

INDUSTRIAL ACTION BY THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION

**CONTINGENCY ARRANGEMENTS DURING THE 8-DAY STRIKE,
22-30 NOVEMBER 2002**

COBR – JOINT ASSESSMENT CELL REPORT

KEY ISSUES

1. Emergency cover worked well. Over the 8 days, 12,160 incidents were attended by the emergency fire cover, and the Joint Operational Control Centres (JOCCs) fielded 30,278 calls. There were a total of 12 deaths in fire-related incidents, the same as an expected average 8-day figure for November.
2. The emergency response exceeded the original remit set for it, which was to concentrate on the protection of life. Assisted by the Police (who played a key role in hosting the JOCCs, assessing incidents and escorting fire tenders to get them to incidents quickly), Armed Forces personnel and working fire-fighters were together able to attend all calls allocated to them, including a very large majority where there was no threat to life.
3. The JOCCs proved an effective method of ensuring that 999 calls were prioritised sensibly and that available resources were deployed effectively.
4. The public responded well, reducing the number of fire related 999 calls made. Hoax calls showed some initial local peaks, but are now at a level comparable with normal operation. But, there is a need to ensure that the level of awareness about fire and road safety remains high.
5. The total number of incidents reported was significantly and consistently higher during the 12 hour period from noon to midnight. The Ministry of Defence are therefore reviewing shift patterns to ensure that availability of emergency cover corresponds to the pattern of fire and other risks.
6. The impact on the wider UK economy was very limited. Business and industrial life were largely unaffected. Mainline and sub-surface rail, road and air travel networks all operated largely as normal. The London Underground was able to run 97% of scheduled services, very much in line with normal operation, although up to 22 deep stations had to be closed. Cross-channel services, including the tunnel, operated as normal. Sporting, leisure and entertainment events and facilities were largely unaffected.

NORMAL FIRE COVER IN THE UK AND THE EMERGENCY RESPONSE TO INDUSTRIAL ACTION

1. There are 58 fire authorities in the United Kingdom. They employ some 58,000 people, including approximately 38,000 whole time fire-fighters, 15,000 retained (part-time) fire-fighters, and 1,700 control room staff. In addition to providing a fire-fighting capability in a wide range of circumstances, fire-fighters attend road traffic accidents and other incidents to extract people trapped, respond to chemical and other spillages, offer fire safety advice, pump out flooded premises and perform other ad hoc tasks such as animal rescues. To do this, Fire Brigades are equipped with around 3,000 advanced fire appliances and specialist vehicles.

2. In order to ensure the safety of the public and the continuing functioning of vital services, preparation of an emergency response to a strike by fire-fighters was set in hand by the Civil Contingencies Committee once the risk of such action had been identified. A wide variety of Departments and organisations were involved in this preparatory work. The level of resources available to the emergency response to the strike was obviously less than that used in the normal operation of the Fire Service. Contingency plans were therefore built around five main areas:

- i. essential fire fighting and rescue capability provided by the Armed Forces. There were 827 Green Goddess fire engines, supported by 331 specialist teams led by experienced Armed Forces fire-fighters and equipped with breathing apparatus and light cutting equipment (BARTs), and 59 regionally based teams equipped with advanced fire-fighting and rescue equipment (RESTs). In addition, 27 Red Goddess fire engines were deployed at the start of the strike, with 56 more added as they became available and Armed Forces crews were trained to use them. In all, the Armed Forces contribution to the response, code-named “Operation Fresco”, involved the deployment of some 18,600 personnel;
- ii. effective local co-ordination across the different elements of the emergency response (Armed Forces, Police, working fire-fighters and control room staff). This involved the establishment of Joint Operational Control Centres (JOCCs), and joint working at the operational level to ensure that fire-fighting resources were concentrated on incidents where they were most required. In particular, the JOCCs and Police at a local level were organised to prioritise calls and filter out false alarms which account for over 40% of total 999 calls to the Fire Service during normal operation;
- iii. reducing the burden on the emergency response by establishing mechanisms whereby some of the lower priority services normally provided by the Fire Service could be delivered by contractors and others (for example, lift rescues and flood relief);
- iv. efforts to reduce the risk of fires and other incidents such as road traffic accidents during the dispute through a pro-active public information campaign via leaflets, radio and TV advertising and the internet, supported by a telephone helpline;

- v. effective co-ordination of the Government response across the United Kingdom, with the Minister of State for Local Government and the Regions chairing regular meetings of the Civil Contingencies Committee in COBR, the Government’s crisis response coordination facility. These brought together Ministers and officials from those Departments and other organisations involved in delivering the emergency response.

THE EMERGENCY RESPONSE DURING THE STRIKE

3. Cooperation between all parts of the emergency response was good. The Devolved Administrations and representatives of Local Government played a full part.

