

FIRE BRIGADES UNION

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HSE SERVE TWO IMPROVEMENT NOTICES ON HERTFORDSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE IN AFTERMATH OF FIREFIGHTER DEATHS AT HARROW COURT, STEVENAGE

The Health and Safety Executive has served two Improvement Notices on Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue Service in the aftermath of the deaths of two firefighters at Harrow Court, Stevenage. The HSE have said there will be no prosecution over the deaths, but did carry out an inspection on 23, 25 and 26 March 2009.

Hertfordshire firefighters Jeff Wornham and Michael Miller died trying to save Nathalie Close in a fire at Harrow Court, Stevenage, in February 2005. Another member of the public was rescued and many others evacuated.

The Fire Brigades Union has welcomed the move by the HSE designed to improve the health and safety of firefighters across the County. It says some of the issues raised now needed to be addressed very urgently.

The union said that while the Notices were served on Hertfordshire they had national implications. Other fire brigades should also start to ensure they too could comply with the expectations set out by the HSE.

The HSE letter to Hertfordshire states: "The investigation into the Harrow Court incident identified a number of failures, **consequently** the focus of the inspection was the service's management of health and safety and specifically looking at training and competence." The HSE also made a number of observations which raised concerns including "no observation of the delivery" of some safety critical training at fire stations.

The HSE highlights the use of breathing apparatus by firefighters at emergency incidents as "a safety critical control measure used in hazardous operations." Safe use of breathing apparatus involves initial training and refresher training.

The HSE state that "the current standards of BA refresher training are not sufficient to cover all aspects". It has served an Improvement Notice requiring Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue Service instructing them "to design a BA refresher program and draw up a plan for delivery to firefighters."

The Improvement Notice itself states: "that refresher training on aspects of Breathing Apparatus (BA) has not been delivered to Firefighters by a BA instructor within the last two year period and is not currently planned to be delivered in the near future, including BA emergency procedures and BA entry control procedure, which were identified as issues in the Harrow Court investigation."

Concerns were also raised about water rescue, finding there is only one training instructor attached to one watch at Hatfield where the rescue boat is based. An Improvement Notice has been served "requiring you to review the boat operator training."

The HSE Improvement Notice states: “all persons who use boat equipment have not received adequate training in the methods to be adopted when responding to water-related incidents.”

The HSE also raised concerns about the size of the dry suits – large and extra large only - provided to firefighters for use with the water rescue boat. The HSE has told the fire service to “review the provision of dry suits to ensure that firefighters have suitable equipment and are able to use it properly in conditions likely to be encountered.”

The HSE also identified issues regarding operational intelligence packs for high rise residential buildings. It particularly highlighted issues in the Hemel Hempstead area including the availability of up-to-date information packs to firefighters on Gade Towers and Goldings House. The HSE has asked the fire and rescue service for more information on this issue.

Firefighter visits to high rise buildings, the HSE says, “appear to be taking place” including walk throughs and exercises on high rise procedures. But it also highlights other instances where planned training exercises on high rise procedures have not been undertaken.

The cleaning of fire kit, specialist protective clothing for use in fires and other incidents, was also a concern with cleaning taking a “significant amount of time” and “sometimes items are not returned”. Cleaning often has to be undertaken to decontaminate firefighters’ clothing, the HSE says.

Firefighters had taken to washing their own kit which “can have an impact on the protective properties of the kit”. Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue service has until 26 June to comply with the Improvement Notices and to respond to the other issues raised in the HSE letter, but not formally contained in the notices.

Tony Smith, FBU Herts Brigade Secretary said: “There are critical health and safety issues for firefighters which need to be addressed as a matter of urgency. While the HSE is not proceeding with a prosecution, the Improvement Notices are very important and very significant.

“Two fellow firefighters died at Harrow Court, Stevenage, and it is very critical that the lessons learned from that tragedy are fully addressed. We welcome the intervention of the Health and Safety Executive, to ensure all lessons learned from that tragedy are acted upon.

“Firefighters work in very hazardous situations where health and safety is more important, not less important. Our job is to protect lives, property and the environment and we want to do that safely so we can return to our families at the end of our working day.

“In the last few years we have lost three firefighters from one watch at Stevenage in two separate incidents. The Fire Brigades Union looks forward to working with Hertfordshire fire service to help address the issues identified by the HSE.”

Matt Wrack, FBU General Secretary said: “Although these Improvement Notices are served on Hertfordshire they have national implications. Other fire brigades across the UK should also now be making sure they can satisfy the expectations of the Health and Safety Executive.”

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