

OFFICERS' VIEW

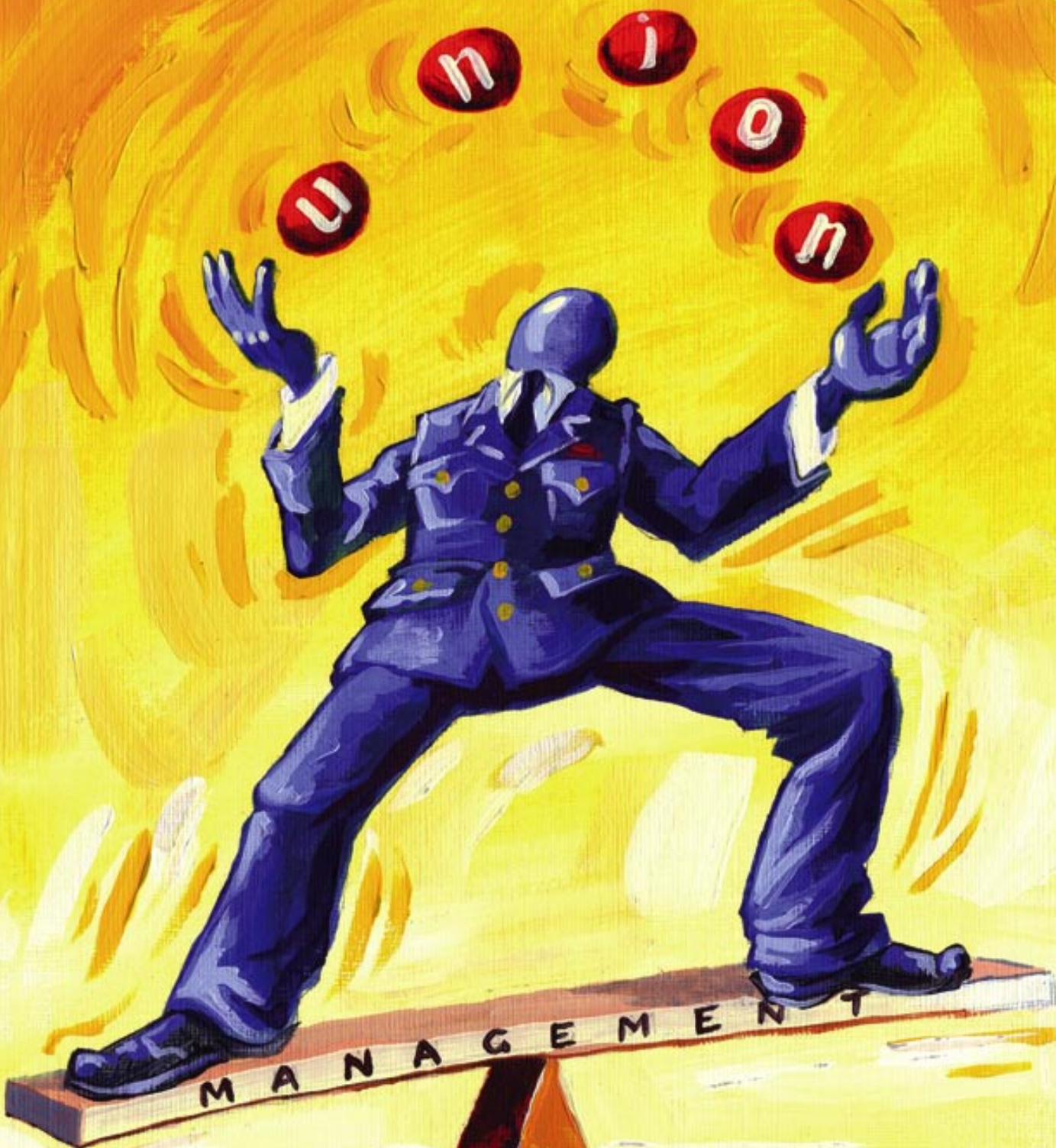
THE JOURNAL FOR FBU OFFICER MEMBERS

APRIL 2005



**Between a rock
and a hard place?**





Serving the

Steve Rose, SDO, Cornwall Brigade tells Officers' View about the challenges of his job

IN the best traditions of the Fire Service – from the days when a strong naval influence held sway – Steve Rose followed his father and his grandfather into the business of fighting fires. As a young man on the Channel Island of Alderney he signed up as a retained firefighter as soon as he became eighteen. These early years of service provided him with the touchstone for a career spanning 17 years as a (wholetime) firefighter. Now, as a Senior Divisional Officer in the Cornwall brigade he takes pride in serving his community.