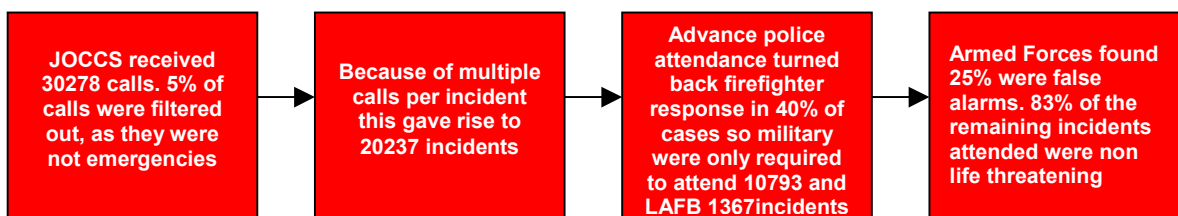
Joint Operational Control Centres

4. The emergency response was directed from 55 specially established Joint Operational Control Centres, usually located within existing Police communications rooms (except in London where control room staff were working normally). Some JOCCs covered more than one Fire Service brigade area. For example, Thames Valley Police covered Oxford, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire Fire Brigade areas.

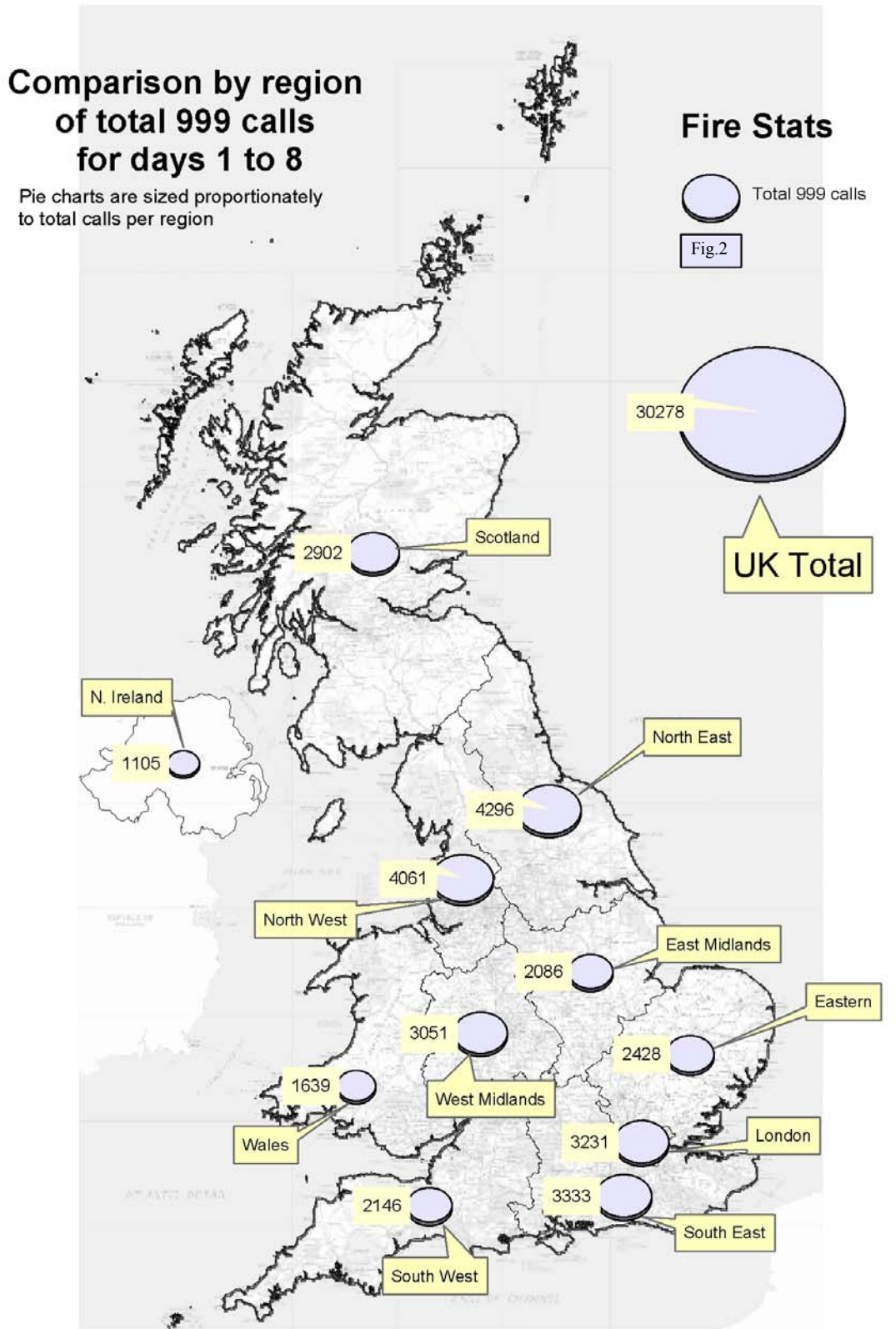
5. Calls to JOCCs were considered by a senior fire officer who assessed the need for a response and deployed resources accordingly. These deployments were managed directly by Police and military staff within the JOCC. The senior fire officer took control of all actions and ensured that sufficient resources were allocated to resolve fire incidents. The military liaison officer could be asked to deploy Goddesses, Breathing Apparatus Rescue Teams (BARTs) or Rescue Equipment Support Teams (RESTs), or a combination dependent on the nature of the call. Simultaneously, the nearest available Police vehicle was dispatched by Police controllers to attend the scene and confirm the need for deployment.

