



# FIRE BRIGADES UNION

## *East Sussex*

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Brigade Secretary: Steve Huggins    Brigade Chair: Matt Dale

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This is an official submission of the Fire Brigades Union in East Sussex.

This Document has been written to highlight the dangers and the concerns of FBU Members to the proposals contained within the 2007 Draft IRMP submission for Public Consultation in East Sussex.

Current details within the IRMP Draft Consultation Document make us believe these changes:-

- would lead to reduced night-time fire cover.
- would lead to longer response time across the county.
- would lead to the abolition of the watch structure.
- would result in a cut in establishment levels.
- would lead to the abolition of the current 2-2-3 shift pattern.
- are not family-friendly and would wreak havoc on our members' family lives

The foregoing would result in detrimental effects on the public we are here to serve.

We believe that funding shortfalls lie at the root of these proposals and not life risk to East Sussex Residents & Visitors. This was highlighted by the initial paper to the Way Forward Working Group.

This document outlines some of the ways that the FBU and its members feel that the service the ESFRS provides can be improved, with a particular focus on why we believe the current working patterns are the best for the public and those on the frontline.

The FBU and its members in East Sussex have always supported genuine modernisation. We do not believe that there will be any improvement by changing the shift duty system, which for almost 30 years has consistently delivered a first-class, high-performing service to the communities we serve. The kind of modernisation that the FBU has argued for includes:

- The provision of realistic and real fire training.
- The delivery of realistic and achievable targets for both training and community fire safety.
- The provision of flexible working for staff.
- Reductions in stress and task-loading of staff.
- An increase in establishment and resources to meet the growing needs of the communities we serve.
- Enhanced health and safety at work provision

It has long been argued by both the FBU and its members that, with the reduction in the number of fires and the increase in special service incidents, staff now require both realistic and real fire training, so as to maintain both experience and core skills.

With the changes to legislation via the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, additional responsibilities have been placed on the fire service, one of which is community fire safety. The FBU welcomed the change to legislation that now sees staff proactively working to reduce further the incidents of fire. However, the FBU cannot support either unrealistic or unachievable targets that have been set to meet community fire safety.

### Current Duty System – Option C

East Sussex FBU maintains that the current shifts and start and finish times provide the best framework to deliver the following objectives which:

- Is centred on the improved safety of firefighters and East Sussex residents.
- Is in accordance with Grey Book conditions of service.
- Meets with legal and contractual compliance that reflect collective agreements.
- Could provide the required number of competent staff to maintain full operational appliance availability.
- Could provide the requisite number of competent staff on each appliance to comply with safe operating procedures.
- Provides for constant crewing levels through a 24 hour period.
- Will take into account staff preference, which is central to effective service delivery.
- Ensure that staff will be properly rested to enable them to undertake difficult and complex tasks in accordance with the current shift working pattern.
- Provides staff with a work life balance, including caring responsibilities.

Using the current system available times both day and night can provide:

- For emergency response
- The ability to undertake enhanced and effective training
- To improve on the current community fire safety activities, specifically realistic and achievable targets.
- To carry out essential maintenance, administration and support activities.

### Changes to shift working patterns

It should be noted that changes to shift working patterns often bring with them industrial unrest, something which the FBU in East Sussex has no desire to see.

Around the country, there have been various proposals for shift changes, and where we have seen those shift changes introduced, industrial disputes have often ensued, including ballots for strike action.

Further, where shift changes have taken place, many problems with crewing levels and resources have arisen, so much so that in at least one brigade (West Midlands), appliances were often off-the-run for long periods. The IRMP is a local document and must consider any new systems in a local context and options A and B may be suitable for a Metropolitan Brigade where there is high density commercial areas but is completely unsuitable for East Sussex. The East Sussex FBU submits that these options do not suit the East Sussex risk profile.

A number of those brigades which have seen changes to working patterns are now reviewing those patterns, including West Midlands and Nottinghamshire.

