



The Fire Brigades Union

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2 April 2015

TO: ALL MEMBERS

Dear Brother/Sister

PENSIONS: THE 2015 SCHEME IS IMPOSED BUT THE CAMPAIGN CONTINUES

On 1 April the 2015 firefighter's pension scheme was imposed without agreement and with many of our key concerns unaddressed. The Executive Council position remains that the new scheme is still unworkable, most noticeably in England. Therefore our campaign continues.

In simple terms the new imposed schemes do not reflect the physical role undertaken by firefighters. In Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland the firefighters pension scheme proposals have been improved and some of the concerns have been addressed. We are still discussing specific issues with each Government and we continue to seek further improvements. **It is important to note that these discussions continue.**

FBU members who were not covered by protection were automatically transferred into the 2015 scheme on 1 April. Those who are fully protected will remain in their current scheme. Those with tapered protection will also remain in their current scheme until their limited protection expires.

Lack of information from employers/Government

The union has attempted to put out as much information about the new scheme/s and how members could be affected by it. This includes a significant number of circulars, bulletins, magazine features, short films and PowerPoints. We have also shared a huge amount of correspondence between the FBU and DCLG, Ministers, MPs, National Employers and individual Fire and Rescue Authorities.

One of our key aims was to ensure members did not take any knee jerk decision in relation to opting-out or not joining the 2015 scheme. We have consistently advised members that we support occupational pension schemes and have recently reiterated the pitfalls of opting-out or not joining the 2015 scheme in a short film by the General Secretary and a voiced over PowerPoint presentation.

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It is clear that both Government and the employers have shirked their responsibility to fully inform pension scheme members of all their options. They seem so intent on exaggerating the cost of the current schemes; making claims about how generously firefighters are being treated; and criticising the action taken by FBU member that they have failed to give clear and concise information on the options available to pension scheme members. Scheme members have been left to make important decisions with very little or very vague information from the people who are imposing and managing the schemes (i.e. Government and employers).

This lack of information has been totally unacceptable.

Legislation and guarantees but no regulation

DCLG have simply ignored our concerns and our requests to meet after laying regulations to impose the 2015 scheme. These regulations were only discussed in Parliament as a result of a superb effort by FBU members who lobbied their MP to 'pray' against the legislation. The debate and vote that followed was heavily influenced by the DCLG Fire Minister's clear guarantee that firefighters would not be sacked if they failed fitness tests as a result of aging. Instead she confirmed that in this situation firefighters aged 55 would be redeployed or would get an unreduced pension

This guarantee has been shown to be empty. This has been confirmed in writing by individual Fire Authorities and by the National Employers. We have consistently said that the only way of providing this guarantee was to include it in the scheme regulations, which has been done in Scotland.

Unfortunately the Westminster Government don't seem to care that they misled firefighters, Parliament and the public in this way.

Options have been ignored by DCLG

We have also continued to highlight that the proposed actuarial reductions at age 55 in England are too punitive. We have suggested a fairer method for applying actuarial reductions but DCLG have so far refused to use this while Scottish and Welsh Governments have agreed to use this method. We continue to press on this issue.

Inadequate protection arrangements for current scheme members

The hardest hit section of pension scheme members is the group who are outside of the protection offered in the proposals. In 2006 when the Normal Pension Age (NPA) was increased from 55 to 60 the FBU opposed this giving a clear warning that it was unworkable. The Labour Government of the time ring-fenced the current 1992 scheme members and suggested that where members of the new scheme could not reach the new NPA they would be able to be redeployed in roles where operational fitness was not required and would remain in employment in this way.

The current coalition Government however has reneged on the previous ring-fencing arrangement and introduced a much worse protection proposal for existing members. This now leaves a significant number of existing members who were previously protected in a totally different position. They have applied this approach across the public sector pension schemes.

This proposal whereby only those who were within 10 years of the NPA (55 years old in the FPS & 60 years old in the NFPS) on 1 April 2012 dramatically changed the protection for many current scheme members. We have only managed to get any sort of improvement in Scotland where the 10 years protection window also takes account of length of service as well as age at 1 April 2012. We have also provided evidence to show that there simply are no redeployment opportunities for firefighters who cannot maintain operational fitness as a result of ageing and have consistently said that claiming otherwise would be completely misleading.

We are continuing to raise concerns that the current protection proposals are inappropriate and will mean that a significant number of firefighter face an uncertain future.

The Joint Fitness Working Party

The DCLG Fire Minister has suggested that a Joint Working Party that has been established to look at fitness issues will be a way of providing a solution to the problem of firefighters not being able to work until age 60. While we remain very sceptical about this, we agreed to be on the steering group and also part of the Working Party looking at the issues.

The Terms of Reference for this group are not far reaching enough for this to resolve the issues in the way the DCLG Fire Minister claims. For example, we are convinced that there is a requirement for a consistent and safe occupational fitness standard which must be applied in all services. There has been extensive work which supports this requirement and a clear recommendation in the Government's own NPA review by Dr Tony Williams which also says this is essential.

Despite this the Government and Employers are currently resisting this, saying fitness levels should be determined locally. We have argued that the role of a firefighter is determined in the nationally agreed rolemaps, which state that a firefighter must maintain operational fitness, and as such allowing each Fire Authority to set its own standard is illogical and potentially dangerous.

Our position, that the Employers have a duty of care to ensure that we have a safe fitness standard which takes account of the physical nature of the role, is not currently accepted and we are considering all options available to us to ensure this is not ignored.

To-date the steering group has met twice and the Joint Working Party met for the first time on 31 March 2015. A report of this meeting is being prepared for the Executive Council and members will be kept informed.

General Election approaches: Political work continues

We continue to raise our pension concerns with MPs and Employers in all parts of the UK and have received some very supportive messages in response to this. We have also been discussing our key concerns with the senior Labour Party MPs in advance of the General Election. On 24 March we met with the Shadow Secretary of State, Hilary Benn and Shadow Fire Minister Lyn Brown, to discuss how they would deal with the firefighters' pension scheme dispute if they formed a Government after the forthcoming General Election.

The Shadow Fire Minister has written the DCLG Fire Minister reiterating the worthlessness of the guarantee. She has also written a positive letter to the FBU suggesting how a Labour led Government would deal with some of our concerns differently. These are currently being discussed and a copy of both these letters will be issued to members very shortly.

Parliament has been dissolved pending the General Election and we are now preparing to continue the campaign with the incoming Government. If it is Labour led we have a strategy to ensure they revisit and address our key concerns. If it is a Tory led Government we can expect more of the same treatment and will have to react accordingly.

Next steps

The scheme has been imposed but we are not going away. We have still got key concerns about the future of our pension scheme and we aim to keep pressing these issues until something is done to rectify this.

This campaign will continue, but the tactics will have to be assessed when we have a clearer picture of the Government we are dealing with.

Over the next few weeks a series of meetings are being arranged around the UK where members and officials will be given a briefing on the most recent developments and the ongoing work.

This will also provide you with an opportunity to ask questions and raise concerns with the campaign and what it means to you.

Please contact your local official to find out where the nearest meeting to you will be.

Best wishes.

Yours fraternally

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Wrack', with a stylized, cursive script.

MATT WRACK
GENERAL SECRETARY

MW/sll