

INDEPENDENT CULTURE REVIEW OF THE LONDON FIRE BRIGADE

FIRE BRIGADES UNION RESPONSE



EQUALITY

MATTERS

FOREWORD

The Independent Culture Review of the London Fire Brigade (LFB) was a wake-up call for everyone in the fire and rescue service. Nazir Afzal and his team found the LFB to be “institutionally misogynist and racist”, as well as finding evidence of homophobia, transphobia, and disability discrimination.

The FBU accepts the evidence of the review. The union’s position is clear: the behaviour and attitudes towards women, Black, Asian and minority ethnic, LGBT+ and neurologically diverse staff detailed within the report have no place in the fire and rescue service, the Fire Brigades Union, nor in society as a whole.



*Ben Selby,
FBU Assistant General Secretary*

The FBU will not sit on the fence in the face of such allegations. We are on the side of members who experience any kind of discrimination. We are against those who perpetrate such behaviours, even if they are members of our union. Such behaviour is contrary to the principles, rules and practices of our union and may be grounds for exclusion from the FBU.

The FBU and its equality sections have highlighted unacceptable behaviour within the service right across the UK. The union accepts most of the conclusions and recommendations of the review, but wants to go much further.

The FBU wants UK-wide standards which we have developed through the National Joint Council’s Inclusive Fire Service Group. The FBU wants union equality representatives to have the time and resources to help promote the equalities agenda and to help tackle the problems in every part of the fire and rescue service. His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services must take their role more seriously in holding fire service leaders to account: it is clear to members of the FBU that they have repeatedly failed to note and report on serious incidents of misconduct.

Equalities cannot be left to chief fire officers and principal managers. Whilst we accept they must step up and be part of building a more inclusive sector, they have repeatedly failed to act and provide the answers. The FBU and its members must be part of the solution and will double our efforts to build our own standards for equality.

The FBU remains saddened that one of our members took his own life because of the treatment he experienced. We shall continue to ensure that a better, more inclusive culture is fought for in the LFB and across the entire UK fire and rescue service.

Jaden Francois-Esprit will always be remembered, and we pay tribute to his family for their unwavering determination to see similar circumstances never repeated.

Equality matters.



FIREFIGHTER JADEN FRANCOIS-ESPRIT

INTRODUCTION

The findings of an Independent Culture Review of the London Fire Brigade (LFB) were published by Nazir Afzal OBE in November 2022. The review was established by the London Fire Commissioner in response to the tragic death of firefighter Jaden Francois-Esprit, who took his own life in August 2020. Jaden's family raised concerns that he may have experienced bullying and discrimination during his time in the LFB. The review sought to investigate the wider culture in which this tragic event occurred, and to provide some direction as to how to begin transforming culture within the fire and rescue service to one of equality and fairness. While Jaden's death was the catalyst for the review, it is the wider cultural context of the LFB that is, in this case, being examined.

Nazir Afzal's investigation spanned ten months, reviewed data from an online survey sent to all LFB staff, held focus groups and one-on-one interviews, and invited all employees to share their experiences via a private email account.

The review clearly commends the bravery and commitment to public service of the LFB, particularly paying tribute to the responses to the Croydon tram crash, the Grenfell Tower fire, the wildfires of summer 2022, and the response to Covid-19.

Despite the claims of the LFB to delivering excellent public service, it was found that significant levels of discrimination, harassment and bullying existed within the organisation, as well as institutional misogyny, racism, homophobia, and transphobia. The report states: *'Although the tight-knit team spirit of watches can be exemplary of comradery, co-operation, and efficiency, significant cultural problems still prevail.'* People of colour are disproportionately subject to disciplinary action and there are countless examples of women being subject to abuse from colleagues on a day-to-day basis.

