

FireFighter

The magazine of the Fire Brigades Union www.fbu.org.uk

January/February 2009



FBU MEMBERS LOBBY MPs

Progress on key issue of guidance after Safer Firefighters
Safer Communities campaign hits parliament **See page 11**

ALSO INSIDE The damning findings the
Audit Commission wanted to keep secret



The emperor's new clothes



You will recall from the fairy tale that the Emperor was tricked by a couple of swindlers into paying a vast sum of money so that they would make him a suit of the finest cloth. The catch, said the tricksters, was that the cloth was “invisible” to anyone who was stupid or unworthy. The Emperor was surrounded by grovelling, fawning and incompetent courtiers who would only ever agree with him. So they too fell for the trick and told the Emperor how magnificent the cloth looked as it was being prepared. Once the

suit was completed the Emperor went on a procession through the city to show his subjects his new finery. And finally the trick was exposed by the common sense of a small child who shouted that the Emperor was not wearing any clothes at all. He had been tricked and the trick had worked because of the failure of any of his advisors to tell him he was going to end up looking really, really stupid. You will see on Page 12 the latest report from our very own version of the Emperor's New Clothes. We have a project (the regionalisation of controls in England) which has been subject to numerous delays; which

has seen costs rise enormously; and which nobody knows will work. But the “Emperor” (in the form of CLG) keeps on telling anyone who will listen what a beautiful project it really is and how everything will be wonderful when it is finally delivered. Of course some people are making a lot of money out of the project, so they are happy to keep saying that everything is fine. The real question is this: At what point does everyone wake up and realise that they have been tricked? We hope that they do before it is too late. In the meantime the FBU will continue to shout that the Emperor is totally naked and is embarrassing us all.

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a cordless
drill/driver
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Regional controls fall
even further behind
schedule

Lobby of Parliament – listen to the professionals

On behalf of the entire union, I would like to once again thank all members who attended the lobby of Parliament in November. This was called to highlight our concerns at the number of firefighters killed at work. The response was magnificent. Over a thousand turned up to our rally and lobby of MPs. It was one of the biggest trade union lobbies for years. The FBU put others on notice. We are the

professional voice of firefighters – and we demand to be heard. As a result of this recent campaign we have increasingly heard others echo many of the concerns we have raised. That is to be welcomed but firefighters have the right to ask where some of these people were when the mad rush to modernisation started. One of the key mistakes made by the government was the abolition of the structures which developed and set standards within the service, primarily

the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council (CFBAC) and Scottish CFBAC. It is now clear that this was a purely political decision, taken to try to undermine the Fire Brigades Union. The sad fact is that others within the Service went along with it precisely because of that and are belatedly realising that it has left a huge gaping hole around the issue of professional standards. Over the past couple of years, the FBU has demonstrated very clearly some of the significant gaps in the Fire and Rescue Service around issues such as flood response, attacks on firefighters, firefighter fatalities and the general lack of central guidance on crucial operational matters. The challenge now for others within the Service is whether they are prepared to start to listen and engage with us.

As a result of this recent campaign we have increasingly heard others echo many of the concerns we have raised



YOUR LETTERS

Impressive safety pack

With regard to the new FBU health and safety pack you highlighted (What does an FBU Health & Safety rep do? *Firefighter*, October 2008) I am extremely impressed with the inspection checklist included in the pack. I am a watch commander and although not currently an FBU H&S rep I hold the NEBOSH general certificate and make my 'skills' available to safety reps locally when required. I have used checklists in different contexts over recent years and have not seen a better or more thorough version. The rest of the pack is equally impressive.

The role of safety rep is something which many people will look on with trepidation, because the range of legislation that is involved is vast and the responsibilities that go with the role can seem immense. Anything which simplifies the process and makes the rep's role easier is to be praised, and the new pack should certainly do that.

No matter how proficient and thorough the brigade health and safety officers and management systems are, the person best placed to manage health and safety is the one at 'the sharp end'.

The competence and confidence that comes from extended study of health and safety, coupled with experience, cannot replace policies or procedures but should complement them to allow us to achieve safe working practices in the real world.

Let us encourage more and more of our brothers and sisters to take on the mantle of 'safety rep', and give whatever assistance is needed to advance their qualifications.

Clive Mason

Hay Mills, West Midlands

→ You can obtain the new Health and Safety pack from your brigade official or from John McGhee, National Officer responsible for Health, Safety and Welfare at FBU Head Office.

Palestine

The West Midlands moved the resolution on Palestine at the last FBU Conference, so we are pleased that this issue has been given a greater prominence in the Union's activities (*Firefighter*, November/December 2008, 'It's about peace, security and justice for us all').

The personal accounts of Dave Chappell, John McGhee and Kevin Brown will hopefully bring home to people just how much suffering the Palestinians endure at the hands of Israel on a daily basis, with tacit support from most of the western Governments.

I hope that every regional and brigade committee now considers affiliating to the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (www.palestinecampaign.org) so that by using our collective voice this grave injustice can be brought to an end.

This Union has always been about playing a role in the wider trade union and political movement. Long may it continue.

Dave Whotton

Executive Council Member, West Midlands
Region FBU

GET YOUR COPY

Not getting your own copy of *Firefighter* at home? Make sure you have informed your brigade secretary of any recent change of address



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Eddie Thomson (left), a recently retired firefighter who organised a petition against the cuts, and General Secretary Matt Wrack led hundreds of campaigners, including FBU members and officials, on a march through the streets of Broughty Ferry in November to preserve the whole-time status of Balmossie fire station

Tayside saves 16 jobs – for now

CUTS FIGHTBACK

The FBU has notched up a victory in Tayside, where officials have been able to withdraw the proposed official overtime ban after the Tayside Fire and Rescue Authority agreed to reconsider the removal of 16 frontline firefighter posts from Balmossie Fire Station in Broughty Ferry.

It was back in January 2008, just days before a meeting of the Tayside Fire and Rescue Board, that FBU officials were told that the posts were to be lost. After

months of correspondence and an unofficial overtime ban, the union told the Fire Authority in October that, failing a satisfactory agreement, the overtime ban would become official.

There was also a dispute about holiday entitlement for office-based non-operational uniformed FBU members in which the fire authority had refused to implement an arbitration recommendation.

This recommendation is now to be implemented. The 16 firefighter posts will be discussed as part of a brigade review, so the

decision to get rid of them immediately has been rescinded. Nonetheless, they are still at risk. The review document, Towards a Safer Tayside, was due to go out for public consultation in January.

These two decisions were enough to persuade the Union to call off the action. Executive council member for Scotland Roddy Robertson told *Firefighter*: "I'm pleased we have at last got a resolution. But we still have great concerns about the review document. We have won a battle but we have yet to win the war."

Two years for man whose car killed a firefighter

DANGER AT WORK

A man whose driving caused the death of Hertfordshire firefighter Paul Mallaghan has been jailed for two years. The Union said the sentence opened up the debate about sentencing policy for causing death on the roads and highlighted the need for central guidance to protect firefighters at work on highways.

Paul Hing, 61, who crashed into a vehicle on fire on a motorway hard shoulder, was found guilty of causing the death of Paul Mallaghan, a 46-year-old watch commander, who was tackling the fire on the hard shoulder of the A1(M) near Stevenage last June. He was wearing high visibility clothing. Hing hit the car on which he was working. A second firefighter was injured along with a Highways Agency officer.

The prosecutor said a passing motorist had seen Hing's Volkswagen Golf move from the outside to the inside lane and then to the hard shoulder. Hing had failed to negotiate the bend as he approached Junction 8, either through tiredness or because he was distracted. He had been



DAVE COOPER

working night shifts.

Hertfordshire FBU Brigade Secretary Tony Smith said the accident showed the need for national guidance on safe systems of work on highways. "This will fuel the debate about whether the sentencing for taking a life on the roads is adequate," added FBU regional secretary Adrian Clarke. "It also ought to remind everyone what a desperately dangerous job firefighters often have to do, and the very real and varied dangers they face in the performance of their duties."

The sentence came shortly after more than 1,000 firefighters lobbied MPs about the increasing number of firefighters being killed on duty and called for better safeguards.

FBU helps secure funds boost

NORTHERN IRELAND

The FBU has welcomed the announcement that Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service will receive £168 million over the next 10 years to replace 26 fire stations, including the purchase of 22 new sites, and refurbish a further 10.

The funding includes £30 million towards a new public sector training college at Desertcreat near Cookstown, which is being developed by the NI Fire and Rescue Service, the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the NI Prison Service.

