

FIRE RESCUE SERVICE MATTERS

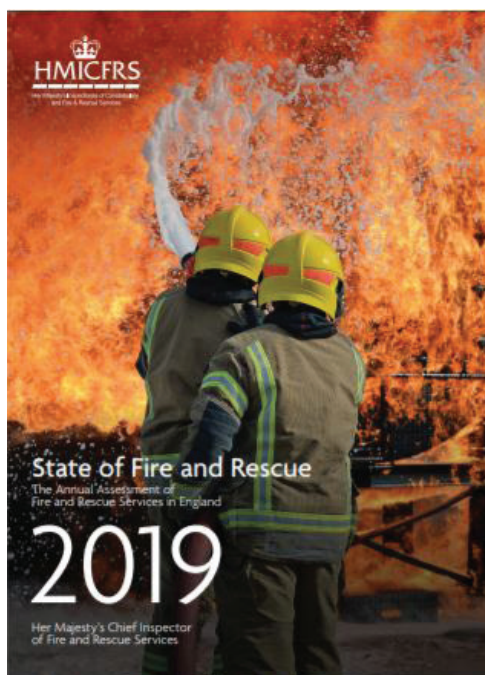
MARCH 2020



FIRE CHIEF INSPECTOR'S UNWARRANTED ATTACK ON FIREFIGHTERS AND THEIR UNION

Sir Thomas Winsor, HM Chief Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services, published his first annual report on fire and rescue services in England in January 2020. He makes an unwarranted attack on firefighters' pay and conditions, blaming the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) for problems caused by central government policy.

The chief inspector's report is meant to be a synthesis based on the inspection of all 45 fire and rescue services during 2018-19 by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS). But Winsor's report is not based on the evidence gathered by his own inspectors. Instead he draws on older central government hatchet jobs.



The chief inspector used the publication of his first annual report to launch an attack on hard-working firefighters. He assailed the National Joint Council (NJC), the UK-wide collective bargaining body where employers and the FBU negotiate firefighters' pay and conditions.

Winsor advocates an independent pay review body instead. For good reason trade unions and their members oppose pay review bodies. Pay review bodies deliberately exclude the voice of the workforce. They impose pay and conditions without negotiation. Sectors that have these bodies - such as police and health - have huge recruitment and retention problems and widespread concern regarding performance.

The HMICFRS local reports do not identify the NJC as a problem. Only four out of 45 contain complaints about national negotiations. Only four out of 45 raise local concerns. These are about legitimate disputes, which the NJC often helps to resolve.

ATTACKS ON FIREFIGHTERS' PAY AND CONDITIONS

The chief inspector condemned the 'Grey Book', which contains firefighters' pay and conditions, safety, health and maternity matters. It is the scheme of conditions of service for firefighters across the UK. The Grey Book is the result of negotiation between fire employers and the FBU. It defines firefighters' roles and responsibilities coherently. In an industry where firefighters collaborate and work across borders, such consistency is vital.

The Grey Book sets out minimum standards on important matters such as health and safety, conditions of service, equalities and discipline. These should be consistent across the sector. Firefighters need the right safety procedures, equipment and training. They need the same levels of protection wherever they work. The NJC has been at the centre of the improvements on equalities in the fire and rescue service for three decades.

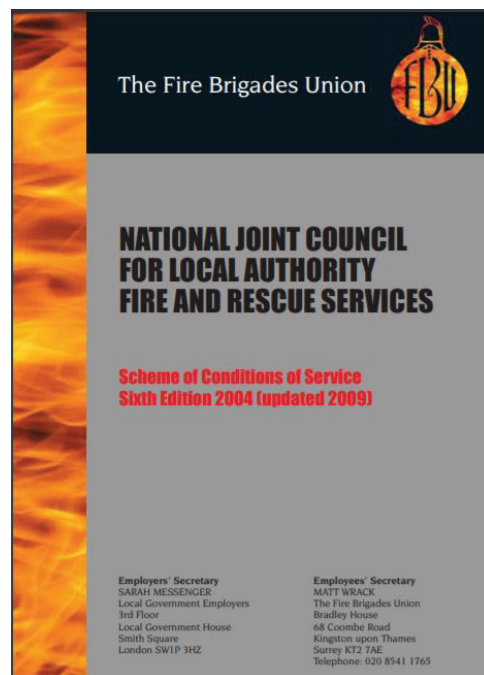
The HMICFRS reports are full of praise for how these matters are dealt with through negotiation at local level. Yet the chief inspector wants to tear this up. Firefighters will not tolerate further fragmentation of conditions of service. Firefighters do a dangerous job and deserve proper protection. The Grey Book is vital.

Winsor criticises slow progress with negotiations on broadening the firefighters' role. The FBU and fire employers are negotiating on broadening the contribution firefighters could make to their communities. The NJC has carried out trials for emergency medical response. The union and employers held discussions about responses to terrorist incidents. Other matters such as the environment and inspection have been investigated.

Negotiations on broadening firefighters' role have stalled because of central government intransigence. The Westminster government has refused to clarify what new roles it expects fire and rescue services to undertake, ironically a point identified in the Winsor's report. Ministers want firefighters to do more work, but refuse to clarify what this means and refuse to agree the necessary investment. That is unreasonable.

