



AGENDA ITEM: 7

NORTH WALES FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

16 June 2014

THE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICES IN WALES PROJECT 2013

Report by Simon Smith, Chief Fire Officer

Purpose of Report

- 1 To advise Members of the current status of the Fire and Rescue Services in Wales project.

Background

- 2 Throughout 2013, Members received regular updates from the Chief Fire Officer concerning what came to be known as the Fire and Rescue Services in Wales Project 2013 (FRSWP). At the 17 March 2014 meeting of the Authority, Members received a copy of the project report under Part 2 conditions. A copy of the report is attached at Appendix 1 for information.

Information

- 3 As can be seen in the summary on page 2 of the report, the "*project looked at the current picture in relation to the FRAs activity, funding, workforce, estates, governance, scrutiny, assurance, performance management, statistics, collaboration and engagement*". The project was undertaken by a Welsh Government (WG) official on a short-term secondment albeit most of the data used was provided by officers in the three fire and rescue services in Wales. The three Chief Fire Officers in Wales sat on a project board to oversee the data collection phase of the project but were not involved in the analysis of the data or the conclusions drawn from that analysis; nor were they provided with a draft copy of the report for comment prior to its issue.

- 4 These omissions were issues of concern for the three Chief Fire Officers and those concerns were raised with WG officials at the time.
- 5 Equally significantly, given the nature of the recommendations, no attempt was made by the project officer to interview any member of the Authority, nor did she attend any meeting or sub-committee of the North, Mid and West or South Wales Fire and Rescue Authorities.
- 6 As Members will be aware, the Chief Fire Officer has had concerns about the FRSWP from its early stages. The report did little to alleviate those concerns. In the Chief Fire Officer's opinion the report lacks substance, presents difficulties in relating some of the conclusions to the evidence and, most worryingly, makes some far-reaching conclusions in recommendations 10-12 about the future of the Authority based on no meaningful contact with it.
- 7 The Minister for Local Government and Government Business has been clear in plenary answers, correspondence and in a meeting attended by both the Chair and the Chief Fire Officer on 19 May 2014 that she intends to press ahead in implementing the recommendations. This despite the Chair setting out the Authority's concerns in a letter dated 10 February 2014 (and attached at Appendix 2, together with the Minister's response at Appendix 3). At the 19 May meeting, she indicated that recommendations 10-12 would be taken forward in the context of WG's overall response to the report of the Commission on Public Service Governance and Delivery. Furthermore, the Minister indicated that the report would not be published thus leaving no opportunity for consultation with stakeholders.
- 8 At the 19 May meeting, the Chairs and Chief Fire Officers of the three Welsh fire and rescue authorities advised the Minister that they still had concerns and, as a result, would seek the guidance of their respective Authorities before committing any further resources to assisting WG with the implementation of a report which they considered to be seriously flawed, together with the potentially time consuming governance of that implementation.

- 9 Members may wish to give consideration to the role of the National Issues Committee which has well established task groups involved in developing policy responses to some of the issues contained in the report. Given the pressure on resources in each of the three FRAs, duplication of effort at this time would have a significant impact.

Recommendations

- 10 Members are asked to:
- (i) note the content of FRSWP report;
 - (ii) consider the Authority's response to the report, the desirability of officer involvement in its implementation and the impact on the Service of committing significant levels of resource to it.

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Gogledd Cymru**

**North Wales
Fire and Rescue Authority**

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10 February 2014

Lesley Griffiths AM
Minister for Local Government and Government Business
Welsh Government
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Dear Minister

Fire and Rescue Services in Wales 2013 Project Report

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the report of the Fire and Rescue Services in Wales 2013 Project. As mentioned at our meeting on 27th January 2014, I have some grave concerns about the analysis of the data provided, some of the conclusions that were drawn from that analysis and, consequently, some of the recommendations presented in the report.

I agree that there was a considerable amount of information and evidence gathered by the author and provided and verified by officers from the three Fire and Rescue Services in Wales. The resultant recommendations 1-9 can be, and some are already being, considered through the National Issues Committee.

