



Department for
Communities and
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To Chairmen of Fire and Rescue Authorities and
Chief Fire Officers in England

04/07/2014

Dear Chairman/Chief Fire Officer,

I wanted to write to you again today in response to the new strike dates that have been announced by the Fire Brigades Union, and in particular to their recent Circular issued on 2 July.

The Union claims that the pension scheme ignores the physical demands of the job. This is not correct. The pension scheme on offer to firefighters has a much lower Normal Pension Age than other non-uniformed services recognising precisely the point that the Union makes.

Correspondence and testimonies from firefighters express concerns that they will be sacked 'if knees or back go' as they age. Such situations are exactly why the pension scheme offers very generous ill-health retirement benefits, based on the unique role of firefighters. The test for immediate payment of their pension on ill-health grounds is whether the individual is permanently incapacitated so as to be unable to undertake the role of a firefighter.

The Union want the payment of an unreduced pension for a firefighter who has lost fitness. But, in these instances a medical practitioner has said that there is no permanent medical reason why the firefighter cannot become operationally fit again.

The Union has said that firefighting requires specific fitness standards. The pension reforms do not change fitness standards, tests or requirements. While fitness remains a matter for individual fire and rescue authorities, I have offered to work with the unions and the employers to thoroughly explore all the points that the Union has raised, and the issues involved in dealing with those who fail such fitness tests. This offer has not been enough for the Union to stop this unnecessary campaign of strike action.

The Union says that firefighters will be sacked just for failing a fitness test. This is not so. No firefighter will be sacked just for failing a fitness test. Fire and rescue authority will provide firefighters with support to regain their fitness and, if there is a permanent reason why they cannot regain their fitness, ill-health retirement procedures will apply.

Firefighters write to me expressing their concern that they will lose half of their pension if they retire before age 60. This is not correct. If they retire before age 60, there will be no reduction to 1992 scheme benefits. If a firefighter retires at, for instance, age 58 they will see an actuarial reduction of 9.5% to their 2015 scheme pension. The reduction in the 2006 scheme at age 58 is over 30%. The Union has not ever taken industrial action over the reduction in the 2006 scheme which is significantly more severe at later ages.

I also wanted to comment on the proposal of a Normal Pension Age of 55 for firefighters in Northern Ireland. The Public Service Pensions Act 2013, which set the Normal Pension Age in England, Scotland and Wales at age 60, does not apply to Northern Ireland. The Normal Pension Age simply will not change in England, Scotland or Wales. The Union has long recognised this and made crystal clear at the start of their campaign that they were not striking over a Normal Pension Age of 60.

Finally, the Union cites the recent interim report on firefighter fitness by the University of Bath as undermining the Government's proposals. In fact, the report does the opposite. Yes, the report recommends a VO2 Max of 42.3 mL.kg.min⁻¹. However, it makes clear that firefighters can remain operational at lower VO2 Max levels, down to 35.6 mL.kg.min⁻¹, if they pass a risk and drill-ground assessment. Dr Williams, in his independent report, stated:

"Based on current practices of setting a standard of 42 mL.kg.min⁻¹ VO2max but allowing firefighters to remain operational at a 35 mL.kg.min⁻¹ VO2max would ensure that 100 % of firefighters who remain physically active will still be operational at age 60 assuming they remain free from injury and disease."

Rather than issuing legal challenges or taking strike action against final decisions that have yet to be taken, I would strongly encourage the Union to engage constructively as part of meaningful discussions.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brandon Lewis', written in a cursive style.

BRANDON LEWIS MP