FACT SERVICE

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Death by a thousand fire service cuts

The number of people who have died as a result of fires has increased by 15%, according to the *Fire statistics monitor* published by the Home Office.

There were 303 fire-related fatalities in England during 2015-16. This was 39 more than the 2014-15 figure of 264 and the highest figure since 2011-12.

The Home Office's bulletin, *Fire incident response times,* reveals that in England in 2015-16, the number of fatalities from fires in the home increased by 17% compared with the same period in 2014-15. There were 34 more deaths than in the previous year.

The FBU firefighters' union says these figures show how the government's cost-cutting exercise in the fire and rescue service has backfired.

Matt Wrack, general secretary of the FBU, said: "Firefighters are doing their best to provide a world class service, but the government have compromised the service by axing thousands of posts, closing fire stations and cutting equipment. It is the public who will pay the price of the government's folly. The decision to prioritise budget cuts ahead of public safety is another example of how out of touch this government is."

The report also found that the average response time to primary fires had increased by 31 seconds since 2010. In rural areas, the figure was even worse with fire crews taking on average 48 seconds longer to get to emergencies.

Wrack added: "In a fire, every second counts. Those extra seconds might not sound like long, and ministers will try to dismiss them, but in an emergency, that time can be the difference between life and death."

www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/545927/fire-statistics-monitor-1516-hosb0916.pdf

www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/584351/fire-incident-response-times-1516-hosb0117.pdf

www.fbu.org.uk/news/2017/01/19/cuts-blame-rising-fire-deaths-home-office-publish-new-figures

Guidance on stress

The TUC has, in conjunction with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), produced a new guide to help trade union health and safety representatives tackle workplace stress.

Last year, seven in 10 respondents to a TUC survey of more than 1,000 health and safety representatives identified stress as the top concern in their workplace. As a result the TUC has issued the guide, which will help union representatives work with employers to find practical solutions to work-related stress.

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The guidance is based on the HSE "management standards" in handling stress. It breaks down the causes of work-related stress into six key areas:

- demands: issues, such as workload, work pattern and environment;
- control: how much say someone has over the way in which they work;
- support: available resources, line management and colleagues;
- relationships: dealing with unacceptable behaviour and promoting positive working;
- role: if the person understands their role at work and does not have conflicting roles; and
- change: how organisational change – large or small – is communicated.

The guide proposes that a group – made up of representatives from across every level of the organisation – gathers information on the current situation in the workplace and carries out a risk assessment based on the HSE standards.

The group can then identify practical proposals for change that could make a real difference, such as tackling a long hours working culture, improving workplace practices or increasing staffing levels.

TUC general secretary Frances O'Grady said: "Workers are increasingly suffering from the effects of workplace stress as pressures of long hours and low job security are taking hold across the UK. But it's in no-one's interest to have an overstretched workforce, as anxious staff are less productive and are more likely to take time off. And the HSE standards provide the best way of tackling the issue.

"Union representatives have a key role to play in working with employers to tackle this problem once and for all. Stress is preventable if workers have reasonable workloads, supportive managers and a workplace free from bullying and harassment."

https://www.tuc.org.uk/workplace-issues/health-and-safety/stress/tackling-workplace-stress-using-hse-stress-management

Modern-day slave traders jailed

Two brothers who trafficked people from Poland to the UK and forced them to work have each been jailed for six years.

Erwin and Krystian Markowski controlled and exploited the workers by threatening them with violence and by pocketing most of their wages.

Nottingham Crown Court heard the "modern slavery" case came to light when one of the victims visited the front counter at Radford Road police station on 31 January 2016 to report he had been living at a house in Radford Boulevard with around 10 other men who were going through a similar ordeal.

He said he was being made to work for Sports Direct and his finances were being controlled by the two Markowski brothers. He told police he had witnessed other workers being beaten by the brothers and was in constant fear of attack.

The court was told the brothers operated by identifying vulnerable targets in Poland and offering them travel to the UK, work and accommodation. Soon after arriving they were taken to an employment agency in Mansfield and given work in the Sports Direct warehouse at Shirebrook.

