

Firefighter

The magazine of the Fire Brigades Union

A dramatic photograph of a firefighter silhouetted against a massive fire. The firefighter is positioned on an extended aerial platform, directing a powerful stream of water onto the flames. The fire is intense, with bright orange and yellow flames reaching upwards, creating a stark contrast with the dark background. The overall scene conveys the bravery and scale of firefighting operations.

Now

STOP THE CUTS

Glasgow fire: report

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**BALLOT FOR
ACTION**
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**MPs BACK
CUTS CAMPAIGN**
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**HIDDEN PERILS
IN WATER**
See p16

April-May 2026



www.fbu.org.uk

In recent months the FBU has been undertaking significant campaigning to secure the investment our fire and rescue service needs to survive and grow.

Funding for the fire and rescue service is crucial to everything we do. We need it to secure our members' jobs now and for the future. We need the money to ensure members get the pay rises they deserve. We also need funding so we're as safe as we possibly can be on the job.

That's why I'm so proud of Oxfordshire members, who voted overwhelmingly in favour of industrial action in their consultative ballot last month. Oxfordshire firefighters have sent a clear message that we are serious when we say, enough is enough.

I visited Dorset and Wiltshire to show my support for members facing station closures. At one station under threat, we arrived only for the bells to go down – a wake



up call for anyone doubting why we need to fight to save our service.

Thanks to members in Durham and Darlington for hosting my visit there and explaining their concerns – and to members in Oxfordshire for their continued campaigning against cuts.

We officially launched our Cuts Kill campaign at Westminster last month. Our message to central government is clear:

Funding for the fire and rescue service is crucial to everything we do

fund our fire and rescue service, or the public will suffer.

Head office officials have lobbied ministers, fire employers and civil servants as part of our campaign. We told them that our members require real commitment backed by sustained finance.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

This month, the FBU held our inaugural health and safety summit in Birmingham. I promised to deliver this seminar as part of our campaign to tackle the safety and health issues our members face, such as cancer and mental health.

We heard best practice from other firefighter unions across the globe and showcased the tremendous work of the FBU. The union is making sure our safety reps get active and organised, using the rights we've won to take up the issues with principal management.

CONFERENCE

FBU conference is the parliament of our union. Delegates will convene in May to set priorities for the year ahead. FBU democracy is precious and makes us the force we are. I urge all members to take part in branch, brigade and regional meetings before conference, and for delegates to report back to members after deliberations have finished.

The FBU actively supports our entire diverse membership – in all roles and duty systems, in control rooms, training centres, on stations and at headquarters. Let's stand together, fight together and make our voices heard.



Warm welcome to new FBU national officer

I'd like to welcome and congratulate Bro. Joe Weir who has been elected to the position of National Officer and will work from our Head Office. He was previously the EC member for the South East region. He's eager to get started.



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Firefighter

Published by the Fire Brigades Union, Ken Cameron House, 171-173 Gray's Inn Road, London, WC1X 8UE

www.fbu.org.uk

Production team: Alice Dann, Alanna Gow, Lisa Irving, Gabriella Matkin, Chris McLaughlin and Tom Walker

Cover image: Jeff J Mitchell/Getty

Print: Walstead Roche, Victoria Business Park, Saint Austell PL26 8LX

Firefighter is mailed in a 100% compostable wrapper. Please do not recycle the wrapper but dispose of it in your home compost heap, your garden waste or food waste bin.



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PEFC/16-33-582

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NEWS

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FBU joins major protest against the far right



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OXFORDSHIRE



ALANNA GOW

FBU members rallying outside Oxfordshire County Council in December

Ballot result is final warning for council: scrap the cuts or face industrial action

Firefighters in Oxfordshire have voted overwhelmingly to back strike action against plans to close five stations and axe at least 42 jobs.

A ballot of Fire Brigades Union members showed 94% in favour of potential industrial action on a turnout of 71%.

It underlined the strength of feeling among firefighters in one of the worst hit areas of a national wave of financial cuts which the FBU warns will put communities at risk.

The consultative ballot took place in opposition to Oxford

County Council proposals that would include the closure of three on-call and the removal of six fire engines.

It follows a vigorous campaign by members, including a protest march through Oxford city centre and a demonstration outside the council offices.

Because the ballot was consultative, meaning it is “advisory”, industrial action will not follow immediately. But the council has been warned that action will follow if it does not budge.

FBU General Secretary Steve Wright said: “The result of this ballot could not be

clearer. If the council don’t move quickly enough to scrap the proposed cuts then the likelihood of strike action in the fire and rescue service moves ever closer.

“It is not too late for those in authority to step back from the edge and do what is right for the fire and rescue service and for the public.

“As well as our message to the council we will take this argument to government, to the fire minister and to the prime minister. They need to be aware of the real damage these cuts will have when it comes to the safety of the people we serve.

“There can be no price put on the safety of firefighters and we will do all we can to stop these cuts from happening. If that means moving to a formal ballot for strike action then that is what we will do.”

Johnny Shuker, Oxfordshire Brigade Secretary, said:

“More wildfires and extreme weather events are expected during the summer. By refusing to shelve these cuts, the council is leaving no choice but to go on strike.

“It is playing fast and loose with public safety and that of firefighters by pressing ahead with these cutbacks.”

New employment rights come into force but question mark over enforcement

The first stages of the government's flagship new employment laws have come into force.

But the introduction of the Employment Rights Act (ERA) was marred by a row over terms of a new body set up to protect workers' rights.

From April employees became entitled to Statutory Sick Pay from day one instead of after four "waiting days" and the threshold for entitlement is abolished. Paternity leave will also become a right from day one.

Protections for whistleblowers have been increased and sexual harassment is now a "qualifying

disclosure", protecting workers who believe speaking out is in the public interest in relation to criminal activity, health and safety dangers or environmental risk.

The Fair Work Agency (FWA), a cornerstone of the ERA designed to police the minimum wage, holiday pay and modern slavery was dubbed a "dead duck" by critics after it emerged one of its duties will be to "reduce regulatory burdens".

