

Firefighter

The magazine of the Fire Brigades Union

REBUILD

A fight for the future, see p10

FIREFIGHTERS DEMAND:

INVESTMENT

**NATIONAL
STANDARDS**

**WORKERS'
RIGHTS**

**GRENELL TOWER
INQUIRY REPORT**

See p14

**CLADDING: 'LIKE
RAINING FIRE'**

See p16

**RESPONSE TIMES
POST CODE LOTTERY**

See p4

October/November 2024



www.fbu.org.uk

TIME TO DELIVER

On Tuesday 8 October, with the new government barely 100 days old, around 1,000 firefighters gathered in central London for a national rally and lobby of parliament.

It was a serious show of strength and dedication from FBU members. Our headline for the day was “rebuild our fire service”. This can be done with investment, new national standards in the fire service, and workers’ rights.

These demands are not just nice ideas. They are within our grasp. Labour committed prior to the election to re-establish national standards, and to the New Deal for Working People – which includes the repeal of the Tories’ latest anti-union laws.

These promises are not a coincidence, but the result of years of careful work by the FBU.

FBU members came from every corner of the UK (the Inverness branch banner was among the most prominent) because they understood the necessity of continuing to apply pressure on this government to deliver. Read more on page 10.

NEW WORKERS' RIGHTS

Shortly before we went to press, the government published its Employment Rights Bill, the culmination of years of work by the FBU and other unions.

As Labour has a majority of 174, it is very likely to become law. When it does so, we will see the biggest expansion in workers’ rights in decades. But we must be clear that our work is not done. The FBU will keep up the pressure. See page 6 for more detail.

FIGHT FOR JUSTICE

This is the first issue of *Firefighter* since the final report of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. It was more than seven years from the events of 14 June 2017 to



Did you know ...?



Firefighting featured at the 1900 Olympic Games in Paris as an unofficial sport. Teams of both professional and volunteer firefighters were required to extinguish a house fire and perform a rescue. There were three volunteer teams: from England, Hungary and Portugal (the winners); and two professional teams: Italy and the USA (the winners).



the publication of Phase Two of the Inquiry on 4 September 2024.

The FBU shares the grief and anger of the bereaved, survivors and residents. We call for justice for those who were killed and traumatised by this entirely preventable fire.

Firefighters and fire control staff were put in an impossible position, forced to respond to a fire in a high-rise building effectively wrapped in petrol. Many behaved heroically on the night,

Scottish firefighters at the rally and lobby of parliament in London on 8 October and, below, Matt Wrack speaking at the rally



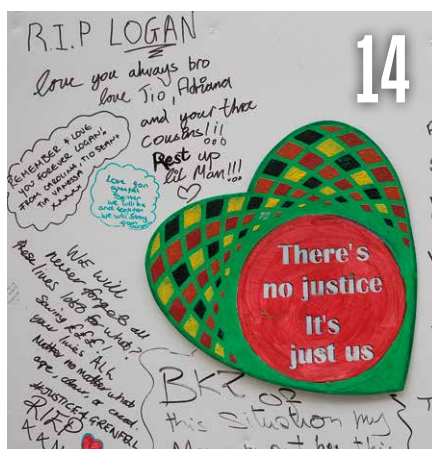
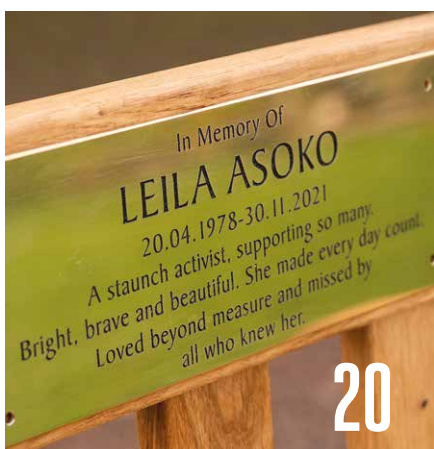
and we should all be proud of them.

We always argued that the fire was the result of

decades of failure by central government to regulate the building industry – the prioritisation of private profit over human life. Residents and firefighters repeatedly warned of the dangers of combustible cladding. They were ignored.

The inquiry report vindicates those who warned of the dangers of deregulation, including the FBU.

You can read more about our response to the report on page 14.



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Firefighter

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Firefighter production team:
Michael Chessum, Alice Dann,
Lisa Irving, Gabriella Matkin and
Alan Slingsby

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NEWS

EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS

Government Bill 'very significant extension of workers' rights' **p6**



CRUEL, UNNECESSARY

Unions push for reversal of winter fuel allowance cuts **p7**



RESPONSE TIMES



The average total response time to primary fires in England was only 10 seconds better than last year's figure

Static response times highlight need for national standards

Fire and rescue response times in England for the year ending March 2024 reinforce the need for national standards, the FBU has warned.

The average total response time to primary fires in England was nine minutes and three seconds, only 10 seconds better than last year's figure, which was the slowest on record.

Of the average total response time, call handling accounted for 16%, crew turnout accounted for 17% and drive time accounted for 68%. Official figures only cover the attendance times for the first appliance, despite the fact that many emergency incidents require a larger attendance.

Response times are significantly slower than 30 years ago. In 1994-95, the average response time to a primary fire was six minutes, 11 seconds.

All fire and rescue services, urban and rural, have seen deteriorating response times in recent decades. The FBU has for many years called for national standards

of fire cover to prevent fire and rescue services setting their own standards and failing to meet their own targets.

This year, response times slowed in services including Avon, Berkshire, Cleveland, Cornwall, Cumbria, Devon, Essex, Gloucestershire, Greater Manchester, Lancashire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, and Oxfordshire.

Cuts to firefighter jobs, fire stations and appliances have resulted in reduced fire cover in many areas, with firefighters having to travel greater distances to attend fires.

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services

'Last years' response times, the slowest in recent records, should have been a wake-up call'

has recognised the post-code lottery of fire cover, finding that standards "vary considerably across England, so what you can expect in one service differs from what another would provide a few miles away across a border".

Matt Wrack, FBU general secretary, said: "The fire and rescue service is in crisis after years of austerity and fragmentation. While we face the flooding, wildfires and extreme weather of the climate emergency, we have lost one in five firefighters to cuts.

"Fewer resources mean that fire engines take far longer to arrive at a fire than in the 1990s, and fire services' capacity varies wildly by region. Last years' response times, the slowest in recent records, should have been a wake-up call.

"The government must deliver on promises to end the fire cover post-code lottery through a statutory advisory body, and provide the urgent investment needed to protect homes and lives."

MP joins calls for rethink on cuts that 'simply don't add up'

Dorset and Wiltshire FBU has launched local campaigns across the region, calling on councillors and the fire authority to reverse plans to slash fire cover.

Fire and rescue service bosses announced the plans only a month before removing fire engines from stations in September. Firefighters were shocked to find the engines had disappeared from four fire stations without warning.

Under the plans, there will be no guaranteed firefighter availability between Swindon and Salisbury which are more than 40 miles apart.

The engines disappeared from stations protecting the vast and dangerous network of former limestone

mine tunnels known as the Corsham Underground, as well as at-risk historic high streets.

Wholetime cover will be downgraded in several areas, with fewer firefighters available at night.

Poole, which provides fire cover across the south of Dorset, faces losing a wholetime crewed fire engine by April next year.

Neil Duncan-Jordan, Labour MP for Poole, has said that these cuts "simply don't add up".

The removal of fire engines at Wimborne, Sherborne and Portland is due to be reviewed in January 2025.

