



Fire Brigades Union submission to spending review 2021

INVESTMENT NOT CUTS TO THE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE



30 September 2021

INTRODUCTION

This is the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) submission to the 2021 Spending Review, launched by the Chancellor on 7 September 2021. The FBU is the democratic, professional voice of firefighters and other workers within fire and rescue services across the UK. The union represents the vast majority of whole-time (full-time) and retained (part-time, on-call) firefighters and fire control staff.

The FBU welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Spending Review 2021, which will set UK government departments' resource budgets and capital budgets for the years 2022-23 until 2024-25 and devolved administrations' block grants for the same period.

This submission speaks to the stated priorities in this Spending Review of "ensuring strong and innovative public services" and to "invest in public services". The FBU believes at the present time, in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, floods and wildfires, terrorist attacks and other hazards firefighters tackle, there is an exceptionally strong case for investment in the fire and rescue service across the UK.

RISKS TODAY AND IN THE FUTURE

The Cabinet Office publishes the National Risk Register, setting out the Westminster government's assessment of the likelihood and potential impact of a range of different risks that may directly affect the UK. The National Risk Register is based on the National Risk Assessment, a classified assessment of risks that could happen in the UK over the next five years. The current National Risk Register (2017) highlights a range of threats:

- Natural hazards – flooding, severe weather and wildfires
- Human and animal diseases
- Major accidents – including transport accidents, industrial and urban accidents
- Societal risks – public disorder
- Malicious attacks – terrorist attacks.

Many of these risks were highlighted in the first National Risk Register (2008). Others have come to prominence in recent years. The latest edition (2017) stated that "the emergence of new infectious diseases is unpredictable but evidence indicates it may become more frequent". Covid-19 shows how devastating new risks can emerge, testing national resilience.

These risks are 'civil emergencies' and are covered by the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. Firefighters are category 1 responders. For example, the National Risk Register (2017) states that "The Fire and Rescue Services throughout the UK

stand ready to protect you, your family, your home and your business against a wide range of different fires, while working hard to prevent fires from starting in the first place.” The public expect firefighters to be available for any emergencies.

The Westminster government therefore has a duty to ensure that the fire and rescue service is properly resourced to meet these challenges. Investment in the fire and rescue service is the only way central government can meet its promises to the public laid down in the National Risk Register. Investment is the only means to ensure fire and rescue services contribute to national resilience – the capability of the UK as a whole to tackle one or more of these risks.

CLIMATE CHANGE

The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports and the Westminster UK government’s UK Climate Projections 2018 provide solid evidence of elevated climate change risks in the UK for the foreseeable future. Average temperature over the most recent decade has been 0.8°C warmer than since the 1960s. Nine of the ten warmest years on record have occurred since 2002. The last decade was around 1°C warmer than the pre-industrial period, consistent with warming observed at a global scale. In the past few decades annual average rainfall has increased over the UK, particularly in Scotland. Sea level has risen by about 16cm since the start of the 20th century.

Over the next half century, if global emissions continue to expand, the UK could be as much as 5°C warmer in summer and 4°C in winter. Extreme weather events are likely to increase. Sea level is expected to rise. The Climate Projections report concludes: “It is therefore a cornerstone principle of resilience preparation that we plan for a wide range of possible future changes, in parallel with taking actions to reduce the likelihood of the worst scenario becoming reality.”

The heatwave of summer 2018 provided a glimpse of the future, with some of the worst wildfires in recent years. Climate scientists suggest such high temperatures could become the norm by the 2050s. In June-July 2018, the north west of England witnessed more than 30 consecutive days of wildfires. At the peak of operations on Saddleworth Moor in Greater Manchester, 15 other fire and rescue services sent personnel across borders to assist.

Firefighters also tackled other significant wildfires, such as Winter Hill in Lancashire, Glenshane Pass in Northern Ireland and the Vale of Rheidol in Wales. The south west of England, the West Midlands and Yorkshire also experienced big grassland fires. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service issued 21 wildfire danger warnings in 2018.

