

BETRAYED

Fire heroes ordered to pay back thousands in injury awards cash after 'overpayment'



PUBUC MONEY: Bob Wilkinson

HERO firefighters injured in the the line of duty and forced to retire are being asked to stump up THOUSANDS of pounds – because of an administrative mix-up.

Former Lancashire firefighters, many with devastating injuries which have left them sick or permanently disabled, have been asked to pay back up to £30,000 after fire bosses told them their pensions have been overpaid.

Lancashire Fire Authority (LFA)

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has issued the repayment letters to firefighters who reared with special ill-health awards added to their pensions because they were injured on duty with the service.

The firefighters include David (not his real name), whose distinguished 37-year firefighting career ended dramatically when he suffered a devastating back injury during an accident on the M6 motorway, near Preston.

In 1989, he was among a crew of firefighters who battled to get a heavy

lamp-post off a crushed car – but David was left pinned underneath the heavy concrete with crippling injuries that ended his career.

For 19 years he has received a special allowance for his injury, plus his pension, but has now received a letter telling him he had been overpaid by almost £2,300.

Another victim is former retained firefighter "Tony," who at age 43 was injured while helping to pull a 350lb light portable pump down to a stream as part of an exercise.

His back was injured when his colleagues slipped, leaving him bearing

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Firemen told to pay back injury 'overpayments'

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the full weight of the pump. He was forced to retire - not just as a firefighter but from his job at a local factory.

In February this year the father of two young children, aged four and eight, also received a letter demanding the return of £8,000 in "overpayments."

Another firefighter, who received a bill for around £30,000, is currently battling cancer.

Now the Fire Brigade Union (FBU) has taken on cases from around a dozen retired members concerned about their ability to repay.

Fault

The amount paid in injury awards is affected by any incapacity benefits pensioners receive from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP).

Lancashire Fire Authority chairman Bob Wilkinson said: "When they finish work with an ill-health award, they are given a paper to say if they receive DWP benefits, they have to tell us. The onus is on them."

"There is a fault in the system at a national level in that the firemen's people who deal with the scheme cannot talk to the DWP until we get permission from the individual concerned."

Mr Wilkinson said repayment could be phased over longer periods if pensioners

were struggling to pay. He said: "At the end of the day it's public money. But we do not want to make anyone bankrupt."

A Fire Brigade Union spokesman said: "They (the LFA) are contacting them five, 10, 15 and one is even 21 years later and saying there has been a mistake, but they don't have the means to pay it."

"At this stage, we are hopeful the service will come to an agreement on the issue."

Furious former firefighter Paul Bums, 64, who finished his career in 1997 as operational commander of a division covering 10 Lancashire fire stations, is helping fight the case for his colleagues.

He said letters went out November to around 150 retired firefighters with special health awards, asking them for permission to access their DWP records.

Most gave permission, leading to some being hit with the hefty repayment bills. A number, including Mr Bums, refused to sign the forms.

Mr Bums, from Fulwood, who retired from the fire service with an ear injury sustained after he was caught up in an explosion in Victoria Street, Belfast, as a young firefighter, says he is not in receipt of DWP benefits anyway.

But he has joined the chorus of protest over the situation. He said: "This has caused anguish for a number of pensioners. Most of them are in a state of shock."