'I feel a strong sense of responsibility to the community – and always have done. From the time I was a retained firefighter on the Channel Islands I felt great pride in being part of the service. My understanding of the effects of fire in a local community informs the job I do every day. I know how a death can have a seismic impact in a small community.'

the first stage. Another year went by and he was working as an apprentice mechanic, when his father, who realised how much he wanted to be a firefighter persuaded him to try one more time.

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I don't see the proposals for regional controls and modernisation as improving the service. I don't think the existing system is faultless, no system is perfect – but it is far from broke

And yet it took Steve three goes to realise his dream of becoming wholetime. When his family moved to Cornwall he applied to the service only to be rejected for not being a Cornishman. At the time, you had to be born locally in order to work for your community fire service. The second time he applied he didn't even get through

'My dad saw an ad and suggested I try – third time lucky – and I got in. There were over 2,000 applicants because in those days in a rural community like Cornwall, firefighters were paid a very competitive wage. I was ecstatic.'

Having worked his way up through the ranks Steve now occupies one of the toughest positions in the service. As usually the highest ranked FBU member in a brigade, SDOs very often have to live in two camps. On the one hand they're fully paid up union members, and on the other they're a level of management that is expected to enact the strategic commands of their more senior officers. Steve particularly is heavily involved in strategic matters around IRMPs and the work involved on combating asymmetrical terrorism.

'Even in a rural brigade like Cornwall we've seen a lot of money and resources come into the county because of the need to be fully prepared for all eventualities such as CCBRN (Conventional, Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear). And we've particularly seen an increase in our ability to deal with chemical incidents.'

In spite of occupying a post that could present certain workplace contradictions, Steve says he's very much a square peg in a square hole. 'I'm lucky in that I can shape the job I do. I've very much designed the role I fulfil – so I'm very happy with what I spend my days doing.'

Recently, due to changes amongst the principal

community

officers Steve had to step up and fill the Assistant Chief Fire Officer role for a temporary period of seven months. And he very much enjoyed the added responsibility.

'I'm a part of the strategic team so it wasn't too much of a change for me when I had to step up and fill in as a temporary Assistant Chief Fire Officer. I was used to doing the political side – working with councillors, committees, etc and planning resilience and corporate risk.'

However, he fully admits that some of his skills on the political side do help him with the job of being an effective SDO and union member. So how does he

welfare of victims, and help in the coordination of potential investigations – as there may be a crime scene. It's basically a matter of dealing with logistics, talking to the police or quite simply making sure people are fed and watered. It's a reasonably frequent occurrence that I go out on a shout ... and when I'm there my role is to be divorced from the frontline in order to deal with these type of things.'

In his strategic role within the Cornish brigade Steve is all too aware of the need for constant modernisation of the service. With ever increasing developments

in technology and new techniques of fighting fires, it's essential that he keeps up with what's happening in the wider field of firefighting.

'The service has changed a lot in my seventeen years as a wholtime firefighter. Gone are the days of yellow leggings and hand held radios ... we've become far more

technical. Consequently, we're also more effective than we used to be and it's now a lot safer for firefighters on the job. Innovations such as PPV (Positive Pressure Ventilation) is just such a development. We can now force feed air into a building to try to suppress fires and thus reducing the risk to the firefighters. Also, we now use water in a very different way. It's more scientific ... so that the size of water droplets can be varied. This means we no longer go and steam a building with a deluge of water ... now we can put out a fire with very little water damage. Plus, we now have the use of thermal imaging cameras as a front line appliance – the advantages of which are obvious. It's brought a massive improvement in firefighter safety.'

But modernisation in terms of technology is one thing – what about the term when it's brandished by Nick Raynsford the Minister for Local and Regional

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reconcile a management role within the Fire Service with being an FBU member? 'The way the fire service operates in Cornwall, there's not a big stick that requires union representation ... or not. Unionisation isn't an issue on a day-to-day basis. The dispute brought this issue to the fore ... because we weren't sure who would go on strike or not. As an individual, when I joined the fire service – I joined the union, and am happy with that. I don't think it adversely affects any promotion I might seek as I've known many Principal Officers and even one Deputy Chief Fire Officer who belonged to the FBU.'