The UK experienced the wettest February on record in 2020 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and the second wettest (behind February 1990) for Scotland. The three named storms that crossed the UK during February 2020 – Ciara, Dennis and Jorge – caused devastation in many areas, with flooding most severe in Yorkshire, South Wales and the Midlands.

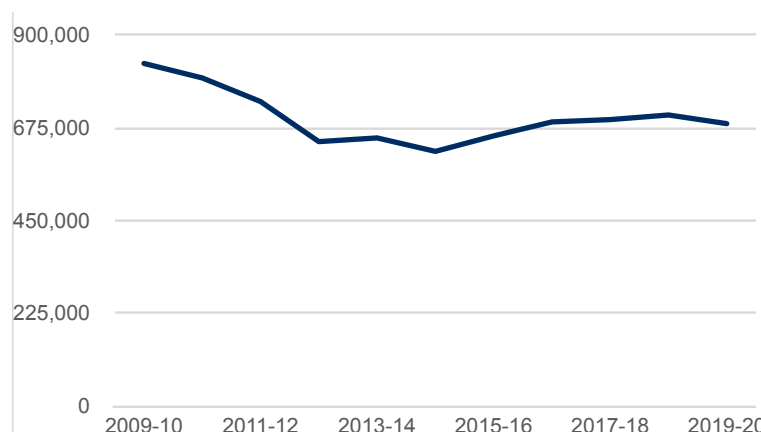
In all affected areas, firefighters played an instrumental role in evacuating residents from flooding and rescuing those who were left stranded. After the rainfall, firefighters continued to assist by pumping away the water and in dealing with hidden hazards like submerged debris or lifted manhole covers. The flooding in recent years underlines the need for resilience. The public rightly expects firefighters to do their utmost when the next floods occur – but this requires sustained investment in personnel and equipment.

THE RISKS FROM FIRES AND NON-FIRE INCIDENTS

Firefighters are mobilised to a wide range of incidents, which are mostly recorded in central government statistics (Home Office, SFRS, Welsh Government and NIFRS). The incidents attended by the fire and rescue service across the UK are made up of fires, false alarms and non-fire incidents.

Firefighters in Great Britain responded to around 1.2m incidents in 2003-04. Since then there have been significant reductions in the number of fires and false alarms, which firefighters would previously have attended. However the trend has plateaued in recent years (see Figure 1). The number of non-fire incidents attended has also risen in recent years. (Northern Ireland is recorded differently, but has similar trends). In short, there is no justification for cutting firefighter numbers.

Figure 1: Total incidents attended by fire and rescue services, Great Britain, 2009-10 to 2019-20

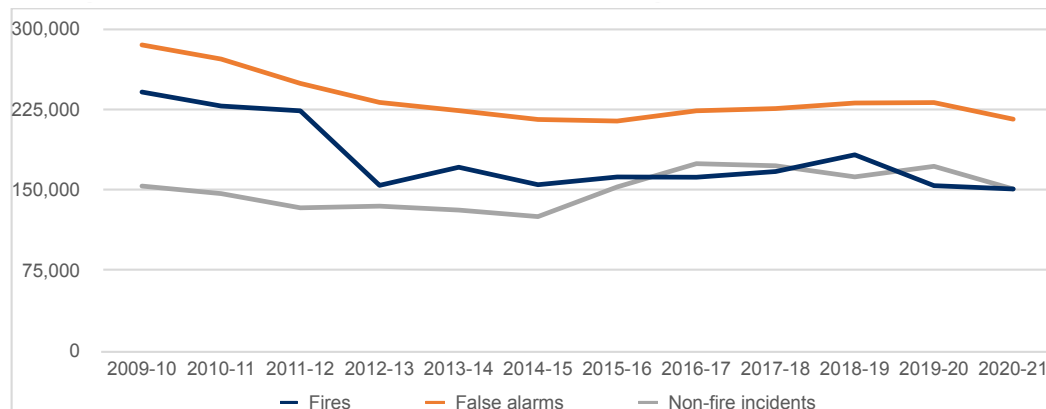


Fire and rescue services record and report the total fires they attend – not the total number of fires that actually take place. (The English Housing Survey estimates only one-in-four fires are extinguished by firefighters). There has been a long downward trend for many decades in the total number of fires attended by fire and rescue services. Some of this is driven by changes in fire safety, technology and smoking habits, as well as firefighters' protection and prevention work.

