

# **Heroism in the fire and rescue service - HSE Statement, April 2011**

## **Introduction**

HSE fully endorses the recommendation in Common Sense, Common Safety that individual firefighters should not be at risk of investigation or prosecution, under health and safety law, if they have put themselves at risk as a result of a heroic act. This guidance outlines how HSE defines heroism and explains how HSE will deal with such matters.

## **Operational realities and expectations**

Striking the balance between operational and health and safety duties in the fire and rescue service recognises the particularly challenging nature of fire and rescue activity and the extremely dangerous environments in which firefighters have to work. It explains how fire and rescue services can comply with health and safety duties while delivering an effective operational service.

The statement makes it clear that fire and rescue services need to manage all foreseeable risk effectively and to review their operational procedures in the light of experience.

It also sets out the duty of individual firefighters, to co-operate with their employer, take reasonable care of themselves, and not endanger others. This means that firefighters should act sensibly and responsibly within the command and control of their employer; they should not act recklessly.

It is also important to recognise that firefighters should not be expected to put themselves at unreasonable risk, even in the face of sometimes unrealistic public expectations.

HSE views the actions of firefighters as truly heroic when it is clear that they have decided to act entirely of their own volition in putting themselves at risk to protect the public or colleagues and there have been no orders or other directions from senior officers to do so and when their actions have not put other firefighters at similar high risk.

Firefighting is a complex activity requiring clear definition of roles and responsibilities on the incident ground and is normally undertaken by teams of firefighters. It is important that command and control discipline is maintained to ensure the safety of firefighters and others. This means that there are few circumstances in which an independent decision by a firefighter to put himself at risk will not result in risk to others in the team.

There are some circumstances when firefighters working together, in a fast-moving dangerous situation, may decide to put themselves at risk when they have not received specific orders or there is no relevant safe working procedure for them to follow.

In those rare cases when a firefighter does perform an act of heroism, it is only right that the Fire and Rescue Service may sometimes recognise and commend them for their bravery.

## **HSE policy**

HSE will view the actions of individual firefighters as heroic when:

- it is clear that they have decided to act entirely of their own volition;
- they have put themselves at risk to protect the public or colleagues; and
- the individuals' actions were not likely to have put other officers or members of the public at serious risk.

In the event of HSE being notified of a serious incident, inspectors may need to make initial enquiries about the nature of the incident and may need to conduct an investigation of the Service's operational arrangements and management of health and safety. If, during this investigation, it becomes clear, however, that the incident involved an act of heroism by individual firefighters, then HSE will not investigate the actions of the individuals in order to take any action against them.

## **Case studies**

The following case studies are realistic examples of heroic actions by firefighters which illustrate the principles outlined above.

### ***1. Attempted rescue from a grain silo***

A crew of four retained firefighters provided the first response to an incident at a farm. Two farm workers had entered an old grain silo by placing a ladder into the entrance at the top of the vessel. The farm workers had lost consciousness. After establishing that the estimated time of arrival for the second fire appliance was at least 15 minutes, the officer in charge instructed one firefighter to enter the vessel wearing breathing apparatus (BA) and wearing a harness secured to a rope. After the firefighter had been inside the vessel for a short time, his BA alarm sounded to indicate that he was running short of air. According to the calculations that had been carried out on entry for anticipated air usage time, this happened far sooner than it should have. The firefighters outside the vessel attempted to pull him out but his rope had become detached and communications had been lost. It became apparent to the firefighters outside that by lowering an additional BA set into the vessel there was no guarantee that the firefighter inside could put on the set successfully.

The entrance to the vessel was very narrow and none of the other firefighters could fit through wearing their BA sets. Based on his much greater experience the officer in charge of the crew decided he would enter the vessel to attempt a rescue by starting up his air supply outside the vessel but only putting on the cylinder pack once inside the vessel. He had been trained in this procedure some time ago. He took an additional BA set with him for the firefighter already in the silo.

He knew that it would not be possible for the others to rescue him if he could not be pulled out. If another firefighter entered then only one would remain outside – it would have been impossible for one firefighter to pull another out alone. So in deciding on this action he was not putting either of the remaining firefighters under any pressure to take additional risks themselves.

The officer descended into the vessel and using the rope system the crew outside managed to raise the farm workers and both firefighters to the entrance.

Sadly, the farm workers could not be resuscitated but the first firefighter was saved.

## **Key points**

- Even though he had not practiced the procedure for some time, the officer in charge placed himself at risk to effect the rescue.
- The FRS procedures were implemented as best they could be in view of the circumstances presented to the attending retained crew.
- The officer in charge informed service control of his decisions and was put under no pressure by senior officers to attempt the rescues in this way.

### **2. *Rescue from a large factory***

During a fire at a large factory, a Breathing Apparatus team of four firefighters were deployed into the building in search of two people reported as still inside the building. The firefighters went to the location where the people were had last been seen and found both of them there. These people told the firefighters that one of their colleagues was still in an adjacent room. The BA team attempted to inform the Entry Control Officer by radio but found that radio communications had been lost, probably because of the size and type of building. The BA team withdrew from the immediate high risk area to a safer part of the building and agreed to split into two teams of two. One team were able to help the casualties safely out of the building and inform colleagues outside of the proposed course of action to be taken by the BA team still in the building. The remaining BA team realised that conditions in the building were deteriorating rapidly due to increase in heat intensity and objects falling around them. Because of this, even though the adjacent room presented a greater risk and there was a real possibility that they would not be able to escape safely, they decided to go on into the fire in order to rescue the other member of the public. They made this decision knowing that had radio communications remained live, they would have been instructed in accordance with their standard procedure to wait for additional support and resource. This team managed to rescue an unconscious casualty and withdraw to an agreed position to meet an oncoming emergency team to help them safely out of the factory.

## **Key points**

- In the absence of instruction from senior officers, the team of four firefighters made their decisions based on their comprehensive training. All were fully aware of the risks and agreed on their actions without instruction or pressure from officers.
- The actions of the four firefighters did not place colleagues or members of the public at greater risk.
- The Incident Commander effectively applied the FRS procedures which were in line with national BA and incident command and control procedures.