



Matt Wrack General Secretary
Bradley House, 68 Coombe Road,
Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey KT2 7AE
fbu.org.uk | @fbunational
020 8541 1765 | office@fbu.org.uk

«NameLine1» «RegionBrigade» «StationCode»
«OtherName»
«Address1»
«Address2»
«Address3»
«Address4»
«Address6»

Circular: **2019HOC0539MW**

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TO: **ALL MEMBERS**

Dear Brother / Sister

The Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase 1 Report and the ‘Stay Put’ Policy

The Grenfell Tower Inquiry (GTI) has announced that it will publish its phase 1 report on 30 October 2019. The report focuses on the events of the night of 14 June 2017. We are currently preparing for the publication of the report, including any areas where the fire and rescue service might face criticism or recommendations for change.

We are determined to defend firefighters from unfair criticism and, where appropriate, to highlight the relevant failings of policy makers and politicians.

Around one thousand firefighters, mostly from the London Fire Brigade (LFB), were interviewed by the police about the fire. Last year, the GTI questioned 88 firefighters, control staff, officers of the LFB and other Brigades in its public sessions. It has published more than 250 firefighter witness statements on its website. This has resulted in unfair and unjustified criticism of individual firefighters and emergency control staff in some areas of the media.

The GTI has made the ‘Stay Put’ policy one of the major focuses of its work to date. It has also raised questions about evacuating high-rise residential buildings. This circular explains the background to these issues and why ultimately it is **central government** that is responsible for any failures with this policy.

Origins of ‘Stay Put’

The ‘Stay Put’ policy originates with the British Standards Institution (BSI) code of practice CP 3 Chapter IV Part 1: 1962. For flats over 24 metres it stated:

The assumption should no longer be made that buildings must be evacuated if a fire occurs and high residential buildings should, therefore, be designed so that the occupants of floors above a dwelling which is on fire, may, if they choose, remain safely on their own floor.

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The BSI periodically published revised codes of practice for flats and maisonettes, with specific 'stay put' advice to residents. Approved Document B, the central government guidance on building safety, with regard to the means of escape from flats, states that "*simultaneous evacuation of the building is unlikely to be necessary*". Such guidance and standards were set nationally. Individual fire and rescue services and their employees operated beneath policy determined at the highest level.

Concerns About 'Stay Put'

A number of organisations and experts have raised concerns about the 'Stay Put' policy following public and firefighter deaths. On 2 February 2005, a fire occurred at Harrow Court, on the 14th floor of a residential block in Stevenage, Hertfordshire. Two firefighters (FBU members) and one resident were killed. The FBU's report published in 2007 made detailed recommendations, including:

re-evaluate the council's entire fire safety evacuation strategy for blocks of high-rise apartments and, in particular, the apparent contradiction between the "stay put" and "evacuation" strategies, and provide explicit direction on what to do in the event of a fire in a flat, and what to do if it becomes necessary to evacuate another flat/s, and entire floor or even the whole building. Subsequently, review fire safety procedure notices to ensure that they give clear instructions to all tenants, visitors and staff on what to do in the event of a fire in any part of the building.

The Lakanal House fire on 3 July 2009 resulted in the deaths of six people, with 15 residents and a firefighter injured. Coroner Frances Kirkham sent a Rule 43 letter to communities' secretary Eric Pickles on 28 March 2013. It recommended that the Westminster government should "*publish consolidated national guidance in relation to the 'stay put' principle and its interaction with the 'get out and stay out' policy, including how such guidance is disseminated to residents*".

Ministers promised to review the guidance with the Local Government Association. However, in the four years after the coroner's letter, no guidance was produced. The Chief Fire Officers' Association (CFOA) also failed to produce any further clarification.

NFCC Guidance

The National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) replaced CFOA on 1 April 2017. After the Grenfell Tower fire, the NFCC published its *Waking Watch/Common Fire Alarm: Guidance to support a temporary simultaneous evacuation strategy in a purpose-built block of flats*, 2 October 2017. This was revised and published as *Guidance to support a temporary change to a simultaneous evacuation strategy in purpose-built block of flats* on 1 May 2018.

The FBU has serious concerns about these publications. They are guidance issued by a chief officers' body and therefore do not compel the 'responsible persons' who own and manage high-rise residential buildings to take further steps. The guidance is 'temporary' but has been in operation for more than two years, with no end in sight.

The guidance identifies two components that are required for the adoption of a temporary simultaneous evacuation policy:

- Early detection of a fire and warning of occupants
- Management of the evacuation.

Anecdotal evidence from residents indicates problems with implementing these measures since the Grenfell Tower fire.

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The FBU is concerned about how effective central alarm systems are to alert residents to a fire, especially at night-time. The so-called 'waking watches' recommended by the NFCC **are not firefighters** and there is little knowledge of who is providing this service in the relevant buildings. The management of evacuation through 'waking watches' may place a huge responsibility on inadequately trained, under-resourced members of staff (or even volunteers). There are no national standards in place to ensure that these components actually meet the needs of residents. There are significant challenges involving the evacuation of vulnerable people. There is also a significant difference between *evacuation* and *rescue*, where a person needs physical assistance to get clear of the area involved in the incident. The Executive Council is currently reviewing the NFCC guidance and will issue further information in due course.

Grenfell Tower Inquiry Experts

The GTI has commissioned experts to investigate a wide range of fire safety matters around the Grenfell Tower fire. For example, David Purser, the fire toxicity expert, highlighted the problems facing residents in seeking to evacuate the building:

my preliminary view is that that rapid filling of the lobbies by dense smoke from around 01:30 hrs was a major deterrent and obstacle to occupants attempting to escape from their flats... a few minutes exposure (between approximately 2-25 minutes depending up on the exact conditions), they would collapse unconscious due to the combined asphyxiant effects of inhaling CO [carbon monoxide] and HCN [hydrogen cyanide].

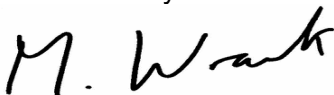
The witness statements from residents and firefighters inside Grenfell Tower on the night of the fire indicate a range of difficulties evacuating this particular building, which had one narrow stairway, no central alarm or communication system, where the lift could not be overridden, where many vulnerable people were asleep or unable to leave of their own volition and other failures in the fire safety of the building.

Issue Raised with Government

The FBU has called for a government initiated review of the issues around 'Stay Put' and has raised the matter with government ministers on several occasions. It is clearly a national rather than a local issue, i.e. it is not simply a matter for the London Fire Brigade. ***It is alarming that government ministers have completely failed to address this issue in the 28 months since the fire.***

The GTI may shed further light on these issues in its forthcoming report. The FBU's own investigations continue. The union is very clear that criticism of individual firefighters and emergency control staff is not justified. Operational firefighters do not determine policy. Locally, policy is the responsibility of principal managers in fire and rescue services. But ultimately it is ministers and their advisers in central government that make regulations and issue guidance. Responsibility for policy should begin at the top.

Yours in unity



MATT WRACK
General Secretary

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