The FBU broadly accepts that the findings of the review reflect the lived experiences of members, including those in our equalities sections. There is work to do to make the LFB an inclusive workplace and this review should act as a catalyst for that work. The FBU developed its 'all different, all equal' policy to better respond to allegations of bullying, sexism, racism, homophobia and transphobia amongst members. This year the FBU launched the 'equality matters' campaign at our 2023 conference, cementing promoting equalities as a union priority. The FBU is inherently involved at all levels in the review's findings. FBU members are amongst victims, perpetrators and by-standers of the behaviours outlined, and the FBU therefore has a significant role to play in driving change.

While the FBU accepts the review is largely an accurate reflection of the culture within the LFB, it should be acknowledged that there are shortcomings. The voice of LGBT+ LFB employees is limited, and experiences of and challenges faced by neurodivergent employees are overlooked. There is also no mention of the work done by the Inclusive Fire Service Group, which is an important mechanism to bring about change through cooperation between employers and employees. There are very few mentions of homophobic bullying, despite far-reaching evidence from the LGBT+ section that this is a significant issue. While the review does acknowledge that the support received by neurodivergent employees is sporadic and insufficient, it unfortunately makes no recommendations on how to improve this situation. The FBU has therefore provided further recommendations to supplement those made by Nazir Afzal that are detailed later in this report.

The review makes difficult reading for the FBU. The FBU has a long history of fighting for equalities exemplified in the Rule Book (2022) which states the union aims *'to support and promote working class unity through the Trade Union and Labour movement and therefore to oppose all forms of discrimination whether on the grounds of race, creed, sex, sexual orientation or otherwise.'* The FBU is clear in the belief that to be a trade unionist is to be opposed to all forms of discrimination.



FBU LONDON CULTURE REVIEW WORKING GROUP

In response to the London Culture Review, the EC instructed that a working group (LCRWG) be established to better understand and respond to Nazir Afzal's findings and recommendations. The LCRWG consists of representatives from equality sections, the London Regional Executive, national officials, and head office staff. The LCRWG's aim is to understand how the review can be used to further the union's goal of transforming the fire and rescue service into a safe and inclusive workplace, in which all employees can work free from bullying, discrimination, and harassment.

After thoroughly analysing the conclusions and recommendations of the review, the LCRWG found it to be a broadly accurate reflection of the current picture and proposed some additional recommendations. Representatives from equality sections discussed individual recommendations and conclusions with their members, and those discussions are pivotal to the LCRWG's proposals.

CONCLUSIONS REACHED BY THE REVIEW

The FBU analysed each of the 15 conclusions and agreed with numbers 1-14. Sections have contacted their members to further understand the extent of misogyny, racism, homophobia and transphobia, and will continue to do so going forward. Responses from the sections reflect that Afzal's findings mirror the experiences of members. Stories that have emerged in the press since the report's publication, as well as anecdotal evidence, would suggest that the findings in this review are not unique to the London Fire Brigade.

The FBU welcomes conclusion 9, which states: 'we did not find the same level of operational bigotry as in the Metropolitan Police' and is therefore concerned that some of those brought in to oversee reforms have previously undertaken similar roles in the police. The Baroness Casey review (2023) demonstrates significant levels of discrimination and bullying within the Metropolitan Police and some of those brought in to address cultural issues in the LFB oversaw this institutional racism, misogyny, and homophobia. There are concerns whether they can be part of the solution in a different organisation.

Conclusion 15 states: 'culture begins at the top' and 'the commissioner is seen as part of the solution'. When speaking at the NFCC culture conference in March 2023, Nazir Afzal restated his belief that blame for the problems he highlighted does not lie with the commissioner, nor would a change in leadership bring about any substantive cultural change. The FBU agrees that replacing one senior leader with another would not adequately address the

scope of issues reported. It should be acknowledged, however, that many of the issues raised in the review were widespread under the current leadership. Issues such as gatekeeping of bullying and harassment complaints go to the top of an organisation and - taken with Afzal's comment that culture begins at the top - this means current leadership alone cannot be viewed as the solution. Instead, employers should work alongside employees through existing NJC structures to bring about meaningful change.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM NAFIR AZAL'S REPORT