It would mean risking "credible threats of inspection, investigation or enforcement", according to Prof David Whyte of Queen Mary university of London.

FIREFIGHTERS' MEMORIAL DAY



MARK THOMAS

The minute's silence for fallen firefighters at FBU conference

FBU members urged to mark international Firefighters' Memorial Day on 4 May

Firefighters around the world prepared to honour colleagues who lost their lives in the line of duty with a minute of silence.

Firefighters Memorial Day, due on 4 May, is an international day of remembrance for firefighters and fire and rescue workers.

More than 2,300 UK firefighters have died attending incidents.

Before the commemorative day, members of the Fire Brigades Union were urged to take part in the tribute to remember those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice in the line of public service.

More than 2,300 UK firefighters have died in the course of duty.

The minute's silence traditionally begins at 12 midday, called and ending with the sounding of appliance sirens.

The Firefighters Memorial Trust, supported by the FBU, encourages members off duty or retired to join in at fire stations or other workplaces.

FBU General Secretary Steve Wright said: "I hope all members will play a part. It's an opportunity to honour those who have died serving their communities."



Sounding Off

A bad deal with Trump

Anita Bhadani of Global Justice Now looks at how the NHS will pay the price for the government's deal with the US

Medicine prices are about to go up under a deal forced on Britain by Donald Trump. It's likely to mean that FBU members and their families will pay more for their NHS prescriptions.

Last December the government signed an agreement with the US which permanently weakens NHS drug price controls and will see the UK double its spending on branded medicines by 2035 – with very little benefit in return.

The government gave in to pressure by Trump and the large drug companies known as 'Big Pharma', who used tariff threats and disinvestment as tools to bully us. The cost to Britain will run into billions of pounds, with the NHS paying the price.

Doubling spending would cost a staggering £9 billion every single year for at least 10 years. Without extra funding that money can only be found elsewhere – for example, in further cuts to the fire service and other public services.

Expert Karl Claxton estimates that for every £3 billion more paid to drug companies, 15,000 more lives are lost in the UK every single year.

Think of what £9 billion could fund. Salaries of medical staff or investment into increasing our capacity to produce our own medicines, freeing us from dependency on big business. More essential medical equipment or research into cures that save lives.

Given the wide-ranging impacts on our health and public services, such as fire and rescue, it might reasonably have been expected that this deal would have been subject to public and parliamentary scrutiny. But it was negotiated in secret. MPs haven't been offered a say – they haven't even seen the deal.

We need to stand together to oppose this deal. We cannot allow Donald Trump and big, unaccountable corporations to hold our NHS to ransom.

Firefighters join 'biggest ever' unity demonstration against the far right



ALANNA GOW

The FBU on the Together Alliance march

Firefighters joined the “biggest multicultural march in history” in a demonstration against the rise of the extreme right.

The Fire Brigades Union banner was paraded through central London in March organised by the Together Alliance and supported by hundreds of groups including environmentalists, musicians, faith leaders, unions, athletes, entertainers, MPs, councillors and community activists.

The event, featuring speeches in Whitehall and a music celebration in

Trafalgar Square, was described by the organisers as the biggest ever, attracting what they said was a million people to the capital.

Co-organiser Sabby Dhalu said the UK is seeing an unprecedented growth in support for far-right organisations: “We believe the majority of British people stand against hatred and division and racism encouraged by these organisations and it’s time to act.”

FBU General Secretary Steve Wright said; “When workers are divided we lose out. It’s our duty now to take a stand.”

NEW ZEALAND

FBU stands in solidarity with New Zealand firefighters’ battle for working equipment

The Fire Brigades Union has expressed “full and unreserved solidarity” with firefighters in New Zealand engaged in strike action over critical shortages of crew and equipment.

The service is operating with fire appliances and specialist aerial equipment that is 20 or even 30 years old, which breaks down on emergency calls. Funding cuts have failed to maintain safe minimum crew levels.

Equipment failures have seen firefighters caught inside burning buildings without water supplies.

After a trans-global online meeting between officers, FBU General Secretary Steve Wright wrote to Wattie Watson, national secretary of the New Zealand Professional Firefighters Union, to say: “We stand with you.

“We know what this fight looks like because we are living it too.”

In brief

REFORM FIGURE THINKS SAFETY HAS ‘GONE TOO FAR’

FBU General Secretary Steve Wright has strongly condemned a leading Reform party figure for a “shameful” attack on firefighters.

The party’s former housing spokesman Simon Dudley said fire regulations following the Grenfell tragedy in which 72 people died had gone too far and that “everyone dies in the end”.

He said fire safety and building rules had “swung too far the wrong way” and was sacked by Nigel Farage after an angry backlash, including from Wright who said the comments were shameful, an “an attack on firefighters who run towards danger to protect the public” and an insult to Grenfell victims and their families.



ALAMY

GOVERNMENT SCRAPS PRISON FIRE PLEDGE

The government has ditched a pledge to make all prison cells fire safe by the end of next year.

About a quarter of 89,464 prison places in England and Wales are officially unsafe, with 44% awaiting installation of fire detectors. Successive governments have set the end of 2027 as a target for a complete overhaul.

This has been dropped with no new target date set by the Ministry of Justice.



Save Bradford on Avon fire station stall at a local farmers' market. Inset: Charmouth rally against station closure

Public support for the campaign against fire service cuts in Dorset and Wiltshire is growing after Fire Brigades Union members reached out directly into affected communities.

A series of public meetings, station-based advice desks and online contacts has prompted a wave of support to block plans for the closure of eight on-call stations and the loss of 96 jobs.

Eight fire engines and six specialist appliances would also be lost across the counties' 2,370 square miles.

Almost 16,000 residents have signed up to the FBU campaign and the union has been able to contact more than 10,000 people with online messages.

"The public have been really supportive when they get the message about what may happen to their service," said Barney Hedgecock, a Dorset and Wiltshire FBU rep.

"A big part of our strength is the public supporting us and they've been really great."

The campaign has been



News Focus

Public outreach in Dorset and Wiltshire

organised on the back of a consultation exercise run by the fire service. The FBU has produced a guide to help supportive members of the public answer the service's questions.

