

North Devon Conservatives

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New Euro rules will cut fire services and increase council tax bills

Labour and Liberal Democrats vote for new red tape on local fire fighters

Philip J Milton, Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for North Devon, expressed concern today at new European Union regulations that could lead to cuts in North Devon's fire services and force up council tax bills. The European Parliament, including local Labour MEP for the South West, Glyn Ford, has voted to impose new red tape through the EU Working Time Directive.

If the new EU rules go ahead, workers' rights to opt-out from the working time rules will be abolished. Employers would have to ensure workers work no more than 48 hours a week. 'On-call' time in the workplace, even when inactive, would be counted as working time. This will have a devastating impact on retained (part-time, professional) fighters, who double up their fire work with other jobs. Many have pagers – on call in the event of emergencies.

This will cut the number of retained fire fighters on active duty, especially in rural communities. There will be reduced local fire cover, response times will increase as fire fighters have to come from further away, and more full-time fire fighters will be needed – pushing up the fire levy on council tax bills. The Local Government Association and Chief Fire Officers' Association have attacked the plans.

Currently, in Devon and Somerset, there are 1,162 retained fire fighter posts. Only 1,131 posts are filled, reflecting difficulties in recruiting them. Such shortages would worsen if Labour's Euro-MPs get their way.

Philip said:

“Retained fire fighters do a superb service to our community, helping tackle fires, floods and road accidents. I am very concerned at the effect of these new rules which would cut back workers' rights to work when they choose.

“This red tape, backed by Labour MEPs, would cut local fire services, put lives at risk and force up council tax across North Devon. It is vital that the Government stands firm on this crucial issue. Labour MEPs need to be sent a message in the European elections that their failure to protect local fire services is not acceptable. Conservatives will stand up for Britain and our fire fighters in the face of this new threat.”

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION OR PHOTOCALL PLEASE CONTACT:

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Notes to Editors

EU THREAT TO LOCAL FIRE SERVICES

In 1993, the Conservative Government secured an opt-out from the Working Time Directive. Workers in the UK may currently derogate from the 48-hour limit on the working week.

A majority in the European Parliament has now voted to scrap this opt-out. They want any period of ‘on-call’ time, including ‘inactive’ time, to count as working time for the purposes of the directive. Compensatory rest would also have to be taken immediately.

Currently, retained firefighters’ ‘on-call’ periods are up to 120 hours a week, rostered over five days. A 48-hour maximum working week, including inactive time, would make it impossible for most retained firefighters to supplement their primary occupation in paid service to their communities.

The Local Government Association has warned: “The loss of the opt-out provision that currently exists would result in a reduction in the number of retained firefighters and would also see the need to increase the number of wholtime firefighters employed by FRAs [Fire and Rescue Authorities] to cover shifts.”
<http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pageId=1628758>

The Chief Fire Officers’ Association have asserted that the Fire Service “could not function effectively” without retained firefighters.
<http://www.hrfu.org.uk/pages/news/detail.asp?newsUID=100>

LABOUR AND LIBERAL DEMOCRATS LET BRITAIN DOWN

In December 2008, a number of Labour and Liberal Democrat MEPs voted to scrap the ability to opt-out from the Directive. All Conservative Members of the European Parliament voted to maintain the UK’s opt-out.

Source: European Parliament Amendment 16 to the ‘common position’ agreed by the European Council on the working time directive, moved by the Socialist MEP, Alejandro Cercas, passed by 421 votes to 273; 17 December 2008.
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2008-0615+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN>

The following Labour MEPs voted to scrap the opt-out:

- Richard Howitt – Eastern region
- Glenis Willmott (then chief whip, now leader) - East Midlands
- Mary Honeyball - London

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- Claude Moraes - London
- Stephen Hughes - North East
- Brian Simpson - North West
- David Martin - Scotland
- Catherine Stihler - Scotland
- Peter Skinner - South East
- Glyn Ford - South West
- Eluned Morgan - Wales
- Richard Corbett - Yorkshire
- Linda McAvan - Yorkshire

One Labour MEP (Arlene McCarthy, North West) did not vote.

One Lib Dem MEP voted to scrap the opt-out: Elspeth Attwooll – Scotland.

LOCAL FIGURES

The table below shows how many retained firefighter posts there are currently, and the number of posts which are filled. Many fire services have difficulty recruiting retained firefighters – which will be even more acute under the new working time red tape.

<i>Retained fire fighters</i>	<i>Posts</i>	<i>Current strength</i>
Metropolitan		
Greater Manchester	44	16
London	0	0
Merseyside*	80	185
South Yorkshire	89	60
Tyne & Wear	24	14
West Midlands	10	7
West Yorkshire	238	149
Non-Metropolitan		
Avon	159	165
Bedfordshire & Luton	136	136
Buckinghamshire	226	194
Cambridgeshire	360	297
Cheshire	223	172
Cleveland	90	72
Cornwall	425	403
County Durham & Darlington	168	147
Cumbria	474	452
Derbyshire	360	204
Devon & Somerset	1,162	1,131
Dorset	356	312
East Sussex	259	206
Essex	458	438
Gloucestershire	300	252
Hampshire	676	614
Hereford & Worcester	383	315
Hertfordshire	257	203
Humberside	347	282

<i>Retained fire fighters</i>	<i>Posts</i>	<i>Current strength</i>
Isle of Wight	168	148
Isles of Scilly	39	39
Kent	716	667
Lancashire	316	317
Leicestershire	216	147
Lincolnshire	495	433
Norfolk	530	497
North Yorkshire	392	334
Northamptonshire	260	196
Northumberland	155	160
Nottinghamshire	252	206
Oxfordshire	328	287
Royal Berkshire	132	100
Shropshire	340	292
Staffordshire	389	313
Suffolk	498	396
Surrey	144	76
Warwickshire	153	133
West Sussex	310	282
Wiltshire	303	298
ENGLAND	13,213	11,744

Source: DCLG, *Fire and Rescue Service: Operational Statistics Bulletin for England*, December 2008.
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/statistics/frsoperationalstats2007-08>

* The Merseyside figures (with strength being larger than posts) are a reflection that retained fire fighters have only recently been introduced there.

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