northern Ireland experienced difficulties with **water supplies**; and **heavy snow** across Scotland's Central Belt resulted in hundreds of motorists being stranded overnight
- In 2011, parts of the UK experienced a much **drier than average spring**, resulting in insufficient rainfall for some crops, **pollution warnings** across England and Wales and **forest fires** in Berkshire.



More flooding is expected with climate change

GETTY IMAGES



PICTURE COURTESY OF THE SOUTHERN DAILY ECHO

Climate change increases the risk of grassland fires

In 2012, Defra published the UK **Climate Change Risk Assessment** (CCRA). The report has substantial implications for the fire and rescue service:

- The global climate is changing and **warming will continue** over the next century
- The UK is already **vulnerable** to extreme weather, including flooding and heat waves
- Flood risk is projected to increase significantly across the UK
- UK **water resources** are projected to come under increased pressure
- There are **health threats** affecting the most vulnerable groups in our society.¹³

These risks have recently been updated by the Committee on Climate Change's adaptation report.¹⁴ It points to evidence that historical emissions and warming have already altered the patterns of UK weather. There is some evidence of a shift in rainfall patterns, suggesting that extreme weather events in recent years are at least partly attributable to human activity and climate change. The UK will have to prepare for more intense heat waves, and longer and more intense wet and dry spells.

The Committee on Climate Change rightly argues that the need for an **effective emergency response capability** will increase with climate change. The demands on the emergency services will be exacerbated by continued building in flood risk areas, a growing and ageing population, and by a building stock not designed for extreme heat. The committee says there is a lack of information on the level of national capability in some areas.

In 2006, DCLG published a report on climate change and the fire and rescue service, which recommended that the service "begin to plan for climate change and to have an awareness of climate change when decisions are being made".¹⁵ It recognised that "for fire and rescue services in the UK there is potential for **increased workloads** all year round". There is "a clear and demonstrable link between hot dry summers and the number of fires", particularly wild and forest fires based on the correlation of data on higher average temperatures and increased secondary fires between 1973 and 2003. The two highpoints in grassland fires coincided with the hot summers of 1995 and 2003.

DCLG estimated an extra workload of up to 50% more incidents of **grassland fires** would, "stretch the resources of the fire and rescue services". It acknowledged that, "Fire crews will be tired from attending more incidents, sickness and injury levels may rise due to fatigue, and equipment will be under more strain due to increased usage". The report said that the increased workload would have the largest impact on rural fire and rescue services and on retained firefighters.

On **drought**, Defra climate projections estimate that summer rainfall may decrease by between 20% and 30% by 2080. DCLG's 2006 report argued that water shortages would affect brigades' training and demonstrative capabilities. Water companies are expected to reduce the pressure in their mains supplies to minimise leakage, so firefighters may have to relay water across longer distances from alternative water sources and could expect changes in training, tactics, procedures, and equipment.

The increased risk of **storms** due to climate change is subject to large uncertainty. Defra climate projections note that severe windstorms around the UK have become more frequent in the past few decades, although not above those seen in the 1920s. Researchers found a significant increase in the number of severe storms over the UK as a whole since the 1950s, although it is not clear how this is linked to climate change.

Given the increased risks of climate change, the need to adapt is urgent and necessary. The fire and rescue service will be a central actor in tackling climate emergencies, and firefighters can provide an unrivalled service to communities affected. However funding and risk planning has not kept pace with the new threats.

Ageing population

There has been a gradual rise in the percentage of the UK population aged 65 and over. One in five people was aged 65 and over in the 1970. Now it is almost one in four – and could exceed 30% by 2044.¹⁶

DCLG figures show that more than half of all fire fatalities in Britain are of people over the age of 60. And the highest number of fire fatalities occurs in those aged over 80. The risk of dying in a fire for elderly people (65 and over) is over twice as high as the average for all ages.¹⁷

The fire and rescue service still has a considerable role to play in reducing fire deaths involving older people, particularly as this section of the population is set to increase dramatically. Deaths and injuries from fire are likely to rise in proportion to the increases in numbers of older people, unless the fire and rescue service has the staff and resources to intervene.

Housing

The number of **households** in the UK will expand dramatically in the foreseeable future.¹⁸ The number of households in England is projected to grow to over 27 million in 2033, almost 6 million (27%) more than in 2008, or an extra 232,000 households per year. Population growth is the main driver of household growth, accounting for nearly three-quarters of the increase. However other factors are in play. By 2033, around 20% are projected to be living alone, compared with 14% in 2008. By 2033, a third of households will be headed by those aged 65 or over, up from one-in-four in 2008.

Out of 23 million households in England and Wales in 2011, over one million (5%) were **overcrowded**. Overcrowding was most likely to occur in socially-rented and privately-rented households. There may be a higher percentage of overcrowded households in London partly because higher house prices encourage more people to rent, and rented households are more likely to be overcrowded. However, most households (16 million) were under-occupied.¹⁹

Changing trends in housing will have a direct effect on the work of the fire and rescue service. High rise tower block fires such as Lakeland House and Shirley Towers have been devastating for the families affected and for firefighters. Firefighters have also seen first-hand the effects of fires affecting vulnerable people,



BRIAN SMITH TELEGRAPH

Two firefighters died at Bethnal Green fire

sometimes living in what has become known as “beds in sheds”. Another phenomenon affecting fire risks is **hoarding**, where some people accumulate huge quantities of flammable materials instead of recycling or disposing of unwanted items. New technologies promise to make living easier, but there are fire risks and other hazards from “exploding” laptops, solar panels, wind turbines and other electrical equipment. Similarly, the mix of new homes built together with commercial premises has an impact on risks, which the fire and rescue service needs the resources to manage.

2.2 Worst case scenarios

Firefighters need to plan for worst case scenarios. Firefighters often experience human suffering in the course of our work that few outside the armed forces will ever witness – and fortunately few members of the public will ever have to endure. Faced with continued austerity, fewer firefighters, ever-more numerous risks and political interference, the future of the fire and rescue service across the UK is perilous. It does not take a vivid imagination to visualise the purgatory that awaits if some politicians get their way. Instead, the experience of other fire and rescue services across the globe – and particularly in the United States – provides a glimpse of what could happen if the service is left to rot.

BURN is a feature documentary about Detroit, told through the eyes of Detroit firefighters, who are charged with saving a city that many have written off as dead. Every time that **bell rings**, the fire house doors roll up, crews step into worn boots, climb into decrepit fire engines, gather equipment held together with duct-tape and drive out into the crumbling streets of Detroit to tackle a huge variety of incidents.

Firefighters have an up-close view of the best and worst in any city. Detroit is a picture of the future of some cities in a post-industrial age: one foot in a prosperous past, with an uncertain next act, struggling to survive in a changing economy. The result is a dying city with one of the highest arson rates in the world. Declining population, vanishing industry, racial tensions and thousands of abandoned homes mean social problems manifest themselves in fire.

But the US also provides a picture of the **fragmented future** of the rural brigades. In many parts of the US, no fire and rescue service is provided at all – unless an insurance or “fire protection” fee is paid. This has led



Detroit firefighters face tough conditions

to numerous horror stories where firefighters mobilise to incidents, only to be ordered to watch as homes burn – simply because the owner has not paid their fee. In other cases, victims receive a punitive bill after a fire is put out, unaware that they owed money. This is compounded by private companies, who have taken on contracts after previously public fire departments were privatised, only to prove incapable of offering a decent service.

Elsewhere, fire stations go **unstaffed** for days or even weeks at a time, with a dwindling number of poorly-trained volunteers unable to provide a service. Response times take 10 minutes or more, and even when appliances do arrive, equipment fails with alarming frequency. Casualty rates are astronomical, with around a hundred firefighters killed every year. They serve as a timely reminder that provision of a fire and rescue service cannot be left to the market, or replaced by capricious profiteers. The IAFF, the firefighters' union that organises firefighters throughout the US, has long drawn attention to these abuses and campaigned against them.

History as far back as the Great Fire of London in 1666 bears witness to times when the fire and rescue service is neglected. In Victorian England, when there was little public provision and the limited cover which existed was provided by often unscrupulous insurance companies, it took countless fires and fatalities before municipal authorities gradually established a patchwork of fire cover. Only after two world wars did universal fire provision become established across the whole of the UK. How easily the great struggles to establish public safety are forgotten.

The lessons of history and elsewhere in the world are clear: the fire and rescue service should remain a **democratically-accountable public service**. There can be no privatisation of the fire and rescue service.

Continued austerity

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 2016.²⁰ Politicians have warned that further public expenditure cuts and public sector pay freezes are planned until at least 2018.²¹ 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.

Labour has pledged to continue with cuts if it forms the next government. Shadow chancellor Ed Balls has committed Labour to matching coalition spending plans in 2015-16. On public spending, the party's zero-based review has left no area exempt.²² Although the precise implications for the fire and rescue service are not currently spelt out, it is clear that the next government, whatever its political complexion, is likely to continue with cuts to the service. The FBU is alarmed by these plans and will oppose them.