The FBU has concerns over references to a 'zero-tolerance' approach in recommendation 1 made by Nazir Afzal. 'Zero-tolerance' is an ambiguous term; managers across the fire and rescue service may therefore interpret the term differently. The review makes a number of references to bullying and discrimination being dismissed as 'banter'. The use of the term 'zero-tolerance approach', without substantive policy and definitions to underpin it, may not address this issue. There is still freedom for individuals to interpret 'zero-tolerance' as they see fit, and it is this freedom to interpret discrimination as 'banter' that has allowed the problem to perpetuate. It is therefore crucial for substantive definitions to exist so that continuity can exist regardless of which stations, brigades, and individuals may be involved.

The FBU has concerns about the use of mediators when allegations of bullying are made as per recommendation 5. The use of mediators is an informal practice and, therefore, recording data accurately and capturing a thorough understanding of issues raised becomes challenging. Furthermore, there is concern that this approach may not address the issue of 'gate-keeping' allegations of bullying and harassment when they are first made.

Secure facilities for women, as per recommendation 9, is supported by the FBU and is in line with recommendations in the FBU's best practice document on minimum workplace facilities. Toilets in fire stations that are designated as 'gender-neutral' frequently lack sanitary bins: this emphasises that it is not a space where women are welcomed. It is important to ensure facilities that meet the needs of women firefighters are present at all stations, and that there are adequate facilities for all firefighters to meet DECON 'shower in an hour' recommendations.

The FBU agrees with recommendation 11 *'to recruit and progress firefighters who reflect and demonstrate commitment to London's diverse communities'* but acknowledges that this has to be seen as an ongoing large body of work. Analysis must be conducted of dropout rates amongst different communities. This should include reviewing external providers, such as those involved in the recruitment and training processes. The FBU also agrees with

recommendation 21, to conduct an independent review of People's Services, and that this also should be an ongoing exercise. The FBU is concerned that recommendation 11 could be interpreted by the NFCC to support 'direct entry' measures which the FBU opposes. Instead focus should be placed on addressing barriers to promotion that currently exist within the LFB.

The FBU agrees that recommendation 13, to integrate head office with operations, would help address the 'them and us' culture that currently exists which may make some firefighters feel unable to come forward with concerns. The FBU does have concerns, however, about how this would work in practice given, for example, the lack of IT equipment in some stations.

Recommendations 15-19 focus on mental health. The FBU welcomes this issue to be seen as a priority, particularly in light of the increased demand for mental health services within the LFB after the Grenfell Tower fire. The FBU has a part to play in monitoring progress in this area as it is a priority for the wellbeing of members. Significant work is needed in this area to address current shortcomings, for example, the number of mental health first aiders is not enough for the size of the workforce.

Recommendation 8 is to '*consider the introduction of body worn video for fire safety home visits*'. FBU policy is to oppose the use of body worn cameras, and the FBU therefore does not support this recommendation. Conclusion 9 states: '*we did not find the same level of operational bigotry as in the Metropolitan Police*', and conclusion 10 states: '*we do not wish to invite comparisons with the Met police with regard to abuse of power.*' The FBU therefore believes there is insufficient evidence to suggest that this is a necessary step. The FBU also has concerns that the use of body worn cameras could create a hostile atmosphere and cause significant GDPR issues.

Furthermore, the FBU feels that the introduction of body worn videos is addressing the symptoms and not the roots of problems. Their introduction would create an atmosphere where those responsible for bullying and harassment feel they cannot use racist, homophobic, and sexist language because there is a camera present, not because it is against LFB values. The review highlights a need for wholesale change, not just increased surveillance of problems.



CREDIT: MARK THOMAS

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE FBU

The FBU analysed each of the 23 recommendations made by Nazir Afzal and have made three additional recommendations in areas that were found to be lacking: (1) To adopt Inclusive Fire Service Group's (IFSG) improvement strategies in full, and monitor, measure, and report on their progress. (2) To review the policies of external providers. (3) To explore barriers to LGBT+ involvement and recording of concerns in the cultural review process. The FBU also accepts the need to provide better support for neurodivergent members.

