FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE MATTERS

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

INVEST IN OUR ESSENTIAL FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

The Fire Brigades Union is calling on the Chancellor to prioritise investment in the fire and rescue service in the forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR), which will set departmental budgets for the next three years. The risks exposed by the pandemic have starkly highlighted the need for the UK to better invest in its resilience planning.

The Chancellor has committed to departmental spending growing in real terms across the CSR period (up to 2025). The inequality exposed by the coronavirus pandemic also led the Chancellor to announce that there will be no limit on this CSR. The FBU wants the Chancellor to listen to stakeholders within the fire and rescue service, who are calling for badly-needed investment to meet the risks facing us.

THE PANDEMIC

During the coronavirus pandemic, firefighters have taken on additional duties, such as assisting the ambulance service and delivering food parcels, to help the national effort to battle the virus. Firefighters have continued to provide a 24/7 emergency service, while contributing to communities and the NHS. Firefighters stand ready for a second wave, but need the resources to carry out our irreplaceable role.

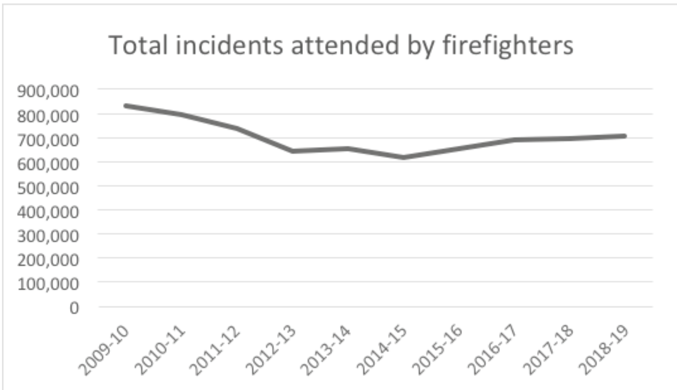
The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 was intended to aid preparation for emergencies like coronavirus. It made the fire and rescue service a category 1 responder. The National Risk Register highlights a wide range of risks, including infectious diseases, to which firefighters are expected to respond. But investment is needed to make sure all our public services are resilient in the face of these risks.

CLIMATE RISKS

Firefighters respond to a far wider range of incidents. Firefighters are major responders to climate change. In February of this year, the UK experienced the wettest February on record and firefighters were the primary responders to the many instances of severe flooding. They carried out hundreds of rescues of trapped residents, as well as pumping away floodwater and securing the area for residents to return. At the other extreme, wildfires during dry summers are also on the increase and will continue. The Westminster government's UK Climate Projections predict that in 25 years the UK will be 5°C warmer in summer.

FIRE RISKS

Fires remain a major risk. After a downward trend in incidents at the turn of the century, the number of incidents attended by firefighters has plateaued in recent years. There is no justification for cuts to the fire and rescue service.



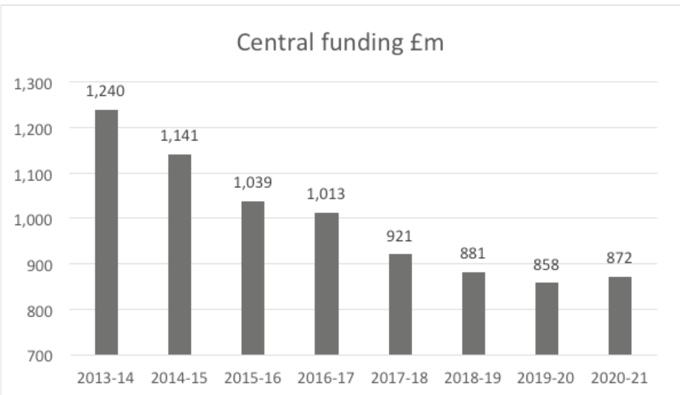
Around three quarters of all fire deaths occur in domestic dwellings and often involve vulnerable people. ONS projections suggest that as the population grows and ages, housing demand will result in 159,000 additional households per year for the next 25 years. To manage these fire risks, more firefighters are required.

The fire and rescue service has additional responsibilities, as set out in the Fire Safety Bill and Building Safety Bill, to inspect high rise residential buildings and carry out fire safety audits. Fire authorities cannot do this without the sufficient funding. In the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire, fire safety must be an important government priority. Therefore central government must provide the fire and rescue service with the resources to protect our communities.

Besides rescues from fires, there has been a steady increase in rescues from non-fire incidents over the past decade. Annually, 40,000 people are rescued by firefighters across the UK. There are ten times more rescues from non-fire incidents than from fires, for example at road traffic collisions and other incidents.

AUSTERITY CUTS

Fire and rescue services are funded from Westminster and local councils. Central funding in England has been reduced by 30% since 2013-14 in cash terms, without taking into consideration the impact of inflation. This year has seen a marginal increase but this does not bring it up to pre-austerity levels. Councils have also been cut, with many losing vital revenue during the pandemic. Investment is needed to recruit a new generation of firefighters.



The picture is the same under the devolved administrations. Scotland imposed major cuts in the first years of their single fire and rescue service. In 2012-13, their resource funding was £291m, and this year is still only £276m.

As a result of austerity, the fire and rescue service has seen a 20% cut to jobs over the last decade, with nearly 12,000 fewer firefighters now available to respond to incidents. That's 7,000 wholetime posts, 2,000 retained (on-call) posts, and 30% of control room jobs. The cuts mean slower response times, when every second counts. Some brigades want three firefighters to crew a fire engine, instead of the required five, which results in a less effective response when they arrive on the scene.

These cuts have also slowed the development of the service. Greater representation of women, BAME and LGBT firefighters in the workforce was promised by successive governments, but has not happened. It is impossible to make the service more diverse if recruitment is frozen. Additionally, pay has been stagnant, with a 13% loss in real terms to firefighter pay. The FBU considers this an insult to people who put their lives at risk to save others.

To conclude, the National Risk Register, the UK Climate Projections and other Westminster government assessments highlight the risks. Resilience means investing in firefighters, who are on the frontline of responses to thee emergencies. Firefighters need a decent funding settlement from this Comprehensive Spending Review, to meet the full range of emergencies we face in the coming years.

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