As one of the main conduits between his local fire authority and the brigade, Steve is well versed in all the issues affecting the Cornwall service and very much enjoys interaction with his local councillors. 'Our fire authority is a relatively small organisation. We have 79 members and they operate with an executive and cabinet approach. We also deal with specific panels handling key issues – so the scrutiny process is very robust. I deal with the IRMP panel and advise members on comprehensive performance assessment. We interact heavily as a department with the County Council ... we try and get the largest slice of cake we can from the corporate budget. But we fully appreciate that the council has to prioritise its resources ... they've a tough job.'

Steve broadly works a 9 to 5, sometimes starting early, sometimes working late. As part of a brigade with 206 wholtime firefighters, 425 retained and 120 non-uniformed personnel, he's part of the flexible duty system and so works approximately 68 hours a week. There are six flexible duty officers at any one time and so of course he still goes out to incidents.

'I still go to fires and incidents but don't tend to get my hands dirty. Although, depending on the size of the problem ... a lot of us can be out ... including the Chief. For example, during the nationally covered floods we had at Boscastle recently the incident commanders on scene were the Deputy and Chief Fire Officer.'

'My role at an incident would be to provide overall health and safety for everyone there, look after the

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Government, with its far more sinister connotations, such as regionalisation of control centres, reduced numbers crewing appliances and with all the attendant implications of job losses? How does this sit with a lifelong union member who's also an upwardly mobile middle manager with potential to go higher?

At this point I can see why Steve is so adept at working with politicians. He chooses his words very carefully. 'The brigade is an unwilling participant in the move to regional controls. We just don't know how robust a system would

be ... there are too many questions and not enough answers. But we have to keep talking in order to make sure we get the best out of whatever situation arises.'

'We're backed up by the local council who also say the outline business case doesn't stand up and so they're not endorsing the move to regionalisation. However, they, and we, realise that this can be imposed. So we're an unwilling participant but we feel we have to sit at the table and discuss it. You've got to prepare yourself for

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the worst case scenario and if it happens you have to be up to speed. Representation has been made at both Chief Officer and fire authority level to say we do not support these moves.'

And what of being a member of the FBU, who are actively campaigning against regionalisation and government 'modernisation' ... and being a middle manager? As a senior divisional officer, how does that potential conflict of interest sit with Steve?

'It's very simple. If I'm given a lawful order by a superior officer ... I have to carry it out. That's what I've been trained to do, what I've always done, and will always do.

'If there are any [negative] changes to the fire service in this country it won't be central government that suffers the loss – it will be the community. It's not a nice debate.

'The government's proposals have been shown to cost more money than is currently being spent and they are claiming the changes will improve resilience and the overall service. My personal view is that I don't see the proposals for regional controls and modernisation as improving the service. I don't think the existing system is faultless, no system is perfect – but it is far from broke. And as for their claims over improved resilience, well, I have many concerns over these ...'

As a 39-year-old family man, a father of two boys, aged 12 and 9, and as an honorary Cornishman Steve Rose has only the good of the residents of the county in the forefront of his mind. As an eight year resident of the town of Wadebridge Steve, like he has all his life, lives and works at the epicentre of what keeps this rural community as safe as possible. As we sit talking about possible changes to the service he loves and the thorny contradiction of being a union member and a possible instrument of government change, you can see the steely resolve of a man who feels he will always do what is right.

'You could ask Nick Raynsford the same questions you've asked me. I would hope his rationale is for the best interests of the fire service and the country. Us and the FBU have to ask the question of Mr Raynsford 'have you considered all the angles?' We have to play the devil's advocate and say 'hang on a minute' before you steam-roller through these proposals. We have to look these changes in the face ... and make the service work. I believe the FBU and the fire service management are on the same side. You won't find a union official who won't say community safety has got to be the top of their agenda ... and that ultimately has a very positive effect on fire-fighter safety. I think it's definitely a partnership ...'

