



Fire Authority 'fails in duty to safeguard public'



The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) in Avon has accused Avon Fire Authority of prioritising a balanced budget over public safety as they axe over 50 firefighter posts.

The Union has said that the authority has failed to adequately plan for local fire risks in their Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP), which details how the service will operate up until 2020 and confirms the cut in frontline firefighter numbers.

The union says that the service would look 'very different' if the priority was purely about safeguarding the public.

The IRMP, which was voted through by the authority on Friday 10th February, will mean that specialist aerial appliances used for rescues from high-rise buildings & firefighting at height will no longer be guaranteed for mobilisation in the event of an emergency.

In addition, the heavy rescue tender in Avonmouth, used in serious road traffic

collisions on the motorway network, will no longer have a dedicated round the clock crew.

IRMP used to 'balance books' instead of minimising risk to keep public safe says FBU

The fire authority, however, did back down on its plan to have just one fire engine at Yate fire station during the night - following a Union campaign the station will now have two fire engines on call.

Gary Spindler, FBU brigade secretary in Avon, said: "It is clear that these plans have been used to try and balance the books instead of looking at the best ways to

minimise risks in order to keep the public safe. It is the polar opposite of how IRMPs are intended to be used.

"The IRMP would look very different without the planned budget cuts imposed by central government on Avon Fire and Rescue Service. These cuts will mean a slower response to any incident in the Yate area during the night, something that will increase the risk to both the public and firefighters

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Fighting for the Fire & Rescue Service



Protecting Firefighters & Control Staff

'Professional duty systems for professional firefighters'

In the last bulletin we reported on a number of 'duty system reviews', being undertaken in our region and the work we are doing to represent FBU members in these 'reviews'. This included asking colleagues from other parts of the UK what lessons needed to be learned from changes they had experienced. This short feature, based around the experiences of colleagues from East Anglia, prompted such a big response that we decided to give further details highlighting the dangers of changes to duty systems against a background of financial cuts.

A number of FRS's in the South West have approached the FBU stating their desire to make changes to the whole-time duty system. Duty systems are a contractual matter, outlined in the 'Grey Book' which is the national set of conditions of service we are all signed up to. This means that any changes have to be negotiated with the Union and we take this responsibility very seriously.

"...2 years without a family holiday due to my restrictive leave...not wishing to withdraw our young children from school...these are two years I will never get back in my children's development"

- Quote from Firefighter

All of the FRS's who have approached us have said that they want a new duty system based on 'flexibility' and quoted a number of different examples across the UK.

Based on this, we asked colleagues across the country for their experiences of duty system changes, especially ones that were purported to be driven by "flexibility".

One of the responses was from Cambridgeshire FBU who told us of a controversial "5 watch" duty system introduced by management in circumstances which sounded very familiar to the proposals in the South West.

We asked FBU reps Cameron Matthews, from Cambridgeshire, and Riccardo LaTorre from East Anglia FBU, to meet with us and the briefing they gave to us not only echoed with our experiences, but also served as a warning about the real meaning of 'flexibility' and the impact it can have on the working and family life of firefighters. Cambridgeshire FBU rep Cameron Matthews told us that the changes began with management first of all approaching watches directly and giving firefighters dire warnings that unless they accepted changes, worse would

"We were bullied into this system under threat of an even worse system"

- Quote from a Firefighter

follow. Promises were made about 'flexibility' being good for staff and implied threats were made about change being 'inevitable' and 'if you don't accept this then you will end up with an even worse system'.

The FBU say that by going direct to watches with warnings of "inevitable" change and threats of worse to come unless changes were accepted, what managers were really doing was trying to undermine the effectiveness of the FBU in future negotiations which they knew they would have to undertake.

Cameron Matthews explained "before the duty system came in Managers undertook

a series of 'roadshows' around the different watches and Stations in Cambridgeshire. They stressed the budget cuts we were facing and made great play on the

claim that, if firefighters conceded detrimental changes to their duty system, it would safeguard frontline services and prevent station closures, appliances cuts and job losses. This was a fundamental reason that firefighters gave us in accepting these changes." However this claim wasn't true. Shortly after the introduction of the new duty system management reneged on their promises and an attempt was made to remove vital rescue tenders but this was fought off by the Union.