Meetings have attracted attendances of between

30–50 on average with one meeting reaching 80.

The proposed cuts are proportionately the worst in a nationwide swathe of fire service cutbacks, which the FBU warns will leave communities without adequate protection from fires, flooding, other life-threatening emergencies and major incidents.

The Dorset and Wiltshire campaign is building towards a crucial meeting in June when the Fire Authority, which includes elected councillors from six local authorities, will decide to approve, amend or reject the plans.

Fire service chiefs blame successive reductions in central government funding requiring an "in year" saving in 2026–7 totalling £1.2 million.

TWO MINUTES

In answer to a question from South West Wiltshire MP Andrew Murrison, prime minister Keir Starmer told the Commons in March that he would ensure an urgent meeting between the counties' MPs and relevant ministers to explore ways to ensure firefighters can continue to serve the community.

Dorset and Wiltshire is already almost two minutes slower than the national average in arriving to life and property saving fires, with rural residents facing greater risk because of the greater distances that need to be travelled to reach them.

Barney Hedgecock said: "We're getting the public on board as the best way to persuade the authority, who have constituents to think of, that these plans can't go through if public safety is to be protected."

'The public have been really supportive when they get the message about what may happen to their service'

CUTS KILL



MPs get the m



The parliamentary launch
of the FBU's Cuts Kill campaign

message

MPs turned out to meet union reps in support of the political launch of the firefighters' campaign to stop swingeing service cuts. More than 50 MPs signed a Commons motion to take the message to Number 10

MARK THOMAS

Parliamentarians lined up to support the fight against cuts to fire services at the political launch of the Fire Brigades Union's "Cuts Kill" campaign. More than 50 MPs have signed a Commons motion calling on the government to increase investment in fire and rescue services after a decade and a half of continued austerity and cuts.

Union representatives gathered on College Green, outside the Houses of Parliament, with firefighters meeting MPs to unite efforts to pressure the government to reverse further real-

terms cuts in the coming year.

Extensive support in Parliament is a powerful boost to the ongoing campaign against chronic underfunding which has hollowed out fire and rescue services and the union warns is leaving communities without adequate fire cover.

Since 2010, 1,200 firefighter jobs have been cut, resulting in appliances arriving at emergencies without enough crew to operate safely, putting both firefighters and the public at risk.

The Early Day Motion, which is expected to attract more signatures as the fight goes forward, delivers a direct message to No10 and ministers that Cuts Kill.

Figures published in February by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government for the coming spending year revealed fire and rescue services in England face a real-terms cut to central government funding, with a below inflation increase of 1.4%.

Inflation, then at 2.5%, has risen to 3% and is expected to carry on increasing as a result of war in the Middle East.

Total funding for fire and rescue services, at just under £1 billion, remains lower than a decade ago despite increase pressure on crews and equipment.



Paul Novak, TUC general secretary



Lee Barron MP



Steve Wright, FBU general secretary



Chris Wycherley, FBU EC for Southern region



Barney Hedgecock, FBU rep



Kim Johnson MP



Ian Lavery MP



The TUC's Paul Novak speaks to the rally outside Parliament

"This is about sending a message to politicians that firefighters have had enough after fourteen years of austerity"

The union fears tens of thousands of jobs could be lost and stations closed if the proposed financial settlement is not improved. It is threatening industrial action in Dorset and Wiltshire where almost 100 jobs and 8 fire stations are at risk.

In the Commons motion, the MPs say: "Any reduction in firefighter numbers or station closure leads to longer response times and longer distances to travel. In an emergency, every second counts."

"Underfunding means inadequate supplies of the vital equipment firefighters need to save lives."

It draws attention to the fact that climate change is causing more extreme wildfires, flooding and severe weather at the same time as an increase in lithium-ion battery fires.

The motion urges the government to recognise that "the service responsible

for responding to these incidents is being asked to do more with less". It calls on the government to urgently provide increased funding to the UK's fire and rescue services, restore firefighter numbers to pre-2010 levels and to halt any further cuts.

The union's Stop the Cuts banner was brandished across the event with the Commons and the tower of Big Ben in the background. MPs from the union's parliamentary group turned up at the rally as well as TUC general secretary Paul Novak who spoke of the importance of solidarity for the firefighters across the trade union movement. He said an attack on one group of workers was an attack on all.

Kim Johnson, MP for Liverpool Riverside, who chairs the parliamentary group, asked why the government could find ever-increasing amounts for war and defence efforts but not

adequate funding for public services. Group member Jon Trickett, MP for Normanton and Hemsworth, said: "These cuts raise the possibility of real danger. The FBU speaks for the whole nation and the government should listen."

Steve Wright, FBU general secretary, said: "This is about our Cuts Kill campaign getting on an industrial footing and sending a message to politicians that firefighters have had enough after fourteen years of austerity, losing 12,000 firefighter jobs and fire stations closing."



TAKE ACTION

Write to your MP
about the Cuts Kill
campaign

An aerial night photograph of a massive fire in Glasgow city center. Thick white smoke billows from a large, multi-story building that is partially destroyed. A fire truck with an extended aerial platform is positioned on the street, directing a powerful stream of water onto the burning structure. The surrounding area is filled with debris and emergency lights. The scene is dramatic and highlights the scale of the disaster.

GLASGOW FIRE

STOP THE CUTS

Huge Glasgow city centre blaze underlines the need to reverse cuts that would see 200 firefighters jobs lost

The entire 1851 Union Corner building was lost in the fire

NOW

The huge central Glasgow blaze which destroyed a listed landmark building and closed Scotland's busiest railway station for nine days has intensified demands for a halt to planned cuts to the fire service.

The Fire Brigades Union has warned the incident, attended by more than 200 firefighters and 18 appliances, underlines the need for a "fully resourced and properly funded fire and rescue service" in the face of proposed cutbacks threatening 500 frontline jobs.

Amid Holyrood politicians' praise for the courage and skill of crews who prevented the inferno spreading to Glasgow Central station and the adjacent hotel, the union said another round of budget slashing would significantly debilitate an already "creaking" service.