6. Of the calls received, it proved possible to use technology and professional experience to deal with 5% of the calls without deployment. Of the remainder, around 50% were considered doubtful, but could not be discounted completely. In many cases, the attendance of the nearest Police vehicle meant that Police officers could provide better information that negated the need for a fire response and allowed fire-fighting resources to be re-deployed or stood down. Of the incidents attended by the Armed Forces, 25% proved to be false alarms. Of the remaining incidents typically 83% were considered non-life threatening, 15% posed a possible threat to life, and 2% were considered life threatening. The role of the Police in deploying in advance to doubtful calls has been very effective in reducing the demand for Goddess, BART and REST deployments by about half, ensuring that resources were directed where they were most needed. The stages in the process are illustrated below.

Identification of Incidents Requiring attendance by Fire Fighters (Fig.1)



7. In all, some 30,278 fire related 999 calls were received during the strike, compared with a normal figure for 8 days of 45,000. These are broken down by region in the map below.

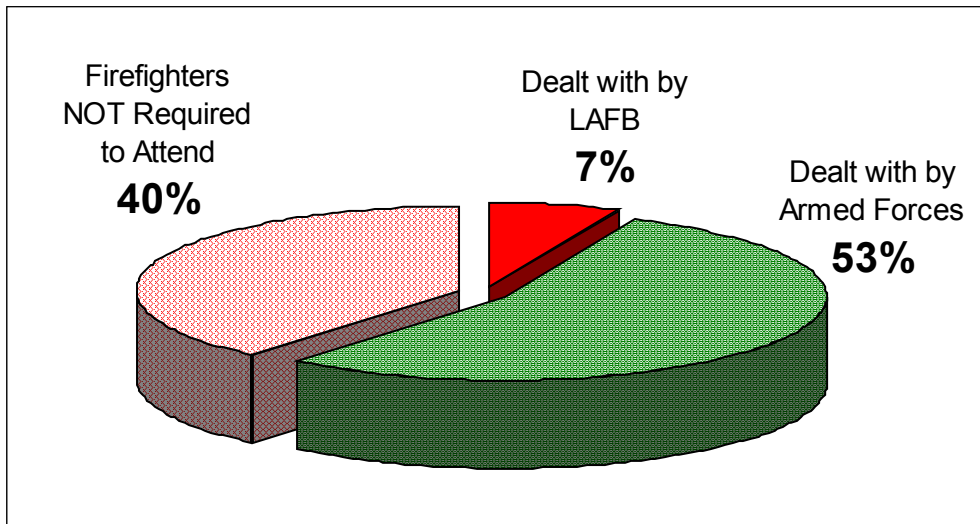


This map was produced by Cabinet Office CCS Research Group

Total number of incidents

8. In the course of the strike the Armed Forces attended 10,793 incidents and fire-fighters working for Local Authority Fire Brigades (LAFB) attended 1,367. This is shown on the chart below:

Dealt with by LAFB	Dealt with by Armed Forces	Firefighters NOT Required to Attend	Total Incidents to JOCCs
1367	10793	8077	20237



(Fig. 3)

