

<b>Institution:</b> Keele University		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA17 Business and Management Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Industrial Relations and Change Management in Public Services: the case of the English Fire Service		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2011-2018		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Dr Kim Mather	Senior Lecturer Honorary Research Fellow	2011-2018 2018-present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2014 - 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>English fire and rescue services (FRS) continue to face significant financial and political pressures that necessitate changes to internal work organisation and service delivery. Dr Mather's research has enhanced English FRS' capacity to meet these challenges by positively influencing workforce management and dispute resolution processes. Based on her insights, commissioned research has informed the development of new station-level procedures in Staffordshire FRS, increasing employee participation in decision-making while enhancing collective trust and organisational commitment. Dr Mather has contributed to continuing professional development of FRS across the UK, and her research has also informed national policy debates, including Sir Adrian Thomas's review of conditions for FRS staff.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<b>Context</b>		
<p>Dr Mather's research focuses on the nature and impact of labour management interventions in public services, a context characterised by the need to deliver 'value for money' and efficiency gains in a resource constrained environment. The central theme running through Mather's work is that inclusive, pluralist forms of decision-making in the change management process, and a positive role for employee representatives, cultivate trust and better outcomes. Mather's research has explored effective labour management approaches, deskilling and factors that mediate skill mix changes, attitudes to work and trust in the sphere of employment relations. This body of work has been informed by both conceptual and empirical studies, using a variety of qualitative and quantitative research methods, and constitutes a coherent research trajectory with both scientific contributions and practical utility.</p>		
<b>Key Insights</b>		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Delivering 'value for money' and efficiency gains in budget-constrained public services has exposed public sector professionals to greater exploitation and more intense alienation as a result of managerialism. In response, through a meta-analysis of studies across public services, 3.1 called <i>inter alia</i> for changes in "inappropriate" unitarist labour management approaches.</li> <li>2. Building on Mather's own PhD research involving 40 in-depth interviews, observation, and documentary review, 3.2 highlights how labour management interventions in the public</li> </ol>		

services - such as performance management and close supervision of workers in higher education - do not always have the desired outcomes and are not conducive to high trust workplace relations.

3. In order to embed principles of trust in social institutions and processes, 3.3 draws attention to the role of employee involvement and employee participation initiatives, empowering employees by affording discretion and decision making. The importance of trust in bridging management actions and workers' individual and collective responses is highlighted and presented as an essential component of effective collaborative working relationships.
4. The notion of employee consensus and collective trust in management, in the context of job insecurity and organisational commitment, is explored in a wider context in 3.4. Based on econometric analysis of a large sample of data from the British Workplace Employment Relations Survey, 3.3 finds that when management is collectively seen by employees as "reliable, honest and fair", levels of work-related anxiety and organisation commitment that accompany job insecurity are significantly attenuated.
5. In an in-depth case study of the emergency services - informed by triangulated data from interviews, observations and official documents – 3.5 reveals distinct types of skill mix changes emerging across the police, ambulance and fire services, varying by the nature of the service provision, the power of the unions, and the pressures on senior managers. In the fire and rescue services, for example, management was under pressure from central government to cut costs without compromising the safety of front-line fire fighters and the community they serve. Close industrial relations allow management and unions to collectively identify opportunities to adopt new working practices among a highly specialised and labour-intensive FRS front line.
6. Labour management strategies in the English emergency services are often driven by the need to cut costs whilst retaining, or being seen to retain, standards and the reach of services. Informed by mixed research methods, including 27 interviews and six discussion groups, 3.6 compares and contrasts management responses to budget cuts in the police, ambulance and fire services. While responses are seen to differ across the services, 3.6 concludes that there is a new division of labour settlement framework that substitutes traditional service standards for more intensive management of task allocation, more technology and more outsourcing of tasks. 3.6 argues that these developments risk increasing the alienation of front-line staff while leading to the provision of a variable and more selective service to the public.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

