

Julie James AS/MS
Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros Lywodraeth Leol, Tai a Chynllunio
Cabinet Secretary for Housing, Local Government and Planning



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Ein cyf/Our ref MA JJ 0952 24

Jenny Rathbone MS
Chair, Equality and Social Justice Committee
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11 April 2024

Dear Jenny,

Thank you for your letter of 18 March to the then Deputy Minister for Social Partnership posing further questions relating to the Committee's current inquiry into Fire and Rescue Authority (FRA) governance. Fire matters now fall within my portfolio, and my responses are as follows.

Reviews in North Wales and Mid and West Wales FRAs

Your letter refers to the then Deputy Minister's written statement of 11 March, when she noted that allegations of staff misconduct in North Wales and Mid and West Wales had been made; and that in light of those allegations, independent reviews of those organisations were merited. You also quote the Chief Fire Officer (CFO) of Mid and West Wales, and the Chair of North Wales FRA, who welcomed these developments and the scrutiny that the reviews will provide.

I do not think there is any conflict between these statements. All agree (as do I) that it is important to have full assurance about workplace cultures and management practices in both organisations. Individual acts of misconduct, while wholly deplorable, do not of themselves establish that the situation is as it was in South Wales, where the workplace culture was oppressive and discriminatory, and management processes were dysfunctional. An independent review is the best way of doing this.

NWFRA and MWWFRA will commission and oversee the reviews, and your detailed questions about appointments, timings and terms of reference should be addressed to them. I expect only that the reviews will be headed by someone of suitable standing from

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

outside the Fire and Rescue Service, that they will engage openly and extensively with current and former staff, and that they will report as soon as possible.

Inspection and audit

I addressed most of the issues you raised in your letter in my evidence paper to the Committee, and have little to add to that.

The only recent change to the inspection regime in England of which I am aware is the move last year from a four-point scale of graded judgements (outstanding / good / requires improvement / inadequate) to a five-point one (which has an “adequate” grade between “good” and “requires improvement”). I do not think that materially changes the overall regime or its strengths and weaknesses. As I said in my evidence paper, there are pros and cons for that approach, but one cannot expect it always to detect or prevent management and cultural failings – as indeed it has not in England.

Chief Fire and Rescue Advisor

The Chief Fire and Rescue Advisor (CFRA) was appointed by the Queen under s28 of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 to inquire into how FRAs are exercising their functions; and to advise the Welsh Government and FRAs accordingly. As a former CFO, his primary focus is rightly on operational matters, which form his main area of expertise. However, that does not preclude him from inquiring into matters of organisational culture and management, especially because these can all too easily affect operational performance. The current CFRA has therefore been very closely involved in decision-making around the South Wales intervention, and about the position elsewhere in Wales.

The CFRA is also a permanent Welsh Government civil servant. It would not be normal or appropriate for civil servants to meet political appointees like FRA Chairs on their own account; that is the role of Ministers. Accordingly, and in line with his status as a professional advisor on operational matters, the CFRA deals mostly with the CFOs and other FRS staff.

You also ask about the former Deputy Minister’s meetings with FRA Chairs over the past three years. There were 21 such meetings, which I have set out in the annex to this letter. The CFRA and/or other Welsh Government officials attended all of these meetings to support her; they also meet the CFOs every three weeks, and the CFOs and other FRS staff frequently in other forums and *ad hoc*. I cannot agree with the views of Cllr Bradwick which you quote in your letter, that engagement was inadequate.

HMICFRS recommendations

You asked about the former Deputy Minister’s correspondence with the FRAs following the report from His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services of March 2023 about the culture of FRSs in England. This is attached, in the form of the letter to the CFO of North Wales FRS (the others were substantially identical), along with the replies received. Please note that these documents exist only in English, reflecting the CFOs’ language preferences.

Training of FRA Members

Training and induction of FRA Members is a matter for the FRA concerned; the WLGA may also be able to offer support in this area. I cannot comment on the content of such training.

