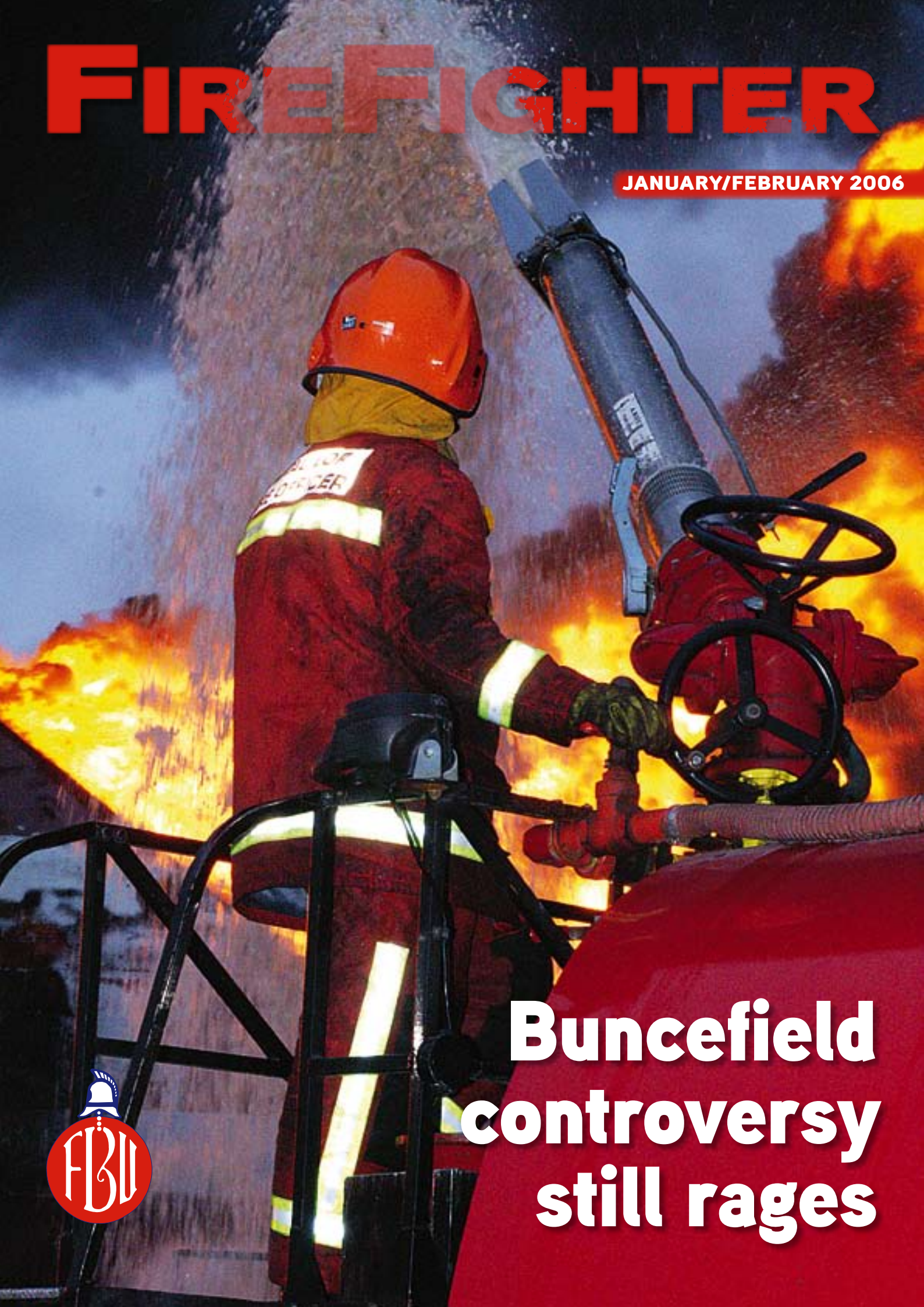


FIREFIGHTER

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2006



**Buncefield
controversy
still rages**



Time to stop the cuts to

THIS IS the first issue of *Firefighter* for 2006. I would therefore like to take the opportunity to send best wishes for the forthcoming year to all members of the FBU and to your families and friends.

December 2005 saw the huge fire at the Buncefield fuel depot. Our members responded magnificently as they always do. Members in Hertfordshire were supported by teams from many brigades across the country. All those who attended worked with dedication, professionalism and determination. Their efforts went above and beyond the call of duty and the whole of the fire service and the public are rightly proud of them.

The Buncefield incident will be the debated and discussed for a considerable time. I have already spoken to many of our members who were involved. Local officials will be continuing this process so that lessons are learned and the concerns of FBU members who attended are raised.

Of course the outstanding effort of firefighters at Buncefield comes as no surprise to me or to other members of the FBU. I know that firefighters perform in such a manner and with such professionalism, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. For a considerable time we have raised concerns that the successes of the UK fire service are not being publicised by fire service politicians or by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

In October we released statistics on rescues by the fire service



It is a shame that those politicians able to make decisions about the future of the service seem to want to ignore the day-to-day successes of the service, says Matt Wrack

(see *Firefighter*, October 2005). These showed for 2003 that 3,868 people had been rescued alive from dwelling fires in England – a rise of 42% in a decade. These figures are part of a remarkable story of success for the fire service. They are a tribute to every single man and woman who works in the UK fire service. They are the facts that should be shouted from the rooftops by fire authorities and by government ministers. Yet we had to discover these figures by questions being asked in parliament.

Remember, these figures were only for England and only for rescues from fires in the home. They therefore do not take into account the other areas of emergency intervention which the service carries out, such as road traffic accidents and so on. Unfortunately it appears that these figures are deliberately not reported so as to undermine the intervention role of the service and thereby justify cuts to the service.

Of course, events like the explosion and fire at Buncefield simply cannot be ignored but it is a shame that those politicians able to make decisions about the future of the service seem to want to ignore the day-to-day successes of the service. It is also a great shame that at the same time as firefighters are praised for doing such a fine job the attempts to make cuts in the service continue.

Many fire authorities, including Hertfordshire, are introducing measures which will lead to a reduction in the level of service provided, mainly by cutting jobs. It

our service

is simply not acceptable to praise firefighters in one breath and make cuts to the service they provide with the next. It is surely time to stop the financially driven attacks on our service.

Hertfordshire's emergency fire control co-ordinated and managed a response which was not regional but national. It was ably assisted by neighbouring brigades. The control system did not collapse, it did not buckle, but showed how truly resilient it is and how truly professional those who work in the control are. Hertfordshire's control did work which would have been difficult or near impossible to organise from the proposed remote centre in Cambridgeshire. It is a shame that there was no praise from ministers for the work of emergency fire controls.

Pensions – legalised robbery

The threat to our pensions remains very much alive. FBU officials have attended a number of very detailed meetings of the Firefighters Pensions Committee but unfortunately there have been no concessions made there on the major issues facing us.

The threat to pensions is a threat to every single member of the current schemes, whether the Firefighters Pension Scheme (FPS) or the Local Government Pension scheme (LGPS). This threat will affect your pension rights in a number of ways. The most important proposed changes would alter the ill-health retirement provisions currently available; alter the arrangements for retirement following injury at work;

The government is trying to take away the pension rights which were explained to you when you joined the fire service

and alter the age at which members can retire.

These changes are proposed for existing members and they are therefore threats to all FBU members. In addition, there a whole host of changes facing new entrants through the introduction of a new scheme. At recent meetings throughout the UK members have expressed anger that a pension scheme can be altered after someone has joined it and been paying into it for some time. Effectively this is a form of legalised robbery. The government is trying to take away the pension rights which were explained to you when you joined the Fire Service.

Our union policy on this instructs the Executive Council to recall the union conference if detrimental changes are proposed. We now appear to have reached that stage. Conference will meet and discuss the campaign to defend pensions. That will inevitably mean considering a call for industrial action. It is therefore vital that every single branch meets to discuss the issues facing us.

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COVER PICTURE: MIKE SEAMAN/MSI PHOTOGRAPHY

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Retained firefighters complete a successful pilot scheme

Norfolk FBU gears up to oppose cuts

THE FBU has warned that lives could be put at risk if plans to cut Norfolk firefighter posts are given the go ahead.

Proposals to cut 32 retained fire officer posts and lose four engines from the county's already stretched service will have "grave consequences", the Union said.

The possible cuts have been suggested as a step towards resolving an apparent multi-million pound shortfall in funding for the county which could also see the loss of hundreds of civil service jobs and a cut in other public services.

Neil Day, brigade secretary for the FBU, said there were grave concerns for the future of fire services. "If there are any job losses or cuts we would oppose

it," he said. "We have never been that well-funded and are short on staff as it is so we could not let this go ahead.

"There are grave concerns that if cuts are made now it could go on year after year and the consequences would be horrendous.

"We cannot afford to do this here. There are potential risks in this area. I do not wish to scare-monger but we have a lot of factories and oil refineries. There is a huge difference between having two fire engines attending on scene or one and more staff means attending a fire earlier, which means a difference between a small blaze and a major fire.

