

How the FBU is organised

FBU policy is set by our annual conference, which usually takes place in May every year. The union is made up of around 2,000 branches, at fire station (and other FRS workplace) level, with elected officials at brigade (in each fire and rescue service) and regional level.

Matt Wrack is the current FBU general secretary. He was re-elected in April this year.

The executive council (EC) of the union is made up of officials elected from each of the union's 13 regions, and one representative from particular constituencies of the union (retained, officers, control), and sectional representatives (women, black and ethnic minority and LGBT). The president of the union chairs meetings of the EC. The EC is assisted in the day to day running of the union by the general secretary, assistant general secretary, president, vice-president, national treasurer, and four national officers – all elected nationally.

The FBU also works with a parliamentary group of MPs, coordinated by John McDonnell MP. We also work with the all party parliamentary fire safety and rescue group, as well as with MSPs, AMs and MLAs in other parliaments and assemblies, as appropriate.

How MPs can work with the FBU

MPs have assisted the FBU in a wide variety of ways in recent years. The union is happy to provide information on fire and rescue service matters to assist with legislation.

MPs can help the FBU by:

- Attending fire and rescue service debates;
- Asking questions about fire and rescue service matters;
- Putting down early day motions on relevant matters;
- Reading our MPs briefings;
- Liaising with our parliamentary group.

Fire and Rescue Service Briefing

From the Fire Brigades Union



June 2010

An introduction to the fire and rescue service

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) represents over 44,000 committed professionals in fire and rescue services across the UK. We represent the overwhelming majority of uniformed personnel in the fire and rescue service – wholetime and retained firefighters, fire control staff and all roles up to the most senior levels within the service.

Pride in the UK fire and rescue service

Firefighters working for UK fire and rescue services have much to be proud of. Firefighters carry out over 4,000 rescues from fires every year. The number of rescues has been at this level for many years, despite fewer fires. And firefighters carry out many other kinds of emergency intervention. Over 3,000 people were rescued during the 2007 floods, whilst many thousands are rescued from road traffic collisions. Firefighters provide vital national resilience in the face of terrorist attacks, industrial explosions like Buncefield, as well as smaller everyday assistance such as rescuing people from lifts.

Over the last few years the role of the firefighter has changed considerably. There is now far more

emphasis on engagement with local communities to promote fire safety and to prevent fires. This is something the FBU have promoted for a considerable time and we welcome the government's acceptance that firefighters have a central role in our society. However, there is still some way to go: the FBU is urging the fire and rescue service to take care of its responsibilities to tackle climate change, adapting to extreme weather and also reducing its own carbon footprint.

The FBU have also been central in driving the equality agenda within the fire and rescue service. We have recognised for many years that in order to best serve all our communities the service needs also to reflect that community with a diverse workforce. We have often been a lone voice in this area but we will continue to work with all stakeholders to ensure we have a service that all sections of our community recognise as truly representing them.



The UK fire and rescue service

The UK fire and rescue service operates under devolved arrangements in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Within England there are 46 local fire and rescue services, working under the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG).

In Scotland, the minister for community safety (part of the Department for Justice) is responsible for the eight fire and rescue services. In Wales, the Department for Social Justice and Regeneration is responsible for the three fire and rescue services. In Northern Ireland, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is responsible for the fire and rescue service.

Local fire and rescue services are run by local fire and rescue authorities (or fire boards in Scotland and Northern Ireland). These consist of elected councillors, with advice from chief fire officers.

Chief fire and rescue advisers for England, Scotland and Wales provide guidance and expertise, but there is no inspectorate.

Firefighter's pay rates and terms and conditions are governed by what is called the Grey Book. Negotiations take place on these matters at the UK-wide National Joint Council for Local Authority Fire and Rescue Services (NJC), which includes the union and employers. There are other national committees that the union takes part in, but no overarching national forum to drive improvements. The firefighters' pension scheme represents an important safety net in what is an inherently dangerous profession.

The FBU's priorities

The FBU has some immediate issues for the new UK government and the new parliament.

Scrap FiReControl

The FBU has opposed the regional fire control project from the beginning. We understood that the loss of local control rooms would mean not only the loss of jobs for our control staff, but the loss of expertise and the reduction in capacity to deal with national emergencies.

The FiReControl project has been beset with escalating costs. It is a white elephant project. Select committee enquiries have exposed its failures.

We would expect the new government to keep its promise, scrap the scheme and update existing control rooms with new technology – as has been done in Scotland.

A statutory duty on flooding

Firefighters responded magnificently to the 2007 floods, rescuing people and helping to avert major inundation of critical infrastructure.

However fire and rescue services are not required by law to respond to flooding – creating serious problems with equipment and training for firefighters. This was recognised by the Pitt Review. Pitt wanted clarity on legal responsibilities – a statutory duty on all fire and rescue services to respond to flooding would complement rather than cut across existing duties.

The new government should impose a statutory duty on fire and rescue service to respond to flooding.

If it does so, we can avoid scenes like those in Cumbria last November, when firefighters once more had to carry out rescues without the right kit.

National standards and guidance

The last government introduced Integrated Risk Management Planning (IRMP) at a local level. Removing national standards of fire cover has not improved the service to the public. If anything, it has made it worse.

Look at attendance times – the time taken from the initial call to arrival at a fire or other incident. CLG research published last year showed that between 1996 and 2006, response times to house fires were 18% slower.

This means fire engines are taking longer to reach people. This means more people are at risk – both members of the public and firefighters: as the incident escalates exponentially the longer we wait for the fire service's attendance. It also means that the level of service differs widely between similar locations – even those side by side in different fire authorities.

The FBU wants national standards of fire cover – at least at the level of the old system - preferably better. That's what they have in Wales. The Scottish fire minister announced a working group on the issue. We think a minimum national standard across the UK is vital for public safety.

And it's not just about time. National guidance for all sorts of other fire safety matters – including essential operational guidance for dealing with a range of hazardous situations – dried up for most of the last five years. The FBU wants authoritative national guidance and national standards to improve our service and to protect firefighters.

Take firefighter safety seriously

A decade ago it had become very rare for firefighters to be killed on duty. However since “modernisation”, we've seen escalating firefighter fatalities. Over the last five years eighteen firefighters have died whilst on duty in the UK; fourteen of them whilst at incidents. Ten firefighters have died while fighting fires.

The FBU believes that an important factor in this is the downgrading of the emergency intervention role of the service. This is exacerbated by the failure to issue up to date operational guidance. We think there are serious concerns about the training received by firefighters to deal with emergency response. The expanding role of the firefighter has meant that some vital areas have been neglected and resources need to be put in place to ensure we have enough firefighters, properly equipped and trained to best protect all in our community. These matters require investigation – an overview so lessons can be learned. That's what we want the new government to do – and we offer our expertise in putting things right, so we reduce to the minimum the risk of firefighters dying in the line of duty.

Don't cut the fire and rescue service

For the fire and rescue service funding cuts mean one thing: firefighter jobs lost. And firefighter jobs lost mean greater risk to public and firefighter safety.

Don't be fooled by the falling number of fires and fire deaths into thinking that firefighter jobs can be cut. Firefighters still make thousands of rescues every year. We don't have exact figures because the government stopped publishing them a decade ago. But our own research shows that firefighters are still making thousands of lifesaving interventions every year.

The range and diversity of emergency incidents we're expected to deal with has grown. Firefighters will face any emergency. But we need the numbers available, from those in the control rooms to those who staff the pumps, right up to those who make the strategic managerial decisions. To compromise any aspect of the emergency response threatens public safety.

Our message to the government is, if you're considering cutting the fire and rescue service funding – think again.