■ Station Cat – page 23

SOUTH YORKSHIRE FIGHT FOR 52



'We won't stop' FBU maternity pay campaigners warn authority

Firefighters called for better maternity pay at a rally outside a meeting of the South Yorkshire Fire Authority in September.

The union's Fight for 52 weeks campaign has resulted in several services increasing maternity provision to 12 months of full pay. However, South Yorkshire currently lags behind, offering only 26 weeks compared to 52 weeks in Greater

Manchester and the West Midlands.

Only 8% of the firefighting workforce in South Yorkshire are women, and firefighters are urging their service to provide better maternity pay to aid recruitment and diversity.

An FBU representative was denied permission to question the authority. Instead, firefighters addressed councillors

directly outside the building.

Robyn Richardson, FBU national women's committee chair, said: "Fire and rescue service employers cannot continue dragging their feet when it comes to fair maternity pay.

"We will not stop fighting until every fire and rescue service provides the necessary 52 weeks full maternity pay."

Sounding off



A Hillsborough law

Elkan Abrahamson is a solicitor and campaigner with Hillsborough Law Now

Following the 1989 Hillsborough disaster, at which 97 people lost their lives, bereaved families have spent decades fighting to reveal the truth.

Exposures which followed led to the campaign for a "Hillsborough law". It was developed by myself and others, and introduced to parliament by Andy Burnham in 2017.

It aims to establish a "duty of candour" on public authorities and officials to tell the truth and to proactively cooperate with official investigations and inquiries.

It would also provide parity of legal representation for victims of disasters or state-related deaths.

A series of other scandals and cover-ups – including the infected blood scandal, the Post Office Horizon system and, particularly relevant for FBU members, Grenfell – have shown the need for this.

What does this mean in practice? It should ensure that any disaster is followed by an honest and open search for truth. Public bodies should cooperate so that a report with recommendations is published and acted on promptly, ultimately saving lives. Junior officers should not feel intimidated into covering up mistakes. The law would require every public body to have a code of ethics promoting ethical behaviour, transparency and candour, and protection for whistleblowers.

At the recent Labour party conference, Keir Starmer promised to introduce the legislation by the 35th anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster in April.

The ramifications for the fire service will need to be considered and training provided.

EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS BILL



Demonstrators in Parliament Square, London, at an emergency protest called by the TUC against the Minimum Service Levels Bill – which eventually became law but now stands to be repealed – in May 2023

Government publishes workers' rights package

On Thursday 10 October, the government unveiled its Employment Rights Bill. The legislation, which will now begin its journey through the House of Commons, would be the biggest expansion in workers' rights in a generation. As Labour has a majority of 174, it is very likely to become law.

It includes:

- The repeal of the Minimum Service Levels Act 2023 and the Trade Union Act 2016
- Day-one rights for paternity leave, sick leave, and unfair dismissal protection
- The right to regular hours for many workers currently on zero hours contracts

- The banning of fire and rehire unless a company is about to go bust
- The right to request flexible working arrangements
- The removal of lower rates of minimum wage for younger workers
- A Fair Work Agency to act as an enforcer.

Speaking as the Bill was published, FBU general secretary Matt Wrack said that it was a “very significant extension of workers' rights” and “a huge victory for the FBU and other unions that have been at the forefront of campaigning to ensure that Labour's New Deal for Working People is fully delivered.”

He continued: “The lives of

firefighters and other public sector workers will be immeasurably improved by the new rights to bereavement leave and parental leave from day one of employment.”

Attention will now turn to the Bill's passage through parliament. Unions will ensure that workers' voices are represented, including with amendments if necessary.

Wrack said: “There must be no delay in the full implementation of this hugely welcome package.

“That must also be reflected in pay offers to firefighters and other public sector workers in the Budget later this month.”

GENERAL SECRETARY ELECTION

In accordance with the rules of the union, the executive council has decided to conduct an election for the position of general secretary. The current holder of the post, Matt Wrack, is eligible for re-election. Nomination forms have been dispatched by head office to all branches.

WEST MIDLANDS

Concerns raised over leaders

The FBU has voiced its concerns over events in West Midlands Fire and Rescue Service. Oliver Lee, its chief executive, resigned in early October after issuing a public attack on the service's governance, though later attempted to withdraw his resignation. He declined to apply for the permanent post. Greg Brackenridge, the chair of the fire authority, has now also resigned.

FBU general secretary Matt Wrack said: “Firefighters and the public in the West Midlands are being failed by senior leaders. After the embarrassment and disruption of recent weeks, it is welcome that the fire authority have acknowledged the FBU's concerns and committed to change. We will hold the new chair of the fire authority and chief of the service to account.”

In brief

Berkshire

Firefighters in Berkshire are campaigning against the removal of one of Slough's two fire engines, highlighting the dangers of increased response times after 300 people had to be evacuated from an apartment building with flammable cladding in the town this August.



ANTONIE JENTERS

Trade unions are pushing for Labour to reverse plans to cut the winter fuel allowance, branding the policy “cruel and unnecessary”.

Chancellor Rachel Reeves has announced that around 10 million pensioners in England and Wales will lose their winter fuel payments. The number of pensioners eligible will drop from 11.4 million to 1.5 million in England. Scotland and Northern Ireland governments plan to follow suit.

Winter fuel payments are worth between £100 and £300, although in recent years this had been boosted to between £250 and £600 due to the cost-of-living crisis.

The chancellor has said that this measure is necessary due to a “black hole” in the nation’s finances.

However, unions have described this as picking the pockets of pensioners instead



News Focus

Winter fuel allowance

of raising public funds through taxing wealth.

Age UK has estimated that two million pensioners who would rely on the payments to stay warm this winter will not receive them.

Charities warn that fuel poverty kills. The End Fuel Poverty Coalition estimates that nearly 5,000 people died as a result of living in cold homes last winter.

Delegates at the Labour party’s annual conference this year voted against the cut, calling for the government to

reverse its plans and tax the wealthy instead.

The motion, put forward by Unite the Union and seconded by the Communication Workers Union, was supported by FBU delegates, and passed in a landmark vote.

Speaking from the podium, Unite general secretary Sharon Graham said: “I do not understand how our new Labour government can cut the winter fuel payment for pensioners and leave the

super-rich untouched. This is not what people voted for.”

Trade union leaders have since continued to raise the issue. At a meeting with Rachel Reeves in early October, general secretaries including Matt Wrack pressed the need for the leadership to reinstate the allowance.

“The proposed cut to winter fuel allowance is regressive, unpopular and unnecessary,” said Matt Wrack.

“It is not an exaggeration to say that people will die this winter if they cannot afford to heat their homes properly.

“We fought for a Labour government on the basis that it would end austerity after more than a decade of attacks on living standards – and Keir Starmer must not let voters down.

“Labour must tax the rich and wealthy instead.”



THE BIG PICTURE

FBU photo competition winner

Well developed vehicle fire two pumps attended Lymm and Altrincham Greater Manchester FRS

Stuart Stenhouse, winner of the 2024 FBU photo competition, combined photographic quality, composition, and relevance in his image of a firefighter with breathing apparatus extinguishing a car fire, said the competition judges.

He may also have had the luck that sometimes comes into play to create a memorable image, with the sun low on the horizon and another light source combining with the flames from the car and dense smoke to create an intriguing picture. Trees, specks of foam caught in the light and road marking add interest. And it's not too hard to imagine the front of the car as a fire-breathing dragon.

■ See page 22 for more winning images and the judges' comments



REBUILD OUR

On 8 October, 1,000 firefighters gathered in Westminster for a national rally and lobby of parliament to demand urgent action from the government.

