



# Home Affairs Committee

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From the Committee Chair

Rt Hon James Cleverly MP  
Home Secretary  
Via email

23 May 2024

Dear Home Secretary,

The Committee ran a short inquiry into the culture in the fire and rescue service in England from March to May 2024. We held three evidence sessions and a confidential roundtable with people working in the fire and rescue service so we could hear about their lived experience.

We would like to thank all of those who contributed to our inquiry whether publicly or confidentially.

We had planned to produce a full report to summarise our findings, but due to the imminent election announced by the Prime Minister on 22 May 2024, we have set out what we were intending to be some of our key conclusions and recommendations below.

The fire and rescue service in England is responsible for extinguishing fires, protecting life and property, rescuing people from road traffic accidents, assessing and preventing any fire and rescue-related risks, and assisting with other emergencies. In 2022, the fire and rescue service in England employed 44,350 people in various roles including fire support staff, fire fighters and fire control. As of 31 March 2023, 8.7% of firefighters were women, 8.0% of firefighters were from an ethnic minority, and the average age of firefighters was 41.

The 44 fire and rescue services in England do an exceptional job of keeping people safe, and the bravery and dedication of fire and rescue staff are outstanding examples of public service. However, in stark contrast to this, the culture in the fire and rescue service—the way that some people who work within the service think it is acceptable to behave—is lamentable. No one should have to endure bullying or harassment within the workplace, least of all people who repeatedly put their lives on the line for the public good. In 2002, our predecessor Committee was told about the deplorable culture within the service, and it seems little has changed. Indeed, some of our witnesses told us that barely anything had changed in the last 30 years.



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Our short inquiry was driven by the findings of the spotlight report into the values and culture in the fire and rescue service by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, and the independent report into the London Fire Brigade, both of which identified deep-set problems with bullying and harassment. People working in the fire and rescue service across England contacted us confidentially. The behaviour they described, together with the reports which prompted our work, leave us in no doubt that the fire and rescue service in England is institutionally misogynistic, racist and homophobic. That means that there are systemic failures throughout the fire and rescue service to prevent these forms of discrimination from occurring, to hold perpetrators accountable, and to provide support and redress to victims.

## Leadership in the fire and rescue service

Leaders at all levels are the key to changing the toxic culture. We recommend that the Government conduct a review of the processes in place to deal with poor leadership and issue an enforceable set of standards if necessary, and that it put the Core Code of Ethics for Fire and Rescue Services in England on a statutory basis.

The Fire Brigades Union has a role to play in the wider culture of the fire and rescue service. Although its policies reflect a commitment to oppose, challenge and eradicate all forms of discrimination within the workplace, this is not a universal experience of people who work with, and come into contact with, the FBU. The FBU should be a leader in promoting, through action, a culture that is free from bullying and harassment and should make it clear that non-disclosure agreements should never be used in settlements with employees who have been subject to bullying and harassment, ensuring victims are not prevented from speaking out.

## His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services

The role of His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) is also crucial to tackling cultural change. It currently inspects but has no teeth. When recommendations from HMICFRS are followed cultural change does take place, but it happens painfully slowly. We want the Government to give HMICFRS enforcement powers so that cultural change can happen at speed.

While there are some small positive signs that culture is changing, such as the introduction of independent reporting lines, it is too soon to say whether they will make a difference in practice. People are still experiencing the consequences of this toxic workplace culture and they currently still feel they have nowhere to turn. This is utterly unacceptable. It is crucial that cultural change is fast-tracked and embedded, and we urge our successor Committee in the new Parliament to return to this important subject to monitor progress.

## Fire and rescue authorities

Fire and rescue authorities, the statutory bodies that are responsible for the policy and service delivery of fire and rescue services, also have a crucial role to play in ensuring that leaders are held to account for their behaviour. We have seen media reports about senior leaders perpetrating bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment,



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and not being held to account by the fire and rescue authority. We want fire and rescue authorities in England to improve their scrutiny of senior leaders especially when it comes to holding them to account on the culture within their fire and rescue service. We recommend that the Local Government Association update the guidance that it provides to fire and rescue authorities about accountability and oversight of leadership. This should include sections specifically about culture change. We further recommend that the Government undertake to write to every fire and rescue authority in England before the next general election reinforcing their obligations and duties, and send reminders at least every two years and certainly after local elections.

## Fire and Rescue National Framework for England

In the light of the reports about culture and values within the fire and rescue service since 2018, it is crucial that the Fire and Rescue National Framework for England is updated to reflect the nature of the challenge in embedding a positive workplace culture where bullying and harassment are not tolerated. We recommend that the Fire and Rescue National Framework for England is updated to include specific reference to cultural change. This should reflect the outcomes of inspections, independent reports and our evidence that clearly point to serious cultural problems within the fire and rescue service.

Yours sincerely

**Dame Diana Johnson MP**  
**Chair of the Home Affairs Committee**