£26 million of the £168 million will be invested in the current three-year budget period, completing a new fire station in Armagh and providing four new stations in areas of the



PAUL FAITH/PA PHOTOS

McGimpsey, (left) Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, told the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Jim Barbour, FBU executive council member for Northern Ireland, said: "This is something that we have been lobbying for over the last year. I have personally spoken to the Minister concerned, together with a cross-section of leading politicians, to help secure this new funding."

The Union had worked with NIFRS on this issue, which would bring "mutual advantage", he said, adding: "The additional monies achieved, in a hostile financial climate, will allow for a range of station refurbishments and rebuilds, as well as fleet procurement and a complete control room 'state of the art' IT upgrade."

highest need.

Eleven frontline fire appliances will be replaced each year as part of an agreed rolling fleet replacement programme and all fire appliances will be equipped with "modern mobile data technology including satellite navigation so that firefighters have access to critical risk information at incidents to enable them to carry out life saving work in modern, reliable vehicles," Michael

Sounding off!

MIKE WOOD

Vice-Chair
Passive Fire Protection Federation

Fire safety disconnect

According to the Liverpool Daily Post in November, Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service has threatened to challenge the local water supplier, United Utilities, in court after "fire crews had complained about the lacklustre water pressure coming from the company's hydrants". The Post reports that United Utilities has apparently refused to increase the pressure and Merseyside Fire has drawn up plans to force the company to do more.

Although crews say they could cope with a domestic fire, there are fears a larger industrial inferno would stretch resources, already under pressure from integrated risk management plans and the threat of regional control rooms. It's not good news. But the implications are also clear for the wider aspects of fire protection. All fire protection measures need to work together because circumstances may not unfold as expected when fire breaks out. If the water supply is vulnerable, it could affect firefighting and any sprinklers systems installed.

It's not just the front, firefighting end we need to worry about. Firefighters take it on trust that a building they enter will have

The luxury apartment development Pacific Wharf lacked even the most basic fire protection, making it a death trap for people living there

adequate built-in fire protection, to maintain its stability under fire so people can get out safely and they can get in.

But the case of Pacific Wharf in London showed what a dangerous assumption this is. The luxury apartment development was recently in the news, having been found to lack even the most basic fire protection, making it a death trap for people living there. Although inspectors had passed the flats as having been constructed properly, there was no effective fire compartmentalisation, which could have risked the whole building.

There are general issues about fire safety awareness, from product manufacturers and engineers to designers, contractors and inspectors. The fire safety community needs to work together as a single entity. And it's important to take the wider perspectives into account. Surely it's critical if we cannot as a community place sufficient faith in the water supply? Joined up fire safety is what we should be concerned about, but right now there is a serious disconnect.

→ More: <http://pfpf.org>

No evidence to support Essex cuts

CUTS FIGHTBACK

Essex Fire Authority's integrated risk management plan for 2009-2012 does not provide sufficient information to demonstrate a case for reducing emergency response resources, says the Union.

Unless it can show such evidence, the FBU recommends that the authority should defer any deliberation on reductions in emergency response capacity or capability.

"Any reduction in the overall number of community-based, operational firefighters would detrimentally impact on the resilience and capacity of maintaining effective emergency response," said the Union.

It called on the fire authority "to maintain existing staffing levels to ensure we have specialist and highly trained fire service personnel, continually crewing all emergency response appliances."

The FBU is highly critical of the idea of "jump-crewing" of specialist appliances. A crew of two firefighters could take off on one appliance to deal with a call, but if another call came in there would be an appliance but no crew. The appliance, say some Essex firefighters, would be "the Marie Celeste of the Essex Fire Service".



Essex firefighters at work

The FBU says that the authority's slogan – "the right people in the right place at the right time" – is fine on paper, but "the right people cannot be in two places at the same time, so alternative crewing of the specialist appliances will inevitably compound the appliance availability problems."

The Union response, delivered at a meeting with the Fire Authority in December, came as local communities started to consider the implications of cuts. In Thurrock, councillors called for the plan to be deferred, to "enable further consultation and clarification of important issues that will have consequence for fire cover in Thurrock." Councillor Carl Morris told his colleagues: "We need assurances that people in Thurrock will be safe."

In brief

◆ Grampian Fire Authority has drawn back from dismissing Kevin Ogilvy, a firefighter for two decades, after intervention by the FBU. Kevin had put on weight – aged 47, he was 22 stone and no longer reached the required fitness standards for a man under 48. Instead of giving him time to lose weight and get fitter, Grampian decided to fire him. The FBU protested that this was not fair treatment, and the authority has now agreed to give him three months to reach the required fitness level. At the time of writing, Kevin had lost three stone and was within an ace of reaching the required fitness level.

◆ Gay and Lesbian Executive Council Member Stewart Brown has been re-elected to office unopposed. He said: "I am delighted that I have been given the chance to represent LGBT members for the next four years on the ruling body of the FBU. I look forward to progressing many important issues that affect us, including the newly announced duty to promote sexual orientation in the workplace."

◆ The campaign to re-open Radlett Fire Station in Hertfordshire was taken to parliament on 25 November by local MP James Clappison. He highlighted local residents' concerns about slower attendance times to their area and said that "Hertfordshire county council needs to listen to local residents." Ahead of a Westminster debate on fire services, local campaigner Jane Sheridan had written to the MP, outlining the strong arguments in favour of re-opening the retained station. "Before it is too late, debate the easy, cost-effective reinstatement of Radlett Fire Station."

◆ Paul Greenfield, a retained FBU member from Clay Cross, Derbyshire, has written to Firefighter to thank FBU East Midlands regional secretary Dave Limer for his advice and for putting him in touch with Mark Ferron, Derbyshire FBU Chair, who Paul also thanked for representing him "in a very kind, thoughtful and professional manner" at a grievance meeting over an alleged overpayment. "With Mark's help we had a successful outcome. I am now reaching the end of my 32-year career, but it is reassuring to know that the FBU is here for all members," wrote Paul Greenfield.

Enlightening, inspirational, invaluable

NATIONAL SCHOOL

"Enlightening", "inspirational" and "invaluable" were among the comments from students at the FBU's National School (right) at Wortley Hall in November.

More than 40 people, from lay members to branch, divisional and brigade officials, attended the school where they heard speeches from Matt Wrack, FBU General Secretary, John McDonnell MP and Sarah Messenger of the employers' side of the National Joint Council. Workshops included local bargaining, the NJC and the Grey Book; dealing with modernisation in the fire service; organising; and tackling the far right.



Buncefield investigation ends amid calls for central guidance and queries over resources



Aftermath of the Buncefield explosion

Investigators into the Buncefield explosion and blaze of 11 December 2005 have ended their work by reiterating calls on the department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) to assess national-level arrangements to provide, fund and maintain emergency response equipment, such as high-volume pumps, firefighting foam and specialist pollution containment equipment to tackle major incidents at high-hazard industrial sites.

Investigators called on CLG and devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to ensure fire and rescue authorities across the UK "review the availability of materials and equipment nationally and determine if they are sufficient to respond to and manage major incidents".

The report by the Buncefield Major Incident Investigation Board into the largest peace-time explosion in Europe, which runs to more than 500 pages, also recommended that CLG, in cooperation with the Civil Contingencies Secretariat and equivalent administrations, "put into effect where it is practical to do so as soon as possible" the recommendations in the Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue Service report into the lessons learned from the fire at the Hertfordshire Oil Storage Depot.

National system

The 2006 Hertfordshire report called for, among other things, a national system to maintain an accurate record of all fire responders at the scene to enable a rapid

head count if required; early consideration of the type, quantity and duration of deployment of national resources; the introduction of earpieces for radios to enable communication while wearing a helmet; and consideration of a national system of incident command support teams that could be deployed during a catastrophic or protracted incident.

The independent Buncefield investigation board, which was chaired by Lord Newton of Braintree and directed by the Health and Safety Commission, further recommended that the Civil Contingencies Secretariat review guidance to responders to "ensure appropriate scales of response and resources are provided, at local, regional or national levels" for an incident at a COMAH (control of major accident hazards) site. This national guidance to local authorities should "address the competencies required for emergency planners, and be clear on the resources that may be demanded for an effective emergency planning function" and it should be "periodically updated in the light of new knowledge of handling major emergencies".

The report also highlighted the welfare needs of responders and recommended that local authorities gave "due consideration" to them, including "arrangements to provide food and drink and toilet and washing facilities, on all shifts.

This will also need to include guidance on rest breaks and the provision of accommodation for responders from outside of the local area."

The report stated: "The priority for major hazard sites such as Buncefield is in improving measures for prevention of loss of containment and escalation of an incipient major incident. However, improving the arrangements to prevent fires and explosions in no way lessens the need to have effective emergency planning and response arrangements in the rare event of a major incident."

