

FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE MATTERS

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



MINISTERS SHOULD REJECT CALL TO TEAR UP FIREFIGHTERS' PAY AND CONDITIONS

In January this year, the chief fire inspector in England Tom Winsor launched a politically motivated attack on the existing collective bargaining arrangements governing firefighters' pay and conditions across the UK.

Winsor used his first *State of Fire* report to blame all the problems of the fire and rescue service on firefighters and their representative body, the FBU. He advocated a pay review body to replace the current arrangements. The FBU believes this would be destructive and create industrial relations chaos across the service at a time when firefighters are busy, along with other key workers, tackling the Covid-19 pandemic.

NATIONAL JOINT COUNCIL

The National Joint Council (NJC) is the UK-wide collective bargaining body where fire employers across the UK and the FBU negotiate on the terms of firefighters' pay and conditions. The employers' side consists of 14 representatives of local authority fire employers in England, as well as employers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The FBU represents the employees' side on the NJC. This is because of the FBU's levels of membership among firefighters, which far exceed those of any other body. There are agreed mechanisms for other organisations to seek representation on the NJC. Professor Lynette Harris from Nottingham Trent University is the independent chair of the NJC.

In recent years the NJC has:

- Resolved matters of dispute which could not be resolved locally and provided industrial relations advice at a local level, through the provision of joint secretarial support
- Formed the Inclusive Fire Service Group, a stakeholder body tackling inequalities across the fire and rescue service. The work of this group led the NJC to develop and distribute a number of improvement strategies to assist local fire and

rescue services to improve culture and increase recruitment and retention of women and BAME firefighters, an issue of concern identified by the HMICFRS

- Raised concerns about the impact of vehicle taxation changes on fire officers
- Developed a procedure for fitness management, to ensure the health of firefighters on duty
- Assisted with implementing apprenticeship schemes across the fire and rescue service.

THE GREY BOOK

The Grey Book determines firefighters' hours of duty and shift systems to ensure 24/7 fire cover across the UK. It sets out rates of pay, including overtime, allowances and recall to duty. It defines leave arrangements, including for public holidays and sickness. It lays down the provisions for maternity leave and pay, parental leave and other time off work. The Grey Book facilitates guidance on health and safety matters, including personal protective equipment (PPE), display screen equipment and the management of stress. It establishes important procedures for grievance and discipline. The Grey Book also sets the framework for the resolution of local disputes.

A pay review body will not provide higher pay for firefighters compared to the current arrangements. More likely it will impose pay cuts. A pay review body will not resolve matters of conditions. Firefighters have contracts of employment based on the Grey Book, which they will defend against attacks. Local bargaining will replicate matters currently discussed nationally – wasting valuable time and resources. ACAS does not have the sector-specific knowledge to resolve disputes. Without the NJC, there will be a greater number of disputes, protracted over longer periods and with more bitterness.

The current arrangements are by far the most cost-effective. The NJC meetings cost less than £10,000

a year. Pay review bodies alone (without wider matters) cost hundreds of thousands of pounds for board members, staff and meetings. Why would central government waste money on such an arrangement when the existing system functions without generating huge expenditure.

The FBU is open to discussions within the NJC to improve its operation. The NJC has evolved over the years of its operation and will do so again. The union is committed to more transparency in the NJC's work and to better communication of the vast array of work it undertakes. The FBU remains open to discussions on the form and content of all NJC meetings and to engaging with employers in a variety of formats, including away-days and other gatherings.

COVID-19 TRIPARTITE AGREEMENT

Politicians should be aware of the immense amount of work undertaken by firefighters during this pandemic. This has only been achieved because of the established industrial relations framework within the fire and rescue service. As the pandemic took hold, the two parties that comprise the NJC, in the spirit of collaborative working, chose to engage a mechanism of a tripartite forum alongside chief fire officers' body NFCC in order to expedite agreement on substantial areas of additional work.

To date, this has produced agreements on fourteen areas of additional work which firefighters may undertake. This includes assistance to the ambulance service and its personnel, delivering essential items to vulnerable persons, mass casualty body removal, face fitting masks to be used by frontline NHS and clinical care staff, assistance in taking samples for Covid-19 antigen testing, delivery of PPE and other medical supplies to NHS and care facilities, and many others.

The FBU believes the agreement has contributed to saving lives during the pandemic. Firefighters are proud of their contribution during this crisis and are rightly identified by the public as having played their part during the pandemic. The FBU believes that the existing efficient industrial relations apparatus was central to providing a high level of assistance, while keeping firefighters safe. The agreement is testimony to the strength of our existing arrangements. It would be folly for these arrangements to be undermined when they have been tested and found to be so effective.

THE CHIEF INSPECTOR'S 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. The critical recommendations were:

- 1. By June 2020, the Home Office, in consultation with the fire and rescue sector, should review and with precision determine the roles of: (a) fire and rescue services; and (b) those who work in them*
- 2. By June 2020, the Home Office, the Local Government Association, the National Fire Chiefs Council and trade unions should consider whether the current pay negotiation machinery requires fundamental reform. If so, this should include the need for an independent pay review body and the future of the 'grey book'.*

The FBU considers that the current pay negotiation machinery is fit for purpose. Conditions should continue to be negotiated through the Grey Book. For good reason, trade unions and our members oppose pay review bodies. Pay review bodies deliberately exclude the democratic voice of the workforce. They impose pay and conditions without negotiation. Sectors that have these bodies – such as police and teaching – have significant recruitment and retention problems, with widespread concern regarding the review bodies' performance.

The chief inspector criticises slow progress with UK-wide negotiations on broadening the firefighters' role. Negotiations on broadening firefighters' role have stalled for a number of reasons. An independent evaluation of the trials praised the work carried out, but also identified a range of safety and health concerns. Some matters require central government backing to progress. Some require Westminster government financial support for fire and rescue services. This has been raised jointly by the FBU and fire employers. Ministers say they want firefighters to do additional work and take on a wider role, but have not provided the necessary guarantees and investment – including for firefighters' pay. This is why progress has stalled.

The chief inspector for England demands that the Home Office cast aside the NJC, scrap the Grey Book, impose new roles and a pay review body. The FBU believes any intervention of this nature will seriously disrupt the fire and rescue service. There is no demand from the public, fire employers or the workforce for central government to impose unnecessary experiments on our vital public service.

