

# FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE MATTERS

A PARLIAMENTARY BULLETIN FOR MPS FROM THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION | JULY 2022



## EMPTY, UNDEMOCRATIC AND HOSTILE TO FIREFIGHTERS

On 18 May 2022 the Home Office launched its consultation on the government's White Paper, Reforming Our Fire and Rescue Service.

The FBU is extremely disappointed with the White Paper. It contains no direct plans or resources to improve the service fire and rescue provides to the public. It will not solve the building safety crisis exposed by the Grenfell Tower fire. The White Paper is remarkably thin on substance, lacking real ambition and seeks mainly to attack the workforce and the FBU. It is a chief fire officers' wish list.

Instead of serious investment and professional standards of service, instead of seeking improvement in delivery of service to our communities, it aims to remove the ability for firefighters to shape the service they provide and reduce them to a 'shut up and do as you are told' workforce who work longer and still get less. The FBU will engage with ministers and employers over the detailed proposals, but the union's primary message to ministers is that they must stop and think again: this is not the way to improve our service and profession.

### FLAWS

The White Paper is flawed in many respects:

- It contains no provisions to improve the service firefighters provide to our communities
- It promises no new investment in firefighters or equipment needed to improve the service
- It threatens the legal rights of firefighters to collectively bargain with our employers over pay, conditions, safety and other vital contractual matters
- If implemented, it would cut firefighters' pay, increase hours, roles and the intensity of work, introduce unsafe practices and all while stretching the service to breaking point
- It threatens the right of firefighters to take lawful industrial action when we are attacked by employers and governments

- It seeks to give chief fire officers powers to dictate firefighters' pay, conditions, duty systems, safety and other matters – even though they have no knowledge, training or experience of these matters.

The White Paper contains some gimmicks, which contribute nothing to the service:

- It pledges to impose an oath, committing firefighters to do as they are told, put themselves at risk while losing the right to be heard and listened to, negotiated and consulted with
- It promises a statutory code of ethics, designed not to improve the service, but instead to make it easier to discipline and sack firefighters.

The White Paper contains some proposals that the FBU is happy to discuss, subject to ministers providing more clarity on what they might involve. These include:

The proposed College of Fire and Rescue  
Professional standards for entry and officers  
Research and data.

The FBU also has a series of our own proposals to improve the service to the public and to improve the pay and conditions of firefighters, matters that should be at the heart of the White Paper.

### CHIEF FIRE OFFICERS' CHARTER

The fundamental objective of this White Paper is to elevate the role of chief fire officers and thereby to diminish the voice of firefighters, particularly the FBU. The White Paper seeks to offer chief fire officers the powers to:

- Make decisions about attendance times and other response standards, night cover, station closures and other vital matters without any accountability to the public
- Turn the local risk management process into a resource management cost-cutting exercise

- Cut firefighter jobs, worsen firefighter safety, impose new roles and contracts without consultation, impose unsafe shift systems and other bad practices that should be made by politicians after negotiation with the FBU
- Become the employer of firefighters, instead of current arrangements which involve public sector organisations with political oversight.

None of these measures will do anything whatsoever to improve public safety. They will in all likelihood lead to empire-building by chief fire officers, waste and bureaucracy, a massive deterioration in industrial relations and damage to the reputation of the fire and rescue service.

## GOVERNANCE

The White Paper threatens to introduce a more hierarchical and less democratic system of accountability for the fire and rescue service governance. Although there are a range of models, most fire and rescue services are currently overseen by a committee of elected councillors, who come from a range of political parties, are elected locally and can be voted out if the majority of voters believe they are not doing their jobs properly.

The White Paper promotes instead that fire and rescue services would be under the local political control of a single, elected individual. This could be a mayor, a police and crime commissioner, or an “executive councillor”. However the White Paper recognises that “regardless of who the executive leader is, each would need a body to scrutinise their decision making”.

This concedes the FBU’s point about democratic oversight. The union insists that every form of governance should involve a committee of elected politicians for scrutiny and accountability. The scrutiny committee should not be appointed by the authority subject to its supervision, nor composed of cronies or appointed bureaucrats.

## FBU PROPOSED TRANSFORMATION AGENDA

The FBU takes the opportunity presented by this White Paper to set out our own proposals for the transformation of the fire and rescue service across the UK, including:

- Westminster-funded investment in the fire and rescue service across the UK
- Immediate recruitment of 5,000 new firefighters as a prelude to a wider review to increase establishments

- UK-wide service delivery standards developed in collaboration with fire and rescue services and governments in the devolved parts of the UK
- A statutory advisory body for the UK, including the FBU in its composition
- A publicly-owned Fire Service College with a governance body, reflecting workforce representatives elected by the workforce and the four UK administrations that will utilise the College
- A publicly-owned and funded fire research body
- Returning the Building Research Establishment to public ownership
- Restoration of all building control functions to local authority building control
- An adequately-resourced and high-quality fire safety inspection regime conducted by trained fire and rescue service specialist fire safety inspectors during all stages of building construction, occupancy and use of all buildings and premises other than individual dwellings.

The FBU wants central government to state its anticipated improved performance outcomes and how its proposals in the White Paper would meet them. These should include the continuous improvement in:

- reduction in the number of fires
- reduction in the occurrence of other incident types that are the statutory responsibility of fire and rescue services
- reduction in the damage caused by fire achieved through early intervention with adequate and safe procedures and sufficient trained crews attending incidents
- reduction in call handling time from time of call to dispatch
- reduction in the attendance times of the first appliance to arrive
- reduction in the attendance times of the second and subsequent appliances to arrive
- increased number of fire safety inspections and related activity of buildings, including during the planning and construction phases
- reduction in the number of fire deaths and other incidents
- reduction in the number of injuries caused at fires and other incidents
- improved pay and reward for firefighters
- reduction in the number of deaths of firefighters
- reduction in the number of injuries caused to firefighters.