"In these situations lives could be at risk. If we ever had a situation like the oil refinery

blowing up in Hemel Hempstead, we would be in a lot of trouble and we need all resources on hand – so we can respond in an emergency."

In Norfolk there are 400 firefighters, 208 whole time and 192 retained, based in five whole time stations and 35 retained stations.

There are two main stations in Norwich, one in Kings Lynn, Yarmouth and Thetford.

Mr Day added: "We are hoping these changes do not have to be made but we will oppose things that affect our firefighters and the people we look after."

The leader of the county council, Alison King, has set out the scale of cuts in services and extra charges needed to peg council tax rises at either 3, 4 or 5 per cent next year.

CLEVELAND FIREFIGHTERS CAMPAIGN AGAINST CUTS

THE FBU in Cleveland is launching a public campaign against proposals to cut the local fire service.

Cleveland Fire Authority's Year 3 Integrated Risk Management Plan proposes to cut 66 frontline operational firefighters by removing a fire appliance, reducing crewing levels on appliances, removing an HP, closing Middlesbrough Marine Fire Station from midnight until noon and removing the operational response ability from Headline Fire Station, which is crewed by retained firefighters.

The union is distributing thousands of leaflets to local residents calling on them to write to fire authority chief, councillor Robbie Payne, asking him to shelve the plans.

The FBU has submitted a preliminary response to the IRMP and a round of well-attended branch meetings held in recent weeks have shown a determination by members to resist these damaging cuts.

"Cleveland fire authority want to make major changes to our community fire and rescue service," said brigade secretary Steve Watson. "They will harm our ability to respond to the full range of emergency 999 calls.

"We support more fire prevention work, but this must not be at the expense of our 999 emergency response."

"We have a responsibility to our members and the local community to fight these proposals to downsize the operational response capabilities of Cleveland fire and rescue service.



Striking firefighters outside West Midlands Fire Service headquarters in Birmingham

West Midlands dispute is settled

THE dispute over new shift patterns in the West Midlands has been settled after FBU members voted in a ballot to accept a new offer by employers.

The offer came after solid support among wholetime and retained firefighters for a series

of three-hour strikes across the brigade.

Two-thirds of those who took part in the consultative ballot approved the new offer put to the FBU in November.

The offer includes compensatory additional annual leave, reim-

bursement of additional travelling costs, and an enhancement of 12.5% on firefighters' hourly rate when working a late split shift pattern.

■ Firefighters in Lancashire will be balloted over possible strike action over plans to cut crew numbers on some fire engines.



Dunfermline (above) and Rosyth (below) fire stations are earmarked for closure in moves that could lead to 60 job losses

THE FBU has attacked proposals to close the fire stations in Dunfermline and Rosyth.

Local firefighters are opposing moves to replace the two stations with a new one, possibly at Pitreavie, which would involve slashing the number of appliances in the area from five to two. That, they say, could endanger lives and lead to 60 job losses.

Alex Kinnear, FBU Fife brigade chair, said: "It appears the two stations will be amalgamated into one with a reduction in appliances and, if the changes go through, you could be looking at the loss of 60 firefighters' jobs.

"Our concern is that you'll then see increased attendance times to get to places like the West Fife villages.

"It will affect our ability to respond and obviously with fires, time does matter. The longer it takes to get there the more at risk people are."

At present, there are three pumping appliances, an aerial ladder engine and an emergency

Union steps up criticism of Fife closures

support unit between the two sites and there are suggestions that just two pumping appliances will be kept.

The proposals are part of the fire service's Integrated risk management plan but the union fears the changes are more to do with saving cash than improvements. Mr Kinnear said: "This integrated risk management plan should be about reducing the risk to the public, not about cutting jobs to save money. I'm afraid that's what is at the back of this."

Fife firemaster Daniel

O'Donnell admitted: "There is potential for the number of fire appliances to reduce but it won't be from five to two as they've suggested. Some of that may be absorbed with redeployment but I must stress there will be no compulsory redundancies."

"The figures we've got for the past seven years also looks at two simultaneous incidents and crews out training and we'll have adequate resources to cover all those contingencies."

One Dunfermline fire fighter disagreed and told local reporters that any cuts would make it much harder to cover an area which stretched from North Queensferry to Kelty and from Kincardine to Crossgates.

"You may well ask what the point of these cutbacks would be. The only answer I can come up with is saving money, although you and I won't see any reduction in our council tax as a result," said the fire fighter, who asked not to be named.



New retained representative

STRATHCLYDE firefighter "Tam" Mitchell has been elected Executive Council member for retained firefighters in the FBU with a determination to further push retained issues with the union and the fire service.

Tam joined the fire service in 1988 and has served at Carluke fire station in Strathclyde ever since. He has held numerous positions in the Union from branch rep to brigade retained rep and then retained rep for Scotland (region 1).

"I'd like to thank members for casting their votes in the election for Executive Council member, retained.

I intend to work hard to promote retained participation and representation at all levels in the Union and ensure the many pressing issues facing firefighters working the retained duty system in the UK gain the support and profile they deserve," said Tam.

SOLIDARITY WITH NOTTS MEMBERS FIGHTING CO-RESPONDING

Nott members are paying a minimum voluntary levy of £5 per week into a Hardship Fund to assist the 34 members at Retford. Send your donation to:

Details of the fund are:
BANK: Nat West Bank PLC
ACCOUNT NAME:
Notts Hardship Fund
ACCOUNT NO: 68013868
SORT CODE: 55 - 61 - 17



Stornoway 8 win sackings appeal



FBU appealed to Justice Minister Cathy Jamieson MSP

THE Scottish Executive has agreed to an appeal from eight members of the Stornoway retained unit.

The Scottish ministers have overturned a decision made by the Chief Fire Officer, Brian Murray and an appeal heard in June by five Highlands and Islands Fire Board members. The FBU co-ordinated the appeal on behalf of the eight sacked members to Scotland's Minister of Justice, MSP Cathy Jamieson, after the June appeal was lost.

Tam Mitchell, the newly elected Executive Council Member for

retained members, and formerly retained rep for Scotland said:

"This is a tremendous decision by the Minister, these lads have over 160 years experience between them, it will be a great boost to the community to have them back providing the service they love.

"It has been an absolute disgrace that these men have had to suffer for over a year the stigma of being accused of turning their backs of the community of Stornoway.

This has been a good day for all retained firefighters in Scotland

and we welcome their reinstatement. Last year the eight received their P45 in the Christmas post – this year's post has been kinder."

This appeal to the Minister of Justice was the last under the Fire Service Regulations (Discipline) (Scotland) 1985, which were abolished this year by the Executive. These have been replaced with standard ACAS procedures which will mean that in the future these type of cases will be heard by employment tribunals or courts, at an expense to the taxpayer and the individual.

Union fury over fire authority's 'bizarre' claims on jobs freeze

THE FBU has slammed Merseyside Fire and Civil Defence Authority for considering a recruitment freeze and blaming the move on the £200,000 bill it built up fighting the legitimate compensation claim by a firefighter who suffered a serious injury as a result of his employer's negligence.

FBU member Gavin Bassie suffered a "catastrophic" injury that resulted in a permanent disability and led to his medical retirement. He been awarded £100,000 in compensation in a legal case that brought an additional £100,000 costs as the fire authority fought all the way to the appeal court and then lost.

The authority is considering three choices – to freeze recruitment, defer or cancel recruitment of fire safety advocates or cancel purchasing a new fire engine. The moves follow a decision to stop all physical training.

In a message to staff, chief fire officer Tony McGuirk called the legal judgement in favour of Mr Bassie "bizarre", the court case "frivolous" and blamed "compensation culture" for the costs the fire authority has sustained. He also incorrectly stated that Mr Bassie – who suffered a catastrophic knee injury in a fall on a dusty floor –

was awarded £200,000. Adding to a catalogue of misinformation and insult the chief fire officer sent a further message to staff to apparently correct his earlier errors but introduced new ones. He stated that in contesting the claim "the mere act of defence has saved £200,000" and that "the alternative to defending the case was to pay the £400k".

Merseyside brigade secretary Les Skarratts said: "No offers whatsoever were put forward by the Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service to settle the claim and they made it clear that they were going to fight it all the way, even to the Court of Appeal where they engaged a QC. This is what massively increased the costs. Mr Bassie has gone on record to say that he would have settled his claim earlier. A reasonable approach would have saved a lot of money.

"Where employers have been negligent and their employees have been injured as a result, they should hold their hands up and pay compensation where it is deserved. Far too many firefighters are injured or even killed in the course of their duty due to the negligence of their employers."

"The failure on the part of MFRS to make provision for the

costs of the claim is remarkable. Their lawyers can surely not have advised them that their tactic to fight the case all the way was risk free and any sensible organisation makes prudent provision within its budget for such eventualities. The blame in this sorry affair is wholly with the fire authority. And yet it is now seeking to scale back training and freeze increases in resources that are badly needed to ensure public safety. It's a disgrace."