Firefighters have attended more non-fire incidents in recent years (see Figure 2). These include:

- Road Traffic Collisions (RTCs)
- Medical Incidents
- Flooding
- Effecting entry/exit
- Animal assistance incidents
- Hazardous materials incident
- Suicide/attempts
- Assist other agencies.

Figure 2: Fires, false alarms, non-fire incidents attended in England, 2009-10 to 2020-21

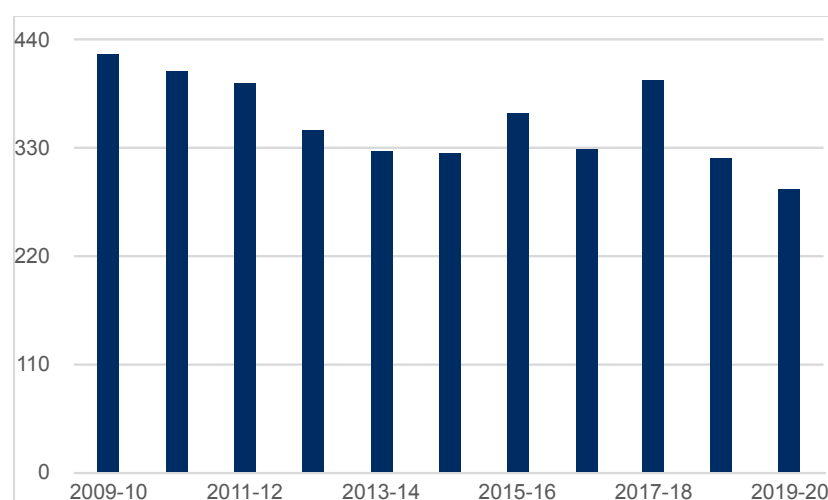


Although the official figures record some of this activity, the FBU believes it is underestimated. The flooding of an entire village and a basement flood at a single property could both be counted as one incident. How responses to terrorist attacks or Covid-19 are recorded is not clear.

THE RISKS FROM FIRE AND OTHER DEATHS

The risk of death and injury from fire at home, at work and in the wider community tragically still exists across the UK. Around three-quarters of fire deaths still occur in dwellings. Fire deaths have reduced from around 1,000 a year in 1980 to fewer than 600 in 2003-04, but more than 300 people still died in fires across Great Britain in 2019-20. The Grenfell Tower fire in June 2017 was a reminder of the terrible consequences of complacency over fire safety.

Figure 3: Fire deaths in Great Britain, 2009-10 to 2019-20



Fires are not the only emergencies attended by firefighters where people die. In recent years, firefighters have had to attend 67% more incidents involving death and injury. Firefighters in England alone deal with around two and a half thousand deaths a year at non-fire incidents, including more than 600 deaths a year at road traffic collisions and more than 100 deaths at floods.

Table 1: Fatalities in non-fire incidents attended by fire and rescue services, England

	Total	Road Traffic Collision	Medical incidents	Assist other agencies	Flooding	Effecting entry/ exit	Suicides
2010-11	1,565	699	189	178	78	51	162
2019-20	2,618	628	290	636	111	458	253

Rescues

Firefighter interventions at incidents save lives. Annually, more than 40,000 people are rescued by firefighters across the UK. This equates to more than 100 rescues every day. Around 4,000 rescues take place at fires. But there were around 10 times more rescues at non-fire incidents. This reflects the breadth of activities that firefighters now undertake and shows the fire and rescue service provides an outstanding response to a burgeoning range of emergencies.