The Scottish government and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service insist sufficient operational resources are in place despite a decade of cuts and the loss of 1,300 front line roles.

A "programme of austerity" has been condemned by the union which it says is resulting in fewer firefighters, stations, fire engines, high-reach units and longer response times, leaving the public less well protected.

APPLIANCES UNAVAILABLE

At the Glasgow incident, the entire 1851 Union Corner building, housing a maze of small businesses, was consumed before partially collapsing on Sunday 8 March after fire broke out in a street-level unlicensed vape shop. Initial speculation focused on lithium batteries being the cause and accelerator.

The city's two high-reach appliances – reduced from six in savings measures – were unavailable. Appliances attended from outside the city, including one from Edinburgh, more than 50 miles

and over an hour's journey away. One firefighter reportedly worked in a cage at the top of an HRA extension for a solid six hours without a break.

Alarm has been raised over Scottish government budget plans for the coming year, which the union says fails to address an £840m backlog in capital investment and is £11m short of what it says is necessary to recruit vitally required new firefighters in the next three years.

Since then, the number of firefighters has fallen from 7,878 to 6,570, or more than 15% on the back of a real terms cut to the service of £66m, according to Holyrood Parliament calculations. In the same period, average response times have risen by more than a minute from 7.13 to 8.42.

"Appliances attended from outside the city, including one from over an hour's journey away"

Scottish ministers insist the proposed budget for fire services is to rise in 2026/7 by £23m to £436m. But the union says this will be eroded largely by inflation and other costs and represents a real cut of 2.5%.

The union has accused the Scottish government of planning to harm the capacity of the very service its Holyrood members praised at the Union Street incident.

It's thought the fact that the incident occurred on a relatively quiet Sunday prevented a greater risk to shoppers and traders while a lower level of traffic enabled speedier arrival of crews.

The union has warned Scottish ministers that the situation is "critical", with real-terms reductions forcing the service to shrink despite rising demands and increasingly large-scale, complex

events. It says political choices are being made without regard to real life consequences.

Members are calling for clear commitments to long-term, sustained investment in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to halt workforce reductions and rebuild firefighter numbers.

However, in exchanges after the fire First Minister John Swinney told the Holyrood Parliament: "All the equipment and resource was there to enable that incident to be tackled. I am confident there were effective resources in place to do all that was needed to be done."

Final spending decisions will be made after Holyrood elections due on 7 May, in which no party is promising to reverse the cuts.



Rally against cuts to the Scottish fire service



A safety-first Fir

Adam Taylor says better protections for firefighters are essential

Across the fire and rescue service, from the fireground to fire control, the work has always carried risk. That is understood by every member who turns out to an incident or answers a call. But there is a difference between risk that is inherent to the job, and harm that is preventable. For the Fire Brigades Union, that distinction matters. Preventable harm is unacceptable. That is what it means to be a safety-first Fire Brigades Union.

The modern evidence base is clear. Firefighters are exposed to a complex mix of toxic substances, extreme physical demands and long-term health risks. Cancer is one of the most serious occupational threats facing our members. Increasingly, firefighters are not just facing danger in the moment, they are paying the price years later through life-limiting illness.

This is not abstract. It is the lived reality of firefighters. Exposure to contaminants on the fireground, the build-up of toxic residues on PPE and equipment, and the cumulative impact of years of service are all contributing to a growing body of evidence that demands action. Alongside this, the pressures of the job; reduced staffing, increased demand and expanding roles, are also driving serious concerns around mental health and wellbeing.

The FBU has not stood still in the face of these challenges. Our DECON campaign has helped transform understanding of contaminants and firefighter cancer across the UK.



The Brigades Union

Steve Wright and Adam Taylor
meet with health secretary
Wes Streeting



Working with leading academics, we have built one of the most comprehensive evidence bases anywhere in the world.

At the same time, the union is progressing a major project on firefighters' mental health. This is a complex and evolving area, and it is right that our approach is led by robust research and the experiences of our members. Early engagement and survey work are already helping to build a clearer picture of the pressures firefighters face. The next phase will

be critical in shaping evidence-based guidance and ensuring that support is meaningful, practical and rooted in the realities of the job.

But evidence alone is not enough. The strength of the FBU lies in our organisation. Health and Safety representatives remain central to everything we do. Raising issues, challenging unsafe practices and ensuring that standards are not just written, but enforced. Our health and safety structures, from local H&S committees to national engagement, are what turns policy into real-world protection.

At a national level, this work is being driven forward through engagement across government, regulators and industry. In recent discussions with health and social care minister, Wes

Streeting, the union pressed the case for comprehensive health monitoring and cancer screening, and the introduction of presumptive legislation for firefighters. These are long-standing demands of the union, and it is vital that they are now being recognised at the highest levels.

At the same time, new and emerging risks continue to develop. Lithium-ion battery incidents, PFAS contamination, and the growing impact of climate-related events such as wildfires and flooding are reshaping the risk landscape for firefighters. These are not future challenges, they are already here, and they require a coordinated, evidence-led response.

That is why the union is bringing together FBU health and safety representatives, academics and leading voices in their field to focus on the next stage of this work. This is about strengthening our collective approach, sharing expertise and ensuring that our reps are equipped to lead on these issues in every fire station and control room. It is part of a sustained programme to embed health and safety at the heart of everything the union does.

However, no summit, meeting or report can replace the role of an organised membership. Every advance in health and safety has come from collective action, from members standing together, supported by trained and confident safety reps, to demand better. That remains as true today as it was when the union first fought for legal protections in the workplace.

The challenges are significant. But so too is the strength of the union. By continuing to organise, to campaign and to lead, we can ensure that firefighters are not made ill by the job they do to protect others.

A safety-first fire brigades union is not just a principle. It is a commitment to every member, in every role, now and in the future.