Walton MP Peter Kilfoyle said: "Surely to goodness the fire authority would have made provision. I do not believe this man's accident has led to a recruitment freeze and I will be asking MFRS for an explanation of the finances."

■ A member who was off work for several months after injuring his back while on a drill has accepted £2,200 in compensation from Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Services.

Matthew Seymour was in the fire tower at Dunstable Fire Station and was instructed to pull up a heavy drum full of foam, using a rope. The action caused him to suffer acute lower back pain. He was off work for six months following the accident, and only able to return to full duties ten months later.



Peter Kilfoyle MP: Demanding explanation



Gavin Bassie: Ready to settle earlier for less



Les Skarratts: Move is a disgrace



Cambridgeshire firefighters tackling a blaze at Peterborough Cathedral in November 2001

Cuts strike warning

CAMBRIDGESHIRE members are ready to ballot for strike action over planned cuts if negotiations fail to produce acceptable changes to fire cover.

Under the local fire authority's year 2 integrated risk management plan, 24 frontline firefighter posts out of a current total of less than 300 are faced with the axe.

"There are now insufficient numbers of firefighters in Cambridgeshire and that's because of these cuts," says Paul Clarke, Cambridgeshire brigade secretary, pointing to a recent example of when the whole of Peterborough had been left with only one appliance crewed by 4 firefighters. "These cuts are not only putting the public at greater risk,

but also the firefighters called to incidents with only four riders. The moral pressure on FBU members to undertake emergency work without having sufficiently safe numbers is immense. Who is going to take the responsibility if anything goes wrong at an incident where there are only four firefighters and a rescue needs to be made? The ODPM? The Fire Authority? No. It's going to be the person stuck at the sharp end having to make the decision whether to commit firefighters to rescue people without the correct resources in place.

"We've made clear in meetings with councillors that no detailed risk/task analysis has been carried out to justify the changes the

authority is proposing. We understand now that Service is now suggesting it didn't need one!

Politicians are also raising their concerns, including Stewart Jackson, Conservative MP for Peterborough, and seven new independent councillors, one of which member of the fire authority. They've been listening to us and their response is that IRMP plans are 'ludicrous', says Paul.

"Of course our members want a negotiated settlement but they are ready for a ballot to strike if there is no positive response from the Fire Authority," says Paul. "It really is firmly in the hands of the Fire Authority to stop that happening now"

No to Trident replacement

AT a time of cuts to the UK fire service and other public services the Government is understood to be planning to replace the Trident nuclear weapons system at a cost the British taxpayer of a colossal £ 25 billion.

A replacement will also undermine the non-proliferation treaty – at a time when the latest US doctrine foresees the use of nuclear weapons once again.

The Campaign For Nuclear Disarmament is demanding a public debate and deciding vote in Parliament on the subject of the replacing Trident.

Parliamentary CND is supporting Early Day Motion 1197 proposed by Michael Meacher MP.

■ **Encourage your MP to support this EDM. Visit www.fbu.org.uk and follow the 'Lobby Your MP' link. For more on the campaign visit: www.cnduk.org/**

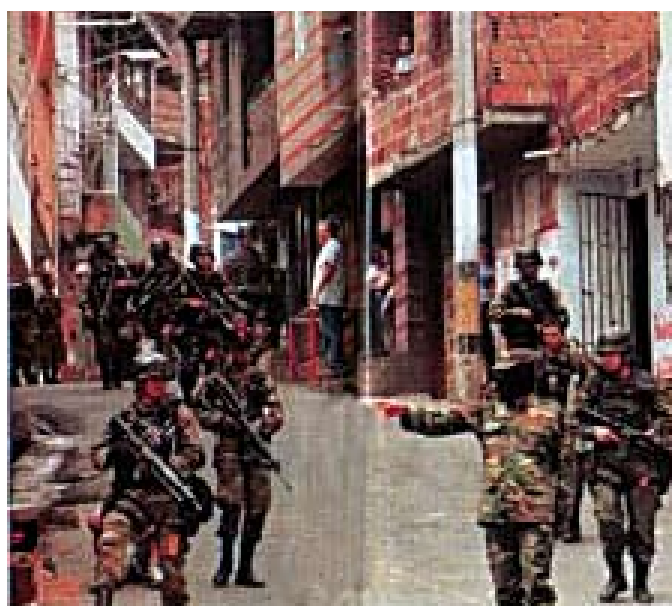
Stop UK military aid to Colombia

BEING a trade unionist is becoming more dangerous with a total of 145 people worldwide killed due to their trade union activities in 2004, 16 more than the previous year, according to the ICFTU Annual Survey of Trade Union Rights Violations.

Once again Colombia was the deadliest country for trade unionists, with 99 murders, and hundreds of death threats set against a background of systematic efforts by the government to undermine the trade union movement.

Justice for Colombia and the TUC have arranged for an Early Day Motion (EDM) to be put down in Parliament. EDM 355 calls on the UK Government to end its secret military assistance project in Colombia – assistance believed to be benefiting Colombian military units that violate human rights, including those that attack trade union members.

■ **Encourage your MP to sign. Visit www.fbu.org.uk and follow the 'Lobby Your MP' link. For more on the campaign visit: www.justiceforcolombia.org.**



A masked paramilitary leads soldiers through a poor neighbourhood of the city of Medellín. This year the army and paramilitaries have murdered over 50 trade union leaders

Fields of

One of the biggest explosions ever felt in the UK was followed by one of the biggest ever fires. *Firefighter* pieced together a first draft of what happened at Buncefield.

AT 06.02 on 11 December a massive explosion physically shook Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire, damaged property several miles away and was heard as far away as The Netherlands. Huge flames reached hundreds of feet through a still dark sky, creating the impression of a false early dawn.

It was to become one of Britain's largest fires. A miracle of timing and sheer luck meant no one died.

The Sunday morning quiet was shattered by a further series of smaller explosions. For 30 minutes the 999 public service telephone system was swamped with calls with the public finding it difficult to get as far as "fire, police or ambulance".

These calls would never have made it as far as the proposed new regional controls, even the ones meant to hold the overflow. The mobile network was also jammed.

Crews from Hemel Hempstead station – facing a cut of four firefighters – reached the scene around 06.08 and found the northern sector of the 90-acre Buncefield Oil Depot had been badly damaged.

Six fuel tanks were alight and two more were damaged. At 06.10 the officer in charge declared it a major incident and almost the entire wholetime Hertfordshire brigade which was on duty was mobilised.

Across the county hundreds of alerters were bleeping, pulling in Hertfordshire's Retained firefighters. At 06.27 crews from Bovingdon retained station – threatened with closure – arrived to the sounds of further explosions ripping through the site and setting fire to more fuel tanks.

The 41 injured were taken to a local Accident and Emergency threatened with closure by regional health barons, assisted by Herts police officers exhausted by a night dealing with those taking advantage of having too much time to drink and firefighters in a brigade threatened with major cuts and station closures.

Crews poured in including from Radlett's retained station – another threatened with closure – and before long there were nearly 100 on the fireground.

The control in Stevenage was flooded by those calls which got through the PSTN but all around, surrounding brigades as far as West Mids were holding repeat calls.

London control took calls from the public in Hampstead where the shockwave had rattled windows. One caller from Harrow had been woken up when his self-assembled wardrobe – wrecked by the shockwave – had collapsed on to his bed on top of him.

But it was Herts control which took the brunt of the calls for Buncefield. And the other emergencies didn't stop. There were calls to two house fires in St Albans, a flat fire in Stevenage and an emergency landing at Elstree airport, nearly 300 other incidents during the days of the fire.

Officers – threatened with cuts in numbers from 45 to 40 across Hertfordshire – were also under strain as they put in long hours of uninterrupted duty in command and control.

One resident who lives close to Buncefield said she initially thought the explosion was a terrorist attack. "The explosion shook the ground and we got up pulled on some clothes and walked into the street. We were just walking slowly towards the smoke, we could see it and the flames even in the dark. It was like watching a disaster movie on a giant screen with what I was watching seeming like it was from another world."

As dawn broke about 45 minutes after the initial explosion a clear blue sky was torn by a wide scar of grey smoke which darkened by the hour. The wide column of thick smoke spread south towards London, then west towards Heathrow later turning towards Essex, north east London and Kent.

By then the battle had started to stop the spread to other tanks as Herts crews set up a cooling curtain to protect other fuel tanks containing million of gallons of fuel. It was defensive firefighting. And at times desperate.

One local firefighter told us: "No one had seen a fireground like it, it was vast. We could get to within 10 yards of the smoke as the radiated heat was not that great. I had felt greater radiated heat at a barn fire."

Hertfordshire were not alone for long. The control was quickly seeking assistance from other brigades, particularly of foam stocks. Essex crews started to arrive at 07.30 with stocks of foam, firefighters and officers in support.