Travel documents, such as passports and national identity cards, were taken away from the new arrivals by the Markowski brothers. At the same time, they were helped to apply for a bank account and bank card, but as soon as the card arrived the Markowski brothers took them.

They were then forced to work, but were only paid by the Markowski brothers about a third of what they earned, £90 out of about £265 take-home pay.

The brothers each admitted to facilitating the transport of a person to the UK for exploitation and fraud by false representation at a previous hearing.

The Unite general union called for an investigation into the recruitment agency Transline.

Assistant general secretary Steve Turner said: "Transline, the recruitment agency involved, has already got form when it comes to the exploitation of workers, having had its licence to operate in the food and agriculture sector taken away by the authorities. There now needs to be a full scale investigation into Transline's behaviour and employment practices.

"Companies using recruitment agencies such as Transline also need to take a long hard look at the behaviour of the agencies they use. Pointing the finger and trying to abdicate responsibility is morally wrong and will not avoid the reputational damage that comes with cases such as these."

The union also called on the government to put its money where its mouth is too, by fully resourcing the new Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, formerly the Gangmasters Licensing Authority

(GLA), and taking enforcement action against modern-day slavers.

Two and a half years ago, a major West Yorkshire recruitment business – Qualitycourse Limited, of Halifax Road, Brighouse, which trades as Transline – was denied a licence by the GLA.

A separate application submitted by Transline Europe Limited was also refused as directors who had failed the "fit and proper" test for Qualitycourse were also named on this company's board.

Dispatches, the Channel 4 programme, described how Transline used to supply workers to a factory in Bolton, which makes own brand pizzas for Britain's biggest retailers. When the GLA inspectors called in 2013, they didn't like what they found. Transline was running a salary sacrifice scheme, paying workers partly in expenses and partly in wages. The GLA found Transline was likely not to be paying "adequate tax and National Insurance contributions".

The GLA reviewed a sample of payslips and found that some workers were receiving much less than the National Minimum Wage "some ... significantly so." In fact, one worker was paid just £2.87 an hour before expenses. Transline advised the GLA that they were employing apprentices. This is significant because apprentices in their first year of work get a much lower rate of National Minimum Wage – in 2012-13 it was just £2.65 an hour.

However, the GLA found the "workers interviewed did not consider they were employed as apprentices". The GLA ruled that Transline had failed its licensing standard by not paying the National Minimum Wage, and also found Transline's managing directors Paul Beasley and Jon Taylor not "fit and proper" persons to hold a GLA licence, meaning Transline can no longer supply workers into food production. But they were and are free to do in other sectors.

Transline claimed: "At no point have Transline paid below the National Minimum Wage". They said they have invested in software which prevents a worker from being paid less than the "applicable National Minimum Wage" and ensures employee aren't worse off through the salary sacrifice scheme. "Such safeguards and systems are specifically designed to ensure that Transline do not break the law."

www.nottinghamshire.police.uk/news/2017-01-23/brothers-jailed-trafficking-slave-workers-nottingham

www.unitetheunion.org/news/unite-calls-for-transline-investigation-after-modern-slavery-conviction/

www.gla.gov.uk/whats-new/press-release-archive/100614-lack-of-cooperation-leads-to-refusal-of-yorkshire-agency-licence/

www.channel4.com/info/press/news/low-pay-britain-channel-4-dispatches

Fees let bad bosses get off scot free

Punitive fees for employment tribunals are allowing bad bosses to get away with shocking treatment of workers.

New regulations giving employment tribunals powers to fine rule-breaking employers for "aggravating factors" in unfair dismissal cases have led to just 18 fines since April 2014.

Ministers expected the rules to generate £2.8 million a year, but so far bosses have only been told to cough up a mere £18,000.

Green MP Caroline Lucas, who obtained the figures through a parliamentary question, said the government should have netted some £7 million by now if its predictions had been right.

She said the £18,000 probably wouldn't even cover the time seemingly wasted by MPs and peers scrutinising the penalties in 2012 and 2013.

Lucas said the "most likely explanation" for the small number of payouts awarded were the prohibitive £1,200 fees introduced in 2013 for workers claiming unfair dismissals.

They "have eradicated exactly the kind of tribunal claim that ministers had in mind when they came up with the idea: a relatively low-value claim, because the claimant is low-paid, against a rogue, exploitative employer," she said.

"It seems that bad employers are getting away with poor practices, and that justice isn't being done. It's clear that the government must immediately publish the review on employment tribunal fees, on which it has been sitting for 15 months – there is simply no excuse for further delay."

www.morningstaronline.co.uk/a-f69f-Tory-Tribunal-Fees-are-Giving-Britains-Worst-Bosses-a-Free-Ride

Top-ranked inclusive employers 2017

Lloyds Banking Group has been named the most inclusive employer in Britain by lesbian, gay, bi and trans (LGBT) charity Stonewall in its Top 100 Employers list for 2017.

The banking firm, which came second in the 2016 list, launched a new colleague volunteering programme, forming official partnerships with LGBT charities. This includes trans youth charity Mermaids, elder LGBT organisation Opening Doors London and the Albert Kennedy Trust, for homeless LGBT youth, volunteering over 1,000 hours and raising £30,000 for them throughout the year.

They've also supported Bi Awareness Day and Transgender Day of Visibility, with new training tools, social media campaigns, and by flying the bisexual flag and transgender flags at 35 of their key sites.

Law firm Pinsent Masons came second followed by City bank JP Morgan and another law firm Clifford Chance came fourth.

MI5 and the National Assembly for Wales came in joint fifth place.

The Top 100 employers list is compiled from submissions to the Workplace Equality Index, a benchmarking tool used by employers to assess their achievements and progress on LGBT equality in the workplace.

Survey This year saw 439 organisations take part in the Index. More than 92,000 staff from across these organisations also took part in an anonymous survey about their employers' attitudes towards workplace culture, diversity, and inclusion, making it one of the largest national employment surveys in Britain. This is an enormous increase from approximately 60,000 respondents in 2016.

The main findings were:
- one in eight LGB people would not feel comfortable disclosing their sexual orientation to any managers or senior colleagues;
- one in five trans employees wouldn't feel comfortable disclosing their gender identity to any colleagues;
- over two out of five (43%) trans employees wouldn't feel comfortable disclosing their gender identity to any customers, clients, or service users;
- just over a fifth (23%) of bi staff see bi role models at work, compared to a third (32%) of trans role models, according to trans respondents; over half (53%) of lesbian role models, according to lesbian respondents; and almost two-thirds (63%) of gay male role models, according to gay male respondents.

www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/top_100_employers_2017-web.pdf

Get tough on executive pay, say pension funds

The Pensions and Lifetime Savings Association (PLSA) has called on investors to take a tougher stance on those who set executive pay policy.

The PLSA, formerly the National Association of Pension Funds, has published an updated edition of its *Corporate Governance Policy and Voting Guidelines*.

The guidelines aim to: promote the long-term success of the companies in which the PLSA's members invest; and ensure that the board and management of these companies are held accountable to shareholders, such as pension funds.

The new guidelines recommend that if shareholders vote against a company's remuneration policy, they should also oppose the re-election of the remuneration committee chair as a company director.

The PLSA recently published research revealing that 85% of pension funds were concerned by the pay gap between executives and ordinary workers. The research also showed that while there were significant votes against pay practices at a number of quoted companies from the FTSE 350, there was little opposition to the re-election of the remuneration committee chairs.

Luke Hildyard, who leads on stewardship and corporate governance policy at the PLSA, said: "Provocative levels of executive pay are doing great damage to the reputation of British business. The failure of some companies to recognise stakeholder concerns on this issue is a major worry for pension funds as investors.

"Our new guidelines are designed to ensure the individuals responsible for a company's executive pay practices are held to account. We hope that this can at last deliver meaningful progress on excessive top pay."

The guidelines also call for companies to explain what steps they are taking to bring diversity, in all its guises, to their boardroom and suggest that annual reports should include better information about a company's corporate culture and employment practices.

www.plsa.co.uk/PressCentre/Press_releases/0548-PLSA-calls-for-more-accountability-over-executive-pay.aspx

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