Adam Taylor is FBU National Officer

"Firefighters are exposed to toxic substances and extreme physical demands"



Water reforms must go further

The government has introduced a Water White Paper setting out reforms to the water industry. FBU general secretary **Steve Wright** explains why this matters for the fire service and why the government must go further by bringing water back into public ownership

Water companies have come under increasing scrutiny in recent years. Widespread water outages, sewage spills polluting rivers and coastal areas, and rapidly rising bills while shareholders and CEOs take home generous payouts has pushed the issue firmly into the public spotlight.

Less visible, but even more alarming, are the risks the current system poses to emergency services. The consequences of a privatised, profit-driven water network are not just inconvenient. They are dangerous.

Although the government has set out plans to reform the water industry, the proposals in the Water White Paper fail to fully account for the role of water infrastructure in emergency-service planning.

The Fire Brigades Union is part of a broad campaigning coalition including trade unions, the TUC, We Own It, Compass, Surfers Against Sewage, and other campaigners calling for the



FBU president Ian Murray with Clive Lewis MP and others supporting public ownership of water

government to bring water back into public hands. Only renationalisation can safeguard this essential utility and public safety.

PROFIT OVER PUBLIC SAFETY

Since privatisation in 1989, water companies in England and Wales have been responsible for everything from pipe maintenance to hydrant repairs.

In that time, water companies have prioritised paying out over £85 billion to shareholders while investment has decreased by 15%. This has had disastrous consequences for water infrastructure.

The National Audit Office has projected that it would take an estimated 700 years to replace aging pipework at the current pace of renewal. With climate change increasing both drought risk and water demand, England faces a projected 5 billion litre per day water shortfall by 2050.

Meanwhile, under the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, fire and rescue services are responsible for inspecting and reporting hydrant defects – but rely on these private companies for the pressure and flow to fight fires safely.

There is no legal requirement for water companies to guarantee minimum levels of pressure or flow.

Pressure reduction is used by water companies, especially at night, to manage leaks and reduce costs. This directly undermines fire-flow rates and leaves fire services at the mercy of water companies increasing water



Water rescue training has been undermined by pollution

"Firefighting requires reliable access to water, and the current system cannot guarantee it"

pressure and flow during an emergency. This has had disastrous consequences at incidents.

LESSONS FROM GRENELL

The Grenfell Tower fire tragically revealed the risks of relying on a fragmented, privatised water network. Investigations revealed a series of failings, including that firefighters were forced to reduce pump output to stop tanks running dry due to insufficient water flow. When Thames Water were asked to boost pressure, they delayed until it was too late.

Hydrants near the tower were mislabelled, unusable, or failed to meet performance standards.

Between 1996 and 2004, tens of thousands of defective hydrants were installed by multiple water companies across England and Wales, resulting in several accidents involving firefighters. Instructions were issued to not use these hydrants, even in emergencies.

These failings expose a serious structural issue: that a life-critical service is dependent on the voluntary actions of private companies whose priorities are not aligned with emergency response.

DIRTY WATER

Water companies' illegal sewage dumping and pollution of rivers, lakes and coastlines has fuelled widespread public anger. Firefighters have also been victims of this dirty business.

Water rescue training has repeatedly been undermined by polluted training environments.

One stark example is Stockton's Tees Barrage, where West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service was forced to suspend all water rescue training after 11 firefighters fell ill over the course of 2019. A report to the fire authority confirmed that these cases were a long-standing problem with firefighters suffering similar illnesses years before training was finally halted.

A larger outbreak took place at the National Watersports Centre in Nottinghamshire, where polluted water drawn from the River Trent was used in flood-rescue and swift-water training. Between 2008 and 2012, dozens of firefighters from brigades across the UK became ill after training in the water. In 2015, 60 firefighters were awarded compensation after legal action brought by the FBU revealed that the water contained harmful

pathogens and bacteria. A privatised system that allows widespread pollution cannot guarantee safe water. Yet the government's White Paper barely touches the problem. It offers tweaks, but not the enforceable standards needed to stop these failures happening again and keep Britain's waterways safe and clean.

WHY NATIONALISATION?

The White Paper promises more efficient regulation and oversight by abolishing regulator Ofwat and consolidating the four existing regulators into one new body. But it does not address the core problems that fire and rescue services face.

Firefighting requires reliable access to water, and the current system cannot guarantee it. A publicly owned water service could provide mandatory hydrant standards, routine national testing, protection for water pressure during droughts, heatwaves and major incidents, and it could embed fire and rescue services directly into infrastructure planning and resilience strategies.

These reforms would create a system designed around public need, which is incompatible with privatisation, where companies are answerable first to investors rather than the communities they serve.

Water is not a commodity. For the fire service, it is critical. It belongs back in public hands.

IAN NUTTALL

"I wish I'd contacted them sooner"

The Fire Fighters Charity offers physical therapy alongside mental health support for firefighters in need

Firefighter Naomi Purvis had spent four weeks barely able to move, reliant on medication to ease the pain of an injury sustained on a breathing apparatus exercise. An awkward fall had resulted in two chipped discs which saw her "just hobbling around" on crutches.

Off work for six weeks, there was little prospect of an early return. Then she called the Fire Fighters Charity. "It was a game changer, I wish I'd contacted them sooner," said the 32-year-old based at Cheltenham East station in Gloucestershire.

Within a fortnight, Naomi was assigned a programme at one of the charity's residential rehabilitation centres, including physiotherapy and counselling sessions. A week at Marine Court in West Sussex was followed by a further week at Jubilee House in Cumbria and in six weeks, physically stronger and mentally more confident, Naomi was back on the front line.

Hers is just one of thousands of



The Marine Court centre in Littlehampton, West Sussex

success stories in the charity's 80 years as the "UK fire family's charity", providing clinical care and wellbeing support to members of the fire services and their families.

Over the past year, the Fire Brigades Union has held constructive discussions with the charity and is keen to build on the engagement, strengthening the relationship to ensure members are aware of, and can access, the support available to them.

MISSION STATEMENT

Founded during the Second World War in 1940 as the London Fire Service Benevolent Fund, its mission was to support the bereaved families of firefighters killed in the Blitz. It was set up by the Deputy Chief of the London Fire Brigade with an initial donation of £24, later becoming the Fire Service National Benevolent Fund with at least 1,400 fire service orphans in its care.