If cuts carry on with such severity, then the **future of the fire and rescue service** as we have known it since World War Two is threatened. If there is an ongoing annual 1% cut, this would mean a reduction of around 7,500 firefighters by 2020, one-in-six firefighters since 2010. If there is an ongoing annual 3% cut, this would mean a reduction of around 14,000 firefighters by 2020, a quarter of those working a decade earlier.

To lose this many firefighters would be **irresponsible and reckless**. Yet this is the future if cumulative, year-on-year reductions continue under the next government. It threatens public safety, vital national and local infrastructure, not to mention resilience in the face of major emergencies.

Privatisation

There is a real threat that the fire and rescue service will be subjected to **privatisation**. The government White Paper *Open Public Services* (July 2011) declared that publicly-provided services such as fire and rescue were “broken” and organised in an “outdated” fashion. The White Paper excluded the fire and rescue service from the list of core services like policing, schools and the NHS that are to remain free at the point of use. An update to the White Paper (March 2012) made the threat explicit, supporting mutuals in the fire and rescue service. In January 2013, the fire minister wrote to the Regulatory Reform Committee at Westminster seeking views on new laws to “enable fire and rescue authorities in England to contract out their full range of services to a suitable provider”. This was rightly interpreted by MPs as a backdoor effort to change the law to allow mutualisation and privatisation.

Cleveland Fire Brigade has created a **community interest company** to attract “alternative” funding. It promised to secure large contracts delivering risk management services to local industry, without much success. In September 2012, chief fire officer Ian Hayton wrote to Cleveland firefighters about his plans to turn the fire and rescue service into an “employee-owned social enterprise”, a form of mutual organisation like the retailer John Lewis. Such a move would take Cleveland out of the current arrangements for every other fire and rescue service in the UK and effectively outside the public sector. Despite an overwhelming 97% rejection of these proposals in an FBU survey in September 2013, principal managers continue to promote the plans.

In October 2012, Surrey Fire and Rescue Service contracted Specialist Group International (SGI Ltd) to provide “contingency services”. In January 2014 Surrey fire and rescue service announced an emergency services partnership, involving the South East Ambulance Service and SGI to train first responders for cardiac arrest incidents. SGI employees were also involved in operations during the recent flooding in the South East of England. Other private sector threats exist. The Fire Service College was sold to Capita. The Danish private fire service provider Falck has signed a “memorandum of understanding” with Devon and Somerset fire and rescue service, though both parties have refused to reveal the details of the arrangement. The London Fire Brigade has also contracted training to Babcock. Ministers have pledged further mutualisation in the health service and elsewhere in the coming years.

Politicians need to be clear: the fire and rescue service is not for sale. Privatisation and related forms such as **mutualisation**, contracting out and other private deals are not acceptable to the professionals who work in the fire and rescue service.

Response times

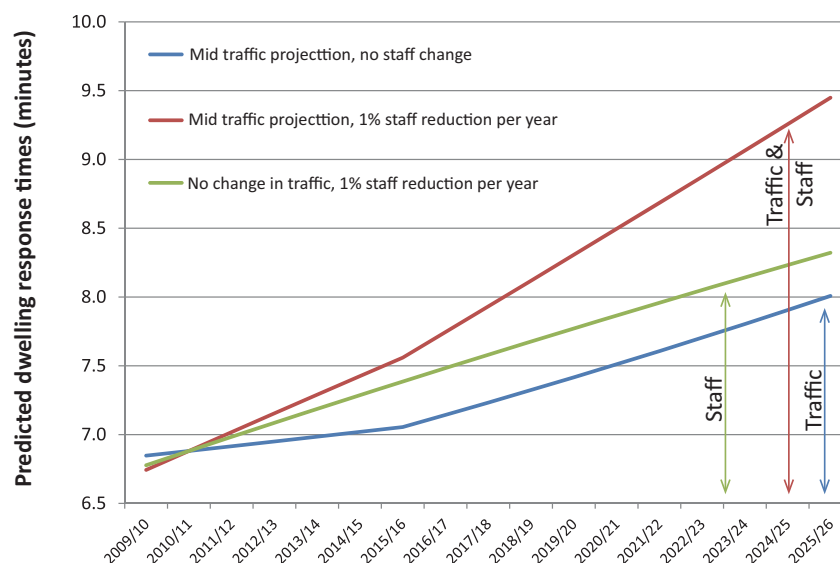
The folly of continued cuts to the fire and rescue service is well illustrated by projections of response times. Greenstreet Berman has recently estimated future scenarios in order to clarify possible futures.²³ The alarming results are clear from Figure 2 overleaf. As the economy picks up and traffic volumes increase, these combine with staff cuts to provide average response times close to 10 minutes in the next decade.

Of course, the fire and rescue service does much more than just emergency intervention at fires. Response times to road traffic collisions and other rescues are already slower than for fires – in some cases **already 10 minutes**. These too are likely to worsen considerably, with waits of 15 minutes a real possibility within a decade.

There are numerous combinations of response times and incidents. Greenstreet Berman suggests this would mean by 2020:

- Between 14 and 41 additional deaths at dwelling fires
- Between 33 and 91 additional deaths at road traffic collisions
- Between 42 and 57 additional deaths at water incidents
- Between 98 and 212 additional deaths at special service incidents overall

Figure 2: Predicted response times to dwelling fires



By 2025, the research estimates between 130 and 290 additional deaths at special service incidents and between 18 and 53 additional deaths at fires. This is a truly damning indictment of business as usual. The FBU is sounding the alarm now before it is too late.

Other threats

Aside from underfunding, deeper cuts, privatisation, slower response times and further fragmentation, the fire and rescue service faces other serious threats. There are calls to reorganise the fire and rescue service, integrate it with other emergency services, and destroy its forms of democratic governance. These are discussed in chapter 5. Many of the institutions and structures that made the fire and rescue service so successful over many decades have already been dismantled or degraded. The FBU has never opposed change when this has meant improvement to the service and to the workforce. But the union is alarmed by the wide-ranging attacks on the FBU itself, with efforts to ignore or remove the professional voice of firefighters who actually deliver the service.

Ken Knight's *Efficiencies* 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). 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.²⁴ Local pay and conditions are hugely inefficient, wasting valuable time duplicating discussions and creating a bureaucratic nightmare. They result in lower rates of pay, which is completely unacceptable to a workforce that has faced years of real pay cuts. Localised or regionalised pay makes no sense whatsoever in a service that operates on a daily basis beyond and across local authority boundaries, and regularly provides personnel to deal with regional or national emergency challenges.

This government has introduced further shackles on trade union activity and some MPs have plans for further restrictions in the next parliament. The Transparency of Lobbying, Non Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014 imposes new restrictions before elections. Some politicians have called for a minimum limit of 50% of the entire workforce balloted before strikes can take place. These calls are replayed every time unions take legal industrial action. Trade unionists have faced attacks on their facility time and on the check-off system, which is a politically-motivated attack on the right to organise. The FBU opposes these disgraceful attacks on the democratic representation of workers.

2.3 Our vision for the fire and rescue service

The FBU has a powerful, positive vision for the fire and rescue service by 2020. Firefighters are proud of our jobs and the services we provide to our communities. We want to see a highly effective and efficient fire and rescue service.

The FBU wants a fire and rescue service that:

- Professionally assesses the full range of risks facing communities and plans to address these by integrating the various measures of prevention, protection and intervention
- Rapidly responds to a wide range of emergencies facing communities
- Provides a first-class service to the communities we serve
- Is publicly-owned
- Is democratically-controlled, democratically-run and accountable to communities
- Receives sustained investment, not cuts
- Is resourced to manage a wide range of risks, rescues and interventions
- Has consistent, universal and professional standards at its core
- Trains and prepares a highly skilled and professional workforce.

A public service

The FBU believes the fire and rescue service should be **publicly-owned and democratically-accountable** to local communities. There is no place for profit making within our service. We want to ensure the fire and rescue service improves as a public service, owned and democratically accountable to the people who pay for it and may need it.

Professional standards

Professional standards are the key to an effective and efficient modern fire and rescue service. The FBU has a proud tradition over more than ninety years of campaigning to improve professionalism within the service. Professional standards must reflect the latest understanding within the service of the risks to our communities from fire and other hazards.

Professional standards also mean that firefighters need the best possible training and equipment, as well as effective operational guidance and procedures. These can provide the framework to enable firefighters to address the risks we face efficiently, effectively and safely. The FBU wants to see a system for ensuring professional standards within the fire and rescue service. This requires a mechanism for setting the best standards to be applied in local circumstances.

Keeping our communities safe

For many decades firefighters have done far more than simply put out fires. The role of the fire and rescue service has expanded considerably over the past 10 or 15 years. Road traffic collisions, floods, terrorist incidents, explosions and industrial disasters – these are just some of the things firefighters respond to. Firefighters are also at the heart of improving safety in the workplace and public buildings and ensuring our communities are better informed about the fire risks and other dangers.