"The duty system has placed a great amount of additional stress on my family" - Quote from Firefighter

"Inflexibility [means], having to form life around my job"

- A Quote from a Firefighter

In addition, following the first year of working the new system, it became apparent that huge numbers of members in Cambridgeshire felt misled and that the shift system that was actually

implemented was not the system which had been explained to them during the numerous 'roadshows' prior to its introduction. In a survey run by the FBU 12 months after the implementation of the system, 85% of Cambridgeshire Firefighters stated that they **did not believe** the duty system which was delivered and implemented was the one which had been originally explained during the 'roadshows' by management.

FBU condemn 'dangerous cuts' in Avon cont from page 1

"The FBU in Avon will continue to fight against these decisions and urge the authority to reconsider these dangerous moves."

The budget cut comes as fire minister Brandon Lewis announced an investigation into Avon Fire and Rescue Service over claims of bullying which could cost up to £1M.

Gary Spindler added: "Taxpayers will be paying for a government instigated inspection - at the cost of frontline firefighters. We believe the public will see that as a disgraceful and immoral use of their money."



'Professional duty systems for professional firefighters'

Cameron Matthews explained: "an overwhelming majority of Firefighters were very confident that the duty system that was implemented was not how it was explained, with many believing that the 'grey areas' in the new system were being abused in implementation. In addition, almost 80% of our members feel that the new duty system is impacting on their family life and has placed additional strain and stress on them and their families"

"I feel that the morale and focus of the workforce has been affected in a negative way as management implemented the system in a very different way to what was promised. Because of this I am now considering a completely different career."

- Quote from a Firefighter

"National terms and conditions, under the Grey Book, state that any shift pattern implemented for firefighters should be 'family friendly' and no-one should underestimate how important this is. Being a frontline Firefighter is already an inherently stressful occupation. Our job has high levels of stress and personal risk and often the results can be a strain on family life. Duty systems must assist firefighters in maintaining this balance, not make it worse, but our experience has shown that you only realise after the event how damaging changes to duty systems can be. **Having worked the new system for 12 months over 80% of firefighters said that they did not consider the changes to be family friendly and almost the same number said it had had a detrimental impact on their family life**".

The survey findings were shocking and serve as a clear warning to the perils of getting sucked into believing management warnings of "inevitable change" or promises of "flexibility". Talking to our meeting, Cameron said "this system is deeply unpopular with the majority of firefighters saying that they would not recommend this change to colleagues in other Brigades. Despite management claims to the contrary, the truth is that this is a very inflexible system and our members struggle to get proper time with their families as well as working a potential extra 14 extra days a year. Four years later we still have unresolved issues

between what was promised and what was delivered. The clear advice we would give to FBU members in other Brigades is to **stick with the Union and don't be hoodwinked by the promises or threats of management.**

Professional firefighters need and deserve professional duty systems and we will only get them by sticking together".



Cambridgeshire rep Cameron Matthews

South West regional secretary Trevor French, who is overseeing negotiations in our Brigades, added "The lessons from Cambridgeshire are fundamental and we are determined to apply them. The requirements in the Grey Book are the nationally agreed, minimum standards that duty systems must meet and no member, or group of members should be hoodwinked into giving them up. In the South West we have

shown that we are ready and willing to negotiate on duty systems that meet the professional requirements of the Fire Service, but we won't compromise the work/life balance of firefighters in order to deliver cuts. Good employers understand this and where they do, we can succeed in agreeing amendments to duty systems which meet the needs of

the organisation and of firefighters - a notable example of this occurred recently in Dorset & Wiltshire.

"78% of Cambridgeshire Firefighters find that the 5 watch duty system is restrictive and stressful to their personal life"

But I want managers who are considering change to be clear - we won't be duped into a duty system that only works for management and which members look back on with regret. The lessons from our colleagues are clear: stick together and don't be dragged into a race to the bottom."

FBU members and Officials from across the Region have been sending their solidarity and best wishes to two of our Officials who recently retired.

Thanks & Solidarity!

