

# FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE MATTERS

A PARLIAMENTARY BULLETIN FOR MPS FROM THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION | APRIL 2021

## CHIEF INSPECTOR RENEWS ATTACKS ON FIREFIGHTERS



On 17 March, the chief inspector of fire & rescue services in England, Tom Winsor, published his second annual State of Fire and Rescue report. It is yet another attack on firefighters. The report is thin on evidence, but packed with unsubstantiated assertions, together with damaging recommendations.

The State of Fire and Rescue report uses the Covid-19 pandemic to attack the Fire Brigades Union (FBU). Since the vast majority of operational firefighters across the UK are members of the union, Winsor is attacking the firefighting profession. This is particularly galling because most of the firefighters driving ambulances, or moving the deceased, or delivering assistance to the vulnerable are FBU members. Firefighters volunteered for this work in addition to maintaining a robust emergency service to tackle fires, road traffic incidents and floods throughout the pandemic.

### NATIONAL AGREEMENTS

For the first nine months of the pandemic, the FBU along with fire employers and the chief fire officers body (NFCC) kept the fire and rescue service functioning through a tripartite agreement. This meant that regular emergency intervention was maintained, while firefighters could volunteer for additional Covid related activities with agreed safety measures in place.

Early in the pandemic, the FBU, fire employers and chief officers jointly developed risk assessments and control measures to keep the public and firefighters safe, including whilst undertaking Covid related work. Sickness absence was generally low in the fire and rescue service at the height of the pandemic, largely due to these safety measures.

Sadly, during the autumn a small number of individual chief officers sought to reduce safety levels. Regrettably, these moves were driven by resource issues rather than by safety.

After a number of attempts to resolve these issues, on 13 January, the employers unexpectedly and unilaterally terminated the national agreement, an agreement which had supported thousands of firefighters in undertaking additional, Covid related work. The FBU offered to renew talks and this remains the position, but this was rejected by fire service employers.

### VACCINATION

The FBU supported vaccination from the beginning of the pandemic. In December 2020, a key reason for negotiating the national agreement with fire employers was to ensure firefighters could play a role in the vaccination programme, while maintaining safe systems of work. Of course the union wanted safety protocols in place, especially as hospitalisations and deaths were accelerating at that time.

The FBU actively sought a national agreement with employers. However they refused. At no point did the FBU request that its members withdraw from or refuse to participate in Covid-19 work. In early February, after further attempts to secure a national agreement, the FBU issued circulars to our officials to assist with reaching local agreements – including on vaccination.

This is the truth about the FBU's constructive role in the Covid-19 pandemic. Regrettably, the HMICFRS report contains nothing about this. The inspecting team did not even bother to speak to the FBU about the difficulties which led to the ending of the agreement in January.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The State of Fire and Rescue report makes a number of damaging recommendations, which will undermine firefighters pay and conditions. Winsor wants ministers to:

- Impose a pay review body and destroy collective bargaining
- Scrap the Grey Book of firefighters' conditions
- Impose new roles on firefighters
- Give chief fire officers "operational independence".

At present, firefighters pay and conditions are negotiated through the National Joint Council (NJC). This is a UK-wide body, supported by employers and the union. It is a voluntary arrangement between employers and employees. The Grey Book sets UK-wide standards for matters such as hours, safety, leave, discipline and resolving disputes. These arrangements give firefighters a voice, through their chosen union, the FBU. They ensure industrial relations are stable and efficiently managed.

Winsor wants to destroy these arrangements. His proposals seek to give chief fire officers political independence and to significantly reduce local democracy and accountability. These proposals are designed to worsen firefighters pay and conditions, as part of plans for a scaled down, casualised fire and rescue service. They will hurt firefighters in every part of the UK. It is levelling down.

## THE POLITICISATION OF HMICFRS

Winsor's recommendations are not based on evidence. Last year, his inspectors did not venture out to fire stations, working from their desks at home. Their previous field reports found only four complaints about the NJC and Grey Book. The chief inspector's recommendations are simply not based on the reality of fire and rescue services.

Winsor pushed through similar proposals in the police, cutting their starting pay by £4,000 a year and sidelining the Police Federation. "Operational independence" is carried over from police chief constables. It means locally-elected politicians will have fewer powers to hold chief fire officers to account, giving chiefs a free hand to dictate to the workforce.

The FBU supported the re-establishment of the fire inspectorate in England. When home secretary Theresa May proposed it, she warned that chief fire officers would no longer "mark their own homework" via "peer review", but would have to account for their decisions. However the HMICFRS under Winsor is not independent, but rather the mouthpiece of the Home Office and the NFCC.

The State of Fire and Rescue report identifies that a third of fire and rescue services failed to adequately protect their most vulnerable black and ethnic minority staff during the pandemic. This should be a scandal, as it breaches both safety and equality rules. Chief fire officers are responsible, yet there is no recommendation on this issue by the inspectorate. Similarly, HMICFRS criticise the London Fire Brigade for slow progress with Grenfell Tower Inquiry recommendations. Yet not a word of criticism against the NFCC, which is apparently deemed responsible for national fire service policy.

HMICFRS is currently an inspectorate in crisis. Its highly paid inspectors are currently bickering through the employment tribunal process about whether they should be paid £140,000 or £180,000 for their services. It is unedifying for people who earn five or six times more than the average pay of a firefighter to direct their attacks at the pay and conditions of well-respected public servants.

HMICFRS reports are increasingly biased. It is a body that has allowed itself to be politicised. Their Getting the balance right report in March this year supports draconian proposals to curtail the right to protest, measures that would be condemned as an affront to democracy if introduced in other parts of the world. The State of Fire and Rescue report is simply a tool to push through a political agenda against the wishes of the workforce.

Ministers and MPs should speak to firefighters and the FBU if they want to understand the real state of fire and rescue. Politicians should disregard reckless and disruptive recommendations from HMICFRS – and insist that they carry out their inspection role more professionally and put to one side their anti-union political agenda.



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