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Phil Woolas MP
Minister for Local Government
Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
Eland House
Bressenden Place
LONDON
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Dear Minister,

I am sure you are aware of the growing disquiet throughout the Fire & Rescue Service with regard to the proposed changes to the Firefighters' Pension Scheme. That disquiet is no less acute among the middle managers of the service, to the degree that I have now been obliged to call a National Delegate Meeting of our Association in order to allow a free and open debate to take place and for our Executive Board to receive the members' instructions accordingly. I would take this opportunity to reassure you that we are a responsible organisation which believes in making all the facts available to our members, without any 'spin', and allowing them to make their own judgements. I enclose a copy of our latest Members' Circular for your information.

However, after hearing your colleague, Works & Pensions Secretary John Hutton MP, on the BBC Sunday AM programme yesterday, 22 January, our hopes are raised that this whole matter will now be swiftly resolved. I refer of course to his statement that the Government has got to meet the pension obligations that they signed up to, and that he does not think anyone is suggesting with any serious intent that the pension rights that people in the public sector have accrued over the years should just be ripped up. As Mr Hutton said "That would be quite wrong".

I am aware that he went on to say that negotiations with regard to some schemes are still continuing, but his preceding statement is so clear that we can only surmise that the proposed changes have surfaced through some ghastly mistake and that in fact they are not Government Policy at all. In fact, Mr Hutton's statement seems to clearly reinforce one made by the then Home Secretary, Jack Straw, in the 1998 Home Office Consultation document "Fire Service Pensions Review";

"There is no intention of reducing the pension benefits that serving or retired firefighters are entitled to as members of the pension scheme. Any revisions to such pension benefits would apply only to new entrants to the service, who would pay lower contributions."

I know you are fully aware of how hard the Fire & Rescue Service is working to implement the modernisation agenda required of it. Much of the responsibility for that implementation falls to the middle managers of the service, but at the moment issues such as the proposed changes to their pension scheme are inevitably having an adverse effect on their morale.

Reassurance that they are in fact to be afforded the same 'ring fenced' protection that their Police service colleagues are to enjoy would improve that morale tremendously and I would be grateful to receive early assurance that the Work & Pensions Secretary's statement is correct and the proposals for change to the Firefighters' Pension Scheme for its current members are to be withdrawn.

Yours sincerely,

Graham Setterfield
Chief Executive

cc Jim Fitzpatrick MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State