

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Fire and Rescue Service, HC 505

Tuesday 5 March 2024

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Members present: Dame Diana Johnson (Chair); Kim Johnson; Marco Longhi; Tim Loughton.

Questions 1 - 140

Witnesses

I: Andy Cooke QPM DL, Chief Inspector, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services; Nazir Afzal OBE, Former Chair, Independent Culture Review of London Fire Brigade.

II: Alex Johnson QFSM, Director, Women in the Fire Service; Tristan Ashby, Chief Executive Officer, Fire and Rescue Services Association; Matt Wrack, General Secretary, Fire Brigades Union.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Nazir Afzal and Andy Cooke.

Q1 Chair: Good morning and welcome to the Home Affairs Select Committee. This morning we are looking into the fire and rescue service.

Before I begin today's session, I just want to acknowledge the three-year anniversary of the murder and rape of Sarah Everard by a serving Metropolitan police officer on 3 March 2021. Public trust and confidence in our public services, including the police and the fire service, is vital. The culture within these services must not encourage or permit discrimination or harm to others.

We have previously examined the culture in the police service during our inquiry into policing priorities. Today, we are very pleased to welcome our witnesses to discuss the culture in the fire and rescue service. In particular, we want to explore the reasons why the reports into the culture of the fire and rescue service in England and in London came about, whether the reports on the culture of fire and rescue services have made a difference to the levels of bullying and harassment, and the challenges faced in making cultural change within the fire and rescue service.

We have two panels. Welcome to our first panel this morning. Would you like to introduce yourselves? Mr Cooke, would you like to start?

Andy Cooke: I am Andy Cooke. I am His Majesty's chief inspector of constabulary and fire and rescue services.

Nazir Afzal: Good morning. I am Nazir Afzal. I carried out the independent review into the culture of London Fire Brigade. Prior to that I was a chief prosecutor. I am currently the chancellor of the University of Manchester.

Q2 Chair: We are very grateful for your time today. I spent last night reading some of the reports. I have to say I was absolutely shocked at some of the stories, incidents and behaviours that were being reported. It felt like we were in the 1970s. I was reading about significant trauma to women firefighters. There were incidents where photographs were taken of dead women in car crashes and then shared on WhatsApp groups. There was an incident when a male firefighter was offered money to use his penis to stir a woman firefighter's cup of tea. I was taken aback.

I wonder whether both of you could explain to the Committee exactly how we got to the point where this type of behaviour is going on in our fire and rescue services.

Andy Cooke: We have been inspecting the fire and rescue services since 2018. From the first time that we did so, we identified that there were significant cultural issues and significant diversity issues. It is fair to say that the fire service has been too slow in addressing some of these, despite repeated warnings.



Q3 **Chair:** Why has it been too slow?

Andy Cooke: We can look right through to issues with leadership and ingrained culture. As we know, culture does not change overnight. It needs very strong, determined and directed leadership to ensure it does. As we know, the fire service is probably the least diverse of all public services in relation both to women in the service and to minority ethnic people in the service. It is struggling to change that mindset on occasions.

Q4 **Chair:** Why is it struggling to change its mindset?

Andy Cooke: You have very ingrained cultures and subcultures within the fire service. For a long time it has been very much a white male environment.

Chair: That is like the police.

Andy Cooke: It is like the police, although policing has a significantly higher percentage of women in its ranks than the fire service. In addressing some of these issues, there is a lack of confidence in some senior fire officers and at middle management level. We have seen that consistently from the reports and inspections we have produced.

The first round of inspections that we did on the fire service back in 2018 showed that nearly half of the services had some significant issues. Subsequently, we did a spotlight in relation to values and culture in 2023. That also identified some significant issues that are still ongoing.

In fairness, a number of services are tackling the problems head on. We have seen some good improvements from some of our fire services. That is not consistent enough, it has to be said, but there have been improvements. I would highlight services like Greater Manchester, which has made significant improvements from its starting point. The new chief there has done a very good job in starting to change the culture.

This is not an issue of bad apples or individuals. This is what we have previously described as some toxic cultures that have formed across the fire service over many years. In the five years we have been inspecting it we have seen some improvement, but it has not been quick enough.

Q5 **Chair:** Can I ask you a question about Dorset and Wiltshire Fire Service in particular? Your inspectorate rated it as "good" in January 2023. After that, there has been some very good reporting of what has been going on by the media. I am going to call out Paul Brand at ITV, who has done a lot of work in this area. He highlighted what was going on in that particular fire and rescue service, revealing a culture of misogyny, sexual harassment and abuse, which was then verified by Alex Johnson in her cultural review. Your inspectorate rated it as "good" in January of that year. What do you say about that?



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Andy Cooke: Our inspections, certainly then and not so much now, were very much moment-in-time inspections. We will look at all the processes; we will speak to people across the service. We have a reporting line that people contact us through. We look right across various parts of the service at any one time during that inspection. Yes, we did grade it as “good” in relation to this—

Q6 **Chair:** Can I just stop you there? This is at the time, if I have got this right, that the assistant chief fire officer there was engaged in sexual harassment, being a sexual predator, grooming and coercion. You rated that service as “good”. He was in post at that time.

Andy Cooke: Yes. Our inspectors will look right across the service itself to identify what processes are like and how the systems are. We will pick up any individual pieces of information that come to us.

Q7 **Chair:** No one said anything to you about what was going on.

Andy Cooke: Individuals will report to us. I cannot say specifically in relation to Dorset and Wiltshire whether we had any reports come through from individuals in relation to that.

Q8 **Chair:** I find that incredible. You are saying it is across the piece and you are talking to people and looking at processes. There is clearly a major problem in that fire and rescue service and you do not seem to know anything about it.

Andy Cooke: No, it is not the case that I do not know anything about it at all.

Q9 **Chair:** Why did you rate it as “good” in the January?

Andy Cooke: It was rated “good” on the basis of the information that we had to hand at that time.

Q10 **Chair:** I understand that, but you clearly did not have the information. I find it amazing that you had an assistant chief fire officer who was then found to have been engaging in sexual harassment, being a sexual predator, grooming and coercion. There were really serious things going on in that fire and rescue service.

Andy Cooke: I would say two things. Prior to that, we did not have a system whereby fire services had to report to us significant issues of public concern from chief officers or others. There was no legal requirement on them to do so. I subsequently wrote to every chief fire officer across the country to say they must report to us any significant issues that have occurred, any investigations that are going on, etc.

Q11 **Chair:** I find it amazing that chief fire officers did not think that they should tell the inspectorate if there was a major problem going on in their fire and rescue service.

Andy Cooke: That is symptomatic of one of the issues in the fire service.



Chair: It is, isn't it?

Andy Cooke: Even though we have set up lines for people to report issues to us, at the time, and still to an extent, staff do not feel comfortable reporting issues to us or to anybody, because they feel they will be targeted by others in the fire service.

Q12 **Chair:** It is absolutely shocking. I am sure my colleagues will want to ask you some more questions about this.

Mr Afzal, your report was a few years ago now. It was ahead of the work that the inspectorate then did much later on. Just tell us about that. How did you come to be engaged to do that piece of work?

Nazir Afzal: London Fire Brigade is the largest fire service in Europe. It has 6,000 staff; it is a 150-year-old institution. Simply put, the commissioner of London Fire Brigade, Andy Roe, and the Mayor and Deputy Mayor of London commissioned me to carry out this independent review. It links to what the chief inspector said a moment ago: perhaps people did not feel able to speak. Previous to our engagement with them, they did not think that anything would happen. They did not think there would be any accountability for anything they said.

There were a number of catalysts for my review. One was the suicide of a black firefighter, Jaden Francois-Esprit. Additionally, there was the Grenfell inquiry and the findings of its first stage, which suggested some cultural issues in London Fire Brigade's response on the night and subsequently. There were also other concerns being raised about whether the fire service represented or somehow mirrored the population of London. Those were the drivers.

Again linked to what the chief inspector has said, people within the organisation did not feel able to speak about what had happened. Part of my role was to ensure they felt confident that anything they did say to us would not have consequences and that they would not fear for their jobs or their livelihoods.

A moment ago the chief inspector mentioned subcultures. There are 103 fire stations in London with four watches in each. That is 412 subcultures. As you have identified yourself, in some cases those could be extraordinarily misogynist, racist or homophobic. The bullying and harassment that we found was on an industrial scale.

I had a professor of mental health assisting me. She said that the undiagnosed PTSD was extraordinary. People were suffering on a daily basis. We ask them to keep us safe. One said to me, "Nobody is keeping us safe." One firefighter asked us, "Who is going to rescue us?"

The description you gave of how women felt was so widespread. Even the former commissioner, Dany Cotton, gave me quite telling evidence about the way she was treated. She said that when she was in a middle



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manager role she went into a fire station and all the male firefighters turned their back on her.

You gave some examples earlier on about the rest of the country. A Muslim firefighter who came back from his pilgrimage to Mecca found a "terrorist hotline" sticker on his locker. He was then asked by colleagues, "How was your al-Qaeda training?"

Female firefighters told us that, on occasion, when they went on fire safety visits—that is engaging with us, the public—male firefighters would go through their underwear drawers, look for sex toys, take pictures, share them on WhatsApp and brag about what they had found. By the way, the female firefighters did not have female-specific uniforms; they were wearing male uniforms adapted to their bodies. Women would say to me endlessly that they were just called "woman". Their name was not used to describe them.

Of course, there was homophobia as well. I remember one gay firefighter telling me that he was told by another firefighter, "Don't follow me up the ladder. I don't know what you'll do." You might call that banter—and people did call it banter—but when you are being beaten over the head with it every hour and every day in this watch environment, with a small number of people, where you could be for 20 or 30 years, it destroys you. People felt destroyed by it.

We were able to give people an opportunity to share. More than 2,000 fire service staff, I imagine for the first time in their lives in many cases, shared with me and my team what they were experiencing. We were just amplifying their voices and giving them an opportunity to share without consequence and without feeling like they would be judged or asked, "Why didn't you report this earlier?" You mentioned the tragic murder of Sarah Everard. There were signs. People knew stuff was happening. People would just walk by: "It's not my business. It's not my job. I won't engage with it."

The chief inspector made a very valid point about the lack of turnover. People have been in the fire service for 30 or 40 years in some cases. 40% of them have a second job. 50% of London Fire Brigade staff do not live in London. There is this idea about engaging with their communities, but they do not even feel like they belong there. There is one firefighter who lives in Yorkshire. He commutes four days a week, sleeps in the fire station and then goes back home. He has been doing that for 17 years.

How do you bring change to an institution that does not believe in change? You were right to point out that there have been reports after reports, prior to my report, where these things have been highlighted. The chief inspector mentioned 2018. In 2018, Staffordshire Fire was rated "outstanding" for people. Two years later, it was rated "requires improvement". There is no sustainability. They can all tick a box. They can all get you to think everything is hunky-dory, but when you walk away, it goes back to normal.



The idea of a firefighter thinking, in the immediate aftermath of Grenfell, that he can take a selfie outside of that building and use it on his Tinder profile tells you that there is something wrong with the organisation. People felt like they were able to do that without consequence.