The fires at Buncefield were extinguished in three days, but the overall fire response lasted 26 days and 642 fire appliances were moved to the incident.

Harmful toxins

The FBU is concerned that the risks associated with COMAH sites are properly taken into account by integrated risk management plans (IRMPs) in order to protect firefighter and public safety.

The Union will also seek to ensure that the health of the many FBU members from across the country who – along with local residents – were potentially exposed to harmful toxins while attending the incident is monitored carefully over the longer term.

Criminal proceedings have been commenced against Total UK Ltd, Hertfordshire Oil Storage Ltd; British Pipeline Agency Ltd; TAV Engineering Ltd; and Motherwell Control Systems 2003 Ltd following an investigation by the Health and Safety Executive and the Environment Agency. The initial court date is 23 January at West Hertfordshire Magistrates Court in Watford.

Union unmask's Audit Commission's secret findings

The Audit Commission found failures in training, poor risk assessments and shortages in crewing levels in brigades across England. But it kept the findings secret – and gave the green light to all brigades. The Union had to make Freedom of Information requests for the truth to come out.

Some integrated risk management plans (IRMPs), and particular risk assessments, have been inadequate and some so bad as to have compromised firefighter safety. Training for emergency response is insufficient. There is not enough training for incident command, not enough time spent on realistic “hot fire” training, and not enough specialist training in safety-critical areas such as breathing apparatus and building construction. Courses have

been cancelled while others are using inadequate methods and materials. Furthermore, crewing levels were not high enough in Greater Manchester, Cambridgeshire, West Sussex, Buckinghamshire, Berkshire and Somerset. These are the findings of spot checks carried out in 2006 for the Audit Commission on most English fire and rescue services, and kept secret until Labour Research Department, commissioned by the FBU, put in a Freedom of Information requests for them.

TOP SECRET

RISK ANALYSIS

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

Audit Commission score: Well/Well

But spot checks found: Various sources confirmed that there are a number of risk assessments being carried out within the Service outside of any formal process

WARWICKSHIRE

Audit Commission score: Well/Adequately

But spot checks found: WFRS have experienced some difficulties in fully resourcing FSEC [Fire Service Emergency Cover], and it is currently operating with three year old data. As a result, WFRS is yet to develop a full risk profile of Warwickshire and FSEC has not been available to contribute to the IRMP process until recently.

SHROPSHIRE

Audit Commission score: Strongly/Well

But spot checks found: At present the FRA is not able to complete a comprehensive assessment of all risk that exists within the county....

HERTFORDSHIRE

Audit Commission score: Well/Well

But spot checks found: The use of geographical mobilising creates a potential risk to crews who attend incidents outside of their normal working area. It was identified that currently, crews may respond to incidents without available risk information on site specific risks and therefore may be at risk in the initial stages of an incident.

EAST SUSSEX

Audit Commission score: Strongly/Well

But spot checks found: There is no overarching risk management policy consolidating the assessment of existing and potential risk within the communities of East Sussex.

OXFORDSHIRE

Audit Commission score: Well/Well

But spot checks found: Station plans showing areas of ‘high risk’ and areas where response standards cannot be met

were not available at some of the stations visited and there was insufficient information to identify appliances that do not meet the response standards.

HAMPSHIRE

Audit Commission score: Strongly/Strongly

But spot checks found: There is no overarching risk management policy consolidating the assessment of existing and potential risk within the communities of Hampshire

GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Audit Commission score: Well/Well

But spot checks found: There is no overarching risk management policy consolidating the assessment of existing and potential risk within the communities of Gloucestershire.



OPERATIONAL PREPAREDNESS

HUMBERSIDE

Audit Commission score: Well/well

But spot checks found: Currently only HFRA staff undertaking phase one training participate in "HOT" fire training. Whilst the remaining operational staff are able to observe hot fire phenomena, there are currently no facilities for staff to gain practical experience in a controlled environment ... At present this type of training is currently not available to all operational staff and remains an area for improvement.

GREATER MANCHESTER

Audit Commission score: Strongly/Strongly

But spot checks found: Whilst there are many embedded training activities spread across the service ... deficiencies... may be leaving some operational staff exposed to risk.

DERBYSHIRE

Audit Commission score: Well/adequately

But spot checks found: The training department is not delivering consistent training to ensure operational competence ... Refresher training in several areas is behind schedule including breathing apparatus supervisors/positive pressure ventilation training, emergency fire appliance driving and annual breathing apparatus.

STAFFORDSHIRE

Audit Commission score: Strongly/Well

But spot checks found: There is little evidence that post incident surveys are carried out and that the results of these are used to improve operational performance....

HERTFORDSHIRE

Audit Commission score: Well/Well

But spot checks found: Although there is evidence that Operational Risk Critical Information is disseminated to operational staff, there is no formal audit system in place to ensure that all personnel with an operational responsibility have both received and understand this information ... HFRS has had to cease using its 'hot fire' training facility. As a consequence some

operational staff expressed their concerns due to the fact that they are no longer able to experience realistic hot fire training ... Hydrants are subjected to an annual inspection, however as a result of staff shortages targets are not being met.

NORFOLK

Audit Commission score: Well/Well

But spot checks found: There are concerns about capacity of existing [health and safety] arrangements, the lack of safety representatives and a meeting structure that is not as effective as it could be. There is also a perception of poor levels of near-miss reporting as the figures seem too low to reflect the realistic position

SURREY

Audit Commission score: Well/Well

But spot checks found: There was evidence of limited training for retained staff with no initial training courses being run for some time even though there are many vacancies. No evidence of a structured training programme for retained staff was found, with one station visited creating their own programme without reference to support officers or the training department.



WEST SUSSEX

Audit Commission score: Well/Well

But spot checks found: The monitoring of crews and incident commanders with regard to operational effectiveness and personal development is sporadic and uncoordinated.

ROYAL BERKSHIRE

Audit Commission score: Strongly/Strongly

But spot checks found: There was clear evidence that RBFRS is operating at significantly below their retained duty system (RDS) establishment. RBFRS' IRMP identifies that the peak time for emergency incidents coincides with the peak of RDS unavailability.

GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Audit Commission score: Well/Well

But spot checks found: Only information for risks within the station area or immediate surrounding area are available to crews. Watches attending incidents off their station ground are not therefore immediately aware of the risks.

DEVON

Audit Commission score: Well/Well

But spot checks found: There was a lack of consistency in the identification of, inspection and re-inspection of premises that fall under the Section 7 (2) (d) of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004. The inconsistencies included the depth and frequency of training for such risks.

CORNWALL

Audit Commission score: Well/Adequate

But spot checks found: The review team was unable to find clear evidence of how policies are subjected to periodic, planned risk assessment and review. The breathing apparatus and tactical firefighting (TAFF) course attended by frontline staff every 18 months is not currently assessed for individual competence meaning that whilst crews are refreshed in core skills, they are not formally assessed and may not be competent.

OASD EXPLAINER

The operational assessment of service delivery (OASD) is scored on a four-point scale: 1 (inadequate); 2 (adequate); 3 (performing well); 4 (performing strongly). According to the Audit Commission, it looks at "how well a fire service plans to respond to emergencies and prevent incidents," but with a very narrow focus of the number of primary fires, deaths and injuries resulting from fires and the number of deliberate fires. This OASD, based on assessments/spot checks undertaken by the Department for Communities and Local Government for the Audit Commission, was carried out in 2006. Two

fire services, Kent and Medway FRS and Merseyside FRS do not have a 2007 service assessment "because they achieved a score of excellent in the 2005 CPA and are therefore exempt from this assessment". According to the OASD, 11 fire services (25 per cent) were performing "strongly"; 17 fire services (38 per cent) were performing "well"; and no fire service was performing "inadequately". None of the detail published in this edition of *Firefighter* magazine appeared in the Audit Commission's *Fire and rescue performance assessment* report (January 2008), which dedicated just three pages to the OASD, out of a total of 36 pages.

EMERGENCY RESPONSE

DURHAM

Audit Commission score: Well/Well
But spot checks found: Arrangements for audit and review of practices relating to emergency response are not robust. There are examples of monitoring and collation of data but little evidence to illustrate audit of policy, practice and procedure in order to improve performance ... Whilst procedures are in place to ensure that any responding appliance is crewed with at least one individual trained in ICS [Incident Command System], in some circumstances there is still the potential for an acting RDS crew manager to respond without suitable training.

NORTH YORKSHIRE

Audit Commission score: Strongly/Strongly
But spot checks found: There is a system for monitoring the availability of retained crewed appliances; however there was one example when the monitoring information was inaccurate. The recording system in use is not robust and on at least one occasion changes in crewing levels had not been recorded and notified to the Control Room. If accurate crewing levels are not advised or recorded additional appliances, to augment the pre-determined attendance, are not mobilised immediately.

