

FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE MATTERS

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



INSPECTORATE ATTACKS FIREFIGHTERS AFTER CHIEF OFFICERS WRECK SAFETY AGREEMENT

On 22 January the fire inspectorate in England launched an unwarranted attack on firefighters, criticising our efforts to support communities and the NHS through the pandemic, as well as carry out regular duties, while following safety advice.

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) launched its attack at a time when thousands of firefighters were out helping vulnerable people cope with widespread flooding, and while others were driving ambulances, moving the bodies of the deceased and delivering vital supplies to the NHS and care sector and vulnerable people in our communities.

ATTACKING FIREFIGHTERS

The HMICFRS report, *Responding to the pandemic: The fire and rescue service's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020*, criticises firefighters for not doing enough to help during the pandemic, despite figures in the report showing that thousands of firefighters took on additional work, as well as attending almost as many fire and non-fire incidents as usual during the pandemic.

Firefighters have always been widely praised by ministers in all four governments across the UK, by NHS professionals and applauded by the public. Instead of celebrating the work done and the continued contribution made by firefighters, the inspectorate says firefighters should be doing more prevention and protection work, and be "more productive". This is an insult.

PUBLIC SAFETY

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) represents the vast majority of UK firefighters. The FBU, fire employers and chief officers' body NFCC signed an agreement on 24 March to manage both regular fire service work and to facilitate additional work by firefighters during the pandemic. Fourteen additional tasks were approved and at least 4,000 firefighters undertook

these additional voluntary duties. The focus was on serving our communities while keeping firefighters safe and well.

The tripartite agreement was renewed and extended throughout the year. Firefighters delivered fantastic support to the NHS and vulnerable people. Firefighters' health was protected by implementing the safety measures set out in government and health service guidance, to ensure the virus was not spread across the service or back into the community.

SAFETY FIRST

Fire service employers have a duty of care for their employees and the public under the Health and Safety at Work Act and other regulations. This requires risk assessments to be carried out and control measures to be introduced to reduce risks to the minimum responsibly practicable.

The tripartite agreement provided national risk assessments for the additional activities. It also included control measures to stop the spread of the virus. A key control measure – agreed by all the parties from June onwards – was for firefighters undertaking additional work for the NHS to be detached from their regular shifts. Before returning to those regular duties, these firefighters would have a three day removal from the workplace and a negative PCR test. This was based on the requirements of the test.

Almost all fire and rescue services complied with these risk assessments and control measures. Only a handful of chief officers wanted to reject them. At no point did the NFCC provide any evidence to suggest the control measures were unnecessary or propose better alternative control measures instead.

NEW NATIONAL AGREEMENT

Fire employers and the FBU renewed the agreement in December through the fire service

National Joint Council (NJC), adding two additional activities. Plans were started to support firefighter involvement in vaccination. This agreement continued as the new variant emerged, cases, hospitalisations and deaths increased and finally another lockdown was introduced in January.

At a time when the risks had clearly risen, when the NHS was in danger of being overwhelmed and firefighters faced a tough winter, the employers walked away from the agreement.

On 13 January, the employers unilaterally announced their withdrawal from the national agreement. They did so with the backing of the NFCC, which produced new (and inadequate) risk assessments and dropped the crucial control requiring a negative PCR test.

The FBU never walked away from the agreements. The fire service employers walked away – in order to downgrade safety procedures they had accepted and implemented for months. They walked away at the very time when the risks were increasing.

LATERAL FLOW TESTS

Instead, the NFCC seized on lateral flow tests as an alternative control measure. However these tests are not as accurate as PCR tests. The pilot study in Liverpool showed that half of those who were negative with lateral flow tests were in fact positive with PCR tests. These tests have not been properly evaluated for use by firefighters. The schools roll out was unsuccessful and has now been paused.

The FBU has not opposed lateral flow tests in principle. The union believes they may have a role in alerting some asymptomatic people when they are positive and therefore should self-isolate. They are “red light” tests warning people who might otherwise be missed. But they are not a substitute for PCR tests, or other measures to reduce transmission. As the scientists put it, they are not “green light” tests to endorse firefighters moving directly from NHS work with higher levels of contact with Covid-19 back into fire stations. Lateral flow tests themselves are not a control measure – they might be an added extra to existing safety measures.

VACCINATION

Since March 2020, the FBU has called on the Westminster government to vaccinate firefighters and repeatedly called for prioritising firefighters. However vaccination for Covid-19 is not yet proven to stop transmission by those people vaccinated. Vaccination protects the person vaccinated, but that person might still contract the virus and spread it to others. So just vaccinating some firefighters (or even all firefighters) does not protect the public or friends and family who are not yet vaccinated.

The NFCC and HMICFRS falsely claim the FBU does not support the fire service’s effort to support the vaccination drive. The FBU-fire employers’ agreement on 9 December stated that that if a request to assist with vaccination work was made, the two parties “will move quickly to support such a request.”

The NFCC knows the FBU was discussing firefighters undertaking vaccination work before they and the employers walked away. Any blame for delays lies with them. The FBU is ready to resume national discussions and wants these issues resolved.

POLITICAL ATTACK

HMICFRS says that employers and the FBU prevented some firefighters from maximising the support they could provide to the public. That is simply a lie. In fact the agreements ensured that firefighters could maximise their contribution to the pandemic effort.

The HMICFRS report does not even mention the control measures in dispute. It simply says there are risk assessments and control measures in place.

Inspectors prepared their report without visiting a single fire station, even in the autumn. They spoke mostly to chief officers. They did not speak to the FBU about the breakdown of the national agreement. The FBU is the only fire service body which has supported independent inspection of the service. However, this report is not independent, is not evidence based and contains numerous inaccuracies.



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