

FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE MATTERS

A PARLIAMENTARY BULLETIN FROM THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION | MARCH 2016

FLOODING – FIREFIGHTERS RESCUE THOUSANDS RESOURCES STILL NEEDED TO MAINTAIN RESILIENCE

During December 2015 Storms Desmond, Eva and Frank brought heavy rainfall and major flooding to the north west of England, Yorkshire, Scotland, North Wales and Northern Ireland.

In early December, Cumbria was worst-hit, with more than a month's rain falling on 5 December. Rivers across the county exceeded their highest levels ever recorded. On Boxing Day hundreds of people in Greater Manchester, Lancashire, North Yorkshire, and West Yorkshire were evacuated from their homes.

Further storms, severe gales and flooding occurred at the end of the year and into January, leading to more evacuations, especially in Scotland.

FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE MOBILISATION

During December 2015 fire and rescue services were the primary flood emergency responders across the country. Over the month, 34 fire and rescue services rendered some form of mutual aid assistance to the areas worst affected by flooding. Personnel and equipment was sent from 24 fire and rescue services to Cumbria, while 12 helped North Yorkshire and nine sent firefighters to Lancashire. South Wales and Mid and West Wales assisted North Wales and brigades in England.

Firefighters provided invaluable assistance to a wide range of people affected by flooding. Data collected by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) from individual fire and rescue services found firefighters responded to at least 1,400 flood incidents across the North West of England, 450 incidents in Yorkshire, nearly 200 in Wales, 1,000 in Scotland, and over 100 in Northern Ireland.

Firefighters rescued people from a wide range of hazardous situations, evacuating vulnerable people

prior to the onset of flood water as well as numerous other emergency interventions.

Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service reported 1000 people were rescued by firefighters on 26 December alone. In Scotland, 1000 people were evacuated from their homes in the Scottish borders after river flooding. Official figures almost certainly underestimate the rescue work firefighters carried out.

FLOOD INCIDENTS AND RESCUES, DECEMBER 2015

Service	Incidents	Rescues
Scotland	350	1,000+
Northern Ireland	103	80
Wales	184	42
Northumberland	118	55
North Yorkshire	263	36
West Yorkshire	169	144
Cumbria	1,095	360
Greater Manchester	101	1,000+
Lancashire	206	91

Source: Freedom of Information communications to the FBU, January-February 2016

At least 10 fire control rooms experienced spate conditions. The North West fire control room, which covers Lancashire, Greater Manchester, Cheshire and Cumbria received, over 1000 calls between 5-7 December. On 26-27 December over 1,200 calls were received and the control room was forced to draw upon primary and secondary back up arrangements, which included control rooms in London and the West Midlands fielding calls due to high volume.

Defra figures provided to the FBU in February 2016 show that over 70% of the 130 boat teams in England come from the fire and rescue service.

For Type B (powered boats) the proportion is even higher, with 77% provided by the fire and rescue service. Worryingly, there were fewer boat teams in 2015 than in 2014.

THE NATIONAL ASSET REGISTER LISTS TYPE B (POWERED BOAT) AND TYPE C (NON POWERED BOAT) TEAMS ONLY

Year	Fire and rescue service		Non-fire and rescue service		Rescue craft
	Cat B	Cat C	Cat B	Cat C	
2015	74	18	22	16	130
2014	76	19	27	17	139

Source: Defra, Freedom of Information communication to the FBU, 18 February 2016

Non-fire service includes search and rescue, RNLI, life guards, RSPCA, mountain rescue and police.

However firefighters did report problems, such as:

- Lack of dry suits – some had to wade in their fire gear
- Prolonged working in cold water
- Not enough boats
- Every appliance mobilised
- Fire stations flooded
- Huge call volume

Nearly 7,000 frontline firefighter jobs were lost between 2011 and 2015. Further cuts will diminish resilience in the coming years.

LESSONS FROM RECENT FLOODING

Firefighters responded magnificently during the floods. Politicians queue up for photo opportunities and lavish firefighters with praise, only to forget the crucial issues they have witnessed when they return to Westminster.

Some politicians even ignored firefighters, instead championing volunteers and the army. Subsuming firefighters under the general 'rescuer' label does a disservice to these well-trained professionals and to the communities they live and serve in. The fire and rescue service has resources to tackle flooding, with firefighters, equipment and appliances best suited to

leading this work and making communities resilient in the face of flooding.

The FBU believes the fire and rescue service in England and Wales should have a statutory duty to respond to major flooding. The need for such a duty was underlined by the Pitt Review in 2008. A duty was introduced in Scotland over a decade ago.

Although the FBU has grave concerns about cuts in Scotland, the duty has made a huge difference at the strategic planning level. Northern Ireland introduced the duty in 2012 and reports improved resilience.

In Wales, FBU officials have held meetings with Welsh AMs and Welsh government fire branch civil servants about a flood duty. The Fire and Rescue Consultative Forum have discussed the issue. This body includes senior civil servants, chief fire officers, employers' representatives and the FBU. The FBU believes progress is likely in Wales.

A statutory duty would add significantly to fire and rescue service resilience when faced with flooding. Such a duty would:

- Underscore the need to resource fire and rescue services specifically for flooding.
- Assist with strategic planning, not only between fire and rescue services and local resilience forums, but also between different fire and rescue services across England.
- Ensure firefighters play a full part in the temporary construction of flood defences, as they do in Sweden.
- Help ensure fire and rescue services have sufficient, professionally trained firefighters available to tackle flood emergencies.
- Ensure sufficient boats of the right quality are available.
- Help ensure sufficiently trained and equipped boat teams are available.
- Ensure sufficient control staff are available to take calls from distressed members of the public and deploy the resources to where they are most needed.
- Make resources available to communities during the clear up, ensuring premises are secure to hazardous substances testing and clear up.