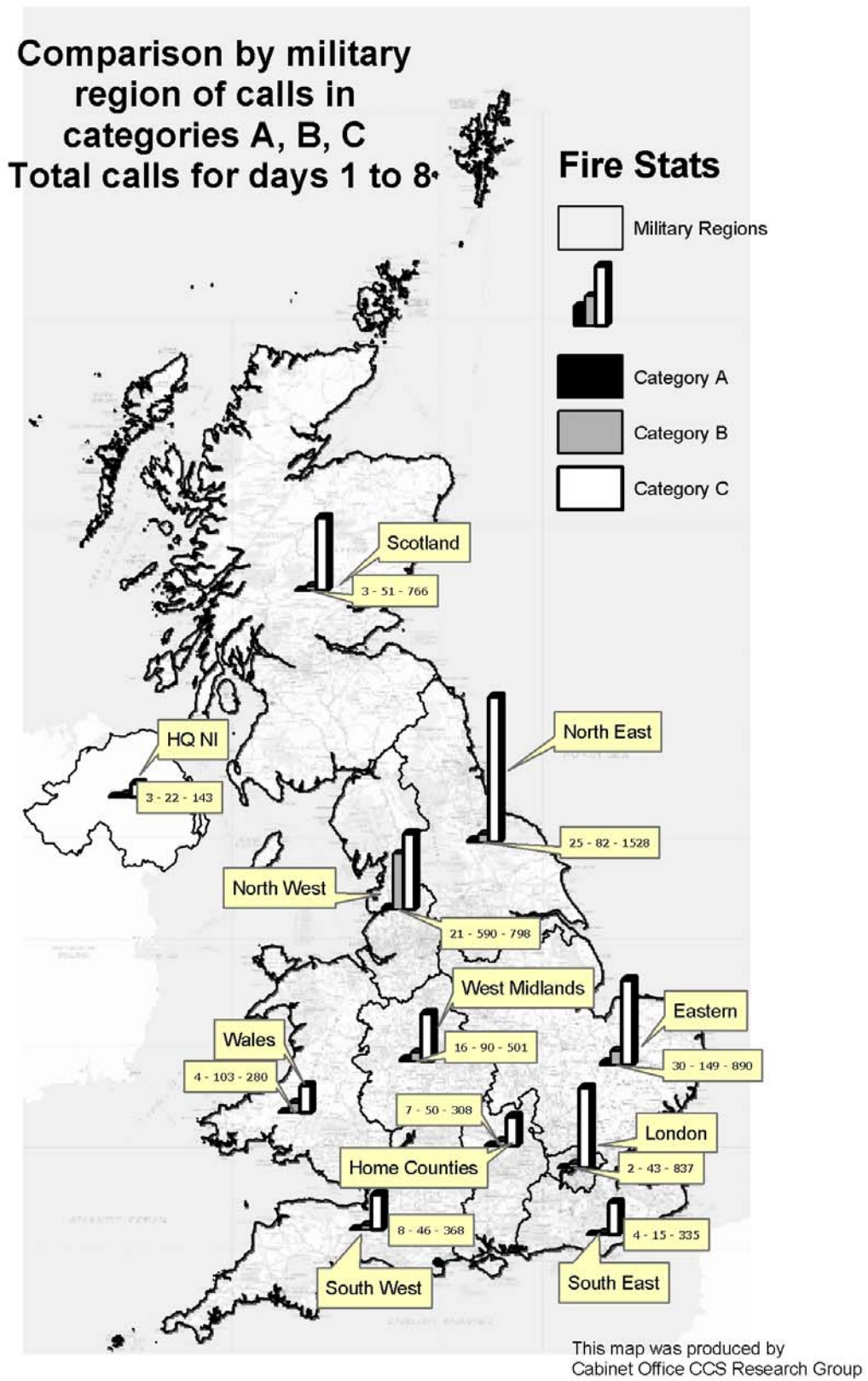
9. Incidents were categorised according to risk to life as follows:

- Category A = confirmed threat to life
- Category B = possible threat to life
- Category C = non life threatening incident

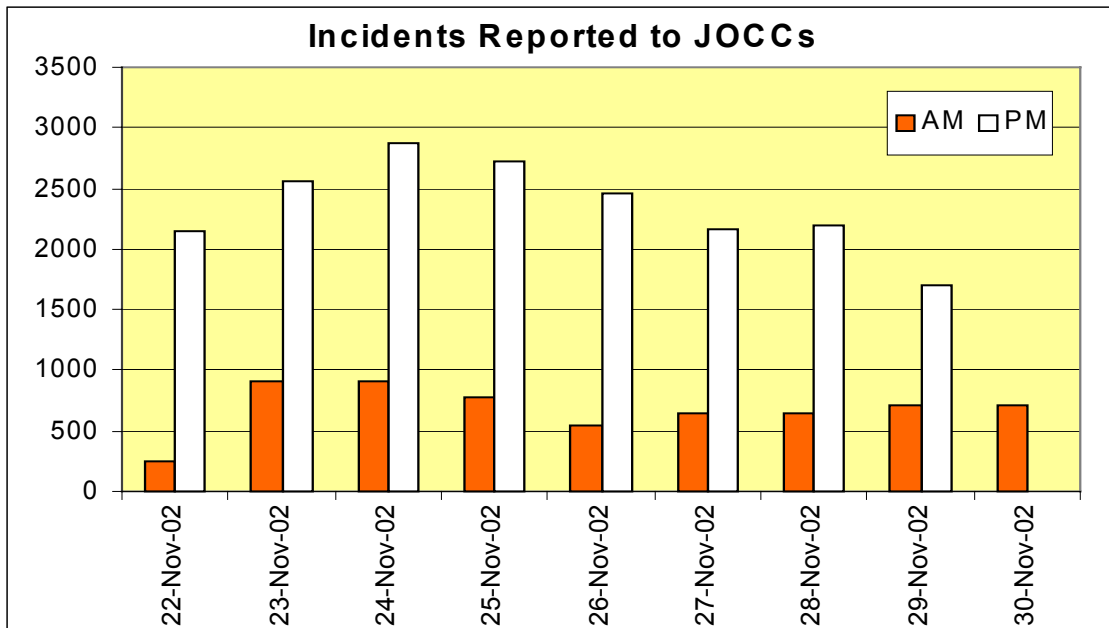
10. Overall the emergency response was designed to ensure that all incidents where there was a confirmed or possible threat to life were dealt with. In fact, this remit was substantially exceeded, with a response available for all incidents where one was required. The majority of incidents attended were Category C, where there was no risk to life. Across the UK the total number of incidents responded to by the Armed Forces was as follows: 124 of Category A, 1,239 of Category B and 6,780 of Category C. In addition there were 2,650 false alarms attended.

