

Fire and Rescue Service Matters

14 years of austerity = 12,000 firefighters cut

July 2024



After 14 years of austerity, there are too few firefighters to guarantee resilience to the public, according to new figures obtained by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU).

One-in-five firefighter jobs (21%) across the UK have been cut since 2010 – more than 12,000 jobs. This has had a significant impact on the resilience of the fire and rescue service. Fewer firefighters mean slower response times, fewer home visits, fewer inspections – all hitting our communities.

Fire and rescue services are labour-intensive – firefighters are irreplaceable on the fire ground. Three-quarters of fire budgets are spent on firefighters. Therefore any cuts to funding inevitably impact on the number of firefighters employed.

Disastrous 14 years of austerity

Since 2010, more than 8,000 wholetime firefighters have been cut, while one-in-five retained firefighter posts have gone. Almost one-in-three control staff, who take the emergency calls and mobilise fire crews, have been lost.

Firefighters are being asked to do more with less. Increased frequencies of storms, flooding and wildfires has shown the incredible stresses that firefighters are under to combat the devastating effects of the climate emergency. Shockingly, fire and rescue services in England still don't have a statutory duty to plan and respond to floods like elsewhere in the UK – this needs to change.

Every part of the UK has felt the chilling effects of austerity – metropolitan, combined and county services – in all parts of the UK and under all devolved administrations, though not to the same degree. England was the worst impacted of the four administrations, with 10,000 jobs cut. In Scotland, there was an 18% decrease in firefighters. In Wales, a similar picture with 500 posts cut. Furthermore, in Northern Ireland there has been a 12% cut in these austerity years.

Double-counting

The FBU figures also reveal once again the scale of “wholetime-retained” contracts across the fire and rescue service. There are 4,000 firefighters

that have a wholetime (full-time) contract and then another retained (part-time) contract – either with the same brigade or with another service.

While these “wholetime-retained” contracts have helped firefighters deal with devastating pay cuts over the last decade, it gives a distorted picture of the state of our services, with one firefighter counted as doing two jobs. This double counting means that the numbers actually employed and available at any one time are significantly less than official figures suggest.

Cuts damage diversity

Swathes of cuts has led to a culture of fear in fire and rescue services. It has led to a lack of diversity in the service and has built further barriers. Chiefs have overseen this situation.

Firefighters want to work in a positive, welcoming culture that promotes diversity, team working and cohesion. All services must review their policies to ensure they are removing barriers to recruitment, retention and progression within their ranks.

More firefighters needed on the frontline

To meet the risks of today and tomorrow, central government and fire authorities must invest in the fire and rescue service as a matter of urgency.

Fire and rescue services	2010	2024	Reduction	%
Scotland	7,712	6,306	-1,406	-18%
Northern Ireland	1,994	1,762	-232	-12%
Mid and West Wales	1,196	1,119	-77	-6%
North Wales	883	724	-159	-18%
South Wales	1,666	1,404	-262	-16%
Cleveland	629	409	-220	-35%
Durham	579	512	-67	-12%
Northumberland	430	322	-108	-25%
Tyne and Wear	940	637	-303	-32%
Humberside	1,053	833	-220	-21%
North Yorkshire	773	599	-174	-23%
South Yorkshire	936	748	-188	-20%
West Yorkshire	1,720	1,103	-617	-36%
Cheshire	746	660	-86	-12%
Cumbria	738	490	-248	-34%
Greater Manchester	1,992	1,397	-595	-30%
Lancashire	1,336	1,070	-266	-20%
Merseyside	1,204	1,010	-194	-16%
North West Fire Control	0	69	69	N/A
Derbyshire	779	734	-45	-6%
Leicestershire	796	624	-172	-22%
Lincolnshire	757	612	-145	-19%
Northamptonshire	575	410	-165	-29%
Nottinghamshire	973	651	-322	-33%
Hereford & Worcester	723	622	-101	-14%
Shropshire	573	485	-88	-15%
Staffordshire	930	695	-235	-25%
Warwickshire	457	429	-28	-6%
West Midlands	1,933	1,417	-516	-27%
Bedfordshire	499	458	-41	-8%
Cambridgeshire	695	535	-160	-23%
Essex	1,415	1,171	-244	-17%
Hertfordshire	842	725	-117	-14%
Norfolk	861	781	-80	-9%
Suffolk	782	595	-187	-24%
London	6,018	4,669	-1,349	-22%
Berkshire	579	464	-115	-20%
Buckinghamshire	625	369	-256	-41%
East Sussex	734	552	-182	-25%
Hampshire & IW	1,837	1,402	-435	-24%
Kent	1,663	1,189	-474	-29%
Oxfordshire	652	563	-89	-14%
Surrey	753	621	-132	-18%
West Sussex	825	632	-193	-23%
Avon	970	750	-220	-23%
Cornwall	647	576	-71	-11%
Devon and Somerset	2,058	1,688	-370	-17%
Dorset and Wiltshire	1,297	1,007	-290	-22%
Gloucestershire	523	403	-120	-23%
UK	59,298	47,003	-12,295	-21%

Data is from Home Office, Stats Wales, SFRS, NIFRS and FBU Freedom of information requests. 2024 figures except for Nottinghamshire, London, Avon, who failed to provide these.