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Employers' Secretary, Naomi Cooke

FIRE & RESCUE SERVICES National Employers

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Matt Wrack
Fire Brigades Union
Bradley House
68 Coombe Rd
Kingston upon Thames
Surrey, KT2 7AE

25 April 2024

BY EMAIL ONLY

Dear Matt,

Further to previous correspondence in relation to the FBU pay claim (on behalf of the employees side of the NJC and MMNB). The negotiations this year have been complex and detailed, dealing with all the issues the NJC committed to as part of the settlement reached in 2023. The National Employers are now in a position to set out in full, the position in relation to pay for 2024.

Pay

The National Employers have agreed to make the following offer:

- A 4.0 per cent increase on all basic pay rates and Continual Professional Development payments with effect from 1 July 2024.

Retained Duty System (RDS) pay and reward working group

Our offer letter in 2023 said: "It is proposed that both parties commit to a joint working group to include review of the retained duty system pay and rewards package". At the end of 8 months of joint working, the group acknowledged the growing recruitment, retention, and availability problems regarding retained firefighters in many areas and noted that remuneration arrangements are not particularly generous. The group explored the changing nature of work, society and other factors that have impacted on the long-term stability of the current model, accepting this challenge is not solely about pay.

In conclusion, the group proposed a re-structuring of the Grey Book retaining fee, with a view to addressing banding related to availability.

Having undertaken consultation with the sector, the National Employers propose that the Grey Book is amended from 1 January 2025 to incorporate the following:

“The annual retainer for an employee providing full cover (which is defined as cover of at least 120 hours per week) is 15% of the appropriate annual basic pay.

Where an employee provides cover for less than 120 hours per week the following bands may be applied:

Up to and including 30 hours per week, 5%

from 31 hours per week and up to and including 60 hours per week, 7.5%

from 61 hours per week and up to and including 90 hours per week, 10%

from 91 hours per week and up to and including 119 hours, 12.5%”

It is important to note that existing local agreements that already exist outside of the grey book are unaffected by this amendment.

The National Employers are very clear about the importance and value Fire and Rescue Services and Authorities place on their RDS firefighters. We note the challenges facing the existing model, and do not claim that this amendment will solve all those challenges. Nevertheless, we do consider it a useful and important step at this moment in time, with additional reward being available to RDS firefighters, and greater flexibility for services.

For those employees who are in post before 1 July 2024, who are currently receiving a higher retainer fee than that which they would receive under the new RDS retainer fee bandings (effective 1 January 2025), we would in the first instance encourage these individuals to consider enhancing their availability in order to match the new expectation. However, if for whatever reason they choose not to do that, and providing they do not reduce their commitment, they should not be any worse off for a period of three years, running to 30 June 2027.

Occupational maternity pay

The Fire Brigades Union wrote to the National Employers in May last year outlining a claim in relation to occupational maternity pay. This issue has been on the agenda of every meeting of the NJC that followed. At those meetings, the National Employers consistently set out that while welcoming this claim and understanding the arguments that the union has made in support of it, the issue needed quite careful deliberation and consideration.

That said, the National Employers are mindful of discussions around culture across our sector and are keen to underline a national commitment to improve and support the representation of women in operational firefighter/Grey Book roles, and to recruit and retain more women. We understand the particular challenges the operational elements of Grey Book roles (including the need to respond to emergencies, mobilise operational resources and to maintain operational competence and/or physical fitness) must bring.

We also noted that some other emergency services (police in England for example) already provided for a more generous occupational maternity pay than our current agreement.

Following consultation among Fire and Rescue Authorities/Services therefore, the National Employers are now in a position to offer an improvement to occupational maternity pay to:

- 26 weeks at full pay (inclusive of all allowances and CPD).
- followed by 13 weeks at SMP.

Please note that this provides a minimum level of occupational maternity pay and does not preclude the possibility that individual Fire and Rescue Authorities/Services may already offer enhanced maternity pay or choose to increase beyond this improvement.

In the FBU maternity claim letter, you also referenced various concerns about the health and safety of expectant and new mothers. It would be the expectation of the National Employers that Fire and Rescue Authorities are following the principles set out in Section 5 – Health Issues within the scheme of conditions of service which set out quite clearly the NJC expectations about the systematic application of preventative and protective measures in a risk assessment framework.

Pay structure, progression and CPD

In our 2023 offer letter to you, we set out that the employers side of the NJC was content to continue discussions with you around the pay structure and progression. We included a commitment to discuss CPD payments within these talks. We together established a joint working party. Following the agreed timetable of 8 months discussion, the group produced a joint report which was noted at the February 2024 NJC.

The national employers welcome the issues explored through the joint working party, and largely agree with the principles captured within the paper. Specifically noting this paragraph:

“While there remains a lot to be said for the existing pay structure as set out in the grey book, it provides for clarity and rationale of rate for the job and provides for a structure that sits well in relation to equal pay. However, the group discussions explored potential areas of improvement and development of the existing pay and reward structure, linking closely to skill and role development.”

The national employers therefore proposed further discussions to take this work forward, to use our national pay and grading structure to underscore firefighting as a highly skilled occupation, rewarding additional skills and knowledge (not simply time served in role) and driving professionalised leadership and management at all levels.

The joint working party raised questions about the role of the existing CPD agreement, a view which a significant number of FRAs/FRS indicated they shared, when asked by the national employers as part of our consultation.

Inevitably this work is complex and requires further detailed consideration and agreement.

Having established these high-level principles between us, the national employers commit to further talks, which should include an allowance of time to raise again the question of additional external funding into the sector (with all governments across our four nations) to support our shared ambition, and with a view to doing further work (in relation to a skills/knowledge framework) for consideration in time for the next annual pay review date: July 2025.

In conclusion

The National Employers are proud of the work we have achieved over this last year, we have continued to have a robust and frank exchange and by working together we have been able to make progress on a number of difficult and long-standing items.

A year-ago we were perilously close to dispute, but the NJC committed to finding a way through that dispute through dialogue. These were not easy discussions, but we were successful and found a way through. Whilst we have rightly been proud of that achievement, we know the real testament of success for the NJC is not just in avoiding a dispute, but in building stability in the years that follow. This offer is made very much with that intention in mind.

We are addressing the issues raised by the employee's side, building a broad and detailed pay offer which deals with maternity pay, the RDS retainer fee, and commits to further discussions around the pay structure. This is all underpinned in a pay increase which we think is fair, takes good account of wider economic factors and yet is at the limit of affordability for Fire and Rescue Services.

The National Employers therefore hope this can form the basis of an agreement between the two sides.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'S. Ward', is positioned above the printed name and title.

Sarah Ward
Acting Employers' Secretary