GREATER MANCHESTER

Audit Commission score: Strongly/Strongly
But spot checks found: There is evidence that the arrangements to maintain adequate crewing levels at stations identified within the FRA's IRMP are not being achieved. The service has identified that it will maintain crewing levels of five personnel on the first appliance on all occasions but evidence shows that this level is not being attained on an increasing percentage of occasions over the last two years.

DERBYSHIRE

Audit Commission score: Well/Adequately
But spot checks found: There is limited evidence that the arrangements to train, develop, and maintain the competence of personnel are effective ... There is little evidence that the operational procedures appertaining to the mobilising of appliances to incidents with reduced crews or skills, including breathing apparatus are founded on a comprehensive risk assessment. The policy relating to turnouts and attendances allows, in exceptional circumstances, for

RDS crews to mobilise to incidents without sufficient numbers of breathing apparatus (BA) wearers or a qualified pump operator. There is no evidence of a comprehensive risk assessment for this procedure or adequate guidance detailing actions and adequate control measures to be adopted.

LINCOLNSHIRE

Audit Commission score: Well/Well
But spot checks found: Following a review of the risk critical information held on front line appliances, much of it was found to be out of date. As a consequence the decision was made to remove risk premises folders while detailed updating is carried out ... This has resulted in front line appliances in LFRS [Leicester FRS] currently having no risk specific information on premises previously identified as posing a risk.

WEST MIDLANDS

Audit Commission score: Well/Well
But spot checks found: WMFS have an agreed standard that the maximum number of appliances unavailable for normal response will not exceed 15. The team found evidence that this standard can be breached during the first TRACS timeslot in each day from 08:00 to 11:00 in the morning. During this period additional appliances can be removed from operational availability resulting in a potential total of 18 off the run.

SUFFOLK

Audit Commission score: Adequately/Adequately
But spot checks found: There is no evidence to show that the majority of incidents attended by SFRS are subjected to any form of debrief ... Information relating to hydrant location is not available on front line appli-

ances for immediate use by operational personnel when attending incidents ... There was insufficient evidence to substantiate that all stations maintain copies of operational risk critical information such as High Risk Cards for risk sites within their station area for use by standby appliances. Ostensibly fire appliances relocated to provide cover at another fire station could be mobilised to an incident at a High Risk premises without having the necessary information to hand to deal safely and effectively with the incident.

EAST SUSSEX

Audit Commission score: Strongly/Well
But spot checks found: ESFRS delegate the implementation of action items arising from safety event investigations to the responsible manager for the area in which the event took place. There is evidence that there is no ongoing monitoring by the health and safety department to ensure that these actions are implemented within agreed timescales.

WEST SUSSEX

Audit Commission score: Well/Well
But spot checks found: The maintenance of adequate staffing levels at RDS stations to fulfil the needs of WSFRS has been identified as an area for improvement. Ten appliances off the run during the day is not an unusual occurrence, a proportion of which are single appliance RDS stations.

OXFORDSHIRE

Audit Commission score: Well/Well
But spot checks found: The systematic operational audit or active monitoring of performance on the incident ground appears to have stopped two to three years ago owing to a shortfall in organisational capacity.



DAVE THOMPSON/PA PHOTOS

Source: Excerpts from operational assessment of service delivery (OASD) reports obtained from Freedom of Information communications, August 2008. This is not intended as an exhaustive list. For further details see the FBU report In the Line of Duty at www.fbu.org.uk

FBU members queue to lobby
their MPs on 12 November 2008

STEFANO CAGNONI

Rally and lobby of Parliament a huge success

Biggest trade union lobby
in recent times

Over 1,000 FBU members and officials attended a rally and lobby of the Westminster parliament on 12 November to press MPs to support the Union's campaign for urgent action over the recent rise in firefighter fatalities in the UK. In what was one of the largest trade union lobbies in recent years, firefighters met with their constituency MPs and asked them to press the Department of Communities and Local Government for a response to the recommendations and findings in the FBU's report, *In the Line of Duty*.

Ministers need to act urgently

Ahead of the lobby at a rally held at a packed Westminster Hall, opposite the Houses of Parliament in London, speakers called for Government action to prevent further tragedies in the future.

John McDonnell MP, Secretary to the FBU Parliamentary Group, said: "This should not be happening in the modern fire service. The Government is not playing its role. Ministers need to listen to the people doing the job, address the issues in the report, *In the Line of Duty*, and implement them as a matter of urgency."

Frances O'Grady, deputy General Secretary of the TUC, called on the Government to "live up to its responsibilities", promising support from the TUC for a "vital" campaign. "In the trade union movement we believe that the right to work is a basic human right. Well, the right

EDM 174 FIREFIGHTER SAFETY: HAS YOUR MP SIGNED IT?

That this House notes the recent increased number of firefighter deaths highlighted in the Fire Brigades Union report *In the Line of Duty*; further notes the lack of safety-critical operational guidance for fire authorities highlighted in that report, and the absence of a properly resourced national body with overall responsibility for recording and investigating firefighter deaths and other serious incidents; and therefore calls for work to be commenced with stakeholders to see through the creation of such a body with responsibility for developing and agreeing safety-critical operational guidance arising from those investigations

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EMAIL YOUR MP NOW

to work safely is even more fundamental."

Martin Seaward, the barrister who has represented families of firefighters who lost their lives in the line of duty in Harrow Court, Hertfordshire and Bethnal Green, London said that "the lessons of the past must be learned, disseminated and imbedded in the safety culture of the UK fire and rescue service."

Matt Wrack paid tribute "to the families of firefighters killed in the line of duty", including Dave Faust and Robert Wornham, who had joined the Lobby. "Both have shown a steady determination to ensure that the lessons of those two tragedies are learned so that hopefully no other families' sons or daughters will be killed in the same circumstances again."

Citing Health and Safety Executive figures, Matt Wrack said the fatality rate among firefighters uncovered in the FBU research was ten times the average for all workers in the UK today. "That is simply unacceptable."

Later that day, a question on the issue of firefighter fatalities was put to Gordon Brown during Prime Minister's Question Time.

In an indication of progress in one key area, on November 16, Fire Minister Sadiq Khan, informed MPs that "a framework for the future development of operational guidance has been developed, including a priority programme of work for 2008-09. This programme has begun and includes the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders."

Nearly 5 years late

2007

2008

2009

2010

2011

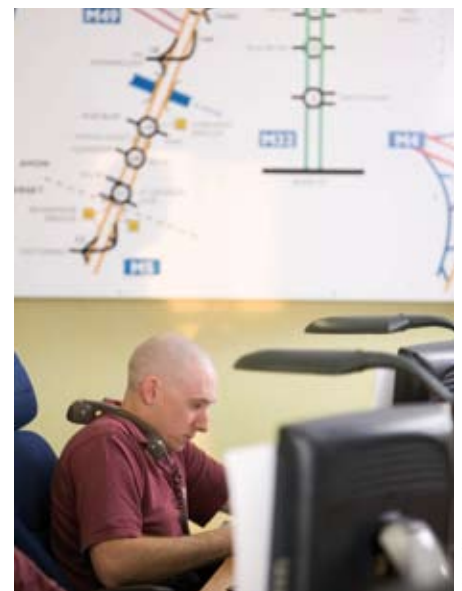
2012?

The Government has been forced to admit there will be further delays in the proposed regional control centres (RCCs) with a start-up date across England now pushed back to 2012, almost five years late. When the plans were first announced, RCCs were to be fully operational by November 2007

In a written statement to Parliament, Fire Minister Sadiq Khan said: "Our current assumption is that the first three centres will cut-over in summer 2010 and that the full system will be in place by spring 2012."

And he added: "As with any project of this nature, we will only have certainty about the timing of these later stages of the project once earlier stages have been completed successfully."

The Minister's admission, which came in an answer to a parliamentary question, followed the news in October that the FireControl project had hit major technical problems.



PAUL BOX

e and counting...



In the South West, which was supposed to be the first centre to open, the RCC start up date has been pushed back nine months until June 2010.

John Drake, the FBU's South West Regional Secretary, said: "It's been put back for technical issues, but we don't know what those technical issues are. What we do know is we've always warned the technology was untried and untested – that's the dangers of inventing a new computer system."

Delays and the escalating costs of the FireControl project also came under attack from Shadow Communities and Local Government Minister Stewart Jackson, who said: "Given that we were told in 2004 that the regional control centres would cost only £100m, the figures are horrendous."