Firefighters have always been willing to take on new challenges with proper planning, training and resources. When something happens which nobody else can deal with – people will usually call the fire and rescue service. We want to see the fire and rescue service clearly identified as responsible for the various threats it deals with – for example rescue from large scale flooding. The fire and rescue service should be identified as the **coordinating agency** in joint rescue operations. We want to see our fire and rescue service develop as an all-round public safety and emergency response service for the twenty-first century.

Public accountability and public engagement

The public value their fire and rescue service and they have the right to demand the highest standards from it. All too often public engagement is rightly seen as a sham. Public consultations are ignored and the views of local communities set to one side. Fire and rescue services will perform better when they can fully engage with all parts of the various communities we serve. While many services have made steps in this direction, there remains a long way to go.

The FBU want to see genuine involvement and engagement with our local communities. We want to see local communities support their firefighters. We also expect that they will on occasion make challenging demands. We want to build a service that engages in dialogue and rises to that challenge. The union wants to see a service that reflects and engages fully with all parts of diverse communities and makes a central commitment to equality for all, both within the workforce and in the community.

Planning for safety

Fire and rescue services are primarily organised around three key areas of activity: protection, prevention and intervention. To ensure that each of these is properly integrated requires meticulous preparation and planning. The FBU want to see better systems of planning put in place. Meticulous preparation requires an integrated approach including:

- The assessment of the likelihood and the impact of emergencies (risk) within communities
- Benchmarking normal and serious risks
- Planning to prevent emergencies occurring
- Planning response to reduce, control, and mitigate the impact of emergencies when they occur
- Training
- Communication between different strands of the service
- Planning at local, regional and national level.

The public have the right to know that their fire and rescue service is planning professionally for the various risks faced by the community. Firefighters have the right to know that the service is planning adequately for incidents rather than deliberately under-resourcing them. Likewise, when firefighters are sent to attend major incidents in other parts of the country, they have the right to know that a **robust plan** has been developed and tested to ensure the safety and welfare of those concerned.

We want to see improvements to the systems of planning at local, regional and national level so as to improve public safety. Such planning also needs to build in the need to protect the safety of firefighters when they are sent to deal with fires and other dangerous occurrences.

Professional staff

Firefighters are **proud** of the job we do. Throughout the history of the modern fire and rescue service the FBU has led the way in improving standards. Firefighters also have the right to expect high standards of pay and good conditions of work. We have the right to expect decent quality pensions which reflect the nature of the work we do. We have the right to expect employers and governments to engage properly and constructively with our elected representatives at local and national government level and through agreed collective bargaining arrangements.

**What our fire and
rescue service delivers**

£50

**cost per person
per year**

100

**rescues
a day**

40,000

**rescues
a year**

3. Defence of the fire and rescue service

Key messages

- Firefighters are popular, trusted and highly respected public servants
- Firefighters continue to carry out very high levels of life-saving rescues – over 100 a day, every day
- The fire and rescue service is a highly efficient public service, which for £50 per person per year provides incredible value for money and significant value-added to social cohesion.

3.1 Public perceptions of the fire and rescue service

Firefighters rightly receive plaudits for the invaluable work we do. The public expects firefighters to respond in an emergency and deliver unparalleled assistance in the most dreadful circumstances imaginable. Public support for the firefighters is exceptionally high. A YouGov survey commissioned by the FBU in 2010 found that more than **nine out of ten** believed the fire and rescue service was providing a good service, with only 1% describing it as “fairly bad”. Two out of three thought **the service was very good** – a glowing tribute to the work firefighters do on a daily basis. Four out of five members of the public were satisfied with their local fire and rescue service, while only 2% were dissatisfied.

There was no mandate for cutting the service in 2010. Some 95% said they favoured maintaining the current level of staffing across the UK, with a third demanding **more firefighters**. Some 85% said they **opposed plans to cut funding** to the fire and rescue service as a whole, with the same percentage opposed to local cuts in funding. Nine out of ten people said the fire and rescue service was good value for money. An overwhelming majority of people (95%) said that **rapid response to an emergency call is a priority** for them as householders and for local businesses. The same percentage believe that attendance times should be a high priority for fire and rescue services – exploding the myth emanating in some quarters that response times don’t matter. A swift response with adequate resources remains crucial to providing a first-class service.²⁵

Other surveys provide similar results. A Co-operative Bank survey found that more than half of respondents said firefighters were the **most trustworthy** people. Only doctors had higher ratings, while politicians and bankers were the most distrusted.²⁶ Similarly, the Institute of Customer Service found almost nine out of ten people surveyed were satisfied with their fire and rescue service, only fractionally behind the ambulance service in the public sector and ahead of almost every organisation, public or private, across the UK.²⁷ The Northern Ireland fire and rescue service reported that 99% of respondents said the service had met or exceeded their expectations for emergency response, special service incidents and fire audits.²⁸

Politicians are quick to praise firefighters for bravery, dedication and contribution. This recognition is welcome. However it is no good grabbing a fine photo-opportunity, only to ignore the legitimate concerns firefighters express about the state of the service and the way it is being run down. Firefighters are proud public servants – but we will not remain silent when politicians tell us one day how valuable we are, and on the next cut our service to pieces.

3.2 Rescues – the continuing importance of emergency intervention

Firefighters are carrying out record-breaking levels of rescues from fires and other incidents, proving that emergency intervention remains at the heart of the fire and rescue service. FBU research reveals how high levels of life-or-death rescues – long ignored by the Westminster government – prove the value of firefighting to society.

In the last year (2013-14), over **40,000 people** were rescued by firefighters in the UK – **over one hundred rescues a day**, reinforcing the vital role of emergency intervention. Between April 2013 and March 2014, there were over 3,000 rescues a month, or 780 a week.²⁹

In England, over **34,000 people** were rescued by firefighters. Over 1,600 rescues took place in Wales, while over 1,500 rescues were affected in Northern Ireland. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service rescued over 3,000 people overall between April 2013 and March 2014. Annually there are a huge number of rescues from non-fire incidents – including flooding, road traffic collisions, hazardous chemicals and lift rescues. For the UK as a whole, over **36,000** rescues were carried out at non-fire incidents in 2013-14, a remarkable figure.

The figures for fires indicate that firefighters still make a significant intervention in these types of incidents, which is well appreciated by members of the public. For the UK as a whole, some **4,240** people were rescued at fires by firefighters over the last year. Firefighters in England rescued **3,362** people at fires over the last year – similar to the level of rescues over the previous four years. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service rescued 550 people from fires in 2013-14.

There were nearly **nine times** more rescues at non-fire incidents, reflecting the wider range of activities now undertaken by firefighters, and indicating that the service provides an irreplaceable response to a huge range of emergencies. There are ongoing concerns with how some incidents (such as floods) are counted – recording a basement flood and a whole high street as a single incident masks very different resource requirements. It is possible some brigades have not recorded all incidents, so the overall figures may underestimate the real extent of rescue activity carried out by firefighters.

For England, DCLG does not publish rescue figures systematically and has not done so since the turn of the century. The last set of published total figures, in Fire Statistics UK 1999 and covering fires only, recorded just over 5,000 rescues for the UK, and nearly 4,000 in England. There are probably fewer rescues than before because of long-term societal trends, with fire calls falling due to better regulation, more community fire safety and other activities carried out by firefighters. The current number of rescues is still similar to figures in the 1990s and greater than those published in the 1980s.

3.3 The value of the fire and rescue service

Annual UK fire and rescue service expenditure for 2013-14 was **£2.7bn** – a little over 0.1% of central government expenditure on public services.³⁰ This equates to less than **£50** for every man, woman and child in the UK per year – extraordinary value for money considering the wide range of protection offered and activities undertaken. It compares very favourably with private sector providers of their version of “emergency response”.

The economic costs of fire are no longer published by the Westminster government. The last report published by DCLG, on the cost of fire in England for 2008, put the total estimate at **£8.3bn**.³¹ The costs in anticipation include prevention or protective measures such as sprinklers and insurance. The costs as a consequence of fires, includes damage to properties, loss of business, and the costs of human injury and death. Response costs are the cost of fire and rescue services.

Table 6: Estimates for the total cost of fire

	Anticipation (£m)	Consequence (£m)	Response (£m)	Total (£m)
England	£3,185	£3,285	£1,807	£8,277

Firefighters play an important role in all these activities. Community fire safety work with vulnerable people helps prevent scores of deaths and injuries, while a rapid response can limit losses to property as well as to life.

WHAT DOES IT COST?

The AA and British Gas are NOT bidding to replace the fire service, but what does the private sector charge for its version of 'emergency response'?