FIRE SAFETY AFTER THE GRENFELL TOWER FIRE

On 14 June 2017 the fire at Grenfell Tower resulted in the deaths of 72 people, injuries to scores of others and the devastation of a whole community. This was the worst fire in living memory in the UK and one of the worst high rise residential building fires ever seen across the globe. The bereaved, survivors and residents are right to describe these deaths as an atrocity and right to demand justice for Grenfell. The FBU stands in solidarity with those fighting for justice at Grenfell.

At the height of the incident, at least 250 firefighters and 60 appliances were on scene to help rescue as many residents and visitors as possible. Firefighters went into Grenfell Tower at considerable risks to themselves with the sole aim of trying to save life. Many firefighters and emergency control staff rescued people or helped them evacuate from the building. Every firefighter has suffered from the physical and mental effects of intervening in the fire: every one regrets the tragic loss of life. And all want justice for the bereaved, survivors and residents.

The Westminster government has responded to the Grenfell Tower fire with a series of measures to improve safety in people's homes. The Fire Safety Act requires firefighters – in their role as fire inspectors – to inspect the common parts of high-rise residential buildings, including the walls, doors and windows. This is in addition to regular inspections of these buildings and other high-risk workplaces, hospitals, care homes, hotels and other sleeping accommodation. No additional funding has been provided to meet this increased workload.

The Building Safety Bill will require fire inspectors to assist the new Building Safety Regulator with rigorous supervision of building safety. At present, there are more than 12,000 high rise buildings over 18 metres, with new blocks under construction. This work requires the recruitment and training of hundreds more professional firefighters to ensure the new regime is robust. The Impact Assessment suggests between 100 and 140 fire inspectors will be needed. The FBU believes far more inspectors will be needed. However the funding for these inspectors needs to be in place now to ensure urgent training is provided.

The Grenfell Tower Inquiry (GTI) has already provided a great deal of evidence about what happened on the night of the fire on 14 June 2017. The GTI's Phase 1 report makes 45 recommendations, many of them generating additional work for fire and rescue services. Additional funding is required to implement these recommendations. Once the GTI has published its final report, there will be many more recommendations, which require investment if they are to be put into practice.

HOUSING DEMAND AND RISKS

Fire safe homes are a fundamental human right. The risks of dwelling fires are likely to change in the foreseeable future – and it will require a properly-resourced fire and rescue service to ensure fire safety standards are maintained and improved. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) Household projections for England are:

- The number of households in England is projected to increase by four million (17%) over the next 25 years, from 23 million in 2016 to 27 million in 2041
- This equates to 159,000 additional households each year
- The number of one-person households in England is projected to increase by 26% between 2016 and 2041, driven by increases in the number of people aged 65 years and over living on their own
- The number of households with dependent children is projected to remain broadly similar between 2016 and 2041, with around a quarter of households having dependent children by 2041
- Almost all the projected increase in households by 2041 will be among one-person and multiple adult households without dependent children.

