



## **AGENDA ITEM: 14**

### **NORTH WALES FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY**

**22 September 2014**

#### **DEVOLUTION, DEMOCRACY AND DELIVERY WHITE PAPER – REFORMING LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

**Report by Simon Smith, Chief Fire Officer**

#### **Purpose of Report**

- 1 Members are invited to approve the Authority's response to the Welsh Government's White Paper on Devolution Democracy and Delivery – Reforming Local Government.

#### **Background**

- 2 Following on from The Commission on Public Service Governance and Delivery (Williams Commission)'s report which made recommendations about future public service provision in Wales, the Welsh Government has published a White Paper.
- 3 The White Paper 'Reforming Local Government' is the Welsh Government's statement of intent about the future of Local Government. In addition, the White Paper also responds to the Commission's findings relating to partnership and collaboration, and it addresses recommendations for fire and rescue authorities relating to scrutiny and governance.

#### **Information**

- 4 The consultation document was published on 8 July 2014 and responses are to be submitted by 1 October 2014.

- 5 The Chairs, Deputy Chairs, Chief Fire Officers and Deputy Chief Fire Officers of the three fire and rescue authorities in Wales have discussed the White Paper and attached at appendix 1 is the suggested response to the consultation questions.

### **Recommendation**

- 6 Members are asked to approve the response for submission to the Welsh Government.

## Consultation Response Form

Cllr M. Lloyd Davies, Chair

North Wales Fire and  
Rescue Authority

email / telephone number:  
01745 535253

North Wales Fire and  
Rescue Service  
Headquarters,  
Ffordd Salesbury,  
St Asaph Business Park,  
Denbighshire LL17 0JJ

### The future of Local Government – what should we expect of Local Authorities?

<b>Q1</b>	How can Local Authorities engage more effectively with their communities, about the challenges of sustaining services as they are currently delivered and the need for change?
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The challenge of reduced public service funding at a time of growing demand and increasing public expectation is well documented and widely accepted, as is the centrality of demand management as a way of meeting that challenge in future.

Many local authorities, however, have struggled to devote sufficient time and focus on reducing demand because of the multiplicity of services that they are required to provide and the scale of the Welsh Government's ambition. Delivering the full range of public services, aiming to deliver all things to all people is no longer affordable. Furthermore, it is questionable whether attempting to do so, effectively removing the responsibility from individuals to determine their own actions and the consequences of those actions, should be the aim of either central or local government.

Help has to be focused on targeting resources on today's most vulnerable members of the community whilst simultaneously ensuring that tomorrow's communities have the knowledge and opportunities to enable them to protect their own wellbeing without the same level of reliance on public services.

The Fire and Rescue Authorities in Wales have demonstrated that by keeping focused on simple ambitions and working across organisational boundaries it is possible to reduce the level of demand for reactive services. For example,

over the past decade it has seen the number of fires in Wales reduce by 50% (from 26,335 to 13,162) and the number of accidental fire deaths by 21% (from 19 to 15).

We believe that it is only by investing in this approach and reinvesting the savings produced by the success of prevention can a sustainable model be created for the future.

Finally, we believe that central to the success of this Authority's prevention agenda is the existence of boundary co-terminosity with other key partners such as the police, health board and local authorities and would not wish to see this compromised.

<b>Q2</b>	What more could the Welsh Government do to assist Authorities with this dialogue to improve their performance in the delivery of priority services?

<b>Q3</b>	What specific suggestions do you have for reducing and simplifying administration which would free up time and resources to deliver and improve services?

**Reforming Local Government – Strengthening democracy, sustaining and improving services**

<b>Q4</b>	What specific changes should be made to the way in which Local Authorities are currently constituted to ensure openness, transparency and clarity of accountability?
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<b>Q5</b>	How should the scrutiny support programme be shaped to support improvements in the effectiveness of scrutiny?
By: a) being clear what the functions of scrutiny are; and b) applying scrutiny only where it can bring about demonstrable benefit; it should be possible to avoid building layer upon layer of administrative arrangements with very little to show in terms of improvements.	

<b>Q6</b>	In what other ways should scrutiny be strengthened to drive service improvement?

### **Scrutiny and Governance – Fire and Rescue Authorities**

<b>Q7</b>	How might governance and scrutiny of strategic service and financial decisions be best secured?
North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority is pleased to see the recognition of its high performance and continuous improvement in the White paper. It is precisely because of the current governance arrangements, introduced in 1996, that the three Fire and Rescue Authorities in Wales have been able to focus their efforts on prevention activities. This in turn has resulted in significant reductions in the numbers of fires and fire deaths in Wales, out-performing both England and Scotland.	

As a consequence of this, it has been possible to release resources from emergency response in order to focus improvement in the safety of the public in Wales through prevention. The saving to the wider public purse in the reduction in fires can only be estimated but, as an example, the economic cost of a fire death is generally accepted to be in the order of £1.5 million.

Therefore, Members of the North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority do not accept that there is a need to reconstitute Fire and Rescue Authorities in Wales as part of the wider restructure of Local Authorities. The so-called 'need' seems to have been created on the basis of the Fire and Rescue Services Wales 2013 report to the Minister which we have repeatedly argued is a flawed report that presents no evidence to support any such recommendations around structure and governance (recommendations 8 to 12).

The author of that report neither met with representatives of any of the three Fire and Rescue Authorities nor observed any meetings of an Authority in action. The report singularly fails to evidence where these conclusions were drawn from. For example, the report refers to a perceived lack of transparency around funding decisions, which is clearly untrue. North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority's financial decisions are formed through a series of papers which are presented and debated at public meetings of the Executive Panel and the Authority until there is an agreement as to which funding pressures will be met. In the last four years this has been clearly focused on decisions around which changes and cuts would be made, enabling us to make a 10% real terms reduction in our budget. Regular dialogue through an independent treasurer with our constituent authorities has ensured that our budget has mirrored the increase or decrease in Local Authority funding over the last 18 years.