AA

Covering roadside assistance, at home cover, national recovery, parts and garage cover and onward travel options costs **£292**



AA = £292 PER YEAR



BRITISH GAS = £377 PER YEAR

British Gas Homecare

British Gas Homecare 400 covering central heating, plumbing and drains, home electrical, annual boiler service, glazing, locks, roof and pet cover and gas appliance cover costs **£377**

Fire service

Fire and rescue service £50 per person (£100 per household) annually, rapid response to fires, floods, road traffic incidents



FRS = £50 PER YEAR

There are good reasons to believe that at least some of these costs have risen since 2008. The most recent figures published by the Association of British Insurers (ABI) indicate that the insured cost of fires in 2008 was £1.3bn, a 16% increase on the previous year. Between 2002 and 2008 the cost of the average fire claim for both commercial and domestic fires doubled, to **£21,000 and £8,000** respectively. The ABI suggested that if this trend continues, the UK could stand to lose as much as £10bn as a result of commercial and industrial fires by 2020.

More recent estimates have underlined rising costs. The financial and economic impacts of blazes in **warehouses** without sprinkler systems in England and Wales add up to over £1bn over the last five years, according to a report published by the Centre for Economics and Business Research. These warehouse

fires cause a direct financial loss to business of £230m per year, £190m per year in productivity and impacts to the supply chain, approximately 1,000 jobs lost through disruption and business failure and £160m in tax receipts lost to the Treasury over five years.³²

The fire and rescue service has reduced the costs of fires, deaths and injuries over the last decade. The cost to the economy of a single fire death is £1.65m and the estimated average consequential cost of a domestic fire is £44,523 – never mind the harm done to families and communities through fires. In simple cost/benefit terms, the fire and rescue service saves the economy billions of pounds every year. On this basis alone, the fire and rescue service merits investment, not cuts. But the FBU believes the value of the service is even greater, with many other benefits to society from firefighters' work.

Wider contribution

The social value of the fire and rescue service is immense. Every day firefighters around the UK work with the young and the old, with offenders and the unemployed, as well as businesses of all sizes and with vulnerable households. Fire and rescue services make a direct contribution to a wide range of other public agencies through their wider work in communities. Firefighters reduce the costs of:

- Traffic congestion
- Road traffic collisions
- Youth unemployment
- Anti-social behaviour
- School exclusion
- Slips, trips and falls in the home
- Reoffending
- Troubled families.

There is some recognition of these additional benefits from the fire and rescue service, although this has not translated into more funding. This year the UK fire and rescue service won the Big Society award for its ground-breaking work with young people to educate them about **fire prevention** and tackle anti-social behaviour. The fire and rescue service's education programmes have allowed over 10,000 young people to learn essential safety information and gain wider social skills. The Prince's Trust has worked with the fire and rescue service to re-engage 2,000 unemployed 16-25 year olds. Activities ranging from primary school visits, sports coaching and interventions to reduce anti-social behaviour by disaffected young people are recognised to add enormous value to society.

Firefighters bring unique value and experience to such work, which is built upon their emergency response role. It is precisely because of the hazards we face and the humanitarian role we play that firefighters can have such a significant impact in other areas of public engagement, with young people and others within the community.

There are also numerous possibilities going forward for the fire and rescue service to add value to other social programmes. For example Simon Stevens, chief executive of the NHS, told a Local Government Association conference in July this year that firefighters should make pensioners' homes safe in a bid to ease the numbers of elderly people being treated in hospitals for falls. Stevens said: "If you are the local fire service and you are doing a home visit to check on smoke alarms there is just a fantastic opportunity, but do we think about that in the round, does the NHS think about how to fund and support that – no it doesn't. These are the kind of practical things that if we got our act together we could make an impact on."³⁴

However the FBU fears that these programmes are threatened by continual cuts in firefighter numbers and the closure of community fire stations. The union believes central government needs to come clean about the value firefighters and the service we provide, and fund it accordingly.

4. The work firefighters can do

Key messages

- Fires and fire deaths have been reduced with the active intervention of firefighters, better regulation and because of societal changes. But the risks are still there, still high – including for firefighters’ safety – indicating that emergency intervention remains an absolute necessity
- Firefighters have responded magnificently to major flooding in recent years, as the public rightly expects. But there should be a statutory duty on the fire and rescue service to respond to major flooding, providing the necessary powers and resources to carry out this work safely and professionally
- Firefighters already respond to a range of medical emergencies, including moving bariatric patients, carrying defibrillators on fire engines and administering first aid. If the government expects firefighters to do more in this area, it should negotiate with the FBU to ensure such work is done safely, with no detriment to fire cover or the ambulance service
- Firefighters have been rightly praised for interventions at terrorist incidents like 7/7 and other civil contingencies, such as the riots in 2011. But firefighters need meticulous assessments of risk, resources and decent staffing levels to respond to these incidents professionally.

4.1 Fires – the irreplaceable role of firefighters

The fire and rescue service in the UK has much to be proud of. The service is a real success story when it has the personnel and the resources to do the job.

However some politicians and commentators argue that the downward trend in fires and fire deaths over the last decade justifies making further cuts to the fire and rescue service to make it more productive.³⁵ The FBU rejects this conclusion. Firefighters have been active agents in bringing about this progress, although there is still a long way to go. It would be irresponsible to decimate precisely the active force that has catalysed these improvements. Such folly will put lives at risk.

In Great Britain over the last decade:

- The total number of fires are down by **two-thirds** (and primary fires by a **half**)
- Building fires are down by 40%
- Total fire deaths are down by more than a **third**
- Non-fatal casualties have also been cut by almost a third.

In England over the last decade the total number of fires has been **halved**, dwelling fires are down by a third and false alarms have been cut by more than a third. Total fire deaths are down by a **quarter**, road vehicle fire deaths have been reduced by a third and non-fatal casualties have also been cut by a quarter.³⁶ Fire deaths in both Scotland and Wales are down by almost a half over the decade.

These improvements are often the result of long-term trends, which mostly predate so-called “modernisation”, the shift of emphasis from emergency intervention to fire safety and prevention.

The progress made by firefighters is now being interpreted by some politicians and think tanks as showing a “reduction in demand” for the fire and rescue service. But it is the role of the fire and rescue service to reduce the number of fires and emergencies where possible and to reduce their impact if they do happen. The “product” of a fire and rescue service is safer communities. The statistics suggest that the fire and rescue service is more productive than ever before. There is no sense in making cuts to such an effective and productive industry.

Why the improvements?

These improvements are partly the result of social changes and technological improvements. The Furniture and Furnishings Regulations were designed to ensure that upholstery components and composites used for furniture supplied in the UK meet specified ignition resistance levels. These regulations were strongly promoted by the FBU, some chief officers and some MPs, often in the teeth of opposition from other MPs and from industry lobbying bodies. Similarly, the FBU long championed improvements to Building Regulations. The **case for regulation**, as opposed to leaving public safety to the market, is a strong one.

There are other trends that have made an impact. The number of cigarette smokers has halved over the last four decades (from 45% in 1974 to 20% in 2011). However the number of cigarettes smoked by men and women smokers has changed little since the early 1980s.³⁷ For many years, the FBU has strongly backed the introduction of fire-safer cigarettes as part of the strategy to reduce risks.

The FBU also believes that the **prevention work** carried out by firefighters has made an important contribution. In 2012-13 fire and rescue authorities in England undertook 740,000 home fire safety checks, up from around 500,000 in 2006-07.³⁸ It was FBU members and local FBU representatives who pioneered youth engagement projects and other efforts with different sectors of the community, particularly with disaffected young people, who took out their ire with society through attacks on firefighters as uniformed authority figures stopping their behaviour.

Clearly, further attempts to cut back the service will impact on this vital prevention work. But prevention alone is not a cure-all. It is well known that in 1988, only 8% of households had a smoke alarm and that today it is 88%. Less well known is that in dwelling fires where a smoke alarm was present, 39% of battery-powered **smoke alarms failed to operate** and some 27% of alarms in 2012-13 overall failed.³⁹

Prevention work is an important component of the modern fire and rescue service. However it cannot directly replace emergency intervention without leaving people and property at risk. Smoke alarms and sprinklers do not rescue people, they do not extinguish fires completely and they do not stop fire spreading to surrounding properties. Similarly, those fire and rescue services that have stopped attending false alarms put lives and property at greater risk if a fire really has started. For these irreplaceable matters, firefighters are necessary.

It's about risk, not demand

One significant problem when trying to draw conclusions from trends in fires and fire deaths is that the official figures do not quantify an awful lot that needs to be measured. For example DCLG's *Fire Statistics Great Britain* states that the fire and rescue service attend only **one-fifth of all domestic fires**, because the majority are put out by someone else, so the service is not called. Similarly, Department for Transport figures suggest that annually there are over 200,000 casualties on British roads and around 2,000 road deaths. Although trends are down in both cases, it is clear that fire and rescue service figures are part of a much wider picture. Firefighters cannot comprehend how some fatalities as a consequence of fire are not always counted as fire deaths in certain circumstances, depending on the cause of the fire or the eventual cause of death recorded for the victim.

The official figures for fires are quantified in such a way as to largely erase the vast differences between huge fires and relatively smaller ones. No effort has been made by ministers to distinguish qualitatively between these fires and therefore to capture the continued importance of emergency intervention. The same number of firefighters is still needed to put out a fire, whether they put out ten or five a day. Neither do historic figures indicate likely future trends in emergency incidents that will result from an ageing population, climate change or terrorist threats.

