

Can 999 services be rescued from the cuts?

The government's austerity measures pose a considerable threat to the country's emergency services.

Just before taking office, prime minister David Cameron pledged to protect frontline services from the impact of public spending cuts.

Interviewed in May 2010 on BBC One's *The Andrew Marr Show*, he said that any cabinet minister "who comes to me and says, 'Here are my plans' and they involve frontline reductions, they'll be sent straight back to their department to go away and think again".

But there is mounting evidence to show that Cameron's pledge was, at the very least, highly misleading. For the reality is that the cuts, as well as "efficiency savings" are hitting frontline fire, ambulance and police services hard.

Fire and rescue services (FRSs), for example, are facing enormous cuts of 25% over the four-year period 2011-12-2014-15 of chancellor George Osborne's Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR).

Frontline jobs lost

According to a report by the FBU firefighters' union, *Don't squeeze our fire service dry*, around 1,500 frontline firefighter jobs were lost in the first of the four years of cuts. These frontline jobs represented two-thirds (67%) of the total jobs lost so far in the fire service.

And, as the CSR set out, the cuts are "backloaded", meaning the worst is yet to come between now and 2015.

The FBU report says that cuts on this scale over the next two years will amount to a reduction of at least 6,000 firefighter jobs over the CSR period, "and perhaps as many as 10,000 fire fighters overall". This would be one in five of all firefighters.

The Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA) also feels that the cuts will impact on the ability of FRSs to respond to emergencies. Its September 2012



Three-quarters of fire services expect to lose more than 10% of their frontline strength

report, *Fighting fires or firefighting: the impact of austerity on English fire and rescue services*, says many FRSs will be left with no option but to cut frontline services with an increase in local and national risk.

A CFOA survey found that all FRSs will have cut firefighter posts and support staff by 2015, with three-quarters expecting to lose more than 10% of their frontline strength, and a similar proportion expecting this to lead to a reduction in the number of fire engines available for emergency response.

The survey also found that a further 4,050 frontline firefighter posts will disappear over the period 2013-2015, while almost 1,150 jobs will go from back office support functions.

The FBU says that response times are already almost two minutes slower on average than a decade ago and, according to FBU national officer Dave Green: "We are now at a tipping point."

He told *Labour Research* that the situation has become so bad in many areas that firefighters now operate a "jump crewing" system. This is where a single crew has to be available for two or more appliances, and FRSs "have to hope that the two are not needed at the same time, as there are not enough firefighters to operate them".

In addition, he said, crews were now smaller. "Historically, we have based all our operational procedures on having five firefighters on each appliance – there are now just four in many areas, and in some

cases [it is] dangerously down to three. That puts firefighters at risk, because you struggle to fight a house fire safely with only four. Or it results in operational delays because they have to wait for a second appliance to arrive."

Ambulance service trusts too are struggling. Like other parts of the NHS, they must find their share of £20 billion of "efficiency savings".

According to Hope Daley, national officer for the UNISON health service union, that equates to around £50 million per ambulance trust by 2015, and comes on top of massive structural changes including privatisation.

Station closures

In the East Midlands there are plans to close up to 70 ambulance stations, including those in rural Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire, Leicestershire and Northamptonshire, replacing them with 13 "hubs". Daley told *Labour Research*: "This means that ambulances needed in rural areas will be travelling long distances from city bases, but it also means that staff will have to travel long distances to pick up their ambulance before starting work. This could have implications for service delivery."

While national guidelines say that at least 75% of the most serious 999 calls should be responded to within eight minutes, figures for the first four months of 2012-13 show that in Nottinghamshire, this target was met for only 68% of those calls. And across Derbyshire it was only 66%.

Meanwhile, the East of England Ambulance Trust is proposing to reduce the number of staff and vehicles delivering emergency response services across the area at a time when demands on the service are increasing and population numbers are rising.

"The Trust's own figures show that in many areas, staffing levels will be below what is needed for many hours of the day," Daley said.

In addition, a shortage of staff in accident and emergency departments is compounding the problem. For example, a recent Freedom Of Information (FOI) request by Gareth Thomas, Labour MP for Harrow West, revealed London Ambu-

■ COASTGUARD STATION CLOSURES

Government proposals to close eight out of the 18 coastguard stations, with the loss of around 160 jobs (see page 4), are being vigorously opposed by the PCS civil service union.

The government argues that fewer stations can cope with the workload.

But the union says that the remaining stations will have to take on responsibility for a considerably larger area of coastline

and sea, and that life-saving local knowledge – vital in ensuring successful search and rescue operations – will be lost.

There were government assurances that no closures would be made until the robustness of a new Maritime Operation Centre has been demonstrated. Yet several stations have already closed, or are planned for closure, before the centre opens in 2014.

In November 2012, the Commons Scottish Affairs Committee echoed union fears about the impact of the closures – two of the nine stations are in Scotland – and is backing calls on the government to reverse its decision.

Meanwhile 33 MPs have signed an Early Day Motion calling on the government "to step back from this hazardous reduction in the number of local coastguard stations".

lance Service figures showing that 42,248 patients waited outside hospitals for longer than 30 minutes during 2011-12. This was a rise of 47% in 12 months.

Police services meanwhile, are facing cuts of 20% over the CSR period. According to the Police Federation, those cuts will mean the loss of 16,000 police officers by 2014-15. Government ministers claim that there are more police officers on the frontline as they are moved from back office jobs.

Dragged away

But national officer for the Unite general union Peter Allensen said: "All the evidence we have is that police officers are being dragged away from the frontline to cover administrative roles as police staff posts are also cut."

Figures released by the Labour Party last year showed that over 5,000 police "first-responders" – officers who principally respond to 999 calls – had been lost by the end of 2011.

And a House of Commons library analysis of FOI requests to the 43 police forces in England and Wales shows that between March 2010 and March 2011, 4,625 officers were lost. Of these, 3,500 were from emergency response.

The numbers of police staff have also been drastically cut. This group makes up 40% of the police workforce and

works alongside police officers in roles including police community support officers, scenes of crime officers and 999 call takers/dispatchers. Between March 2010 and March 2012, the number of police staff across England and Wales fell almost 19% from 83,200 to 67,474.

Stretched

Police Federation chair Paul McKeever told *Labour Research* that as a result of the cuts: "Our members are feeling greatly stretched and that they are not delivering the same level of service to the public."

As the cuts continue to bite, unions are stepping up their anti-cuts campaigns. UNISON is backing local ambulance trust branch campaigns that include lobbying MPs, collecting signatures on petitions and demonstrations through city centres to highlight the public safety risks of cuts to the 999 service.

And both the Police Federation and UNISON are currently collating evidence from their members to demonstrate how the cuts are impacting on the police response to emergencies.

The FBU recently took out adverts in national newspapers with the slogan "They Slash, You Burn" emblazoned on pictures of George Osborne and David Cameron as part of a wider campaign that included lobbying MPs.