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Circular: 2024HOC0434MW

Date: **25/11/2024**

To: **All Members**

Dear Brother/Sister,

Storm Bert, flooding and extreme weather

The FBU is immensely proud of our members, who worked tirelessly in recent days during Storm Bert, to rescue people and serve our communities. The contributions of firefighters and emergency control staff underline yet again the irreplaceable role of the service in protection and emergency intervention. Firefighters are the only professionals trained and equipped to tackle the scale of flooding and other extreme weather that happens every year – although we know that more resources are needed now and for the future.

The FBU's record on flooding

Since the 2007 floods, the FBU has campaigned consistently for a statutory duty on fire and rescue services to respond to flooding.

The FBU's report, ***Lessons of the 2007 Floods***, was submitted to the Pitt Review into those events. The Pitt Review recommended "the government should urgently put in place a fully funded national capability for flood rescue with Fire and Rescue Authorities playing a leading role, underpinned as necessary by a statutory duty".

The FBU fought for suitable PPE for flood rescue, after numerous brigades sent firefighters out in regular fire kit to tackle water rescues. The FBU contributed to Exercise Watermark in 2011, which also recommended a statutory duty on fire and rescue services to respond to flooding.

The Scottish government implemented a statutory flood duty in 2005. It was FBU officials who made the case for a statutory duty to ministers in the Northern Ireland assembly government. As a result, a duty on major flooding came into force in Northern Ireland on 1 January 2012.

In 2015, the FBU published ***Inundated: The lessons of recent flooding for the fire and rescue service***, making the case for statutory duty. In 2017, it was campaigning by FBU officials that convinced the Welsh Government to implement the duty on fire and rescue services in Wales.

The FBU continued to make the case at Westminster, with only England lacking the duty. The union briefed select committees and convinced MPs from across the political spectrum of the importance of the flood duty.

The sad fact is that for 14 years, successive Conservative governments failed to implement a statutory duty on fire and rescue services to respond to flooding. They were backed by the Chief Fire Officers Association and by the National Fire Chiefs Council, who opposed the demand for a flood duty, despite some of their own members knowing it was needed.

The FBU did not give up the fight. FBU officials campaigned within the Labour Party's annual conference, National Policy Forum, and other committees for a statutory duty. Labour's 2024 general election manifesto stated:

"Preparing for the future not only means tackling the climate and nature emergencies, but also adapting to the changes they will bring to our environment. Without action, flooding and coastal erosion will pose greater risks to lives, livelihoods and people's wellbeing. The Conservatives' poor risk management, and a disjointed approach across government and regulators have left Britain badly exposed.

"Labour will improve resilience and preparation across central government, local authorities, local communities, and emergency services. This includes formally working with all stakeholders in the Fire and Rescue services to inform policy and establish national standards."

Next steps in the union's campaign

For two decades, successive Westminster governments scrapped national standards in the fire and rescue service. This affected the service to the public and the conditions of firefighters. Chief fire officers were given a free hand to impose their own local projects, ignore new and emerging risks, as well as making devastating cuts.

The FBU fought to defend national standards when they have existed in the fire and rescue service. The FBU is the only organisation that has fought for national standards since they were scrapped. Higher standards mean better protection for the public and consistent, professional standards for all firefighters, wherever we work.

The FBU believes that national standards are a central mechanism to defend and improve our industry. The union has long demanded a statutory advisory body, involving the FBU and other stakeholders, to produce, implement and monitor national standards.

The FBU has written to ministers (attached) in light of the latest flooding to demand a statutory duty on fire and rescue services to respond to flooding. The union will work with ministers to implement its manifesto commitments, to ensure national standards on flooding and other key matters, and for the voice of the FBU to be heard.

Yours in unity,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Wrack', written in a cursive style.

Matt Wrack
General Secretary



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*Our reference: 20241125 – Home Secretary
By email only*

Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP, Home Secretary

CC:

Rt Hon Dame Diana Johnson MP, Minister of State for Crime, Policing and Fire

Rt Hon Steve Reed MP, DEFRA Secretary

Emma Hardy MP, Under-Secretary of State for Water and Flooding

25/11/2024

Dear Yvette,

Flooding and the fire and rescue service

I am writing on behalf of the Fire Brigades Union regarding the flooding events during Storm Bert over recent days. I'm sure you will add your voice to the praise for the hundreds of firefighters who were deployed to rescue people threatened by flood waters, as well as putting up temporary flood defences and checking homes and businesses once the waters had abated.

Flood risk

Firefighters have been responding to flooding events for many years. Firefighters have witnessed the growing risks of climate change, with annual storms generating flooding and other extreme weather.

All the evidence, from the IPCC, Cabinet Office National Risk Register, Committee on Climate Change and DEFRA points to increasing flood risk across the UK now and for the foreseeable future. This includes flooding from seas and rivers, as well as surface water flooding from sudden downpours.

The fire and rescue service is the only viable body with the skills and infrastructure to deliver a comprehensive flood rescue service. Given the risks and challenges related to flood response, the safety of firefighters and of communities, and the provision for an effective response can only be achieved by formalising existing arrangements by way of a statutory duty.

Statutory duty

The FBU believes that a statutory duty on fire and rescue services to respond to flooding would help make the UK more resilient to flooding. Devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland have already implemented a duty, so it makes sense for England to have the same legal framework.

Failure to manage flooding, including and effective emergency response, carries huge economic and individual costs. Fire and rescue services need secure income streams to ensure sufficient numbers of firefighters, training and suitable equipment can be deployed to respond to flood emergencies.

The Pitt Review investigated the response to the 2007 flooding. It recommended “the government should urgently put in place a fully funded national capability for flood rescue with Fire and Rescue Authorities playing a leading role, underpinned as necessary by a statutory duty”.

A statutory duty on fire and rescue services to respond to flooding was also recommended after Exercise Watermark in 2011 and by the EFRA select committee at Westminster. For 14 years, Conservative governments refused to implement the duty, despite annual evidence of increased risks.

The FBU has campaigned for a statutory duty on fire and rescue services to respond to flooding since the 2007 floods. Although some chief fire officers opposed the duty under Conservative administrations, the FBU understands that the NFCC have now switched to supporting this measure. The duty could be implemented via an Order under the Fire and Rescue Services Act.

Next steps

You will know that Labour’s 2024 general election manifesto stated:

“Preparing for the future not only means tackling the climate and nature emergencies, but also adapting to the changes they will bring to our environment. Without action, flooding and coastal erosion will pose greater risks to lives, livelihoods and people’s wellbeing. The Conservatives’ poor risk management, and a disjointed approach across government and regulators have left Britain badly exposed.

“Labour will improve resilience and preparation across central government, local authorities, local communities, and emergency services. This includes formally working with all stakeholders in the Fire and Rescue services to inform policy and establish national standards.”

The FBU is keen to assist with implementing the Labour manifesto commitments to improve resilience through a statutory duty on fire and rescue services to respond to flooding, the establishment of national standards and a representative statutory advisory body.

The FBU is eager to meet with you and your advisors at the earliest opportunity to take this agenda forward. We look forward to constructive engagement, so our communities are protected.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Wrack'.

Matt Wrack
General Secretary
Fire Brigades Union