

THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION

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A YEAR ON FROM THE FLOODS - SEVERE SHORTAGE OF BASIC EQUIPMENT AND TRAINING STILL PUTTING THE LIVES OF FIRE CREWS AT RISK

A year after summer floods caused havoc, the safety of rescue crews remains at risk because Fire and Rescue Services remain under resourced to cope with major flooding. Fire and rescue crews still lack even basic safety equipment such as waterproof clothing, boots and life jackets.

The warning comes from the Fire Brigades Union, whose members were praised for their key role in rescuing over 7,000 people from floods in June and July last year. It is also urging them to adopt Scotland's lead and introduce a legal duty on fire and rescue authorities to respond to major floods, backed up with extra resources.

The call comes as the FBU publishes a wide-ranging report 'Lessons of the 2007 floods - the perspective of fire crews', produced by the Labour Research Department. It draws on the experience, expertise and perceptions of crews involved in last summer's floods, alongside official reports and government documents.

The report charts how Ministers performed a 'U-turn' only three months before last summer's downpours. when they decided not to include response to major flooding in the Fire and Rescue Services (Emergencies) Order for England. The lack of a legal duty means fire and rescue authorities in England are still prevented from applying for new funding for the extra equipment, training and personnel needed to deal with the increased risk of flooding climate experts predict.

The Government now faces mounting pressure to make responding to floods a statutory duty as both the FBU and leading fire chiefs say it is needed to prepare for and respond to future flooding. Scotland already has a statutory duty in place and Northern Ireland is considering one.

The Department of Communities and Local Government is urged to issue safety critical national guidance for fire crews working in major floods. This should cover equipment, protective clothing, inoculations, and accredited training to ensure crews can carry out flood rescues without needlessly endangering themselves.

Health surveillance, better welfare provision and inoculations should be provided. This should be backed up with increased investment in specialist equipment to ensure fire and rescue services are better prepared for further flooding, made more likely with the advent of global warming.

The report makes startling reading. In last year's floods, very few fire crews had even basic waterproof clothing. Often there were no life jackets to wear or poles to test the depth of the water they were working in.

Fire crews worked in contaminated water in heavy kit designed to protect them from fires. Some worked in darkness in dangerous conditions without torches or hand held lamps.

During the few short breaks some slept on floors in their wet kit having worked to the point of exhaustion. Some were dehydrated because of a lack of drinking water.

The report also concludes that things might have been much worse if the Government's proposed new system of closing all 46 local emergency fire controls in England, replacing them with just nine regional control centres had been in place. This new system would drastically reduce the capacity of the service to respond to major incidents such as those that took place last year. The plans have been opposed by local MPs unions and the public, and the FBU continues to campaign against them. With good reason. .

For according to the Government's own figures, the new regional centres would only be able to handle 35,505 calls over 24 hours - around half of the 72,000 routed towards Hereford and Worcester control centre over 24 hours at the height of the floods. Wales has no plans to adopt the Government plans and Scotland has shelved moves to follow England's lead.

Opinion polls have concluded that those affected were more impressed with the reaction of the fire service than of any other body. But those on the front line of the fire and rescue service did not have the equipment and training they were entitled to.

Matt Wrack, FBU General Secretary said: "We are rightly proud of the work of fire crews during the floods. It was enormously difficult work, but they were determined to protect their communities and assist as best they could.

"The only thing standing in the way of a properly funded, equipped and trained professional response in the future is Government. There is no excuse for the lack of safety critical guidance about equipment and training which is still putting the lives of fire crews at risk.

"We got on with the work last year without key safety equipment and not enough fire crews, but we must not be put in that position again. If firefighters are to be sent to such incidents they have an unarguable right to do so with a reasonable degree of safety.

"Fire crews are particularly angry at the proposals to close all the local emergency fire controls. These were the critical link at local level which organised the response and liaised with other local emergency services.

"If regional controls centres been in place they would have made the work of the fire service much more difficult. They do not provide a solution, just another problem."

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A low-resolution pdf of the full report is available from annaz@fbu.org.uk

Briefing Paper

LESSONS OF THE 2007 FLOODS - THE PERSPECTIVE OF FIRE CREWS prepared for the Fire Brigades Union by Labour Research Department.

GOVERNMENT MUST LISTEN, LEARN - AND PAY UP

Government must not be allowed to sideline the experience and expertise of frontline crews in shaping future flooding policy, says the FBU, whose hard-hitting report highlights key areas of concern which must be addressed to cope effectively with future floods. Its proposals are

grounded in the experience of front line crews and control staff - and properly resourced, would make flood response more resilient.

But on the anniversary of the 2007 floods, there are worrying signs that the views of fire and rescue crews mobilised during the floods risk being marginalised as policy is shaped to deal with the increased threat of flooding. That must not happen if rescue crews and the public are to get the protection they deserve in future.

GOVERNMENT POLICY ON FLOODING (4.pg 15) Three main areas of concern are flagged up, and proposals outlined to deal with future floods more effectively. (4 pg 15)

* The Pitt Review interim report and recommendations - DEC 2007 **This critical view of the Pitt's interim report highlights gaps and inaccuracies. (4.1 pg 15)**

* The law on responsibility for dealing with floods **The FBU says every Fire and Rescue Authority should have a statutory duty to respond to major floods. (8.4, pg 31) The Chief Fire Officers Association agrees. Flood response is statutory in Scotland; England, Wales and a Northern Ireland should follow suit to give their communities the best protection when flood strike,**

* Lack of guidance on flooding for Fire and Rescue crews. **There should be national guidance and 24 hour welfare packs for crews mobilised to flood-hit areas. (8.2 pg 30)**