The FBU is concerned about the under-reporting of the experiences of LGBT+ firefighters. Homophobia is mentioned only a few times in the report, despite the LGBT+ section reporting examples of widespread discrimination and bullying experienced by their members. This may be because LGBT+ firefighters felt less able to come forward with their stories, as the review was ongoing, than those who have experienced misogyny and/or racism. This in itself is indicative of a homophobic culture in which LGBT+ firefighters feel it necessary to hide their sexual orientation. This was further reflected in the absence of speakers from the LGBT+ community at the NFCC culture conference. Work needs to be done on tackling homophobic harassment and bullying in the LFB, which was sadly lacking in the report.

The FBU has concerns about the omission of the work of the IFSG. The IFSG was set up by the NJC to consider matters relating to equality, diversity and cultural issues, such as bullying and harassment. It involves employer and employee representation, and is the only sector-wide body tasked with addressing cultural issues. The IFSG has undertaken a substantial amount of work to evidence the current position. Furthermore, the IFSG has developed guidance on issues relating to the promotion of an inclusive culture, recruitment and progression. This includes placing emphasis on senior managers challenging bullying and harassment at every level. Framework and willingness for bringing about cultural change therefore demonstrably exist within NJC structures. The FBU believe that more emphasis should be placed on implementing the IFSG's recommendations, which so far has unfortunately been lacking, rather than implementing a completely new framework.

The IFSG also notes: *'union involvement should be recognised as an important factor in delivering improvement.'* None of the recommendations made by Nazir Afzal refer to the need for union involvement going forward. Given the high density of FBU membership within the LFB, and the union's demonstrable commitment to fighting for equality, the FBU agree that the union has a unique and crucial role to play in bringing about change.

Monitoring, measuring, and reporting on progress will be vital to bring about whole-scale and long-lasting change. The FBU believes that independently led 'climate surveys' should be a part of practice going forward, and not just a 'one-time' solution.



CREDIT: MARK PINDER

NEURODIVERSITY

The FBU believe the experiences of neurodivergent firefighters were unfortunately omitted from this review. At least 10% of fire service employees are thought to be neurodivergent, with the LFB recently reporting 28% of firefighter apprentices to be neurodivergent. This disparity is likely to reflect improvements in the identification process rather than a higher incidence rate of neurodiversity amongst newer firefighters. This is a significantly higher rate of neurodiversity than the 10-15% estimated amongst the general population.

The review did note that the support received by neurodivergent firefighters is sporadic and often insufficient. An ableist culture was also found to exist in the service, which allows discrimination to occur, and examples were reported of neurodiverse members being bullied and harassed by colleagues.

The FBU is therefore concerned, given the high incidence of neurodiversity within the fire and rescue service and the identified insufficient support, that no recommendations were made on this front.

The FBU supports the LFB policy to introduce 'reasonable adjustment passports'. Additionally the FBU supports recommendations from the education team in this area: (1) Including ableism alongside racism, misogyny, and bullying as focus for anti-discrimination matters. (2) Evaluating and reporting on the accessibility of operational procedures. (3) Consulting neurodiverse employees to better understand the challenges they face. (4) Committing to reviewing and updating training, education, and exams in line with neurodiverse-friendly framework. The LFB must become more supportive of neurodiverse employees, rather than force neurodiverse workers to fit into an unsuitable workplace. This is particularly pertinent as the family of Jaden Francois-Esprit have said that he was not receiving support for his dyslexia while working within the LFB.



CONCLUSION

The FBU is committed to fighting for equality, and eradicating discrimination, harassment and bullying from fire and rescue service work spaces. A long-held aim of the union is that all our workspaces are free from discrimination, harassment and bullying, and are places where all staff are properly supported and valued regardless of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or neurodiversity. The report, therefore, understandably made difficult reading for the FBU, and the FBU acknowledges that many of the conclusions reflect existing knowledge of issues the union has been trying to change.

