

# WLGA Evidence: Equality and Social Justice Committee Inquiry – Fire and Rescue Services

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## **Introduction**

### **Welsh Local Government Association - The Voice of Welsh Councils**

We are The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA); a politically led cross party organisation that seeks to give local government a strong voice at a national level. We represent the interests of local government and promote local democracy in Wales.

The 22 councils in Wales are our members and the 3 fire and rescue authorities and 3 national park authorities are associate members.

### **We believe that the ideas that change people's lives, happen locally.**

Communities are at their best when they feel connected to their council through local democracy. By championing, facilitating, and achieving these connections, we can build a vibrant local democracy that allows communities to thrive.

**Our ultimate goal** is to promote, protect, support and develop democratic local government and the interests of councils in Wales.

### **We'll achieve our vision by**

- Promoting the role and prominence of councillors and council leaders
- Ensuring maximum local discretion in legislation or statutory guidance
- Championing and securing long-term and sustainable funding for councils
- Promoting sector-led improvement
- Encouraging a vibrant local democracy, promoting greater diversity
- Supporting councils to effectively manage their workforce



## **Inquiry – Fire and Rescue Services**

### **Background**

#### Relationship Between the WLGA and the FRAs in Wales

Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) are part of the local government family. The Fire and Rescue Authorities in Wales are Associate members of the WLGA. Each of the FRAs nominate a representative to sit on the WLGA Council and a collective representative sits on the WLGA Executive Board. The Association's role is to act as the representative body of the FRAs in Wales; to support the FRAs in their role; and to advocate for and lobby on behalf of the FRAs to Welsh Government and the UK Government as appropriate.

The WLGA also hosts the WLGA Fire and Rescue Panel which is Chaired by one of the WLGA's Social Justice Spokespeople and is made up of the Chairs and Deputy Chairs of each FRA and each Chief Fire Officer. The Panel's aims are to:

- Help develop further the relationship between the WLGA and the three Fire and Rescue Authorities
- Enable discussion between the three Fire and Rescue Authorities and the WLGA on key strategic issues
- Help facilitate the development of an all Wales approach where appropriate
- Raise issues of concern and/or reflect views to the Welsh Government.

Members of the WLGA also participate alongside FRA members in Welsh Government meetings including the Fire and Rescue Consultative Forum and the Social Partnership Forum for Fire and Rescue Services. The WLGA occasionally attends Chairs and Chiefs meetings with Welsh Government.

Councils are also the most significant funder of the work of FRAs in Wales through a levy the FRA submits to the constituent councils each year. This is a significant amount of money and there is scrutiny of proposals by each council on what financial request is being made by the FRA before the final budget is set. Over recent years, councils have been very clear in the need for FRAs to fully consider and reflect the wider financial context facing public services and pressures when setting their budgets.

The WLGA is also the employers organisation for local government in Wales and represents Fire and Rescue Authorities as a member of the Employers' Sides of the National Joint Council for Local Authority Fire and Rescue Services, the Middle Managers' Negotiating Body, and the National Joint Council for Brigade Managers of Local Authority Fire and



Rescue Services on matters relating to the workforce, including pay negotiations and any changes to Terms and Conditions.

### Independent Review into the Culture and Values of South Wales Fire and Rescue Service

The WLGA received updates on the progress of the Independent Review into the Culture and Values at SWFRS via discussions at the WLGA Fire and Rescue Panel and at meetings of the Social Partnership for Fire. The Association was supportive of the Review and was committed to working with SWFRA, and the other FRAS as appropriate, in order to assist in the implementation of its recommendations and to share learning.

Following the publication of the Independent Review Report in January 2024 the WLGA published press releases in response to the report on behalf of the WLGA<sup>1</sup> and on behalf of the 10 constituent councils<sup>2</sup>. The WLGA Leader, Cllr Andrew Morgan and the Spokesperson for Fire and Rescue Services, Cllr Lis Burnett also wrote to the Chair of the Fire and Rescue Authority, Cllr Steve Bradwick, copied to all FRA members and the Chairs of the other Welsh Fire and Rescue Authorities, stressing the importance of fully accepting the report and its recommendations and highlighting the leadership required to fully implement and successfully make and embed the changes required to address the findings of the report and improve the working culture of the Service. As an associate member of the WLGA, the offer of support was also provided to both the Service and Authority in making the changes needed.

The WLGA also encouraged the other Welsh FRAs to reflect and act upon the recommendations as appropriate and necessary, and the Morris Report will be a key agenda item for discussion at the next WLGA Fire and Rescue Forum.

The WLGA Executive Board received a report in February informing WLGA members on the outcome of the Morris review, also updating members on the actions Welsh Government had taken in response.

The WLGA is clear that there are lessons in the report for other public bodies as no organisation is immune from bad behaviour occurring or the wrong culture developing, either in departments or across the whole organisation. Other recent similar reports have found similar bad practices in other organisations and similarly, lessons can be learnt from those reviews, for example, recent experiences in S4C and the Welsh Rugby Union and at a UK level, reviews undertaken for the Metropolitan Police and the London Fire Brigade.

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<sup>1</sup> [WLGA Responds to Investigation of South Wales Fire and Rescue Service - WLGA](#)

<sup>2</sup> [South Wales Councils Respond to Investigation of South Wales Fire and Rescue Service - WLGA](#)



## Fire and Rescue Governance

The WLGA has not formally considered and debated the issue of Fire and Rescue Governance since its response to the Welsh Government White Paper in 2019.<sup>3</sup> In its response to the White Paper the Association did not believe, at that time, that significant changes were needed, nor that the case for change had been made, but fully accepted that there was always scope for continual improvement and set out a number of areas where it would welcome further discussion and exploration.

