

The Officer Issue

The magazine of the Fire Brigades Union officer members www.fbu.org.uk

Summer 2010

A large group of approximately 30 fire brigades union officer members are posed on a wide staircase with a red carpet. The group is arranged in several rows, with some individuals standing on the stairs and others on the ground. They are dressed in a variety of attire, ranging from casual t-shirts and jeans to formal suits. Many of the members are wearing red lanyards with identification badges. The background shows the ornate architecture of the staircase, including wooden railings and framed pictures on the wall.

Successful officer members' seminar

report p5



Foreword

It's about time

In the June 2010 *Firefighter*, I outlined the Fire Brigades Union's campaign for national standards of fire cover.

I also described the current postcode lottery of fire and rescue service attendance and the fact that the average attendance time to a dwelling fire increased by 18% between 1996 and 2006. It has increased still further since then and highlighted government research that shows that attendance time increases may be causing 13 additional fire deaths per year.

It might be of benefit to think about how this position arose.

In 1995, the English Audit Commission report *In the Line of Fire* pointed out the lack of emphasis FRSS were placing on fire safety in the community. It said that the fire service should "place equal priority on fire safety and firefighting as a means of achieving objectives".

Two years later, the Community Fire Safety Task Force said: "Our principal aim is ... to make Community Fire Safety the primary focus of the fire service". (*Safe as Houses*)

The emphasis had changed. In 1995 the call was for fire safety and firefighting to have equal priority, by 1997, the call was for community fire safety to be the primary focus. In 2002, it changed again. The Bain report said: "The new emphasis must be on the prevention of fire, rather than the methods of dealing with

fire after it has started." (*The Future of the Fire Service*).

Bain said "every fire is a failure". His message was that attending fires was not something that a fire and rescue service should be proud of - it was something to be ashamed of.

By accident or by design, a perfectly reasonable suggestion from 1995 was distorted to the point at which "firefighting" has become a rude word in some corners of the fire and rescue service.

To get back to where we should be, we need to retrace our steps. This means taking every opportunity to say that the fire and rescue service

should ensure that firefighting is not given secondary priority to anything, including fire safety.

It means emphasising the need for national resilience and for nationally verified standards. Wales still has national standards. The Scottish government is reviewing its standards, after a successful FBU campaign. The FBU will campaign to ensure minimum national standards and rapid response and rescue hold a central place in the delivery of our service.

The new government at Westminster, which can massively influence the policy agenda in all parts of

the UK through control of the funding mechanism, has made "localism" a key feature. Localism under this government is likely to mean merely providing political cover for lower, unmeasured standards being introduced in public services.

Public safety and national resilience must stand above party politics. This is the key message which the FBU will be seeking to deliver to fire service stakeholders, MPs and, if possible, the ministers at CLG and Treasury in the coming months.

Andy Dark
Assistant General Secretary



Andy Dark speaking at the officers' seminar in April

"By accident or by design, 'firefighting' has become a rude word in some corners of the fire and rescue service"

This issue

Opportunities to challenge the bean counters



*Safety research: ONC
health and safety rep
Mick Coakley*



FBU fire safety adviser Dave Sibert addresses the officers' national seminar

Editor's letter

So, the wrath of the bean counters is upon us or, so some would have us believe, there is a financial crisis. And though it is none of our making, we as the UK fire and rescue service must pay for it.

Or must we? And if we do have to pay, just how much will it cost? The recent budget announcement of 25% cuts over the next four years really does not tell the full story. Because the full story started quite some time ago. UK fire and rescue services have been cutting their inputs and at the same time increasing their outputs for some considerable time.

This means that the service, with its 57 local services, has 57 potentially different starting points. That means 57 different opportunities to challenge whether, in fact, the proposed across-the-board cuts can be implemented without significant impact on what we do and what we do for others.

And in making that challenge I hope that what we do is actually highlighted. For instance,

what about the added value we provide to other local authority services, what about the added value we provide to the community.

Fire and rescue services undertaking those added-value activities present a saving to another provider. We should not be looking to cut those added-value provisions, we should be looking to offset them against any required savings.