Firefighter reports

On a Tuesday in early autumn, politicians setting out for a routine day in Westminster were confronted with a different spectacle to the usual crowds. Around 1,000 firefighters had descended on central London, travelling from all corners of the UK to demand a future for the fire and rescue service.

Later that day, the corridors of the Houses of Parliament were packed with firefighters in tunics. Each had arrived with a clear purpose: to speak to their MP face to face.

At midday on 8 October, FBU members from across the UK had gathered for a national rally at the Emmanuel Centre. Some had journeyed over 500 miles to be there. Many brought stories of fire services devastated by cuts and fragmentation.

The rally took place around 100 days into the new Labour government's time in office. After 14 years of austerity and decades of fragmentation, the change in government offers the opportunity to turn the tide.

Firefighters filled the historic auditorium as speakers began to address the audience. Rank and file speakers from across the UK spoke eloquently about the damage caused by austerity, the dangers of crews of three, the FBU's



DECON campaign, the fight for equality in the fire and rescue service and right to strike.

The rally also heard from a number of guest speakers, including Mauro Giulianella of the FP CGIL union representing firefighters in Italy; Nikolaos Lavranos, president of the Panhellenic Federation of Fire Service Employees in Greece; and Sarah Sultana MP, chair of the FBU's parliamentary group.

FBU general secretary Matt Wrack reminded the rally of the achievements of members in recent years. "They haven't privatised us," he said. "The NJC is still there. The Tory White Paper is

all but dead. And that is because of this union, and the thousands of firefighters who have stood together. Together, we've mobilised and we've pushed them back."

He noted the union's recent pay settlements – 7% in 2022, 5% in 2023 and 4% in 2024 – and the recent increases to the retaining fee and maternity pay. "This is what we can achieve when we speak with one voice", he said.

This was the first trade union rally of its kind since the general election, and the FBU was keen to use the event to drive home its message to the new government.

"Whatever you think of this government, what we have now is an

FIRE SERVICE



'What we have now is an opportunity, not just to win better conditions for ourselves, but to shape the future of our profession and the fire service for decades to come'

opportunity," he said, "not just to win better conditions for ourselves, but to shape the future of our profession and the fire service for decades to come".

The FBU is focussing its lobbying efforts on three key areas:

INVESTMENT

After 14 years of austerity, we need to repair the damage inflicted on the fire and rescue service and public safety.

We need investment to make our service resilient for a future with a changing climate and emerging new technologies, and we need resources to create better, safer working conditions for firefighters on the frontline.

STANDARDS

Fragmentation of the fire service has made the public less safe. Response times are slower than ever, and in some areas fire engines are sent to fires without enough firefighters to safely tackle incidents.

We need a national body with legal standing to set standards on fire cover, training, equalities and health and safety, with firefighters given a voice.

WORKERS' RIGHTS

Firefighters and other workers have endured years of attacks on their pay, pensions, collective bargaining, and right to take industrial action.

The government must deliver the New Deal for Working People in full, scrapping the Tories' anti-union laws to give workers a proper voice and improve the living standards of all working people.

ON THE AGENDA

The Labour Party promised in its manifesto to re-introduce national standards in the fire and rescue service, and to scrap many of the Tories' recent anti-union laws.

This is not an accident, but the result of years of careful work by FBU members who have rallied, lobbied and campaigned.

This rally marked the beginning of a collective effort to get the fire and rescue service on the agenda of every MP. The FBU will now push Labour to deliver on its promises – and to go further.

We took the message to parliament on 8 October. now we must take it to MPs' local offices, meetings and surgeries across the UK.

WHY WE RALLIED

Will Stone listened to the speeches and spoke to firefighters at the FBU's national rally about why they attended



LEONI MUNSLow

National women's committee, London region

“We want to see national standards for maternity rights that give 52 weeks of full pay for all female firefighters. Currently maternity pay is a postcode lottery where one station will offer the minimum and another 52 weeks. This has to change. However, we're pleased that we have achieved a minimum agreement for 26 weeks full pay at the last pay round, so we're half way there.



LEWIS CLARK

FBU Scotland

“We have had more than 1,400 frontline firefighters cut in Scotland since 2010, which is nearly 20%. It has to stop. We need investment to properly fund resources, allow for better working conditions and to help respond to emergencies on time. If the new Labour government is serious about change it must turn back the clock on 14 years of austerity, and put public safety first.



CRAIG ELSON

Staffordshire brigade organiser

“I've been a firefighter for 21 years and keeping communities safer has become increasingly difficult. There have been cuts to more than 12,000 firefighter jobs across Britain since 2010. We have seen fire crews cut to unsafe levels as a result. Some fire engines have crews of only three, which is putting lives at risk. We are demanding a national standards body that firefighters sit on. It's time that we rebuild our broken and fragmented fire services.



EMILY HOLLANDS

**Greater Manchester
fire investigator**

“I’m proud to be part of a humanitarian profession that saves lives. But too many are suffering from bullying, harassment and discrimination, which goes right to the top. In Greater Manchester we have won 52 weeks maternity leave on full pay. But it isn’t good enough for us to stop there. It’s great that a woman in my brigade gets 52 weeks, but why should a woman next door get less?”



DAVE PITT

**West Midlands fire service
crew commander**

“Many of us will know a firefighter who has died of cancer as a result of their job. Exposure to toxic substances is an avoidable risk and we need to stop firefighters dying as a result. Every firefighter should have access to the resources they need to protect themselves. But these resources won’t be given to us, we have to fight for them. We can prevent cancers and death. Let’s do it for our colleagues and the future generations of firefighters.”



EMMA POLLEY

Essex fire control

“I was involved in the first ever control strike in FBU history in 2014 and 2015. I didn’t come into the fire service to strike, I joined to save lives. But to defend public safety we must be able to defend working conditions, and sometimes that means taking industrial action. What we did nine years ago was effectively banned under the Tories with the minimum service levels act. Before the election, Labour promised to scrap that law quickly. I’m here today to make sure they don’t forget that promise.”



JOHN HODGKISS

**West Midlands
watch commander**

“I’m here because I want to see the new Labour government deliver what they have promised and to reverse the cuts. But the cuts date back further than 14 years. They have been going on for much longer. The last Labour government has to share some responsibility for it. We can only hope that the new Labour government will do better. I also want to see national standards set for training that will also help to improve safety and save lives.”