However, North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority is continuously looking to improve its effectiveness through its governance arrangements, and although we believe that this should remain the responsibility of elected members we acknowledge that the current committee system may have become outdated and we would welcome the opportunity to explore alternative options such as a Cabinet model.

## Community Governance

<b>Q8</b>	What suggestions do you have to ensure communities have an effective voice in the decision making process of the new Authorities?
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We agree that communities should be able to contribute effectively to Fire and Rescue Authorities' decision-making. However, the suggestion in the White Paper that, in future, unelected Chief Fire Officers should be given the legal responsibility for planning, managing and delivering an effective Fire and Rescue Service, but that the elected members of the Fire and Rescue Authority should be given only a scrutiny function would seem to run contrary to this aspiration.

Democratically elected members of the Fire and Rescue Authority are in an excellent position to act as champions for the communities they represent. By continuing to be directly involved in the Authority's improvement planning and budget setting decisions before they are implemented they could continue to challenge and scrutinise and hold Chief Fire Officers to account. By reflecting the concerns and ideas of their communities, carrying joint responsibility with officers for the Authority's plans, and reflecting back to the public the rationale and context for why decisions have been made about the Service, members remain pivotal to the co-production and accountability aspects of public service delivery.

Putting the entire decision-making process in the hands of one individual would surely stifle the community voice and actually reduce the current level of public accountability.

<b>Q9</b>	What sort of consultation, engagement and feedback processes should the new Authorities have with communities?
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North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority's experience of consultation exercises reflects the common problem that members of the public respond most strongly when the proposals are immediate and close to home, but tend to remain silent otherwise. A prime example of where this reaction might be anticipated would be in the closure of a fire station. Even if the plans were supported by reasoned and logical argument it would be safe to assume a degree of local resistance.

However, our experience has been that engagement works very well as an ongoing dialogue with partners and various sections of the community and their representatives about the design and shape of service provision. This has helped us, for example, to tailor our safety messages and services to suit particular sections of the community, such as people at higher risk of being involved in a fire or a road traffic collision. A good recent example is the "Revolution" project which was created jointly with the police and with the young drivers it is designed to help. Prevention projects are much more successful with partner organisations who have the knowledge and access to harder-to-reach individuals whom we wish to influence and inform.

North Wales Fire and Rescue Service is currently working with the six counties, police service and university health board in North Wales to develop a more coordinated approach to consultation, and we would welcome further guidance as to how to develop meaningful and cost effective consultation with our communities.

### **National Partnership arrangements**

<b>Q10</b>	How can we best engage with Local Government to take forward a programme of Local Government reform?
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**How do we ensure Local Government performance is improving and continues to improve? – Improving Performance**

<b>Q11</b>	How can we help and encourage Local Authorities to be more proactive in identifying and responding to delivery or governance issues?

<b>Q12</b>	What should be the principles and standards for performance management and performance reporting across Local Authorities, and the broader public sector?

<b>Q13</b>	In what ways could we more effectively use the money we invest in supporting Local Authority improvement?



<b>Q14</b>	Do you have specific suggestions for powers and responsibilities which could be considered for devolution to the new Authorities?

**The future shape of Local Government**

**Facilitating and incentivising voluntary merger**

<b>Q15</b>	Does anything else need to be covered in a power to achieve a voluntary merger?

<b>Q16</b>	Is your Authority considering submitting a proposal for voluntary merger?
No. This does not apply to Fire and Rescue Authorities.	

### Local Authority electoral wards

<b>Q17</b>	Is there anything else we need to do in order to ensure LDBCW is able to effectively consider and make recommendations for electoral arrangements in the proposed Authorities?

### Remuneration of Elected Members

<b>Q18</b>	Is there anything else we need to do in order to ensure the IRP is able to effectively consider and make recommendations for payments to councillors in the proposed merged Authorities and any preceding shadow authorities?
<p>Assuming that the proposed mergers take place, we would like to see the IRP commencing its work early so that it can keep up with the introduction of the new Authorities. That way, there would be a better level of understanding of the increased workloads and responsibilities of councillors in those new Authorities.</p> <p>We would also advocate creating closer links between performance and remuneration.</p>	

### Disposal of property and assets

<b>Q19</b>	Do you agree the proposed power for the Welsh Ministers will be sufficient for disposal of property and assets? If you do not agree the proposed power will be sufficient, what specific problems do you envisage?

<b>Q20</b>	What sort of assistance or guidance might Local Authorities need?

**Collaboration, cooperation and preparation in advance of mergers**

<b>Q21</b>	Is there anything else which should be specified for joint transition committees to do in preparing for a merger of their authorities?

<b>Q22</b>	What other powers might the Welsh Ministers require to prevent harmful damaging behaviour?

**Staffing matters**

<b>Q23</b>	What should be the role and responsibilities of the Staff Commission?
<p>We have no specific comments to make but would emphasise that that pay and conditions of service for all members of fire and rescue authorities are determined jointly at a UK level and that this must be taken into account.</p>	

<b>Q24</b>	Is anything else needed to prepare the way for merging Local Authorities?

**Local Government Funding – Council Tax**

<b>Q25</b>	What would be the most equitable approach to raising revenues for local services?

**Other issues**

<b>Q26</b>	We have asked a number of specific questions. If you have any related issues which we have not specifically addressed, please use this space to report them:

Responses to consultations are likely to be made public, on the internet or in a report. If you would prefer your response to remain anonymous, please tick here: