



Zack Polanski AM
Chair of the Fire Committee

Jonathan Smith
London Fire Commissioner
(Sent by email)

4 March 2026

Dear Jonathan,

The wellbeing of London's firefighters

As you will no doubt be aware, the number of London Fire Brigade (LFB) firefighters reporting experiences of stress, anxiety and depression has been increasing. So much so, that it is now the most common reason for firefighters to be off work for more than two weeks.¹ These are concerning figures which the London Assembly Fire Committee felt warranted investigation. Accordingly, on 13 January 2026, we asked two panels of expert guests: who rescues the rescuers?²

We were pleased to hear in that meeting that the mental health support offered by fire services has improved radically over the past two decades. Gareth Cook from the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) told us when he started in 2007 there was "nothing" offered to firefighters.³ Now, LFB has a comprehensive Wellbeing Strategy⁴ and mental health policy.⁵ Deputy Commissioner Spencer Sutcliff also noted that this work has reduced the stigma surrounding reporting stress, anxiety and depression, which may be a reason for the increase in the number of cases we are now seeing.⁶

¹ The Mayor of London, [MQ 2024/2155 - LFB Staff Turnover and Absenteeism \(1\)](#), August 2024, and The Mayor of London, [MQ 2025/3959 - LFB Staff Turnover and Absenteeism \(2\)](#), November 2025

² London Assembly Fire Committee, [Wellbeing of London's firefighters](#), November 2025

³ London Assembly Fire Committee, [Wellbeing of London's firefighters – Panel Two](#), 13 January 2026, p.8

⁴ LFB, [Wellbeing Strategy](#), August 2022

⁵ LFB, [Mental health: promote, prevent and treat](#), November 2022

⁶ London Assembly Fire Committee, [Wellbeing of London's firefighters – Panel Two](#), 13 January 2026, p.2

LFB's work in this area is important to ensure firefighters feel supported by the Brigade, but also to help them feel able to identify when something is not right, in themselves and others. And importantly, to know how to respond to those signs. A Brigade that feels good both physically *and* mentally will be one that is best prepared to serve the needs of Londoners.

Prioritising mental health also has a financial payout. Since 2021, the estimated total cost for LFB resulting from sickness absences, which includes mental health, was £84 million.⁷ Deputy Commissioner Spencer Sutcliff also told us that "every pound spent on prevention for mental health [issues] will give you a £4 return."⁸

It is clear to the Committee that firefighters' mental health is something LFB is taking seriously, and this is to be commended. However, we also heard from Dr Carolina Campodonico, who is leading the FBU-commissioned research into firefighter mental health,⁹ that "more than three-quarters of firefighters said that they would be interested in more mental health training."¹⁰ We also heard of specific types of targeted mental health strategies that are currently not included in LFB's wellbeing offering. We therefore believe there are improvements LFB could make to elevate its support for firefighters.

Data-informed support

An extensive research project into the health and wellbeing of employees in the UK's fire and rescue services has identified the importance of data as a key priority for an effective health and wellbeing strategy.¹¹ The findings of this research showed that data is important for measuring impact, informing strategic priorities and highlighting where offers of support should be reviewed.

Data published by LFB shows that stress, anxiety and depression is more common for control staff (999 call handlers and their managers) than it is for firefighters or non-uniformed support staff.¹² It was therefore promising to hear Deputy Commissioner Spencer Sutcliff state that he is "conscious that different stressors impact different vocational groups", and he wants to use data "so we can target our responses to those most at need".¹³ Yet, when we asked LFB if it tailors its mental health support or training for the specific needs of each occupational group within the Brigade, we heard that these services are "generalised" and "broadly the same for everyone".¹⁴

In evidence to the Committee, the London Ambulance Service (LAS) explained how it analyses absence levels and data provided by its Occupational Health provider, which is contracted by all three blue light services.¹⁵ The insights provided by this analysis recently allowed LAS to introduce a

⁷ UK Fire, [UK Fire & Rescue Service sees a rise in staff absences due to mental health costing millions amid 'crisis'](#), January 2025

⁸ London Assembly Fire Committee, [Wellbeing of London's firefighters – Panel Two](#), 13 January 2026, p.2

⁹ FBU, [Call for firefighters to participate in ground-breaking national mental health research](#), February 2025

