

Britain: Bain review sets out a devastating government assault on fire service

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Last week the review chaired by Professor Sir George Bain published its findings and recommendations of the future of Britain's fire service.

Much has been made of the supposedly "independent" character of the 160-page review and its impartiality on the pay dispute between the UK's 55,000 firefighters, local authority employers and the government. Last month the Fire Brigades Union held several strikes aimed at pursuing the campaign for a firefighters salary to be £30,000 per annum, a 40 percent increase. The strikes were suspended in favour of talks between the FBU and the employers through the conciliation service ACAS.

The review was, however, commissioned by government on September 20 with the aim of scuppering the firefighters pay claim by linking any improvement in wages to far reaching changes within the fire service. Its interim report in November 11 was used to press the government's case against the strike.

The final report also insists that the most firefighters can expect is an 11 percent pay increase over two years. Its objectives go far beyond wages, however.

The Bain Review, under the guise of "modernisation" and "risk management", aims to dismantle statutory requirements governing the provision of fire cover and the conditions of fire service employees.

Under existing legislation, the fire service is responsible for answering all emergency 999 calls routed to it and its primary duty, enshrined in law, is to put out fires. In addition, the fire service is required to carry out "special services" work such as dealing with major transport incidents, chemical, biological and radioactive exposures and spills, severe weather conditions, collapsed buildings and rescuing people.

The level of fire cover is determined according to the characteristics of property and buildings in each area, with large cities and towns and high-risk industrial property given greater coverage. Statutes require the fire service to respond to incidents within a recommended time, and set out the number of vehicles and crew to be allocated. Staffing is determined by a system of "constant crewing", so that a set number of firefighters is available at all times with 95 percent of firefighters working a shift system of two days, two nights on and four days off.

The Bain Review derides such "outdated, rigid statutes". In place of the "predominant culture of responding to fires", fire service objectives must be redefined to emphasise its "specific responsibility for risk reduction and management, community fire safety, safety enforcement". This should be combined with its obligation to provide "emergency response to fires and other emergencies, and emergency preparedness coupled with the capacity and resilience to respond to major incidents of terrorism and other chemical, biological,

radiological or nuclear threats".

The review claims its proposals are aimed at saving lives. It complains that the provision of fire cover according to building density means that resources are "targeted on protecting unoccupied buildings rather than people". It gives as an "extreme" example the City of London where population during the day is 500,000 falling to 5,000 at night but fire cover stays the same.

This is a red herring, given that the review provides no other evidence to back up its insinuation that fire cover is being squandered in certain areas at the expense of others. The report indicates that the incidents of fire are rising and that the "most vulnerable in society suffer disproportionately from fire and its effects," especially in households with "young children, if the household is in financial difficulties or the person has a disability." By these criteria, cover in inner city areas would have to be prioritised. But instead there is a more ill defined call to "target resources"—a codeword for rationalisation.

The review demands the revoking or amending of a series of statutes covering fire cover. It specifies that the government amend or remove Section 19 of the Fire Services Act of 1947, which prohibits reducing the number of fire stations, appliances or staff without approval by the secretary of state.

Rather than an emphasis on "putting out fires", it insists on the "cost-effective" deployment of "people and equipment" through a concentration on fire prevention and responding solely to emergency situations. Fire cover is to be reduced in cases "where there is little scope to save lives." Put simply some fires are to be left to burn.

This is also the implication of the review's praise for the army's role in firefighting during the FBU strike. It argues that the army was able to cover for firefighting duties with greatly reduced resources and this supposedly proves the inefficiency of current provision. But the army was only able to manage because it responded to less than one-third of all emergency calls, with command centres determining in advance which incidents were deemed worthy of attendance.

"Community education", including the installation of domestic fire alarms, should reduce domestic incidents the review asserts. As for commercial fires, all businesses should be required to adopt a more "pre-cautionary" approach, Bain stipulates. This does not mean that business will be "neglected", but that they "will receive the appropriate cover which recognises companies' investment in sprinklers, night security staff and other precautions".

The review also suggests that insurance companies could be charged for the cost of fire crews attending road accidents, and businesses charged for crews responding to false alarm calls.

In line with this new cost-driven ethos, conditions of fire services

employment are to be radically undermined.

The review's primary aim is to legitimise a degree of labour flexibility that has major repercussions for public safety. It complains that just 10 percent of firefighters' time is spent fighting fires, so requirements on manning and preserving levels of alertness and fitness (such as enabling night crews to sleep on duty where possible) are deemed wasteful. Besides reducing manning levels, it also envisages firefighters being used to fill in for deficiencies in other emergency services. Firefighters are to be required to work with the ambulance service for example, with a view to "increased efficiencies and economies" by providing "co-responder" assistance to medical emergencies.