High volume pumps, hose-layers, lighting units started pouring in. HVPs from London, Derbyshire, Somerset, Staffordshire, Berkshire, North Yorkshire, Norfolk and GMC plus foam stocks from Kent, Hampshire, Humberside, Cheshire, Sussex, and Buckinghamshire started to arrive. Depending where they were from, they were crewed by wholetime or retained.

fire

Angus, one of the companies which manufactures foam, initially sent three tankers of foam, hose and crew, then a further 50,000 litres of foam concentrate then another 100,000 litres. Refineries and other oil depots offered supplies, Germany offered 100,000 litres, Stockholm said they had 70,000 tonnes of foam waiting to be airlifted.

Water pressure and availability at the site was also a major problem. Getting the concentrate to Herts was one thing, getting millions of gallons of steady water supply would be another.

It took time putting all the ingredients together. The water supply problem also appeared to have been resolved, although another remained: the depot was situated near essential natural underground water supplies. The risk of polluting that water was significant. At around 08.30 on the Monday, after 26 hours of defensive firefighting, there were enough stocks of foam on site – 170,000 litres – to start what was to be the first attack.

“It was difficult going and desperate at times” one Herts firefighter told us. “There’d be flare-ups all over the place but given the obvious potential it says a lot for our safety culture that there were four firefighters injured over the course of the fire, none of them serious enough to be reportable injuries.”

But the first attack ran into problems and firefighters were withdrawn by 14.30 that afternoon. The official line – which resulted in a frenzy of media speculation – was that the fire service did not know what was in tank 7.

It may well have been a simple slip on the tight rope of the media circus that gathers at these events (most fire service contacts have told *Firefighter* the FRS are very unlikely not to have known what was in the tank given they had been on site for a day and a half). Senior officers with minds fixed on how to put out a major fire would hardly be expected to concentrate on every dot, comma and syllable of a press conference.

Putting the alleged mystery of what was in the tank aside, firefighters were withdrawn for their own safety. That gave time to re-assess and re-think. Later on Monday the second wave attack started, or more accurately, separate attacks on four distinct parts of the site. It was this sustained attack which ultimately put the main part of the fire out although a break in the AFFF caused re-ignition on the Wednesday morning. This was ultimately resolved by containment and letting it burnt itself out on the Wednesday afternoon.

Four days after one of the single biggest explosions ever experienced in the UK had started one of the biggest ever fires it was out, although carefully monitored. It started as a bang, ended with a whimper but some controversy still rages.

‘THE CHANCE OF A MAJOR INCIDENT AT BUNCEFIELD IS REMOTE’

THERE’S a story doing the rounds in Hemel. One local resident was bewildered by what he thought was the strange sound of the fire and asked a local firefighter what was making it. “Oh that sound?” he said. “That’s the sound of the chickens coming home to roost.”

Controversial proposals to cut 53 frontline firefighter posts, close two stations and cut equipment at other key stations have been controversial since they were proposed several months ago. The fact that four of those frontline jobs cuts are in Hemel and both the stations threatened with closure were in the first wave of response has heightened the controversy.

Herts has a rising population being added to



by significant and dense new housing (ODPM led), plus stretches of the M25, M1, A1 and an A41 bypass which hosts regular and major accidents (and holds the British record for speeding on a public road). Buncefield is the fourth major incident in seven years, the others being horrendous rail crashes at Watford Junction, Hatfield and Potter’s Bar.

There was no specific reference to Buncefield in the second year IRMP, although there was a generic reference to major industrial risk. But somehow the new draft IRMP managed to leave out Buncefield Oil Depot, the fifth largest in the UK, a major and obvious fire risk. And senior officers had been doing the rounds telling all who would listen that Hertfordshire is a low risk county.

Senior council officials were pressed by local FBU reps only weeks before the Buncefield fire. The union expressed concern that this and other risks were simply not being addressed.

Their response: “the level of major incidents is low, and the chance of a major incident at Buncefield remote”. As far as Herts were concerned there was no problem a stance which came back to haunt them.

Herts FBU IRMP co ordinator, Derek Macleod

CONTINUED OVER PAGE

MAIN PICTURE
DAVID MANSELL/REPORTDIGITAL.CO.UK
INSET: MIKE SEAMAN/
MSI PHOTOGRAPHY



FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

said: "In some ways this demonstrates a lack of appreciation of risk management. The level of activity of an event is no yardstick to use when assessing the risk posed, the impact once it has occurred and the resource requirement it places on the Fire Service, and indeed other agencies."

All of the fire stations under threat of closure or downgrading, Radlett, Bovingdon, Royston, St.Albans, Stevenage, Hemel Hempstead and Watford were required to fight the oil depot blaze. In fact almost every Herts firefighter not on leave had been at Buncefield at one time or another – that is around 650 and with the assistance of other brigades the actual total number used may not be far short of 1,000 firefighters at one time or another.

Derek Macleod says: "All of the firefighters played a crucial role at great personal risk. All of Hertfordshire's resources will have been used, in both putting out the oil depot fire, and providing some level of fire cover in the rest of the County. Many of the additional calls received were dealt with using a minimum response, which may have led to crews working outside their normal standard procedures.

"Without the level of resources we have at present, we would have had to call in an even bigger response

**'Firefighters
from Herts
and across
the country
worked to
the point of
exhaustion
fighting this
fire. Their
efforts were
above and
beyond the
call of duty'
– Matt Wrack**

from the rest of the country. To suggest we need less firefighters now, must seem like madness."

But councillors have made clear they intend to press on with cuts. Retained firefighters at Bovingdon and Radlett were expecting their 90-day notices to arrive only days after the fire subsided telling them they are no longer required. Herts councillors have said publicly that the proposed cuts can go ahead because the fire proved they could call in resources from elsewhere when they needed them.

Following a visit to the site General secretary Matt Wrack said: "Firefighters from Hertfordshire and across the country worked to the point of exhaustion fighting this fire. Their efforts were above and beyond the call of duty and they worked in very difficult and trying conditions. The local community and people around the country are rightly proud of the huge effort made by the firefighters dealing with this fire. Of course this effort should come as no surprise to those within the service. Firefighters have always shown that they are willing to do whatever is necessary to protect their communities.

"Those helping at Buncefield knew firefighters back in their own brigades had to work tirelessly to cover for their absence. Those who assisted at Buncefield made clear to me they don't want their efforts and willingness to assist used as an excuse to cut the Hertfordshire fire service.

"Many other brigades are facing threats of significant cuts and station closures. Hertfordshire county council cannot cut their fire service on the basis there will always be others who can help. If every fire service cuts back then there will be far fewer firefighters in future to respond to major incidents. Herts fire authority and the Government need to wake up to that."

It is a point echoed by FBU National IRMP advisor Dick Pearson: "This exposes a faultline in the ODPM's approach. Without national standards of fire cover, local fire authorities decide what their resources will be based on what they 'assess' to be their local risk. They do not decide on the number of firefighters on the basis of what their contribution might be to a regional or supra-regional response to a major incident or major terrorist attacks."

"National standards at least ensured a defined baseline across the UK which ensured sufficient numbers for planning to band together and assist, while local IRMPs don't ensure anything of the sort."

The fire also justifies a closer look at ODPM Civil Resilience Division, how it organised the response of the HVPs, hose-laying pods and lighting units. These are based in brigades but still owned and controlled by ODPM. There was near universal praise at the site for the quality of the equipment provided by ODPM. But there may be lessons which can be learned if ODPM's Civil Resilience Division is prepared to learn them.

The equipment is also meant for use if there is a major New Dimension terrorist incident and an oil depot fire like this is the type of 'spectacular' Al-Qaeda is looking for. As Al-Qaeda has an established history of hitting two and three sites at the same time, is there enough of this equipment to have a reasonable chance of dealing with two significant incidents?

Another is that planning is more than just grabbing available resources and throwing them at an incident. These resources need support and back up, the personnel may be many miles from their brigades, fresh crews need to be rotated in and these need to be trained in using the new equipment.

A key question must be whether there are enough of those trained crews and what happens in the 'home' brigade when they are taken out. Buncefield suggests these are serious issues but ODPM do not want to hear they need more firefighters and equipment, they only want to hear they need less.

It's not as if the union are the only ones to raise the issue of ODPM's Civil Resilience Division's track record in these areas. Nancy Morghem the head of the CRD, which is tasked with preparing the post 9/11 response, resigned this time last year. One of her key roles was ensuring a planned and smooth response using the ODPM's superb new kit.

On her departure she wrote a poem (extracts, right) which made its way to national newspapers in which she described the Civil Resilience Division as a "sham", "a farce" riven with in-fighting and back-stabbing and the ODPM a "bureaucratic" and selfish machine" which she labelled "ODPM Hell".

Her key charge was that the project had been on-time and running smoothly until the ODPM took it away from the fire service. She felt the fire service was deliberately sidelined for no good reason and the work of the division damaged as a result.