As you have indicated, following my report the National Fire Chiefs Council, from which you are hearing, developed its own action plan. I was asked to speak on my report at its conference. I am not a fool. I am not blind. I could see some chief firefighters in that room who did not buy into it. They thought, "Nazir will leave. When the circus leaves town, nobody will be interested. We will carry on as we always did."

I was pleased to see the chief inspector and HMICFRS deciding, "No, we are going to keep an eye on this and keep going." I want to pay tribute to the commissioner of London Fire Brigade. He is not the problem. He is a solution. He accepted every one of my 31 recommendations. He has brought in independent oversight. Martin Forde KC chairs that. He has given evidence regularly to the London Assembly. He talks openly about the progress and the obstacles that he faces. That is leadership. Unfortunately, it is lacking in other parts of the country.

Q13 Chair: You were independent. You had nothing to do with the fire and rescue service at all.

Nazir Afzal: Nothing at all, no.

Chair: You came in with fresh eyes. Is part of the problem with the inspectorate that the people who are doing the inspecting are from that whole culture? Is that the problem? Is that why they are not seeing what is going on?

Andy Cooke: It would be wrong to say that every inspector we have is part of that culture. We have people from different walks of life and backgrounds who form parts of the inspectorate. We have civil servants. We have secondees from fire services.

As Mr Afzal has said, we identified the problems, to use London as an example, in our first round of inspections. In our second round of inspections in July, we gave it a "cause for concern" in relation to the culture of the brigade. The inspection by Mr Afzal was self-commissioned by Andy Roe. I agree fully that Andy Roe is part of the solution to this problem. He is a strong leader who is making real changes in London Fire Brigade.

We identified those problems. The inspection and report that were done by Mr Afzal certainly assisted us in coming to the conclusion that the LFB needed to go into "engage" status. It is now constantly monitored. In fact, both the commissioner of the London Fire Brigade and the Mayor of London will be at my fire performance oversight group later on this afternoon to detail how their action plan is progressing in relation to these cultural issues.



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The LFB is under close scrutiny, but it is certainly making improvements. This will not happen overnight. It could be many years before every part of that poor culture is eradicated because that is how difficult it is in an organisation like the LFB or similar organisations.

- Q14 **Chair:** Can I just ask one last thing? Has your inspectorate ever made any recommendations about uniforms for women firefighters? Has it ever identified that as an issue?

Andy Cooke: I will have to come back to you with some information in relation to that. I could not tell you at this point.

Chair: I would just be interested to know whether you are picking up that those are issues that are very important in the workplace.

Andy Cooke: We are picking those issues up. I cannot say whether we have made a recommendation in relation to it, but we have certainly had conversations in relation to it in the inspectorate with both the FBU, as I recall, and senior fire chiefs.

- Q15 **Tim Loughton:** Mr Cooke, how does your inspectorate work? You have been responsible for both the police and the fire service since 2018. How many people do you employ? How many of those are from a police background and how many are from a fire background?

Andy Cooke: We employ roughly 350 people full time. We have associates in addition to that. We have associates who predominantly inspect policing, and associates and employees who mainly inspect fire and rescue services, depending on the skills that they have.

We use mixed economies as well, so we use police and fire on certain inspections. Ex-police officers, civil servants and fire secondees are involved in the Home Secretary-commissioned misconduct inspection that we are undertaking at the moment.

- Q16 **Tim Loughton:** Of those 350, how many came from a fire background before they became part of the inspectorate?

Andy Cooke: I would have to give you the exact figures at a later date.

Tim Loughton: Roughly how many?

Andy Cooke: We have far fewer secondees than we used to. We have far more civil servants. In relation to fire, it is probably—I am guessing—50:50 between secondees and civil servants.

- Q17 **Tim Loughton:** Is your inspectorate capable of inspecting the fire service?

Andy Cooke: Yes, very much so. We have some very talented people involved in those inspections. We have highlighted for many years some of the significant issues. If I come back to Andy Roe, the commissioner of the London Fire Brigade, he is quite open in saying that the best thing that has happened to the fire service is the inspectorate becoming



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involved. We have turned over so many stones. We have identified so many problems. We have been a driver for change.

The White Paper that is with the Government at the moment was driven by my predecessor's "State of Fire and Rescue" reports. We continue to make significant improvements and raise standards across the board. However, as an inspectorate, I cannot make anybody do anything. I can only make recommendations.

Q18 Tim Loughton: Do you think that you have made the right recommendations but they largely have not been followed, or that they are being followed but lacking in urgency?

Andy Cooke: Yes.

Tim Loughton: Which is it?

Andy Cooke: It is both. There are occasions of both. Some have not been followed. I would give you the example of the checks on firefighters when they join and those in service. Following our recommendations and with support from the Government, the majority of services are engaged in significant checks on their staff. There are still seven or eight services that have not done that yet.

There are plenty of other examples that I could give where we have made the recommendation and that recommendation has not yet been followed through. We are far better nowadays at following through and making sure that services that are not doing that are identified and chased up. I have no further power than chasing them up.

Q19 Tim Loughton: Do you have deputies?

Andy Cooke: As well as me, I have four other HMIs.

Q20 Tim Loughton: How many of them come from a fire background?

Andy Cooke: One does. One of my HMIs is an ex-fire chief and the ex-head of the National Fire Chiefs Council.

Q21 Tim Loughton: What is the turnover within the fire service, roughly?

Andy Cooke: People tend to join the fire service and stay for a long time. It does not have the same retention problems as policing, for instance. As Mr Afzal has said, some people tend to stay an awfully long time in the fire service.

Q22 Tim Loughton: Is that part of the problem?

Andy Cooke: It depends on the individual. There are some very good firefighters and fire service staff who have been there for a long time. We have identified some significant issues in the fire service, but the vast majority of those firefighters and fire service staff do a marvellous job of keeping people safe on a daily basis. They are committed to doing what



they need to do and are not involved in the sorts of subcultures that we see, but there are far too many who are.

- Q23 **Tim Loughton:** You inspect both the police and the fire services. Is the toxic culture, which Mr Afzal has described finding in London, more prevalent in the fire service than the police service?

Andy Cooke: That is a really difficult question to answer. There are issues within both of those services, as there are in most organisations across the country.

- Q24 **Tim Loughton:** So it could be worse than the police; it could be better than the police.

Andy Cooke: I don't think it will ever be better, inasmuch as—

Tim Loughton: It won't ever be better.

Andy Cooke: Even a small number of instances are not a good thing, are they? It really is a significant issue in both services, which both services are trying to address. There are some good fire chiefs and some good police chiefs who are attempting to do that.

- Q25 **Tim Loughton:** How do you change that culture? Surely part of the change of that culture has to be a change of personnel. If the change of personnel in the fire service is rather lower than it is in the police service, you have a bigger challenge, do you not?

Andy Cooke: It is a bigger challenge. It is a bigger challenge to reflect properly the communities we serve when there is so little turnover. That brings up two significant issues. First, the fire service needs to get better at recruiting from right across our communities. Secondly, it needs to retain those people who are from protected characteristics within the fire service far better than it does.

- Q26 **Tim Loughton:** I was with my fire service on Friday. We have an outstanding chief fire officer who is a female. She has aggressively set about changing the culture that we had in West Sussex, as many others have, with a fair degree of success. However, the percentage of women in the fire service nationally is 8%. We are not far off that. West Sussex is recruiting 20% women. On that basis, it is going to take decades before we get anything like parity because of the relatively low turnover.

Should we be patient and wait or should we be looking at turning over the staff, if they do not come up to muster at some of these inspections? Certainly, the alarming review done by Mr Afzal revealed some seriously toxic culture problems.

Andy Cooke: The question is, how do you turn over the staff? They have employment rights. Quite rightly, they have significant support from the Fire Brigades Union in relation to their terms and conditions. Turning them over is not that easy without a change in the law.

- Q27 **Tim Loughton:** Mr Afzal, as you have heard from the Chair, your report



was pretty shocking. We all found that. You do not have a background in the fire service. You are a prosecutor. You have done many distinguished things, particularly around child protection scandals. You came to London Fire Brigade new—you had to set up a team of people to inspect it without, in many cases, any experience of inspecting a fire service—yet you were able to come up with some pretty detailed and shocking revelations about the problem within the London Fire Brigade. Why could you do that when the inspectorate, with all its infrastructure and experience, was not able in other fire services to reveal some of the shocking industrial-scale bullying and harassment that you found in London?

Nazir Afzal: The word “independent” is the most important word in what you said. This is what the staff told us. They did not have confidence in HMIC. They did not have confidence in their own organisation or their own HR. Human resources was not seen as the referee. It was seen as the goalkeeper: keeping stuff out, telling people, “You are the problem,” and gaslighting victims when they came forward. They did not have confidence in the structures that already existed for reporting.

I am grateful to you for talking about my own credibility in this area. I have spent my whole career in public service amplifying the voices of the unheard. I wanted people to have real confidence that what they shared with me would result in something. I had no axe to grind. I had no prejudgment. As I said to the Chair before the hearing, I had Fireman Sam as my image of the fire service. I did not know anything about the fire service. I came in with a complete blank piece of paper and provided people with the psychological safety to speak up and the feeling that there would be accountability.

A moment ago, the chief inspector talked about not being able to hold people to account, in effect: they can do what they like; they might comply with what is being said. Well, that is not good enough. I said to them, “There will be accountability.” There have been reports previously. There was one back in 1999 just after Macpherson and nothing has happened in 25 years, seemingly.

You mentioned turnover. We want people with experience in organisations. I am glad they are there. The thing is that they do not move from that watch in that fire station. They could be in the same group of 12 people for 25 years. The idea that they owe some loyalty to the wider fire service, to the fire brigade or to the public they serve, given that they do not even live in London, is challenging.

People felt able to share with us. We had to use a secure email address—I am talking about security service-level security—so that people felt able to speak up. We had our own microsite. I reinforced our independence. I said to them, “There will be something that comes from this.”

What I did not share earlier on, when the Chair asked me, was that, in the immediate aftermath of the review coming out, I was approached by



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people from up and down the country telling me to look at them. Of course, I cannot look at them; I was not commissioned to look at them. You spoke about the stuff that Paul Brand and others have covered. Those people had nowhere to go. They did not feel able to go to HMICFRS. They did not feel able to go to their own HR. Some of them started ringing Crimestoppers because they did not know where to go. They ended up in many cases, quite rightly, approaching the media and asking, "Where else am I going to get heard?"

You had a series of areas of the country where suddenly people felt enabled and empowered to speak up. Until you have something confidential in place, so that they feel like action will be taken, they think that people will be held to account and they feel safe, you will continue to have the cultures that we have identified.

Q28 Tim Loughton: If you were asked—not that you would have had the time to do it—to do a similar review of every fire service around the country, do you think you would find similar sorts of problems?

Nazir Afzal: Yes, 100%. I can tell you I will. I have done. Most of the people who contacted Mr Brand at ITV have also contacted me. I had no means to investigate. You are right: I do not have the resources. I have just been commissioned to carry out a review of the Nursing and Midwifery Council for starters. Come back to me in a few months' time about that.