Anyone can cut services. The FBU has a long history of protecting services. Let's hope that others rise to the challenge and positively engage with FBU officials and officer members to identify common ground to protect the service.

Dave Beverley
Secretary, ONC

I apologise if you were unable to obtain your own copy of the last *Officer Issue*. To receive further copies, direct to your home address, please ensure that your brigade membership secretary has your full contact details including your current role.

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Leading professionals

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Watch where you're putting your hands!

Driving

Watch where you put your hands – especially when driving, of course! But how many officers actually do that? How many use a mobile phone or their main scheme radios while driving?

The law is explicit about use of mobile phones, but allows operation of two-way/press-to-talk radios and mobile phones that are hands free.

ONC health and safety rep Mick Coakley (right) has been carrying out research, not only into the use of communications equipment, but also the safety in general of officers mobilised to incidents in cars.

This study, the results of which should be available shortly and is supported by the FBU safety and health committee, poses the question of whether any communications equipment at all should be operated while driving.

The study also addresses concerns that officers should not leave their vehicles without first donning some sort of



high-visibility clothing. As Mick points out, keeping a lightweight vest-type fluorescent tabard easily accessible to the driver to wear before donning the correct



level of safety clothing is better than getting out of the vehicle in day-to-day uniform. Mick suggests that brigades whose members wear polo shirts might consider adding some sort of conspicuous markings at point of manufacture.

It is hoped that the research into safety within 'light vehicles' will be produced in the form of a guidance document later in the year and contributions and suggestions for inclusion should be forwarded to dave.beverley@fbu.org.uk

IN BRIEF

Bullying in Boston?

A FOA rep in Lincolnshire has circulated correspondence encouraging officers to join, claiming that *only* FOA members will be allowed to stay on the current flexible duty system, suggesting that a principal officer "is willing to sign up with FOA to keep the current terms and conditions for the present rota for FOA members only". Don't be so bonkers, Baxter!

I am sure that Lincolnshire fire and rescue service has a bullying/harassment at work policy. I wonder if it ever uses it.

Does it make sense.com?

I welcome the development of new scenarios for ADCs, but please do not ignore situations which occur across FRS activities that might make excellent scenarios.

Why are ADC designers so set on not reflecting fire service managerial aspects. If the arguments are that it does not matter what the scenario is, then why not use a fire service setting? Are FRS scenarios used by other industries in identifying potential? I think they might use scenarios which are relevant to the organisation or business.

And why is it that someone who has spent considerable time in a temporary position, being monitored and mentored are then required to undertake an ADC to assess if they have the potential to undertake the role they are often able to demonstrate competence against?

Pensions sell out?

FOA

After the Firefighter Pensions Committee meeting in March, the Fire Officers Association (FOA) conducted a survey asking its members which of the (now-withdrawn) proposals they would be prepared to accept and then circulated those results, supposedly internally.

Which, of course, neither CLG pensions team leader Martin Hill, nor any of the employers' representatives,

would be able to obtain and read, would they? And, of course, the comments will not be considered by those reviewing public service pensions, will they?

The FBU, supported by the Association of Principal Fire Officers, which represents chief fire officers, successfully argued that the proposals should be withdrawn and properly costed before being brought back to any further meeting.

There was only one

representative body that thought the proposals worth considering without full and proper costings.

There is only one representative body that has subsequently potentially "informed" the review what detrimental changes its members are prepared to accept (and no doubt those detrimental changes acceptable to the FOA will be pushed back even further now!) without actually knowing the full and long-term details of the

pension schemes.

There is only one representative body that has demonstrated its wobbly-kneed willingness to sell off its members' pensions at the first sign of any confrontation.

The pensions of FBU members are worth much more than 40 pieces of silver and the FBU will fight to protect them, but we will not be deciding how to do that until we receive the evidence and information that Martin Hill was so reluctant to provide.

‘Strive to maximise officer membership of the FBU’

Russell Troth reports on an FBU officers’ seminar

Education

More than 40 officer members from across the UK attended a second seminar organised by the FBU officers’ national committee (ONC) at Wortley Hall near Sheffield in April this year. It ran alongside a similar event hosted by FBU control colleagues and included some joint presentations. FBU assistant general secretary Andy Dark, who is responsible for the national officer section, opened the seminar.