**'This exposes
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the number of
firefighters
on the basis
of what their
contribution
might be to
a major
incident'**

ODPM RAP

*So much delivered at the start of the project,
Full steam ahead was the fireman's logic.
But "Whoa up" there, slow it down,
Doing it well seems to be causing a frown.*

*The powers that be can't stand it no more,
Control with the Fireman, yet without a flaw.
Let's pull it all back, show them who's boss,
Despite a huge financial loss.*

*Who's running the show here, no one knows?
So many times, it has come to blows.
Back stabbing and secret meetings every day,
Everyone fighting to have their say.*

*Frustration and shock at decisions made,
It's gone full circle again I am afraid.
Well done to the civil servants for reinventing the
wheel,*

*And every event made into such a big deal.
Let's hire consultants, at a huge cost,
Just tell the firemen to go get lost.*

*A whole year gone, no one says what they think,
Behaviour in here, it really does stink.*

*'Them and us' attitude all the time,
Civil Servants constantly trying to undermine,
What the fireman can do, just given a chance,
Instead red cards given, and a negative stance.*

*Raynsford, Prescott and Tony Blair
Do you even realise this project's a MARE!!!!
No, because facts are all well too hidden,
Speaking the truth is highly forbidden.*

*If the public knew, about the lack of capability,
And what could be achieved, if one could use their
ability.*

*But instead the Government not giving a Damn,
Such an important programme is just a Sham.*

*It's the responders I fear for if the day arrives,
Panic and Horror people fearing for lives.*

*But hey what will it matter, the MPs are protected,
Away from the scene, unaware so much was rejected.*

*Rejected by CRD flyers, trying to make the next grade,
At the cost of lives it seems I'm afraid.*

*Someone in here needs a reality check,
To be honest, you're a real pain in then neck!*

*Stop all the Bull, get on with the task,
Stop the in-fights and what you don't know just ask.
As I started, I will finish, I wish some well,
In this bureaucratic ODPM HELL!!*

**Mrs Nancy Morghem
ODPM Jan 2004–Dec 2004**

Was FBU right to speak out about failings of the Herts brigade IRMP?

THE union also stepped into controversy when it questioned whether Hertfordshire fire authority had equipped the local fire service to deal with the risk posed by Buncefield. The oil depot is the fifth largest in the UK and typically handles 2,800 oil tanker movements every week. In short, Buncefield created a major and obvious fire risk. In terms of risk in Hertfordshire, Buncefield stuck out like a sore thumb with a lighthouse on top. Yet it was not specifically mentioned in year 2 and 3 IRMPs.

In different circumstances Herts may have had to deal with a much smaller yet still significant oil fire. The brigades in attendance were more than a bit surprised that Herts did not have, in their view, much of a foam capability.

These views were repeatedly and forcefully passed on to the union by a number of crews in the brigades in attendance. These were not criticisms of the Herts crews but of the lack of specialist foam equipment within the brigade.

There was a heady mix among the Herts crews themselves. The service was very, very stretched even with the



HEMEL HEMPSTEAD GAZETTE

assistance of the other brigades. Some of those being run ragged trying to cope at the site and elsewhere in Herts knew their stations or those of their colleagues were earmarked for closure.

There was considerable pressure on the union to make these views known. Some at the time, especially some officers in Herts, felt it was an attack on them. It was never meant to be that and the union has had a clear-the-air meeting in Hertfordshire to make the position clear. There has been a range of comments from both union members and the public and we set out some of those below:



HEMEL HEMPSTEAD GAZETTE

I am outraged at your comments in the aftermath of the Buncefield fire. Why do you have to use this opportunity to once again to "score points" against the brigade's employers?

JG, member of the public

As someone with young children living two miles from the Buncefield fire I would just like to say that I fully support the FBU's comments. The firefighters themselves have been incredibly brave. Please continue to push for a public inquiry.

AW Herts

You guys have done a great job at Hemel Hemstead. New Years Honours list – never mind daft actors and football players picking up the gongs – Distinguished Service Crosses for you guys. As an ex submariner and steelworker I salute you.

JWC member of the public

Criticisms of the way Hertfordshire dealt with the Buncefield fire seems at best badly timed and at worst self-defeating. We would have been better saying the guys on the ground worked wonders considering the resources they had to work with. As a firefighter of some 22 years I knew what we were trying to say and all my colleagues knew what we were trying to say, but to Joe Public it came across as our union criticising its own firefighters. Saving

jobs, stations and getting as much funding as it takes to run a professional fire and rescue service is of paramount importance, but I'm afraid to say timing-wise we shot ourselves in the foot. I feel at the inevitable enquiry would have been best time to point out failures in government policies and funding.

Firefighter Bill Skinner

Just like to say what a smashing job your members have done not just over the last week in south Herts. I would like to make a suggestion: Do you think you could state the obvious in your next press release by saying the FBU is made up of firefighters and is the voice of the firefighters. People have mistaken your comments as criticising the firefighters rather than the poor management of the brigade. Keep up the good work and the public are on your side with regard to the proposed cuts !!!

EW Herts

It sounded on the news tonight as if the union was point scoring. To be honest it sounded naff.

WM West Yorkshire (FBU member)

Well done to the brave people who tackled the fire in Hemel Hempstead and to the other emergency services who supported them.

KB, member of the public

As the
Union
puts in its
submission
to the
ODPM
select
committee
inquiry,
Firefighter
puts Fire
Minister Jim
Fitzpatrick
straight on
the costs of
the regional
controls
project



FBU members campaigning in Devon earlier this year

NO Minister

(We're not wrong!)

FIRE MINISTER Jim Fitzpatrick took exception to a recent article in *Firefighter* and wrote to the Union to put us right.

"The October edition of *Firefighter* magazine mistakenly quotes the cost of the FiReControl project as £2 billion. As I have pointed out, this is an error. I have never used that figure. The cost of the project has not doubled."

He then set the record straight on an earlier increase in project costs:

"The FBU...has also claimed that the project cost has climbed from £754 million to £988 million in recent months. This is not true. In fact, the £988 and £754 figures are both correct. They refer to different ways of looking at the project and control service costs."

"The £754 million figure represents what is known as discounted cash flow. In other words, this is what you would need to put in the bank today to pay for the project and for providing control services, allowing for when you would need to spend the money and the interest you would earn in the

meantime."

That's all clear then! Or maybe not. Mr Fitzpatrick quotes the "project costs" the ODPM put on the books. That excludes huge amount of other work which is "off the books" and not counted. ODPM

estimates this work to account for between 30% and 70% of that done by existing controls. It also excludes the amount being spent on Firelink, essential to the regional controls.

As Jim Fitzpatrick said in a written parliamentary answer on 27 October 2005: "Mott MacDonald calculated that over a 10 year period, at 2004 prices, the regional control option would deliver a total net saving of £155 million. It estimated project costs at £100 million, comprising project management costs, technology costs, accommodation costs and redundancy."

So Mr Fitzpatrick is correct, the costs haven't doubled. They have in fact increased TEN times!



RECALL CONFERENCE WILL DISCUSS

THE Union is preparing the ground for a recall conference early this year to discuss industrial action over pension reforms. The decision comes as months of negotiations with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister have so far failed to produce any positive changes to the proposed changes to the Firefighters Pensions Scheme (FPS).

The Union will seek to co-ordinate any action over the detrimental changes with unions representing workers in the Local Government Pension Scheme who include control staff.

In annual conference decisions over a number of years members have made it clear that they are prepared to take industrial action to defend their pensions. The FBU's annual conference in 2005 agreed that: "if there are detrimental changes proposed at the outcome of negotiations conference will be recalled."

An Executive Council meeting in December debated the current state of the negotiations and decided that this stage is near being reached.

**'We are fast
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have made'**

A further meeting in January will make a final decision on this. The Conference will consider all options, including launching strikes.

In a last ditch bid to avoid such a possibility, the Union will seek an urgent meeting with ministers to make clear the FBU's concern at the way negotiations are being conducted and our anger at the fact that members of the FPS are being treated worse than members of other schemes, including the police. It will also do what it can to bring pressure to bear on the government.

The Union will, meanwhile, continue to engage with the membership on the issue of pensions with a further round of regional meetings starting in early January, by boosting the flow of campaigning material to members and by seeking to highlight its case more widely.

General Secretary Matt Wrack said: "Negotiations with the government have so far failed to deliver a satisfactory outcome. We will continue to negotiate and use all channels open to

Turner report 'progressive' says TUC



Adair Turner addresses the 2005 TUC while general secretary Brendan Barber and then pensions minister Alan Johnson (right) listen carefully

As Lord
Turner
unveils
his report,
Firefighter
reports on
the reactions

THE REPORT of Lord Turner's pensions commission was published on 30 November. TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber said it was "bold and hard headed". It set politicians and all involved in the pensions debate the challenge of creating the consensus needed to implement its radical agenda.

"Of course in such a detailed report there are proposals that we do not like, and other areas where we would have liked it to go further," he said. "We remain opposed to any proposal to increase the state pension age that would make manual workers and the poor worse off.

"But the clear majority of the conclusions are undoubtedly progressive, and meet the tests we set in advance.

There were no pain-free solutions, said Brendan Barber. "Employers, employees and the state must all play their part".

The great danger was that a combination of vested interests and opposition politicians would "kick the report into the long grass" he also said.