PITT'S PARTIAL PICTURE When Hilary Benn announced the Flooding Lessons Learned Review in August 2007, appointing Michael Pitt to lead it, he said the investigation would look at the views of everyone involved, including fire and rescue crews. "The over riding purpose of the Pitt Review is to learn the lessons from the floods of 2007 and to bring forward recommendations that will help the country adapt and deal more effectively with future flooding incidents" (Pitt 2007, pg3)

But, so far, in Pitt's interim report, this does not appear to have happened. "The review offered few opportunities to raise the key issues that affected fire and rescue services and their personnel. From the FBU's point of view, Michael Pitt has largely ignored the perspective of fire crews." His interim conclusions "barely offered space for suggestions on how to improve flood rescue." (4. Pg 15)

It also contained a glaring inaccuracy. Pitt stated fire and rescue services usually attend floods "as all fire and rescue crews are trained to work safely near water and are provided with suitable equipment to assist people in difficulty in water". This "would come as a surprise to many firefighters who waded through contaminated flood water in unsuitable personal protective equipment or rescued stranded people in boats borrowed or supplied from whatever source was to hand".

As the FBU spells out: "The health, safety and welfare of fire crews were put at risk during the floods through insufficient planning, equipment and training. Firefighters should not have to wade through contaminated water wearing unsuitable protective equipment and exposing themselves to health hazards. Fire crews should not have to work excessive hours without sufficient nourishment and without decent rest facilities" (pg6)

CASE FOR STATUTORY DUTY ON FLOODS "OVERWHELMING" A statutory duty on fire and rescue services to attend serious flooding is in the best interests of both the public and fire crews, the FBU argues. (4.2. Pg 16) **The report pinpoints a government "U- turn" three months before the first summer deluge.**

Ministers backed away from making dealing with floods a statutory duty. This U-turn has substantial consequences for fire and rescue authorities when floods hit. The case for imposing such a duty is “overwhelming” (4.2 A statutory duty? pg 17). “Imposing a duty, as long as it is backed by the necessary resources, will help the Fire and Rescue service prepare for the next floods.”

The nature of flooding is changing. South Yorkshire and Humberside were hit by surface flooding on an unprecedented scale last summer, which, as Pitt points out, is difficult to predict and “tends to result in significant amounts of flooding in areas that have not previously been flooded.” As the FBU report argues “This means *every* fire and rescue service needs to be prepared for flooding - not only those considered to be higher risk under river or coastal scenarios.” (3. pg 14)

THE NEED FOR NATIONAL GUIDANCE

During the floods, the health, safety and welfare of crews was put at risk - and there is still no national guidance to protect personnel from unnecessary health risks. As firefighters pointed out, kit designed to resist heat offers little water resistance - and crews could risk hypothermia and disease from working in contaminated water without inoculations. (8.1, pg 29) Crews have not been trained consistently to the standards necessary to deal with flood-related incidents.

The Department for Communities and Local Government should draw up the guidance for crews working in major floods, in consultation with the FBU and the Health and Safety Executive. Sir Ken Knight has also called for national guidance.

REGIONAL CALL CENTRES WILL LOSE VITAL LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

The union is campaigning against the planned introduction of regional control centres in England (6.2. pg 24) Under the plans, the service’s current 46 control centres would be replaced by just nine. The government has pushed ahead despite opposition from MPs, unions and the public.

But according to the government’s own figures, the new regional centres would be able to handle 35,505 calls over 24 hours – around half of the 72,000 which were routed towards Hereford and Worcester fire control centre over 24 hours at the height of the floods.

Expected staffing levels when regional control centres are fully operational, supplied by Fire Minister Parmjit Dhanda in a written answer to a parliamentary question, make startling reading. (6.2 pg 250 inc table). “It is a matter of concern for the FBU that for 17 hours from 11pm until 4pm the following day there would be no more than 76 control officers - and for most of the time only 59 - on duty across the whole of England. This is simply not enough to respond to an emergency such as the floods”.

The FBU has always argued that local knowledge is crucial in dealing with calls quickly and efficiently. This was underscored by crews’ experience in the 2007 floods, which showed the benefits of local controls and highlighted the weaknesses of plans for huge regional control centres. (6. pg 25)

Gloucestershire’s chief fire officer said his brigade’s response to future flooding would have been hampered if the new system had been in place. Under the plans, Taunton would serve the whole of the South West. Crucial expertise would be lost in the proposed new regional centres. “Control is one of those jobs where technology is no substitute for people” (6, Pg 24)

WILL THE GOVERNMENT LISTEN AND LEARN ?

The report gives a clear-eyed, evidence-based assessment of last year's floods - with robust suggestions on how crews can be better supported, equipped and prepared for the job next time round. For this to happen, the Department of Communities and Local Government has to ensure that fire and rescue services get the funding they need to meet the increased risk of floods, with adequate staffing levels to meet growing demand without eating into budgets for other emergencies. (P6). This is spelt out in the report's recommendations - and underpins them all.

As Matt Wrack the FBU'S general secretary, puts it in his foreward to the report, it all comes down to money. "While we are rightly proud of the work of firefighters during the floods, we are also increasingly frustrated that central government seems to endlessly want to deliver our service 'on the 'cheap'.

"If firefighters are to be sent to such incidents they have an unarguable right to be provided with the best possible equipment and training. It is simply not acceptable to send crews across the country without proper protective equipment and to expect them to 'make do' by borrowing torches from each other, grabbing inadequate food, and, on occasion, sleeping on floors.

"In the end, like so many other issues, this one comes down to money. Society expects firefighters to be there in such times of crisis. Firefighters are proud to respond. Government needs to provide the investment in the service to make this work."

The next few months will show if the government is prepared to listen, learn - and pay up.