

Fire chief vows to end pensions row

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Lancashire's fire authority chief has pledged to meet top officers in a fresh bid to stop a row over pension cash ending up in court.

County Coun David O'Toole, who was elected chairman of the county's Combined Fire Authority (CFA) last week, has pledged to bring a "swift" conclusion to the row.

Dozens of retired firefighters, many of whom were left sick or disabled after being seriously injured in the line of duty, were hit with sudden demands in 2007 to pay back up to tens of thousands of pounds by bosses at the Lancashire Combined Fire Authority.

The CFA sent the letters to firefighters who retired with special ill-health awards added to their pensions because they were injured on duty with the service.

The authority said these were affected if a firefighter received state benefits from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for the same injury.

But the firefighters and the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) said the fault lay with the fire authority, as those rules had not been made clear.

The have enlisted solicitors to fight their case – but Coun

O'Toole says court action is a "last resort".

He will now meet with Lancashire's chief fire officer Peter Holland and other senior officers in a bid to find a way forward.

He said: "We want to settle this amicably and where anyone is in the wrong – whether it is us or them – it needs to be done openly and quickly.

"The next step is that myself and my deputy John Shedwick have promised to have further meetings with the chief and senior officers.

"I have made it clear that the long-running problem over firefighter pensions, particularly injury pensions, is to be resolved as soon as possible within the law."

He added that he was happy to meet with the affected firefighters although he said he had never been asked to.

But former firefighter Paul Burns, from Fulwood, speaking for the affected pensioners, said: "The county councillor says he has not been asked to discuss this, does he need an invitation?

"County Coun O'Toole has been on this committee for the 21 months this issue has been running.

"The door is firmly open. In the meantime, the litigation against Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service continues."