Steve obviously loves this part of the world and wants to further his career in the brigade which he knows so well. He quotes Mick Howells (his outgoing Chief Fire Officer) as saying that every dedicated firefighter becomes a mistress to the service – and he agrees. But adds that what makes such dedication easier is if you also feel part of a strong and clearly defined community. 'A lot of people in Cornwall feel they are different from the rest of the country. They see the Tamar river as a natural divide. They see Cornwall as being out on a limb. There is a very strong local identity here and it's a major plus if you're providing a front line service because people have a strong feeling for their community. We don't have any large urbanised areas ... there is a friendlier attitude. Public services are generally looked at as the good guys. That's all good stuff for us. It enables us to engage the community in what we do and with our issues.

'I feel sad when I see firefighters being attacked by people in the community. Firefighters put their lives on the line to save whoever is in peril. Even if someone is having a go at you, you still try to do your best to help them. People do the job because they get an immense sense of satisfaction out of it ... and I feel very lucky to be living and working in Cornwall.'

Steve's applying for the vacant position of Assistant

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Chief Fire Officer that becomes available in April with the retirement of Chief Fire Officer Mick Howell. He says Mick Howell has always been supportive of officers who are unionised, but then he knew he was retiring. Steve doesn't say it but it's a universal maxim that new regimes can bring new challenges. However, he seems to have a handle on it, like everything else on his watch.

OFFICERS are 'claimed' by both sides in the UK fire and rescue service. Management for the most part expects individuals to be completely loyal and unquestioning, however they are treated. On the other hand, friends and colleagues expect support and unity.

Individually or in small groups, officers are required to develop and implement policies and processes they often do not agree with. Putting your head down and not speaking out is often perceived as being the better part of valour and the most likely damage limitation route for career development. Where individuals are judged to have strong views or are in larger groups, other ways are found to disenfranchise them, and there are many examples of that.

This is of course what they want because it undermines the ability to have influence. What is certain is that individuals can suffer quite badly in their professional, personal, and private lives as a consequence of the competing pressures they often find themselves under, personal health, relationships, and beliefs suffering as a result.

An independent survey into 'Stress in Officers in the UK Fire Service' undertaken during 2003-04 by the Robens Centre largely before any 'modernisation' sought to assess the degree of stress faced by officers. It found:

- Officers believe there is over-bureaucratic organisation
- Pressures of running brigades as a business rather than a service
- Insufficient authority to match responsibility
- Unsympathetic management
- Tortuous promotion system
- "The majority think they have far too much work..."
- "...a significant number believe they are either not coping or are allowing jobs to pile up and not get completed"
- "The overwhelming view is that the job involves trying to deal with too many issues at once. A large number of respondents do not think they get sympathetic support from their line manager...."
- "Almost half do not complete their work within normal working time and have to work extra hours, which they believe causes problems in their home life"
- "Organisational factors are clearly a cause of stress for officers"
- "Officers do not cope with stress very well and do not employ the typical coping strategies used by others. This may be because some of these coping mechanismsare not available to them"
- "Despite the self perception that they are generally healthy there is evidence that mental and physical health is adversely affected by the levels of stress"

THE SURVEY

THE report from Nottingham Health Care NHS Trust reviews and summarises the organisational factors that contribute to stress and in particular the organisational factors within the modern fire service. However, this report had a different emphasis as it included post traumatic stress and it focused on the work-related stressors which are experienced by firefighters and fire control staff of ranks below that of Officer grades.

'Stress in Officers in the UK Fire Service,' undertaken during 2003-4 by the Robens Centre, focuses entirely on the stressors which are perceived by firefighters as being relevant to the stress they encounter in their job as Fire Officers. Much of the information, which informed

the construction of the questionnaire, was obtained from focus groups held in London, Surrey, Northants and South Wales. No previous work appears to have been published which has examined the stressors encountered in the jobs of Fire Officers in the UK fire service.

The objectives were to:

- Determine the proportion of Officers who perceive significant levels of stress in their jobs.
- To understand the organisational and other factors which contribute to this stress
- To determine what coping and support mechanisms are available, and are used, by Officers to deal with stress at work.
- To measure the effect this stress has on

BETWEEN A ROCK

Have you at any time since becoming an officer suffered from stress?