The Association is also cognisant of the work being undertaken by Audit Wales in relation to FRS Governance and we await the outcome of their review. It is also noted that the Terms of Reference for the Commissioners in South Wales FRS includes the objective to: ‘develop proposals for the future governance of SWFRA which are most likely to minimise the risk of further such failings’. The WLGA has yet to fully discuss and agree a formal position in relation to governance and will consider the findings of the Audit Wales report and also any recommendations in relation to future FRA governance which may emerge from South Wales.

However, at its February meeting members of the WLGA Executive Board agreed a broad set of principles which the Association proposes should underpin any recommendations around future changes to the governance and accountability for Fire and Rescue Services which the Association would wish to share with the Committee as part of its inquiry. These principles are set out as follows:

- Fire and Rescue should remain part of the local government family.
- Local Authorities should continue to nominate members to serve on FRAs.
- FRAs should remain as separate and distinct entities with the same boundaries as now.
- The WLGA does not support the transference of control of FRs to Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs).
- Members of FRAs could be appointed from LA Cabinets, although consideration would need to be given to capacity; political balance of FRAs; and whether amendments could be made to the current limit on LA Cabinet sizes.

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<sup>3</sup> [Download.aspx \(wlga.wales\)](#)



- Proportional representation is supported based on being reflective of population numbers and the levels of funding provided to the FRA.
- Whilst there is no limitation on current FRAs to co-opt a member for specific issues or to obtain external specialist advice, there may be areas where non-executive members could add value, particularly in relation to scrutiny and challenge, but further discussion is needed on this. Should there be non-executive members on FRAs, the WLGA believes that local authorities or FRAs should be responsible for the appointment process, following a fair and open competition as is the case for local authority lay members on Audit and Standards Committees currently.
- While there are discussions with councils as to the financial needs of FRSs as part of the levy setting process, in the longer-term, councils would prefer the funding mechanism to be changed to a precept model rather than a levy which they believe would bring more transparency for the public on the way in which FRSs are funded.

## **Issues Arising from the Current Intervention in South Wales FRS and Implications for Governance**

On 6<sup>th</sup> February 2024, the Deputy Minister for Social Partnership announced that in the wake of the Independent Report into the Culture and Values of South Wales Fire and Rescue Service she had conferred the functions of the South Wales Fire and Rescue Authorities to Welsh Government appointed Commissioners. The appointment of Commissioners to run and take on the functions of a Fire and Rescue Authority is an unprecedented move in Wales and as such there is a lack of clarity on how relationships and engagement with local authorities will be pursued moving forward, with the nominated elected members from each authority to the FRA having previously been a key link between individual councils, local communities and the FRA.

The Terms of Reference that have been set by Welsh Government for the Commissioners cover issues wider than implementing the recommendations from the Culture Review report. It is important that there is full understanding among councils and partners of the role, responsibilities and functions of the Commissioners as set out in the Terms of Reference and, as their work progresses, there is a need to consider and identify whether there are any potential implications from decisions or actions Commissioners take, or recommendations from the Commissioners to Welsh Government, that could affect the relationship between the constituent councils and what was the FRA and/or the other FRAs in Wales.



The WLGA and the constituent councils are keen to establish good working relationships with the Commissioners, offering support and assistance as may be helpful and ensuring councils are fully engaged in their work as is appropriate. An initial meeting has already taken place at the beginning of March between Commissioners and the WLGA Spokesperson for Fire and Rescue and the WLGA Spokesperson for Workforce.

The 10 South Wales Leaders have recently met and identified a number of concerns and outstanding questions about the implications for councils and local communities following this action by Welsh Government. There are a range of issues that remain unclear and there has been limited communication and information with the councils so far, despite councils being the significant funder of FRAs. The Leaders are seeking meetings with both the Deputy Minister and the Commissioners to gain a better understanding of any role councils will play in supporting the Commissioners and ensuring they are kept informed, and views sought, as their work continues.

## **Member Development and Training**

Member Training and Development for members of the FRAs are provided by the FRs in Wales through their comprehensive Member Development Strategies and Training Programmes. These will cover areas such as: Code of Conduct and Ethics; Induction Training for Chairs and Vice Chairs; Corporate Budget Planning; Treasury Management; Scrutiny Training; Independent Development Review; and Communications and Social Media. In addition, as a result of the dynamic legislative and regulatory environment within which FRs operate, Members have been receiving regular Business Fire Safety briefings and training to ensure they are aware of any changes which impact how the services are provided, as well as regular briefing sessions on other current issues such as Fire and Rescue Service culture and governance, contaminant issues, and any other matters that may arise. Authority Members also accompany Officers to conferences such as CIPFA, WLGA, LGA and others.

In addition to the training and development provided by the FRs, all elected members will receive a broad range of training and development opportunities through their respective home authorities' member training and development programmes, which will assist them in their roles. The WLGA works with local authorities across Wales to help provide this important support to councillors, working in partnership with the councillors themselves and the officers who support them. For example, the Association produced a series of e-learning modules for councils ahead of the last local government elections which were made available to all local authorities, FRAs and National Parks Associations. The WLGA has also developed a number of National Frameworks which are used by local authorities and FRAs including the Member Development Charter (now Wales Councillor Support Self Evaluation Framework), Member Role Descriptions and Member Competency Framework.



## **Conclusion**

The WLGA hopes that the information provided is helpful as part of the Committee's Inquiry. If you have any queries, please see contact details provided.