My point is that, yes, I cannot believe there is any part of the country where fire staff feel safe to speak up. I know the chief fire officer in West Sussex. She is doing a brilliant job—you are absolutely right. She is carrying out her own review of how to improve things and not waiting for somebody else to tell her. That is what should happen. That is what leadership is. Do not wait for an external review. Do not wait for HMICFRS. Fix your own problems and do so knowing that you are going to get attacked because people will attack.

Q29 Tim Loughton: If you are readily finding these industrial-scale problems, as you have called them, in fire services that the inspectorate is rating as "good", is the inspectorate fit for purpose?

Nazir Afzal: Under Mr Cooke, yes. I knew Mr Cooke in his previous chief constable role. He took over two years ago, 18 months ago or something. I would not have had the same confidence about HMICFRS in 2018-19. I have just given you the Staffordshire example.

You are right to question where people's loyalties lie. In this regard, I do not think that, because you work in a fire service, you will not be confidential about what you hear, but the person sharing will think otherwise. The perception becomes people's reality: "Why would I share with a former chief fire officer how I feel about my current chief fire officer?" That is the problem that he has.



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They are fit for purpose. We need some kind of helpline or hotline that is a confidential source of information. He needs the power to hold people to account. You mentioned performance management—

Q30 Tim Loughton: Surely we have a helpline or a hotline. It is called whistleblowing. Why is that not working?

Nazir Afzal: I do not know whether it is working. I do know that people do not have confidence in it.

Q31 Tim Loughton: On that point, Mr Cooke, there is a formal whistleblowing system within the fire service. It is openly advertised to all fire officers to use. That is correct, yes?

Andy Cooke: Different fire services have different approaches to it. This is one of the recommendations from the spotlight report that we did. To date, at least 35 fire services have put in place confidential hotlines as a result of our recommendations.

Could I come back on a point you made slightly earlier, Mr Loughton? You said that Mr Afzal, who did an excellent report, had identified things that we had not identified previously. In our first round of inspections in 2018-19, we graded over half of these services as “requires improvement” or “inadequate” in relation to values and culture. Once I report that, I have no power to change those issues other than to keep reporting on them. It is for others in Government, for fire chiefs and fire authorities, etc., to make those changes.

I remember when I spoke to you 12 months ago. You asked me about powers for the inspectorate. I said that I would report that in my “State of Policing” report. I did. I asked for additional powers initially in relation to policing. In my “State of Fire” report, which is coming out in the next couple of months, I will be asking the same in relation to fire services. I am doing what I can to improve these services and these police forces as an inspectorate. I am doing it with one hand tied behind my back.

Q32 Tim Loughton: Without targeting the criticism at you personally, Mr Cooke—you have made some changes since you came in a couple of years ago, in the police as well as the fire service—I am more worried about the structure of the inspection service. First, is it able to identify and engage with some of the problems within the fire service? Secondly, does it have the punch to call those things out such that they are noticed, taken up and changed either within the service itself or by Ministers, council officials and others who are responsible for the fire service? That is my issue.

It is interesting to hear Mr Afzal mention whistleblowing. You have just said that only 35, or whatever it was, have some form of whistleblowing.

Andy Cooke: It was 35, yes.

Tim Loughton: As far as I am concerned, whistleblowing is an absolute bog standard requirement of any institution.



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Andy Cooke: I agree.

Tim Loughton: There needs to be a whistleblowing service that people have confidence that they can confidentially report concerns to and that those concerns will be taken up and acted on. You are telling me that 35 out of 44 fire services have one. A quarter of them do not have anything at all. That is quite worrying.

Andy Cooke: They do not have anything yet or it is in progress. I wish, following our recommendation, this had been done within months, as it should have been, but it has not been done yet.

As I mentioned, there is a similar situation in relation to vetting checks on firefighters. Most services are doing really well in relation to that, but a small number are too slow in responding. That is one of the issues that we see consistently.

Those services that have significant issues come into the fire performance oversight group, where they get support from across the sector. That is one of the benefits of going into "engage" status. That is why the likes of Andy Roe and other fire chiefs will say to you that it is an excellent thing for them to get that support across.

However, I am not a regulator; I am an inspector. It is recommendation, cajoling and encouraging. Most recommendations that we make are followed by the vast majority of services and forces.

Q33 **Tim Loughton:** In another capacity, I chair a safeguarding board for a children's group. One of the first questions I asked of the management was, "How many whistleblowing complaints do you get?" to which the response was, "We only get a few", as if that was a good thing. My instant challenge was, "In an organisation of this size, where there will be people who may want to blow the whistle on a whole series of things, why are you only getting a few? That suggests to me that it has not been properly publicised and promoted, and people do not have proper confidence in it."

We now have regular whistleblowing audits and the number has gone up considerably, which is a good thing. We can now assess it on how those whistleblowing complaints are dealt with, where people have come forward because they have confidence in the system to deal with them.

Whistleblowing is a pretty basic aspect of an inspection, to see how it is working. Have you done any work on the whistleblowing stats across all the different fire authorities?

Andy Cooke: I could not give you those facts here and now. What I will say is that I am aware that the usage of the confidential hotlines is increasing. Chief fire officers have a real requirement to ensure their staff understand that these are confidential because that lack of trust still exists in the fire service.

Q34 **Tim Loughton:** Do you have tables of how many whistleblowing



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complaints there have been across every fire service?

Andy Cooke: I can't answer that question.

Tim Loughton: You do not know whether you have tables.

Andy Cooke: No.

Q35 **Tim Loughton:** Could I suggest that having a table of comparable whistleblowing complaints across fire services might throw up a few outliers? That might be something that the inspectorate could usefully deploy resource in.

Andy Cooke: I am certainly happy to take advice in relation to that and to look at that issue.

Q36 **Tim Loughton:** Mr Afzal, you made the point about people having the confidence to talk to you in your review but not having confidence in the inspectorate. Does that suggest that the inspectorate and, indeed, the management of the fire service need to bring in people from completely outside the fire service?

Nazir Afzal: I mentioned the review of NMC. The staff said to me, "I am not going to talk to you if you have anything to do with NMC. If you have spoken to it or you are part of the health profession, I am not going to talk to you." The same thing is true of the fire service.

I will tell you an anecdote. I was walking past the door of the commissioner of a fire service when I was visiting their office and somebody said, "I saw you walking past. I am not sure I trust you any more." I was walking past.

Tim Loughton: Did you do it in a menacing way or something?

Nazir Afzal: My point is that it does not matter what the reality is. The perception of independence is key to people feeling able to speak. That tells you how much fear there is in an institution.

When they did report something, they were castigated. They were treated as if they were a pariah in some way, shape or form. You mentioned being a whistleblower. They were called grasses. People did not have the confidence. Yes, there has to be some means that people have confidence in, which is entirely independent of the fire service, for them to speak up.

Q37 **Tim Loughton:** I have one final question. The Committee went to see the Met's standards committee after all the revelations about the culture in the Met. They have done a lot. They are now trawling through lots of previous standards complaints that were not taken any further. I asked them, "Who is doing all this work?" The answer was, "We have seconded in lots of police officers from around the country." It struck us that that was the police marking their own homework.

Would it not be much better to have complete outsiders—from the



military, for example? They are quite good at this sort of analysis, they have no axes to grind with the police, and they can have a completely fresh and unequivocal perspective on these things. If that works and throws things up, it will hopefully give people the confidence to come forward and raise whistleblowing complaints or follow whatever complaint process on the basis that there is somebody who will understand them, rather than them thinking, "He knows the person involved. He might tip them off," and having that concern about being labelled a grass, as you say.

Nazir Afzal: You are right. I am not sure whether the military is the right organisation. As the chancellor of the University of Manchester in our bicentenary year, what about academics? They carry out research, they know what they are looking for, and they are looking for new funding streams too.

From my perspective, yes, there is a real appetite for people to be able to speak to people to whom they would not otherwise speak. They will then share. It was a tsunami, Mr Loughton. Once they realised, "I can trust this," they came—and they are still coming.

Q38 **Kim Johnson:** For the purpose of the minutes, I want to clarify that I had a working relationship with Mr Cooke in his former role as the chief constable of Merseyside Police.

Mr Cooke, you mentioned that there are 350 people working for the inspectorate. I would like you to let me know how diverse that group of individuals is. We have talked about deeply ingrained institutional racism inherent across the services.

Andy Cooke: I will have to get you those figures. I could not tell you offhand. It is certainly higher than the police forces and services that we inspect.

Q39 **Kim Johnson:** It would be true to say that both reports paint a very damning picture in terms of the services. Mr Afzal identifies very clearly in his report the institutional racism. From the inspectorate's view, do you also believe that that is a major issue?

Andy Cooke: We have uncovered a lack of management expertise and leadership in addressing some of these issues over a significant amount of time. Policies and procedures have been changed significantly over the last few years to address them and to attempt to engage a far more diverse fire service, but that work is very slow. Recruiting the right people from across our communities is a massive challenge, particularly for the fire service at the moment. It is not much better for policing, I must say.

While I do not use the terms "institutional racism" or "institutional misogyny", there are certainly issues that need to be addressed in both the fire service and policing.



Q40 **Kim Johnson:** Sadly that change is not happening at speed. You have mentioned that a couple of times this morning in response to questions. There were 35 recommendations in the report that you published last year. I would like to know how much progress has been made on those recommendations.

Andy Cooke: Some good progress has been made by the vast majority of services. Unfortunately, we have recently placed two other services into the “engage” programme because they have not been changing as quickly as we would like to see them change or addressing the issues that need to be addressed. If you were to mark a scorecard, the vast majority of services are taking cognisance of what we are saying and they are following our recommendations. As I said before, at least 35 have introduced a whistleblowing approach.

Q41 **Kim Johnson:** Can you explain why that is not a consistent approach across all 44 services?

Andy Cooke: Much like in policing, we have 44 different leaders and 44 different governance approaches in different parts of the country. In my view, we have far too many fire services.

Q42 **Chair:** I am sorry to interrupt, Kim. Could you give us the list of which ones are not engaging in this way? That would be helpful for us to understand.

Andy Cooke: Do you mean the services that are currently in “engage”?

Chair: Yes, the ones that are currently in “engage” and the ones that do not have a whistleblowing policy. You are saying that some of them are not changing. Which ones are they? Let us hear who they are.

Andy Cooke: I am more than happy to come back to you via letter with a list of services that have not fully—

Chair: You can’t tell us today which ones you are most worried about because they are not changing quickly enough.

Andy Cooke: There are four services that are currently in “engage”.

Chair: Which ones are they?

Andy Cooke: There is Buckinghamshire. There is London Fire Brigade, which is making great strides. It has been there for some time. There is Gloucestershire, which has been in for a time. Most recently, Avon has come into the process. We have identified concerns around those services. We continue to monitor all the other services as well to see how well they are progressing.

Q43 **Kim Johnson:** In terms of that lack of progress and change, I just wanted to know what kind of sanctions and actions are taken against chief fire officers who are intransigent. Mr Afzal mentioned people not wanting to engage. You do the reports and you make the recommendations, but some of them have just said, “I’m not doing it



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because I don't have to and I don't want to." I would be very interested to know what direct action is taken against those fire chiefs.

Andy Cooke: We do not tend to get fire chiefs saying, "We're not going to do it because we don't want to."

Kim Johnson: But their actions identify that they are not going to do it, because they are not doing it.

