

Interview with Chief Officer John Bonney of Hampshire Fire and Rescue

John Bonney – JB

Caption: Tell us about your life both inside and outside the fire service.

Caption: John Bonney. President, Chief Fire Officer's Association. Chief Officer, Hampshire Fire & Rescue Service, England.

JB: My life story. I wasn't part of a fire service family. I was brought up just outside London. I went to university and actually studied politics. I came out of university and wondered what I could do and I wanted to do something that was inspiration and meant something. So the job that I applied for was London Fire Brigade. Fortunately, I was accepted, which I was really pleased and I worked my way up through the ranks in London up until the rank of Senior Divisional Officer, which is a Battalion Chief in your terms. I then became a Deputy Chief in a much smaller fire department down on the other side of England. And eventually I moved to Hampshire in southern England. And Hampshire is a medium sized fire department of about 1700 full time staff. And I became Chief there in 2004.

Caption: Could you summarize what it takes to be a successful fire and EMS leader?

JB: To be a successful Chief, I think that's a difficult question. I think one of the things it's got to be is you have to be yourself, to some extent. You're going to have to make some very difficult decisions in your professional life and you're going to have to live with those decisions. And when everyone else has gone home, you're going to have to reflect on them and make sure you're happy with those. So there's something about being authentic and being yourself. Being able to go into a fire station and talk to your firefighting crews and then going to speak to somebody in City Hall and still being able to relate to them. So you need to be yourself and you need to be honest with yourself. And I think that's one of the most important things about being a Fire Chief.

Caption: How does Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service interact with its citizens and business community?

JB: How do we act with our citizens? Well, we do that on different levels. We do that every day. Every single member of the fire and rescue service meets somebody every day. And we have a strapline in Hampshire which is "We make life safer." What we mean by that is every single time somebody in the fire and rescue service meets a member of the public; they should be selling a message about safety. Even when they're off duty and they're at parties meeting people down at the pub, they should be reminding people about safety. So that's one of the things we teach. The other way we interact with people is we have very, very large education programs, something that you have in the U.S. but is probably much more extensive than you will have witnessed. We work with all our school children at least three times a year in the whole of the county,

we work with young drivers because of road traffic collisions, and particularly we work with old people who are most at risk for fire.

Caption: How do you determine what services Hampshire citizens need?

JB: I guess, in the old days, certainly in the U.K., we set our deployment against – absolutely against – gut instinct and how it used to be and how we feel about the greatest risks. We don't do that anymore; it's much more hard-nosed. We map every single risk in the county and every incident we attend and we plot for the future so we make decisions on the basis of intelligence now. We don't leave it to chance. And in truth, that's what we did in the past. Now that's quite difficult because that sometimes means gut instinct is wrong and convincing people that they actually need to look at the evidence and actually shift from their position is really tough sometimes.

Caption: What innovative steps are you taking to deal with the loss of revenue to retain services?

JB: We all face the financial realities of the time so we're looking very much to the way we match resources to the types of incidence we have. We know what types of incidences we have; we know what types of resources we use there. What we don't do is we don't send the right level of resources. We over-resource. So one of the things we are looking at is sending what is necessary, particularly on very small incidences. We don't send fire trucks this size anymore with five or six people, it ties them up. We don't do that. We have two and three person vehicles that we will use to match that resource. We're also in the process to changing our shift patterns, which as you can imagine is not popular. But actually the way we resource personnel on stations is also not the most effective way of doing it. So we're starting to do that in a very different way. But the biggest change that we make is actually in prevention. We have been shifting resources away from response, you call suppression, into prevention because the rate of return in terms of keeping people safe is much, much more heavily invested in terms of prevention rather than response.

Caption: What steps do you take to ensure your department is sensitive with the diverse population of Hampshire?

JB: We used to sell diversity and the response to diversity on the basis that it was the right thing to do because everybody has equal opportunities and equal rights. That's very hard to sell, I think, to frontline firefighters. They either don't get it or they think it's management speak. So one of the things that we do is we show how diverse populations are at greater risk, whether that's because you have a disability or because of your ethnic background, you'll be more at risk. And as a result of that, we've shifted the perception of frontline firefighters away from diversity being something that has nothing to do with the service to one that's focused much, much more on suppressing risk. We map all diversity now because we can do that in terms of census data and spending patterns. So we know where diverse communities are and we work with charitable organizations to identify those most at risk.

Caption: What is the greatest risk in Hampshire?

JB: The greatest risk in Hampshire is that we have the three largest petro-chemical refineries in the U.K. It's crucial to the U.K. economy and we have very, very clear preset plans for dealing with an incident at that refinery and all the parasitic industries that feed off it, so in one sense the greatest fixed risk. The greatest risk, though, in terms of reducing likelihood of safety is...is people it's not actually that refinery. So we look very carefully at risks in relation to people and where fires, particularly fires, are most likely to occur. And we plan on the basis that certain areas in our community are much more at risk and we target them for additional prevention activities.

Caption: How should those who aspire to become Fire Chiefs prepare themselves?

JB: Well, I think you've got to make sure you want it for the right reasons. There will be people who want to be Chiefs because they like the braid on the shoulder or on their caps. I don't think that's a very good motivation for being a Fire Chief. The motivation for being a real Fire Chief is because you want to make a difference and you want to move the organization to a better place and when you leave it, it doesn't fall over. So you are there as a guardian of that organization to take it forward and then to hand it over. The day you become a Fire Chief, you should be planning for your replacement. And as trite as that seems, you need to build a team behind you that when you get run over, hopefully not by one of these, or something tragic happens to you, they pick up the baton because the organization and the mission of the organization is more important than you. You are purely a guardian. And if that's the reason you want to become a Fire Chief, I think that's the best reason.

Caption: What was your most difficult day as Fire Chief?

JB: The most difficult day of being a Fire Chief I absolutely know what was the most difficult day for me and that occurred about three months ago where I picked up the phone, nine o'clock in the evening, and one of my Assistant Chiefs said, "We've lost two firefighters." That was the most difficult day of my life. Difficult because I am personally responsible for those firefighters and as much as there are reasons why they were killed on duty, it falls to me and I have responsibility. It's also the point which you realize what it is not to be a Fire Chief, but to be a leader. You're there to lift your heads and be there for everybody else. That's my most difficult day.

Caption: What was your best day as Fire Chief?

JB: My best day... My best day occurs every year. And I know it's going to be my best day because it's the day we hold once a year celebrating the successes of various people in my organization, whether that they've achieved bravery awards, whether they've achieved academic awards, or achievements for best performance or long service. It's the day when I feel the most proud to be part of an organization where I am blessed with having incredibly able people who do a fantastic job. And that's...that's the real pride for me, that's my best day. And it happens once a year.

Caption: How have you balanced family with the pressures of such a high profile position?

JB: How do you balance your life, both private and social? That's probably one of the hardest things. For me, this year, I'm not only Fire Chief but I'm also President of our professional association. So I'm out of my service and I'm away from home more than anything else. I think it's one of the most difficult things that I have to do and I'm not sure that I always get it right. At the end of the day, you try to do your best for all parties.

Caption: Are you still physically active?

JB: Yes. I joined this job, as I suppose a lot of us do, as a 21-year-old who's excited about the idea of doing something practical, something meaningful. And actually, do to that properly, and to do that to the best of my abilities, I have to remain fit. I don't drag hose and I don't wear breathing apparatus anymore, but actually the demands on my job and my time mean I need to stay physically fit because I want to keep my health. So, yeah, I keep fit. I ride, I cycle, I undertake fitness training, I walk, I enjoy life.

Caption: Can you explain the shift in focus that the UK fire service has taken?

JB: We have shifted and through the rest of my interview, you will have seen the focus I've given to prevention work. Let me tell you that is not easy and I'm sure many of you will have worked in the fire station, the fire houses, and trying to get people who joined the job to take a different approach is really, really difficult. Now that paradigm shift began in the U.K. ten years ago forced through by some very inadvertent Chiefs and through central government, as well. But the shift is now embedded. People now see their job as not just responding, which remains incredibly important and is not the poor cousin of prevention work. They see it as part of their armory. And I actually think in the UK, the test of how far we've come is if we actually tried to remove some prevention work that's done on stations, there would be an adverse reaction. They are incredibly committed to it. Selling it is about thinking about the ends of what the fire and rescue services do, not the means. Our ends are to make people safer. They are not to crunch through burning buildings as the last resort. And we know, as in the States, many of the fire deaths that we face, those people are dead even before we leave the fire house. Now if we're going to resolve that, you have got to understand the logic of prevention. And selling that message time and time again to people, our people, who face those incidents every day and those tragedies, selling to them, that as much as they're professionally important for them, they're actually not in the best interests for the community and even the fire service. Stopping them happening in the most important thing. We're here to make people safe and the best way of doing that is to prevent those incidences in the first place.

Caption: How effective has this change in culture been?

JB: Cultural change doesn't occur overnight and it doesn't cut in a uniformed way so there are some massive successes of prevention work, and yet you will go to certain areas and still have difficulties in terms of convincing people. How's it changed? Well, the way that I measure it: If you think of the innovation that people display when they get off fire trucks like the one behind me at incidences, how they use their brains, their creativity, and their innovation to solve fire-ground problems, it's amazing. You watched them do that when it comes to prevention work and you see the value of what we can

do. I have firefighters now, who are running programs that they designed, all having massive effect in terms of peoples' safety, initiated by them now because they believe that prevention is better than having to ride to fires.

Caption: What counsel can you provide to your comrades in the US?

JB: Well, firstly, you need to do it. We see, we look at you in from the U.K. and you have...you're enormously progressive in some areas, in terms of your equipment, in terms of some of your training, you're very well advanced. But we look at your prevention work and it's a step back. It's where we were ten years ago. And what I'll say to you is you will not do this overnight, but what you need to do is you need to plan a strategy convincing not just firefighters but your political leadership as well that you need to be investing in that prevention work. The other selling point for you is it's not just about fires. You start to do education work that educates people to be better citizens, to actually not behave in anti-social behaviors and not to engage in arson. That's got spin offs in terms of criminality, safety, better citizens. In the U.K. now, some of the work we do around cooking fires is now improving the peoples' health and diet. One of the things that you can do is you can show to others how your agenda can convert and you will get enormous support as a result of that.

Caption: Is there anything you've learned in your career that you would like to share?

JB: As you move...as you move through the ranks, much, much more of our work is about management and managerial approaches to things because we run businesses and that's absolutely right. There are times, though, as a Fire Chief, when you have to step beyond being just a manager and you need to be a leader. You need to be able to stand up in front of your people and talk to them, not as their manager but as their leader. And you need to be able to do that. And, if you want to be a Chief, nobody else is going to do that; you're ultimately the person that takes the canon, you've got to be the person that stands up and wear your heart on your sleeve occasionally and do that right thing. And that's the fundamental difference between being a chief and everything else.

Caption: Any final thoughts?

JB: Well, I know that it's really, really hot here in Washington, even in springtime or early summer. One of the things I want to share with you is one of the reasons why I'm over here. I'm over here to learn. I've come over to learn. My view is that you should never get yourself into a position where you always know best and that you're the only person that's had that experience. However much it takes and however much time it takes out of a busy schedule, you need to be outward-facing, as a chief. You need to be looking at issues that are on the horizon from outside your jurisdiction. And you need to be looking at different solutions and different approaches to problems that you face. And you do that by having a good network within your jurisdiction, having a good network outside that nationally, but you should also have it internationally as well.