The union welcomes the establishment of the review, and believes it must mark a turning point whereby significant changes are made across the fire and rescue service. The current culture identified is not acceptable, has no place in the modern-day fire service, and much of the behaviour reported is incompatible with the FBU's principles. Senior leaders in the London Fire Brigade must reflect on the report and consider if they have handled matters brought to their attention appropriately. Positive cultures must be set and adhered to by senior officers: those cultures must include an environment which gives confidence that serious allegations will be listened to and addressed when reported.

Many of Nazir Afzal's conclusions reflect existing knowledge within the FBU, and many of the conclusions reflect FBU policy. The FBU is uniquely placed, therefore, to bring about change and has a crucial role to play. The FBU does agree, at least in part, with many of the recommendations and conclusions. However, it is concerned by the lack of representation of LGBT+ and neurodiverse firefighters, and disappointed by the omission of the work of the IFSG.

The FBU must be instrumental in bringing the LFB in line with FBU values: the FBU believes this can be achieved by working with employers through the NJC framework.



Recommendation	Comment
1: Zero-tolerance policy.	Broadly agree but feel 'zero-tolerance is too ambiguous a term to be useful here.'
2: Consider anonymised reporting of bullying, misogyny and racism.	Broadly agree.
3: Consider historic review of complaints.	Broadly agree.
4: Make it easier for people to report.	Broadly agree.
5: Develop values 'public service' first.	Some concerns regarding use of mediators.
6: Build a culture dashboard.	Broadly agree.
7: Develop a robust mechanism for measuring LFB culture.	Broadly agree - already in ASH policy.
8: Consider introducing body worn video for fire safety home visits.	Oppose. Policy of FBU is to oppose body worn cameras. Report found no evidence of 'operational bigotry' (Conclusion 9) so unclear why this is necessary.
9: Ensure secure facilities for all women in stations.	Agreed. Falls into FBU privacy for all policy.
10: Borough Commanders should build closer relationships with their local communities.	Broadly agree.
11: Recruit firefighters committed to London's diverse communities.	Agree but acknowledge that this is a large and complex project needed to achieve this aim.
12: Named person to members of the public.	Agree
13: Consider ways to integrate head office with operations.	Agree. The divide leads to a 'them and us' culture. Concerns raised over how proposals for hot-desking would work in practice e.g. lack of IT in some fire stations.
14: Senior selection panels.	Agree.
15: Mental health prevention.	Agree.
16: Gather better information on employee red flags.	Agree. Need to make sure this is developed properly. Professional and detailed programme. FBU to monitor. LFB have mental health first aiders but not enough for the size of the workforce.
17: Investigate stress, anxiety and depression.	Agree.
18: Understand the reasons for suicide.	Agreed. As with R16.
19: Review mental health and wellbeing.	Agreed. As with R16.

17: Investigate stress, anxiety and depression	Agree
18: Understand the reasons for suicide	Agreed. As with R16
19: Review mental health and wellbeing	Agreed. As with R16
20: Independent review of People Services	Agree. Points to a bigger project. Outcomes must be shared with the FBU
21: Create an HR Data Analytics Strategy and develop HR data analytics skills	Agree. 'I-Trend' database coming soon. Will allow better/more thorough analysis of data. Dashboard available to station chiefs and above and HR teams. (Links to R6)
22: Create an LFB workforce planning strategy to support the 'Togetherness Strategy'	Agreed. Points to a large project – needs monitoring. Can't just be a 'tick-box' exercise i.e. can't improve ratios etc. with a campaign of posters. Need thorough understanding of issues.
23: Investigate BAME grievance and discipline	Agree. However there has been no engagement on action plans.



EQUALITY

MATTERS

LEADING THE FIGHT FOR EQUALITY IN THE FIRE SERVICE
OUR SERVICE, OUR UNION, OUR DUTY