Andy Cooke: That is an issue for the governance of that fire chief. I have no power to make fire chiefs do anything. I can only make recommendations on what I believe they should undertake.

Q44 **Kim Johnson:** We have heard this morning that the inspectorate might not be fit for purpose in terms of undertaking this piece of work, being involved and making significant change moving forward. How would you respond to that assertion, Mr Cooke?

Andy Cooke: I totally disagree. All the significant changes that have happened in the fire service since 2018 have been driven by the inspectorate. The White Paper that is currently with the Government, which sets out a number of ways to improve the fire service, was driven by the inspectorate. Our misconduct thematic, which will be published in summer, will identify some of the key issues in addressing misconduct issues in the fire service.

We drove the confidential hotlines being implemented in services. We were responsible for approaching the Government in relation to changing the level of checks that are undertaken on fire officers and staff. All the significant changes since 2018, when we started inspecting, have been driven by the inspectorate. I am not saying those changes are happening quickly enough or that that on its own is enough. That is why I have consistently asked for further powers to ensure that fire and police chiefs do what needs to be done in the interests of public safety.

Q45 **Kim Johnson:** We have also heard this morning that some of those that were rated as "good" through the assessment process turned out not to be. We could have high numbers of services that are quite dysfunctional where a lot of these issues are still prevalent. If you are not doing a deep enough investigation into some of these inherent issues, how confident can the public and the staff be in how that work is being undertaken?

Andy Cooke: I will cover two issues. The first is the amount of resource that I have. While 350 might seem a lot, we are looking at 43 police forces and 44 fire services. We undertake not only PEEL for policing and FRS inspections every two years but other thematics as well. We are a tiny percentage of the overall spend on policing and fire. We are less than 0.25% of the overall budget. With more resource, we could do more.

In addition to that, our inspections are consistently improving. We now take a different approach to our inspections, which is very much focused on the outcome for the public as opposed to being a tick-box exercise.



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You can only be a good service if you are doing what the public believe a fire service or a police service should be doing to keep them safe. It is a distinct change in the approach to inspection, which is starting to uncover more and more things. Our inspections have got more in-depth over the last two years. I will never compromise on the quality of our inspections.

Q46 Kim Johnson: Both of your reports identified issues around watches and the impact that they have on the perpetration of abuse, whether it is of women or of black members of staff. What needs to happen to change that? How do we get rid of that and not allow it to continue?

Andy Cooke: It is fair to say that there are some good watch cultures, but we have seen and heard from our inspections, Mr Afzal's inspections and media reporting that that is not consistently the case. When people work and sleep in the same building and are with each other for a significant amount of time, it can bring significant issues for people coming into those cultures who might not be seen as one of the group.

There are a number of ways to address it. First, fire chiefs and fire leaders need to focus their attention on ensuring that these cultures do not start developing. When they do, they need to take swift action on it. They need to improve how they deal with misconduct. They need to give further confidence to middle managers to address these issues immediately in whatever way is needed. There is also an element of people being on watches for too long. They need to change the watches around more often than they do at the moment.

Q47 Kim Johnson: Public confidence in both the police and the fire service is at an all-time low because of all these reports and actions. What is the inspectorate doing to improve people's confidence in those public services?

Andy Cooke: We highlight the issues where services and forces are failing and where they are being innovative or showing good practice. We speak on behalf of the public. Despite being an ex-chief constable, I hold no allegiance to police forces, fire services or the Government. I am quite happy to speak out when I need to. That has been shown over the last two years. My inspectorate will continue to do that where it is necessary. We will not shy away from raising the issues.

Policing and the fire service have a long way to go to regain that confidence. A lot of it is down to the cultures that we have seen and the public not believing that the services are doing the right things on behalf of communities. I will keep publicising that.

Q48 Kim Johnson: Mr Afzal, your report into the London Fire Brigade was started because of the very sad suicide of a black firefighter. We know that there was another suicide of a fire chief in January this year. We have mentioned the deeply ingrained institutional racism. I believe that is the issue here. What needs to happen to challenge that going forward?



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Nazir Afzal: I do not shy away from using the terms “institutional racism”, “institutional misogyny” and “institutional homophobia”. It is not individuals; it is a systemic failure.

Let me pay tribute to the chief fire officer of the West Midlands, whose early death was reported in January. His memorial service was last week. He was the only black chief fire officer in the country. There will undoubtedly be things that come out during the inquest, which you will hear about then.

How do you deal with it? You have to listen to your staff. You mentioned the watch culture, Ms Johnson. The answer is to move people in and out. A group of 12 people should not be there for 40 years. That culture will be self-perpetuating.

What we discovered was that around the country there was a culture of “FIFO”—that is what they called it. “FI” stands for “fit in”, and you can tell me what the rest of the words are—it is inappropriate for Parliament, of course. The point is that people were told, “You must fit in.” No—you have to make them welcome.

Accountability is something we have touched on today. Where is the accountability? Certainly in London, people are being suspended and disciplinary hearings are taking place. People are leaving the service at some speed because action is being taken. You have to have the accountability.

You have to have an environment that makes you feel safe. You have to give people the opportunity to speak up. You have to support the staff networks. There are plenty of them around. They need to be properly supported so people have a voice internally. You have to believe them when they share and not simply say, “You are just a one-off,” because they are not.

Q49 **Kim Johnson:** Can I ask about the recruitment, retention and promotion of under-represented groups—women, black people and LGBT people? Have you seen any change in the London Fire Brigade?

Nazir Afzal: In London, yes, very much so. I do not have the data, but something like a third of new recruits in London were from black and minority communities. I said to them, “Stop having these open days where you show them a fire engine. Talk to them about the job.” One south Asian firefighter said, “I get so much respect driving this fire engine, more than if I drove a BMW or a Mercedes.” They love the job if they are given the opportunity to do the job. They need to be encouraged more.

The sad news is that people are leaving. While more are coming in, they tend to be the ones who leave. It is that thing about changing the culture. You have to change the culture.

Q50 **Marco Longhi:** As a former Audit Commission inspector who inspected



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the London Fire Brigade as well as others, I can relate to what you are reporting, gentlemen. It feels like a million years ago, but in the grand scheme of things it was not that long ago. We know how long ago the Audit Commission ceased to exist.

If I may ask more of a leading question, would either of you regard most of the problems that we have talked about today, if not all of them, as being the result of poor senior management and senior leadership?

Andy Cooke: From my perspective, yes. Other issues come into it, but certainly strong leadership is required.

Nazir Afzal: Yes is the answer.

Q51 **Marco Longhi:** Who is responsible for changing management and leadership in these organisations?

Andy Cooke: The appointment of chief fire officers is for the governance authority, whether that is a mayor, a fire and rescue authority or a county council. Below that, it is the responsibility of the chief fire officer to appoint.

Q52 **Marco Longhi:** Is it similar for the police?

Andy Cooke: It is similar for the police, yes.

Q53 **Marco Longhi:** Therefore, would you say that the impact that the inspectorate or, indeed, you as an independent individual would have is largely reputational, given that you do not have the powers to mandate any of these changes?

Andy Cooke: Yes. It is reputational. It is about credibility and identifying the right issues.

Q54 **Marco Longhi:** As much as we can ask questions about whether we have whistleblowing or whether we have the ability to change how these organisations perform, the only powers that you really have are those that arise from the negative reputational impact that a poor report might have on those organisations.

Andy Cooke: Yes.

Q55 **Chair:** We talked about people not having confidence to come forward and the lack of trust. Could you just say something about the trade unions and how they fit into this? Obviously, if you are a member of a trade union and you feel that things are not right in your workplace, you would go and talk to your trade union. Mr Afzal, how did it work in London in terms of the FBU involvement?

Nazir Afzal: I am a member of a trade union myself—the First Division Association—and they are great when they work. There was some denial within the FBU, particularly in London Fire, because some staff were saying, “The union is on the side of the perpetrator rather than me,” and I was saying, “You are both members, so there shouldn’t be a side in



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this." Some people did have concerns about where the FBU's loyalty lies. I did not find any evidence that the FBU was responsible or in some way facilitating the abuse that I have touched on, but it was perhaps slow in responding to it.

Andy Cooke: The key issue is that unions need to work hand in hand with fire chiefs, particularly in relation to cultural issues, and not against them. Surely it is in the interests of both that people feel happy, safe and secure coming to work, and feel like they are making a difference. The FBU and other fire unions need to work closely with fire chiefs to do that.

I have never been a member of a trade union, obviously, but certainly I am supportive of trade unions that are doing the right thing for their members, with a full understanding of the overall picture of what is required to be done to improve a service, in this case. That better working together would certainly put us in a better place.

I know some fire chiefs will say that the FBU, on occasions, does not work with them and hinders progress. The FBU itself will have a different view in relation to that, I am sure.

Chair: We are going to hear from them, yes.

Andy Cooke: I know that Matt Wrack is speaking to you next. I have fairly regular meetings with the FBU to discuss ongoing issues.

Q56 **Chair:** Can I just ask about ministerial involvement? Chris Philp is the Minister responsible. He was the one who asked you to look at the behavioural and cultural issues and started that report off. You have engagement with the Minister.

Andy Cooke: We have very good engagement with the Minister on both the policing and the fire side of the house. That does not mean I am always happy with the pace at which things happen in Government, as you would expect me to say, but certainly the Minister is very energetic in pushing forward the agendas in relation to it.

Q57 **Chair:** Mr Afzal, have you met the Minister?

Nazir Afzal: Yes. In fact, I would endorse what Mr Cooke says. I have met Mr Philp. He was at the national fire chiefs' meeting. I have had another virtual meeting with him, and I think he understands the challenges the fire service has.

Q58 **Chair:** That is good to hear. Can I also ask you again about leadership? I just want to ask about the chief fire officer in Dorset and Wiltshire. I started off my questioning with my concerns about that force. I was reading comments he made where he was denying that there was a problem.

I also came across the chief fire officer in Tyne and Wear, where there were similar issues about someone who was accused of rape being promoted within the fire and rescue service. Again, there was a denial



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from the chief fire officer there that there was a problem.

If leadership is so important, how is it that those chief fire officers are still in place if they are denying what we all now recognise are real problems?

Marco Longhi: That is a very good question.

Chair: They are both still in situ, are they not?

Andy Cooke: I think the Tyne and Wear officer has retired.

Chair: He has retired.

Andy Cooke: Yes, I believe so.

Chair: He was not told to go; he retired.

Andy Cooke: Yes.

Chair: What about Dorset and Wiltshire?

Andy Cooke: Offhand, I cannot tell you if the same chief is still in place or not. I will find out for you.

The question was, what does it tell you about leadership? Obviously, the inspectorate cannot change who is in charge of fire services. That is for others.

Q59 **Chair:** No, but you would be surprised that someone would be in post who had denied there was a problem.

Andy Cooke: It would be difficult for me to comment on that.

Q60 **Chair:** Could you just explain this to me? You do not accept the terms "institutional misogyny" or "institutional racism" full stop as an inspectorate.

Andy Cooke: I just don't use the terms.

Chair: You don't use the terms.

Andy Cooke: No.

Q61 **Chair:** Mr Afzal, you recognise institutional racism and misogyny, and everything else.

Nazir Afzal: Yes, and institutional homophobia as well.