On **pension age and retirement**: "We remain opposed to any proposal to increase the state pension age that

would make manual workers and the poor worse off. We will be studying the option to allow 65-year-olds to claim means-tested pension credit. We welcome the proposal to scrap a formal default retirement age. But if people are to work longer then we will need major changes in employer attitudes, and new routes through part-time and changed job roles to a flexible retirement.

On **basic state pensions**: "The commission's proposal for linking the basic state pension to earnings once again is extremely welcome. Making the basic state pension a sure foundation for all is the right approach. While we would want to see an increase in the basic state pension to pensions credit level, we recognise that a reformed state second pension will do this for many people. Making a universal pension based on residence retrospective was always tricky. Giving a higher state pension as of right to the over-75s is an effective way to help many of the poorest women pensioners and those put off means-tested benefits."

On the **state second pension**: "The commission is right to keep the state second pension. the argument to scrap

INDUSTRIAL ACTION ON PENSIONS

us to press our case. But we are fast losing faith that the government has any other plans than to press ahead with its proposals, despite the serious objections we have made.

"The proposals will have a negative impact on existing members pensions, particularly on ill-health benefits and the increase in the retirement age. The proposed changes to injury compensation will be detrimental to both wholetime and retained firefighters.

"The changes are ill-thought out out, unfair and unacceptable. They are based on bogus claims that the existing scheme is generous. Existing members have paid substantial contributions towards their future retirement income. The pension is an integral part of the contract between fire service employers and employees. Now the government is proposing to rip this up.

"The fact is that when our pension contributions were exceeding the pension payments going out, they had no complaint. It is opportunism for

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generous'**

them to demand changes now there is a shortfall and they have to dip into their pockets. All of the pension contributions paid by firefighters and notional contributions from employers had been spent and not placed in a fund and invested.

"It is not current FBU members who have created the so-called crisis in the pension scheme and they should not be the ones to pay for the reckless actions of employers and government. Nor should future firefighters be getting an inferior scheme to existing members.

"The government also appears determined to push ahead with changes to the LGPS, the pension scheme of our control staff and hundreds of thousands of local council workers. We will seek to co-ordinate our campaigns and any strike action members decide to take with the unions that represent council workers."

A date for the recall conference had not been set as *Firefighter* went to press. Members will be kept informed of developments by head office.

it because of its complexity may be superficially attractive, but it would have hit those on average and below average incomes hard. We warmly welcome the improved credit system for carers. The precise future of state second pension is now a key issue for debate.'

On **women**: "We believe the proposals in the report will be good for women. The commission is very clear that a new pensions settlement should serve those facing poverty in retirement – and this will help women simply because they are by far the most likely to be poor when they retire. A quick boost to pensions for the over-75s will do much to help today's poorest pensioners, and the rest of the report will help those retiring in future years.

On **compulsory pensions**: "The TUC has been at the forefront of those arguing for compulsion on employers. This is therefore a major victory for TUC campaigning. Government should listen to those employers who have backed compulsion as the best way to stop good employers being undercut by the bad. While we would have preferred a system closer to the Australian approach and with higher contributions, we recognise the commission has made a recommendation that has the potential to build wide support and cannot be accused of being any kind of incentive to close existing schemes.

Other reactions to Turner:

Pensions secretary John Hutton told parliament that said the government was "ruling nothing in and nothing out". "We will welcome ideas and proposals from the political parties, employers, trade unions and everyone with an interest in the future of our pensions system," he said. And a "major consultation exercise" will seek to involve all members of the public across the country.

Shadow pensions secretary Sir Malcolm Rifkind said that the government should have already acted to tackle the pensions issue. "One has to ask where the government have been over the last eight years," he

**'The great
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told MPs. And he said it was "simply not feasible" for public sector workers to be able to retire at 60 when other workers were being asked to retire later.

Lib Dems pensions spokesman David Laws said: "It is time to acknowledge that raising the state pension age to 67 is acceptable if the change has a 25 year lead-in and if it is used to fund a more generous state pension settlement. And it is also time to reform public sector pensions to make them both fair and affordable."

Labour MP Frank Field, chairman of the Pensions Reform Group, said the report was a "powerful broadside against the government's strategy of forcing an ever growing proportion of pensioners onto means-tested help. The battleground will centre around the Pension Commission's idea of increasing the retirement age and increasing taxes to pay for a new pension and the Pension Reform Group's proposals of merging the current pay-as-you-go state pension with a new funded scheme controlled by the contributors," he said. "The Pensions Reform Group's scheme is much more generous to lower income groups and allows all groups to plan safely for additional pensions above a universal adequate minimum."

Labour MP Harry Cohen said he "didn't enter politics to raise the retirement age and worsen pension conditions for working people". He cautioned that many working class people work long hours in difficult, intense jobs and get burnt out. They often die at a younger age too and it is not right for them to be cheated of their pension at a reasonable age, said Cohen.

Paul Kenny, acting general secretary of the GMB union, said a uniform compulsory retirement age of 67 "is simply not acceptable. There is no way the GMB will go along with raising the state retirement age to 67 and we will actively campaign against this," he said.

Unison general secretary Dave Prentis said the conclusions were "a good first step" but he also criticised plans to raise the state pension age.

An off-duty FBU member recently tragically died of the MRSA 'super-bug', the infection that affects thousands of hospital patients each year. On-duty firefighters are mostly likely to add to the risk of spreading the infection rather than getting it, however. What can be done to reduce these risks?

METHICILLIN RESISTANT *Staphylococcus Aureus* (MRSA) is a bloodstream methicillin (antibiotic) resistant infection. There are other so-called hospital-acquired infections (HAIs), but MRSA has hit the headlines because it is resistant to antibiotics and has spread rapidly in recent years. In 1993, 51 people died from MRSA. In 2002 the figure stood at 800.

MRSA is not a new problem. It first appeared on the scene in the early 1960s. In some countries where antibiotics are available much more freely than in the UK, the spread of MRSA has been accepted as more or less inevitable. In the UK there has been, and continues to be, a focus on prevention and control.

MRSA is resistant to Methicillin, Flucoxacillin and many other agents. In the UK, most people get the super-bug in hospital and cases of the infection out in the community are usually related to recent hospital or nursing home exposure or treatment.

Staphylococcus aureus causes skin and soft tissue infections such as pimples, boils, carbuncles, wound infection and occasionally pneumonia; if a patient is already unwell they may develop a blood stream infection, which is rare. Staphylococcal bacteraemia can lead to osteomyelitis (acute or chronic inflammatory process of the bone) and abscesses in the liver, kidney and spleen.

The good news is that these infections can usually be effectively treated by commonly prescribed antibiotics – a course of five to seven days should usually suffice. However, some strains of *staphylococcus aureus* are resistant to antibiotics called Methicillin, Flucoxacillin and some of the antibiotics that are usually used to treat other infections. And sensitivity to resistant *staphylococcus aureus* can be lethal.

Still, the super-bug preys on the weak: patients because of their illness and/or treatment. It is unlikely to present a problem to a healthy person. Most people are only 'colonised' with MRSA; the bacteria are present on the body but cause no harm. However, the mere presence of the bacteria on the skin presents a risk should you develop an ulcer, have an operation or have a urethral or

MRSA, sometimes referred to as "the super bug" or "hospital acquired infection" has the potential to affect every one of us and is reaching epidemic proportions.

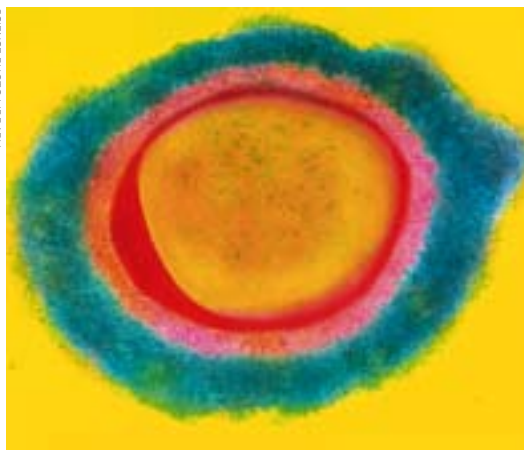
The root of this problem is the lack of basic hygiene in hospitals caused by lack of training, private finance initiatives and contracted out cleaning. I have unfortunately been affected by MRSA.

My husband, after fighting leukaemia for four years and receiving a successful bone marrow transplant, caught MRSA and he died. To add insult to injury, the hospital refused to put MRSA as the cause of death on his death certificate, as they did with baby Luke Day, a 36-hour-old baby, who was born healthy but died of MRSA in an Ipswich hospital last February.

Since January this year MRSA has now been reported in gyms, nursing homes and ambulances. Can the Executive advise Conference what measures they are taking to protect our members who have the potential to be affected by MRSA, especially as MRSA is now being reported in ambulances and continues to be prevalent in hospitals and nursing homes where our members could come into contact with it? This issue must be addressed.