"Some £55m has been spent so far on consultants and £50m on local and national project set-up. That is £100m already. Some £190 million has been spent on IT and £342 million on premises. We are heading towards £700 million, and not one regional control centre is yet open, nor is one likely to open."

Disastrous project

"This is a disastrous project. It's impacting in the post-comprehensive spending review period, on real front-line services and on revenue funding. Kill it off; pull the plug."

But on 26 November Sadiq Khan made a written ministerial statement in which he said the Government remained committed to the FireControl project. The "set up" and transition costs paid by Government for FireControl alone will be £380 million and

the RCCs will then be handed over to Local Authority Controlled Companies who will pay for costs from then on in.

No evidence of savings

The promised 28% savings had fallen to 10% producing – claimed CLG – £8 million savings in running costs (nationally), although some regions will make considerable losses. Yet the Institute of Public Finance could find no evidence of savings in the figures presented in the regional business case and there is enormous scepticism among fire authorities about the continuing basis for the claims about the alleged savings and benefits of the technology.

The £8 million savings on running costs – even if accurate – mean it would take 48 years to recoup the £380 million set up costs alone. The total project cost is now in excess of £1.4 billion. FireControl will never, as originally claimed, pay for itself.

Furthermore, while it constantly highlights the benefits FireLink will bring, CLG has never built the running costs of FireLink into any of its published calculations on the costs of regional controls. These costs will be considerably higher than the current radio system.

In the South West the campaign continues to protect control staff jobs come what may. Says John Drake: "It's incongruous that at a time when government is bailing out banks and financial institutions to save the economy

and jobs, they intend to put almost 1,000 dedicated public servants on the scrapheap."

But John and the Union have some reasons to be pleased: the FBU SouthWest has succeeded in recruiting staff working in the new centres into the Union.

"It's a really significant step," said John, "because if the government thought it would be able to get these people inside, they're wrong."

"We've explained to the workers our policy of opposing regional controls and they understand that, but they still wanted to join the FBU because they wanted protection at work, especially as they're dealing with a management that is making things up as they go along."

"We've been proved right in everything we've said about the regional control centre, but one area where we don't want to be proved right is where we say it will cost lives. We hope it will never come to that."



JUST IN TIME FOR THE OLYMPICS?

Spring 2012? There is enormous uncertainty about keeping even to this delayed timetable and there appears little confidence at ministerial level in the new dates. In summer 2008, those best informed estimated the delay to be a minimum of 9 months and, more likely, 2 years

It is widely acknowledged that the 2012 summer Olympics heighten the terrorist threat facing the UK. While the current delay makes it appear the RCCs will arrive 'just in time' this is not the case and it effects far more than London which has had its start date brought forward.

The union is aware that many chief fire

officers were clear that they needed all RCCs to be fully operational at least 12 months before the 2012 Olympics and the new timetable will not achieve that. There is a clear and significant risk of the fire service command, control and communications system being only partially ready with a patchwork quilt of fire services moved to RCCs and others waiting to move by the summer Olympics.

Every RCC has to be fully operational, not only London. It is a fallacy that bringing the new London RCC date forward resolves the issue, as the fire service is fully aware.

Iraqi Kurdistan revisited

Val Salmon, Greater Manchester FBU, reports

“ It seemed as if only weeks had passed since we delivered two fire appliances to our comrades in Iraqi Kurdistan. In fact it was September 2006 when we ventured those 3,000 miles across Europe and, since then, little contact had been made by the FBU.

Brian Joyce, who retired in 2006, had been the initiator and organiser of previous visits and the driving force of the work the FBU had carried out in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan.

Our involvement had always been two-fold: support for the trade union movement and for the firefighters who work in difficult conditions with limited equipment.

We had promised to support and assist both of these where possible. However, time had passed so we were unsure of what progress had been made, and if there had been, in what direction it was. Were their needs the same and how realistically could we help, if at all?

We were aware of the important role played by the FBU's physical presence in these countries. Past experience had proved the benefits both politically and for the trade union movement. The appreciation of the Iraqi and Kurdish officials had always confirmed this, as well as the media coverage. This wasn't just about practical assistance – however important – but a statement of solidarity, political leverage and a place in trade union history for the FBU.

From our last visit we knew that the Kurdish General Workers Syndicate Union (KGWSU), the TUC of Iraqi Kurdistan, was in need of laptop computers, indeed, all forms of technology, including faxes and photocopiers. They were getting assistance from another UK union, Unison, that was delivering education courses. However, that union's role was, or had been, completely different to that of the FBU.

Personally, I was keen to re-establish my links with the female officials I had met previously. But I also shared Brian's wish to see the appliance we had delivered working on its home station and speak to the firefighters once again. So, I was pleased when the phone rang and Brian suggested a fact-finding trip back to Kurdistan.

Contact is not easy and it took several months for emails to be answered, but it gave time for preparations to be made.

On 14 April 2008 Brian, myself and FBU vice-president Alan McLean went to Iraqi Kurdistan (this time by air). We were well received as always by Hangaw Abdullah Khan, President of the KGWSU, and his officials, who are based in a large town called Erbil. When we were taken to their offices, we saw that very little had changed. Their needs were clear – office furniture and equipment needed replacement or renewal as well as refurbishment of the building.

Our next few days were spent as we requested – a meeting with committee members of the KGWSU in Erbil, including representatives of the transport, mechanics' and building industry unions.

We met the director of the Erbil fire service in the morning and visited the fire station where our appliance is

now kept. We also met three women representatives of the textile industry and media unions one evening.

The KGWSU's warmth and appreciation for the FBU were apparent from the moment we arrived, and it became quickly clear that our continued support was paramount to all those present that day. Specific needs were many, but primarily IT equipment, education, finance and the wish for a small delegation of officials to come to the UK.

Although badly fitting and not all fit for their purpose, it was with some pride that the Erbil firefighters donned their fire kit. The one BA set (basically a face mask and cylinder) taking pride of place. For the others a mask similar to those carried by civilians in the Second World War. Equipment is needed; the requirements are extensive, but also technical information, including manuals and publications. However, translation of such is an issue. Training is essential; bringing a member of the brigade to this country would be indispensable.

We walked to the front of the station. It brought back so many memories seeing our appliance on the forecourt. The crew demonstrated a turn out, (although the steering wheel being on the right caused some difficulty).

With great generosity, Shirwa from the textile union and Shilan from the media agreed to meet us. As women trade unionists they are an important and integral part of discussions on workers' rights in Iraqi Kurdistan. They hold seats by right at all levels of the movement up to and including committees that draft legislation. They were astounded to hear that parity of pay, maternity leave and childcare issues have not been resolved in the UK.

They have parity of pay for work of equal value, childcare is provided and they certainly do not feel gender is a barrier to anything they wish to achieve. They were keen to maintain and further links with the FBU and other UK trade unions. It was evident that to do so would be beneficial to all.

Alan was an important part of the visit (not least for his wicked sense of humour) for giving status to the delegation. He presented a delighted Hangaw with a laptop, vital for their continuing work. Later we had detailed discussions with Hangaw regarding a way forward and how the FBU could assist in the future.

I was privileged to visit Iraqi Kurdistan once again, to spend time, not only with comrades but with people I care deeply about.

The FBU has an unrivalled reputation for supporting comrades on an international level. The delivery of the two fire appliances was part of that. That trip is now firmly embedded in all KGWSU education as an example of international solidarity.

The continuation of that support for Hangaw, the KGWSU and Iraqi Kurdistan is essential. There can be no lonelier place in the world than to be on your own. Iraqi Kurdistan needs our political and practical help. It would be unthinkable not to deliver it.

Thanks to all those regions who once again supported our work and this visit to Iraqi Kurdistan.





Vice-President Alan McLean and Brian Joyce (centre) with KGWSU officials



One of the two fire engines brought by land in September 2006 by Brian, Val and other FBU officials, stationed at a fire station in Erbil



KGWSU General Secretary Hangaw Abdullah Khan with Alan McLean



Firefighters at an Erbil fire station in their kit

Erbil: headquarters of the KGWSU

WHAT DOES A FIRE INVESTIG

Jackie McConochie needs an open mind and attention to detail when she attends a fire scene

Jackie McConochie joined the London fire brigade 20 years ago – and spent many years as a frontline firefighter. She is nearing the end of a year-long detachment as a fire investigations officer in West London. And she's relished the chance to broaden her skills.

Fire investigators carry some sophisticated equipment to help them determine the cause of a fire. But, according to Jackie, there are two things an investigator needs above everything else when visiting a fire scene – “an open mind and attention to detail”.

These tools of the trade are crucial in a job which is, as Jackie puts it, “all about reading the scene, gathering data and not jumping to conclusions”.