The charity grew to national status with the late Queen Elizabeth becoming patron in 1953 and opening three rehab centres – the third at Harcombe House in Devon. Services are provided at no cost to firefighters or their families, in service or retired.

Its mission statement states its aim is to help firefighters "adapt to physical, emotional and social changes, to adapt to conditions, injuries and illness, and to transition to life after service".

Those who have benefited could not be more fulsome in their praise. Ronnie Selfe, a firefighter with more than 25 years' service with three commendations, was "really struggling" after illness forced a move away from operational capacity. He's been diagnosed with sarcoidosis, a cancer which affects lung and kidney function.

"I'd been bottling it up mentally. I'm a really private person anyway, but the counsellor at the charity was so skilful, they really brought it out of me, the therapists were fantastic," he said.

Ronnie, a 58-year-old father of five, was seconded from Sheppey to Maidstone where he is now a crew manager. "I'm still in service, an active member. If it wasn't for the charity who knows where I'd be now without their help."

Rachel Sutherland, a 52-year-old crew commander at Grantown and Spey, in the Scottish Highlands, was off work for nine months after radiotherapy treatment for breast cancer induced a frozen shoulder. Clinicians she might have to consider never being able



Crew Manager Ron Selfe and wife Rebecca



Ron Selfe prior to his diagnosis. He is still in service today



Harcombe House



Jubilee House

"Who knows where I'd be without them"



Naomi Purvis was off work injured for six weeks until she contacted the charity and was helped to a full recovery

to return to work. She says a week of physical therapy exercises at the charity's Jubilee House in Penrith, Cumbria "took me from living with very limited mobility to be able to swim in a couple of days".

The FBU and the Fire Fighters Charity have not always enjoyed a connected relationship. But now a "mutually beneficial relationship" is on the horizon, with particular regard to the mental health of union members and raising awareness of the charity's specific services to members.

Steve Wright, Fire Brigades Union general secretary, said: "The appointment of a new chief executive at the Fire Fighters Charity has seen greater engagement and a willingness to reach out to the FBU, in a way that hadn't happened previously.

"When the charity asked to meet we were more than willing to engage with them. Our officials tell us every day how important the charity is to the rehabilitation of FBU members and our Executive Council has agreed to build the relationship which we hope will benefit our members across the UK."

Fighting for equality as biased AI spreads a new wave of misogyny

A report on the FBU delegation to TUC Women's Conference 2026

A pushback against the insidious creep of misogyny in artificial intelligence was led by Fire Brigades Union delegates to the TUC women's conference. Sexualisation, discrimination and misrepresentation in references to women in mainstream AI systems is increasingly recognised as a major problem caused by innate bias among the world's mainly male community of programmers.

Online spaces perpetuate societal inequalities because creators build their own prejudice into them, often unaware they are doing so, meaning inbuilt protections against potentially harmful content are non-existent.

Katie Holloway, representing the National Women's Committee of the FBU, told the Bournemouth conference in March:

"Artificial intelligence does not emerge from thin air. It is designed, trained and deployed within a society that is already shaped by inequality. When systems are built on biased data, in male-dominated industries, without diverse voices at the table, they do not magically produce fairness. They produce the inequalities they are fed.

"If misogyny exists in the real world, it will be reflected – and often amplified – in the digital one. Bias in, bias out."

She was moving a motion from the FBU NWC, which was represented at the conference by colleague delegates Robyn Richardson, Jo Trafford, Philippa Smith and Leoni Munslow.

The motion, which was overwhelmingly endorsed by the conference, called on the TUC to campaign for regulation and transparency in AI and to work with union affiliates to raise awareness of digital misogyny and its impact.

It also demanded ethical standards



The FBU's delegation (l-r): Jo Trafford, Robyn Richardson, Katie Holloway, Leoni Munslow and Philippa Smith

in AI development that promote equality and protect women's rights.

"Equality must be built in from the start, not retrofitted after harm has been done," said Holloway. "The future is being coded now. Let's make sure equality is written into it."

PAY EQUALITY FOR CONTROL

Conference also supported an FBU motion calling for proper pay and staffing levels, as well as equal recognition for women in emergency control rooms.

Moved by NWC delegate Robyn Richardson, it underlined the message that adequately staffed control rooms

are essential to public safety. She told the conference: "Control room staff are the first point of contact in someone's worst moment.

"Yet too often we ask these professionals to do critical work without proper staff levels. We treat resilience as a substitute for resourcing.

"We must confront an uncomfortable truth – the control room workforce is predominantly women. Historically, that work has not always been valued, or paid, on a level equal to other operational roles.

"We call for pay equality for the women in our control rooms. That is not special treatment. That is justice. Equal pay for work of equal value."



Meet the rep

Hayleigh Marks Talabis, East Midlands
Control rep and political organiser

Why did you want to become a rep?

I have always been politically aware and active so becoming a rep seemed natural to me.

What are the main issues the union faces in your region?

Resourcing. We are running on minimum crewing within fire control and on the appliances after years of austerity. There is nothing left to cut and our service is in dire need of investment.

How have the cuts made the role of control operator more difficult?

The types of calls we take have changed over the years. We experience far more spate condition events like flooding and wildfires with lower numbers on the fire control watches to handle that level of incidents. The health and wellbeing of the control room staff is suffering.

What advice would you give to anyone thinking of becoming a fire control operator?

Have patience. It is not a job you learn overnight and we never stop learning. There is so much to our role – it takes dedication and hard work, but it is all worth it.

What's been the most stand out experience in your time in the FBU?

Being involved in the 'Stop The Rot, Remove the Mold' campaign in Northamptonshire. I will always be extremely proud of how we organised and motivated our membership during that campaign. In every section, in control and on all stations: we came together and organised and we won. Following that campaign, we have new members and new reps.

Who are your trade union heroes?

Margaret Bondfield, the first female chair of the TUC general council and first female MP for Northampton in the 1920s.

