

Industrial Relations

Purpose of the Report

To update the Fire Service Management Committee on the potential for national unrest.

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.

Contact officer:

Gill Gittins

Position:

Principal Negotiating Officer, LG Group

Phone no:

020 7187 7335

E-mail:

gill.gittins@local.gov.uk

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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 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 some eight 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.

Pension scheme reform

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

National issues

4. The Employees' Side of the NJC for Local Authority Fire and Rescue Services entered a claim in March for an increase in line with the RPI figure available in June. That figure is 3.5%. The letter also made the point that from the Employees' Side perspective the matters of pay awards in 2010 and 2011 are not closed.
5. The Employers' Side considered the claim when the NJC met in June. In doing so, members were mindful of a number of issues including: the financial challenges facing fire authorities, economic pressure on the workforce, the Government's current public sector pay policy, a desire for reform of terms and conditions, and the current position for local authority employees.
6. In the case of the latter, members were aware of two key differences when compared with this group (uniformed fire service staff from firefighter through to middle manager levels). The first difference is that, unlike local authority staff, this group does not have an incremental pay structure, therefore to not apply a pay increase would genuinely be a third year of a pay freeze. The second difference is that employee pension contributions for this group had increased by 0.6% in April, which was not the case for local authority staff.
7. Taking all factors in to account members indicated to the Employees' Side 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 that should this be unsuccessful a campaign for national strike action should commence in July.
9. Since June discussion has continued and a potential way forward has been identified. The FBU has not commenced a campaign for national strike action.
10. The FBU has latterly insisted that it consult its members and discussion has recently focused on the best way to jointly manage this latest position. The National Employers wish to see pay negotiations for 2012 concluded quickly in order to create an environment to undertake the important reform work which they would like to see progressed in future months. The current position is that, in the absence of an offer from the Employers' Side, the FBU has commenced a postal consultation seeking its members views on where it believes negotiations have got to. The consultation paper includes an Executive Council recommendation to accept such a position should it be offered. The consultation closes on 11th September. Fire authorities have been kept fully informed.
11. Therefore, at the time of writing this report, there remains a risk of the FBU taking part in national industrial action later this year.
12. Whilst every reasonable effort will be made to ensure industrial action does not arise authorities will want to make sure appropriate business continuity arrangements are in place.

Local issues

13. Since the last meeting of the FSMC formal assistance has been provided to two fire and rescue services.
14. 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).
15. In the other case, conciliation work involving the Joint Secretariat and the local parties is on-going as it is a multi-issue dispute requiring several days' input. However it has been agreed that a ballot for industrial action be put on hold to allow that work to take place.

Conclusion

16. Members are asked to note the content of this report.



**Fire Services Management
Committee**

14 September 2012

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