Before I go on to concentrate on recommendations 10-12 I would contest the funding profiles in the report which only extend to 2012/13. If the figures used were to the end of the Authority's three year budget freeze in 2013/14 it would emphasise the fact that North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority has already reduced its budget by 7.5% over the last three year period without the need for compulsory redundancies. I also believe that the use of 'cost per head' as a comparison is always going to be fundamentally flawed in a country as sparsely populated as Wales. As I am sure that you are aware, the very nature of a predominantly rural country brings with it additional costs.

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Recommendations 10-12 are the most contentious recommendations because of their potential fundamental impact on the governance and funding arrangements for Fire and Rescue Authorities in Wales. It is remarkable that the conclusion has been drawn that the current governance and funding arrangements do not function effectively without seeking the opinion of Fire Authorities themselves. Any evidence supplied in the form of publicly available FRA papers illustrating options proposed and decisions made by the FRA with regard to budget increases and cuts appear to have been ignored. I am not aware that the author observed Fire and Rescue Authority, Executive Panel or Audit Committee meetings in North Wales and I am at a loss to understand on what evidence she was able to draw these conclusions.

The current funding arrangements have always been open and transparent with regular public papers being considered at Executive Panel meetings where the recommendations as to which cost pressures will and will not be funded are minuted and in later years which actions to be taken to reduce the budget. These have all been publicly debated prior to approval by the full Fire and Rescue Authority.

Before any work is undertaken in support of recommendations 10-12, I would like to be provided with the evidence from which these conclusions and recommendations were formed, so we can be convinced, or otherwise, of the problem which needs to be solved.

I look forward to discussing these observations further when we next meet and appreciate your request for clarification around my concerns.

Yours sincerely

Meirick Lloyd Davies
Chair - North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority

Copy to Chief Fire Officer Simon Smith

Lesley Griffiths AC / AM
Y Gweinidog Llywodraeth Local a Busnes y Llywodraeth
MINISTER for Local Government and Government Business



Eich cyf/Your ref RLL/CR
Ffôn eidd/Gourad LG/00169/14

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14 March 2014

Dear Meirick

Thank you for your letter of 19 February regarding the recommendations set out in the Fire and Rescue Services in Wales Report 2013 (FRS Wales Report).

The FRS Wales Report recognises the improvements Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) have made in financial terms and I already conveyed my appreciation on these successes in my statement made recently. I recognise the report as a valuable tool to help us understand the current situation in fire and rescue services in Wales. I am disappointed that it has not recognised the report and its recommendations were developed as an enabler to improvement rather than a criticism of any organisation.

I am committed to taking forward all of the recommendations set out in the report, linking appropriately to the wider public service reform. The recommendations will be delivered as a suite of projects through a Programme Board. My officials will contact you shortly regarding timelines and input.

In your letter you mention the report did not fully reflect the savings made by North Wales FRA because 2013-14 data has been omitted. The report could only include information and data available at the time of drafting. I recognise FRAs have made efficiencies, however, given the continued financial pressures we face in Wales, I believe there is more to be done. I will continue to work with you on this and will support those who are working to improve their services. The report also highlights the funding issues for fire and rescue services and many considerations are set out in the Report recommendations.

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Mae croeso i chi gysylltu â'r
Awdurdod yn y Gymraeg neu'r Saesneg
You are welcome to contact the
Authority in English or Welsh

You make the point cost per head of population is not a true reflection of value for money on its own, particularly for more rural areas such as North Wales. I can assure you my Chief Fire and Rescue Advisor has advised that cost per head is not a true reflection of value for money on its own. I will ensure that the relevant information is included in the report.

You raised concerns about the lack of direct member engagement and observation of meetings by the author. Evidence was fed into the review from a wide number of sources, including the Wales Audit Office. I understand Sir Paul Williams did take evidence directly from members and this information was also fed into the FRS Wales Report. The draft report was subject to challenge by my Chief Fire and Rescue Advisor. The Williams Commission Report has highlighted similar issues to the governance and security. Further to the evidence of members, the key purpose of the recommendations in the report is to ensure complete and comprehensive in structure and systems which inhibit members in their working role. Your views and comments regarding the recommendations on member and governance are actively reflected across the report of Wales.

I look forward to working with you on this matter.

Regards



Lesley Griffiths AC / AM
Y Gweinidog Llywodraeth Leol a Busnes y Llywodraeth
Minister for Local Government and Government Business