Q62 **Chair:** Could I just check, Mr Afzal? We had a note that nobody had actually been dismissed from the London Fire Brigade after your report. Is that not correct? Are you saying people have been?

Nazir Afzal: It is a bit confusing, but I think there was some evidence given to the London Assembly a year on that suggested that 10 people had left. That is the phrase that you just heard a moment ago. Whether they have been dismissed or were given the option to leave is not a



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question I can answer on behalf of the London Fire Brigade, but I am with Mr Longhi on this: accountability is lacking.

Chair: Mr Cooke, did you want to come back on that?

Andy Cooke: Under Andy Roe and with the work that is being done to improve misconduct procedures, the number of individuals under a more professional investigation for wrongdoing has significantly increased, so you will see an increase in misconduct in the London Fire Brigade. That is a good thing, not a bad thing.

Q63 **Chair:** Will you supply the list of the forces that have the whistleblowing policy in place and the forces that you have described as not changing quickly enough? We would like to know which you think those are. You have already given us the four that are in “engage”.

Andy Cooke *indicated assent.*

Q64 **Chair:** That would be very helpful. Is there anything else either of you would like to say before we conclude?

Nazir Afzal: I will just endorse what Mr Cooke said. The vast majority of fire officers and fire and rescue staff are doing a great job keeping us safe. Our job is to keep them safe.

Chair: Thank you very much for your time today. We will move to our second panel.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Alex Johnson, Tristan Ashby and Matt Wrack.

Q65 **Chair:** Good morning and welcome to the second panel today. I am going to ask you to introduce yourselves first of all. Shall we start with Mr Wrack?

Matt Wrack: I am Matt Wrack. I am the general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union and formerly a firefighter in London.

Alex Johnson: I am Alex Johnson. I am the director and patron of Women in the Fire Service. I am also retired chief fire officer of South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service and the author of the independent review of Dorset and Wiltshire.

Tristan Ashby: Good morning. My name is Tristan Ashby. I am the chief executive officer of the Fire and Rescue Services Association and a former on-call firefighter.

Q66 **Chair:** Could you just explain what your organisation is?

Tristan Ashby: It is an independent trade union.

Q67 **Chair:** Ms Johnson, can I start with you? I read your review of Dorset



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and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service. Would you like to convey to the Committee your overall thoughts about what you found in that particular fire service? More generally, in your experience as a woman firefighter over a number of years, what is going on? What is going wrong? Why are we in this position?

Alex Johnson: We are in the same position we were in nearly 33 years ago when I joined the fire service. The culture has not changed considerably. Women are now starting to speak out, as are people from other under-represented groups. People are starting to perhaps listen, but it is very difficult.

You talk about whistleblowing. You can have confidential whistleblowing, but when you may be the only woman on a fire station, even then, to take any action on that fire station, there is a big neon sign saying, "It was her." It is very difficult for people to feel confident to speak out about what is happening.

I was not surprised by what I found at Dorset and Wiltshire. I am sure I could have gone into most services and found that. As Mr Afzal said, it was about creating a space where women and other people could come and speak and feel confident. The more people we spoke to, the more people wanted to speak to us. We expected to speak to 20 to 30 people. In fairness, Dorset and Wiltshire promoted people coming and speaking to us, and we ended up speaking to 136.

Q68 **Chair:** They felt confident to speak with you. Although you are obviously part of the fire service and have been for many years, they felt able to speak to you.

Alex Johnson: The difference is that, as a woman, I have been through a lot of what they have been through. I suppose I am fairly well known in the fire and rescue service for supporting women. I have been involved through my role in Women in the Fire Service. I was a women's rep for the Fire Brigades Union in my earlier years. That creates that space where people can relate to you and know that you can relate to them.

For nearly 30 years, Women in the Fire Service has spent time supporting women to help them progress, develop and feel confident. None of this is a surprise to me; I am just pleased that it is getting the airtime that it needs.

Q69 **Chair:** You said that Dorset and Wiltshire publicised what you were doing and got people to speak to you. Was Dorset and Wiltshire helpful and co-operative?

Alex Johnson: Yes, it was very co-operative. It put out bulletins for us. We did little videos that it shared among its staff. It extended timescales for us so that we could interview the number of people who came forward. We were able to go to buildings that were not fire service so that people could feel more confident that they were not sitting on a fire station being watched.



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Q70 **Chair:** Did Dorset and Wiltshire agree with your recommendations or did it try to get you to change your recommendations?

Alex Johnson: It accepted all the recommendations. As with any report, a bit like the HMICFRS, if it disagreed with the accuracy then there was a little bit of to-ing and fro-ing, but I did not change the content of my report.

Q71 **Chair:** Is the chief fire officer still in place who was there when all these problems were happening?

Alex Johnson: Yes, he is.

Q72 **Chair:** Do you think that is right?

Alex Johnson: That is not for me to comment on.

Q73 **Chair:** He denied that there was any problem, though, didn't he?

Alex Johnson: He did in some initial interviews, yes.

Q74 **Chair:** I saw clips where he was saying there was not a problem, and he is still there.

Mr Wrack, one of my questions in the previous session was about the FBU and your members feeling confident to come forward, speak and raise concerns. Could you just explain to us what happens when individual firefighters come forward and say there is a problem? What is the process you engage in?

Matt Wrack: There would be various processes. If I may make one point to start with, though, picking up on something Mr Afzal said to you earlier, in many cases watches and fire services are welcoming to people from under-represented groups. We should not lose sight of that. Nevertheless, I am not trying to take away from what are very serious problems.

The sorts of cases that we will have may be that an individual approaches a trade union rep to say, "I am being discriminated against" or "I am being bullied." We provide trained reps who may then make an approach to the management or make a complaint, and further down the line that may lead to legal action.

We take employment tribunal cases every year on behalf of members who have been either bullied, harassed or discriminated against within fire and rescue services. To get a successful outcome in an employment tribunal, clearly you have to demonstrate a failure of that employer to take action at the appropriate time. That might be a failed grievance, or it might be a discipline case that has gone wrong. In our annual report, which goes to our conference every year, there will be cases of that nature reported in our legal section.

Q75 **Chair:** Do you think enough people are coming forward? We have been hearing that this is happening a lot. Do you think people feel confident to



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come forward and do that?

Matt Wrack: The question of confidence in the system is probably one of the biggest problems that these various reports have highlighted.

Q76 **Chair:** What about with the FBU?

Matt Wrack: There are problems occasionally within the FBU as well. We have just done our own report on sexual harassment within the FBU, so not in the workplace but in a union context. That did report some quite alarming findings in some parts of the union of people experiencing inappropriate behaviour, comments, language and so on. We have accepted that report and we are taking steps on that.

Again, a point that was made in a report to us was a lack of confidence that some officials may take up those complaints if they were made.

Q77 **Chair:** Can I ask about the people who the allegations of discrimination or harassment are made against? They come to you and say, "This person has made a complaint against me." What do you do then? How do you represent them?

Matt Wrack: We have, certainly in theory, very robust policies. We have a rulebook that requires people to behave in certain ways towards other members. We have discipline cases within the FBU, and fairly recently we have disciplined officials for breaches of those policies. We have, in some cases, barred those people from holding office in the union. That is internally.

In terms of the fire service, we have a policy that is probably pretty unique to trade unions. It is called "All different, all equal". It is about equality and diversity, but it also has processes for when representation will be granted and when it might not be granted. That has developed over the years. It arose out of a particular case where we did withdraw representation from an individual, but we were taken to an employment tribunal as a result of that decision. We have taken legal advice and we have a process whereby a matter is investigated and a report will be presented. In most cases, it will recommend continuing representation, but in certain circumstances representation would be withdrawn.

Q78 **Chair:** I have a note that, in the Dorset and Wiltshire case, the FBU represented many of the male aggressors in those cases against women firefighters. The FBU did that.

Matt Wrack: I do not know that I am in a position to discuss individual cases.

Q79 **Chair:** Generally, you were representing men who were accused of discrimination.

Matt Wrack: Clearly, we cannot withdraw representation from people on an ad hoc basis.

Q80 **Chair:** You have just said that there is a process you go through, and



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that you will not always represent people if you feel they have behaved in a certain way.

Matt Wrack: It is not about what we feel; it is an evidence-based decision we have made on the basis of seeking legal advice.

Q81 **Chair:** You go through a process and decide, but in Dorset and Wiltshire, where we know there were real problems, with discrimination, harassment and all sorts happening, you were, as the union, representing male firefighters when there were allegations against them. I am just asking you factually. Is that correct?

Matt Wrack: We may have been. There are no individual cases highlighted, so I am unable to answer whether, in a particular case, we represented people.

Chair: Perhaps you could write to me and let me know if you represented some of the men.

Matt Wrack: I could if you can provide me with the details of the cases. That is the problem.

Chair: All I know is that the FBU was representing some of the male aggressors in cases against women in Dorset.

Matt Wrack: That may be the case.

Q82 **Chair:** Ms Johnson, are you able to help us with this? Was there FBU representation? Do you recall?

Alex Johnson: Those were the comments of some of the women and the people we spoke to, but, because we promised that we would not use people's names, I will not be able to provide the names so that you could look at that. It was more about that feeling that the aggressor or the person that has been accused is represented, and women felt that they were almost not believed. That is wider than just a union; that is a society in which women feel they have to fight to be listened to and believed.

Matt Wrack: May I just make one point, Chair? That may well be the case. Equally, we have also had cases, not in that brigade but elsewhere, where someone has represented individuals in breach of a decision not to represent, and that person has then been disciplined by the union and removed from office. Where we become aware of it, we are very able and willing to take action.

Q83 **Chair:** Does it worry you that perhaps your members are not feeling that confident in coming to you as the trade union? Women members particularly do not feel that they are getting a fair shout.

Matt Wrack: Yes, of course. It does worry me.

Q84 **Chair:** What are you going to do about that?



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Matt Wrack: We have various mechanisms in place. This debate has been going on in the fire service for about 40 years, since the early 1980s, and as part of the fire service and as a trade union we have had to struggle and adapt ourselves to that situation.

We have created equality structures within our union. We have a black members' section, a women members' section and an LGBT+ section. They clearly argue their case, and they will raise these points within the union structures at conference. Sometimes those discussions are uncomfortable for other people in the room, and we encourage people to do that.

We have just commissioned an independent report into ourselves, which we invited the author to present to our executive. Some of that was uncomfortable listening, so we are not shying away from that. We have accepted all those recommendations and we will be making changes within our structures as a result of that, including mandatory training on the issue of sexual harassment, for example.

Q85 **Chair:** You do not have mandatory training already.

Matt Wrack: We have training structures, but we will develop new, specific training arising out of this particular report.

Q86 **Chair:** Mr Ashby, what do you say about all of this? What is going on in terms of the confidence of firefighters to speak out and to get justice?

Tristan Ashby: It was really helpful sitting and listening to the first panel, which resonated with me. Our members do not have the confidence that the internal processes will ensure their confidentiality and a fair or swift process. That is why so many people choose not to use that.

When we are approached to provide representation, one of the last things we are keen on advising is submitting a bullying and harassment complaint, because we know that that can, in more cases than not, end up with a target on somebody's back. They are then likely to leave the service, which is probably why Mr Afzal got so much traction with regard to the responses he had, and Alex got the same with hers.