It is clear to the FBU that the current working pattern should remain, in order to provide the best service to its communities and to avoid unnecessary hardship to staff and to prevent similar industrial unrest as seen in other brigades.

### Variable Crewing – Option A

The IRMP proposals on shift working patterns give unsatisfactory reasons for the need to change the current shift pattern. The FBU and its members believe that the real purpose of the proposed changes are to allow for reduced fire cover at night, thereby offering a large cost-saving.

The FBU urges the East Sussex Fire Authority Members to listen to the advice the government offers to the public via the website [www.firekills.gov.uk](http://www.firekills.gov.uk):

‘Fires happen when you least expect them, often during the night. They also spread very quickly damaging property and injuring and killing people.’

‘You are almost three times more likely to be killed in a fire that starts during the night.’

Night-time fires are more dangerous because:

- People are asleep
- Fires develop undetected
- Smoke inhalation is the cause of most fire deaths
- Escape can be more difficult at night

Many of the more serious and life-threatening fires occur at night.

We do not accept the argument, sometimes advanced, that night time fire cover can be reduced as victims are ‘dead already’.

***The FBU opposes any reduction in the level of fire cover during any night-time period. Night-time reductions mean fire engines take longer to arrive at the scene of a fire. This has implications for firefighters: the speed and weight of response are vital ingredients for a successful outcome, not only for the victims but also in terms of firefighter safety.***

### Annualised Hours – Option B

The FBU officials have made several presentations to Fire Authority members through the Way Forward Working Group. We have explained and remain concerned with

- The complexity of the system.
- The requirement for excellent IT systems, programs and operators.
- The need for significant slack in the system to allow for short notice leave/sickness.
- The lack of flexibility for personnel working the system as all leave is rostered.
- The devastating effect on many personnel’s family arrangements.
- The lack of flexibility to allow for training.
- The lack of flexibility to allow for promotions/secondments.

This list is by no means exhaustive.

***We do not believe that the annualised hours system would work in East Sussex. There may be scope in a Metropolitan Brigade to apply this system but it seems nationally even they are struggling to make it work. If with their resources they are having trouble how will East Sussex fare?***

### Alternative Combination – Option D

For the purposes of the IRMP consultation this is not an option open to staff. We simply do not know what this system would involve and cannot comment. Brigade management have recently produced a basic idea of what this will include and we are currently canvassing our membership for an outline opinion. Unfortunately due to the last hour production of these proposals we are unable to indicate a general view at this time but as we said earlier we are prepared to consider any suggestions and these proposals could be part of future discussions.

***It may be a route for future discussions but for this consultation's purposes we will not be able to consider it a viable option.***

### Equalities Impact

The job of firefighter is a desirable one. Firefighters are held in high regard in their local community – which is appealing to many and the working pattern (despite working nights and weekends) fits in well with family life. Recent efforts made to increase the intake of under-represented groups in the community have changed the traditional all white male make up of the fire brigade.

The proposed change in working patterns would undoubtedly have a negative impact on the vast majority of the workforce. The message that this sends to those under-represented groups that the brigade wishes to attract is that you are wanted in a profession that requires a considerable amount of skill and training, but that you will work the shift pattern of an unskilled worker.

A number of our female members have stated in very plain terms that the current duty system is very family friendly and suits the combination of firefighting and motherhood. They have also raised serious doubts as to whether they would be able to continue working for ESFRS if the shift system was altered in either of the ways proposed. This would be disastrous for an Authority and Organisation that aims to recruit a more balanced workforce; it would be harder to attract female and minority members of the communities and harder still to retain the ones we have got.

### The Watch System

Teamwork is vital in emergency situations, where reliance on your colleagues is paramount to ensure that safety is not compromised. The current watch system is based on the principle of teamwork.

Individual members within a watch will have unique personalities, experience and qualities that determine both their strengths and weaknesses. Collectively, these attributes are harnessed on a watch, whereby those strengths are capitalised upon and the weaknesses are improved upon, thus resulting in an effective team.