#### *Publications*

(3.1) Worrall, L., Mather, K. and Seifert, R. (2010) Solving the labour problem among professional workers in the UK public sector: organisation change and performance management. *Public Organization Review*, volume 10 (2): 117-137, DOI: [10.1007/s11115-009-0100-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11115-009-0100-0)

(3.2), Mather, K. and Seifert, R., (2014), The close supervision of further education lecturers: 'You have been weighed, measured and found wanting', *Work, employment and society* 2014, Vol. 28(1) 95–111, DOI: [10.1177/0950017013490332](https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017013490332)

(3.3) Mather, K., Employee relations and the illusion of trust, in R.H. Searle, and D. Skinner, (2011), *Trust and Human Resource Management*, Edward Elgar Publishing

(3.4) Wang, W., Mather, K. & Seifert, R. (2018) Job insecurity, employee anxiety, and commitment: The moderating role of collective trust in management, *Journal of Trust Research*, 8:2, 220-237, DOI: [10.1080/21515581.2018.1463229](https://doi.org/10.1080/21515581.2018.1463229)

(3.5) Seifert, R. and Mather, K., (2013), Neo-Liberalism at Work: A Case Study of the Reform of the Emergency Services in the UK, *Review of Radical Political Economics* 45(4) 456–462, DOI: [10.1177/0486613412475185](https://doi.org/10.1177/0486613412475185)

(3.6) Mather, K. and Seifert, R. (2016) ‘Heading for Disaster: the management of skill mix changes in the emergency services’, *Capital and Class*, 41(1):3-22, DOI: [10.1177/0309816816667423](https://doi.org/10.1177/0309816816667423)

#### *Evidence of quality*

The quality of this research is indicated by publications in journals ranked 4\*, 3\* or 2\* by the Chartered Association of Business Schools. Dr Mather’s research on labour management and labour processes of front-line public sector workers – and their resistance to change – has led to several follow-up projects, including:

- SFRS, Mather (PI), ‘Report on the Findings of a critical evaluation of industrial relations at SFRS’, commissioned by and presented to SFRS, 2014
- SFRS, Mather (PI), ‘Support-staff participation in decision making, commissioned by and presented to SFRS, 2018

Evidence as part of the case study demonstrate that these projects were well received by commissioners and wider bodies and were an important factor in achieving the impacts described below.

#### **4. Details of the impact** (indicative maximum 750 words)

Dr Mather was Programme Director and taught on the Keele part time MSc Industrial Relations Human Resources Management (IR-HRM) (2011-2018) Among the 2013 cohort was Becci Bryant, then Deputy Chief Fire Officer (DCFO) at Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) (5.1). Mather’s research-led teaching offered insights into failing labour management processes across the public services (3.1,3.2,3.4), the need for greater fairness, trust and legitimacy in management-worker relations (3.3,3.6) in the context of reduced budgets and the need to maintain safety standards in FRS (3.5); these were insights that resonated with the national disputes, financial constraints and range of industrial action occurring in English FRS. Notwithstanding a culture of “exemplary, open, honest and challenging” IR at SFRS (noted in 5.2 and 5.3), the DCFO wanted an independent, critically informed perspective and subsequently commissioned Mather to review the IR processes at SFRS (5.1). This commission impacted positively on labour management processes at SFRS and led to the delivery of continuing professional development (CPD) to other regional English FRS. Additionally, it informed wider public debate on IR in English FRS.

#### **Informing labour management processes**

Between December 2013 and June 2014, Mather undertook an independent review of IR in SFRS and presented a set of recommendations to senior management and various committees in 2014 and 2015 (5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4). The report recommended extending the consultative structure, seen at higher levels, across the organisation as a whole. Mather’s research led to new Service Delivery Group level procedures to enable employees to participate in decision making at workplace level, resolving solutions at a local level in real time (5.1). Within SFRS, more emphasis was placed on developing middle management IR negotiation skills and capabilities (5.1).