MATTHEW WILKINS

Firefighter, Perry Bar

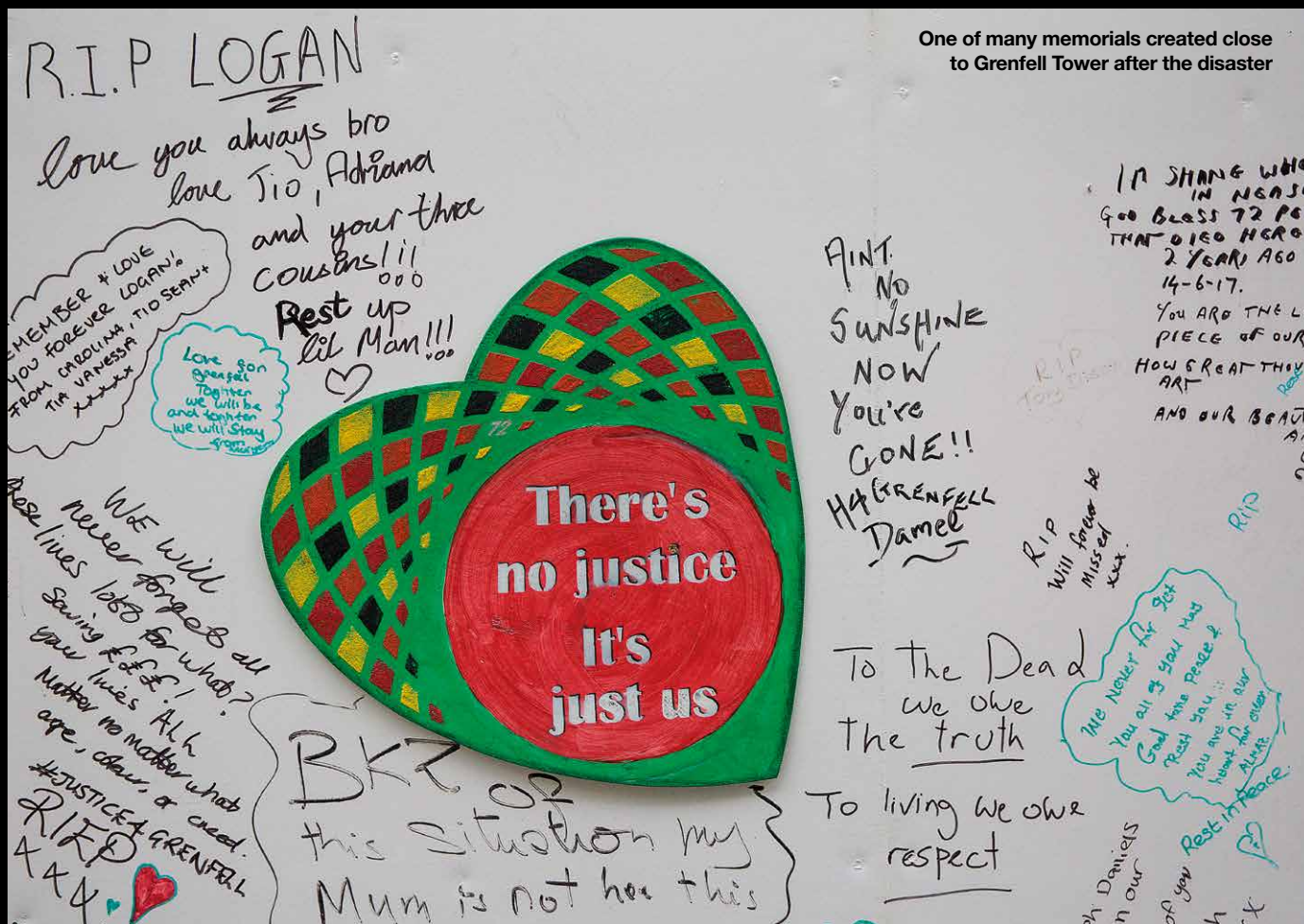
“There’s no standardisation on training for firefighters. Training usually takes around 13 weeks but it’s a postcode lottery. More investment and standardisation in training would help improve fire services across the country and all operating at the same level.”



MILES STUBBS

**Group commander
based in Inverness**

“National standards have been in decline for many years and we’re going backwards. The new Labour government has a real opportunity now to repair the damage. Fire services are facing big challenges financially with reduced budgets. But funding and resources need to address the new challenges caused by climate change as floods and wildfires increase.”



Grief, anger and vindication

The final Grenfell Tower Inquiry report blamed government and construction firms. **Matt Wrack** commends the public inquiry for finding systemic failures and says ministers must go further

After seven long years the Grenfell Tower public inquiry finally published its report, blaming the fire on the Westminster government, manufacturers and the construction firms that refurbished the building.

The report excoriated the private testing and certification bodies like BRE and BBA, along with industry lobbyists NHBC and others who failed to warn of the risks of flammable cladding and insulation.

London Fire Brigade (LFB) failures were due to “a chronic lack of leadership”, while the firefighters who attended the Grenfell Tower fire “displayed enormous courage and selfless devotion to duty”.

THE REPORT

The Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase 2 report is a gargantuan publication – seven volumes, 113 chapters, 1,700 pages and 58 recommendations. The report will certainly set the agenda in our profession for many years to come.

The inquiry found that “the fire at Grenfell Tower was the culmination of decades of failure by central government and other bodies in positions of responsibility in the construction industry to look carefully into the danger of incorporating combustible materials”.

The report repeatedly criticises the government’s deregulatory agenda, which “dominated the department’s thinking to such an extent that even matters affecting the safety of life were ignored, delayed or disregarded”.

The inquiry concluded that “the conflict between the regulatory function of building control and the pressures of commercial interests prevents a system of that kind from effectively serving the public interest”.

DEREGULATION

Deregulation meant freeing markets and increasing opportunities for competition, while lifting supposed administrative and legislative burdens from business. It meant putting profit before safety. Deregulation was the underlining political philosophy pioneered by the Thatcher government, continued under Blair and accelerated under Cameron.

Forty years of deregulation broke the building safety system and left the fire and rescue service on its knees. Thatcher watered down the building regulations,

The public inquiry report deserves careful reading, assessment and, where necessary, criticism. The FBU must have a seat at the table, to stand up for our members, hold politicians and businesses to account, and ensure justice for Grenfell



The report repeatedly criticises the government’s deregulatory agenda, which ‘dominated the department’s thinking to such an extent that even matters affecting the safety of life were ignored, delayed or disregarded’

allowed private “approved” inspectors to assess new buildings, and privatised testing and research facilities like BRE.

Blair imposed “modernisation” on the fire and rescue service, removing national standards and weakening enforcement through the Fire Safety Order.

Then Cameron and his friends imposed austerity, sold off the Fire Service College, tried to privatise the whole fire and rescue service and gave chief fire officers a free hand with CRMPs, cuts and empire-building.

LONDON FIRE BRIGADE

The LFB was at the sharp end of this deregulation. They sold off London’s fire engines, handing them to AssetCo, which promptly went bankrupt. LFB’s training was given to Babcocks, which failed to keep incident commanders, firefighters and other staff up to date.

In 2012, LFB came within a whisker of privatising its brand new control room, and then introduced the terrible Vision system into control.

Just three years before the Grenfell Tower fire, London mayor Boris Johnson imposed savage cuts, closing 10 fire stations and removing one in 10 firefighter jobs in the capital. Response times slowed and principal management failed to train firefighters and control staff for the risks they faced.

THE FBU

Uniquely, the FBU opposed deregulation and warned of cladding risks decades before and right up to the eve of the Grenfell Tower fire.

As soon as Thatcher came to power, the FBU faced down their plans to wreck the fire and rescue service. The union defended national standards and saw off efforts to water down fire safety laws. The FBU fought off another round of deregulation proposed by John Major.

In 1999, 18 years before the Grenfell Tower fire, the FBU warned the Westminster parliament in writing and with testimony about the risks of flammable cladding. Ministers, senior civil servants and chief fire officers ignored the union and carried on with business as usual.

The FBU investigated firefighter deaths in tower blocks, such as Harrow Court in Hertfordshire in 2005 and Shirley Towers in Hampshire in 2010. The FBU wrote to ministers, warning about procedures, stay put, pre-determined attendance and risk assessment, but was rebuffed.

The FBU fought against privatisation and austerity, while defending our members’ pay, pensions and safety.

The FBU is therefore vindicated by the public inquiry report in standing up for public safety and our profession.

CHANGE DIRECTION

The inquiry’s recommendations are a good starting point for discussions with politicians at Westminster and the devolved administration. The FBU will engage with the NFCC and others in the sector about a change of direction, to revitalise the service and its workforce.

The public inquiry report deserves careful reading, assessment and, where necessary, criticism. The FBU must have a seat at the table, to stand up for our members, hold politicians and businesses to account, and ensure justice for Grenfell.



