Government Advice to Business on Actions to Take Before and During a Strike in the Fire Service

Introduction

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) has announced that there will be strikes within the Fire Service.   This guidance provides advice on the practical implications for businesses and their employees.

Places of work are already subject to a range of duties under fire safety and health and safety legislation. The absence of a local authority fire service does not increase the danger of a fire occurring at the workplace and should not prevent the overwhelming majority of businesses continuing to operate safely during the dispute. The owner or operator of a building (not the fire brigade) is responsible for safety on site and emergency evacuation arrangements.   Employers should therefore check their preparedness and review their contingency arrangements accordingly.

During any strikes, the Ministry of Defence will provide emergency fire and rescue cover as part of national contingency arrangements. The 999 system will continue to operate with calls being diverted on a temporary basis to alternative operations centres. From there, emergency fire crews and other specialised teams will be mobilised from temporary fire stations. Military fire crews are trained and equipped to carry out basic firefighting and rescue operations. They will not have the same capability as your local fire brigade and they are more widely dispersed. Businesses and other organisations should consider what additional measures they can put in place to prevent fire and limit damage.

From a health and safety perspective, it is anticipated that the vast majority of businesses shall be able to continue their commercial activities unaffected by the dispute. However, during periods when the fire services are on strike, it is foreseeable that:

- Attendance times to some incidents will be increased.
- The emergency services attending will have fewer specialised capabilities.
- The emergency services attending will be familiar with neither the incident site concerned nor the local geography.

Accordingly, businesses should consider the implications of, and risks associated with, the potentially reduced emergency services response and where appropriate institute supplementary measures and arrangements to prevent incidents and minimise the consequences of reduced emergency response cover. Examples of such measures include, where possible, delaying certain activities if they have an increased risk of

fire associated with them; rescheduling deliveries of flammable substances to coincide with periods when full emergency response cover is available when or lowering inventories of substances/items that are flammable or toxic. However, businesses should ensure that such measures do not increase the risks of an incident of another nature; for example, delaying the welding of a pipe decreases the risk of fire but might result in the collapse of the weakened pipework.

Further information on risk assessment and other health and safety information can be found at www.hse.gov.uk.

Directors and Managers Responsibilities

The Health and Safety Commission's recent guidance on the responsibility of directors and the guidance on internal control issued following the Turnbull Report affirm the importance of risk management.

The responsibilities of directors and management boards will include the identification of any increase in risk to their core assets or business operations that may arise out of the dispute and taking appropriate steps to manage the risk.

Normal evaluation of the risk from fire is based on the presumption of an early and defined attendance by fully trained and equipped firefighters. This cannot be guaranteed for the duration of any strike action and there will be an increase in the level of risk. Briefings for senior staff, review of risk assessments and validation of emergency response information are key features in preparation and response during the dispute.

The principal risks associated with the proposed industrial action relate to direct fire damage and its consequences, although other services normally undertaken by fire services will also be affected. With regard to fires these risks can be categorised as follows:

Operational

- Loss or damage to buildings, plant and equipment.
- Denial of access to unsafe sites.
- Loss or degradation of critical data, communications or IT facilities.
- There are secondary impact risks which could affect your key suppliers or service providers.

Reputations

- Publicity associated with injuries to staff, contractors or members of the public.
- Perceived or actual failure to comply with health and safety regulation.
- Perceived or actual failure to safeguard public or commercial assets.

Financial

- Direct costs of fire damage.
- Consequential costs.

Accountable directors and senior managers are urged to make the best use of the remaining time available to check their organisations preparedness and to review their contingency arrangements. Existing risk registers and risk assessments may be useful to identify and prioritise action.

Remember, most safety provisions place a legal requirement upon employers. These safety measures are designed to protect life **REGARDLESS OF FIRE SERVICE INTERVENTION**. It is, therefore, essential to ensure that all existing fire safety provisions are in place and effective.

Directors Checklist

- Have the risks from fire been properly assessed and prioritised? Do these include risks to assets and business as well as risks to safety?

- Is there an Incident Control Team to manage any emergency situation and limit damage?

- Is there a Business Recovery Plan in place and is it up to date?

- Are key records, emergency plans and contact details duplicated off site?

- Have all existing fire precautions been specifically checked to ensure readiness?

- Is there a detailed emergency fire procedure in place? Is this up to date and has this been brought to the attention of all staff?

- Are all key staff aware of their duties and have they been properly trained?