Sis Julie Barton, NWC
FBU Annual Conference 2005

Handling the super-bug



*Coloured electron micrograph of a section through a methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) bacterium. *Staphylococcus aureus* is a Gram-positive spherical (coccus) bacteria with a cell wall (red) and capsule (blue) surrounding it.*



Healthcare professional washing hands, using a dispenser placed next to a patient with MRSA.

intravenous catheter inserted.

Since MRSA spreads mainly by being transferred from patient to patient, or patient to person, it is crucial that people decontaminate their hands effectively before and after contact with MRSA-positive patients, and there is now a widespread hospital initiative to ensure staff, visitors and others do this using alcohol based hand gels.

Risk assessment

Hospital patients who have been colonised should be identified, a risk assessment then carried out to determine how and what risk to other patients, staff and visitors the infection presents. The findings must be made available and control measures put in place.

Firefighters are most likely to add to the risk of spreading the infection, as opposed to being colonised. Good hand hygiene is very important to prevent colonisation this can be achieved by simple alcohol hand gels which are commonly available.

However, people who are 'immuno-compromised' – susceptible to infection because of diseases, open wounds or on medication such as steroids – should avoid exposure. All fire service personnel in contact with patients should comply with the hospital or care home infection control policies, procedures and patient risk assessments.

KEY POINTS

■ Firefighters are most likely to add to the risk of spreading the infection, as opposed to getting it

■ Good hand hygiene is a must – use commonly available simple alcohol hand gels

■ If in contact with patients, firefighters should comply with hospital/home care infection control policies, procedures and patient risk assessments

MRSA, CUTS AND PRIVATISATION

■ A snap inspection of hospitals found many were unacceptably dirty, including one where investigators discovered stains from bodily fluids left on a hoist chair.

The Healthcare Commission sent inspectors into 98 hospitals around the country without warning to look at the dirt, dust, decor and state of the toilets. While 33 did well, "too many hospitals failed to perform as well as they could", the commission said, and in 22 there was "clear evidence of poor standards of cleanliness", which suggested systemic problems.

Although there is not a direct link between MRSA and dirty hospitals, the report said "failure to maintain a clean environment can break the fundamental cycle for good control of infection. How can an organisation that tolerates dirty work surfaces and toilets be trusted to deliver the rigorous standards of hygiene in relation to clean hands and clinical practices that are essential for the effective control of infection?"

The Guardian, Thursday December 15, 2005

■ The Government plans to cut MRSA rates by 50% by 2008. Measures that are recognised as important in the control of HAI:

- handwashing
- use of gloves and protective clothing
- damp dusting/disinfection/high standards of ward cleanliness
- sensible use of antibiotics and antibiotic policy
- isolation of infected patients
- avoid overcrowding of patients
- appropriate levels of staff: nursing, domestics and others
- regular monitoring to ensure compliance with Infection Control Policies

■ In February 2000 the National Audit Office reported that one fifth of NHS trusts did not have an infection control programme and only 40% had a designated budget for infection control.

■ Over the last 20 years, the numbers of cleaners has halved. In 1984 there were around 100,000 and this has dropped to 55,000 in 2004.

■ A series of inspections in recent years have revealed that the majority of hospitals with poor cleanliness had their cleaning services provided by private companies.

■ Unison is calling on the Government to make sure the NHS employs enough cleaners by:

- Requiring all NHS organisation to set safe minimum staffing levels for their cleaning services
- End market testing, so that cleaning services are based on quality not cost and return cleaning services to the NHS
- Provide proper, up-to-date training and equipment
- Ensure more involvement of all staff – cleaners, domestic supervisors, nurses and managers – in setting and monitoring cleaning standards.

www.unison.org.uk

Before long your new work colleagues could be recruited through standardised national selection tests. Developed by the ODPM in conjunction with the FBU, among other stakeholders, they should ensure access to the UK fire and rescue service is fair and equally available to everyone, providing all brigades are obliged to adopt them in full.

IN 1997, the Home Office Implementation working group (IWG) carried out a survey of all fire brigades using a confidential questionnaire to gain a clear picture of how selection tests for entry into the fire service were being applied. Fifty-two fire brigades responded, an 83% response rate. The survey revealed that there was a considerable degree of inconsistency applied to selection across the service. The IWG concluded that there was need for a standardised approach which could be adopted and applied by all Brigades.

What did the IWG do?

THE IWG produced a set of physical tests that are currently in use, with different standards applied and extra tests bolted on, throughout the UK fire service. These are:

- Hose run
- Ladder climb
- Ladder extension
- BA crawl
- Dead lift
- Multi-stage fitness test (Bleep Test)

What was wrong with those tests?

CONSULTANTS, Optimal Performance, were employed by the Government to look at those tests and evaluate them.

The consultants stated that: "It is our view that most of the current tests broadly reflect the requirements of the job of fire fighter. However several important aspects of fitness appear to be lacking from the test battery, most noticeable of these absences is a lift/carry test and possibly a manual dexterity test."

The consultants' conclusions were:

The IWG test package does not appear to reflect the full range or extent of physical capabilities required to perform effectively the varied physical tasks required of firefighter.

The consultants therefore recommended that the IWG physical test battery should be extended to cover all of the physical demands.



Joining you at

How did Optimal Performance do that?

OPTIMAL Performance stated that: conducting a Physical Demands Analysis (PDA) or job analysis should be an employer's first step in defining those characteristics or standards to be assessed during selection. The purpose of conducting a PDA is to describe and quantify those aspects of physical fitness or physical performance that are relevant to job performance. The output forms a sound foundation for establishing physical selection standards.

The Consultants reviewed three studies. They were; The Chelsea Report, The Robens Report and the Lilleshall Report.

Having reviewed these reports the consultants believed that there were four limitations of the UK studies. They were:

- Work rates were uncontrolled
- The samples of participants used were not representative of the current firefighter population

A National Standard hasn't yet been set, but some brigades are already using some of these tests. This is ill-advised

- Training drills may not reflect true job requirements
- Using heart rate to estimate VO2 in the manner it has been used is inappropriate.

The consultants believed that an adequate physical demands analysis for firefighters had not yet been performed and therefore the requirements of firefighters in the UK were not known.

An expert panel was set up to define the critical physical tasks that all firefighters should be able to perform after



initial training and define minimal and optimal standards of performance on these critical tasks.

The table at right shows the physical tests that all firefighters should be able to perform after initial training. These tests were developed by the expert panel and tested by many firefighters across the UK.

Is that how the entry tests look then?

NO! Following the development of this test battery, the actual standard for entry is still being determined by the ODPM Strategy Group for recruitment and selection and the final endorsement will rest with the Practitioners Forum. We are represented on the Practitioners Forum by Matt Wrack, FBU General Secretary.

Will my Brigade have to implement them and when will that happen?

CURRENTLY the ODPM have a paper out for consultation on the 'New Arrangements for the Recruitment of Firefighters and the Progression of Operational and Control Managers in the Fire and Rescue Service'. This

the station...

consultation includes all stakeholders and asks many questions of the fire service nationally. Importantly it has not yet been decided whether individual fire services will have to adopt the test battery that has been 8 years in development. The Fire Brigades union has consistently argued for the recruitment standard to be applied across

The Union has kept a close eye on the types of tests developed and opposed tests that were not relevant to the role of firefighter

the UK to ensure access to the Fire and Rescue Service is fair and equally available to everyone. Even though the standard hasn't yet been set or agreed, it has been reported that some brigades are already using these tests. This is ill-advised and should not be happening as the whole process needs to be complete before any part of it is applied locally.

Does the Fire Brigades Union have a role and what are we saying?

THE Union is represented on the ODPM Strategy Group and has consistently argued for a national standard that reflects a firefighters role. The Strategy Group, together with the external consultants, have spent many years developing the most relevant tests and has used existing firefighters from both rural and metropolitan brigades to assist in setting the standard e.g. time taken, weights used etc. The Union has kept a close eye on the types of tests developed and expressed opposing views where we felt a particular test was not relevant to the role of firefighter. All of the tests in the table above have been agreed in principle by the Fire Brigades union.

RURAL FIRE

Simulates setting up a water relay

Distances and loads based on reasonable worst case scenarios along a 50m shuttle course.

1. Drag a hose reel off an appliance for 50m
2. Jog back 50m
3. Pick up and carry 2x 70mm coiled hoses dropping the first at 175 m and the second at 200m
4. Run out the two dropped hoses
5. Jog back 150 m to appliance
6. Pick up and carry 100mm suction hose and basket 200m
7. Jog back 200m to appliance
8. Pick up and carry LPP simulator (33kg) 200m

DOMESTIC FIRE

Simulates conducting a search and rescue

Distances and loads based on reasonable worst case scenario along a 10m square course, wearing BA under air

1. Drag a hose reel from the appliance 30m around the square
2. Locate and recover a 30kg child casualty back around the square
3. Walk 10m pause
4. Pause for 30seconds for BA obscuration mask to be fitted
5. Crawl around square holding onto hose reel
6. Locate and recover a 55kg adult casualty back around square

LADDER LIFT

Simulates putting a 13.5m ladder on the back of an appliance without a gantry
13.5m ladder simulator

1. Raise the free end of the pivoted ladder arm supported 75cm off the ground above head
2. Mass of ladder lifting point starts at 20kg and increases by 2kg after every successful attempt following at least 60 seconds of rest.

