

AGENDA ITEM: 5

NORTH WALES FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

FIRE AUTHORITY REPORT

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| DATE: | 22 nd April 2004 |
| REPORT BY: | CHIEF FIRE OFFICER |
| PURPOSE OF REPORT: | To consider the proposed response to the draft Fire and Rescue Service National Framework for Wales. |

1. **INTRODUCTION**

Following the publication of the draft Fire and Rescue Service National Framework for Wales by the Welsh Assembly Government, it is proposed that a response should be sent to questions raised within the document. To this end the Executive Panel is requested to consider the following comments.

2. **INFORMATION**

Overall, the draft document represents a first practical step towards the devolution of the Welsh fire and rescue services. Although it is intended that the Welsh National Framework will be reviewed annually and published every autumn, the rapid rate of reform will inevitably mean that parts of it will become outdated before the formal revision process can take place.

Whilst welcoming the repositioning of the fire and rescue services in Wales into a national dimension, it is important not to diminish the significance of retaining a local focus for our Integrated Risk Management Plans.

2.1 **Suggested responses to the questions posed within the document:**

Q1. The NWFA welcomes the establishment of a Wales Fire and Rescue Service Strategic Committee (WFRSSC), and indeed considers it essential to take forward the development of the Service to meet the specific needs of Wales. We agree that there is a need for this committee to be 'a small high level advisory group' as stated, and we envisage that this influential group will include the Chiefs and Chairs of the three fire authorities in Wales. However, the suggested inclusion of a number of external bodies, i.e. business, industry, local authorities, representative bodies, seems to dilute this intention. There is most certainly a need for inclusion of the opinion of many of these bodies further down the chain (as well as other voices in society representing equalities, health, education, age, other emergency services, etc.), but surely not at the highest strategic policy advisory level.

2.2 Q2. We support the drive for consistency of approach across the whole of the UK in the way certain policies are implemented. There are paragraphs in the document that imply that the high level advisory board would be concerned with the detail of day to day working, but this was clearly not the intention.

2. **INFORMATION** *(continued)*

- 2.3 Q3. The questions of cross-borders issues can be adequately dealt with at local level, following Welsh Assembly Government policy and guidance, however the needs of Wales at a UK level would be better addressed via a different route than the WFRSSC.
- 2.4 Q4. Although it is not clear from the document, we have assumed that the proposed new Community Fire Safety (CFS) Committee and the expanded CFS Group are, in fact, one and the same. We would support the continuation of the good work that this group has already begun, and would not wish to see its time being diverted by the introduction of additional tiers of accountability. To this end, we would favour the notion of a 'Group' of people and organisations working together on common issues, as opposed to a formalised 'Committee' operating as part of the existing structure.
- 2.5 Q5. The remit as listed represents a good starting point to meet the priorities and needs of the communities of Wales in relation to fire safety. However, it should be remembered that continuous development will need to take place as matters develop in relation to a continually changing fire and rescue service environment.
- 2.6 Q6. As we are aware that a high number of fire deaths occur in areas of social deprivation or involve individuals who are already known to health and/or social services, we should seek to influence those agencies that are able to bring about improvements in these areas. Similarly, we need to work with those agencies able to influence policies relating to alcohol, smoking and drugs.
The introduction of a 'new' category of fire deaths – namely those described as being 'preventable' – when up to now only definitions of 'accidental' or 'deliberate' have been applied, is incompatible with the existing arrangements. Clear definitions will be required to ensure consistency across all fire authorities.
- 2.7 Q7. The Fire and Rescue Service is fully involved in all of the collaborative partnerships mentioned, and has been for several years. The Service's influence has grown during this time, fuelled as much as anything by a changing culture within the Service.
Although this looks set to continue to gather momentum over the coming years, it is difficult to envisage a process that could force this pace, other than through encouraging the expansion of this influence or by dramatically reducing some of the causal factors such as substance abuse.
- 2.8 Q8. It may well be the case that more could be done to manage risk and promote fire prevention in general in Wales, but insofar as the legislative framework is concerned, all is being done that can be. However, it must be remembered that the lives that are being lost are almost exclusively in premises outside the remit of the legislative framework, namely in domestic dwellings.
- 2.9 Q9. We consider that the Assembly is doing enough to ensure collaboration between the three Fire and Rescue Authorities, although other opportunities are sure to arise in future.

2. **INFORMATION** *(continued)*

- 2.10 Q10. Authorities could open discussions with medical and ambulance service to properly assess the advantages and implications of such a scheme. However, it would probably not be appropriate without first having received a clear indication from the ambulance service that first- or co-responder schemes would improve outcomes for patients.
- 2.11 Q11. The question seems to imply that a conducive atmosphere does not already exist, whereas the opposite is true. Although there may be an argument for better rationalisation, mutual assistance arrangements are well established and have been readily actioned without any difficulty wherever practically feasible and necessary. For example, North Wales Fire Authority has arrangements for providing sea rescue firefighting first response with all the fire authorities that have a coastline between Mid and West Wales and the Scottish border, and also incidents off the coast of the Republic of Ireland.
- 2.12 Q12. It is assumed that this question relates to the major incident protocols outlined in paragraphs 4.17 to 4.20. Many of these protocols are in the stages of being redeveloped under the umbrella of terrorist incidents and New Dimensions. The effectiveness of response to such incidents can only improve following the upgrading of appliances, equipment, training and exercising which has taken place over recent months.
- 2.13 Q13. There will be issues with resilience and cross-border interoperability if England, following regionalisation of Control Rooms, uses different mobilising equipment, techniques and protocols, and operates a different resilience regime.
- 2.14 Q14. It is assumed that this question relates to the section on human resource management, paragraphs 6.8 to 6.10 and 6.23 to 6.26. This being the case, these improvements, if achieved, will help to provide the staff needed in future for the fire and rescue services in Wales.
- 2.15 Q15. Following the full implementation of the Integrated Personal Development System (IPDS) as outlined here, then the developmental needs of our staff will be fully met, but with one notable omission, namely non-uniformed support staff. There appears to be no mention to this group of workers although our understanding of the IPDS is that it is all inclusive, and that the development needs of these members of staff will also be met, to the advantage of the Service.
- 2.16 Q16. It is important that the Framework accurately reflects the final version of the Wales Programme for Improvement (WPI), which is currently under development. In seeking an effective national performance framework, it is worth remembering that Integrated Risk Management Plans (IRMPs) are fundamentally tailored to local risks and needs, and that trying to force these into a national framework may compromise them. However, in terms of the national performance framework for the Welsh fire and rescue services, we consider that the proposals being made do strike the right balance of national and local priorities.

2. **INFORMATION** *(continued)*

- 2.17 Q17. If this question is in relation to the outlining in paragraphs 10.9 to 10.16 in the construction of a database targeted at the problems of domestic fires, then this is a commendable step towards achieving one of our goals. However, this sort of data collection and analysis is only one aspect of our research needs, and is presumably the first step in a longer term research strategy.

3. **General Points:**

- 3.1 Some of the questions are confusing and it is not always evident to which paragraphs they apply.
- 3.2 Some of the headings and sub-headings do not always correctly reflect the content of the section.
- 3.3 There are very few references to equalities or Welsh language issues.
- 3.4 The list of matters that fire authorities should set out in their IRMPs does not exactly match that already published by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM).
- 3.5 Paragraph 9.13 is factually incorrect in that the working group has been set up by the ODPM, not the Audit Commission, and that the Welsh member referred to is an Officer, and not an Authority Member.

4. **RECOMMENDATION**

- 4.1 Members consider the above comments, and agree a response to the draft Fire and Rescue Service National Framework for Wales.