How important is pay reform for firefighters?

This is a once in a generation chance to change all our pay for the better. Control staff are still behind our firefighters on the appliances when it comes to pay, yet we give the same dedication to our careers, carry the trauma of the same incidents with us and sacrifice the same time with our families. It's time to close that gap.



What's new?

PFAS-free PPE

Dangerous per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) have become a growing focus across the fire sector, and not just in foam. In the UK, PFAS are also present in elements of structural firefighting PPE, valued for their water and oil repellency, and their role in keeping contaminants from penetrating protective layers.

But as awareness of potential long-term health impacts increases, so too do the questions. The union has rightly pushed for the removal of PFAS from firefighting foams, recognising the environmental and occupational risks. The conversation is now turning to PPE – yet here, the issue becomes more complex.

Emerging alternatives to PFAS-treated materials are being explored, but questions remain about whether they can provide the same level of protection against heat, flame, and chemical exposure. Internationally, some unions and fire services have begun trialling PFAS-free PPE, while continuing to assess durability and safety performance over time.

So where does that leave us? As a union, our priority is clear: the safety of our members, both on the incident ground and in the years that follow. That means rigorously questioning current materials, properly evaluating alternatives, and ensuring no firefighter is exposed to unnecessary risk. This is not a settled debate – but it is one we, the union, must lead, openly and collectively.



PFAS is best-known for its use in foam, but it has also been used in fire PPE



President's dispatch

Enough is enough: Cuts cost lives, says FBU president **Ian Murray**

Massive congratulations to Oxfordshire FBU members who responded magnificently in their consultative ballot to determine whether they were willing to take industrial action to oppose the cuts being proposed by the service. On a 71% turn out, a whopping 94% of FBU members voted Yes: they are prepared to fight to defend fire cover.

The ball is now firmly in Oxfordshire Fire & Rescue Service's hands: they can choose to listen to their firefighters, who oppose the cuts being proposed that are not only dangerous to their health and safety but pose a massive risk to the communities that they serve, or they can ignore the voices of those that know best and walk headlong into an industrial dispute.

After fourteen years of cuts, the fire service is in dire need of investment, we need more resources and more firefighters, not less. Fire calls are up, extreme weather events increasing, there is no slack in the system. Firefighters have said enough is enough, these cuts are dangerous.

Oxfordshire members will have the full support of the national union and firefighters across the UK in their fight, as will firefighters in Buckinghamshire and Dorset & Wiltshire who are also facing cuts.

UNION EDUCATION

FBU education courses coming up

Introductory Branch Officials

10–12 June, Cambridge

17–19 June, North West England

You will be trained in the essential tasks associated with branch officials' roles, learn where to get help and advice, and ensure you have the resources you need to support members in your branch and build a strong union group.

Disability & Neurodiversity in the Workplace

30 June–2 July

Coventry

This course has been designed to give reps the skills, knowledge, and confidence to represent and advocate for disabled and neurodivergent members, so that physical or neurological difference is never a barrier to a long, successful, and safe career.

■ To apply to attend, go to:
fbu.org.uk/education-contacts

PODCAST

Listen to the latest episode of the FBU podcast, 'Cuts Kill', by scanning the QR code.



MEMORIAL



The minute's silence for Jennie Logan and Martyn Sadler at FBU conference

A day to remember fallen firefighters

Close to a year since the deaths of firefighters Jennie Logan and Martyn Sadler in the Bicester fire in Oxfordshire, the international day of remembrance takes place on Sunday 4th May.

Firefighters on or off duty and retired are urged to mark the event with a minute's silence at stations or other workplaces.

■ See page 5 for more information

SAFETY

Safety inspections

All Fire and Rescue workplaces face inspection from the Health and Safety Executive from July. FBU reps will be invited to attend the inspections. National officer Adam Taylor is to write to all H&S reps with details.



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Wright on the Road

■ **4 Mar** – Oxfordshire station visits to discuss the consultative ballot (see page 4)

■ **10 Mar** – Represented the union at Local Government Association Fire Conference

■ **14 Mar** – Attended the memorial lecture for miners David Jones and Joe Green, organised by the NUM

■ **15 Mar** – Supported the London St Patrick's day event

■ **18 Mar** – Trade Union and Labour Party Liaison Organisation (TULO) meeting with the prime minister

■ **25 Mar** – Opened branch officials' course in Durham

■ **27 Mar** – Visits in Dorset and Wiltshire (see page 7)

■ **28 Mar** – Marched with FBU members on the Together Alliance demonstration against the far right (see page 6)



Steve Wright marches with the FBU contingent on the Together Alliance demonstration

Pay for your own flags, '30p Lee'

Station Cat on how Reform are spending your council tax

With local government elections due on April 7, your cat thought she'd take a look at how Reform-controlled councils are getting on with Reform UK's "patriotic flags" policy.

Cash-strapped Nottinghamshire Council, which has already broken an election pledge with a 3.99% hike in council tax, is spending £75,000 to hang 164 union jack flags around the county.

Chief cheerleader for the flags is Lee Anderson, MP for Ashfield and Reform chief whip, who told the county's ratepayers that the flags won't cost them a penny. They are all going to be sponsored by local businesses, he promised.

So how much has been raised so far, after four months? It took a Freedom of Information request from a resident to come up with the exact figure. Which is, er, nothing at all. Not a single local business has offered to put in a penny. Nottinghamshire ratepayers will almost certainly have to foot the whole bill.

It's not the first time Mr Anderson has been caught being economical with the truth. During the 2019 election he asked



a friend to pose as an anti-Labour swing voter on the doorstep for the TV cameras. Asked on BBC Radio Nottingham if that was dishonest, he asked the reporter 10 times if she had ever lied.

Conservative county councillor Mike Adams likes to see union jacks: "I have one outside my house, but it should stay as donations. People have been doing this out of their own pockets. Why should a struggling family be contributing from their council tax?"