LADDER CLIMB

1. Ascend an extended 13.5m ladder to the third floor
2. Alight onto the landing
3. Get back on the ladder and descend to the ground (untimed)

PORTO POWER ASSEMBLY

1. Assemble and then disassemble the Porto Power unit following the colour coded diagrams provided as fast as possible

ENCLOSED SPACE

1. Negotiate a walkway and crawl way wearing a full BA set and a face mask that is obscured
2. There are 8 obstacles to go through.



Rothbury firefighters studying hard

E-learning – the new frontier?

An e-learning trial by the FBU and Scottish Fire Service College pilot project with retained firefighters has been completed successfully

and the ULF project team were available for additional support.

E-LEARNING?

WITH the introduction of IPDS, WDS and S/NVQs, the UK fire and rescue service learning and training ethos is under scrutiny. The 'sheep dip' method over countless years has failed numerous staff and has discouraged countless firefighters and emergency control staff. With a limited number of training hours available for retained firefighters the quality, content and delivery of training has suffered and without the introduction of the IPDS there has been little need for brigades to improve on standards for retained firefighters. In some cases this has been exacerbated by budget and resource restrictions placed on fire and rescue services (FRS) on training delivery but in other cases a certain lack of management drive has been reported. This has all created a major stimulus for looking at alternative methods of delivering learning, the application of IPDS in the Fire Service and how equality of access can be given to all fire and rescue service staff. E-learning is now becoming a universal learning medium and although not the panacea, can, if delivered and supported properly, engage learners who would otherwise not get the

FIREFIGHTERS WORKING the retained duty system in Grampian and Northumberland Fire and Rescue Services have successfully completed the pilot being run by the FBU's Union Learning Fund (ULF) Projects and the Scottish Fire Services College (SFSC) e-learning site.

Twelve volunteer firefighters from retained stations in Braemar and Rothbury took part in an eight week project to see how and if e-learning could be used as a delivery medium for retained firefighters.

The virtual college site of the SFSC has been up and running for around two years with brigades throughout the country accessing its modules covering a range of subjects including Equality and Fairness, Health and Safety, Command and Control and Community Fire Safety. The SFSC has recently added the

Firefighter Development Plan to the virtual college site for fire services across the country to access.

For the pilot it was agreed that the participating retained firefighters would be given access to the Command and Control module only and would be asked to complete the course within eight weeks.

The Scottish ULF and ULF project workers – Jock Munro and Chris Williams in Braemar and Adrian Slassor and Claire Wealleans in Rothbury – delivered a presentational introduction to the students at their home stations. Northumberland fire and rescue service ICT tutor Amanda Tee provided additional support in Rothbury.

Throughout the period their progress was monitored by Trevor Shanahan, FBU ULF project manager, who was given the administration rights to the virtual college by the SFSC. Trevor

opportunity to train and improve their skills.

The Fire Service College has recently announced its success in a business plan for a managed learning centre (MLC) that will expand capacity to deliver e-learning in the Fire Service. Trevor Shanahan says: "I have been fortunate to represent the FBU on the FSC e-learners stakeholders group, supporting the MLC and will continue to feed our views into the MLC project team as it evolves." Further news on its construction and implementation will soon be released by the FSC.

THE PILOT:

MANY of the issues that arose from the pilot project with FBU retained firefighters will no doubt raise issues in many other brigades regardless of duty system. Others were particularly representative of firefighters working the retained duty system.

The self-assessment of ICT skills at the start of the module varied from very basic to intermediate and they indicated that the introduction given by the project staff was very helpful. One of the brigades employed an ICT tutor to give basic ICT training to all staff and this was reflected in the outcomes of the course.

So how did the pilot project go?

Says Trevor: "I am pleased to say that the project dispelled one myth that seems to be circulating in the Fire Service that firefighters on the retained duty system are not interested in training, learning or meeting the requirements of IPDS! During a post course discussion with them and from the completion of a course questionnaire, it was clear they had enjoyed the opportunity to take part, responded candidly to the issues of e-learning but importantly they supported this method of learning delivery." However they did say, adds Trevor, it should be followed up with practical application.

Having overcome the first hurdle of getting their individual internet access accounts the ULF team and students were met with a problem at one of the stations with the reliability and access to the internet. This led to the firefighters having nearly all access taking

I wasn't quite sure what to expect but at the end of the module my command and control knowledge and IT skills improved

place from their home computer – something the FBU needs to watch carefully. For one unfortunate firefighter this became a bit of a nightmare as his house was struck by lightning which knocked out his home computer!

The main concern of those taking part was the time of year that the pilot was carried out.



Braemar firefighters at study

The summertime is the busiest period for the retained firefighters taking part. Engaged in agriculture or tourism occupations, they have limited time for additional training – even e-learning. If IPDS is to be fully implemented across the Fire Service then brigades need to plan carefully recognising such issues.

The retained firefighters involved in the

and take accredited courses if available.

Says Gareth Guy, retained union learning rep at Braemar fire station: "As a new FBU learner, it was a good learning experience to be involved in a new learning project. We all gained from using e-learning and I hope the issues in the pilot will be helpful to retained firefighters.

There is a positive mood about e-learning.

All the retained participants agreed that e-learning and the virtual college was a major step in the right direction

pilot found the command and control module itself to be interesting, easy to follow and most importantly they all learned from it. The courses do have assessments at the end but on this occasion they completed them voluntarily.

There are also issues here for the FBU to consider on behalf of its members. These include: paid time for accessing courses from home, provision of suitable ICT hardware for all personnel, payment of home internet connec-

Chris Bruce, retained member, Braemar, says: "I wasn't quite sure what to expect but at the end of the module my command and control knowledge and IT skills improved. Well done the FBU for promoting e-learning!"

Stuart McKenzie of Rothbury fire station says: "I wish to thank the FBU and the brigade for giving me the opportunity to experience e-learning through the SFSC. It was hard work but very enjoyable."

Fellow Rothbury firefighter, David Young, adds: "Good cause. I will be continuing with e-learning. Best thing the FBU has done."

Says Trevor: "Thanks should go to the management of Northumberland FRS and Grampian FRS for supporting the pilot project in their brigades and the partnership co-operation with Jim Robson of the SFSC. And a special thanks must go to the retained firefighters at Braemar and Rothbury who took part. Their views and responses will help in assessing the implications of e-learning."

FOR FURTHER information on the pilot, email Trevor Shanahan at Trevor.shanahan@fbu.org.uk. Details of your regional FBU ULF co-ordinator are available on www.fbu.org.uk.

tions and associated H and S issues.

However there is a positive mood about e-learning. All the retained participants agreed that e-learning and the virtual college was a major step in the right direction and would be more than happy to follow further courses. Some would also like to improve their ICT skills

FBU



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25-YEAR BADGES



Noel Harris, Warwickshire, receives his 25 year badge from branch chair, Norrie Henderson



Kevin Gardner, Warwickshire, receives his 25 year badge from branch chair, Norrie Henderson



Quinton Day, Wimbledon branch secretary, receives his 25 year badge from Matt Wrack



Simon Frost, Warwickshire, receives his 25 year badge from branch chair, Norrie Henderson



Steve West, Warwickshire, receives his 25 year badge from branch chair, Norrie Henderson



Ade Mallaban, Warwickshire, receives his 25 year badge from branch chair, Norrie Henderson

Please send your photographic prints or digital picture files to: Firefighter, FBU, 68 Coombe Road, Kingston upon Thames, KT2 7AE or firefighter@fbu.org.uk (Please note that inkjet prints from digital pictures reproduce very poorly). Please include **FULL DETAILS** for every picture – full names of everyone who is in it; their station/watch etc; where they are in the picture (e.g.: left to right ...); their union posts/branch if relevant; and where and when it was taken.



Dave Torrice, Homerton Green Watch and station FBU rep (r) receives his 25 year badge from Khaled Haider (l)



Clive Rolley (right), Green Watch, Buxton, Derbyshire receiving his 25 year badge from Dom McGlynn, Branch Secretary



Bill Neighbour (r) Lincoln Fire Safety Dept, receives his 25yr badge from John Taylor, Lincolnshire Officers Branch Sec



Station officer David (Taff) Logan (r) "White Watch", Salford fire station, receiving his 25 year badge from station FBU rep Dave (Stan) Allsey, "Blue Watch"



Gary Pepper (r) North Lincoln Fire Stn, receives his 25yr badge from John Taylor, Lincolnshire Officers Branch Sec

HAVE YOUR SAY Firefighter magazine welcomes letters from members. Letters should relate to articles in the magazine. Please include full postal address, telephone number and reference to relevant article. We may edit letters. Please send them to: firefighter@fbu.org.uk or Firefighter, FBU, 68 Coombe Road, Kingston upon Thames, Surrey KT2 7AE

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