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Dr Kirsty Darwent
Chair of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Board

Margaret Mitchell, MSP
c/o Diane Barr, Senior Committee Clerk
Justice Committee Clerks
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Our Ref: KD/LB/DJH
Your Ref:
Contact: Dr Kirsty Darwent
Contact No.
Email: Kirsty.Darwent@firescotland.gov.uk
Date: 24 June 2020

By email to: Diane.Barr@parliament.scot

Dear Margaret

Thank you for your letter of 1 June 2020.

In early March, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) took a range of decisions to ensure the maximum number of firefighters and control staff were available for front-line duties based on the reasonable worst-case planning scenario that was available at that time. These decisions were taken as a precautionary measure and included informing 6 of the current 8 full time FBU staff that they may be required for front-line duties. In addition, we put out a call to recently retired operational staff and providing refresher training for our day duty staff.

Whilst we wrote to the FBU Regional Secretary that we would require 6 full-time officials for operational duties on 6 April 2020, we have not, at any stage, required them to fulfil this role. Although one full-time FBU official was re-trained for front line service and was not required. This is because, to date, there have been no issues encountered with maintaining service delivery.

The FBU's Regional Secretary approached the Service on 16 April 2020 and asked for the Health and Safety Representative to be reinstated. Following due consideration, this was agreed to and confirmed to the Regional Secretary on 22 April 2020, although it should again be noted that the individual was not deployed to front line duties and was therefore always available to carry out FBU business during the whole Covid-19 period.

We believe that the approach that the Service has taken in response to Covid-19 is in line with the fair work requirements agreed between Scottish Government and the Scottish Trade Unions Council, ensuring that the right decisions are made, in partnership, in order to protect workers and public safety, using the latest guidance.

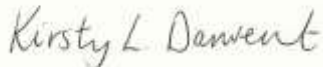
We have increased the engagement with the FBU during our response to the global pandemic, having weekly meetings, chaired by the Deputy Chief Officer, and these meetings have regularly involved up to 5 of the full-time officials. During these meetings the FBU officials have consistently praised the levels of engagement from the SFRS with the FBU and our regular, supportive and informative communication with all of our staff. The FBU have recently requested that these meetings revert to 2-weekly as the agendas have become increasingly light.

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The Service has received positive support from staff for the way that it has responded to Covid-19, engaged with staff regularly, provided written and video updates as well as clear and unambiguous operational guidance for all of the operational scenarios that they have faced. This has included the way in which workplaces have been cleaned where there have been instances of Covid-19 infection in the work force. This positive feedback has been supported by the FBU officials, including the Regional Secretary, during the weekly meetings.

SFRS were due to undertake a review of Trade Union Facility time at the end of March, in line with normal business requirements. Due to Covid-19, the Service wrote to the FBU in early March and that this further benchmarking and review would now take place in July 2020. The data indicates that we have a significantly higher number of full-time FBU officials than any other Service. The London Fire Brigade, the closest to SFRS in size, has four full time FBU officials, for which London Fire Brigade pays the costs of two. The FBU pays for the other two representatives. Currently, the SFRS has eight full time officials, which are fully funded by the SFRS, of which three are funded to work with the SFRS on Reform and Service Transformation. A substantial bench marking exercise will be undertaken in July 2020 as part of the review of Trade Union Facilities time.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kirsty L. Darwent". The signature is written in black ink on a light-colored background.

Dr Kirsty Darwent
Chair
Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Board