11. Details of the number and type of incidents responded to in each region is shown in the map below.

(Fig. 4)

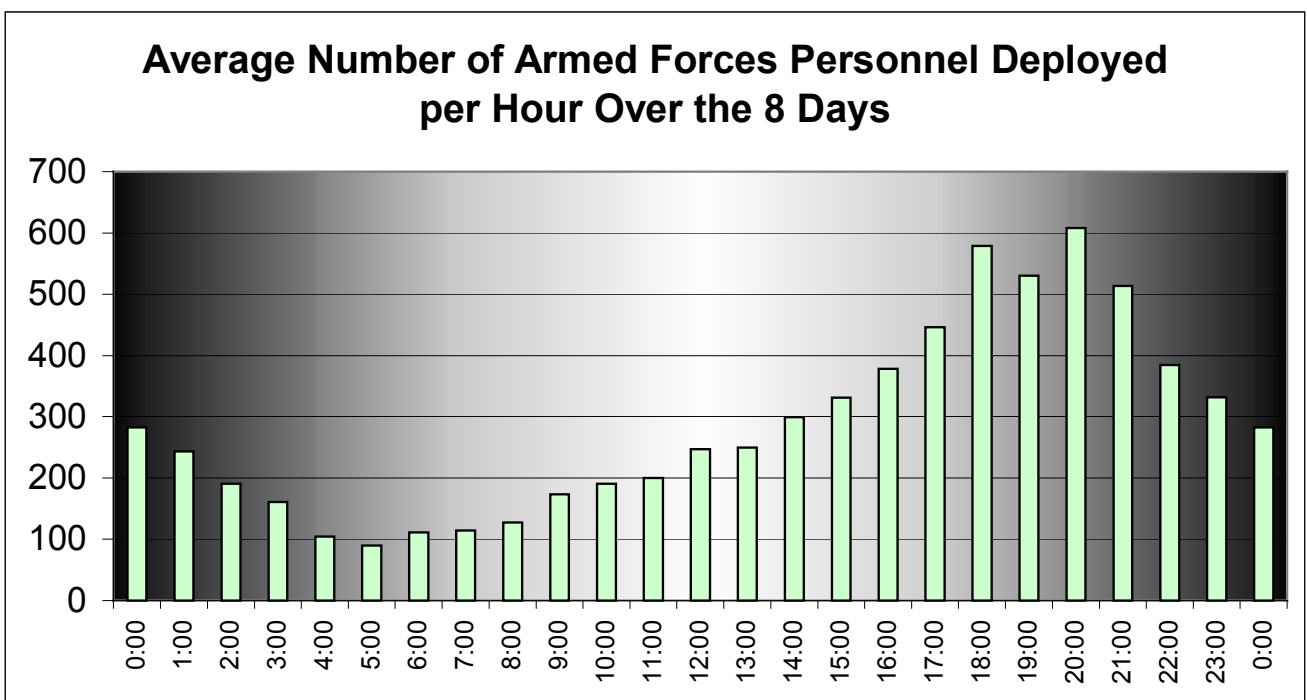


12. Experience has shown that there were significant peaks of activity. This is particularly noticeable for the 12 hours between 12 noon and 12 midnight, when 75% of the incidents that were reported to JOCCs occurred (see below).



22nd November AM is for 3 hours & 30th November AM is for 9 hours (Fig.5)

13. The graph below shows the average numbers of Armed Forces personnel deployed on Red and Green Goddesses, BARTs and RESTs in any one hour. Each 12 hour shift had a total of 5935 (excluding Wales) personnel assigned across these duties. 20:00 was the busiest hour with the most personnel deployed on average. However, this period only involved the deployment of 10.25% of available Armed Forces personnel. The quietest hour, 05:00, saw only 1.5 % deployed on average. This demonstrates that the Armed Forces were running well within their capacity, even where certain regions had higher averages (the busiest, London, had an average peak deployment at 19:00 of 21% with deployment still significantly within capacity).



Figures do not include Wales (Fig.6)

14. The Ministry of Defence, in consultation with HM Fire Service Inspectorate is considering whether, for any future strike periods, emergency cover would be improved by rostering staff so that more personnel are on duty during the 12 noon to 12 midnight shift when most incidents occur.

