

FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE MATTERS

A PARLIAMENTARY BULLETIN FOR MPS FROM THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION | APRIL 2020



FIREFIGHTERS - DOING OUR DUTY, BUT NOT EQUIPPED, PROTECTED OR RESOURCED TO FIGHT COVID-19

Firefighters are playing an important role in tackling the Covid-19 pandemic, but need the resources, equipment and protection to do their job during this difficult time. That's the message from the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), the professional voice of the majority of firefighters across the UK. The union wants politicians to intervene to ensure firefighters can carry out their duties safely.

Operational wholetime (full-time) and retained (part-time) firefighters, along with emergency control staff have continued to provide a 24/7 all-hazards emergency service, dealing with a number of high profile fires, road traffic collisions, floods and other incidents. Firefighters have also agreed to carry out additional work to help our communities, contributing to efforts to combat the Covid-19 virus.

UK-WIDE AGREEMENT

On 27 March, the FBU signed a tripartite UK-wide agreement with fire service national employers (UK) and the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) as an urgent response to the crisis. Under the agreement, firefighters will initially be enabled to:

- Deliver essential items like food and medicines to vulnerable people
- Drive ambulances and assist ambulance staff
- Move dead bodies, should the outbreak cause mass casualties.

The organisations are meeting regularly to discuss any additional requests for assistance made by Local Resilience Forums and Strategic Coordination Groups or other parties. Any activities considered must be risk assessed with fire and rescue personnel must be given any necessary additional training and the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE).

The additional work taken on by firefighters is temporary to tackle the Covid -19 pandemic. Initially

in place for two months, the agreement can be extended or shortened if agreed between all parties.

ABSENCE

Fire and rescue services are already reporting staff absences due to Covid-19. Firefighters are already having to self-isolate when they have symptoms or someone in their family has exhibited symptoms. Some services are already reporting absences of 10% of the workforce.

There are no substitutes for operational firefighters and emergency control staff when they are away from work sick or self-isolating. The professional training, technical skills and fitness levels required for these roles means that it is not possible to replace staff immediately.

Staff cuts over the last decade have already reduced the numbers of firefighters available; this has significantly reduced resilience within the service. Recruiting a new generation of firefighters is necessary to improve resilience.

PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT

Firefighters already work with specialist equipment, which is shared among the workforce and therefore liable to spread infection unless handled properly. Fire kit, breathing apparatus, face masks and other equipment are often shared between individual firefighters and crews. Control rooms are often situated in tight spaces where social distancing is difficult. Firefighters' everyday work already means they will come into contact with people with Covid-19. The additional tasks also put firefighters at greater risk. Firefighters already have rigorous cleaning regimes in place, but need governments to guarantee supplies of PPE, cleaning products and other equipment to keep them safe and the necessary funding to enable FRS employers to provide these.

NO TESTING

At present there are no antibody tests available to firefighters who may have had Covid-19 or with family members who may have had it. Only the Scottish government is currently offering some (initially small scale) testing for firefighters.

This means some firefighters are unable to return to work, even when they have not been ill or have recovered. Firefighters are on the frontline dealing with emergencies every day, in contact with people with Covid-19.

Firefighters fully support testing for NHS frontline staff as a matter of extreme urgency. We also want other essential, key workers tested to ensure food is available, critical national infrastructure can operate and that everyone still working is kept safe. But firefighters want ministers to sort out the lack of testing so that they too are properly diagnosed and treated if they get it and are released back to work swiftly if they don't. There should be a national programme of testing of key workers.

NATIONAL RISK REGISTER

Firefighters plan and prepare for a wide range of national and local emergencies as part of their job. Under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, the fire and rescue service was made a category 1 responder. The Act requires such responders to assess the risk of an emergency occurring, to maintain plans to respond to an emergency, to publish the assessments and plans in so far as this is necessary or desirable to deal with an emergency. The Act made it a statutory requirement for all emergency responder organisations to put in place business continuity management arrangements.

NATIONAL GUIDANCE

More than a decade ago, the NHS produced guidance for the fire and rescue service on pandemic flu. The risks have been known for years – but planning by the governments and chief officers over the last decade has been almost non-existent. The FBU has not received any updated plans, risk assessments or guidance at national level to prepare firefighters and our communities for the risks of a pandemic.

IRMPs

Local fire and rescue services have to prepare integrated risk management plans (IRMPs), as part of their statutory responsibilities to protect the communities they serve. These high level documents are renewed every few years. The FBU has often complained that these plans are not about the risks, but about allocating ever-shrinking resources. Almost none of the most recent IRMPs even mention pandemics as a risk. Even fewer actually set out any concrete plans for dealing with them. Similarly, only a few mention business continuity, which is supposed to address how to deal with unpredictable events and staff shortages. Very few have concrete plans now this is a reality.

FIRE INSPECTORATE REPORT

Over the last year or so, the new fire inspectorate (HMICFRS) has visited every fire and rescue service in England. Inspectors criticised almost half (22/45) of the local fire services about the lack of fully tested business continuity plans. A third (16/45) were instructed to improve their business continuity preparations in the inspection reports. Ministers and chief officers have not made the necessary preparations for this crisis.

JOB CUTS

A central problem for fire and rescue service resilience is having sufficient staff. A decade ago, there were 60,000 firefighters employed across the UK. Today there are around 48,000. This means we have lost one-in-five or 20% firefighters due to austerity cuts. A decade ago, when swine flu emerged, fire and rescue services had 15,000 firefighters on duty, day and night. Now we are down to 12,000 across the UK.

Firefighters will do our duty during this Covid-19 crisis. But firefighters expect to have the right PPE and testing in place to protect themselves. They expect governments to plan and resource the fire and rescue service properly so they can do their jobs. They expect adequate planning for national emergencies like the current one as is required by legislation. The FBU wants ministers to remedy these failures as a matter of urgency – and ensure the same mistakes never happen again.



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