Ann Jones, a Wales assembly member and a former FBU executive council member, gave a passionate account of the progress in Wales of legislation to make compulsory the installation of sprinklers in the home. Participants commended her determination to improve safety in the home for both residents and firefighters.

FBU education officer Trevor Cave led a very topical and enlightening session on officer recruitment and retention. Some delegates described the real difficulties

faced in establishing effective industrial relations within their own brigade. Other members were able to demonstrate that, with flexibility and determination, positive working relationships can be forged.

National officer Sean Starbuck provided real food for thought on the application and management of development rates of pay. National opinion is divided but there are some more enlightened principal managers who recognise that an employee engaged in a development post will usually be delivering the full expectations of that role and should be remunerated appropriately.

In the evening, ten mixed teams struggled to find answers to the obscure and often controversial questions compiled by region 2 quizmaster John Denvir. A collection raised £1,000 for the families of FBU members who had recently lost their lives in the line of duty.

Attendance times

FBU fire safety adviser Dave Sibert

opened the second day with a presentation on the impact of removing national attendance time standards and the resulting variations in response times across the UK. Dave also gave examples of the consequences of reduced weight and response when attending confirmed fires.

This presentation was supplemented and supported by Rob Martin, ONC member for region 8, who spoke about the problems encountered when fighting fires in high-rise buildings and voiced concerns about sporadic regulatory enforcement of measures intended to assist firefighters dealing with incidents.

Sean Starbuck closed the seminar by summing up the political situation and emphasising that, as the only credible voice with the resources and the commitment to secure improvements to conditions of service and member’s health and safety, we should all strive to maximise levels of officer membership within the FBU.



Ann Jones speaking at the seminar

Is the BALANCE right?

I do not think anyone would argue that officers should not have suitable personal qualities and attributes and that they need to be demonstrated. But these are just some of the knowledge, skills and understanding that must be demonstrated by today's fire and rescue service officer.

Yet far too often operational or technical knowledge, skills and understanding have been the silent partners in progression – not tested until much later, if ever, in the process of selection for appointment or promotion. Some people are at last recognising that an ADC (assessment development centre) cannot be the only process for selection. It is only a part of informing the process for selection. And some are recognising that where within the process those knowledge, skills and understanding are tested or identified is just as important.

Starting point

I would argue that the testing of knowledge, skills and understanding should be the starting point in any process for promotion or appointment to any post that has an operational commitment or technical competence requirement. That is because it is the most important. In some appointments it is a critical safety issue, one on which not just firefighter safety depends, but also the ability to deal successfully with an incident or resolve a technical matter.

In the process that was used previously, before applying for promotion to

ONC secretary Dave Beverley asks if the selection process for promotion has the right balance

a post that had risk-critical implications, a person would have to demonstrate, against a set of nationally applied criteria, that they had the necessary knowledge, skills and understanding. Then those knowledge, skills and understanding were tested in a selection process. I often hear arguments that someone may have

reached the particular standard (or exam as we used to call them) many years before they apply for promotion and that knowledge and understanding would be at a lower level than that required.

Competence

My answer is that in the selection process those matters were tested by sample questions. So if anyone could not confirm their current competence, or competence specific for the post they had applied for, then they were not considered as being suitable for promotion to that post. Having the qualification did not automatically lead to promotion. It was simply an indication that someone might be suitable for promotion.

But it meant that someone would not normally be promoted without having the requisite knowledge, skills and understanding. Why is that process of determining whether someone possesses currency in the level of knowledge, skills and understanding for the post they are applying for wrong as a principle now?

If there were any failings in that process – and I am not convinced there were any that could not have been





resolved – then they were surely in the selection process, not the attainment of knowledge through a national standard of examination.

And does not the passing of an exam or attainment of a qualification often demonstrate that the individual has the ability to assimilate learning – often learning at a higher level? Not the potential of being able to assimilate learning, it demonstrates they can learn and have learnt and can do and have done (in the case of any practical examinations).