Fire investigators don't attend every fire scene. In London they will attend large fires requiring four or more pumps, or if there

‘We have to be very forensically aware so that if we suspect anything we don't contaminate the scene. We will preserve evidence and work closely with the police and carry out a joint investigation’

are fatalities or persons reported. If the fire is suspicious, it involved explosions or the incident commander requests assistance, they will also turn up at the fire scene. The objective – to determine the origin and cause of the fire.

Fire investigators are hard-wired to approach each fire scene with an open mind, ditching any preconceptions so they can begin piecing together clues to how and where the fire started.

“It's a really logical process, a process of elimination; you start by gathering all the available information from any witnesses and the initial fire crews and progress to the fire scene itself.

“You'll work your way from the area of least damage to the area of greatest damage, recording the scene using a camera to gather photographic evidence and making copious written notes. You will inevitably begin to rule things out and rule things in,” Jackie explains.

“If there are signs of forced entry not attributable to fire crews gaining entry or the fire has developed much quicker than you would expect given the fuel or time available it may raise suspicions that this could be a crime scene rather than an accidental fire.

“We have to be very forensically aware so that if we suspect anything we don't contaminate the scene. We will preserve evidence and work closely with the police and carry out a joint investigation.”

As an experienced fire fighter, Jackie is, of course, a seasoned team player. And though each fire investigator works alongside fellow professionals from other agencies, there will be times when you're working alone, painstakingly collecting data and chronicling the evidence.

The results of any tests or examinations carried out at the scene must be recorded.

These could include tests to see if any accelerant, such as petrol, lighter or barbecue fuel were used to start or spread the fire. Equipment called Gaztec can effectively “sniff” the area and give a reading indicating whether or not such a substance has been used.

“We may also call upon one of two hydrocarbon-trained dog teams who can



ATION OFFICER DO?

indicate whether a substance has been used to accelerate the fire," says Jackie.

The dogs have an incredible sense of smell 10,000 times better than a human. "It's impressive watching dogs and their handlers work. They can cover a large area very quickly and indicate in a matter of minutes." Samples are then taken for analysis at a scientific lab.

"After gathering all the data you will form a hypothesis about how it started. Notes taken at the fire scene, supported by photographs, will form the basis of reports to be written away from the scene." Accuracy is paramount – these reports can be destined for coroners or crown court hearings should someone die in the fire or if any individual later faces arson charges.



Jackie McConochie
at her Acton
headquarters

Jackie explains: "To the trained eye of the fire investigator, every feature of a smoke and fire damaged interior may hold vital clues. The burn patterns and charred remains will often 'point' you to the area of origin and you can visualise how the fire developed. However if a room has reached flashover, little will remain of the fire patterns on walls, and room contents to indicate the origin and you will look for other evidence. Signs of arcing on electrical wiring for instance, can give a good idea of where the fire first attacked the electrical system.

"Once you identify the area of origin, you start to examine the area very closely to see what else can be found. Any electrical items, candle remains, cigarette ends and spent matches – it's amazing what you can still identify in the fire debris. Such forensic scrutiny can pay dividends: you develop knowledge of what everything looks like once it's been burnt beyond recognition. You'll work through the debris carefully lifting off layer upon layer and examining it as it will reveal vital evidence underneath where it all began."

Jackie says she's learned a great deal in her short time as a fire investigator, thanks to the skills of her colleagues who have mentored her through the initial training. "It takes a long time to learn the role

Though each fire investigator works alongside fellow professionals, the role demands the ability to work alone, painstakingly collecting data and chronicling the evidence

thoroughly, the knowledge and experience my colleagues have is incredible and takes years to develop."

Jackie has always been keen to learn new skills. Alongside frontline firefighting, she's instructed trainee firefighters in firefighting basics and officers in incident command so far in her varied career.

In March, Jackie's off to manage a watch and is looking forward to yet another fresh challenge. And, yes – she's keeping her options open – but certainly hasn't ruled out returning to fire investigation later on in her career. "I've had an excellent time and learned an incredible amount. I'd certainly recommend it."

Working For You



CHRIS DOWNES

Regional Secretary

West Midlands

West Midlands Fire Service's plan to close ten fire stations and replace them with eight new ones should be scrapped. There should be new consultation on a new plan under the ownership of the chief fire officer who will replace outgoing chief Frank Sheehan who resigned in November.

Firefighters and the people of Sandwell and Birmingham have combined forces to let the fire authority know their anger and disgust at the plans to close fire stations. Local labour MPs and councillors have been very helpful and supportive in their opposition to this weak set of uncoded proposals that do not give answers, just raise more questions.

FBU members have led the way in mobilising for rejection of the plan. Sandwell Council has called for immediate postponement of the plan. The fire authority was due to meet on 15 December to discuss this motion. Public consultation on it was due to end on 7 January.

Other trade unions have joined in the battle to stop the closures, 1,000 flyers have been distributed and in just a couple of hours in a Halesowen shopping centre, 1,350 people signed a petition protesting against the threatened closure of their local station.

Smethwick, Sheldon, Cradley Heath, Hay Mills and Billesley crews – whose stations all face closure – have also spread the word of the ill-thought out plan and the public has responded in large numbers.

Many businesses in the Smethwick area were unaware of the plan and have vowed to fight the planned closure and the increased risk that a reduced fire service would bring.

The public of the West Midlands deserve the first-class service currently provided by firefighters and FBU members want to maintain this cover as a bare minimum. In an economic downturn and with a heightened risk of terrorist attack we believe fire cover should be increased not decreased.

With each cutback proposed by managers comes another risk to firefighter safety. The FBU in the West Midlands, supported by the public, will not allow this to happen.

Trying to relive your youth?

This condition affects people from their late 30s into their 50s

MID-LIFE CRISIS

A sudden change of lifestyle, a penchant for fast cars and faster women, an urgent need to relive our youth before it's too late ... Whether it's in car adverts or Hollywood movies, we're all familiar with the stereotypes of mid-life crisis. However, despite the masses of media images and the often-heard judgment "Oh, he's having a mid-life crisis ..." we are still left wondering, what exactly is mid-life crisis all about?

Mid-life crisis refers to a period of change that some people can experience in their middle years. Little is known about how many people are effected, however it's thought that it can affect people anywhere from their late 30s into their 50s, and is more common amongst men than women. For men, it's unclear whether this is caused by hormonal changes, or is more psychological.

One theory is that it is caused by the 'male menopause', or 'andropause'. Although men do not experience the huge hormonal changes that women go through during the menopause, men experience a gradual reduction in testosterone that can be linked to health issues some may face in middle age, such as fatigue, weight gain, low mood and loss of libido. However, as hormone levels decline only slowly amongst men, many people see it as more psychological.

Everyone has to deal with times of transition, but some age-related milestones are more significant than others. In a youth-obsessed culture, ageing can be difficult to handle and it's thought that, for some, mid-life crisis can be about facing up to the loss of our younger days.

Others, amid the daily grind of work, family and relationships, may not have thought about where their life is going, and mid-life is a time of re-thinking what it is they really want.

Our middle years are full of events such as the death of parents, children leaving home and changes in our bodies which are stressful enough as it is, but can leave us wondering about the path we're on. However, it is important to remember that mid-life can be a time of satisfaction and fulfilment, even if the journey there isn't always smooth.

Mid-life crisis affects everyone differently, but there are many things you can do to help. If you feel dissatisfied with life in general, look carefully at your life, and about

- ◆ Mid-life crisis is thought of as a 'man's problem', but it can effect women too
- ◆ People can experience mid-life crisis anywhere from their 30s into their 50s
- ◆ It's unclear whether it is caused by hormonal changes or psychological factors
- ◆ While mid-life can be a time of upheaval, many people report that it can be the happiest time of their lives

where you want it to go in future. Identify the problem areas, and think about whether you want to make changes.

Try to be as realistic and honest with yourself as possible. Although it's not always easy, talk to your partner, friends or someone you can trust. Just talking things through can be a powerful way to combat low mood and feelings of confusion and unease.

If you're feeling particularly down, do visit your doctor – they may recommend therapies or a short course of antidepressants.

Make sure you look after your body. As the saying goes, you are what you eat. Blood sugar levels are known to effect mood and change throughout the day according to what and when you eat. Make sure you eat regular meals, and avoid too many sugary or fatty products that can throw blood-sugar off kilter.

Sleep is as vital for a healthy mind as it is for a healthy body, and getting enough sleep can make a huge difference to how you think and feel.

While it can be difficult to get active if you're feeling low, keep exercising – physical activity is proven to reduce stress and lift mood, as well as keeping you in shape.