The DCFO subsequently invited Mather to undertake further research on the ‘hidden’ involvement of SFRS professional services staff in decision-making. In 2016, Mather evaluated employee ‘voice’ mechanisms for professional services staff, delivering a report in January 2018 with recommendations to further strengthen existing practices at Service Delivery Group level and overcome perceived barriers to effective employee participation (5.1,5.3). This work was seen as a key part of SFRS strategy to mitigate the potential risk of loss of employees (5.4). The wider relevance of the research for other FRS was noted early on (5.3), and through SFRS publications (5.5,5.6) and Mather’s presentation at the Asian Fire Officers Association Annual Conference in 2015, Mather’s research was disseminated as evidence of ‘good practice’ in IR management, attracting the attention of other regional FRS.

### **Influencing continuing professional development in English fire services**

Mather's research underpinned development and provision of tailored CPD for English FRS, making a substantial contribution to staff upskilling within participating organisations. Mather's research highlighted a 'gap' through which middle managers 'fell' in SFRS, prompting requests for further training and development for middle management on IR capabilities in SFRS (5.1,5.2). In response, during 2014, Mather provided three staff development workshops to 52 fire service employees (5.7). Subsequently 10 middle managers from SFRS attended the Certificate in IR at Keele University, three of whom continued on to the MA Industrial Relations, enhancing these individuals' capabilities to consult and negotiate with representatives from across the Service (5.1). The relevance and importance of this training remains. Becci Bryant, now CFO at SFRS, commented: "*These programmes are currently being reviewed but this component is considered a vital part of training and will remain*" (5.1).

At a national level, to help challenge unitarist labour management approaches and cultivate sustainable, high trust industrial relations among future senior leaders, Mather delivered research led CPD training as part of the national Fire Service Executive Leadership Programme (ELP) (led by SFRS CFO/Warwick University) four times between 2017 and 2019. Each cohort comprised 20 senior English Fire Service leaders, all aspiring to CFO roles. Mather's input to the ELP led to requests from other fire services for CPD. For example, in November 2016, Mather developed and delivered a 'Fire Service Industrial Relations and Political Awareness' session for Cambridge FRS staff development series.

### **Contribution to wider public policy debate**

Sir Adrian Thomas' (2015) 'Independent review of conditions for fire and rescue staff in England', commissioned by Penny Mordaunt MP, Fire Minister, in 2014 explored barriers to change within English FRS. At the behest of the CFO at SFRS, Mather contributed written evidence to the review and followed up with a telephone interview with Sir Thomas. Sir Thomas' final recommendations were based on findings from a survey of over 3000 fire fighters, over 200 interviews with staff from 21 Fire and Rescue Authorities, written submissions from employer and employee representatives and individuals, and secondary review of previous studies and reports. The first priority recommendation foregrounded the importance of culture and trust: "*the fire service needs inspirational leaders able to deliver a high performing, engaged workforce*", (5.8: p12). Sir Thomas reflected that where he found these inspirational leaders, he also found positive industrial relations. Echoing the central idea that runs through Mather's research – that inclusive and pluralist forms of decision making in the change management process and a positive role for employee representatives cultivate trust and better outcomes – the review called for the "*implementation of employee engagement surveys and amendments to management objectives...by each fire and rescue authority.... relatively quickly*" (5.8: p13). The review makes further recommendations to improve the working environment including "*training in effective change management, leadership and employee engagement in addition to Industrial Relations*" (5.5: p14).

### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

5.1. Testimonial from Becci Bryant, Chief Fire Officer, Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS)

5.2. Minutes of the SFRS Strategy and Resources Committee, 30 September 2015

5.3. Minutes of the SFRS Service Management Board, 2 July 2014

5.4. [Stoke on Trent and Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Authority, Strategy and Resources Committee Minutes \(22 November 2016\)](#), p 77

5.5. [SFRS Publication 'Above and Beyond: Traditional Expectations of a Fire and Rescue Service' \(2016\)](#)

**Impact case study (REF3)**

5.6. SFRS Burning Issues Winter 2015, p.5.

5.7. Participant feedback from SFRS CPD Sessions, January and May 2014

5.8. [Adrian Thomas, Independent Review of the Conditions of Services for Fire and Rescue Staff in England \(February 2015\)](#), p12 and 13