

Item 05 - Right to Speak (SO 1.21A) - FBU

Chair and Fire Authority Members,

Thank you for allowing me to address the Authority meeting today. My name is Gary Spindler and I am the Brigade Secretary of Avon Fire Brigades Union, elected to this position by the Firefighters and Emergency Fire Control Staff in Avon Fire & Rescue Service.

I would like to make some brief and initial points regarding the report entitled “Statutory Inspection of Avon Fire and Rescue Service” and the subsequent activity and comments that have followed its publication.

The first and most important point that I would ask all Authority members to consider, is that throughout the myriad of complaints, counter complaints, political accusations and political counter accusations – the firefighters and emergency fire control staff within Avon Fire & Rescue service have continued to provide an excellent, lifesaving service to the public.

At the instigation of this inspection – as the press reported with glee the accusations which led to it – the firefighters and emergency fire control staff within Avon were providing the public with the frontline service that they require.

During the course of the inspection – as the press reported with glee the leaks being fed to them about the political shenanigans within the Service - the firefighters and emergency fire control staff within Avon were providing the public with the frontline service that they require.

At the close of the inspection and publishing of the report – as the press reported with glee the political fallout and finger pointing - the firefighters and emergency fire control staff within Avon were providing the public with the frontline service that they require.

In other words Chair, whilst many around us were losing their heads, jumping on bandwagons, making accusations and running around like headless chickens – it was the firefighters and emergency fire control staff within Avon who continued to make sure that the public were provided with the frontline service that they require.

There must be no question and no challenge to the integrity, courage and lifesaving professionalism of the firefighters and emergency fire control staff within Avon Fire & Rescue Service. They have found themselves, through absolutely no fault of their own, in a situation where their Service has been publically dragged through the mud by a mixture of political incompetence and political infighting.

The contrast between the integrity of firefighters in Avon and the political shenanigans of some of those meant to be responsible for our Service, has never been starker. It is not lost on any of us that over the Xmas period, it was firefighters on the streets of Avon campaigning against cuts to our vital service – whilst in the political halls of power chaos was the order of the day.

Mr Chair, Elements of this report are as shocking as they are disgraceful – but no one on the Fire Authority at the time can pretend they did not know. The outrageous pay rises and pension uplifts were not put in place by a single individual, acting alone and covertly – they were made as a direct result of the decisions and votes of the Fire Authority. Indeed, it was the Fire Brigades Union who were publicly and openly condemning them – but, at that time, no one was listening.

Mr Chair, the focus of the report should have remained on the governance failings within the Service – that is why it was instigated and that is where it should have remained. The report's author is a consultant who has no experience or knowledge of the operational running of our vital emergency service. However, his subsequent report has strayed into operational areas and I would say this about the comments made within it. It is surely political opportunism to include in a report about governance of the Fire Service suggestions to downgrade fire stations, cut firefighter numbers or reduce operational response.

Tell me Mr Chair:

- Will cutting firefighter numbers reverse the decision to give the CFO a huge pay rise?
- Will downgrading fire stations make up for the political incompetence that led to inflated pensions for an elite few?
- Should members of the public have to wait longer or receive a worse response because of political infighting and incompetence?

Mr Chair – I tell the Fire Authority today that this is your mess, these are your failings and the Fire Brigades Union will not sit back and allow Firefighters or the public to suffer as a result of them.

To finish Mr Chair, I would also say this. When fires escalate or incidents become more difficult – firefighters do not run away. Instead we fight harder, work longer and dig deep to make sure that the incident is resolved and the situation made safe. It is now the responsibility of everyone around this table to do the same. No one here gets to run away. The firefighters and emergency fire control staff who have risked their lives on a daily basis whilst this disgraceful political fiasco has unfolded around them, now demand that you take responsibility for our service, start acting like leaders and bring the reputation of Avon Fire & Rescue service back out of the gutter in which some of you are directly responsible for dragging it.
Many thanks for your time.