Despite significant reductions in fires, extremely dangerous life-threatening fires still take place. Last year during the waste recycling plant fire at Smethwick in the West Midlands, at one stage only one West Midlands fire engine was available for other incidents. There was heavy demand for cover from neighbouring brigades and at least 13 firefighters injured. Several of the fire engines attending were earmarked for decommissioning due to cuts.



Martin Stott/LNP

Politicians praised the “bravery, professionalism and hard work” at the Eastbourne pier fire

The risk profile may be changing, but **risks are not disappearing**. The number of hazardous (COMAH) sites across the country which has remained fairly static at approximately 350 since the Buncefield disaster in 2005, when more than 1,000 firefighters from 33 fire and rescue services across the country attended the blaze. The fire and rescue service has dealt with thoroughly modern risks such as exploding laptops, chemical exposure at hair salons and nail bars, and with tremors caused by fracking. But firefighters cannot be replaced instantly – training and experience have to be gained over years.

The **deaths of several firefighters at fires** in recent years are also testimony to the hazardous nature of modern firefighting. A firefighter was killed in Edinburgh in 2009 at a fire in a pub. Two firefighters died while effecting a tower block rescue in Southampton in 2010. Another firefighter died in 2013 at a fire at a hair products supply business in Manchester. Poor planning and poor training leading to poor decision-making has been a common theme in the FBU’s investigations. These deaths are painful reminders of the ongoing risks faced by firefighters when keeping our communities safe.

4.2 Floods – the need for statutory duty

Firefighters have increasingly tackled major flooding in recent years, doing everything from shoring up flood defences to emergency evacuation and rescue, as well as flood recovery. Politicians have rightly praised this magnificent response, and the public are understandably highly appreciative of firefighters’ efforts. Increased flood risk is the greatest threat to the UK from climate change. Historical emissions and global warming are likely to have already increased the potential for flooding. But the legal framework and resourcing of this work leaves a great deal to be desired – and it requires a central political answer.

The winter floods 2013-2014

Heavy rain and storms between December 2013 and February 2014 caused enormous upheaval across the UK, with over 7,800 homes and nearly 3,000 commercial properties flooded.⁴⁰ England and Wales

endured the wettest winter since records began. At least **seven fatalities** were attributed to the flooding. A tidal surge and coastal flooding in early December were followed by widespread flooding on Christmas Eve. Further heavy rain at the beginning of 2014 led to extensive flooding, particularly in the south of England. In total 11 local fire and rescue services were directly affected.

At the height of the flooding in February, 28 individual fire and rescue services were supplying personnel and assets, particularly to Somerset and the Thames Valley, and all 51 high volume pumps were deployed.⁴¹ Over 100 **specialist flood rescue teams** and their equipment were available during these floods, although many were not deployed. Firefighters helped build flood defences, evacuate people in need, distributed leaflets door-to-door and advised people in distress from control rooms. Firefighters visited every home in the Somerset levels – over 200 in total – by boat, to identify anyone who was vulnerable. As well as pumping out high streets and homes, rescuing victims from their houses and vehicles, firefighters also checked premises for carbon monoxide as the waters receded. Firefighters then helped with the clear-up.

There were a large number of incidents attended by the fire and rescue service, based on figures obtained by the FBU. Across the UK over the entire three months nearly **7,000 incidents** were recorded. The vast majority of those were in England, with over a third in just three services (London, Surrey and Kent). Firefighters in Wales dealt with 457 incidents during the three months, with more than half in Mid & West Wales. The Scottish fire and rescue service dealt with 356 incidents during the three months, while there were 27 incidents in Northern Ireland.

There were a large number of rescues recorded by fire and rescue services – almost **2,000** across the UK during those three months. Most of those were in Surrey, Kent and Devon & Somerset. Surrey alone recorded over one thousand rescues during the three months, and told the FBU this may be an underestimate. During December 2013, particularly the storm surge early that month and around Christmas Eve, 450 rescues were carried out, mainly in Kent, Surrey, Devon & Somerset and Humberside.⁴²

2012 flooding

The year 2012 was a **record year** for rain and for flooding. According to the Met Office, it was the second wettest on record in the UK, the **wettest year on record** for England and the third wettest for Wales. Flooding from a range of sources (rivers, surface water and groundwater) affected both urban and rural areas. Around 8,000 properties were flooded, with some of the worst affected areas in the north east and the south west of England.⁴³



Firefighters did a “magnificent and heroic” job in recent flooding

Firefighters turned out to **nearly twice as many flood incidents** in 2012 compared to 2011 – and these figures probably underestimate the scale of intervention.

In 2012, firefighters across the UK attended just over 22,000 flood incidents, compared with 13,000 in 2011, representing a 73% increase in flood incidents attended by the fire and rescue service in one year. Northern Ireland firefighters went to three times more flood incidents in 2012 than they did in 2011, whilst in Wales the response more than doubled. Turnouts were three times higher in the South West of England, Yorkshire, the East Midlands and the North East of England, while they doubled in the South East and the North West of England.⁴⁴

There have also been a number of significant flood events since the turn of the century: **Cornwall** in 2010 and 2004, **Cumbria** in 2005 and 2009, and **Northumberland** in 2008. The autumn of 2000 was then the wettest since records began and saw widespread flooding. Flooding affected many parts of England in the **summer of 2007**. The wettest summer since records began, with extreme levels of rainfall compressed into relatively short periods of time, caused 55,000 properties to be flooded. Around 7,000 people were rescued from the flood waters by the emergency services and 13 people died.

Clarity needed

After the 2007 floods, the FBU raised a number of concerns, ranging from issues of national resilience to aspects of firefighters equipment, welfare and health. In particular the FBU concluded that the government should “introduce a statutory duty on fire and rescue authorities to respond to significant water-related events such as flooding, and make the necessary resources available to meet these obligations”.⁴⁶

The Pitt Review investigated the 2007 floods and came to very similar conclusions. Pitt accepted the FBU’s call for a statutory duty. Recommendation 39 proposed:

*The Government should urgently put in place a fully funded national capability for flood rescue, with Fire and Rescue Authorities playing a leading role, underpinned, **as necessary**, by a statutory duty... To give clear and unambiguous direction – giving certainty where there is doubt... the Review strongly believes that a statutory duty is the best means to achieve these outcomes.*⁴⁷

The last government did not follow Pitt’s recommendation and implement a statutory duty on the fire and rescue service to respond to major flooding in the Flood and Water Management Act, although it did provide £2m in additional funding for assets, equipment and training. The Coalition Agreement made the commitment to “take forward the findings of the Pitt Review to improve our flood defences, and prevent unnecessary building in areas of high flood risk”.⁴⁸

After the 2007 events, the FBU assessed the resilience of the fire and rescue service to tackle floods. The union published *Lessons of the 2007 floods*, setting out the difficulties faced by the service and by firefighters, and proposing solutions to it.⁴⁹ This was submitted to the Pitt Review. Our central conclusion was that a **statutory duty** on the fire and rescue service to respond to major flooding is necessary. This flowed from the problems firefighters face tackling floods:

- There is insufficient **funding** for the fire and rescue service in order to tackle ongoing and increasing flooding incidents
- There are insufficient operational **firefighters** and control room staff during many flood incidents
- Flooding is not properly incorporated into all individual fire and rescue service planning (**IRMPs**)
- Not all firefighters have the right personal protective equipment to work safely in flood water
- Not all firefighters have been **trained** to work safely in flood water
- While there has been some investment in boats and high volume pumps, fire and rescue services do not have sufficient **equipment** to tackle floods
- Some firefighters have been made very ill after work in flood water

- Firefighters' **welfare** during incidents, which may involve many days a long way from their home or normal fire station, has not been adequately managed
- Fire and rescue service **guidance** on flooding has not been developed and agreed with stakeholders such as the FBU.

The balance sheet on recent floods confirms these concerns and highlights others. The Committee on Climate Change says current underinvestment in flood prevention increases the potential for avoidable flood damage, with **three-quarters of existing flood defences** not sufficiently maintained. It found that statutory local flood risk management strategies are only just being produced in many areas and “there is little evidence that local oversight and scrutiny committees are holding public bodies and their partners to account for the actions being taken”.⁵⁰

Statutory duty

In England and Wales, there is no specific duty requiring fire and rescue services to respond to major flooding. The Scottish government introduced a statutory duty in 2005. In Northern Ireland, the duty came into force in January 2012.

A statutory duty on fire and rescue services could be introduced as an Order under Section 9 of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004. It would not require primary legislation. DCLG produced a draft Order, but it was never implemented. A statutory duty would clarify responsibilities, reduce deaths and injuries and help affected areas to return to normal functioning.

The question is often posed: why does the fire and rescue service need a statutory duty when firefighters will turn out anyway? Without a statutory duty, flood **risks** may not be fully assessed and the necessary **resources** made available to tackling major flooding. Without a change in the law, **responsibilities** for emergency response will not be clear and transparent. Without a specific duty, there is no right of **authorised entry**.