Elements of the Emergency Response

15. The Armed Forces contributed 18,600 personnel to Operation Fresco, which provided around 6,250 frontline fire-fighters per shift. In addition there were, on average, around 8,000 working fire-fighters available per shift (this includes retained fire-fighters). (This compares with normal totals of approximately 6,000 whole-time frontline fire-fighters per shift, 12,000 retained fire-fighters on call and 1,200 day staff.) The Police also made a key contribution, by hosting most JOCCs in their communications centres, sending officers to assess incidents and to divert resources as appropriate, and escorting fire tenders en route to incidents, to ensure a quick response.

16. The Armed Forces' deployment was organised into two shifts, compared with the usual four watch system operated by the Fire Service. Armed Forces personnel therefore worked up to 96 hours to provide the necessary levels of emergency cover during the strike.

17. Green Goddess availability was 99% on average. The Armed Forces Breathing Apparatus and Rescue Teams had a daily availability of 100%. The Armed Forces confirmed at the outset that they had the necessary equipment to provide the cover required. However, Green Goddess engines are old, although serviceable and well maintained, and with their limited capacity are not ideal assets. Red engines have been increasingly brought into use during the strike as Red Goddesses, with limited equipment aboard. The number of Red Goddesses increased from 27 to 83 over the 8 days of the strike, allowing the Armed Forces to utilise their high pressure pumping capacity and manoeuvrability alongside the Green Goddesses. Action is in hand to enable more Red Goddesses to be put into use if there is further strike action.

Arrangements for major contingencies

18. A UK-wide agreement was reached with the Fire Brigades Union prior to the start of the strike on the way in which striking fire-fighters would respond to "Gold command incidents" during periods of strike action (these are the most serious incidents, such as major terrorist attacks or serious train crashes.) Local arrangements are being negotiated to underpin this. No such incidents have occurred during this strike.

19. There have been a number of incidents of note during the 8-days, including:

22 November

- i. A major fire at the disused Phoenix Steel Tube Factory in West Bromwich. At the height of the fire, 12 Green Goddesses were dispatched, together with 6 Red Goddesses, 1 Rescue Equipment Support Team (REST), 5 Breathing Apparatus Rescue Teams (BARTs) and a total of 150 Armed Forces personnel. This was contained;

- ii. Around 22:00 a lorry fire took place on the M6 Southbound. A total of 6 Green Goddesses, 2 Red Goddesses, 1 REST and 1 BART attended. The fire caused severe damage to the carriageway with only one southbound lane open for a period of time. The M6 Southbound was later closed for emergency resurfacing.

23 November

- i. A fire in a factory complex in Walgrave. Gas cylinders were present in this site close to a chemical works. Aggressive fire-fighting by BARTs prevented the fire from establishing or spreading.

27 November

- i. A full emergency was declared at Birmingham International Airport involving an aircraft with technical difficulties en route between Manchester and Monastir (Tunisia). In accordance with standard practice when full emergencies are declared and emergency support requested, three Green Goddesses and one Red Fire Engine were dispatched to the scene and arrived before the aircraft. The aircraft landed safely at 09:20. Routine airport services were unaffected.
- ii. 2 Green Goddesses attended a fire in a commercial van. Nitrogen and refrigeration gases were present. The Police imposed a 200 metre cordon around the incident and 150 civilians were evacuated from their homes. The fire was brought under control in one hour.

30 November

- i. A call was received at 06:30 in the JOCC in Colchester reporting a fire at the Ramada Hotel. Retained fire-fighters and Armed Forces responded to the incident, involving 2 Green Goddesses, 1 BART and 1 REST. The fire was put out at 09:30 after operational handover to the Local Authority Fire Brigade. No casualties were reported.

Fatalities and Injuries

20. There were a total of 12 deaths in fire-related incidents, the same as an expected average 8-day figure for November. In addition, during the whole 8-day period there were 36 deaths from road traffic accidents that were attended by Local Authority or Armed Forces fire-fighters. There is no directly comparable figure for non strike operations, but the average figure for road traffic fatalities at this time of year is 11 per day (although this can vary substantially from week to week). The public have been careful, and the Government have reinforced road and fire safety messages.

21. Detailed incident analysis has not yet been undertaken, but at this stage there is no evidence to suggest that non-availability of the normal fire service response contributed to any of these deaths.

22. There were 15 injuries to Police officers and 42 injuries to Armed Forces personnel involved in emergency fire cover activity relating to the strike.

Police Injuries

Nottinghamshire Constabulary. 2 officers sustained smoke inhalation injuries as a result of rescuing persons trapped in a house fire in Bessel Park Estate on 25 November . They were assessed in hospital and released shortly afterwards.

Strathclyde Constabulary. 4 officers suffered from smoke inhalation after attending a fire in Well Street, Paisley on 23 November. All 4 attended the Royal Alexandra Hospital for precautionary checks and were released shortly afterwards.

Police Service of Northern Ireland. 3 officers sustained smoke inhalation injuries as a result of attending a house fire in Newton Abbey on 27 November. All 3 were assessed in hospital and released shortly afterwards.