Dagenham: 'It felt like it was raining fire'

Barrie Clement reports on another cladding blaze that could have ended in tragedy

The call came through at 2.44am. Darren Placid, sub-officer at Romford fire station in east London, thought it sounded fairly routine. There was a fire outside a high rise building in nearby Dagenham. There was a nursery on the ground floor, but mercifully at that time of the morning it would be empty.

When Darren and his four-strong crew neared the blaze about 10 minutes after getting the call, it became clear that the incident was far more serious than originally thought. Three pumps were on their way initially to join the Dagenham appliance, but that soon rose to 10 and quickly to 20. A major incident was declared.

One side of the Spectrum building in Freshwater Road was free of fire, but thick black smoke billowed from the other side and it was fully ablaze on the top few floors. "It felt like it was raining fire," said Darren. "Embers were flying everywhere."

One of the officers from the Ilford station used a loud hailer to tell people to get out of the building. "If you can evacuate, evacuate," he shouted. "If you can't, we'll come and get you."

TERRIFYING

One of those who managed to escape was BBC journalist Paul Cusiac, who was woken at about 2.45 am to see "fiery orange flames" engulfing his bedroom window. "It was one of the most terrifying times of my life. I started coughing and I was aware that many people who die in fires, die of smoke inhalation."

He fled his flat, leaving the building amid a shower of blazing embers and sparks. "I was wearing everything I owned in the world. Just two T shirts."

He added: "I have nothing but praise for firefighters. The values of our society are all wrong when people in the financial sector receive vast pay packets, while the people who really matter like firefighters are undervalued."

The fire has left him, and all the other residents, in a homeless limbo, "but I'm alive and I came very close to dying".

More than 80 people escaped, while 20 more were rescued by firefighters. Two people were taken to hospital, but thankfully no-one died.

All those present that night, including Darren, could not help but remember the Grenfell Tower disaster.

They also recalled the findings in September of the public inquiry which revealed the incompetence, dishonesty



Two aerial ladder platforms were used in the aftermath of the fire
Pictures: Jess Hurd



FBU general secretary Matt Wrack talks to members at the scene

'I've been in the fire service for 19 years and I've not seen a fire quite like it'

and greed that made the tragedy possible. And in particular the flammable cladding which acted as a devastating accelerant.

The blaze drew attention yet again to the crisis in high-rise building safety. The Dagenham complex had "non-compliant" cladding on it, according to the London Fire Brigade and had been the subject of a fire enforcement notice since 2023. The structure was in the process of having the dangerous material removed – the top two floors were surrounded by scaffolding.

While the process of removing the cladding on Britain's buildings continues at snail's pace, FBU members like

Darren have to risk their lives to deal with the consequences.

"I've been in the fire service for 19 years and I've not seen a fire quite like it. We were all a bit emotional about it and we all breathed a sigh of relief because there were no fatalities."

Some 4,600 residential buildings have been identified as having unsafe cladding. Seven years after the Grenfell tragedy, work to remove it has still not started on half of them.

Matt Wrack, FBU general secretary, said: "Once again, a fire has erupted in a residential building wrapped in flammable cladding.

"Hundreds of thousands of people continue to live in buildings like it, with various failings in fire safety. This is a national scandal."

A spokesman for activist group End Our Cladding Scandal said the previous government had demonstrably failed to heed the warnings of ordinary people living in fear in their own homes. Tory ministers should have funded work up front to remedy defects – not just cladding – and "then pursued the blame game later".

"The Labour government must swiftly provide the support that the blameless residents and leaseholders in Dagenham need to recover after the fire, and show that safety in our own homes is at the heart of their housing policy," said the group.



INTERVENING TO FIGHT FOR OUR SERVICE AND OUR RIGHTS

Riccardo la Torre reflects on this year's TUC congress and Labour conference, and explains why the FBU gets stuck in

Politics intervenes regularly in our work. Cladding fires, including the Grenfell Tower fire are occurring because ministers scrapped regulations which kept people safe. Firefighters have to attend fires with too few people on an appliance because of political decisions.

So the FBU intervenes in politics, too, and doing this effectively means building alliances with other unions. Every September, we attend the conferences of the Trade Union Congress and the Labour party to push the FBU's agenda – as determined democratically by you and the representatives you elect.

JESS HARRIS

TUC CONGRESS

The TUC represents 5.5 million workers and its annual congress is its highest body. Delegates from each affiliated union – including the FBU – speak and vote on motions, which become the policy of the TUC.

This year, Congress was in Brighton between 8 and 11 September. It was the first time since the general election that the trade union movement had met.

The FBU proposed two motions, both of which passed. The first was a call for investment in the fire and rescue service, as well as national standards, overseen by a statutory body, and a variety of other core demands. The second committed the TUC to pushing Labour to deliver on the New Deal for Working People, and to reaffirming its commitment to the repeal of all anti-union laws.

The congress also heard from guest speakers including the prime minister, Keir Starmer, and the Palestine ambassador, Husam Zomlot.

THE PRESIDENCY

For the first time in almost half a century, TUC congress was chaired by the general secretary of the FBU.

Matt Wrack was elected as TUC president last year, and so chaired this year's congress and the TUC's other decision-making bodies.

In his opening remarks, he focussed on the final report of the Grenfell Tower inquiry, which was published just days before the Congress opened.

"Almost to a man and woman," he said, "the people entering that inferno that night, risking their own lives in desperate attempts to save others – were trade unionists, members of the Fire Brigades Union and I remain incredibly proud of what they did."

At the close of the congress, Matt handed over the baton to the next TUC president, Mark Dickinson of Nautilus International, the seafarers' union.

Matt Wrack addresses the TUC congress in Brighton

LABOUR PARTY CONFERENCE

Tens of thousands of people gathered for the Labour party conference in Liverpool between 22 and 25 September. The FBU's intervention was focussed on four key things.

First, we fought for Labour to adopt a policy to learn the lessons of the Grenfell tragedy and rebuild the fire service. The passing of our motion means that conference formally called on the government to:

- Provide sustained investment in local government and the fire and rescue service, including fire inspectors.
- Ensure building control is only carried out by local authority staff, not private contractors.
- Bring fire testing and research under public ownership and control
- Establish a statutory advisory body, including the FBU, to oversee fire safety policy, research, training and guidance.

Second, we united with other unions to push Labour to repair the damage of the last 14 years by fulfilling its promises on workers' rights. We also supported

Unite's motion to scrap the cuts to winter fuel allowance, which passed.

Third, we met dozens of Labour politicians – including mayors, councillors and MPs from all over the UK – to lobby them on our demands for investment, national standards and workers' rights. And, finally, we organised and took part in a series of fringe events, including a major discussion of how the labour movement can defeat the far right.

WE STAND TOGETHER

As outgoing TUC president, Matt Wrack addressed the Labour conference shortly before it closed. He used his speech to reflect on the vital role of all workers during the Covid pandemic.

"During that pandemic we saw ordinary people, do extraordinary things. Workers grew the food. Workers transported food. Workers sold the food. And of course, workers delivered our amazing public services.

"Workers got this country through that crisis and workers should never have

to pay for crises. That's why unions make no apologies that we wish to deliver the New Deal for Working people in full and without delay."

Addressing this summer's riots, he said: "Our message is that we stand together – that we are united regardless of our differences. Our enemies don't sail the Channel in flimsy boats. They travel the world by private jet and they play financial games with our futures and with the future of our planet."

VITAL WORK

The fire and rescue service is a public service. The money that funds us – that pays for our wages, pensions, equipment and training – is controlled by politicians. However your own service is governed by politicians: commissioners, councillors or mayors.