A number of years ago, I recommended that there needed to be an independent process specifically for bullying and harassment. I will never forget the meeting, but at that point I was mocked, with people saying, "If you're happy to have stations closed to fund that, then we'll progress it."

Q87 **Chair:** Who was mocking you?

Tristan Ashby: I am not going to say who was mocking me within the meeting because that would not be fair, but it was a national meeting where it was pooh-poohed that the fire service needed an independent reporting system for bullying and harassment complaints.



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Q88 **Chair:** That was by managers.

Tristan Ashby: Yes.

Q89 **Chair:** Is there anything else you want to add at this point? I have just asked Mr Wrack about representing people who have allegations against them. Do you want to say anything about how you deal with that?

Tristan Ashby: We are slightly different. We take the approach that, if somebody is a member and we have been taking their subscriptions for 10, 20 or 30 years, we are not going to then not represent them. Where somebody is accused of something serious, we will guarantee representation, but that guarantee is to ensure a fair process. That process might result in them being dismissed, and that would be the end of the line for us, whereas in other situations it might be that we would follow that even further in terms of representations at employment tribunals.

Q90 **Marco Longhi:** You were in the room when I asked my questions to the previous panel, and I think you could see where those were leading. If I were to repeat those questions to you now, would you be in agreement with the responses that were given before?

Tristan Ashby: In terms of the leadership, I would, 100%. Everything stems back to the lack of leadership, of accountability and of implication for performing poorly.

Alex Johnson: You have to recognise that leadership starts at supervisory level. We need to invest in our supervisory leaders, empower them and make them accountable and confident.

Q91 **Marco Longhi:** Who would empower them?

Alex Johnson: It has to be through training.

Q92 **Marco Longhi:** Who would put that in place?

Alex Johnson: The senior leadership do, but those senior leaders started as supervisory officers, so we need to start at the bottom to break that culture.

Matt Wrack: I would agree. The 2023 HMI report stated that 75% of bullying allegations identified in its survey were undertaken by people in a managerial position against a subordinate, and 85% of discrimination allegations found in the survey were by someone in a managerial position against someone in a subordinate position.

The mistake that is made in terms of policy is that, every time this is looked at, the answer that is identified in every single case is to give more power to chief fire officers, particularly the National Fire Chiefs Council, to resolve this. These are the people who have been setting policy in the fire and rescue service for almost 20 years.

Q93 **Marco Longhi:** Would these not be the very people at the top of the



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pyramid who should be accountable for the poor performance anyway?

Matt Wrack: That is my point.

Q94 **Tim Loughton:** Ms Johnson, you were talking about the review you did into Wiltshire, and we heard that the inspectorate assessed it as "good". How can those two things be complementary?

Alex Johnson: I think there is a huge difference, in that, obviously, Paul Brand raised it with ITN, the independent review was just that, and we got a lot more under-the-skin and deeper responses than the HMI has time to. The HMI does not spend days looking into culture and interviewing lots of people. I had the luxury of access to anybody who wanted to speak to me, and the time to speak to them and follow any information that was given to us.

My focus was on culture. I was not looking at community fire safety and other things. I had free rein to look at anything I wanted to in Dorset and Wiltshire, and therefore I could get more information.

Q95 **Tim Loughton:** Surely the inspector has free rein to look at whatever he wants. That is part of his powers of access.

Alex Johnson: Yes, but he or she has themes. I am not an inspector, so I could not comment on how they do it and how much time they spend on different areas.

Q96 **Tim Loughton:** The inspectorate is there not only to check procedures are happening and that the training and quality of the service is there, but also surely to inspect the culture and the underlying morale, teamwork and ability to recruit within the service, which is dependent on culture. Do you think the inspectorate is fit for purpose in that respect?

Alex Johnson: We need something to assess whether fire and rescue services are doing what they should be doing. When I was chief, inspectors would come in and visit a certain amount of stations. They would meet with our support groups, so the women's group, black and minority ethnic groups, LGBT groups and the carers' group. They were given access to all those groups to find out how they felt, but they probably were not focused on people coming forward who have challenges and issues. They have to look at a wide spectrum of people within the service.

Q97 **Tim Loughton:** Do you think enough has been done to promote women coming into the fire service?

Alex Johnson: There is a lot more work to be done. A lot of positive action is carried out, but one of the biggest challenges we have is that gender bias is set when children are four, five or six years old. We still get asked to go to the nursery because they want to see "firemen", and the press still refer to "firemen". That has to change. Even elected members still use the wrong terminology. We have to change that, because young girls do not see being a firefighter as a career.



Positive action takes a lot of time. You cannot decide you are going to recruit and say, "We will do some positive action and get more women and under-represented people in." It has to be an ongoing thing. The best resources you have for positive action are the fire engines as they ride around the street and how they interact with the public.

There is a huge amount of work to be done with that, and role models are essential. I talk about women but, just by numbers, there are so few role models from any under-represented group. We say, "If you can see it, you can be it." Not many girls can see other women as firefighters. Of the few outstanding role models we have, some do not want to stick their head above the parapet.

Nazir mentioned "fit in or go elsewhere". That desire to fit in and conform or be accepted is something we have to work on, because that is not just about women and people of colour. There are men who join the fire service and very quickly drop into that watch and behave in certain ways. I certainly did it. I probably spent four years trying to be one of the lads on the watch, and then remembered I was not.

We have to create that environment where people feel included for who they are, not who people think they should be. I was going to say that that is going to take time. I have been retired two years and did 30 years. It needs to be a constant thing.

One of the other things is EDI roles. They are the first thing to go. The minute there are any cuts, the roles of equality, diversity and inclusion manager or leader are the first jobs that go. We do not get rid of health and safety, but, as Mr Afzal says, we need to protect people not just with health and safety equipment and PPE, but through psychological safety and those sorts of things. There are lots of things that need to become an integral part of fire and rescue services.

Q98 Tim Loughton: Our West Sussex fire chief, Sabrina Cohen-Hatton, is an outstanding role model. One of the things she said the other day is that she was at a social function with her husband, who is a fire officer, and people asked what he did and he said, "I'm a fire officer," and they said, "That's very good." Then they asked what she did and she said, "I'm a fire officer," to which the response was, "How do you manage to balance that with your family responsibilities?" because they have a child. It is a completely different mindset. How do we counter that sort of thing?

Alex Johnson: I do not know. I was asked similar questions, because I have a daughter. The majority of the fire service are white men, and they have to start speaking up on behalf of women, people of colour and LGBT people, because it is a really lonely place when you are the only person on a watch or in a department on a station who is from an under-represented group. When one of your white male colleagues says, "Do you know what? I don't care whether she found that offensive. It stops here," that is where we will change the culture.



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It is about male colleagues stepping up and calling out those inappropriate comments and the banter that goes too far. Until that happens and as long as people just keep their head down and tie their shoelaces, nothing is going to change.

Q99 Tim Loughton: Mr Ashby, how do your white male colleagues speak up and make change happen?

Tristan Ashby: It is a really good question. It is about calling it out when you see and hear it, and having the confidence to do that. Being trade union officials and having the network of support that our members have will enable that to happen more.

We have a number of female people on our exec board who are able to influence and show that we are that sort of organisation with a diverse range of people, but it is really difficult, because we do not feel that we are getting the necessary support across the whole fire service family.

Q100 Tim Loughton: What does that mean? Who is not being supportive of this?

Tristan Ashby: There is a lot of lip service to this, clearly, because we have been talking about this for so long. I rewatched these Committees from 18 months and two years ago, and they could have taken place yesterday because nothing has changed. Mr Tom Winsor said the wind of change was a flutter; it still is a flutter.

To my knowledge, there has been no work to identify why women do not choose the fire service as a career. To my knowledge, there has been no work undertaken to identify why ethnic minorities do not choose the fire service as a career. Those sorts of pieces of work need to take place. We need to have a better understanding to be able to fix the problem that we have.

Q101 Tim Loughton: Whose job is that?

Tristan Ashby: It is everybody's job, but the ones with the resources are obviously senior management. You had Mark Hardingham from NFCC here previously. He has the resources. That organisation is being part-funded by the taxpayer. Those are the sorts of pieces of work that should be the priority to ensure that the fire service is heading in the right direction.

On the point about the inspectorate, I gave evidence at the Welsh Parliament yesterday. Wales does not have an inspectorate, and I was advocating that it should. I would be very careful of being overly dismissive of the inspectorate. It is not as strong and as good as it was before. It is not the structure of the inspectorate; it is the personnel within it. They probably need to be appointed more carefully.

Q102 Tim Loughton: In answer to the question I put to Ms Johnson and others earlier, do you think the inspectorate is fit for purpose?



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Tristan Ashby: It is fit for purpose, but it needs to be a lot more robust because, as you quite rightly identified, you go into a brigade like Dorset and Wiltshire and come out saying it is wonderful, when clearly it is not.

Again, to namecheck Paul Brand and the work he and his team did, if he had not done that, there are so many things that would not have been identified, and we would not have made some of the progress that we have. Why did it take the media to do that? Why was it not led by the senior leadership within the NFCC?

Q103 **Tim Loughton:** That is the question. When it comes down to media reporting to instigate something that all the various inspectorates and other infrastructures already in place would presumably be proactively promoting themselves, why were they not?

Tristan Ashby: You picked up something earlier, with the first panel: it was mentioned that there was a 50:50 split between the fire service and civil servants. You need that fire service involvement to a degree, but you need to have people from the outside world who do this for a living and can get down to the important bits that need to be analysed and ask the right questions of the right people at the right time. That is not necessarily from the fire service; it is those from outside who can do that. There needs to be more outside involvement.

Q104 **Tim Loughton:** You think there is too much of the fire service marking its own homework, effectively.

Tristan Ashby: Within the inspectorate, there absolutely is. We read inspection reports, and sometimes we have to double check whether we are reading about the right service, because it does not reflect the experience of our members. There are some really good inspection teams out there, and there are some teams that are probably not as good.

Q105 **Tim Loughton:** What would happen if a chief fire officer in a county brigade was recruited from outside the profession with no prior experience of the fire service? Could that be a good thing or is it never going to happen?

Tristan Ashby: It has already happened. I am from Norfolk, and the chief there was from adult services within Norfolk County Council, with no fire service background at all. That ground has already been broken. That is not the issue. The issue is about getting the right people in the right positions who are going to make change, know what needs to be done and are not afraid to do it.

Q106 **Tim Loughton:** Was he a chief fire officer or was he a chief executive and there was a chief fire officer alongside him?

Tristan Ashby: It is a lady.

Tim Loughton: Sorry, that was an automatic assumption. But she is not from the fire service, interestingly.



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Tristan Ashby: She has absolutely no connections with the fire service whatsoever, but she has taken on that chief executive role and is undertaking the appropriate training.

Q107 **Tim Loughton:** That is my point. She is a chief executive, not a chief fire officer.

Tristan Ashby: She is also a chief fire officer, having now undertaken some operational training.

Q108 **Tim Loughton:** She had to qualify as a fire officer in some form in order to be called the chief fire officer. Is it a protected term?