Armed Forces Injuries

The injuries to Armed Forces personnel ranged from smoke inhalation to broken arms and twisted ankles. For example:

At the factory fire in West Bromwich on 22 November, 3 soldiers were taken to hospital suffering from smoke inhalation and 1 with an eye injury. All were later released. A further 10 personnel were examined at the scene.

At a house fire in Birmingham on 26 November a Red Goddess crew member was taken to hospital with a broken arm after a fire hose exploded.

Response of striking fire-fighters

23. During the course of the strikes so far, striking fire-fighters left the picket line to assist on a number of occasions. Few problems were reported in respect of picketing. There have been, however, a few localised incidents of secondary and intimidatory picketing, as well as individual cases of harassment and intimidation of working fire-fighters and personnel staffing JOCCs. Police have committed staff to dealing with these problems. They have been closely monitoring reports of intimidation and a number of criminal investigations have been initiated.

Police Contributions to Managing Consequences

24. The management of the fire strike has involved a significant commitment of Police resources, both to the emergency response itself and to coping with consequences of the strike. On a daily basis, the following personnel were directly involved in fire strike related activity:

control room staff – 517 Police and support staff;

escorts to Armed Forces fire appliances – 3,207 Police staff and 1200 Police vehicles;

public order contingency – 728 Police staff.

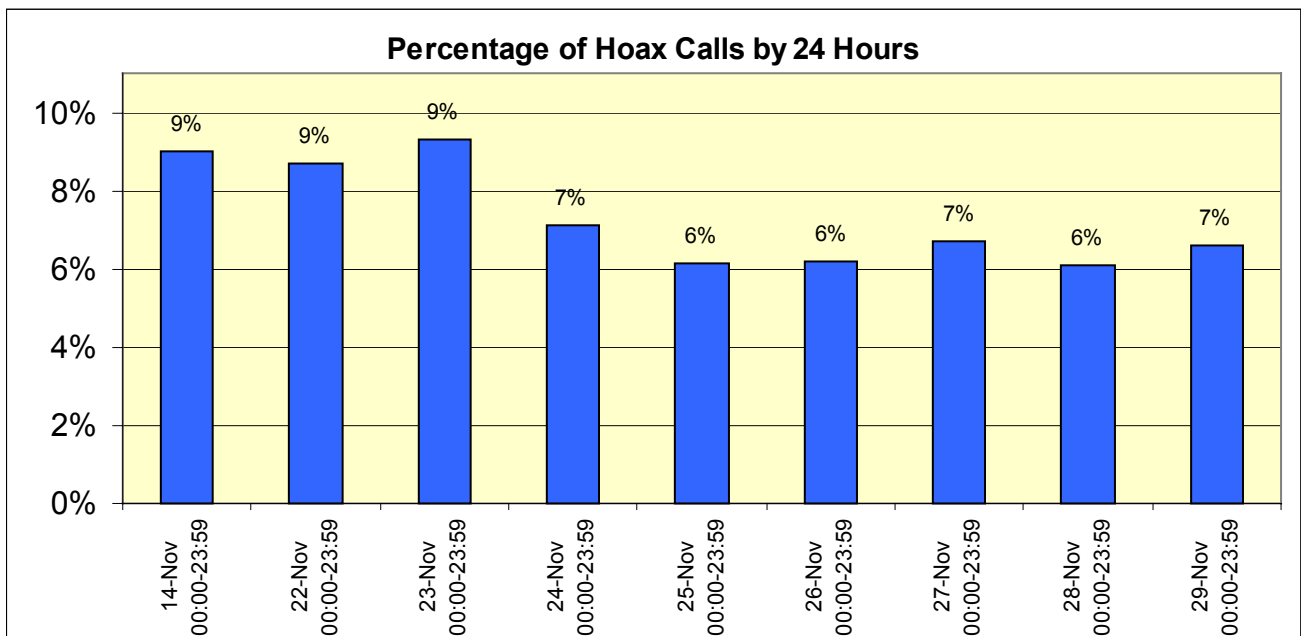
25. Efforts were made to minimise the impact on other Police activity, but as any further strikes continue, this will represent a continuing load on Police resources.

Hoaxes

26. Generally the public responded well and reduced the number of 999 fire related calls. In normal operation, 8% of all calls to the Fire Service are malicious false calls. In the first 48-hour strike period the percentage of hoax calls was slightly higher, and markedly so in some areas. Irresponsible behaviour by a small number of individuals could present a risk of resources being diverted away from serious incidents where they might be required to save life.

27. During the 8-day strike, steps were therefore taken to minimise the number of hoax calls through a pro-active information campaign emphasising the dangers of such behaviour. Arrangements were also put in place in conjunction with the Police and telecommunications industry to disconnect the telephones of people found making hoax calls, and to bring offenders quickly before the courts. Since these measures were introduced, 12 people have been prosecuted and 168 have had their telephone disconnected.

28. The number of hoax calls throughout the strike is shown in the chart below, with the figures for the only complete day of the 48-hour strike included for purposes of comparison.

















