



THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION

SPECIAL CONFERENCE 2012

EXECUTIVE COUNCIL POLICY STATEMENT

DEFEND THE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE – STOP THE CUTS

INTRODUCTION

The Fire Service is facing a funding crisis stemming from cuts in central Government grants imposed as part of the Westminster coalition Government's drive for austerity. This threatens the jobs and conditions of service of Fire Brigades Union (FBU) members and the quality of the professional service we can provide to the public. Inevitably, the safety of firefighters, and our communities are being put increasingly at risk.

BACKGROUND

The Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) is facing a centrally orchestrated squeeze on UK wide Government grants and on a continuing council tax freeze. These Whitehall cuts will inevitably pose similar challenges in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland whose parliament and assemblies face the prospect of further funding cuts as part of the wider austerity agenda.

On 10 February Communities and Local Government (CLG) fire minister Bob Neill wrote to the Chairs of all Fire Authorities in England seeking a second year of council tax freeze. Those fire services which do have pre-cept powers would typically be looking at maximum increases of £5 a year per household and often little more than £3 per household in a year.

Cuts in central Government grants undermine Fire Authority budgets and this has been exacerbated by the complicit approach of many local Fire Authorities, leaving significant shortfalls to be made good by cuts in frontline personnel, appliances, station closures, supervisory officer structures as well as control room mergers and outsourcing. A mixed variety of duty systems have either already been introduced or are being put forward in an attempt to mask the problem.

VARIATIONS IN OUR RESPONSE

Fire and Rescue Services across the UK (with a few exceptions) have faced significant cuts already. There have been a range of responses with some excellent local campaigning. A key aim of the next stage of our work should be to ensure a UK wide focus on defending the quality, capability and professionalism of the Fire and Rescue Service.

Clearly the level of attacks on all public services means that the challenges we face are very significant. Nevertheless our existing policies suggest that the focus of our campaign should be around the following demands and themes:

- Opposition to all proposed cuts
- Opposition to all job losses (by whatever means)
- Highlighting the impact of cuts on response times
- Highlighting the impact of cuts on national and local resilience
- Highlighting the detrimental impact on public safety
- Highlighting the detrimental impact on firefighter safety
- Highlighting the detrimental impact on the business community and the economy.

The Executive Council recommends that we need to rapidly develop our UK wide campaign to defend our service and make the case for adequate funding. Such a centrally led campaign would in turn tap in to local issues and campaigns and provide resources and support to officials campaigning at local level. It would also provide a framework by which local campaigns may be

coordinated to add solidarity and to amplify the national campaign against central Government's underfunding of UK Fire and Rescue Services.

TIMESCALE

The grant settlement for this Comprehensive Spending Review to 2015 has been 'back-loaded' but will amount to around 25% cuts in central Government grant by 2015. The first year of austerity measures brought cuts of over 1,000 frontline firefighters of all roles and duty systems between April 2010 and April 2011.

The precise details of the grants for 2013 to 2015 will be announced following a Government spending review which will feed into the Chancellor's autumn statement - provisionally expected in late November 2012 (the last autumn statement was on 29 November 2011).

CROSS-PARTY CONCERNS

There is growing political and public concern about the impact of large grant cuts in 2013-15. The six English Metropolitan Fire Services (outside of London) have suggested these cuts could, in the Mets alone, mean a further:

- 2,000 frontline firefighters lost
- 50 station closures
- 100 appliances lost.

THE CASE FOR THE FIRE SERVICE

The FBU campaign needs to focus on a two-pronged attack to make the case for adequate Fire Service grant funding aimed in the first instance at the coalition parties and Labour in Whitehall. At local level, the campaign would need to build pressure on councillors within Fire Authorities to address the local needs of the service. In this context however the Union will have to develop further work to address the balance between central and local funding; the pressure on local budgets created by cuts in central grants and the consequential pressures on council tax.

Particular approaches will also be needed in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland which address the relationship between funding from Westminster, the devolved Governments and relevant Fire and Rescue Authorities.

AIMS AND METHODS

The aim of such a campaign would be, over the next 18 months, to make the case for adequate Fire Service funding and to get a better funding outcome than is currently envisaged. It would need to be seen as part of a longer term campaign leading into the 2015 general election. It would also be part of the wider political campaign opposing austerity measures as a whole and raising the need for a fundamental shift in policy.

Between now and the end of 2012 the target would be central Government although we would also need to attempt to marshal support from councillors and Members of Parliament/Assembly Members in all political parties in defence of the Fire Service. We will also seek to strengthen our lobbying links with relevant business groups and the insurance industry.

To do this we need to increase the profile of Fire Service cuts and push it up the national political agenda between now and the end of 2012, which is the crucial timeframe. The FBU needs to shape that political agenda and narrative focusing on the expanding rescue role, cuts to firefighter and firefighter (control) numbers, station closures, control mergers and outsourcing, loss of appliances, slower response times, firefighter injuries, fatalities, fire deaths and the impact on the business community.

The key time for attempting to influence decisions on funding and grant allocation is likely to be in the early autumn 2012. Ministers will then take final decisions on the allocations and these are likely to be announced in mid- to late-January. An assessment of the distributional impact on the level of spending power for each single purpose Fire and Rescue Authority in England will be made in early 2013.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Executive Council recommends to Conference;

- That a national campaign as outlined above is agreed and developed
- That the necessary funding be identified and allocated for the campaign
- That further research is undertaken as necessary to support our case for a fully funded and professional Fire and Rescue Service
- That this campaign should include mechanisms to build on local anti-cuts campaigning as part of the wider fight to defend the Fire and Rescue Service
- This should include the necessary campaign material and resources
- In the short term this should aim to influence decision-making over the next 12 months but will also need to continue into the 2015 general election
- That this should involve national events such as lobbies and demonstrations, including a national lobby of Parliament in early autumn.