

# FIRE BRIGADES UNION

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## **TALKS AIMED AT AVERTING FIREFIGHTER INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN ESSEX FAIL**

Talks aimed at resolving a major dispute over cuts to frontline fire services in Essex and other matters were derailed this afternoon with the firefighters accusing their employers of not being interested in negotiating. It's the second time in succession the talks were ended before they got going – this time it was all over in just 45 minutes. Firefighter members of the FBU have voted 4 to 1 to take industrial action in Essex over the planned cuts.

“This is a very serious situation for the people of Essex and their fire service,” said Essex Fire Brigades Union official Keith Flynn. “Management is targeting vital life-and-death fire services for cuts while planning a massive increase in the information technology budget (£5 million in 3 years) and wanting to buy a helicopter. The fire authority wants to spend money in the wrong areas, cutting frontline services when the money clearly exists to avoid that.

“The immediate cause of today’s breakdown in talks seems to be management’s insistence on introducing personal likes and dislikes concerning attitudes to individuals, and seeking to dictate who can take part in the negotiations on behalf of Essex firefighters. This is a red herring which has nothing to do with the dispute between us. We came to talk, but management representatives seem to be concerned only with their hurt feelings. This is personality negotiation, and has no place in dealing with problems affecting our vital fire services.

“We remain determined to resolve the issue through negotiation, but that requires a management which is willing to talk rather than seeking excuse after excuse to break off discussions. We want to talk about the actual trade dispute, the real issues that matter and that affect the safety of the firefighters and people of Essex. We want to find a mutually acceptable way forward that can be supported by the professionals that deliver our vital life-saving service. The fire authority’s negotiators seem to have a different agenda.

“We have even offered to engage in a joint review of the proposals. But, sadly, management doesn’t seem to be interested.

“Less than three weeks ago there were several 999 incidents in south Essex at the same time, so there was a shortage of firefighters and equipment to deal with the incidents within fire authority target times.

“The current lack of resources would be made even worse if the cuts being proposed went ahead. Resources were also stretched to the limit in Colchester earlier in July, raising similar concerns about the impact of future cuts.

“We believe there are many places where savings can be made, but cuts in Essex are only being targeted at frontline crews. At the same time the fire authority is obsessed with massively increasing the information technology budget and buying a helicopter. It just doesn’t make sense. Let’s take a look at where savings can be made which preserve the frontline emergency service the public and businesses are paying for.”

Essex Fire and Rescue Service is set to implement a rolling programme of cuts to the frontline 999 emergency response service. The result will be fewer firefighters spread more thinly across Essex, leaving too few firefighters on duty to crew all the fire engines.

The Fire Authority proposes to cut the number of firefighters by “managed vacancies” from 954 firefighters in December 2008 to 905 in March 2010.

Forty four of those jobs – one in ten of the frontline fire station based crews – would go by changing the way higher reach aerial ladder platforms and rescue tenders are crewed. There would not be enough firefighters to crew all appliances, even if they were needed in a 999 emergency.

The union has also objected to a number of other changes which it says local managers are trying to impose rather than negotiate.

Ends

Media contacts:

Mick Rogers 07967 023709

Keith Flynn 07956 459111