We attend conferences like Labour and TUC to fight for our profession and for a better world. Our long history shows that, however far off it may seem from the realities of frontline firefighting, this work is vital.

The FBU B&EMM committee reports from this year's FBU black and ethnic minority members' school



Thirty years – and still plenty to be done

The FBU black and ethnic minority members section (B&EMM) national committee hosted its annual school at Wortley Hall, Sheffield. This year we recognised 30 years of the section, discussing the journey so far and the work still to be done.

Members were greeted by rousing music played on steel pans, before entering the brightly adorned conference room. Assistant general secretary Ben Selby opened the school, followed by an array of speakers, all contributing to a weekend of education, empowerment and valuable networking.

Speakers included Micky Nicholas, Les Bowman, Paul Greaves and Mark Brown – four retired members instrumental in the formation of the FBU B&EMM, first as an informal network in 1994 and then as an official FBU section in 1999.

This followed five years of organising by black and minoritised individuals who were suffering racial abuse, victimisation and discrimination in their fire and rescue services.

Attendees also witnessed the unveiling of the George Arthur Roberts portrait, which now hangs in the FBU Bar at Wortley.

The portrait was proudly unveiled by his great granddaughter Samantha Harding and is now on loan to Wortley until mid-next year.

George Arthur Roberts was a soldier during the First World War and an auxiliary firefighter based in London during The Second World War. He was awarded a British Empire Medal for his courage. After serving as a firefighter, George was recognised for his community work.

Speakers during the weekend also included Ben Jamal, director of the



Palestine Solidarity Campaign; Moyra Samuels, representing the North Kensington community around the Grenfell Tower; Cameron Matthews, Unison; and FBU general secretary Matt Wrack.

We recognised the contributions of two phenomenal woman – Samantha Samuels and the late Leila Asoko.

Samantha Samuels announced her retirement after serving 34 years with West Midlands Fire and Rescue Service.

Attendees heard tributes from her brigade and others. Samantha was the first black woman to serve in the West Midlands, and became a full-time FBU

rep. She has been a continuous and committed FBU member, contributing greatly to both the fire and rescue service and the union.

Leila Asoko was the Region 5 B&EMM rep. She sadly lost her battle with cancer in November 2021. It was at her funeral that the B&EMM committee made a solemn promise to keep Leila's memory alive. A staunch activist with resilience and a gift of true empathy, Leila was remembered by the unveiling of a memorial bench, in the presence of the school attendees and her family members.

This year's B&EMM school closed with a reminder to all that, sadly, there is still plenty of work to be done to ensure that all are treated fairly, with equal opportunity and dignity. The work continues, building on 30 years of organising.





Meet the rep

Emma Polley
Essex fire control

1. What made you want to become a rep?

The current rep left the service, and control were heading into the biggest fight Essex control has seen. I had only been in the service a couple of years, but I have always been one to stand up for what is right, and taking on the role just felt right. It was a bit daunting to begin with, but seeing the strength of the branch gave me full confidence.

2. What is your proudest moment as a rep?

The most proud moment for me as a rep was when the mighty Essex control branch took strike action in 2015 after service leaders dismissed any kind of negotiation, and tried to take away our terms and conditions. The branch took the strike to the next level and carried out nine full days of strike action which got us a mention by then TUC general secretary Frances O'Grady and a standing ovation at the Women's TUC, a very proud moment. Oh, and we won our terms and conditions back!

3. Who are your ultimate heroes?

My heroes are the people in my life and beyond that have had the courage to make a stand against something that is unjust. There's a lot to learn from being around people who aren't afraid to challenge. You may not achieve the outcome you want, but at least you can say you've tried. It takes a lot of courage and determination to stand out from the crowd.

4. Describe yourself in three words

Kind, honest, open-minded

5. What was the last conversation you had that made you think differently about something?

A recent conversation taught me that, regardless of a person's bad attitude or behaviour towards you, always be yourself and don't lower your standards to treat them like they are treating you. You can't change the way someone is, but you are in control of how you react to it. Being kind doesn't cost a thing.

6. Which TV show could you not live without? What's your favourite band or musician?

Bit of a boring answer, but I don't watch an awful lot of TV. I'll always tune into a good drama, and my most recent favourite show by far has to be *Bridgerton*. As for music, I love a bit of cheesy pop, 80s and all things ABBA. I recently visited the ABBA museum in Stockholm with my daughter.

7. If you weren't a firefighter, what would you be?

I really like the thought of being a midwife if I didn't work in control. I'd enjoy meeting different people and helping them through their journey.

8. If you could travel back or forward in time, where and when would you travel to and why?

If I had the chance I would love to go back to a time when my Nan remembers me before suffering with dementia for many years. It was a sad day when I realised she had forgotten who I am.



What's new

Animal rescue

As the climate crisis intensifies, firefighters will be called on to perform more rescues from floods, droughts and fires. While the focus will be on saving human lives, there will also be a rise in animal rescues – which can require a unique approach.

UK firefighters are learning from crews in Australia and the USA, where firefighters regularly rescue wildlife from raging wildfires or droughts.

In the UK, Northamptonshire's fire and rescue service's animal rescue unit is one of the busiest in England. It attended more than 80 animal rescues last year.

Local firefighter Mick Titcombe was a key speaker at an international conference



dedicated to improving the response to incidents involving animals.

He told the conference: "Much of the emergency response models for flooding are focused on human rescue.

"Highlighted again from the September floodings, the animal component is intrinsically linked to rescues from water. Firefighters are responding to equine and livestock incidents cut off by flood water.

"Whilst evacuating residential areas, the human animal bond means that we will need to be prepared to rescue their pets as well, there is much to learn and improve to ensure responders are safe and effective from equipment, knowledge and experience of rescuing animals from water."

Juan Latorre-Cruz – taken during swiftwater rescue boat operator training on the river Humber



Quality, composition and relevance

This year's FBU photo competition had another large entry, with judges looking at a wide range of images to decide on 12 for the union's calendar, including a winner and two runners-up.

It took some time to decide on the top three as judges balanced complex considerations, including photographic quality, composition and relevance.

Winner Stuart Stenhouse had all three in his image (*see p8*) of a firefighter with breathing apparatus extinguishing a car fire.

Runner-up Juan Latorre-Cruz captured a moment of mystery and

calm with his image of firefighters in front of a bridge partially hidden by mist. Beautifully composed, the image's diffused misty colours work well against the red of the firefighters' uniforms.

Lit by blue lights from appliances, runner-up Dale Perry's image of first attenders at a vehicle breakers yard fire is a dramatic full-frame composition on an immense scale, showing what dangers firefighters often have to deal with.

