

Roundtable meeting on fitness and capability issues in the fire service.

Held at 12.00pm in Committee room 18. House of Commons on 4 December 2013.

Attendees

Matt Wrack – FBU	Brandon Lewis MP (Chairman)
Sean Starbuck – FBU	Neil O'Connor - DCLG
John Barton - RFU	Peter Holland - Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser
Tristan Ashby – RFU	
Clive Robinson – FOA	
Paul Fuller - CFOA	
Peter Dartford – CFOA	
Des Prichard - APFO	
Cllr Maurice Heaster - National Employers	
Cllr Sian Timoney – National Employers	

The Minister opened the meeting by saying this roundtable was intended to be part of the consultation process which ends on the 4th December. He wanted the process to be as transparent as possible and to give the invitees the opportunity to discuss the consultation prior to the response date. He continued by confirming that he had recently spoken to Dr Williams who stood by his evidence that firefighters could remain operational until the age of 60 if they follow a normal exercise regime and maintain a healthy lifestyle. The Minister said that he was particularly keen to find out what the barriers were to working longer and how they could be broken down. The Minister then asked each group to set out their organisation's views on the 11 principles being consulted upon.

Going round the table, FOA stated that their concern was that fitness standards focused on VO2 Max but there were differences in the standards needed for operational and non-operational staff. They felt that VO2 Max was a good benchmark.

The RFU said that a fitness standard was needed, but that it should be realistic. More work was needed to identify what a realistic standard is.

APFO argued that the pension scheme should be designed with the intention that every member should be able to reach pension age. They see fitness as separate to the pensions issue and believe that firefighter fitness should be relevant for the role that they perform. They have no problem with the VO2 Max level.

CFOA said they had some detailed concerns on the wording in the principles being consulted upon, but confirmed that they were manageable. CFOA see an opportunity to assess what levels of fitness are needed for specific operational roles, using examples from overseas to highlight the point. CFOA

went on to express concerns about the effects of a single fitness standard on a diverse workforce and recognise that 42 VO2 Max is aspirational. Most FRAs take someone off of the run at considerably below 42 VO2 Max. CFOA have previously made an offer to look at these issues in more detail and that offer remains on the table.

The FBU began by explaining that this issue goes back many years and that fitness particularly affects their members who as a matter of course work in physically demanding and hazardous roles. Firefighters need to be fit and well trained and if they are not, lives are put at risk. They quoted the Williams Report citing risks to individuals, other crew members and the general public if they are not fit.

They mentioned that there have already been discussions on how a standard could be set. They said there would need to be a transition between fitness for new and established firefighters if a change to fitness standards were established. They expressed concerns around contractual issues if there were to be role changes and said they would need to understand how any changes would be introduced. They said that decisions were being taken on the normal pension age, without it being considered fully whether firefighters could meet it. A further concern for the FBU was equality. They mentioned implications on age regarding men and women and their ability to maintain standards. They went on to discuss inconsistencies between different authorities and differences between wholetime and retained firefighters. They suggested that there are areas where firefighter fitness is not tested at all.

The National Employers said that, following discussions, they were in broad agreement with 10 of the 11 principles but that they could not agree on principle 11. They are not keen on a national fitness standard, but would welcome national guidance on fitness issues. They stressed that any additional costs arising from principle 11 should be borne by the Government. The National Employers went on to say that they understood the Scottish proposal allowed firefighters to receive a full pension if they cannot reach the fitness required to fulfil their role, whereas the England, Wales and NI, proposals allows discretion for fire authorities. The National Employers suggest that their legal advice says that there would be difficulties in using the National Framework guidance for the proposals as authorities could not be fettered in their discretion.

The National Employers said that they had no problem with set standards but that they should not be rigid and should be managed by fire services. They agreed that a working group may be an excellent sounding board and that standards are not all about 42 VO2 Max. The National Employers agreed that there is a need to look at roles and job descriptions and used the example that a chief officer was a firefighter but will rarely go into a burning building in breathing apparatus.

The Minister opened the discussion to the floor by reiterating that the meeting was part of the consultation and he was not expecting to reach any conclusions today.

BL asked the National Employers if they felt that the way that all fire authorities look at fitness means that all firefighters are treated exactly the same. The National Employers said that fire authorities need to look carefully at what people are actually doing and the Grey Book would need to be looked at.