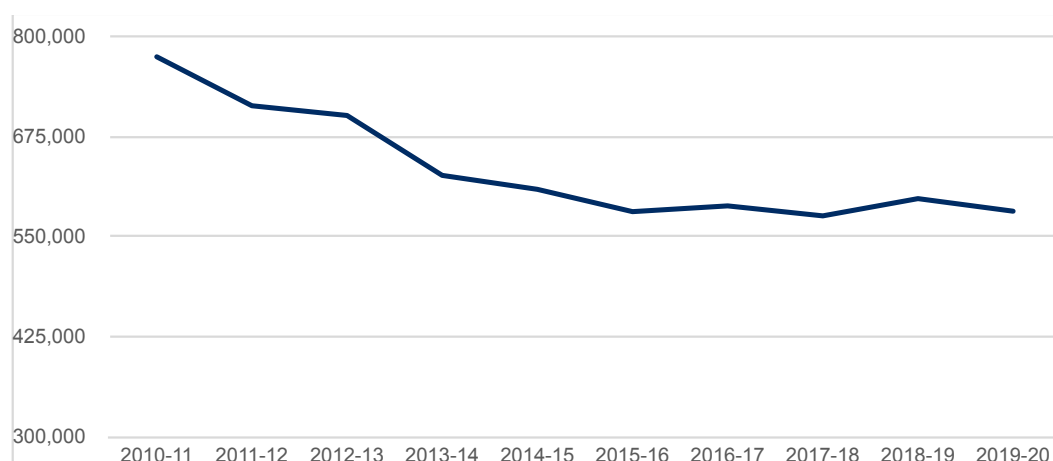
A report for homelessness charity Crisis and the National Housing Federation estimated that over the next 25 years, around 380,000 new houses are needed per year for Great Britain, to address these existing needs plus expected future needs. The fire and rescue service will help manage the risks associated with those new homes. But to provide the full range of prevention, protection and intervention requires sustained investment from central government.

AN AGEING POPULATION

Population changes will also affect future fire risks. The UK population is projected to increase by 3.6 million (5.5%) over the next 10 years, from an estimated 66 million in 2016 to 69 million in 2026. The UK population is projected to pass 70 million by 2029 and be almost 73 million by 2041. By the 2040s there are projected to be many more people at older ages. This partly reflects the 1960s baby-boomers, but also the continued increase in life expectancy meaning that more people live to very old ages. In 2016 there were 1.6 million people aged 85 and over; by 2041 this is projected to double to 3.2 million, according to the ONS. Generally, the risk of fire-related fatality increases with age, with those aged 80 and over at by far the greatest risk of dying in a fire. Around half of all fire-related fatalities in England were 65 years old and over.

Fire and rescue services already conduct programmes for community fire safety and engagement with vulnerable people. However as Figure 4 shows, the number of home fire safety checks carried out by fire and rescue services in England has slumped by a quarter (25%) over the last decade, in part due to cuts in the number of firefighters.

Figure 4: Home fire safety checks carried out by fire and rescue services in England



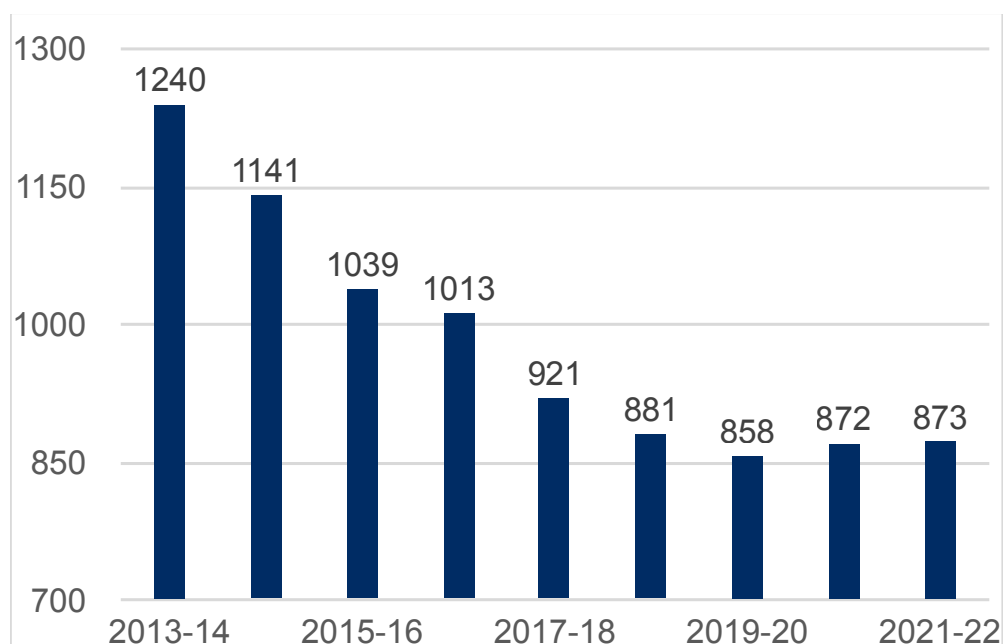
CUTS TO CENTRAL AND LOCAL FUNDING

Responsibility for the fire and rescue service is a devolved matter. But firefighters and emergency control staff have common pay and conditions across the UK. Firefighters regularly collaborate across borders and learning is shared on a UK-wide basis. The FBU is a UK-wide trade union and therefore seeks to represent our members in every fire and rescue service.

