

The risk of firefighters' exposure to contaminants and its impact on their health and wellbeing

Key information

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Introduction

The Fire Committee is investigating the risks associated with firefighters' exposure to contaminants.

Investigation aims and objectives (Terms of Reference)

This investigation will explore the risk of firefighters' exposure to contaminants in London and scrutinise the London Fire Brigade (LFB) response and processes in place associated with risks. It will examine:

- The health and wellbeing risks associated with firefighters' exposure to contaminants in different environments in London;
- LFB's approach to risk assessments on firefighters' exposure to contaminants and strategies to mitigate exposure risks;
- What and how should national standards apply to risk assessments of firefighters' exposure to contaminants;
- What LFB is doing to ensure PPE and equipment procured effectively mitigates against risk of contaminant exposure.

Key issues

- Firefighters can be exposed to hazardous contaminants (including so-called ‘forever chemicals’) as an inherent part of their firefighting duties. Recent research (commissioned by the Fire Brigades Union) has indicated that through this exposure firefighters are at an increased risk of cancer. Findings from this research showed that instances of cancer amongst firefighters aged 35-39 is up to 323 per cent higher than the general population in the same age category. The researchers also found [exposure to fire contaminants was linked to poor mental health](#).
- The FBU has called for a combination of measures to minimise firefighter exposure to toxic contaminant, including annual health monitoring, exposure recording, decontamination protocols, PPE and workwear cleaning. In addition, it has called for legislation to provide compensation to affected firefighters diagnosed with an occupational disease.
- As an employer, [LFB has duties under health and safety legislation](#) to adequately control exposure to materials in the workplace that causes ill health. In August 2024, new British standards for cleaning firefighter PPE were introduced, with [a key focus on contaminant exposure](#).

Key questions

1. How well understood are the risks posed by firefighters’ exposure to contaminants in different firefighting environments in London?
2. How should the risk of firefighter’s exposure to contaminants and forever chemicals be tracked, monitored and limited in London?
3. How does LFB mitigate risks against contaminant exposure for its firefighters?
4. Are LFB’s policies and procurement processes effective in mitigating against exposure risks?
5. Are national standards and/or guidance needed to address firefighter contaminant exposure?

Call for Evidence

As part of this investigation, the Committee issued a Call for Evidence.

[Read the written evidence in response](#)

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