

London Fire Brigade proposes closing a quarter of its stations

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London mayor Boris Johnson announced last month that the London Fire and Rescue Service must reduce spending by £65 million over the next two years. A number of the proposals for achieving this that have been leaked to the press will all involve drastic cuts to staff and services.

What is being demanded is nearly a 15 percent cut from the service's £448 million annual budget. The demand was accompanied by a letter outlining some cutting options.

The letter stated bluntly that it would not be possible to make the required cuts without cutting from frontline services. "Given the amount of money we need to save, it would not be possible to achieve all of these savings from 'back office' functions," it states. The letter initially outlined two plans to give some idea how the cuts might be implemented.

Under the first plan, 30 fire stations would close and 30 engines would be removed, with a loss of 840 jobs. The second plan would involve the closure of 13 stations, the removal of 30 engines and the loss of 704 jobs. The projected closures cover around one third of the capital's 112 fire stations.

Neither of these plans would actually make up the whole of the demanded cut. The first plan is projected to save £45 million, the second £37 million. More cuts would have to follow.

The London Fire Brigade (LFB) has indicated that it will find ways of meeting Johnson's demand. Commissioner Ron Dobson pointedly did not add his name to criticism of the cuts issued by the six other metropolitan fire commissioners. The LFB said, "Like virtually every other public service, the brigade is facing the need to make savings."

Two weeks ago, the LFB wrote to firefighters asking them to consider taking redundancy to aid the cuts

programme. The LFB has written to civilian staff with an additional offer of £10,000 if they leave. The LFB has drawn up a cuts proposal of its own, which was leaked to the BBC. Under the LFB's plan, 17 stations would be closed and a fire engine removed from 4 more, with a loss of around 600 jobs. Stations earmarked for closure are Acton, Belsize, Bow, Clapham, Clerkenwell, Downham, Islington, Kensington, Kingsland, Knightsbridge, New Cross, Peckham, Silvertown, Southwark, Westminster, Whitechapel and Woolwich. An engine would be removed from Chingford, Hayes, Leyton and Leytonstone stations.

Disgracefully, the demand for cuts was justified on the grounds of "the declining number of fire deaths". These have fallen from 81 in 2001 to 55 in 2011, with 28 in 2012 up till the end of August.

The Labour Party has simply looked to question closures in each borough without challenging the broader programme of cuts, so it can pose as an ally of firefighters on a local basis while allowing the cuts to go through unopposed.

The *London Evening Standard* also offered another argument to justify the cuts. A quarter of existing fire stations (23), they say, respond on average to so few calls per year (less than one a day, on average) that the effectiveness of the service would not be reduced if they closed. It offered a list of the 10 "quietest" stations across London to illustrate this point.

Comparing this list with the LFB's proposed list of closures highlights how unreliable a guide it is. The "quietest" station, Biggin Hill, has averaged 100 call-outs annually over the last three years. It does not make the LFB's threatened list, presumably because it is close to a civilian airport and thus an essential safety measure. The same applies to Heathrow, the fifth

“quietest” station with an average of 257 call-outs annually. Number 10 in the *Standard*’s list, Hainault, responds to an average of 294 call-outs—on average, a call-out four days of every five.

Call-out rate by station does not consider responses by fire crews to calls from other stations. The closure of local stations not only increases response times through additional distance, it also increases the demands on other stations. Proceeding on this basis would be to remove comprehensive cover across the capital. Commenting on the *Standard*’s argument, one firefighter noted that the quiet stations were often the ones without backup for long periods. If they were closed, he wrote, “expect body recovery at best.”

Response has already been scaled back. Previously, enough engines would be sent to an automatic fire alarm to deal with any fire. Now, only one engine is sent if the alarm is on commercial premises with no sleeping risk, meaning that crew must wait for additional engines to deal with a significant fire.

A spokesman for the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) told the *Standard*, “Clearly the idea of basing decisions on risk has gone out of the window and they are going to cut their cloth according to their budget. It’s going to have major implications for safety. Already five boroughs don’t hit their attendance times for the first vehicle and five don’t hit them for the second vehicle. What they’re proposing is slashing a service that has already been cut back over the last few years.”

This is some admission for a union that supposedly exists to defend firefighters. At every turn, the FBU has betrayed its members. It does not oppose cuts to fire services in principle, but only those it claims are not “cost-effective”. Its betrayal of the 2002-2003 strikes led to thousands of job losses and the continued expansion of privatisation across the service. Matt Wrack, a former member of the Socialist Party, was elected as general secretary in 2005 in a reaction against the betrayals of the previous leadership. Any illusion that he might prove different was quickly dispelled. On taking office, he promised that he would loyally enforce the sell-out deal agreed by his predecessor. After calling at the Trades Union Congress for “a huge movement, led by the trade unions,” he sought to block any joint strikes with transport workers.

In 2009, the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority awarded a five-year contract worth £12

million to AssetCo to provide frontline firefighters. The company already owned and maintained all of the frontline fire and rescue vehicles and operational equipment used in London and Lincolnshire. The *Evening Standard* correctly identified this as “£9 million for 700 reserve strike-busting firefighters.”

Sure enough, AssetCo strikebreakers were deployed against London firefighters striking against imposed cost-cutting roster and shift changes a year later. Again, the FBU betrayed the strike. Strikers were threatened with the sack for opposing roster changes already introduced by agreement with the FBU elsewhere across the country. The FBU made it clear it was prepared to agree on a deal with management if they would only withdraw the sacking threat. The union called off the dispute hours before a 48-hour strike was due to begin. The *Independent* described the effect of this betrayal as “First blood to the coalition [government]”.

The struggles of London firefighters have not even been linked up with those of their colleagues in neighbouring counties like Essex. Over the summer, the FBU called off a strike in Essex planned during the Olympics “so as not to disrupt” events. The union had called only one 24-hour strike, a one-hour protest and an eight-hour stoppage.



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