ATTACK ON THE FBU

The chief inspector also used his report to launch an unwarranted attack on the FBU. He complained about the union's "considerable influence" and that it is a "barrier". Disgracefully, he said that "trade union influence is not always in the best interests of the public".



The FBU is the democratically elected representative of professional firefighters. Firefighters know best about their service and should have a strong voice in how it is run. The FBU has a proud history of improving safety for both firefighters and the public.

The chief inspector's comments are not based on evidence gathered by his local inspectors. The overwhelming majority of local HMICFRS reports made positive comments about industrial relations, including the joint consultative committees, health and safety, committees, equalities, grievances, risk management, learning and other matters. Even those services critical on certain issues also praised good relations with the FBU.

THE STATE OF FIRE

Almost 20 years ago, supported by most MPs at Westminster, the government brought in a new framework for fire and rescue services. The Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 scrapped national standards of fire cover, facilitating the fragmentation of the service. It abolished the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council, which included all key stakeholders and made fire a world class public service. It also replaced the original HM fire inspectorate in England with a system of peer review.

The legislation terminated national oversight of firefighter numbers (known as “establishment”). This facilitated cuts to fire and rescue services. Under austerity, central funding has been cut in money terms by at least 30%. One-in-five (21%) firefighter jobs were cut between 2011 and 2019.

In the years after the previous inspectorate of fire services was scrapped, the FBU was the only voice taking up many of the issues raised in the local inspection reports. The union fought for the safety of the public, firefighters and control staff - and we will continue to do so.

CUTS

The HMICFRS report says that some services “are operating in a very tight financial environment”, which is having “a detrimental effect on the services they provide to their communities”. However it says they should spend their reserves. That is not a strategy for investment in the fire and rescue service.

The chief inspector refers to “unjustifiable variation” across the country and suggests “areas where national consistency is sensible and efficient”. But he explicitly rejects national standards, despite overwhelming evidence of a significant slowdown in response times and a postcode lottery across different brigades.

The HMICFRS reports highlight cuts to prevent and protection work in recent years. Two-thirds of services were under-resourcing their fire safety teams. Since 2010-11:

- Fire safety audits declined by 40%
- Home fire safety checks reduced by 25%.

This is due to underfunding. Yet the chief inspector does not call for more investment to resolve these gaps.

CULTURE

The HMICFRS reports condemn a “toxic culture” of bullying and harassment, especially “overbearing or autocratic management styles”.

Its staff survey found that almost a quarter of firefighters (24%) felt they had been harassed or bullied at work in the past 12 months. Most reported that this was by someone senior to them. Firefighters rightly turned to the FBU for remedy.

The report criticises the lack of diversity, Less than 7% of operational firefighters are women. Less than 5% of firefighters come from minority ethnic backgrounds. But the chief inspector does not make the connection to central government scrapping targets and making job cuts, which have damaged the drive for equality in the workforce.



SOURCES

The chief inspector attacks firefighters’ conditions and the FBU. There is no basis for such an attack from the evidence published in the 45 local inspection reports carried out in the last year. Instead, he reaches back to some familiar old chestnuts.

First, Winsor draws on the Bain report, *The Future of the Fire Service* (2003). This was the architect of the catastrophic changes brought in by the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004. They too blamed the FBU and tried to cut the union out of the service.

Second, Winsor draws on Ken Knight’s *Facing*

the Future report (2013) and Adrian Thomas' review of conditions of service (2016). Both were shallow attempts to justify attacks on firefighters' conditions. Both were attacks on the FBU.

Repeating failed old texts is no basis for public policy. The chief inspector should have based his report on the evidence gathered by his own inspectors. Instead he chose to launch a political attack on firefighters and their representative body.

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

HMICFRS also commissioned research into public perceptions of their local fire and rescue service. The public were mostly positive:

- Almost three-quarters are satisfied (73%).
- Only 2% are dissatisfied
- Nine in ten (90%) are confident they get an effective service
- Only 3% are not confident
- Almost three-quarters (72%) say the service is good value for money
- Only 4% disagree.

The survey shows the public are not clamouring for 'reforms' of their local fire and rescue service. Politicians should desist from painting the services as failing or in need of dramatic take over.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The chief inspector made only four recommendations in his report. None will solve the problems faced by the fire and rescue services or the firefighters that work for it. Winsor demands that the Home Office intervene immediately. He encourages them to cast aside the NJC, scrap the Grey Book, impose new roles and an independent pay review body.

The FBU believes any intervention of this nature will seriously disrupt the fire and rescue service. There are serious matters to be addressed, arising from the Grenfell Tower fire, climate change and other risks. There is no demand from fire employers or from the workforce for central government imposing unnecessary experiments on our vital public service.

FBU DEMANDS

- Investment from central government
- Recruit more firefighters and more fire safety officers
- Re-establish national standards
- Set up a statutory national oversight body, including strong FBU representation
- Implement the recommendations of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry alongside the necessary investment
- Pay firefighters a decent wage for the work done.



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