



**Department for  
Communities and  
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24/02/2015

To all firefighters in England

I am truly sorry that those of you who are members of the Fire Brigades Union have been asked once again to undertake strike action on the 25<sup>th</sup> February. This latest action is not about the issues surrounding the pensions' dispute, but introduces a new and completely artificial complaint.

Working until 60 was part of the 2006 scheme, and no protections were put in place for older workers. What we have done is add to what was agreed then with improved protection and better actuarial reduction rates for those who want to retire earlier. Despite Dr Williams finding that there is no reason why all firefighters could not remain operational until 60 and the fact that we already have 1,000 firefighters over 55 and haven't seen a single dismissal on fitness grounds, I decided to introduce further protections for older workers. I did this because without these assurances people might want to leave the service early for fear that they would not be able to enjoy a full career. I want firefighters to be confident that their employers and the Government will support them to work to their Normal Pension Age.

We looked at a range of ways of doing this with the FBU. Because there is no one fitness standard common to all fire services in England we could not employ exactly the same route used in Scotland - but we could amend the National Framework to require fire and rescue authorities to have regard to the steps of providing support for firefighters to regain fitness, or to consider redeployment or the provision of an unreduced pension. This amendment to the National Framework came into force on 12 January and is now law. Part of the force of the protection is created by this: previously the FRA did not have to go through that process, now they must. The SI states they 'will'. It is not optional.

The fitness principles themselves should ensure that firefighters who do not have an underlying ill-health condition, will remain in work until they are 60 and this should provide firefighters with greater confidence. However, in the unlikely event that a firefighter is not eligible for ill-health retirement and fails a fitness test, with no redeployment opportunities available, then the Secretary of State and I have been crystal clear - they should be offered an unreduced pension.

The National Employers with, we expect, union input, need to devise what the process looks like for people in that position, and I am pleased to say that they have agreed to start work on looking at the processes involved. They have seven years before the process needs to be in place, but we have stressed to them that the earlier this can be devised the better - you need to see how this will happen. The National Employers have a meeting with my Department to talk through this in early March and I expect them to make swift progress after that. DCLG will audit compliance with the new fitness principles in the framework and if we find fire and rescue authorities not complying, the Secretary of State has the powers to intervene. That process and the auditing of compliance completes the protections we have introduced.

The work of the fitness group itself, facilitated by the Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser, will also open up further avenues for consideration, including the fitness required for specific roles, as well as exploring the appetite amongst fire and rescue authorities for a national fitness standard. In advance of that work we have no other option to create something different. If there were something further we could do now, we would have done it.

It is vital that the whole of the fire family: the professional service, the authorities, industry and the unions are focused on the challenges that lie ahead in continuing to deliver a world class service and the adaptations that will require in the forthcoming years. We need serious engagement on these fundamentally important issues.

Instead the FBU have created an artificial row, deliberately misrepresenting the facts, campaigning against an improvement to firefighter protections to a pension age with which they were content with 2006. There has been plenty of debate and improvement over more than two years and the scheme comes into force in less than six weeks. The pensions regulations were not revoked following the vote in December and there is no opportunity now to change it before it other than causing disruption for the general public. The further strike action you have been asked to embark upon will serve no useful purpose. I am disappointed that the leadership of the Fire Brigades Union appears not to recognise this, nor the predicament facing individual firefighters as they are once again asked to compromise their dedication to their communities and lose pay.

I will continue to do all I can to avoid such action, and to keep you informed.

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

**PENNY MORDAUNT MP**