Yes 69.2%

Causes of stress – one most important reason:

Excessive Workload (insufficient time)	22.5%
No support from senior staff (feeling isolated)	12.4%
Personnel issues (managing difficult people)	7.0%
Personal (non-work-related)	7.0%
Poor management	6.2%

Is the promotion route stressful?

Yes 90.1%

To what extent do you feel you have control over the areas of work you have responsibility for?

Feel fully in control	13.4%
Sometimes feel I am not in control	57.7%
Frequently feel I am not in control	16.9%

Have you ever worked hard to achieve a target and then found it changed?

Yes 79%

Are unachievable targets causing stress?

Yes 72.1%

Do you think your role as an Officer isolates you?

Yes 51.2%

If YES do you find this isolation stressful?

Yes 49.1%

Is the brigade trying to be run like a business?

Yes 82.7%

If YES do you agree with the following?

Efficiency and accountability is enhanced	22.8%
You cannot run a public service like a business	51.5%
Pressures of being run like a business are stressful	53.9%

How would your line manager react to complaints about workload?

Be sympathetic and do something positive	36.5%
Be sympathetic but do nothing	45.5%
Be unsympathetic and dismissive	5.5%
See it as sign of weakness	8%
Question your professional capability	4.5%

Job is unnecessarily bureaucratic?

Yes 85.6%

This bureaucracy involves:

Too many statistics being requested	76.3%
Tasks often seem pointless	69.9%
Too many records/reports	68.8%
Too much form filling	65.9%
Too much target setting	62.4%
Constant reviews and re-evaluations	59.5%
Too many bosses	43.9%
Unrealistic striving for quality	41.0%

physical and mental health

■ To make recommendations on changes and interventions, which may be required to manage identified stressors.

GRADES included in this survey ranged from Station Officer to Assistant Chief Fire Officer. A stratified sampling method was devised so that all the ranks were represented in proportion to the numbers in each rank, the size of the brigade and whether they were in a rural, urban or metropolitan brigade.

Following a number of pilots and focus groups, 400 officers were selected in a way to ensure that all the ranks were represented in proportion to the numbers in each rank, the size of the brigade and whether they were in a rural, urban or

metropolitan brigade. In February 2004, they were sent the following:

■ The purpose-designed biographical and stress questionnaire

■ The Occupational Stress Indicator (Cooper, Sloan and Williams 1988)

■ The Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach, Jackson and Leiter 1996)
Just over 50% replied.

WHAT NOW?

The Executive Council has endorsed the report and has agreed a budget to publish it, with recommendations, at the earliest possible date and to distribute it within the Union and to key figures in Government and the UK fire and rescue service.

OFFICERS BY NUMBERS

Total	5,148	
Rural brigades	1,359	26.4%
Metropolitan brigades	2,234	43.4%
Urban brigades	1,555	30.2%
Station Officer	3,179	61.8%
Assistant Divisional Officer	1,025	19.9%
Divisional Officer	719	14.0%
Senior Divisional Officer	144	2.8%
Assistant Chief Fire Officer	81	1.6%

AND A HARD PLACE



STEVE AND GAGNON/REPORTER/DIGITAL.CO.UK

PREVIOUS SURVEYS

TWO previous surveys have been commissioned by the FBU into stress faced by employees of the UK fire and rescue service and Union officials. Organisational Stressors in FBU Officials (Woodward et.al. (undated) – Centre for Trauma Studies, Nottingham Healthcare NHS Trust), concluded that Union Officials suffered excessive levels of stress as a result of organisational structure and role within the organisation. There was dissatisfaction with many areas of the work as a Union representative and evidence of stress-related physical and mental illness. Whilst the study focused on the fire-fighters' role as a Union Official there was inevitably overlap between stress arising from organisational factors within the fire service and organisational factors within the Union. For example the largest single cause of stress was lack of time to do the work. Ninety-four per cent felt that their role as union officials created additional stress over and above that of being an operational firefighter.

The second study (An Audit of Organisational, Operational and Traumatic Stressors in Firefighters and Fire Control Staff (Regel et.al 2001), revealed that firefighters experience excessive levels of stress arising from both organisational structure and traumatic incidents in the field. Lack of consultation / communication, factors not under the individual's direct control and morale and organisational climate were the three most frequently cited sources of organisational stress. Although this study included Officer ranks up to and including Divisional Officer, no analysis was made of the stress levels of Officers as compared with sub-officer grades.

