



## Department for Communities and Local Government

An open letter to all firefighters in England

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I know that many of you undertook strike action on Friday 1 November 2013 and Monday 4 November 2013. I am sure that you will have been as disappointed by this as I was.

Many of you will be concerned at the lack of progress towards a resolution of the dispute on firefighters' pensions. Two weeks ago we brought the FBU leadership and the employers together to facilitate a resolution to the concerns some firefighters have about fitness and capability. They reached an impasse. To overcome this, I have commenced a consultation on basic principles of fitness and capability. These principles go further than the principles provided by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and the Scottish Government to the FBU, offering a commitment to independently review them after three years, and place them in statutory guidance via the Fire National Framework. The consultation document can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/firefighter-fitness-standards-and-assessments>.

I believe that the working of these principles, along with robust management systems and existing employment law, will ensure that no conscientious firefighter will leave the service without access to a job or a pension after the age of 55. Dr Williams in his independent report found that 100 per cent of firefighters, following an appropriate exercise regime, should be able to maintain fitness to the age of 60. To underpin the consultation, I am also organising a round table with key interested parties to discuss fitness and capability issues, invites will go to the employers, representative bodies including the Fire Brigades' Union, the Retained Firefighters' Union, the Fire Officers' Association, and other interested bodies such as the Chief Fire Officers' Association.

I also feel that it is worth reflecting on the changes that Government has offered to firefighters over the past 2 years. In protecting rights earned in current schemes, the Government agreed to provide enhanced protection so that:

- members could continue to retire and take their 1992 scheme pension benefits from the same age as before even if they transfer to the 2015 scheme;
- the loss of double accrual would be recognised; and
- there would be continued use of the very generous commutation arrangements.

In setting the cost ceiling in 2011, the Government also made an improved offer for firefighters, including:

- an accrual rate which is more generous than the majority of other public service workforces; and

- a retirement age of 60, which is lower than many other public service workforces and the same as the police and armed forces.

Following further discussions, leading up to the publication of the Proposed Final Agreement in May 2012, the Government agreed to:

- 4 years of tapered protection, which is longer tapering than the majority of other public service workforces;
- firefighters to be able to retire from age 57 with improved terms;
- an immediate review of the Normal Pension Age and further, regular reviews to follow;
- a lower employee contribution increase in 2012-13 than that seen by other public service pension schemes; and
- a formal review of opt outs.

More recently, following further discussions with the unions, I wrote on 19 June 2013 proposing:

- an extension of the improved early retirement terms down to age 55;
- lower, average employee contributions to apply for the 2015 scheme, from 2015; and
- a Joint Working Party to examine workforce management issues around fitness.

I should emphasise that all of these improvements were negotiated and offered over a period of two years of discussion, without industrial action.

The final offer on pensions was made on the basis that it addressed the majority of the FBU's remaining concerns. The extension of improved early retirement terms down to age 55 was conditional on the FBU agreeing to these terms. I asked them for a response by 12 July to enable the Department to proceed with the next and final stages of the reform process. The FBU knew the enhanced early retirement provision would fall if they decided to take strike action. Their decision to strike again last week was a clear rejection of that final offer.

We are now at the stage where final decisions need to be taken to enable the 2012 valuation to conclude and the new scheme be finalised in draft regulations for consultation. Members of the Firefighters' Pension Scheme will continue to get a pension that is one of the most generous in the public sector. You can check what pension you will receive by using the pension calculator based on the Proposed Final Agreement:

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/212581/Calculator - Proposed Final Agreement unprotected2.xls](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/212581/Calculator - Proposed Final Agreement unprotected2.xls).

It is important to draw this divisive and disruptive dispute to a close before any further damage is done to the reputation of firefighters. This is entirely in the hands of the leadership of the FBU. As always, my door remains open to further discussions.



BRANDON LEWIS MP