England

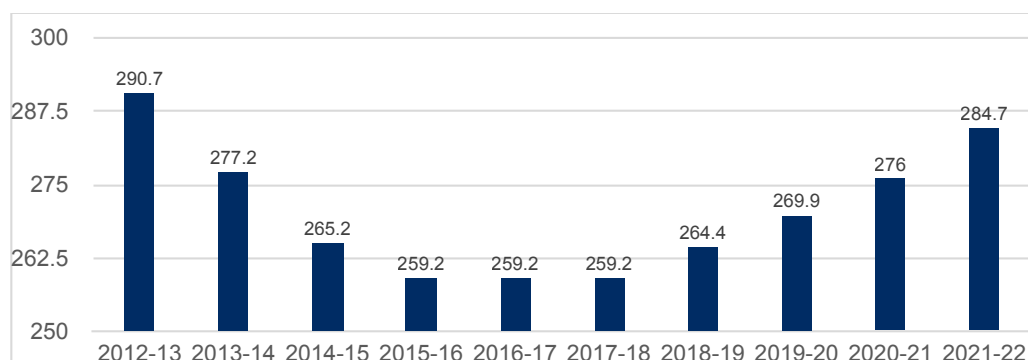
Funding for the fire and rescue service in England is made up of central funding from Westminster and locally raised revenue from councils. In 2010, this was split roughly 50:50 for England as a whole, but with varying proportions in different brigades. Since 2010 the central funding system has changed, because central government has allowed some councils to keep more locally-raised revenue. But central funding has been reduced both in absolute and relative terms.

Overall fire funding figures show that between 2013-14 and 2021-22, central funding has been reduced by 30% in cash terms alone (see Figure 5). This year there has been a small increase, but it barely kept pace with inflation and has done little to repair the overall picture. Local authorities have also reduced their contribution to fire funding or were not able to make up the shortfall.

Figure 5: Central funding for fire and rescue in England, (£m)

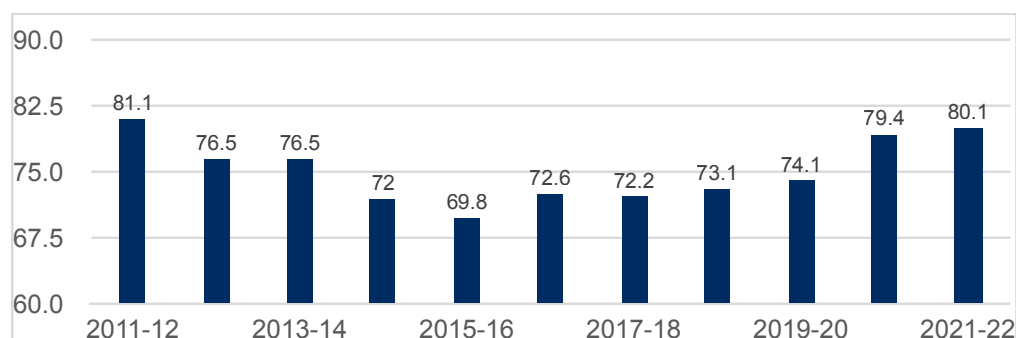
Scotland

On 1 April 2013, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) came into existence, replacing the eight previous fire brigades with a single service. However overall funding in cash terms fell steeply by 11% in the first five years, before some increases in recent years. Overall funding is still lower in 2021-22 in nominal terms, compared to 2012-13, the year immediately before the single service came into being (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Resource funding for fire and rescue in Scotland (£m)