Members of sports teams do not work in isolation; they are reliant on the rest of the team members to help, support and work in unison to achieve the desired objective. There is a bond, trust and understanding amongst those team members. This is fundamentally the same principle that underpins a watch system.

Bond and trust are achieved at an early stage when new members to the watch are introduced. New trainees, for example, are assigned a mentor who assists them through the early stages of settling in and becoming part of that team. This is an important aspect, as it builds trust amongst all the watch members in relation to that new member, thus creating harmony and further resulting in good working relationships, both in professional and social environments.

The Health and Safety Executive improvement notices that were served on the London Fire Brigade following the Gillender Street incident in 1991, where two firefighters lost their lives, identified the importance of teamwork. It was asserted that the mixing of crews compromised the safety of those firefighters at that incident.

Teamwork can only be achieved by maintaining a watch-based system, where firefighters are able to work and train together to achieve an understanding of each others needs, thus reducing risk and maintaining a safe working environment. Many watches will have members within it from a minority background. This assists that watch to maintain local links with community leaders of differing cultures and ethnicity. This encourages effective communications, thus benefiting the fire and community safety agenda.

Likewise, local knowledge has proved beneficial, in terms of identifying hazards and issues within the station's ground. This local knowledge is usually attained by individuals of that watch, who have served at their location for a considerable time.

The bond and trust achieved within the watch environment will allow that knowledge base to be transferred to other watch members; this can only be continued by that watch environment being maintained.

Dismantle the watch environment and the brigade will lose experience, knowledge and reflection of the community, resulting in ineffective fire and community safety. If the principles of watch-based systems are undermined, this will lead to a breakdown in that team environment.

Whilst it is accepted that firefighters carryout standby movements and may perform pre-arranged overtime at other fire station locations, they are still primarily attached to a base watch for the purpose of carrying out effective training and community safety. Likewise, all managers on those watches/stations have to work as a team to ensure that the running of the watch/station is effective and efficient, thus resulting in improved service delivery. Any disruption to that watch system has the potential to lead to ineffective response with negative consequences.

For reasons outlined elsewhere in this document, any proposals to alter the current shift system will lead to a disruption of people's lives that may ultimately lead to personnel leaving the service. This may apply particularly to those from minority groups - women, single parent families, etc - where child and other care responsibilities becomes a problematic issue. The FBU believes that the watch system is crucial to firefighters' development and safety.

### Impact to the Health of the workforce

The last decade has seen an acknowledgement in the world of work that a healthy workforce is a more productive workforce. Many employers have realised that the traditional view that increased working hours automatically leads to an increase in output is a myth.

Instead, some in the private sector have come up with a range of ideas such as flexi time and enabling employees to complete a 5 day week in 4 days.

The brigade's shift proposals would be detrimental for the vast majority of the workforce's work-life balance. They will also have a negative impact on the health of the workforce - one of the main motivations behind the new approaches of the private sector.

The health of a workforce is affected by a number of factors. The main ones are employer practices, hours worked, start and finish times, breaks - including meal breaks - and the nature of duties carried out.

Regardless of working patterns, the vast majority of firefighters have to work days and nights and carry out demanding tasks. The need to foster a healthy workforce is, therefore, paramount particularly in the fire service due to health, safety and welfare implications.

The current shift pattern has the overwhelming support of those that work it. One of the main reasons for this is the way in which the shifts are currently arranged, which limits the adverse affects on one's

health.

It is only two shifts (successive night duties) that present real challenges to the workforce's health, as two 9 hour working days are followed by 24 hours rest. The health of the workforce is further aided under the current working pattern with the provision of an adequate stand down time that is factored-in to the night shift.

The shift system offers good value for money, is family friendly and delivers an excellent service at the point of need.