Unabashed, Mr Anderson seems quite happy for ratepayers to pick up the bill. Which is odd, given that he's a kind of self-appointed scourge of waste in the public sector. Asked about low pay on BBC Radio Nottingham, he said: "I will challenge you right now to find a firefighter or a nurse in Ashfield that's using a food bank." Low-paid families, he says, could make meals from scratch "for about 30 pence a day."

Not that you are likely to catch Mr Anderson preparing a 30 pence meal. He's thought to be worth about £5 million, a lot of it from the public purse.

Here's a thought: Why doesn't Mr Anderson pay for the flags himself? £75,000 would be small change to him.



"The poor thing's been stuck in that nest for hours without so much as a worm..."

25-year badges



Peter Murphy (centre), Orpington blue watch, receives his 25-year badge from station officer Pressney and station rep Karimi with colleagues around



Martin Hill, Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire, receives his 25-year badge from brigade organiser Darren Barrett, with colleagues



Jim Wilson (r), Parkway blue, South Yorkshire, receives his 25-year badge from brigade organiser Alex Wilson (l) with members of Parkway



Victor 'Vaz' Vasquez-Martinez (r), Rivelin Red, South Yorkshire, receives his 25-year badge from Rivelin branch secretary Jamie Cheetham, with members of Rivelin branch



Nick Croudace (r), red watch, Watford, Hertfordshire receives his 25-year badge from brigade secretary Rob Fortune



Rachel Tester (r), Berkshire fire control, receives her 25-year badge from Berkshire brigade organiser Sam Underwood



Colin Watts, blue watch Orpington, receives his 25-year badge from station rep Kayvan Karimi



Paul Wells, Grays, Essex red watch receives his 25-year badge from brigade organiser Mark Twin with red watch colleagues



Ricky Sawdon receives his 25-year badge from branch chair Dom Waas, alongside regional secretary Mark Chapman and colleagues from St Mary's, Hampshire and Isle of Wight



Kevin Lay (r), watch manager, operations, service HQ, receives his 25-year badge from Matt Edwards, brigade organiser, Essex FBU



Mark Rowlands (l), Bala on-call, North Wales, receives his 25-year badge from brigade secretary Rebekah Uden



Neil Massey (centre), Ramsbottom, Greater Manchester receives his 25-year badge from branch secretary Lee Burns with colleagues Nicola, Adam and Ian



Dean Reynolds, Yeovil green watch, Devon & Somerset, receives his 25-year badge from brigade secretary Chris Grantham



Christopher Hedgcock (r) receives his 25-year badge from west area chair Ross Pollock



Andrew Forster (centre), watch manager, receives his 25-year badge from brigade organiser Sam Underwood (l) and brigade secretary Steve Collins (r)



Donna Coombes (l), NAO Bedford, Bedfordshire, receives her 25-year badge from Bedfordshire brigade organiser Darren Barrett, surrounded by colleagues



Alistair McKay (l), red watch, Sighthill fire station receives his 25-year badge from branch secretary Mohammed Mediouni (r) as colleagues look on



Helen Christmas (l), borough commander for Westminster, receives her 25-year badge from officers' branch secretary Peter Johnson with friends and colleagues watching on



Neil Dickenson (r), borough commander for Bexley, receives his 25-year badge from officers' branch secretary Peter Johnson with friends and colleagues watching on



John Holt (r), borough commander for Lambeth, receives his 25-year badge from officers' branch secretary Peter Johnson with friends and colleagues watching on



Andy Lewington (r), station commander for Finchley and Barnet, receives his 25-year badge from officers' branch secretary Peter Johnson with friends and colleagues watching on



Chris Clark (centre left), red watch Cheadle, Greater Manchester, receives his 25-year badge from brigade organiser Matt Fryer alongside members of the watch



Danny Innes (l), white watch Norbury, receives his 25-year badge from London SE area sec Martin Thompson, with Norbury and Croydon colleagues



Gordon Cairns (r), group commander, receives his 25-year badge from Chris Smart, West Area 5th official



Ant Bearder receives his 25-year badge from West Yorkshire brigade chair Jim Davies



Neil Hopkins, Berkshire (Learning & Development Branch), receives his 25-year badge from brigade organiser Sam Underwood



Steve and Jennifer Bussell (holding certificates) receive their 25-year badges from brigade secretary Chris Grantham, joined by green watch Taunton, Devon & Somerset



Matt Lingard (r), Godstone red watch, receives his 25-year badge from branch rep Tom Hirst with colleagues



Graham (Lenny) George receives his 25-year badge from brigade secretary Mark Harriss, with colleagues from white watch Huntingdon



Steve Conway, Cambridgeshire Training Centre Team, receives his 25-year badge from brigade secretary Mark Harriss, alongside colleagues



Richie Carr (r), Hartlepool red watch, Cleveland, receives his 25-year badge from Glenn Watson, Hartlepool branch secretary



Sarah Smith (r), Cannock Station Manager, receives her 25-year badge from Staffordshire brigade organiser Craig Elson alongside blue watch colleagues



Stuart Higson (r), Chorley, Lancashire, receives his 25-year badge from brigade secretary Kev Wilkie, with colleagues



Dom O'Hanlon (r), Chorley, Lancashire, receives his 25-year badge from brigade secretary Kev Wilkie, with colleagues

40-year badges



Paul 'Evo' Evans (centre), former wholetime & long serving RDS firefighter receives his 40-year badge from Staffordshire brigade organiser Craig Elson, surrounded by his RDS colleagues at Uttoxeter fire station



Phil Harries (centre), receives his 40-year badge from Gareth Tovey, EC member for Wales (left) and Lloyd Price, South Wales brigade chair (right)



Ann Sharp (l), Derbyshire & Nottinghamshire fire control, receives her 40-year badge from Chris Tapp, Derbyshire brigade secretary

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Change of address or next of kin

Advise your brigade organiser of any change of address and head office of changes to next of kin or nominations for benefits.

FBU FREEPHONE LEGAL ADVICE LINE

England, Wales and N Ireland

0800 100 6061

Scotland 0800 089 1331

The line provides advice for personal injury, family law, wills, conveyancing, personal finance and consumer issues. For disciplinary and employment-related queries contact your local FBU representative.



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