Social Partnership Forum

The former Deputy Minister established the Social Partnership Forum for Fire and Rescue Services in January 2023, and chaired all its meetings. The membership includes:

- the three FRA Chairs (for SWFRA, now one of the Commissioners rather than the Chair)
- all recognised trade unions and representative bodies in the sector (Fire Brigades Union, Fire and Rescue Services Association, Fire Officers Association, Fire Leaders Association, GMB, UNISON and Unite)
- the WLGA
- the Welsh Government (in the form of the CFRA)

The CFOs and other officials attend in an advisory capacity, but are not full members of the Forum.

I am happy to share agendas and minutes of the Forum. I have attached agreed minutes (which also reflect the agendas) for meetings up to October 2023, and the agenda for the meeting of 11 March 2024 (the minutes of which will be agreed at the next meeting). I will also arrange for future agendas and minutes to be passed to the Committee. Please note that these documents exist only in English, reflecting the language preferences of Forum members.

Yours sincerely



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Annex – Ministerial meetings with FRA Chairs 2021-2024

Date	Present / location	Meeting type	Duration
17 March 2021	All FRA Chairs and CFOs, online	General discussion	45 minutes
7 July 2021	All FRA Chairs and CFOs, online	General discussion	1 hour
9 September 2021	SWFRA Chair and SWFRS CFO and staff, SWFRA headquarters, Llantrisant	Discussion and presentation of Healthy Hillside wildfire reduction programme	2 hours
13 January 2022	All FRA Chairs and CFOs, online	General discussion	1 hour
31 March 2022	NWFRA Chair and NWFRS CFO and staff, Wrexham fire station	Discussion with female firefighters about women's experiences in the Service, and general discussion with Chair / CFO	2 hours
7 April 2022	MWWFRA Chair and MWWFRS CFO and staff, Earlswood training centre, Neath	Demonstration of training facilities and general discussion with Chair / CFO	90 minutes
7 April 2022	SWFRA Chair and SWFRS CFO and staff, Cardiff Gate training centre	Recruit pass-out ceremony and general discussion with Chair / CFO	90 minutes
21 September 2022	SWFRA Chair and SWFRS CFO and staff, Cardiff International Whitewater Centre	Water rescue skills demonstration and general discussion with Chair / CFO	2 hours
22 September 2022	MWWFRA Chair and MWWFRS CFO and staff, Welshpool fire station	Meeting with duty watch and general discussion with Chair / CFO	2 hours
29 September 2022	NWFRA Chair and NWFRS CFO and staff, Rhyl fire station	Meeting with new recruit cadre, and general discussion with Chair / CFO	90 minutes
13 December 2022	SWFRA Chair, online	Discussion of news reports of misconduct by SWFRS staff	1 hour
26 January 2023	All FRA Chairs and CFOs, Tŷ Hywel, Cardiff	Social Partnership Forum for Fire and Rescue Services	90 minutes
8 March 2023	All FRA Chairs and CFOs, online	General discussion	1 hour
19 April 2023	SWFRA Chair and SWFRS CFO and staff, Whitchurch fire station, Cardiff	Opening of new urban search and rescue facility	90 minutes
26 April 2023	All FRA Chairs and CFOs, Pierhead Building, Cardiff	Social Partnership Forum for Fire and Rescue Services	1 hour

Date	Present / location	Meeting type	Duration
4 July 2023	Counsel General and all FRA Chairs, online	Discussion of UK Government's Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill	30 minutes
5 July 2023	All FRA Chairs and CFOs, Tŷ Hywel, Cardiff	Social Partnership Forum for Fire and Rescue Services	90 minutes
14 September 2023	All FRA Chairs and CFOs, WG office, Llandudno Junction, and online	General discussion	1 hour
25 October 2023	All FRA Chairs and CFOs, Pierhead Building, Cardiff	Social Partnership Forum for Fire and Rescue Services	90 minutes
8 January 2024	SWFRA Chair and SWFRS CFO, online	Discussion of cultural review report by Fenella Morris KC	1 hour
11 March 2024	MWWFRA and NWFRA Chairs, SWFRA Commissioners and all CFOs, Cathays Park, Cardiff	Social Partnership Forum for Fire and Rescue Services	90 minutes

The Deputy Minister also had three meetings with CFOs which the relevant Chairs were unable to attend: on 7 October 2021 with the CFO of MWWFRS at Llanwrtyd fire station, and on 30 September 2021 and 18 May 2023 with the CFO of NWFRS at its headquarters in St Asaph.