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An open letter to all firefighters in England

[www.gov.uk/dclg](http://www.gov.uk/dclg)

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Over the past few weeks I have talked to many of you and I know from those conversations and letters received that you have been looking carefully at what our offer on pensions would mean for you. We have tried to make sure that you have all the facts you need to help you make a decision. For example, the pension calculator we set up, so you can work out your own pension change, has now been viewed over 29,000 times. Over half of all current serving firefighters will see no change in their retirement age. For younger and newer firefighters it shows that your pension will still be one of the most generous in the whole of the public sector.

With a week to go before the FBU's ballot closes, I would like to answer three of the most important points firefighters have been putting to me.

**Fitness concerns**

First, a retirement age of 60 does not mean the introduction of a national fitness test and dismissal if you fail a fitness test. That is not on the cards. One in three pension scheme members is already due to retire at 60 and the FBU has acknowledged that a retirement age of 60 is not part of their dispute. There is more information about fitness at the end of my letter. If you are still concerned, please ask your HR team about the occupational health and fitness support that your employer provides for you.

**Timing of final offer**

Second, some of you asked why I requested a response from the FBU to my final offer by 12 July. We have been discussing reforms to the firefighters' pension schemes with your employers at national level and unions for two years now. During that time we have made several significant improvements to meet concerns raised. We made an offer that is the best possible and protects more firefighters from changes than in any other large public service. Now it is time for the discussions to end so we can deliver that deal in time for 2015. I had hoped to complete the process in the same positive spirit that we have maintained with employers and unions over the past two years.

**Opt outs**

Third, some of you have heard a story going round that if large numbers of firefighters opt out of the 2015 scheme, then the Government will need to increase your contributions further. This is simply not true. The reforms are not based on any cash income target and opt outs would not lead to an increase in employee contributions.

To finish, I would repeat that for those of you who do move to the new pension scheme, it is one of the very best around. If you haven't had the chance yet, I urge you to look at the pensions calculator [here](#) and see the facts for yourself.

**BRANDON LEWIS MP**

## **FITNESS AND CAPABILITY**

### **The Government is not introducing new fitness standards**

The local fitness standards that are already in place are likely to have been made in consultation with the trade unions before being implemented. Your union will be consulted about any changes that your employer makes to its fitness policies.

Fitness arrangements will remain a local matter – I have been clear that I will not be introducing such a standard across England.

It is worth noting that the independently researched 'Normal Pension Age' report found that with no changes in fitness standards, "100% of firefighters who remain physically active will still be operational at age 60 assuming they remain free from injury and disease." (Paragraph 11.2.3)

### **No one will be sacked just for failing a fitness test**

No fire and rescue authority will sack you just for failing a fitness test. Older firefighters in particular represent a considerable investment for the fire and rescue authority in training and experience – it makes no sense at all to dismiss them if this can possibly be avoided. While each authority will approach fitness in a different way, there are common approaches and ways to regain fitness that in no way threaten your employment:

- firefighters have had regular fitness tests for a long time now and get access (often during working hours) to fitness instructors and gyms.
- if a firefighter falls below the expected level of fitness, they are provided with a personal fitness training programme and re-tested until they pass. The Normal Pension Age report found that the vast majority of firefighters were able to regain their fitness levels following a period of extra training.
- if a firefighter falls significantly below the level of fitness expected by their authority (usually 35 VO2Max) then they may be taken off operational duties and referred to an occupational health adviser to find out if there is any medical reason for not reaching the minimum standard.
- If there is no medical reason for the firefighter persistently failing to achieve the minimum fitness level expected, the firefighter will be referred to HR.
- If there is a proven medical reason that a firefighter can't undertake firefighting duties and that condition is permanent, a firefighter is likely to be offered ill-health retirement.

Firefighters are given every opportunity to regain their fitness and where there are minimum fitness levels, a firefighter who maintains a healthy, active lifestyle should be able to reach the standards. If you are still unsure speak to your HR Department as they can explain their fitness policy and support available to you.

### **Government is absolutely not introducing a new 'capability clause' in the new pension scheme so firefighters can be sacked more easily**

The Department has never proposed introducing a new capability clause. Indeed, we have actually removed the clause in the 1992 scheme that allowed the compulsory retirement of a firefighter who was over the age of 50 under Rule A14.

In the same way as under the 2006 scheme, the 2015 pension scheme will require an authority that retires a firefighter on efficiency grounds to enhance the member's pension so that it is paid immediately and without a reduction.