- Have steps been taken to increase security patrols or management inspections to deter fire raising and improve housekeeping?

- Are arrangements in place (during periods of strike action) to call the fire service by using the 999 system rather than placing reliance on automatic systems?

Employees' responsibilities

- The best protection against such a risk remains, as ever, the vigilance of everybody who works in a building observing the usual health and safety precautions.

- Under the law, employers should not dismiss or discipline employees who remove themselves from a situation at work where there is "serious and imminent" danger. But it should not be assumed that the workplace is more dangerous simply because of the strike.

- If employees have any concerns about their own positions, or about safety in their workplaces more generally, they should be encouraged to talk to their managers. If they withdraw from work without the employer's permission, the law will not necessarily protect them from being penalised or, in certain circumstances, even dismissed.

Additional Fire Safety Measures for Employers

Normal contingency planning is based on the presumption of early attendance by fully trained and equipped firefighting teams. This cannot be guaranteed for the duration of any action and accordingly there will be an increase in the level of risk from fire. Organisations are urged to check their preparedness and to review contingency arrangements.

In premises those activities can be regarded as presenting a high risk to life management should consider the need for additional staffing levels or patrols in order to enhance as necessary existing arrangements for fire prevention, the early detection of fires, evacuation of the occupants, and first aid firefighting, particularly outside of normal working hours. Employers and other persons having control of premises are already subject to a range of duties under fire safety and health and safety legislation. Consideration should be given to the additional steps that can be taken at this time to check, modify or enhance these arrangements. The following measures are suggested.

Ensure that business continuity and damage control plans are up to date:

- In the event of a major fire, effective plans should be in place to cover the maintenance and availability of a trained incident control team to manage the incident and detailed business recovery plans to ensure the continuity of key business services, information technology and communications (both internal and external).

- Check that key staff can be contacted out of hours if necessary and that sufficient copies of the plan are held in readiness off site.

- Check that all contact details contained in the plans are current and correct.

- Special attention should be given to damage control and salvage arrangements in buildings and those containing business critical processes, information or other resources and in heritage buildings.

Check the effectiveness of existing fire precautions:

- Ensure that fire exits are all unobstructed and available and that fire alarms and emergency lights are in good working order.

- Ensure that fire resisting doors and shutters are kept closed as far as practicable to limit the spread of fire and smoke.

- Check that appropriate firefighting equipment is available, serviced and ready for use. Automatic suppression systems, e.g. sprinkler installations, should also be thoroughly checked to ensure that they are in proper working order.

- Staged evacuation arrangements involving progressive horizontal evacuation (in hospitals, residential and nursing homes for example) rely on early intervention by the fire service to contain fire at compartment boundaries. This containment cannot now be guaranteed and as a consequence more extensive evacuation may be required at an earlier stage. Management should consider the need for additional staff resources to allow for this.

Confirm staff are fully aware of fire and evacuation procedures:

- Check that staff know how to raise the alarm and call the emergency services, and are familiar with the location of escape routes and evacuation procedures. Don't forget cleaners, part-time staff and those with mobility difficulties or other special needs who will require special assistance to evacuate safely.

- Check that senior officers, security personnel, fire wardens, incident control teams etc are aware of their duties in the event of fire.

- Arrangements should be made for an additional fire evacuation drill to be carried out at an early opportunity to practise the relevant emergency procedures.

Take appropriate steps to enhance staff vigilance:

- Increase the frequency of patrols or inspections to enforce the highest standards of housekeeping. In particular make sure staircases, other escape routes and high fire risk areas are kept free from any accumulation of waste or storage.

- To deter fire raising make sure that perimeter security is sound and that materials stored in the open (including waste) are kept well away from buildings.

- Particular attention should be paid to the control of activities presenting a high risk of ignition such as smoking and contractors operations involving 'hot work', especially any construction work involving blow torches, welding equipment and the like during the dispute.

Review arrangements for calling the emergency services in the event of fire:

- In the event of fire a telephone call using the 999 system must be made at the earliest opportunity. A full response may not follow a call received via automatic fire alarms without further confirmation (automatic alarms are responsible for large numbers of false alarms).

- To reduce unnecessary burdens on the emergency services at this time special care must be taken to minimise the possibility of unwanted automatic fire signals.

- Check that effective arrangements are in place for a responsible person to meet fire crews on arrival and provide them with appropriate information - for example, the location of the nearest fire hydrant or other water supply.