Without a duty, there is no ring-fencing for essential **equipment** such as boats, poles, kit, welfare facilities etc, so that firefighters can intervene for as long as it takes to tackle major floods. There may not be **sufficient firefighters** available to tackle these and other emergencies, especially as these incidents often require cross-border support. This has been recognised in Scotland and Northern Ireland. It should be recognised in England and Wales.

4.3 Medical intervention – questions that need to be answered

Firefighters' response to serious medical emergencies – often known as co-responding and first-responding – has been widely discussed within the UK fire and rescue service over the last decade or so. Co-responding is when the fire and rescue service agrees to routinely be called to medical emergencies where the ambulance service will either immediately or eventually make an attendance. First responding is when the fire and rescue service agrees to routinely be called to medical emergencies with the clear understanding that no response will be forthcoming from any other agency.

The FBU has discussed firefighters' potential role in medical emergencies many times since the turn of the century. FBU conferences have made policy on first responder and co-responder schemes. The 2001 policy asked three key questions:

- Are these schemes in the interests of the public?
- Are these schemes in the interests of the fire and rescue service?
- Are these schemes in the interests of firefighters?

In previous discussions, the majority of FBU delegates have answered “no”. The FBU has highlighted a number of operational concerns that would need to be addressed:

- Ensuring sufficient fire cover
- Funding for such an initiative
- Concerns over litigation
- Concerns over training and working practices
- The absence of a national agreement
- Funding of the ambulance service
- Future closer collaboration with the ambulance service

The policy states that: “All FBU members shall oppose, and shall not participate in any proposed first responder or co-responder initiative and shall cease their participation in any such existing scheme.” In 2007 the FBU won a court case when some employers tried to impose co-responding without negotiation with the union. The court case and subsequent appeal clarified that there is no contractual obligation upon firefighters to undertake co-responding and any change to this would need to be negotiated with the union. However, the FBU has kept the position under review.

The situation today

Firefighters already receive first aid training, although the standard and consistency varies across the country. Many fire appliances carry defibrillators in case of need by the public or firefighters, a policy supported by the FBU. The fire and rescue service is already responding to some serious medical incidents and in increasing numbers. DCLG figures show that the total number of medical responses has increased from 10,000 in 2009-10 to over 13,000 in 2012-13, an increase of **almost a third**.⁵¹ Although there are some concerns about the official figures, if anything they underestimate the amount of activity going on in this area.

Currently 19 fire and rescue services (around 40%) say they are engaged in co-responding or first responding in England. Scotland and Northern Ireland don’t undertake this work. Only Mid & West does so in Wales. This is around the same number as in 2007-08. Medical response has not spread as widely as many expected. However beneath these figures it is clear that more activity is going on.⁵²

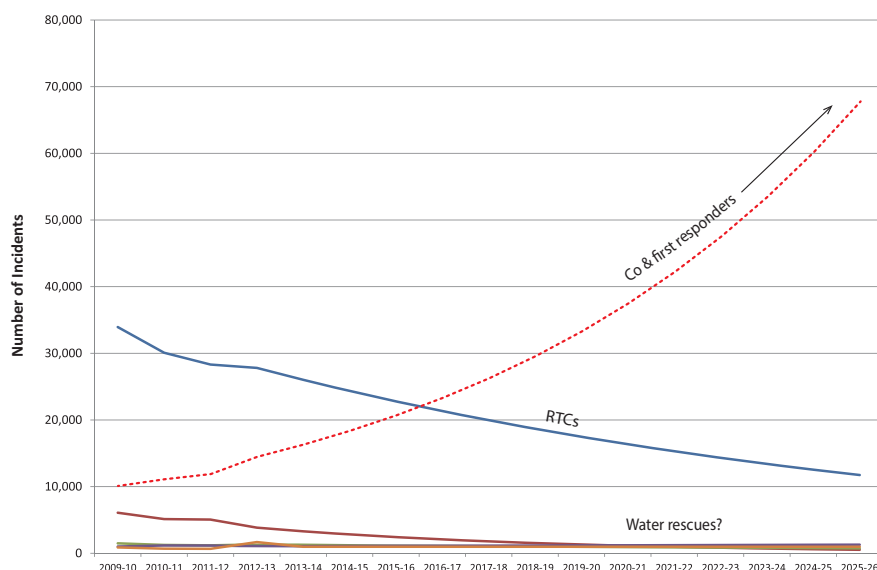
More firefighters, fire stations and appliances are involved in co-responding than previously. Around 1,500 retained firefighters are now involved (around 11%), compared with 600 in 2007-08. Now some 200 fire stations are involved, compared with around 100 in 2007-08. Currently, over three-quarters of frontline appliances in England carry a **defibrillator**, up from a third in 2007-08. In addition, some services reported incidents with bariatric patients where firefighters are involved.

In terms of the number of incidents, the FBU has found that in 2012-13, the fire and rescue service in England responded to over 22,000 medical incidents. This was higher than the official statistics. However incidents are heavily concentrated in a small number of brigades: almost three-quarters are in Hampshire, Lincolnshire and Devon & Somerset. In Wales, some 2,468 medical incidents were attended, two-thirds of which were in Mid & West Wales (and the remainder in South Wales). Some 180 retained firefighters from 13 stations in Mid & West Wales were involved in this work.

There are signs of further activity on the horizon, with plans announced in Durham, Humberside, Cheshire, Hereford and Worcestershire, Shropshire, Hertfordshire, Surrey, Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Avon. South Wales ran a pilot in 2013. In controls, many of the incidents are mobilised by the ambulance service. However Cleveland, Lancashire, Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire, Surrey, Buckinghamshire, Cornwall, Dorset and Wiltshire said their fire control rooms mobilised firefighters to medical incidents.

Greenstreet Berman has recently conducted some future forecasting research.⁵³ The research suggests that responding to medical incidents (as well as water rescues) are the most likely growth areas for the fire and rescue service in the years to come (see Figure 3 opposite).

Figure 3: Projections of future non-fire activity



The ambulance service

There is a growing demand for medical services and larger numbers of people need a swift response.

Ambulance calls in England have increased enormously over the last decade.⁵⁴ In 2012-13, there were over nine million emergency calls to the ambulance service, compared with less than five million in 2002-03. In 2012-13, there were 2.72 million category A (immediately life-threatening) incidents, compared to 1.11 million such incidents in 2002-03. Similar trends are found in the other services in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

Around 150,000 people have a stroke every year in the UK. Of those, a third make a full recovery, a third are left with a disability and a third die. An estimated 100,000 people die from sudden cardiac arrest in the UK every year. Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) when used alongside a defibrillator increases the survival rate by as much as a half. Recent ambulance response time figures show that average times for category A incidents have risen by over a minute since 2011, while in parts of the country such as the East of England, response times have slowed by nearly three minutes.⁵⁵

At present, the number of serious medical incidents firefighters respond to is tiny by comparison to the ambulance service. Currently it is estimated that the ambulance service undertakes less than 2% of cases with the fire and rescue service.⁵⁶ So even a tenfold increase in the number of incidents attended will not substantially reduce the number of calls answered by the ambulance service. Co-responding and first responding are at best a small **complement** to the ambulance service as a whole – but it might be argued that they are important enough to save some lives and to help some people in distress, and to help professionally-trained paramedics to concentrate on the most serious cases.

The way forward

The FBU rejects the arrogant approach taken by some chief officers towards the ambulance service. In 2010, CFOA announced that the fire and rescue service should “take over” the running of the ambulance service, or at least the life-threatening part of it (as opposed to the transportation side). Experts within the ambulance service quite understandably dismissed these overtures.⁵⁷

When the FBU won our co-responding court case in 2007, the judges said they hoped the union and the employers would sit down and discuss the issue of co-responding. At no time since have the government or the employers put forward **serious proposals**, addressing our legitimate concerns – for example at the National Joint Council. The FBU has always said it would consider proposed changes to firefighters’ working practices on their merits. That remains our position.

4.4 Civil contingencies – tackling critical events

Firefighters have long tackled emergencies far beyond our fire and rescue remit. Threats to human welfare, in terms of loss of life, injury or damage to property, alongside damage to the environment and threats to security are key “civil contingencies” the fire and rescue services plans and prepares for.

The last decade has also seen a huge number of high profile emergencies where firefighters have intervened magnificently. No one will forget the terrorist attacks in London on 7 July 2005, when 52 people were killed. Firefighters helped **rescue 700 injured people** and led hundreds of victims to safety on that terrible day.⁵⁸ The coroner praised those responding for their “extraordinary courage, composure and compassion”. Similarly, the Buncefield oil storage terminal explosion, the Stockline factory collapse and the Selby train crash all involved vital interventions to save life, reduce injuries and make premises safe. However, inquiries have also revealed shortcomings in command and control, as well as other deficiencies.