Tristan Ashby: That is normally the case. I am not saying she had to do that. I do not want to speak on behalf of her, but she probably felt that she wanted to fit in, maybe. I do not know, but she took that training to ensure that we could have the title of chief fire officer.

Q109 **Tim Loughton:** The only reason I am interested is that I want to see if there are any barriers to somebody new coming in, because the problem that we have—we have had the same attitude in the analysis of the Met—is that it is very much a closed shop, and it is the police or the fire service marking their own homework.

What capacity is there for somebody who does not happen to have the fire pips on their uniform, having coming up through the ranks, as is mostly the case in my understanding, to come in with a completely different perspective on things? That is probably what is going to be needed if we are to bring the fire service to the level that we all agree it needs to be at, having heard how Ms Johnson described it 33 years ago when she joined, or in the 1970s as the Chair described it.

Mr Wrack, how important is promoting women, fire officers of colour and various other under-represented groups in the fire service? How big a deal is that for the FBU?

Matt Wrack: That is a huge deal and, again, has been a discussion for 40 years. One of the problems in the fire service is a complete lack of institutional memory. Frankly, we keep having the same debates every few years, including coming here and having the same debates with the people sitting in your chair. I find that worrying.

Somebody who is in the room today has made this point several times in our equality debates. I do not want to be party political, but in 2010 the first statement by the new fire Minister of the incoming Government was this: "We will no longer tell fire and rescue services who to recruit, how to recruit, who to promote or how to promote. That is a matter for the sector."

Anyone who lived through that time in the fire service was very clear about what message was being sent to fire and rescue services: "You can take your foot off the gas in terms of equality issues." Alex highlighted that, with austerity, the first teams to go were the equality and diversity



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teams, the people who did targeted recruitment and so on. We played a big role in the 1990s in getting officials of the union from our equality sections to go out and engage in discussions with communities about joining the fire service. All that has ceased for the past 15 years, and there is very little of that type of work going on, so let's not be surprised that equality has stalled. There is a complete failure to remember all the steps that we have been through in the past.

You talked about the inspectorate and the fire service marking the fire service. The old inspectorate was abolished in 2003-04. We were the lone voice in the fire service opposing that abolition. The chief officers supported its abolition and did not call for it to be restored. We called for it to be restored throughout that period. However, what has been restored is not the inspectorate that people had previously; it is the inspectorate of constabulary, so by and large it is the police marking the fire service in terms of the inspectorate.

Q110 Tim Loughton: Why does it require the Government to tell you to go and seek out talent?

Matt Wrack: It is not me. I do not run the fire service, Mr Loughton.

Tim Loughton: No, but the FBU has a role in this, does it not?

Matt Wrack: For 20 years, the FBU has been frozen out of these discussions, by and large. I will give you another example in terms of policy and guidance. Several years ago, through the National Joint Council, we established a group called the Inclusive Fire Service Group. It was initiated by us and the fire service employers. We invited Government to attend. We invited chief fire officers to attend. We sent all our equality strands to participate in that to have some of these discussions that we are now having here about six years down the line.

That body has established standards and made recommendations to fire and rescue services. Virtually no fire and rescue service has adopted those, nor has the National Fire Chiefs Council. By and large, those recommendations stayed on the shelf for years. Yes, people are competent in doing that. The question is whether there is the political will to introduce the necessary changes.

Q111 Tim Loughton: Are you actively promoting greater inclusion now?

Matt Wrack: We are constantly promoting greater inclusion. That is a struggle, but that is built into our education structures, policies and so on.

Q112 Tim Loughton: So when I go to your website and there is no mention of women, BME recruitment or gender balance—

Matt Wrack: That is completely untrue.

Tim Loughton: Well, I have just gone through your website. The last reference to women was a blog on International Women's Day, 8 March



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2022, about—

Matt Wrack: That is completely incorrect.

Tim Loughton: Let me finish, Mr Wrack.

Matt Wrack: Well, be accurate in your questions.

Tim Loughton: I have just gone through your website. Your website is not the only platform you have, but it is your face to the outside world. Just going back the last four years, I found two references to women. One of them is about stereotypes on 8 March 2022, and the other one is on 31 December 2020 about the role of women firefighters in the second world war. I could not find anything else about positively recruiting women into the fire service and why the fire service is appropriate for women to want to join. What have I missed?

Matt Wrack: There is a campaign that we launched at our conference last year called Equality Matters. It is a major—

Tim Loughton: It is not on your website.

Matt Wrack: It is on our website.

Tim Loughton: It is not under “Campaigns”.

Matt Wrack: With all due respect, Chair, it is on our website, and I will point you to it.

Chair: We will check.

Matt Wrack: There is a campaign called Equality Matters, which was initiated following discussions with our equality sections, and particularly with our women’s section. It is about precisely the issues we are discussing here.

Jointly driven with our women’s section, we have launched a major campaign on maternity leave over the past year. I am staggered that you have not managed to find that on our website, because it is highly profiled on our website. We have done a great deal of work. We have taken that issue about maternity leave to our employers. In fact, within the past two or three days we have announced progress on improved maternity leave for women firefighters in Greater Manchester, following a number of concessions by individual employers in Kent, the West Midlands and elsewhere. I lose track of how many there are. Those have all been reported on our website. Perhaps one of your researchers could find them for you.

Q113 **Tim Loughton:** Why are still only 8% of firefighters women?

Matt Wrack: That is perhaps a question for the National Fire Chiefs Council. The Fire Brigades Union plays no role in recruitment policies or in any recruitment process.



Q114 **Tim Loughton:** Why would a woman not want to become a firefighter?

Matt Wrack: There may be many reasons why a woman would not choose to become a firefighter. It is a very good question, but you are asking the wrong person.

Q115 **Tim Loughton:** How many members do you have?

Matt Wrack: 33,000.

Q116 **Tim Loughton:** How many firefighters are there?

Matt Wrack: Not many more than that are full-time firefighters.

Q117 **Tim Loughton:** You represent the vast majority of firefighters in this country, of whom 92% are male and a disproportionate number are white and male, so you have quite a deal of influence, I would have thought.

Is your membership giving out the wrong image to attract the people you have said—and I agree—we need to attract? Surely part of the problem is what is there already, so what is changing? What is happening to say, “We really welcome having more women as firefighters. We desperately need them. We really welcome”—as you suggested to start with—“having more people from the BME community and other under-represented communities?”

What is happening among your membership, who are the life and soul of the fire service up and down the country, to get that message across? It does not appear to be having any impact.

Matt Wrack: We listen to the voices of those affected, so we listen to the voices of our equality sections. Issues have been raised with us, for example, about maternity leave. On the initiative of women members of our union, we have launched a major campaign about maternity rights within the fire and rescue service, where there is a huge disparity in the maternity provision in one fire and rescue service versus one possibly just down the road. Our women members have asked us to take that up. Our women members have asked us to take up the issue of provision of advice and policies in relation to the menopause. We have taken that up.

I will give you one example of the obstacles we run into. We have particular education structures for women activists. In that, a report was given about a process within a particular fire and rescue service whereby firefighters were stripping off to their underwear before putting on their PPE. This was a practice I had certainly never heard of and was somewhat taken aback by, as were other officials of our union. It is not a practice that we were aware of anywhere else.

We have raised that with the inspectorate, the relevant chief fire officer, the politicians in that area, and the Minister, Mr Philp. Our response on that issue has been to hit a brick wall. Not a single other voice in the fire and rescue service has questioned whether it is appropriate for people to be asked to strip down to their underwear in full view of other people,



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including potentially in the street, before putting on their personal protective equipment.

Q118 **Tim Loughton:** You have mentioned various things that women have raised perfectly reasonably, be it around the menopause or around maternity conditions. Have your female members come to you to complain about misogyny?

Matt Wrack: Yes.

Q119 **Tim Loughton:** What has happened about that?

Matt Wrack: I did mention this earlier to the Chair. We have commissioned an independent report looking specifically at the Fire Brigades Union on the question of sexual harassment. Again, it is on our website if you want to have a search. We published a report on that just a couple of weeks ago.

We invited the authors of that report to make a presentation to our executive council, which they did, and we agreed all the recommendations made by the authors of that report. We will be taking a report to our conference in May, outlining what was identified and the steps that need to be taken in response. We have very recently addressed issues directly relating to sexual harassment and misogyny.

Q120 **Tim Loughton:** Are you aware how many of your members have faced investigations about sexual harassment or misogyny over the last few years?

Matt Wrack: I am not sure I would be able to give those figures, or whether we even would keep such figures centrally.

Q121 **Tim Loughton:** It is quite an important issue, is it not?

Matt Wrack: It is, but fire and rescue services should be able to give you those figures centrally.

Tim Loughton: They should be.

Matt Wrack: They should be. They run the disciplinary cases. It would be easier for employers to give you those figures. I am not sure that I would be able to have them centrally.

Q122 **Tim Loughton:** Given that, statistically, most of those cases are going to involve people who are your members, and you are committed to rooting out misogyny, this is something you want to take a closer interest in.

Everybody is agreed, be it from the limited reviews that have taken place, that there is a serious problem with misogyny within the fire service. Within the police service, and in the Met in particular, we know that there is a big backlog of standards investigations, which are now being revisited. I am getting the impression that there is not a comparable number of standards investigations that have taken place against fire officers, and that the number of those resulting in disciplinary



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action or dismissals is relatively light. Is that your understanding? How many fire officers have been dismissed?

Matt Wrack: One point I can make to Mr Afzal's report into the London Fire Brigade, and picking up a point that Kim Johnson made earlier about the police and the fire and rescue service, is that there are differences that Mr Afzal's report identified. He was very clear that, in relation to interactions with the public, he did not find evidence that attitudes that may exist on fire stations were felt in relation to interactions with the public, which was very different from other findings in relation to the police.

That is an important difference and possibly reflects why the confidence rates in the fire and rescue service vis-à-vis the police service are very different. Public confidence in the fire and rescue service is at something like 90%; in the police, I believe it is now below 50%, so there are big differences in people's perceptions and how firefighters interact with the public. That is not to say there may not be problems or to diminish the problems that exist potentially within the workplace.

I will try not to be specific about particular cases, but one of the difficulties with how some of these issues are managed is that sometimes I believe it may be easier for a person in a senior position to say, "I won't deal with this actual case; I will commission some sort of report in general." Until you start dealing with the individual cases, you do not begin to achieve the cultural change that people have referred to.

Q123 **Tim Loughton:** I agree with that, which is what my question was about. We have heard from the Chair about a number of cases referred to where the FBU has represented male fire officers who are facing allegations of misogynistic behaviour. How many cases have there been of FBU members over the last few years?

Matt Wrack: We need to be clear about the type of organisation we are. Most of our representatives are lay volunteers. They are not paid employees of the Fire Brigades Union. They are firefighters. To be a union rep they will have done some training through the union. If they are representing someone, they will seek permission from their employer to go to that disciplinary hearing, for example. That is how it works.

It is not the same as in some other unions where that might be a full-time employee of the union who then may come back and be required to fill in a form. It is very much a voluntary arrangement, so the truth is that we do not have that level of information. We would have done pre-2004 when there were national discipline regulations that recorded all cases. No such policies exist.

