



PRESS RELEASE

Isle of Wight Constituency Labour Party

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Labour Party candidate warns Government's pension changes could put firefighters' lives at risk

Today, Labour Parliamentary candidate, Stewart Blackmore, warned that changes that the Government is making to firefighters' pensions are built on the assumption of a dangerously low aerobic fitness standard.

The Williams Review, which the Government itself commissioned, states that the aerobic fitness measure the Government is basing their plans on means "*the risk of sudden catastrophic cardiac events increases... with a risk of sudden death particularly while undergoing high levels of physical exertion*". This flawed fitness standard would put firefighters needlessly at risk and fail to protect the public.

If a more robust fitness standard is implemented it would mean that the assumptions on which the Government's pension regulations are based would no longer be valid. The result would be that a number of firefighters who try to maintain fitness would be unable to meet these operational standards into their late 50s through no fault of their own.

Mr Blackmore, who visited striking fire fighters at their Newport HQ to hear first-hand about their concerns, said:

"The Government's Firefighters' pension regulations are not fit for purpose. They are based on an assumption about a dangerously low fitness standard, which would put public safety and the lives of firefighters at risk. Today I heard for myself just how seriously these dedicated firefighters are worried about these proposals and I support them wholeheartedly.

"The Tories can't build a better future for working people because they stand up only for a privileged few. Firefighters risk their lives to save ours and they deserve better than this."

Notes to editors

- The Government has presided over 47 separate periods of strike action by firefighters in England since September 2013 and, after more than three years of dispute, they have failed to negotiate a fair and sustainable solution.

- The new Fire Minister offered firefighters warm words and raised their hopes when she first took up the post, only to put down essentially the same offer that her predecessor in the role proposed in June 2013, ceasing negotiations.
- There is currently no nationally-determined fitness standard for firefighters in England; the 46 Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) have different fitness standards and a number use an aerobic fitness standard that estimates a firefighter's maximum rate of oxygen uptake (VO2max), a universally recognised measure of aerobic fitness.
- The general minimum fitness standard used by many FRAs is 42 mL·kg⁻¹·min⁻¹ VO2max, while some adopt an 'at risk' standard of 35 mL·kg⁻¹·min⁻¹ VO2max where firefighters are allowed to continue on operational duties for a limited period while they undergo remedial fitness training.
- Aerobic fitness is a core component of total firefighter physical fitness and a universally recognised measure of aerobic fitness is the maximum rate of oxygen uptake (VO2max). The Government state that no firefighter who remains physically active will be forced to retire early under the regulations that you have laid before Parliament. This claim is based on a single line in the Williams Review commissioned by the Government, which reads:

"...a 35 mL·kg⁻¹·min⁻¹ VO2max would ensure that 100 % of firefighters who remain physically active will still be operational at age 60 assuming they remain free from injury and disease."

- However, the Williams Review was based on a higher aerobic fitness standard and it made clear *"the general standard used by many FRAs is a minimum fitness level of 42 mL·kg⁻¹·min⁻¹"* and that *"this review has taken 42 mL·kg⁻¹·min⁻¹ for the aerobic fitness benchmark for the recommendations"*.
- Labour are deeply concerned that using the lower aerobic fitness measure as the basis of the fitness standards underpinning your Government's pension regulations, may put the lives of firefighters and the public at risk. The Williams Review made this clear, stating:

*"Studies show that below an aerobic fitness standard of 42 mL·kg⁻¹·min⁻¹ **the risk of sudden catastrophic cardiac events increases**, and below the level of 35 mL·kg⁻¹·min⁻¹ the increase is significant, with **a risk of sudden death** particularly while undergoing high levels of physical exertion. There is a strong argument that FRAs have a duty of care to their firefighters and to the general public to minimise this risk by maintaining an **appropriate and safe level of aerobic fitness**."*

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