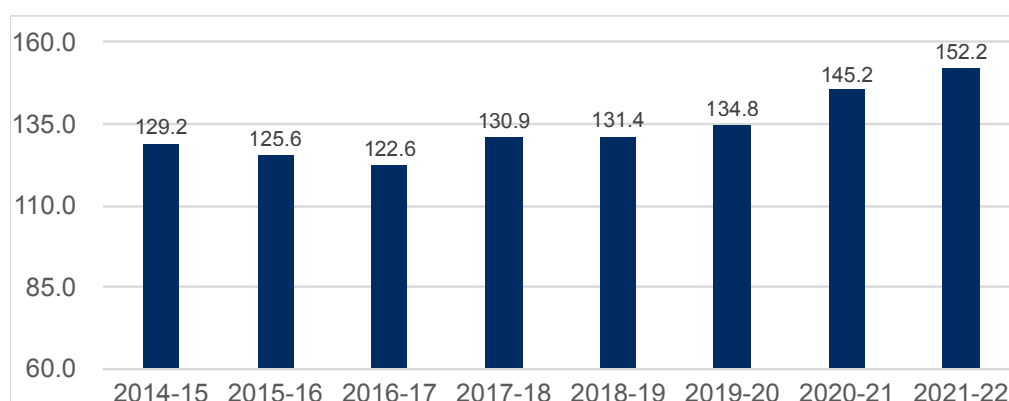
The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service is resourced by the Department of Health in the province and has followed a similar pattern (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Northern Ireland Opening Budget Allocation: Fire (£m)



Fire and rescue service funding in Wales also saw a period of deep cuts, followed by increased spending in recent years (see figure 8).

Figure 8: Standard Spending Assessment for fire and rescue in Wales (£m)



FIREFIGHTER JOBS CUT

Since 2010, around 12,000 firefighter jobs have been cut across the UK – almost one-in-five (20%) of the total number of jobs. This is a travesty, without precedent in the history of the fire and rescue service and without any credible evidence to support it. In England, almost 10,000 frontline firefighter jobs have been cut since 2010. The bulk of those job losses were wholetime (full-time) firefighters, with more than 7,000 jobs lost. More than 2,000 retained firefighter jobs were also cut, while almost 30% of control jobs were cut.

Table 2: Firefighter job cuts 2009-10 to 2020-21

FRS	Job cuts 2010-20	Job cuts 2010-20 (%)
England	-9,986	-22%
Northern Ireland	-130	-7%
Scotland	-1,018	-13%
Wales	-464	-12%
UK	-11,598	-20%

The cuts have also led to the closure of around 80 fire stations (4%) and the reduction in frontline appliances (9%). More than a third (17 out of 50) of emergency control rooms have closed in the last decade.

Fewer firefighters, stations and appliances has a huge impact on the service to the public. It means that there are fewer firefighters to crew appliances, with some brigades seeking to impose three firefighters on a fire engine instead of the required five. This means fewer firefighters on the fire ground at the early stages of any incident and greater delay for oncoming appliances. Incidents deteriorate exponentially – slower attendance times and fewer firefighters mean more harm to our communities and more risk to firefighters. Similarly, day crewing systems, brought in to save money, also leave whole communities more vulnerable at night – when fatalities and injuries are often higher because more people are asleep. Cuts put public safety and firefighter safety at risk.

EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY STALLED

Ministers have made public criticisms of the slow pace of improvement in equality and diversity in the fire and rescue service. But progress in this area has been hampered by government policies and by very limited recruitment since 2010, due to the cuts in firefighter numbers outlined above. One of the first acts of the Westminster coalition government in 2010 was to scrap the equality and diversity strategy in England, removing targets for improving the proportion of women and black and ethnic minority firefighters in the workforce.