The current watch system provides for effective teams of people, which:

- know each other's strengths and weaknesses
- work and train together, which is so necessary in our organisation

***The current shift system allows for a structured day and night, with flexibility inbuilt. It provides a good work and life balance. Firefighters are entitled to a healthy and fulfilling life both at work and outside of work. Most FBU member's lives, and those of their families, are largely based around the current shift system.***

***The current shift system was instrumental in attracting people to a firefighting career.***

## Summary

Fire can destroy lives, devastate families and wreck homes, property and businesses. The human cost is not the only cost to be considered. A current government advertisement claims: 'A fire doesn't have to destroy you to destroy your life,' whilst showing images of a home destroyed by fire. The latest statistics show that fires cost the economy £7.03bn a year; the fire and rescue service response only accounts for £1.7bn of that. The average cost of a domestic fire is estimated at £24,900; a commercial building fire, £43,800; and a vehicle fire, £4,400. Politicians seeking re-election often regard keeping council tax down as the best way to win. However, it makes no economic sense to the residents and businesses of East Sussex to "modernise" a service by reducing night time cover if any consequent savings in tax lead to a large increase in the consequential cost of fire.

(The above statistics from 'THE ECONOMIC COST OF FIRE' - ODPM)

The fire and rescue service is currently experiencing a period of dramatic change, brought about not only by changes in legislation but also a Government that is reducing funding and increasing workload. All too often, modernisation is a euphemism for frontline cuts whilst opening up the service for private sector involvement through schemes such as the private finance initiative (PFI), without a proper examination of the long term consequences. The Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 placed a specific requirement on all fire and rescue services to undertake (amongst other things) community fire safety work - something that the FBU has long supported - in an attempt to reduce the number of fire related incidents. However, community fire safety should not be used as an argument to reduce fire cover. Fire and rescue authorities would do well to remember that the purpose of the legislation regarding community fire safety was not to enable them to deplete frontline resources and erode effective levels of response.

Indeed, the Act calls for fire and rescue authorities to adopt a more balanced approach between prevention and intervention, both of which are vital in the battle to reduce fire-related incidents. However, whilst greater emphasis pre-2004 was placed on intervention - underpinned by national standards of attendance – the pendulum since has been swinging in the other direction, but not without cost. Insurance companies now report large scale losses due, in part, to flawed and misguided Integrated Risk Management Plans (IRMPs) introduced by individual fire and rescue authorities. Here, East Sussex is no exception having previously reduced appliance attendances, reduced aerial cover, reduced

the numbers of personnel attending and extended many attendance times.

In East Sussex, the problems associated with a change in emphasis away from intervention are now being seen with the difficulties experienced by firefighters in maintaining core skills. It can be argued that core skills of firefighters pre-2004 were maintained more effectively than they are today.

The FBU is willing to engage in negotiations on any changes that improve the service, making it better and safer for firefighters and the general public. But we will oppose any crude attempt to cut costs at the expense of the wider service or our members' conditions. The actions of fire and rescue authorities in this regard often lead to unsafe working practices or an inability to respond appropriately. The effects of such cuts are also felt by insurance companies through increased and expensive claims, the costs of which are then passed onto the public through higher insurance premiums.

Residents in East Sussex expect and receive a first-class service. Our members take pride in the job that they do; indeed, the foreword of the union rule books states that the FBU serves the community by encouraging its members to be skilled at their craft. Our members are always conscious of the importance of good value for money; our members are always the first to ask for better training and equipment to carry out their tasks. But there is a major distinction between providing good value for money and providing the cheapest option. The FBU believes that to make detrimental changes in our response to fires will inevitably make East Sussex an 'unsafely' place and will simply increase the costs related to the consequences of fire.

***Taking all the above into account and being fully aware of the feelings and wishes of our members, the East Sussex Branch of the Fire Brigades Union urge you to confirm Option C as the way forward. We will continue to work to promote an efficient service maintaining the levels of cover that exist within the County.***

East Sussex Fire Brigade's Union.