"Co-responder assistance" was introduced in 1996 because the ambulance service was only able to respond to life-threatening calls within eight minutes in 75 percent of cases. Rather than increasing provision within the ambulance service, firefighters could be allocated as first on the scene.

The review envisages a significant expansion of firefighters replacing paramedics as "first responder". That is a major factor in the review's insistence that the fire service be compelled to establish joint control rooms with other emergency services, under a "best value programme".

The "first responder" proposals have already drawn fire from the British Paramedics Association (BPA). In a communication to the government inquiry, the BPA noted that paramedic training "takes approximately two years and is only completed with 12 weeks of training sessions and one year on-the-road experience to become a technician, a further 10 weeks of hospital placements for training and practice in invasive skills, several written and oral examinations and full-time patient contact with a qualified mentor during this time."

Only after completing this training successfully can a person apply for state registration as a paramedic, the BPA notes. "So for fire staff to become paramedics would either entail their training to our standards or a change in legislation, neither of which we see as feasible."

Whilst using firefighters as a substitute paramedic service, the review rules out training firefighters in full paramedic skills as being "not cost effective nor appropriate." Their role is to be limited to basic trauma care and use of an automated defibrillator.

The review proposes scrapping the Grey Book regulations that cover all aspects of firefighters duties and rights, because such conditions "underpin an approach to management which is out of date in comparison to the culture of the modern workplace". Regulation should in future only cover "core conditions", such as pay, and these must be redefined so as to allow managers to vary shift patterns, crewing levels and redeployment according to demand.

The review calls for changes in management in order to promote cost-effectiveness. "Agents" must be recruited to provide "co-ordinating links" to the fire service, so as to "spread best practice".

The current practice of a single-entry level employment, where career progression is dependent upon years of service and experience, must also be scrapped. This is presented as a means of facilitating equal opportunities for women and ethnic minorities. The fire service is referred to as an "old-fashioned, white, male dominated manual occupation." By introducing part-time, flexible working and changing recruitment procedures, it is claimed that a more equitable balance will be achieved. The cutting of wage costs is merely an added bonus!

As to concrete proposals on the recruitment of women and ethnic minorities, the review has little positive to say. What it does say is

worrying. It complains that current regulations for recruitment set "absolute levels of fitness, not minima.... This means that, unlike for example, the army, people have to be physically ready to be firefighters before they start. This inhibits people who do not fit the stereotype, especially women, joining."

The review rejects any significant pay increase on the grounds that current salary levels are competitive as against similar jobs in the public sector. It stipulates that an 11 percent pay offer—spread over two years, as in the government's proposal—is conditional on firefighters agreeing to the "total reform package". The 11 percent package refers to an increase in the overall pay bill, however, requires that Bain's proposals on increasing overtime, and equalising the hourly rate of part-time and full-time fighters, must be funded from the award. The FBU has said that the real pay increase amounts to less than three percent over two years.

Pensions also form a major target for Bain. Firefighters pensions are in need of "comprehensive modernisation," the review states. Currently, these are "too costly, both to employers and employees, and is poor value money for the taxpayers".

Employees contribute 11 percent of pensionable pay, and employers approximately 25 percent. The "burden of net pensions costs will absorb 25 percent of Fire Service expenditure by 2007," the review states.

Current provisions enable a pension to be paid at a minimum age of 50 and with a minimum of 25 years service, while for the maximum pension a person must be over 50 years old and have 30 years of services. Compulsory retirement is set at 55 years for station officers and 60 years for more senior ranks. Those firefighters no longer physically fit for operational duties are able to retire rather than be redeployed.

Such "perverse incentives" enable some 43 percent of firefighters to retire early on ill health grounds, the review complains, implying proof of malingering. The review says that, based on mortality rates, firefighting is just 23rd out of the 30 most dangerous jobs. This is meant to imply that firefighting is not as dangerous as the FBU has suggested. But the review implicitly accepts that the relatively low rate of fatalities is due to careful management, training and the provision of proper equipment—the very conditions the review wants to scrap.

The proposals have won enthusiastic support from the government and the media. Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott said the loss of an estimated 3,500 jobs was a "fair deal". The *Times* welcomed the attack on pensions as a means for "slimming the service" and enthused that "substantial savings could be made from modernising by not replacing around half the firefighters who retire," over the next six years.



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