The FBU has a strong record promoting equality and diversity throughout the fire and rescue service. The union's longstanding women's, BEMM and LGBT sections have played a crucial role supporting firefighters and campaigning for change. However the union believes there is still much to do. Westminster government funding and support is essential to the next steps on the road to equality.

Women firefighters

The Westminster government has hailed the increase in the proportion of women firefighters in England, which has risen from 4.0% in 2010 to 7.4% in 2020 for wholetime and from 3.8% to 5.6% for retained. In emergency fire control rooms, where three-quarters of the workforce are women, almost a third of control jobs have been cut in England. Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have smaller proportions of women firefighters but similar trends to England.

Black and ethnic minority firefighters

The proportion of black and ethnic minority firefighters in England has increased, from 4.6% in 2011 to 5.9% in 2020 for wholetime and from 1.0% to 1.5% for retained. The absolute numbers of black and ethnic minority firefighters has not improved sufficiently and official figures leave the identity of significant numbers of personnel unstated. Data produced by the SFRS is poor, while Wales and Northern Ireland do not provide a breakdown of firefighters by ethnicity.

Sexual orientation

The numbers of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) wholetime firefighters is recorded at 3-4% in England over the last few years. LGB firefighters make up 2% of the retained workforce, and more than 3% of control and support staff. However there is significant under-reporting and no account of transgender firefighters is provided. The proportion of lesbian, gay and bisexual firefighters is not recorded in Northern Ireland and Wales.

FIREFIGHTERS' PAY

The FBU believes that firefighting is a profession – skilled work that requires planning, training and best practice if it is to be carried out safely and effectively. Firefighters deserve to be paid according to the level of skills, risk and other capacities required to do the job to such a high standard. The FBU estimates that in real terms firefighters have lost around 12% (measured by the consumer prices index) over the last decade. This is equivalent to more than £4,000 a year. The union believes firefighters' pay should be a high priority for the Westminster government.

All firefighters have been hit, but some in different ways. Retained firefighters are angered by getting paid a pittance in exchange for giving up a massive amount of their lives to be on call. The small amount they get from the 'retaining fee' is not enough, resulting in the continual loss of staff. Similarly, emergency fire control staff have seen a significant increase in the range and responsibility of their work in recent years, without receiving the requisite compensation in pay.

CONCLUSIONS

The fire and rescue service across the UK is an **all-hazards emergency service**. It is an irreplaceable component of critical UK-wide infrastructure, essential for resilience.

The Westminster government's own **risk assessment** highlights the wide range of emergencies that firefighters respond to on a regular basis. Whether it is tackling fire and floods, terrorist incidents and pandemics, or climate change and vulnerable people firefighters provide our communities with a 24/7, 365 professional emergency service.

The fire and rescue service has suffered unprecedented cuts to central and local funding in the last decade. The Westminster government and devolved administrations must commit to **investment, not cuts** to the fire and rescue service.

The reduction of firefighter and emergency control staff jobs are now putting public and firefighter safety at risk. The Westminster government and devolved administrations must fund the initial employment of an **extra 5,000 firefighters** to complement the existing professional workforce, with a review to examine further recruitment.

The equality agenda in the fire and rescue service has stalled. The Westminster government and devolved administrations must 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 institutionalised sexism, racism and homophobia within the service.

The Grenfell Tower fire exposed the consequences of deregulation for fire safety. **Fire safety inspectors** should get the resources needed to enforce existing fire safety legislation, as well as new provisions proposed as a result of the Grenfell Tower fire. Fire inspectors are involved in all stages of new buildings, from design to sign off before occupancy. The Westminster government and devolved administrations must ensure tenants are given a real voice in the running and safety of their buildings.

Firefighters have the right to expect **high standards of pay and good conditions of work**. The FBU wants a pay rise that reflects the real contribution firefighters make to communities, an end to the pay freeze and remedy for its impact on our members' living standards.

Firefighters expect employers and governments to engage constructively with our elected representatives at local and national level – namely the FBU – and through agreed collective bargaining arrangements. Governments must respect the professionals.