Civil disturbances 2011

The civil disturbances in August 2011 were another huge test for the fire and rescue service. Nearly 2,000 people were charged with criminal offences including arson, which meant firefighters were expected to tackle blazes while under threat of attack. In London, firefighters attended over 800 fires in five days – on average, **one fire every nine minutes**. Control staff also dealt with an extraordinary number of calls. For four nights in a row, staff handled on average **one call every 48 seconds**. Over four days, control staff handled more than 5,500 calls.⁵⁹ Similarly high call volumes and incidents were reported in other towns and cities across the UK.

The real extent of firefighters’ work in the civil disturbances is not recorded. DCLG admitted that the “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 main official figures do not capture the geographical area subject to deliberate fire damage.⁶⁰ The widespread praise for firefighters during that period needs to be matched by recognition that the resilience of future work is damaged by ongoing cuts.



Politicians praised firefighters for a “fantastic and professional” response during the 2011 riots

Terror threats

The risks of further emergencies, civil disturbances and terrorist attacks are widely discussed in public life. As well as the risks of flooding, these are high on the list of priorities for national resilience. For example, Richard Barrett, the former head of counter-terrorism at MI6, warned recently that hundreds of veteran fighters from Syria and Iraq were already back in Britain, among them radicalised jihadists intent on mounting terror attacks. He claimed that British intelligence services face an “impossible” task in trying to track them, ratcheting up fears of further assaults.⁶¹

After the terrible Mumbai attacks, the government has highlighted the risks of marauding terrorist and firearms activity (MTFA) and the need to prepare for such eventualities in the UK. The FBU has engaged in negotiations on this matter, given the expectation that firefighters would intervene if an attack took place. This is a serious matter – 343 firefighters were killed on 9/11. Given the enormous threats to firefighters’ lives in such an incident, the FBU has sought assurances that risk assessments, safety control measures and standard operating procedures are fit for purpose. If politicians expect a professional response to every type of incident conceivable, then they need to ensure that systems are in place to make this work as safe as possible.



IAN MARLOW

Coroner commended firefighters’ “courage and composure” during 7/7 terrorist attacks

5. How the fire and rescue service should be organised

Key messages

- The fire and rescue service has experienced periods of reorganisation throughout its history, but the current laissez-faire approach is chaotic and ultimately threatens national resilience
- A chaotic and unstructured rush towards blue light collaboration and integration will not make the UK more resilient – restructuring proposals must be discussed thoroughly with stakeholders – especially the FBU
- Police and crime commissioners have no democratic mandate and are not fit to oversee the fire and rescue service
- National standards for fire cover, for recruitment (including fitness), for equipment, for training, and for procurement would make the fire and rescue service more efficient and effective
- A robust fire and rescue service inspectorate with a wide remit, including matters of planning, training and operations, is needed to help improve the fire and rescue service.

5.1 Collaboration, integration, and police and crime commissioners

Fire and rescue service governance has to grapple with both national resilience and democratic accountability. The service was a patchwork until the Second World War, with 1,440 separate fire authorities in England and Wales, and 228 in Scotland. It was briefly nationalised because of the Blitz, before becoming a universal but locally-run service after the war.

After the Fire Services Act 1947, there were 147 public fire brigades. The Northern Ireland Fire Authority (created in 1950) was amalgamated with the Belfast Fire Brigade in 1973 into a single Fire Authority for Northern Ireland. As a result of the reorganisation of local government in 1973-74, the number of brigades in England and Wales was reduced from 128 to 55 and from 11 to 8 in Scotland.⁶² Wales reduced to three brigades in 1996. Devolution of the fire and rescue service took place over a decade ago. The single Scottish Fire and Rescue Service came into being in April 2013. There are currently 46 brigades in England.

Collaboration

Recently, there has been vocal support from politicians for **collaboration**, involving closer relations between fire and rescue services, as well as closer relations with both the ambulance service and the police. 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”.⁶³

There is support for collaboration at senior level across the three blue light services. CFA, the Association of Ambulance Chief Executives and the Association of Police Chief Officers issued a joint statement in February 2014 stating that “all three organisations are keen to support innovative approaches to service delivery” and believe 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”. The statement recognises the unique skill sets of individual organisations and the “paramount” need for the ambulance service to remain an integral part of the NHS.⁶⁴ Remarkably, this statement was drawn up without consultation with the workforce – senior managers appear to believe they can speak for their services without having to discuss matters with those who actually carry out the work.

There is also support for collaboration from senior Labour politicians. Shadow fire minister Lyn Brown told the LGA fire conference in March 2014, “I must admit I am somewhat persuaded by the argument of closer collaboration with the ambulance service... the most important thing must be that when someone rings 999 and needs urgent help – someone with the necessary training and equipment responds quickly.”⁶⁵

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”.⁶⁶ Fire and rescue services including Surrey, Lincolnshire, Suffolk, Cheshire, Cornwall and Northamptonshire, had bids for “blue light integration” accepted as part of a local authority transformation fund.⁶⁷

There are a number of local initiatives involving wider collaboration. For example, the Surrey Public Service Transformation Network involves Surrey police, Surrey Fire and Rescue Service, Surrey County Council, the South East Ambulance Service as well as Sussex police and both East Sussex and West Sussex Fire and Rescue Services. Proposals on the table include a joint operational response and “joint contact, control and dispatch”.

This could potentially create the same **chaotic bidding** and merger process we’ve seen in control, after the scrapping of the FiReControl project. Forced mergers of control rooms, in the North-West and South of England, 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.⁶⁸ Key recommendations include:

- Ministerial responsibility for blue light services brought under the control of a single minister in a new Department of Homeland Security
- The creation of a single fire and single ambulance authority for England and Wales with hubs of responsibility based on regional boundaries. This would act as a stepping stone towards a full merger of the two services to create an emergency response service
- A new post, chief of the emergency services to sit above police, fire and ambulance authorities
- Training for all services merged into a national college of emergency service excellence
- A national operations and coordination centre with the ability to monitor locations, move blue light assets around the country and tie into Local Resilience Forums.

These suggestions are at least aimed at promoting national resilience, cross-border cooperation and planning, which is preferable to the laissez-faire localism in which 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. Any discussion around collaboration between or merging of services needs to remember that much of the invaluable community engagement work undertaken by firefighters is successful precisely because firefighters are not generally seen in the same light as police officers. Any steps that undermine such neutrality would threaten many aspects of the work of the fire and rescue service.

Police and crime commissioners

Another form of blue light integration is under discussion: **police and crime commissioners** (PCCs). The *Sunday Times* reported (16 June 2013): “The home secretary has instructed her officials to draw up plans to merge the “blue light” emergency services of police, fire and ambulance, and place them under the single control of locally elected PCCs... May has been in talks about the plans with Francis Maude, the Cabinet Office minister, and the fire services minister.”⁶⁹

There are also a range of threats from Home Office funding for “blue light collaboration”, driven especially by PCCs. In November 2013, the government announced a £20 million precursor Innovation Fund available to PCCs in this financial year. There is also a Police Innovation Fund from 2014/15, worth up to £50 million per year. 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.

This has been encouraged by Westminster. A Home Office minister wrote to PCCs (4 March 2014) claiming that “some PCCs and FRAs were considering proposals for responsibility of local fire and rescue authorities to transfer to PCCs”. He said “primary legislation would be required to enable such changes” and that, due to demand on parliamentary time, “we are unable to legislate at this time”. However he promised to “keep all future options open”. If these kind of parochial, maverick-driven schemes get the go-ahead, it will further fragment the fire and rescue service, and inevitably public safety will be put at risk.

The Labour Party has not yet spelt out its attitude to PCCs. However a report for Labour by Lord Stevens 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’.⁷⁰

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.

Gerrymandering in London

The Mayor of London’s plans to reform fire and rescue service decision-making in the capital also represent a serious threat.⁷¹ In the longer term the mayor wants a governance model more like the Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC), with a deputy mayor and an assembly committee instead of London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA), much like the PCCs. Because this requires primary legislation, for now he wants to reduce the number of elected assembly members (from eight to six) and councillors (from seven to five), while increasing mayoral appointees from two to six.

The mayor’s proposals to remove representatives of the London Assembly and local boroughs would mean that parts of London will have **no voice** and no influence over the affairs of a central and critical decision-making organisation. LFEPA members are not directly elected to their positions on the authority. However, there is an underlying democratic dimension to their work in view of the fact that they could only be appointed in the first place because they won an election – and secured a mandate – to become a councillor or London Assembly member. And if voters do not like any aspect of their work – including on the fire authority – they retain the power to remove them. That is not the case for mayoral appointees.

LFEPA currently reflects the political balance of parties across London. The mayor’s proposals would undermine this seriously. They would also weaken the mechanism for making **checks and balances** of the mayor’s decisions. Those who are there thanks solely to the patronage of the mayor are inevitably less likely to scrutinise or challenge his decisions.

The proposals are a brazen attempt to gerrymander LFEPA so that it dances to the mayor’s tune. It was never the intention that mayoral appointees should be used to provide a political majority, but to bring a unique expertise and experience to the authority. To increase their number for reasons of political expediency corrupts their role.