BL questioned whether, if principles 1-10 were followed, principle 11 would ever be needed. The National Employers thought that if principles 1-10 were followed, there may still be a small number of FFs who could become unfit. This was unknown territory so they could not be sure and could not describe the characteristics of such an individual. The Minister questioned the existence of any evidence to support the likelihood of firefighters becoming unfit and unable to regain fitness with remedial support unless there was an underlying medical cause. If there was an underlying condition causing an inability to maintain fitness this would bring ill-health retirement into play, the alternative was that the firefighter had not fulfilled their contractual obligation to maintain their own fitness.

CFOA said that there might be cases where a firefighter was unable to maintain fitness but that they were not necessarily predicated on age. In terms of principle 11, CFOA agreed that if authorities got the first 10 principles right, principle 11 would probably not be needed - and in any case it was manageable. They continued that the challenge was that many services would need an incentive to pay for fitness training and equipment - perhaps the transformation fund could be used for this.

The FBU said that it was important to note that their discussions with the National Employers had been positive. They went on to say that it was important that people should be fit enough to undertake the tasks they might encounter as they undertake the job. On the discussion regarding whether principle 11 would ever come into play, the FBU said that fitness declines as people age. The question is whether it can be managed. They continued that the Williams report is based on a starting point of 47 VO2 Max. The FBU would like to see realistic occupational fitness standards. They do not endorse 42 VO2 Max, but it seems to them to be a safe minimum standard. In their view many firefighters will not reach that standard at 60. They do not want to be in a position where firefighters are forced to take a reduced pension or sacked.

In other discussions, the FBU continued, there is a debate about national resilience and interoperability. Firefighters need to be prepared to attend incidents where they will work with crews from other authorities and as such, a single, occupational standard is needed.

DCLG questioned further what the characteristics would be of a firefighter who failed fitness standards in a scenario where principles 1 to 10 were in place across fire authorities. The FBU advised that many wholetime firefighters are currently retiring at 52 years of age. Less than 1% are

currently beyond age 55. DCLG pointed out that there are now over 1,000 firefighters aged 55 or over.

DCLG asked if current fitness regimes are up to standard in all authorities? Would they currently comply with the first 10 principles? The FBU said that even if a firefighter began their career with a 47 VO2 Max, they would not hit 42 VO2 Max at age 60.

CFOA said that new technology being introduced is resulting in safer firefighting and will result in less need for a fixed standard as the job is changing significantly. CFOA continued that they would want to avoid unintended consequences. The FBU said the standard was needed for today's situation, not the possibilities for tomorrow. They referenced a survey they had conducted which they felt showed there were only very limited redeployment options for firefighters. DCLG stated that as no firefighter will have to work beyond their current Normal Pension Age for another 9 years, there was time to get this right.

APFO said they supported occupational standards for their members but had problems with the wording of principle 11. They continued that Independent Qualified Medical Practitioners (IQMPs) were responsible for identifying underlying issues which prevent fitness and if they can not identify any underlying issues, then they will not consider medical retirement.

National Employers said that principle 11 is untested. DCLG again questioned this given the existence already of over 1,000 operational firefighters aged over 55 years.

BL asked the RFU whether they had assessed what a standard could be. The RFU said that there needs to be consideration of what standards should be for all roles – the 42 VO2 Max seems too narrowly focussed on a compartment fire. They continued that not all operational firefighters are treated equally. Some authorities treat them differently.

BL then asked the attendees to consider why they would not want national fitness standards but would be happy with national guidance?

The National Employers said that there was no need for rigid standards set nationally. Services should manage their own fitness processes. They continued that there should be some flexibility.

The FBU said that there was debate about what standard fitness test should be, stating that for example, London Fire Brigade has different standards from other authorities. They believe that the tests should be occupation based, but with flexibility among FRAs. They continued that firefighters are not doing very different roles between different FRAs. They highlighted the point that there should be standards which apply today and future standards for the future. They also highlighted that contrary to what had been said in 2006, there appeared to be no redeployment opportunities for firefighters.

The National Employers said that role maps say that employees must keep themselves fit for their role.

CFOA said that they are not talking about geographic standards; they are talking about authority based standards. There is already an understanding of the need for different standards for different circumstances.

BL thanked attendees for their time and said that he hoped to be in a position in the New Year to hold a further meeting of this type following consideration of the written responses to the consultation.

DCLG
December 2013

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