Consider the need for additional staffing or patrols:

- Where buildings or parts of buildings remain unoccupied for long periods.

- For damage control and recovery operations in heritage buildings and for buildings with other high value contents.

- For the evacuation of disabled people.

Lifts

- Ensure that your maintenance contracts for lifts are up to date.

- Ensure that, in the event of a lift becoming stuck, clear advice is available on how to contact the responsible maintenance company. Details should be made available in the lift and where alarm calls are received in the building.

- If you call 999 and a lift maintenance company is sent to your premises you will be expected to pay their bill.

Workplace Fire Precautions

Places of work are already subject to detailed fire safety requirements under the Fire Precautions (Workplace) Regulations 1997 as amended. They may also be covered by fire certificates under the Fire Precautions Act 1971. Risk assessments and fire certificates prepared under this legislation may assist employers in reviewing their existing fire precautions.

The following checklists are taken from *Fire Safety: An Employers Guide*, the official Government guidance on compliance with the workplace fire precautions legislation. The guide is available online at: www.official-documents.co.uk/document/fire/index.htm.

Fire Warning and Detection

- Can the existing means of detection discover a fire quickly enough to raise an alarm in time for all the occupants to escape to a safe place?

- Can the means for giving warning be clearly heard and understood throughout the whole premises when initiated from any single point?

- If the fire detection and warning system is electrically powered, does it have a back up power supply?

- Have you told your employees about your fire warning system, will they know how to operate and respond to it?

- Are there instructions for your employees on how to operate the fire warning system?

- Have you included the fire detection and fire warning arrangements in your emergency plan?

Means of Escape in Case of Fire

- How long will it take for all the occupants to escape to a place of safety once a fire has been detected?

- Is that a reasonable length of time or will it take too long?

- Are there enough exits and are they in the right place?

- Are the types and sizes of exits suitable and sufficient for the number of people likely to need to use them?

- In the event of fire, could all available exits be affected or will at least one route from any part of the premises remain available?

- Are all escape routes easily identifiable, free from any obstructions and adequately illuminated?

- Have you trained your staff in using the means of escape?

- Are there instructions for your employees about the means of escape?

- Have you included means of escape arrangements in your emergency plan?

Means for Fighting Fire

- Are the premises' portable fire extinguishers suitable for the purpose and of sufficient capacity?

- Are there sufficient extinguishers, hosereels and fire blankets sited throughout the workplace?

- Have the people likely to use the fire extinguishers been given adequate instruction and training?

- Are the right types of extinguishers located close to the fire hazards and can users gain access to them without exposing themselves to risk?

- Are the locations of the extinguishers obvious or does their position need indicating?

- Have you included the use of firefighting equipment in your emergency plan?

Maintenance and Testing

- Do you regularly check all fire doors and escape routes and associated lighting and signs?

- Do you regularly check all your firefighting equipment?

- Do you regularly check your fire detection and alarm equipment?

- Do you regularly check any other equipment provided to help means of escape arrangements in the building?

- Are there instructions for relevant employees about testing of equipment?

- Are those who test and maintain the equipment properly trained to do so?

Emergency Plans

- Do you have an emergency plan?

- Does the emergency plan take account of all reasonably foreseeable circumstances?

- Are your employees familiar with the plan, trained in its use and involved in testing it?

- Is the emergency plan made available to all who need to be aware of it?

- Are the procedures to be followed clearly indicated throughout the workplace?

- Have you considered all the people likely to be present in your workplace and others with whom you share the building?

Fire Safety Checks at Shutdown

- Are all windows and doors closed, including doors held open by automatic release units?

- Is electrical equipment not in use switched off, and where appropriate, unplugged?

- Check that smoker's materials are not left smouldering.

- Check that all naked flames are extinguished or left in a safe condition.

- Ensure all flammable rubbish and waste is removed to a safe place.

- Check that all highly flammable materials are safely stored.

- Ensure that the workplace is secured against unauthorised entry.

Further information and guidance on fire safety, appropriate to many sectors of public and commercial enterprise, is available from official organisations promoting fire safety or through trade associations.

Sound advice is available from the Fire Industry Confederation at: www.the-fic.org.uk under 'news'. This provided links to major industry bodies. The link www.fire.org.uk provides a considerable amount of material on all fire issues. General advice is offered at www.firekills.gov.uk.

Specific fire safety advice for householders, commerce and industry can also be found at the FPA's website, www.thefpa.co.uk.

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