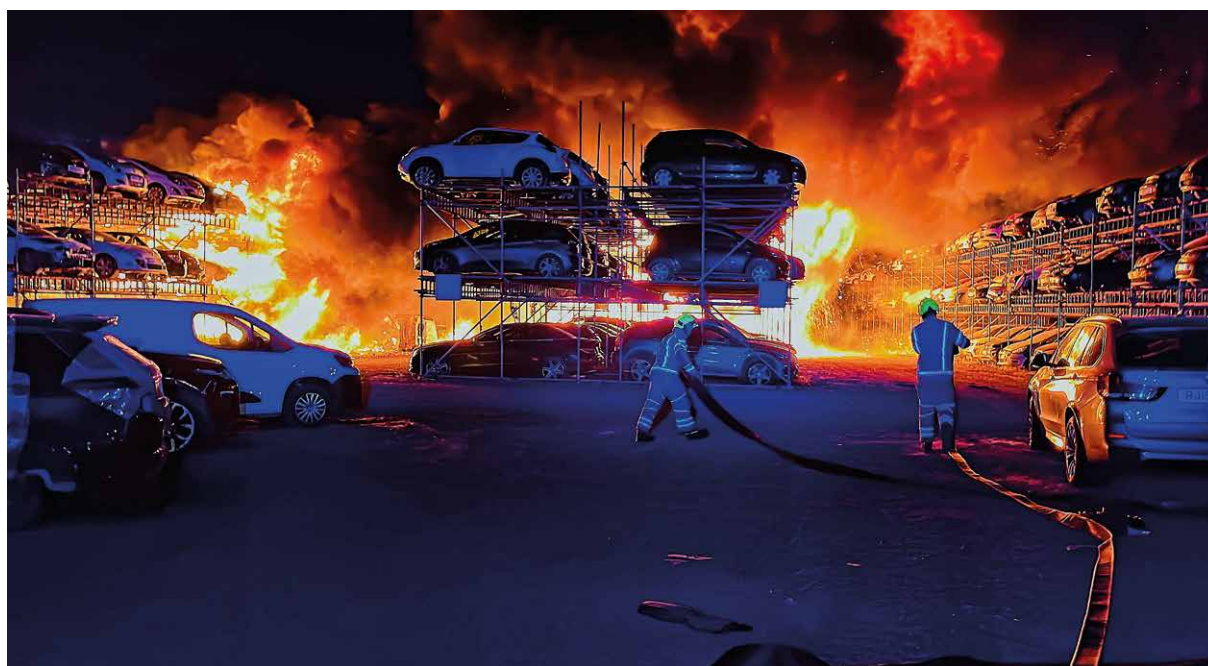
If you ever wonder whether images captured on a smartphone are suitable entries, be assured that they are. The overall winning image was taken with a

Samsung Galaxy A528B and one of the 12 chosen for the calendar came from an Apple iPhone XR, a model introduced in 2018.

FBU CALENDAR

This year's photo competition winner takes pride of place in the 2025 FBU calendar, along with 11 more of the best images from the competition.

■ Pre-order at shop.fbu.org.uk



Dale Perry – first in attendance at a vehicle breaker's yard in Southend-on-Sea, Essex. Scene lit by the flashing blues on the appliance



Wrack on the Road



ZUMA PRESS/ALAMY

■ 4 September – publication of final Grenfell report



JESS HIRD

■ 8 September – chaired TUC congress as then president

■ 18 September – attended the Emergency Services Show



■ 22 September – addressed Labour party conference and moved a motion on Grenfell

■ 8 October – FBU national rally

■ 12 October – attended memorial in Gateshead for Thomas Hepburn, leader of one of the first miners' trade unions

UPCOMING

■ 16 October – FBU organisers' school

■ 23 October – event to mark bicentenary of the founding of the world's first municipal fire service in Edinburgh

■ 11 November – FBU national school

'It's crazy'

Station Cat on four disappearing fire engines

Watchful though she is, Station Cat failed to spot the disappearance of no fewer than four fire engines in Dorset and Wiltshire until it was too late.

Fire crews arriving for their shifts in Sturminster Newton, Wareham, Corsham, and Marlborough fire stations one week in September were horrified to see just one fire engine in the appliance room instead of the usual two.

What happened? Is a phantom fire-engine thief at large in the West Country? But who would steal a fire engine?

It's not the ideal vehicle for doing the family shopping, or taking the kids to school, or delivering groceries. And it's not easy to hide – the designers of fire engines expend little effort to make the things inconspicuous.

And it's not that easy to resell. Apart from the shortage of customers, it would be hard to account for how you came by it. "Fell off the back of a lorry, squire" might have a potential purchaser raising a quizzical eyebrow.

Of course there's a simple explanation, and the firefighters eventually discovered it. The fire brigade took them away. Where did they go? No one knows. They were taken to the workshops, then seem to have vanished into thin air. Maybe there are plans for them. Maybe not.

The brigade says it sent emails to the firefighters, though none of these emails seem to have arrived. "They were trying to sneak it through without the press finding out," says FBU executive member Val Hampshire.

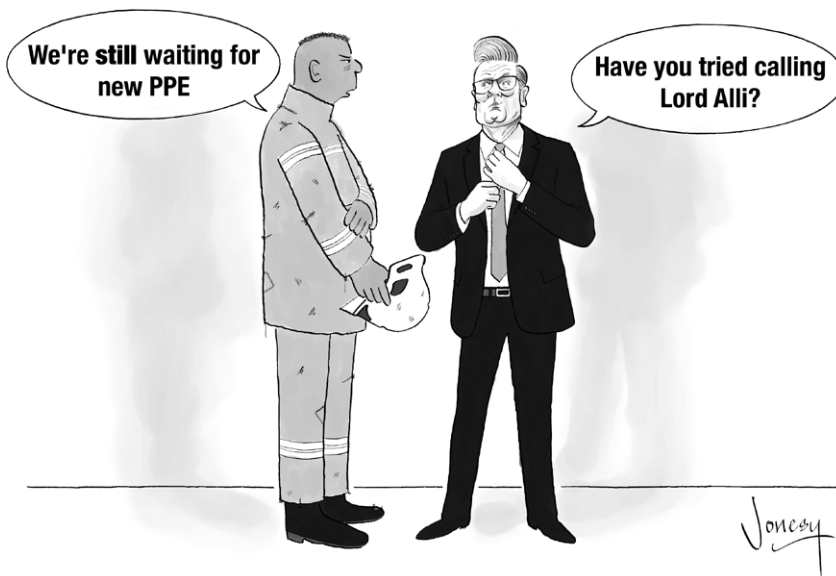
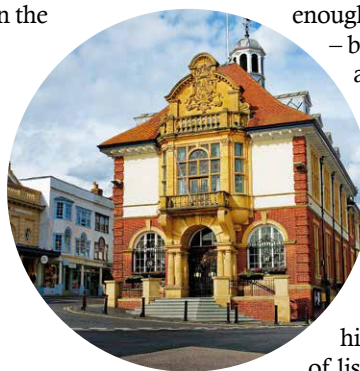
Whatever the reason, it very quickly started to look like a very foolish decision indeed. Shortly after the fire engines disappeared, Corsham had a major fire to deal with. They had eight firefighters, enough to send two fire engines – but they only had one. So a second one had to be sent from Chippenham, which took longer to get there.

And there's worse to come, Val Hampshire confided in the Station Cat.

"In Marlborough, the high street (pictured) is full of listed buildings where there have been at least four big fires in the past 30 years – and they have all needed at least 10 pumps.

"In Corsham, the problem is not what's on the ground, but what's below the ground. There are disused limestone mines, which were used by the military during World War Two. Most of them are still in use today, with both private and military occupiers.

"Yet both Marlborough and Corsham are now down to one fire engine. It's crazy."