¹⁰ London Assembly Fire Committee, [Wellbeing of London's firefighters – Panel One](#), 13 January 2026, p.11

¹¹ Nottingham Trent University, [Recommended Key Priorities for the Next Fire and Rescue Health and Wellbeing Strategy](#), March 2023, pp.11-12

¹² LFB, [People Services Bi-Annual Performance Report Q3-Q4 2023/24](#), July 2024, Table 12, p.4

¹³ London Assembly Fire Committee, [Wellbeing of London's firefighters – Panel Two](#), 13 January 2026, p.2

¹⁴ London Assembly Fire Committee, [Wellbeing of London's firefighters – Panel Two](#), 13 January 2026, p.9 and p.4

¹⁵ London Assembly Fire Committee, [Written evidence – Wellbeing of London's firefighters](#), January 2026, pp.3-4

mental health screening tool, which is now being used in areas of the Trust where poor mental health is more likely to be an issue.¹⁶ We believe that this approach to data-informed support is something LFB should consider adopting, and we therefore encourage LFB to learn more about how LAS has approached this, via The Royal Foundation's Emergency Responder Senior Leaders Board.¹⁷

Recommendation 1: LFB should use the mental health and wellbeing data it has, as well as data shared by external partners such as its Occupational Health provider, to explore how the support it offers could be tailored to the specific needs of occupational groups or roles who are reporting higher levels of mental health problems.

Peer support

In our meeting we heard of the need for a balanced, multi-stakeholder approach to improving firefighters' mental health, summarised succinctly by Professor Jo Yarker as an 'IGLOO' framework – Individual, Group, Leader, Organisation, Outside.¹⁸ We heard that peer support, which comes under the 'Group' element of this framework, is extremely valuable. Dr Carolina Campodonico explained that peer support allows firefighters to be able to have supportive, confident conversations with each other, which might not be attainable through other formal avenues.¹⁹

We also heard from LFB firefighter Dean Corney, who founded Walk and Talk 999, a peer support group which organises weekly walks for those connected to the emergency services.²⁰ Dean explained that this form of safe space is needed for like-minded people to share their lived experiences, and it has allowed firefighters to de-stigmatise seeking help from doctors or counsellors, leading to more of them seeking this type of support.²¹ We think the work Dean has done deserves praise, especially as it has been carried out on a voluntary basis, by firefighters, for firefighters.

Whilst LFB's Wellbeing Strategy and mental health policy are comprehensive, they have a strong focus on how LFB and external organisations can support individuals and leaders, omitting the 'Group' element of a multi-stakeholder approach. We believe this is a missed opportunity for LFB to recognise the role that colleagues play in supporting each others' wellbeing.

Recommendation 2: LFB should explore how the 'IGLOO' framework (Individual, Group, Leader, Organisation, Outside) could support delivery of its wellbeing strategy and mental health policy, ensuring a multi-stakeholder approach to mental health. This should include a specific focus on strengthening peer-to-peer support at group level.

The Committee would welcome a response to this letter by 15 April 2026. Please send your response by email to the Committee's Clerk, Diane Richards (Diane.Richards@london.gov.uk).

¹⁶ London Assembly Fire Committee, [Written evidence – Wellbeing of London's firefighters](#), January 2026, p.4

¹⁷ The Royal Foundation's Emergency Responder Senior Leaders Board brings together leaders from across all of the UK's emergency services on the issue of mental health. See: London Assembly Fire Committee, [Written evidence – Wellbeing of London's firefighters](#), January 2026, p.6

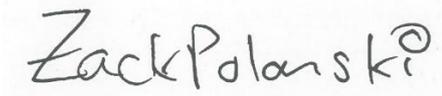
¹⁸ London Assembly Fire Committee, [Wellbeing of London's firefighters – Panel One](#), 13 January 2026, p.14

¹⁹ London Assembly Fire Committee, [Wellbeing of London's firefighters – Panel One](#), 13 January 2026, p.13

²⁰ Walk and Talk 999, [About us](#)

²¹ London Assembly Fire Committee, [Wellbeing of London's firefighters – Panel Two](#), 13 January 2026, p.14

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Zack Polanski". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Zack Polanski AM
Chair of the Fire Committee