Finally, stay positive. Change has its plus points as well as its down sides. Mid-life is a great opportunity to take stock of your life and to make changes for the better. For many people, it can be the happiest time of their lives.

→ If you are worried about mid-life crisis, visit www.mind.org.uk for more information and advice on where to go for help. Alternatively, you can call or email our information help line MindInfoLine 0845 766 1063 / info@mind.org.uk.



A taste for fast cars could be a sign of mid-life crisis

Q I was overpaid for several months and my employer has just notified me that they intend to take it all back. Can they do this in one go or can I ask for time to repay?

A You can ask for a repayment deal. In some circumstances it may be possible to resist a claim by the employer for the overpaid wages. But these cases turn on their facts and depend on issues such as whether the employee was unaware of the overpayment, whether it was the employer's error and whether the employee changed their position by relying upon the payments being correct and, therefore, incurred expenditure which would not otherwise have been incurred.

In practice, such a case is stronger if the overpayment occurred some time previously, continued for a significant period of time and amounted to a substantial amount of money.

Often, employers are prepared to agree reasonable repayment arrangements over a period of time mindful that if they do not, they may face legal proceedings that could result in the overpayment being written off.

Q I'm in the Firefighters' Pension Scheme (FPS). I've been told that one day more people will be members of the New Firefighters Pensions Scheme than the FPS and when this happens the old scheme will be closed. Is that legal?

A There are now two Firefighters' Pension Schemes both set up under Statutory instruments: the original Firefighters' Pension Scheme (FPS) which is outlined in The Firefighters' Pension Scheme Order 1992 and The



SATOSHI KAMBAYASHI

years to come, the government may try to stop members accruing further benefits under the scheme and either transfer them to a new, less favourable scheme, or amend the existing scheme so that it is less favourable in terms of future benefits.

It should not be forgotten that in 2006 the government sought to undermine the 1992 scheme in terms of the benefits existing members could accrue in future years by requiring members to work longer to accrue those benefits.

It was only the successful FBU campaign that defeated this proposal. Clearly there is no guarantee that this or a future government will not bring forward a similar attack on the scheme and the recent threat by David Cameron to close down public sector final salary schemes is a clear warning as to what can be expected from a Tory Government.

This threat and the experience of 2006 act as timely reminders that pension rights are constantly under attack and must continue to be fought for.

But while governments may seek to bring forward proposals on future accrual of benefits etc., they are unlikely to attack rights and benefits already accrued and legal issues would arise if they tried to do so.

→ The advice published here is not intended as legal advice on individual cases. Write in with your legal problem to legalbeagle@fbu.org.uk and those of widest relevance to FBU members in the workplace will be selected and answered in future editions. With thanks to Thompsons solicitors.

Legal Beagle

Answers to some frequently asked legal questions that members put to the FBU

New Firefighters' Pension Scheme (NFPS) which is outlined in the Firefighters' Pension Scheme Order 2007.

Additional benefits are also provided via the Firefighters' Compensation Scheme Order 2006.

As these schemes are set up under statute, they can only be amended or closed by due process, including consultation.

The term "closed" can mean

one of two things:

1. closed to new members; or
2. a scheme where no further benefits can build up within the scheme.

The original Firefighters' Scheme was closed to new members in 2006. However, those in the scheme prior to this date continue to accrue these benefits into the foreseeable future.

But it is feasible that, in

'Falconry is pure escapism'

Paul Finnigan likes nothing better than to walk through the countryside in the company of his two Harris hawks and a falcon



I moved to Scotland three years ago for a change of lifestyle and change of scenery and the birds

were a big part of my decision. I've got three magnificent birds at the moment, two Harris hawks (Zinga and her daughter, Zephyr) and a male gyr/saker falcon called Argent.

To me, falconry is pure escapism. When I'm out with the birds it doesn't matter what's happened at work. I can just relax, enjoy walking through the countryside and being in their company.

The first bird I trained was a kestrel when I was 14 years old. I'd been interested in birds since I was about ten, but didn't have my first one until four years later.

And, before you ask, yes, I have seen Kes and I think it's a great film, but it didn't influence me because I was already into birds when I saw it.

I've kept birds ever since then, and moved up here after 21 years working as a firefighter on Merseyside. It's a fantastic place to live and work. If you've ever been here, you'll know just how beautiful it is. The scenery's amazing, with coastlines, lochs, mountains, forests ... you name it, it's here.

I work nine to five now. My job is in fire safety, so I have to go round hotels and commercial premises, checking that they're compliant. The only trouble with the job is

that, unlike when I used to work shifts, I have less time to fly the birds, especially in winter.

I try to take them out every day because the more they fly the better it is for them – the fitter they become – but it's difficult here because we're so far north that daylight is so short, starting at 8.30am and beginning to get dark at 3.30pm.

It's important the birds aren't out when it starts getting dark because they'll instinctively start looking for somewhere to roost,

flying to the top of the highest tree they can find because the higher they are, the safer they are.

I've lost birds at dusk before, and it's heartbreaking because you're responsible for them. If they go missing, you never know what has happened to them. You worry about whether they can

survive in the wild, or whether they've been taken by bigger birds, such as Golden Eagles, which nest around here.

One time, when I was working in Crosby on a nightshift, I'd lost one of my birds during the day and went to work to find a friend, Paul Craig, had cut out a photograph of the missing bird from a falconry magazine, put the photograph on a pole and then stuck the pole outside the upstairs window of our canteen. I had a bit of a shock when I saw it but I had the last laugh.

I had a couple of hours owed to me, so I

Birds of prey are wild and will never be domesticated like a dog or a cat. They'll always be wild, which is what makes it so amazing when they come back to you of their own free will



Paul Finnigan with Harris hawk Zephyr. Right, Argent, a gyr/saker falcon

finished early that night and, before the sun came up, went back to where the bird was. Luckily she was still there so I took her back to the station with me and went upstairs to where Paul was sleeping.

I sat next to his bed with the bird on my arm and when he woke up to see this huge hawk right in front of his eyes. He had the shock of his life! It was sweet revenge!

Of course, losing a bird because it roosts overnight isn't the only way you can lose one. Sometimes they can just fly off and, when they're capable of flying six miles in a few minutes, you're not going to get them back.

But that's what makes hawking so exciting for me. Birds of prey are wild and will always remain wild. They'll never be domesticated like a dog or a cat. They'll always be wild, which is what makes it so amazing when



PAUL FINNIGAN

Paul Finnigan, 47, is a Watch Commander in Fire Safety at Oban, Argyll, Strathclyde Fire & Rescue Service. There are 28 wholetime and 12 retained firefighters at the station. In his spare time, Paul enjoys a spot of falconry.

they come back to you of their own free will.

When you first go hawking you're always a bit worried the bird will never come back and that nervousness never really goes away, even though the more experienced you are, the more confident you become.

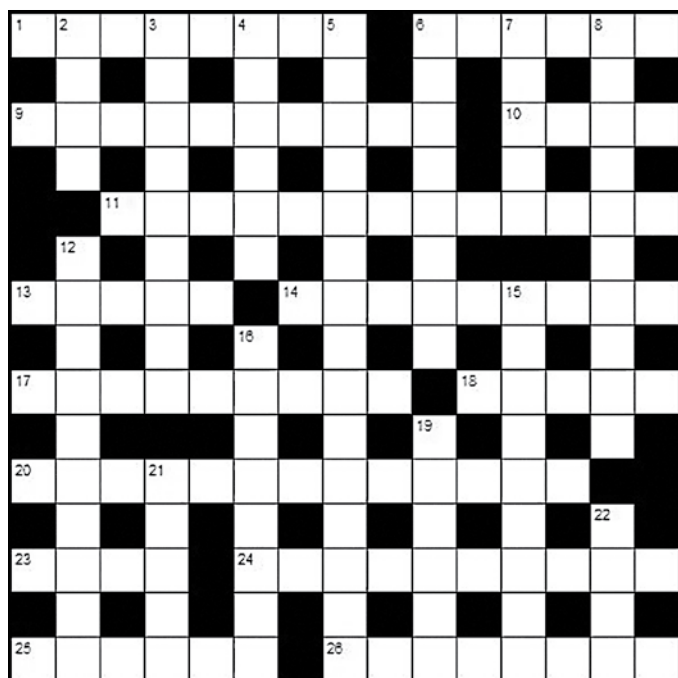
I go out hawking as often as my job allows, sometimes for an hour or two, or at weekends for six hours at a time, maybe more. I could be out all day.

Falcons can fly at 70mph and stoop (dive) at 200mph, while hawks are more like sprinters, flying between 35 and 40mph in short bursts, and when you see them flying at full speed, it's so exhilarating, nothing in the world can beat the feeling.