Firefighters defend democratic accountability and the right to organise

The FBU believes that there should be no downgrading of elected representatives nor any increases in the mayoral appointees on LFEPA. Any future proposals on LFEPA's structure should strengthen the role of elected representatives on LFEPA, improve democratic accountability of the service and should be subject to thorough consultation with the FBU.

5.2 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 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 might 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 might 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 slide of fragmentation into potential disintegration that is visible in current arrangements.

A principal concern with a national model is that it offers **no guarantees** on cuts, firefighter jobs or further attacks on our conditions. A national model could have an adverse effect on certain key areas of fire and rescue service work, such as in emergency fire controls or in relation to officer roles, with an impact on command and control. 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 without the resources to do anything professionally.

A wider concern is with the democratic governance and **local accountability** of the service. At present, fire authority/board 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, as well as by firefighters.

There are serious implications arising from changes to the work firefighters do and the way the fire and rescue service is governed. There are implications for the basic pay of firefighters that would go with a heavier workload, more responsibility and a wider skill-set. A pay freeze or below-inflation limit of 1% would be scandalous in these circumstances. But there are pay implications of secondary contracts for some kinds of work, for overtime payments and for the body that has overseen these arrangements for decades, the NJC. The issues require a careful analysis of costs and benefits from all models, national, regional and local. In all these matters, it is vital that the FBU – as the voice of those on the frontline – is properly consulted.

National standards and inspection

The case for consistent and common **national standards** is considerably more straightforward. Ken Knight pointed out that the fire and rescue service is out of step with other sectors by not having an independent **inspectorate**. As public bodies, fire and rescue authorities are financially audited, “but an inspectorate would look more widely at the operational performance and effectiveness of the service”.⁷² Confidence and assurance in the service provided are significantly assisted by an independent regulator and inspectorate setting the standards and bringing the providers to account. The absence of such a body for the fire and rescue in England is a serious anomaly.

One of the FBU’s principal criticisms of the so-called “modernisation” agenda of the last government was the fragmentation of the service, brought about by scrapping national standards and some national oversight bodies such as the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council (CFBAC) and the fire inspectorate. These trends have continued under the current government, which scrapped the Practitioners’ Forum. This has led to substantial gaps in vital operational guidance as well as to the deterioration in the speed and weight of emergency response needed to deal efficiently with an expanding range of incident types. There is a crying need for a high-level advisory body, with a wider remit and more resources than the chief fire and rescue advisors, and which would include senior elected FBU officials to oversee the production of operational guidance throughout the service and an inspectorate covering operational, training and planning issues.



FBU members defend vital control rooms

6. What firefighters want

Key messages

- The fire and rescue service needs **investment**, not cuts
- Firefighters provide an irreplaceable service – **more firefighters** are needed to meet the range of threats, risks and emergencies now and going forward
- The FBU wants firefighters' **wider contribution** such as dealing with flooding and terrorism to be recognised, resourced and rewarded accordingly
- Consistent **national standards** backed by a national inspectorate are the best way to improve the fire and rescue service, level up performance and deploy resources efficiently
- The FBU – the **professional voice** of firefighters across the UK – must be heard in any reorganisation plans. Consult the professionals and negotiate to improve the service.

6.1 Investment not cuts

1. 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.
2. The reduction of firefighter numbers is now below resilient levels for normal and major incidents, putting public and firefighter safety at risk. The FBU wants a **new generation of firefighters** recruited to complement the existing professional workforce.
3. The equality agenda in the fire and rescue service has stalled. The FBU wants governments to instigate and implement a **new equality and diversity strategy**, developed in consultation with key stakeholders, and which includes recruitment targets, reporting and training to tackle sexism, racism, homophobia and under-representation within the service.
4. Fire station closures and fewer pumping appliances damage the service to the public. The FBU wants a **moratorium on reduced crewing levels on pumping appliances, and on fire station closures**. We want national standards for appliances and equipment, to cut down on waste and duplication, and to enhance cross-border cooperation.
5. Response times to calls have slowed drastically in the last decade, partly driven by cuts, leading to a postcode lottery when people call for help. Speed and weight of response matter. The FBU wants consistent **national standards**, including a minimum five minute standard for higher-risk areas, and steps to **improve response times to all calls**. There should be a key target for all fire services to improve their emergency response times in relation to attendance and number of appliances.
6. The absence of central guidance and oversight of integrated risk management planning (IRMPs) has led to the fragmentation of the fire and rescue service. Local Resilience Forums are not functioning as they should. The FBU wants **risks and resilience to be assessed nationally** as well as locally, to guarantee standards are maintained and improved.

6.2 A professional fire and rescue service

7. The UK faces increased risks and uncertainty, now and in the future from climate change, the ageing population and the housing crisis, as well as other hazards and threats. The need for an **effective emergency response capability** will increase with these risks. The FBU wants a national risk assessment that includes fire and rescue service capability to plan for and respond to any emergency now and going forward.

8. Continued austerity, further fragmentation and privatisation in all its insidious forms are worse-case scenarios, leading to slower response times, poorly staffed and equipped appliances, and massive problems tackling major incidents. The FBU wants a **guarantee against privatisation** of the fire and rescue service, an end to efforts to outsource and mutualise local fire and rescue services and the return of the Fire Service College to public ownership and control.
9. Firefighters have the right to expect **high standards of pay and good conditions of work**. We have the right to decent quality pensions which reflect the nature of the work we do. Firefighters expect employers and governments to engage constructively with our elected representatives at local and national level and through agreed collective bargaining arrangements. Governments must respect the professionals. There is no case whatsoever for the imposition by government of further changes to mechanism for determining conditions of service.

6.3 The value of the fire and rescue service

10. Firefighters are among a select group of public servants who maintain the **trust and confidence** of the public. The continued high level of **rescues**, rendering assistance to people at their time of greatest need, is testament to the ongoing importance of emergency intervention. Firefighters provide an all-round emergency rescue service. The FBU wants the government to value firefighters and invest in the fire and rescue service.
11. The value of the fire and rescue service far exceeds simply cost-benefit calculations. For £50 per person per year, firefighters tackle a wide range of emergencies, providing **expertise and reassurance** at crucial times for individuals and governments. Firefighters also contribute to wider social goals, such as inclusion, education, reducing anti-social behaviour and helping vulnerable people. The FBU wants governments to recognise this wider contribution and fund the service accordingly.

6.4 A wider role for firefighters

12. Fires and fire deaths have been reduced through the active role of firefighters, better regulation, and societal changes. But the risks are still there and are still high, as firefighters can testify. Emergency intervention is still an absolute necessity. The FBU wants fire **risks to be fully assessed**, fire and rescue services to be fully resourced and firefighters properly trained and equipped to tackle fires.
13. The FBU wants to see the fire and rescue service develop into a modern, all-encompassing fire, rescue and community safety service, which plans for the full range of activities (prevention, protection and intervention) necessary to address all the various risks faced by our communities in the twenty-first century.
14. Firefighters have responded magnificently to major floods in recent years, as the public rightly expects. Flood risk has increased and will continue with climate change. Flood defences alone are not sufficient to protect communities – an emergency response is a vital complement. The FBU wants a **statutory duty on the fire and rescue service to respond to major flooding**, providing the necessary powers and resources to carry out this work safely and professionally.
15. Firefighters already respond to some medical incidents, alongside our colleagues in the ambulance service. The FBU has concerns about expanding the role firefighters could play at category A incidents, including legal liability, training and the impact on fire cover. The union is willing to **discuss serious** proposals put forward by the government and the employers.

16. Firefighters have been rightly praised for interventions at **terrorist incidents** such as 7/7 and in other civil contingencies, such as the riots in 2011. The FBU wants adequate risk assessments of these incidents, as well as resources and sufficient staffing levels to respond professionally.

6.5 Consistent national standards, backed by an inspectorate

17. The FBU wants a **democratically run** fire and rescue service. The union is opposed to integration with the police, including joint control rooms to simultaneously mobilise firefighters and other blue light services. The FBU opposes police and crime commissioners taking over the governance of local fire and rescue services.
18. Proposals for a national fire and rescue service have the advantage of looking at the service as a whole, putting the emphasis on national resilience, cross-border cooperation and planning. This is preferable to the laissez-faire localism in which the government abdicates its responsibilities for the fire and rescue service. The FBU is willing to **discuss serious proposals** for reorganising the fire and rescue service, as long as they will improve public and firefighter safety and protect democratic accountability.
19. The fire and rescue service is unique – in England at least – in not having an **inspectorate** to monitor its work. The FBU wants a national fire and rescue service inspectorate, with a wide remit – including operational planning, training, procedures and efficiency – to help assess and audit national standards.
20. The fire and rescue service also needs a **national oversight body** responsible for the development of national standards, codes of practice, guidance and standard operating procedures to level up and improve standards across the country.
21. The FBU will campaign for our right to **independent trade unionism** in the fire and rescue service and wider society, which should not be restricted by the type of work firefighters carry out. The union will campaign to defend existing national negotiating structures on pay and conditions, and in defence of our officials' right to facility time, time off for trade union duties and other workplace rights.



Flood rescue is now a core function for firefighters

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