(Fig.7)

WIDER CONSEQUENCES

29. There has been minimal disruption to national life during the strike, with industry and the transport infrastructure largely unaffected by the dispute. There has been no significant secondary industrial action and the overall economic impact of the dispute has been limited. This is in part due to the detailed contingency planning that has occurred, and the general acceptance, with some exceptions, that under the 1992 Trade Union and Labour Relations Act the absence of Local Authority fire cover in itself does not constitute a serious and imminent threat to someone's safety.

30. Critical sectors of national life, such as mainline rail services, the road network, air travel, fuel distribution and power generation were not disrupted. In the chemical industry a detailed risk assessment of procedures and processes was undertaken. A small number of high risk processes were suspended during strike action, but there was no material interruption to service or supply. A small number of petrol forecourts closed during restocking. Channel Tunnel services were not affected and sports and entertainment events and venues were able to continue to operate.

31. Some local disruption occurred on London Underground, with up to 22 deep stations closed where lifts were required for public access. A very small number of drivers refused to work. The lack of disruption across the UK is summarised in the table below:

Sector	  	Comment
Mainline Rail Networks		No disruption
London Underground		Local disruption – up to 22 stations closed.
Airports		No disruption
Road		No disruption
Channel Tunnel		No disruption
Power		No disruption
Fuel Distribution		No disruption
Chemical Industry		No disruption
Public Events		No disruption
Sports Events		No disruption
Music & Entertainment		No disruption

(Fig.8)

32. The 8-day strike had no adverse environmental impacts and the good liaison between local authorities and the JOCCs in North Wales meant that localised flooding was handled well.

EXAMPLES OF CONTINGENCY PLANNING AND PUBLIC INFORMATION

33. London Underground Limited (LUL) completed a risk assessment and reviewed their normal contingency arrangements to identify areas where any role was envisaged for Local Authority Fire Services. Reviews were based on the assumption that no fire cover would be available. Legal advice was sought on the implications of the 1989 sub-surface railway regulations and other statutory duties.

34. As a result of this work, LUL identified a slightly increased risk at 22 stations that were heavily dependent on lifts for normal passenger access. They concluded that these should be closed on strike days. Elsewhere, LUL was able to modify operations in such a way as to ensure safe operation for passengers and staff. Staff were

consulted on the potential risk and the mitigation measures that were being introduced.

35. The **Channel Tunnel** was a particular cause for concern given its length and reliance on the Kent Fire Brigade to provide the first response. Eurotunnel reviewed their plans and recruited and trained their own staff to operate fire-fighting and rescue equipment to provide a first line of response in the event of an incident. Some operating procedures were also revised. The Cross Channel Safety Authority approved continuing operation.

36. **Airports** as a condition of their licence are required to maintain minimum levels of on-site fire cover to respond quickly to any airside emergencies. This cover is provided using specialist fire tenders owned by the airport operator and operated by their staff and therefore not party to the dispute.

37. Local authorities and the Highways Agency, with the Police, reviewed **road safety issues**. Each major road tunnel was considered separately and where necessary restrictions were introduced, for instance, the tidal flow in the Blackwall Tunnel was suspended to ensure that north-south traffic flows were kept in separate tunnels.

38. Revised arrangements were put in place involving contractors and others to handle chemical and other spills on the road networks supported by advice to highways authorities on the procedures to be followed.

39. Measures were also considered to reduce the risk of road traffic accidents given the likelihood that strike action would occur in the autumn/winter. A public information campaign was drawn up using television, radio and press advertising to emphasise the need for careful driving. Messages were displayed on motorway warning signs to remind motorists. Specialist cutting equipment was procured for the Armed Forces' specialised rescue teams to ensure that they could quickly extricate anyone trapped in damaged vehicles.

40. **High Risk Premises** - discussions took place with contingency planners and the relevant industry associations (for example the Petroleum Industry Association and the Chemicals Industries Association), where they were briefed on the likelihood of strike action and the contingency arrangements that were being put in place and asked to identify any specific issues that might arise. This information was used by HSE and DTI to prepare industry specific guidance that was circulated to operators. Where significant local concerns were identified, meetings were often arranged with local Armed Forces commanders for clarification.

41. A planned fire-safety campaign ran on television in October. Once it became clear that a strike was likely an additional public safety campaign was launched using radio, leaflets, posters and a selected door-drop by means of adverts in the local press. In addition, HM Chief Inspector of Fire Services wrote in October to 25,000 businesses advising them to review their fire safety procedures, and similar guidance was issued to local authorities.

Cabinet Office
02 December 2002

GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

BART – Breathing apparatus rescue team

CCC – Civil contingencies committee

COBR – Cabinet Office briefing room

FBU – Fire Brigades Union

GG – Green Goddess

HMFSI - Her Majesty's Fire Service Inspectorate

JOCC – Joint operational control centre

LAFB – Local authority fire brigade

LUL – London Underground Limited

MOD – Ministry of Defence

REST – Rescue equipment support team

RTA – Road traffic accident