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Heroes told to repay cash

by NAZIA PARVEEN

Firefighters who were injured in the line of duty and forced into retirement are being asked to pay back thousands of pounds in overpaid pension benefits.

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

Former Lancashire firefighters, who were left them permanently disabled, have been asked to pay back up to £400,000 after fire bosses stated their pensions have been overpaid.

Lancashire Fire Authority (LFA) has issued the repayment letters to nearly 200 firefighters who retired with special ill-health award added to their pensions because they were injured on duty with the service.

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

Authority chairman Bob Wilkinson is calling for a change in the law over data protection to avoid any future mistakes.

Mr Wilkinson, a firefighter for 29 years, said: "This is not just something in our authority, this system affects every fire and police authority in the country.

"None is allowed to contact the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to find out what benefits people are receiving. It's ridiculous."

Former firefighter Paul Burns from Fulwood said the letters were sent out in November to around 150 retired firefighters with special health awards, asking them for permission to access their DWP records.

The 64-year-old who finished his career in 1997 as operational commander of a division covering 10 Lancashire fire stations, added: "Most of them gave permission to the authority to access their records, which has left them paying out thousands of pounds."

"I refused to sign the form as I have never received any benefits."

Mr Burns, who retired from the fire service with an ear injury sustained in Belfast, says his colleagues feel cheated.

He added: "People have felt crippled and broken by this, they are in a complete state of shock and feel violated and betrayed."