Ability to complete work within normal time?

Always	3.5%
Usually	48.8%
Never	47.8%

Working extra hours?

Regularly	54.2%
Occasionally	37.3%
Never	8.5%

Manager understands how much work you have?

Yes	47.0%
No	45.5%
Don't know	7.4%

Expected to deal with too many issues at once?

Yes	87.1%
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Let's stay focused – and involved

'MODERNISATION' means different things to different people, depending on their affiliations. Its meaning is also significantly influenced by group politics and ambition – and compounded by internal politics within these groups. Each of the groupings within the UK fire and rescue service would argue that their motives are service driven and honourable. Accepting that all organisations may have many decent individual members, in the end deeds speak louder than words. Agendas are often delivered by opportunistic individuals, driven by personal ambition and power, rather than the good of the Service and safety of the public. We will have to live with the consequences of their actions or inactions.

We've seen the agenda behind the abolition of the Fire Service institutions like the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council (CFBAC) and the Fire Safety Advisory Board (FSAB) as the ODPM has moved to assert its power over the Union, councillors and Chief Fire Officers. We've seen the plans to forcibly include other groups and the introduction of the Middle Managers Committee for the National Joint Council (NJC) in a thinly veiled attempt to marginalise Officer Members. The Government has not given up on this plan, as they are actively encouraging the Employers to overturn those elements of the June 2003 Pay and Conditions

Agreement which demand membership of the NJC only be allowed through a proper democratic process, successfully negotiated by the FBU.

Then take the FiReControl Project. The Union wants efficient fire control provision that is properly specified, funded and resourced. And we would all wish to see proper resilience provision in place. The Government claims it wants efficiency and resilience improvements. But local politicians through chief officers to the practitioners tasked with delivering the project, know that is not what is happening.

The integrated risk management plan (IRMP) process? This is cynically cost driven. If it were service-driven, then the Pathfinder

route would have been developed and resourced to achieve real economic efficiencies and risk-based improvements. What we as a Union are endeavouring to do now is to promote a culture of zero fire deaths and to convince Government of the need for a new national standard for emergency response planning genuinely geared to protecting the lives and health and safety of FBU members and the public.

Employers are also back to their old dishonourable ways around the Grey Book (although we must remember that today's new version, as with the old one, was only ever an agreement dependent on people on both sides behaving honourably!) They are attempting to implement 'new' discipline procedures, 'new' duty systems and rank to role arrangements, despite or ahead of national agreements and then wilfully ignoring grievance and collective issue procedures. Where this is happening, they have clearly judged that they can get away with it, for now at least.

All of these moves are about political – or

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in some cases – personal gain: delivering the service on the cheap through staff cuts and isolating and silencing the employees who remain.

Depressed? That's exactly the effect that they intended to have. They want a demoralised workforce that will give in. The consequences for members are fairly obvious and none more so than if we give up the fight.

We have all been through difficult times but let's be clear that despite what some, including a small number from within, would have you believe, we made some important advances in the June 2003 Pay and Conditions Agreement, including a new Grey Book with many improvements, substantial pay rises for all members and a "professional" pay formula



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kicking in from July 1 2005.

All of this was achieved in the most difficult of circumstances against the background of a determined and quite ruthless and morally bankrupt Government. Also be clear that much of this was on the agenda despite the pay dispute although it suits

many to blame the policies, strategies and timing of the Union leadership for what they claim to be poor outcomes.

Importantly, we have remained intact and are able to continue to deliver, develop and influence on behalf of our members.

One of the significant factors in our success has

been our unity. Raynsford and others like him were aghast that 'managers' were on picket lines with 'other' workers (an excellent example of strength in unity). They continue to try to undermine that very unity, ably assisted by the disgraceful antics of some senior officers. We must not be deceived by the smoke and mirrors of those with an agenda that is not in our interest.

The key to successfully meeting the challenges that lie ahead and providing that vital support for our members is to build on that unity and actively support each other. If, as FBU members (officers included), we fail to stay focused and importantly involved, the price will be that we are all subjected to the agenda of those who do.

This is the first issue of what we hope will be a regular publication dealing specifically with FBU officer members issues. Given the changes under rank to role the title of the publication is necessarily temporary. We'd like to hear from you as to what you think would be an appropriate name for the publication.