→ More info: www.britishfalconersclub.co.uk

Quick Crossword



ACROSS

- 1 A firefighter's place is in ... (3,5)
- 6 Six-legged critter (6)
- 9 Takes turns with another (10)
- 10 Author of Capital – a bestseller again! (4)
- 11 Designed dance (13)
- 13 A pair – of pheasants, for example (5)
- 14 Nixon's undoing (9)
- 17 Pain relief (9)
- 18 Woman's name – seasonal song (5)
- 20 One of three ghosts in seasonal Dickens novel (9,4)
- 23 Let's hope we don't have to attend one on Christmas day (4)
- 24 Those who live closest to us (10)
- 25 Animals (6)
- 26 Chatted (8)

DOWN

- 2 Assist(ance) (4)
- 3 Immoral (9)
- 4 Fail to acknowledge (6)
- 5 (Taking into) public ownership (15)
- 6 Introduced into (8)
- 7 Recap, draw conclusion (3,2)
- 8 Amendment; punishment (10)
- 12 Thomas the Tank Engine had his own! (6,4)
- 15 19th century premier who gave his name to a bag (9)
- 16 It's a good idea to attend FBU ones (8)
- 19 Final outcome or fallout (6)
- 21 Thoughts (5)
- 22 Soft French cheese (4)

Answers to the November/December quiz
 1. Wimbledon FC
 2. Ince
 3. Cantona
 4. La Bombonera
 5. 1938
 6. Pele

Winner of the October 2008 prize quiz was Richard Gomersall of West Yorkshire



Prize Quiz

Win a DeWalt cordless drill/driver

Just answer the following questions on the news in 2008

1. Lion's Mane, Sea Wasp and Mauve Stingers were in the news last summer due to higher than average sea temperatures. What were they?

2. Name the first financial institution in the UK to hit major trouble in 2008.

3. Name America's first African American president, elected in November 2008.

4. Name the senior Member of Parliament involved in discussions aboard a yacht belonging to Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska about a large donation to his party.

5. Name the two British comedians who caused a public furore because of obscene phone calls made to Andrew Sachs during a BBC radio programme.

6. Who came second in 2008's I'm A Celebrity, Get Me Out Of Here?

HOW TO ENTER

To win the DeWalt power tool please send your answers to the Prize Quiz by 12 February 2009 on a postcard to: Prize Competition (Jan/Feb 2009) FBU Head Office, Bradley House, 68 Coombe Road, Kingston upon Thames, Surrey KT2 7AE. Include your name, address and membership number. The winner will be selected at random from all correct entries.



StationCat

... brings you the news they don't want you to hear

Morton-Texas



Another day, another army of £1,000-a-day consultants, another mess. The New

Dimension programme was launched after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the USA to make sure fire services in England had the equipment to cope with something similar.

It has not happened, of course. The National Audit Office has just confirmed that the project has been beset by delays and cost overruns.

There's confusion over who is authorised to use New Dimension equipment, emergency planning is "undeveloped" and most of the equipment was not available until 2005 – two years later than planned.

Training at the Fire Service College, according to the NAO, is both inadequate and expensive – so much so that **800 firefighters have been sent to train in Texas**. It's cheaper to send them there, even after air fares have been taken into account.

So what did the government do about this mess? Well, naturally, it spent £12 million on consultants. Did that sort it out? Not really – a management accountant working on the programme still managed a false payments scam that defrauded New Dimension of £867,200.

Out of Control?



So have ministers learned the lesson? Will they now get rid of the even bigger army of consultants who are apparently helping them to prepare FiReControl, the whizzy but untested system which will see England's 46 control centres reduced to just nine? (You know it's whizzy because of the whizzy way they like you to write it, with capital letters in unexpected places. Public relations consultants get paid hundreds of thousands of pounds to come up with that sort of thing).

The FiReControl consultants haven't exactly been a barnstorming success, either. The project is months behind schedule and is going to cost £20 million more than it was going to cost the last time the costs estimate went up.

The first three new regional centres, in the East Midlands, North East and South

West, will now not be ready until the summer of 2010, nine months later than expected. The full system will be ready by the spring of 2012, five months later than they were projecting the last time they said it was going to be later than they'd stated the previous time.

Connoisseurs of such things will enjoy the way the news of this further embarrassing delay was sneaked out.

It came in a written parliamentary answer, which is what ministers use when they hope we're not going to notice. Fire Minister Sadiq Khan devoted the first four paragraphs of the written answer to saying what a wonderful thing FiReControl is.

Then, at last, when his few readers might have been soothed into a dreamless slumber, he sneaked in the real point of the whole exercise.

The fifth paragraph reads: "However, FiReControl is a complex and demanding project and as such is subject to rigorous ongoing review. Since I took up my post as Fire Minister a thorough review of all aspects of the FiReControl project has been completed, and a number of difficulties with the ICT and other dimensions of the project were identified. These issues will result in some delay, and the Fire and Rescue Service rightly expects us to address these in full."

Mr Khan added: "Members of the Fire and Rescue Service are being given more opportunities to contribute to the development of the project so that they can have full confidence in the new systems being developed." Station Cat has been asking people how involved they feel with Firecontrol – sorry, FiReControl. **The politest answer we have had so far is: not very.**

Mrs Pepperpot



Meanwhile Mr Khan's boss, Hazel Blears, the diminutive, bright-eyed and relentlessly on-message Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, known to political journalists for some reason as Mrs Pepperpot, has come in for some cruel mockery.

At a recent reception at City University's Graduate School of Journalism, attended mostly by journalists, one of the speakers read out a quote from her recent White Paper about the sort of society she claims she wants to see: "Decentralised, greater

democracy, devolution and control for local communities, with power diffused through our society." **Sadly, we have to report that the assembled hacks simply laughed, loudly and cynically.**

Service values



There's a strange irony in the resignation of West Midlands Fire Service chief Frank Sheehan after being arrested in connection with a child pornography enquiry. Not long before, the brigade dismissed two firefighters for making a video which, though fairly harmless and emphatically without sexual content, wasn't in tune with the values of the fire service. FBU intervention got the two men their jobs back. But **they might now be forgiven for wondering about the man in charge.**

No, First Minister



When Grampian Fire Authority opened a new fire station in December, it decided not to invite the FBU.

But Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond, down to perform the opening ceremony, had different ideas. He asked to meet local FBU officials.

The FBU arranged to meet him in a room in the fire station – and this was vetoed by Chief Fire Officer David Dalziel. So the meeting took place a room in a local hotel.

It was a private meeting, and no one is repeating what was said, but **it's a safe bet that the First Minister was not impressed with the fire service's attitude.**



✂ if you have any snippets you think Station Cat should get his sharp claws into email: stationcat@fbu.org.uk

25-year badges



Alun Guest-Rowlands (l) receives his 25-year badge from North Wales membership secretary **Arwel Roberts**



Andy Beveridge (r) receives his 25-year badge from **Ken Caldwell** FBU rep, HQ Branch Fife Fire and Rescue Service



D Currie (l) receives his 25-year badge from ONC chair **Allen Guest**



Steve Fuller (l), Enfield White Watch, receives his 25-year badge from branch rep **Barry Payton**



David Burns Cheadle, White Watch (r) receives his 25-year badge from **Dave Lumbard**, GMC Cheadle branch secretary



Dawn Erkek (l) West Midlands Fire Control receives her 25-year badge from West Midlands brigade secretary **Rose Jones**



Graham Smith (l), White Watch, New Malden branch secretary, receives his 25-year badge from Merton and Sutton borough secretary **Derek Warman**



Rodney Butcher (centre right) Stanground Station Peterborough, Cambs, receives his 25-year badge from **Tim Thompson**. Looking on: (l-r) **Richard Boston**, **Gary Beacher**, **Mervyn Creamer** and **Mark Moloney**



Ian Bevan (l) Swansea Fire Safety and **Gary Williams (r)** Community Fire Safety Headquarters, receive their 25-year badges from **Rob Martin**, officers rep, Welsh Region



John Hogben White Watch, Maidstone Branch Secretary and watch manger (centre, left) receives his 25-year badge from station manager **Dickie Baugh**

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Change of address or next of kin

Advise your Brigade Membership Secretary of any change of address and Head Office of changes to next of kin or nominations for benefits.

FBU FREEPHONE LEGAL ADVICE LINE

0808 100 6061

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.

T THOMPSONS SOLICITORS

Please send photographic prints or digital picture files to: Firefighter, FBU, 68 Coombe Road, Kingston upon Thames, KT2 7AE or firefighter@fbu.org.uk Please include FULL DETAILS for every picture – 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 and when it was taken.