25-year badges



Sean Gray (r), Hampshire & Isle of Wight, receives his 25-year badge from FBU vice president Steve Wright



Dan Winter (r), Hampshire & Isle of Wight, receives his 25-year badge from Basingstoke branch rep Matt Davis



Stu Rutley (l), green watch, Elm Lane, South Yorkshire, receives his 25-year badge from branch rep Rick Green



Alan Bell (r), Leyland, Lancashire, receives his 25-year badge from brigade secretary Kev Wilkie, with Will Ferneyhough, Rob Bramhall, Chris Melling, Aubrey Cooper, and Dave McCarty looking on



Stuart Francis (r), green watch, Stockport, Greater Manchester, receives his 25-year badge from branch secretary Dave Cracknell with watch members looking on



Mark Clift (l), blue watch, Farnworth, Greater Manchester, receives his 25-year badge from branch secretary Patrick Brennan with fellow watch members looking on



Kyle Campbell, (l), Skegness, Lincolnshire, receives his 25-year badge from brigade chair Dan Taylor with colleagues



Nick Such (r), training centre, Bedfordshire, receives his 25-year badge from brigade secretary Craig Carter



Dan Read (l), Oxfordshire, receives his 25-year badge from FBU vice president Steve Wright



Terry Coupar (r), Oxfordshire, receives his 25-year badge from FBU vice president Steve Wright



Dean Wells (l) green watch, Dunstable, Bedfordshire, receives his 25-year badge from brigade organiser Darren Barrett



Darren Hampton (l), white watch, Coventry, West Midlands, receives his 25-year badge from norough rep Mark Boileau



Gary Skarratts (l) and Brendan Doyle (r), Skelmersdale, Lancashire, receive their 25-year badges from brigade secretary Kev Wilkie with Ian Stuttard, Jack Matthews, Ray Fry, Kev McKnight, and Barry Foster looking on



Tim Powell (r), green watch, Dunstable, Bedfordshire, receives his 25-year badge from brigade chair Mark Cook



Geoff Bushnell (r), Berkshire, receives his 25-year badge from FBU vice president Steve Wright and brigade organiser James Hunt



Phil Smy (r), Burnley, Lancashire, receives his 25-year badge from rep John Rivett while blue watch colleagues look on



Graham Kewley (r), Dorset and Wiltshire, receives his 25-year badge from officers' rep Jason Moncrieff



Andrew Mabbett (r), green watch, Luton, Bedfordshire, receives his 25-year badge from brigade secretary Craig Carter



Adam Joyce (r), Highgate Green, West Midlands, receives his 25-year badge from branch rep Jim Nayak, with colleagues (l-r) Aaron Smith, Chris Kirby, Matt Taylor, Alex Nicholls, Zaheer Asghar and Shay Devlia

»



Paul Tomlin (r), blue watch, Barnstaple, Devon & Somerset, receives his 25-year badge from South West region chair Scott Young



Barney Smith (l), Mitcham, London, receives his 25-year badge from SW London area secretary Dave Young



Mark McDonald (r), East Kilbride, receives his 25-year badge from Scotland West area organiser Paul Cole



Jim Stone (l) and **Paul Ratcliffe** (r), Lancashire, receive their 25-year badges from brigade secretary Kev Wilkie, with Mick Angland and Craig Wilkinson looking on



Natalie Pomponi (r), Northwest Fire Control, receives her 25-year badge from branch rep Erica Devey with colleagues in the control room



Luke Morgan (r), red watch, Stopsley, Bedfordshire, receives his 25-year badge from brigade secretary Craig Carter



Marc Berry (r), green watch, Gorton, Greater Manchester, receives his 25-year badge from brigade organiser Matt Fryer



Ram Karavadra (r), green watch, Stopsley, Bedfordshire, receives his 25-year badge from brigade secretary Craig Carter



Rob Mears (r), green watch, Chesterfield, Derbyshire, receives his 25-year badge from branch rep Graham Cooper with colleagues Paul Markham, Adam Mears, Nick Crisp, Tom Longden, Dan Allen, Dan Lewin and Phil Austin



Mike Souster (r), white watch, Yeovil, Devon & Somerset, receives his 25-year badge from brigade organiser Dave Lock with colleagues looking on

40-year badge



Jan Hayton, (l), Humberside chair, control white watch, receives her 40-year badge from executive council member Pete Smith



Sheila Macgregor (r), Mitcham, London, receives her 25-year badge from SW London area secretary Dave Young



John Sheppard (r), green watch, Luton, Bedfordshire, receives his 25-year badge from brigade secretary Craig Carter

Please send high resolution digital files or prints to: firefighter@fbu.org.uk
or Firefighter, FBU, 68 Coombe Road, Kingston upon Thames, KT2 7AE

For your image to look its best, we need the original, full-resolution image. One lifted from a website may not do justice to a unique occasion. We do our best with images that are low resolution, taken directly into a bright light or suffer from camera-shake, or have other problems, but cannot perform miracles. Please include details for each image – full names of everyone who is in it; their station/brigade/watch etc; where they are in the picture (eg: left to right); their union posts/branch if relevant; and where/when it was taken.

FBU REGIONAL OFFICES

REGION 1 Scotland

52 St Enoch Square, Glasgow,
Scotland G1 4AA
0141 221 2309, 01rs@fbu.org.uk

REGION 2 N Ireland

14 Bachelors Walk, Lisburn,
Co Antrim, BT28 1XJ
02892 664622, 02rs@fbu.org

REGION 3 Cleveland, Durham, Northumberland, Tyne & Wear

1 Carlton Court, 5th Avenue, Team
Valley, Gateshead, NE11 0AZ
0191 487 4142, 03rs@fbu.org.uk

REGION 4 Humberside, North Yorkshire, South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire

9 Marsh Street, Rothwell,
Leeds, LS26 0AG
0113 288 7000, 04rs@fbu.org.uk

REGION 5 Greater Manchester, Lancs, Isle of Man, Cumbria, Merseyside, Cheshire

The Lighthouse, Lower Mersey St,
Ellesmere Port, Cheshire, CH65 2AL
0151 357 4400, 05rs@fbu.org.uk

REGION 6 Derbyshire, Notts, Lincs, Leics, Northants

The Waterside Offices, Pavilion Road, West
Bridford, Nottingham, NG2 5FA
Region06@fbu.org.uk

REGION 7 West Mids, Staffs, Warks, Hereford & Worcester, Shropshire

195/7 Halesowen Rd, Old Hill,
West Midlands, B64 6HE
01384 413633, 07rs@fbu.org.uk

REGION 8 Mid and West Wales, North Wales, South Wales

2nd floor, Hastings House, Fitzalan
Court, Cardiff, CF24 0BL
029 2049 6474

REGION 9 Herts, Beds, Cambs, Essex, Norfolk, Suffolk

28 Atlantic Square, Station Road,
Witham, Essex, CM8 2TL
01376 521521, 09rs@fbu.org.uk

REGION 10 London

Alpha House, 100 Borough High Street.,
London SE1 1LB
020 7359 3638, london@fbu.org.uk

REGION 11 East Sussex, Kent, Surrey, West Sussex

Unit 11, Hunns Mere Way,
Woodingdean, Brighton, BN2 6AH
11rs@fbu.org.uk

REGION 12 Bucks, Berks, Hampshire and Isle of Wight, Oxfordshire

Eleanor Marx House,
Unit 2, 12 Richfield Place,
Reading, RG1 8EQ

REGION 13 Avon, Cornwall, Devon & Somerset, Dorset & Wiltshire, Gloucestershire

158 Muller Road, Horfield,
Bristol, BS7 9RE
0117 235 7605, 13rs@fbu.org.uk

Change of address or next of kin

Advise your brigade organiser of any
change of address and head office of
changes to next of kin or nominations
for benefits.

FBU FREEPHONE LEGAL ADVICE LINE

England, Wales and N Ireland

0800 100 6061

Scotland 0800 089 1331

The line provides advice for personal
injury, family law, wills, conveyancing,
personal finance and consumer issues.
For disciplinary and employment-
related queries contact your local FBU
representative.



THOMPSONS
SOLICITORS

FIREFIGHTERS NEED TO REFLECT THE COMMUNITY THEY SERVE



LEADING THE FIGHT FOR
A FAIRER FIRE SERVICE

EQUALITY
MATTERS

ALL DIFFERENT ALL EQUAL
FAIRNESS AT WORK POLICY