ADCs

To be clear, I am not advocating that ADCs be discontinued, but that they should be used as they were originally intended: to inform the selection process. And I do mean to inform the selection process, not to be the selection process. ADCs should be used to assess and identify development needs, meaning that everyone who attends an ADC should have their development needs identified. That does not mean to say the fire and rescue service must provide the development programme for everyone,

“ADCs should not be discontinued, but their use and effectiveness should be evaluated”

but that it should identify development needs and then help to identify ways in which those needs can be met.

And there is the issue of how long a successful ADC result is valid for. The norm seems to be around two to three years. Why? If a fire and rescue service has a proper system of IPD (integrated

personnel development) in place, then those attributes that were tested at the ADC should surely be maintained and verified within the IPD system.

I also want to be clear that this does not preclude applications external to a fire and rescue service. In fact it makes it simpler. If someone wants to apply for a risk-critical post, or one with a technical competence requirement in the fire and rescue service, then their knowledge, skills and understanding critical to the post would be tested at point of application, prior to any ADC process.

Those who were not successful would receive feedback on their performance and how they could improve it. It would then be up to the individual to decide whether they wished to improve their knowledge, skills and understanding in order to be successful next time.

The ADC, where used, would only be offered to those who were able to demonstrate that they possessed the required levels of knowledge, skills and understanding to pass to the next stage, the ADC.

I am not advocating that ADCs should be discontinued, but I do suggest that their use and effectiveness should be evaluated.

The cost of the statutory examinations was cited as one of the reasons for their discontinuation, yet no-one seems to be asking how much ADCs are costing as a proportion of the whole selection process.

Is the balance correct or do they just place a disproportional financial burden on the process?



Announcements

Have your say

Dave Sibert Fire safety adviser

The Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) has a timetable for revising its Approved Documents to the Building

Regulations. Currently, except if "exceptional circumstances" arise, it is proposed that Approved Document B (Fire Safety) (ADB) will begin its revision in 2013, a new edition coming into force in 2016.

Some parts of the fire industry feel that this timetable is inadequate and have called for an earlier review of ADB. These calls have linked themselves to the fire at Lakanal House in Camberwell – proposing that alterations to ADB could prevent the occurrence of a similar fire in the future.

However the ONC fire safety sub-committee does not share this view. The committee believes that while it was a human tragedy, the fire at Lakanal House did not represent an "exceptional circumstance". It believes that the existing CLG timetable for revising ADB should



be maintained.

According to the Building Services Research and Information Association, less than 1% of the UK's building stock is replaced each year. So in truth, bringing forward the revision of ADB by a couple of years

isn't going to make a great deal of difference to the fire safety of the built environment. In fact, bringing forward the revision may have adverse consequences. If a review were to start in the near future, there would be insufficient quantitative evidence on any of the issues to justify making any change.

Therefore, rather than bring forward the review of ADB, the FBU believes that the fire industry should use the years from 2010 to 2013 to gather hard statistical evidence to justify the changes that it thinks are needed. The FBU should support and encourage the fire industry to lobby CLG and others to use the Incident Recording System and the system of Fires of Special Interest to gather meaningful data that would support the need for change.

Officers National Committee meeting dates

Sept 29 **ONC Business Meeting** (To include AGM of ONC)

Sept 30 **MMNB**

Nov TBC **ONC Sub Committee**

Dec 14 **ONC Business Meeting**

Dec 15 **MMNB**

And finally ...

Award for promoting women

Congratulations to Sian Griffiths, a London officer FBU member on her recent award of the Queen's Fire Service Medal. Sian, who attended the ONC seminar in April, received the award to commemorate her work in promoting women in the fire service. Many FBU officials have witnessed firsthand the commitment Sian has to the Fire Brigades Union and she is pictured left at the 2010 Officer Seminar held at Wortley Hall in April.

Fond farewells

I would like to say a fond farewell to Russell Troth, ONC Region 11, who is retiring from the service and to Mick Coakley, ONC Region 6, who is standing down from his position. We send them both best wishes for their futures.

Dave Beverley, ONC Secretary



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