Q124 **Tim Loughton:** Whether or not there are official central records, you are saying that, as the FBU, you do not know how many of your FBU members have faced allegations and disciplinary procedures around misogyny and, as a result, how many have been disciplined or dismissed.



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You cannot give me those figures from the FBU.

Matt Wrack: I can research that and respond to the Chair in writing, but I may not be able to find that level of detail.

Q125 **Tim Loughton:** Is that not slightly worrying, given your commitment to doing something about the obvious misogyny problem you have within the fire service, which is not directly your problem but affects the vast majority of fire officers who are members of your union? That is the sort of detail you need to know if you are to take this seriously and to be seen to be doing something practical and serious about it, putting pressure on those other parts of the fire service—the management, the local authority management and ultimately the Government management—to take the problem more seriously, but you do not know the level of it yourself.

Matt Wrack: I would certainly be able to identify the number of legal cases that related to matters of this nature. Those are much easier records to obtain. Whether our local reps make a record of that in each fire and rescue service, I could not answer today.

Tim Loughton: Whatever information you have would be helpful.

Q126 **Kim Johnson:** For the purpose of the minutes, I would just like to declare that I am a member of the FBU parliamentary group.

Matt, you have talked about the role of the National Fire Chiefs Council, particularly in setting standards. I just want to know, from your point of view, what role central Government play in that. Is that actually happening at the moment?

Matt Wrack: There has been a complete retreat of central Government from fire policy for the past 20 years. The Minister is supposed to come and provide a written report to Parliament each year. If it happens, it is an absolutely minimal report.

The issue of fire policy and how fire and rescue services should operate has been, by and large, handed over to individual fire and rescue services and to the National Fire Chiefs Council. The result of that—and we are talking about England only, although we represent people across the UK—is that, in English fire and rescue services, there is a complete fragmentation on every level of policy, whether it is in terms of how fire services respond to incidents, how fire services train people, how fire services promote people, or how fire services deal with the issue we are discussing today. There will be 44 different approaches on all those issues.

Q127 **Kim Johnson:** In your opinion, does the fact that there is a lack of consistency in terms of that approach contribute to the level of misogyny and racial abuse that we are seeing in the service at the moment?

Matt Wrack: It exacerbates it by preventing it from being addressed. If there were clearer standards that were accepted nationally, endorsed by all key players, including the relevant Minister, then people would know



what standards were expected. That would make it clearer for an inspectorate to inspect against those agreed standards. As much as I occasionally criticise the inspectorate, it is hard to know what it is inspecting against when there are no national standards. We may not always agree with what they might end up being, but having common standards that people buy into and are understood would assist in this.

I understand there may be criticisms of targets, but since the abolition of all the previous targets the situation has worsened. It may not have worsened because of that, but the situation has worsened because of the abolition of targets that existed under the previous Government.

Q128 Kim Johnson: You just mentioned the independent review being undertaken within the FBU. As a result of that work you have done, you have taken on board some of the issues raised by women members in terms of providing support around the menopause. I just wanted to know what issues, if any, have been identified by black members and what they feel needs to happen to improve the situation for them within the fire and rescue service.

Matt Wrack: We hold a black members' school each year and a black members' section attends our conference. Issues that have been raised in particular are about a disproportionate use of disciplinary processes against black firefighters. That is quite a common concern that is raised. I think concerns have also been raised about under-representation in terms of recruitment and under-representation in terms of promotion. Those are probably the three things that are raised through our black members' section.

Q129 Kim Johnson: Do you believe that the FBU has a role in changing the culture and improving the level of diversity? I know you say that the FRSs and fire chiefs are responsible for that, but what role do you believe the FBU has in changing that culture?

Matt Wrack: We could play a role. I think there was a period in the 1990s, where there was much more joined-up action on these issues. We had a period when Ministers would regularly meet with our equality sections. That has not happened for 20 years. That gives you a direct input, not from me as a white bloke, but from people on the frontline of the fire and rescue service who are dealing with these issues.

There was a lot more collaborative work on recruitment. As I say, our equality sections had discussions in many fire and rescue services about what could be done to improve the recruitment profile of people joining the fire and rescue service. Again, to Alex's point, when people's view of the fire engine changes, their view of applying and joining the fire service may also change.

A lot of that work has stalled in the past 20 years, which is reflected in the stalling of the figures. I am not trying to make an overly political point, but we have lost 12,000 jobs in the service. It is harder to change the structure of the fire service when there are fewer and fewer people actually in the service than there were 15 years ago.



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Q130 Kim Johnson: We heard in the first panel that only 33 out of the 44 services have implemented whistleblowing. From your point of view, what needs to happen to build confidence for people to report instances of abuse?

Matt Wrack: The first thing is to have a serious discussion around it. A lot of these decisions are made without us in the room, so we do not have any influence. Of those 33 cases, I am not sure where there was even any discussion with us about that in those particular fire and rescue services. I am sure, at a local level, or if people wanted to have a discussion with us nationally, we would have suggestions to make.

It depends on what is meant by whistleblowing, but there certainly needs to be a route by which people who may not have confidence in their local structures, which might be a local manager or a local managerial structure, have somewhere else to go, but have the confidence that their concerns will be taken seriously. In the numerous reports that you have referred to today, and in our own evidence, I think that lack of confidence is a big factor.

Q131 Kim Johnson: Alex, you were a serving firefighter for many years. You mentioned earlier that things have not changed in 30 years. Matt mentioned that things have not changed in 40 years. That must be soul destroying for you, particularly in this position and in terms of the organisation that you are involved in. You mentioned that EDI is often the first thing to go whenever there are budget cuts. In today's news, we are hearing the Chancellor asking local government to pull those things. What impact will that have long term on the likes of improving diversity and squashing misogyny in our public services, if that happens?

Alex Johnson: It is really difficult because, like I say, as budget constraints come, we recruit fewer people. Therefore, there are fewer people to change that diverse group of people coming in. It is frustrating. It is still the best job in the world, and I love most of it.

I have to say, the majority of the people in the fire service are good human beings, but those good human beings have to start standing up and challenging the minority of people who think it is okay to come to work and treat people horribly. That is the only way. The trade unions and the senior leadership have to work together in a push-pull about, "Come to work, and be nice to each other." It is not rocket science.

Unlike the police, who police by consent and have to have the trust of their public, everybody loves the fire service. We go, we turn up, we put the fire out, we shoot off. We do not arrest anybody. We do not upset anybody. Why would you want to change something? They do not have that reason to change other than to be seen as professionals and to not let people go home feeling miserable. We have to identify that point that will make people realise why we need a diverse workforce and why we need to come to work and treat people pleasantly.

Q132 Kim Johnson: Tristan, we heard earlier that 85% of those cases relate to people in managerial positions. What needs to happen to those people



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who are found guilty of misogyny and abuse in the workforce?

Tristan Ashby: Due process needs to take place. First of all, everybody needs to understand what good looks like and the benefits of a healthy workforce and workplace. They also need to understand the implications of poor behaviour so that, when a manager is performing inappropriately and there are traits of misogyny, etc., they are dealt with appropriately and it is, as much as it can be, transparent across the service, to demonstrate that, if you behave like this, we will not tolerate it.

A lot of services talk about zero tolerance. When it comes to practice, there is not really that much zero tolerance on it, but when poor management and practices are identified, appropriate action needs to be taken so a clear message runs across all fire and rescue services. Quality of training is really important. Very often you find that, while people have had some EDI training, they have just flicked through a few presentation slides and ticked a box, and that is all it is.

Q133 **Kim Johnson:** Would you say that the National Fire Chiefs Council is a barrier in terms of significant change happening in the service at the moment?

Tristan Ashby: It is a barrier in the fact that it has not been doing what it should be. It is made up of chiefs, principal officers and senior leaders, and a number of those people, as we have seen in the media, are the people who are conducting poor behaviour. Going back to marking your own homework, it is why we feel it is really important to have that confidence in the independent structure that people can report their concerns and that they will be listened to and action will be taken.

Q134 **Chair:** I just want to ask each of you in turn: is the service institutionally misogynist, racist, homophobic—yes or no?

Matt Wrack: In terms of its outcomes, yes.

Alex Johnson: I would go with that.

Tristan Ashby: I am not going to go with that because the majority are fantastic, well-behaved staff, and the institution really hits home with them. I would not subscribe to that.

Q135 **Chair:** Mr Wrack, you were talking about your sexual harassment policy. I was just looking online at a story from 7 February this year. Nearly a third of female firefighters have experienced sexual harassment at events related to union activity. You have been the general secretary since May 2005. In 2024, that is pretty grim reading for you, as the general secretary of your union, that nearly a third of women are being harassed at your events.

Matt Wrack: It is indeed.

Q136 **Chair:** Do you have any reflection on that, having led the organisation for 19 years?

Matt Wrack: We are having a major discussion on that issue.



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Q137 **Chair:** We have to be very brief, so perhaps you can write to me about your reflections on that very poor statistic. I know the TUC often rallies about the use of non-disclosure agreements, where employers use them. Do you use non-disclosure agreements in your union?

Matt Wrack: What do you mean by that?

Chair: When you get rid of people.

Matt Wrack: When you get rid of people?

Chair: Yes, in your union.

Matt Wrack: What are you referring to?

Chair: I am just asking you: do you have a policy of using non-disclosure agreements?

Matt Wrack: I don't have a policy of using anything.

Chair: Do you use them?

Matt Wrack: We have used settlement agreements, if that is what—

Chair: You use settlement agreements, okay.

Matt Wrack: Do you know what a settlement agreement is? Are you aware of settlement agreements?

Chair: I am asking you: are you using non-disclosure agreements in the trade union?

Matt Wrack: A settlement agreement may include a confidentiality clause.

Chair: Yes. You use those in your trade union.

Matt Wrack: I would imagine many organisations, including the Labour party, which you are a part of, have—

Q138 **Chair:** I am just aware that the TUC says, "Too many employers are using NDAs to shirk responsibility for tackling and eradicating sexual harassment, discrimination and bullying at work." I am just asking if your union uses them.

Matt Wrack: There are no cases in the Fire Brigades Union that I am aware of where there are allegations of discrimination or bullying that have led to a non-disclosure agreement.

Chair: You don't use them.

Matt Wrack: But we have used settlement agreements. They are quite a common practice in employment.

Q139 **Chair:** I am just asking you if you use them. I don't know quite why you are so defensive about it. I am just asking you.

Matt Wrack: We have used them, yes.

Chair: You have used them.

Matt Wrack: Yes.



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Q140 **Chair:** Okay, thank you. I asked the previous panel which fire and rescue services they were worried about and which were not making most progress. I wonder whether you might be able to send me any information about the ones you think are not making the most progress, because the Committee would be interested to look at that list.

Alex Johnson: I have obviously been into a couple of fire and rescue services, so I could not compare them. That would not be fair for me to do. What I can say is that every single UK fire and rescue service is now a member of Women in the Fire Service and is sending women to our training and development weekend. This is the first time in nearly 30 years. That must be a reflection that services are starting to think about supporting their women. I see that as a positive.

Chair: We just want to know how everyone is doing and we would like information, if you feel you could share it with us, on where you think progress is not being made. Can I thank you all for your evidence today? It has been very useful. We will carry on with our inquiry in a few weeks' time with a second session. Thank you very much.