

Industrial Relations

Purpose of the Report

To update the Fire Commission on matters in relation to fire service industrial relations.

Summary

This paper is for information and briefly describes the main industrial relations issues at present.

Recommendation

Members are asked to note the issues set out in the paper.

Action

This report is for information.

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Background

1. As far as uniformed operational staff from firefighter to Chief Fire Officer level are concerned they are in the main represented by one of four unions specific to the fire service – the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), the Fire Officers Association (FOA) the Retained Firefighters Union (RFU) and the Association of Principal Fire Officers (APFO).
2. Instances of industrial action at national level are unusual. The last national action was undertaken by the Fire Brigades Union several years ago in 2003. That dispute led to a substantial raft of changes to working arrangements which have underpinned the modernisation agenda within fire and rescue services since that time.
3. However, industrial relations in the fire service both at national and local level can still be difficult and at times volatile. It therefore requires careful management. There have been a number of instances of industrial action at local level and the National Joint Council for Local Authority Fire and Rescue Services Joint Secretariat relationship at national level is often used to provide a conciliation service at the request of the local parties to assist in the identification of a mutually agreeable resolution to the local issue/s. There are also independently chaired national processes which can be of assistance.

Pension scheme reform

4. Pension reform proposals are just now moving in to the next formal stage. Therefore any immediacy around potential industrial action is reduced.

National issues

5. No pay award was applied to uniformed personnel covered by the NJC for Local Authority Fire and Rescue Services in 2010 or 2011.
6. The usual pay settlement date for this group is 1 July. Earlier this year the Employees' Side of the NJC put forward a claim seeking an increase of 3.5% on all pay rates. The letter also made the point that from the Employees' Side perspective the matter of pay awards in 2010 and 2011 are not closed.
7. The Employers' Side considered the claim when the NJC met in June and indicated that they would be minded to make some level of pay award linked to commitments in respect of reform of conditions of service.
8. The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) conference later in June reiterated commitment to reaching agreement on pay through dialogue and negotiation. But it also resolved

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that should this be unsuccessful a campaign for national strike action should commence in July.

9. Discussion continued, a potential way forward was identified and the FBU did not commence a campaign for national strike action. Instead it decided to consult its members on where it believed negotiations had got to and whether or not that position would be acceptable given an Executive Council recommendation to accept such a position should it be offered.
10. Members will be aware that a settlement has now been agreed. Relevant employer and joint circulars were issued to authorities on 12 September 2012. The agreement restricts the pay award of 1.0% to basic pay only and includes commitment to two reviews relating to reform of terms and conditions. There will be a short term review of on appropriate mileage rates and a medium term review on pay structure and terms and conditions.
11. In reaching this agreement members of the Employers' Side took into account of a number of issues including:
 - 11.1 the financial challenges facing fire authorities;
 - 11.2 economic pressures on the workforce;
 - 11.3 Government current public sector pay policy;
 - 11.4 a desire for reform of terms and conditions;
 - 11.5 the current position for local authority employees and more widely within the public sector;
 - 11.6 the views of interested parties; and
 - 11.7 the views of its Advisory Forum which contains chief fire officer, human resources, finance and legal advisers drawn from differing types of fire and rescue services across the UK.

Local issues

12. Since the last meeting of the Fire Commission formal assistance has been provided to two fire and rescue services.
13. In one case agreement has been reached on the introduction of a new shift system at local level through the NJC's Technical Advisory Panel (Independent Chair and Joint Secretariat). As usual, information has been circulated to fire authorities.
14. In the other case, work (including conciliation) involving the Joint Secretariat and the local parties is on-going as it is a multi-issue dispute. The Fire Brigades Union agreed to put on hold a ballot for industrial action.

Working Together

15. Members may also be interested to note that, when requested to do so, the National Joint Secretariat can also work with fire and rescue services that are jointly reviewing their local industrial relations relationship. Such work has been well received.
16. In addition, the Employers' Secretariat can work with management teams solely, for example, where there has been a change in management structure and a number of people are new to direct involvement in industrial relations. The session is not just fire service focused, drawing upon the wider industrial relations expertise within the LGA as well. This too has been well received.