Steve was presented with a piece of Bristol Blue Glass by EC member Tam McFarlane as a thank you for his



Officers rep Steve Underhill receives a presentation from Tam McFarlane

Steve Underhill, the Regional rep for FBU Officer members in the South West, retired in February after a successful career in Somerset and then Dorset & Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service's.

commitment and work on behalf of our Union. Tam & Steve worked closely together as Union reps in Somerset many years ago and we all send Steve our very best for the future. Unity is Strength!

Another fond farewell was given to Avon Brigade Secretary and Regional Vice Chair, Chris Taylor who retired from Avon Fire & Rescue Service at the end of March. Chris has spent his entire career in Avon and has

served members in the role of Branch rep, Brigade Chair and finally Brigade Secretary. Chris is highly regarded across the FBU for his commitment to members and EC member Tam McFarlane made a special presentation on behalf of the Union to him at his recent retirement do. Thanks for all your work and best wishes for the future Tayz!



Avon Brigade Sec Chris Taylor

Duty systems should be built on respect, not cuts.



They've attacked our conditions, cut our pay and slashed our pensions - now some want to undermine our family lives to pay for cuts. We must say NO.

As budget cuts continue to bite, a number of politicians and principal officers across the UK are trying to force through detrimental changes to duty systems as a means of delivering budget cuts. This is something that we must all resist if it is attempted in the South West.

Sitting on the Union's Executive, I receive constant updates from colleagues in other areas of the UK outlining the attacks they are facing on duty systems. The majority of these plans are targeted at wholtime duty systems and the changes nearly always mean firefighters working longer hours, with short notice changes which have no regard to our families or caring responsibilities.

Properly constructed duty systems are enormously important to the fire service. They are the means by which we provide the public with a professional 24/7 emergency service whilst maintaining a proper work/life balance for the staff who deliver it. That's why they are treated with such importance by everyone within our service and why they have such a prominent position in our national, contractual terms and conditions. Requirements for duty systems are set out in the Grey Book, which is the bedrock of firefighter contracts. These basic requirements, which have been agreed nationally, are designed to ensure firefighters are treated fairly & are protected from exploitation in the workplace.

We have to make sure that these basic protections are followed and aren't undermined or compromised at a local level.



The primary duty of the FBU is to protect our members, and we will do so with vigour & determination

In the Fire Brigades Union we take our responsibilities seriously and approach all negotiations in a professional, thorough manner.

That's why, when approached about altering duty systems, we undertook research and listened very carefully to the experiences of our colleagues in Cambridgeshire who had surveyed firefighters 12 months into a new, heavily altered duty system.

The results serve as a clear warning of the dangers of going outside of agreed structures and accepting organisational change under pressure to deliver budget cuts - as one firefighter puts it "***we were bullied into this system under threat of an even worse system***". The reported outcome is a demoralised workforce working under a system that they find restrictive, stressful and has impacted negatively on their families. **We must not go down the same route.**

An effective duty system is built on a foundation of mutual respect. As firefighters, we commit to our profession and respect the contractual obligations, freely signed up to, in order to deliver a life-saving service in often hazardous circumstances. **Our employers must do the same.** A contract of employment works both ways and employers must respect their duty to negotiate properly and in accordance with the clear requirements set out in the Grey Book.

Recent negotiations within Dorset & Wiltshire FRS are a good example of this working in practice, with the FBU and principal management negotiating a fully agreed, complex set of proposals - including amendments to duty systems. This was done in a professional, timely manner with respect for effective industrial relations on both sides. Other FRS's would do well to take note.

Unfortunately however, in other areas of the region, the Union has received reports which echo with the bad experiences in Cambridgeshire. Some FBU members have told us that they have been approached about duty system changes with the now familiar gambit of '***if you don't accept this, you'll end up with something worse***'. We now know from Cambridgeshire that, not only is this not true, but also of the potential consequences to our working and family lives when duty systems are driven by budget cuts.

The primary duty of the FBU is to protect our members, and we will do so with vigour & determination. Whilst we will always undertake to negotiate, we will not compromise on the right of firefighters to have a proper work/life balance which gives them dignity and treats their families with respect. I call on all members to stand by the Union and stand up for professional duty systems for professional firefighters.

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Tam McFarlane

