

CABINET SECRETARY FOR HOUSING, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND PLANNING MEETING WITH SOUTH WALES FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY COMMISSIONERS – 25 APRIL 2024

Present

Julie James, MS – Cabinet Secretary for Housing, Local Government and Planning
Vijith Randeniya – South Wales FRA Commissioner
Kirsty Williams - South Wales FRA Commissioner
Carl Foulkes - South Wales FRA Commissioner
Baroness Debbie Wilcox - South Wales FRA Commissioner
Karin Phillips - Deputy Director, Community Safety Division
Dan Stephens - Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser
Steve Pomeroy - Head of Fire Services Branch
Kerry Citric – Fire Services Branch
Steph Wood – Private Secretary to Cabinet Secretary for Housing, Local Government and Planning
William Parry – Assistant Private Secretary to Cabinet Secretary for Housing, Local Government and Planning

1. The Cabinet Secretary thanked the Commissioners for taking on the role of implementing change in South Wales Fire and Rescue Service (SWFRS). The Cabinet Secretary indicated that she wanted to have an early discussion about the following matters :

- Their experience so far
- Their early thoughts on an exit strategy
- The need for diversity in the decision-making process.

The Commissioners Experience in SWFRA

2. The Commissioners provided the following observations on the intervention to date :-

- Their initial assessment of the position of the service supported the Welsh Government's decision to intervene.
- The breadth of the challenge was greater than they had anticipated.
- They had mapped action against their terms of reference and put in place the structures to deliver the required programme of work. A Director of Transformation had been appointed and the advertisement of the appointment of a permanent Chief Executive/Chief Fire Officer was imminent.
- They had identified some talent in the Service as well as opportunities for new ideas and ways of working.
- They believed that one of their key early challenges was to create the conditions necessary for change by building trust and effectively

communicating and involving staff in developments (such as the recruitment processes for senior appointments).

- Engagement with all stakeholders, including Unions was also key.

Exit Strategy

3. The Cabinet Secretary indicated that she had spoken to the Leaders of two, and the Chief Executive of one, of the ten SWFRA constituent Local Authorities and that she would hold further discussions with all of the Local Authorities about FRA governance arrangements. The Cabinet Secretary pointed out that it was important that the South Wales constituent Local Authorities knew and understood the Commissioners' role and terms of reference, the actions that were being undertaken in SWFRA and the emerging role for LAs as part of the intervention exit strategy.

4. The Cabinet Secretary explained that future governance arrangements for FRAs would be informed by Commissioners' feedback, the views of Local Authorities and the WLGA; the size of the FRA, and the selection of members, including the potential for Welsh Government direct appointments, were all issues to be considered. The Cabinet Secretary indicated the importance of taking into account the experience of governance arrangements elsewhere and referenced the National Parks. The Cabinet Secretary indicated she planned to have discussions with the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales in due course.

5. The Commissioners indicated that they had already met with WLGA members Cllr Lis Burnett and Cllr Jane Gebbie, and the Commissioners and the Interim CFO were also going to undertake a programme of engagement with the Leaders and Chief Executives of all of the constituent Local Authorities.

6. The Commissioners explained they were not yet in a position to provide a firm timeframe, but their initial view was that there could be an exit from the intervention when it was clear management structures and the culture of the organisation had improved to the point that the FRS was able to support its own programme of improvement and that future governance arrangements had been agreed. The Cabinet Secretary confirmed she would give further consideration to the exit strategy and broader issues of FRA governance and officials would discuss parameters with the Commissioners in more detail.

7. The Cabinet Secretary indicated that she would invite Commissioners to one of her future meetings with Local Authorities for further discussions.

Diversity in Decision Making

8. The Cabinet Secretary referred to her concerns about the lack of diversity in strategic decision-making processes which was not unique to SWFRA, and this encompassed elected members as well as senior managers. The Cabinet Secretary indicated that it was important to focus on improving representation at a senior level. The Commissioners acknowledged that there was a lack of diversity in the FRS generally.

9. It was noted that the Welsh Government planned to resume collecting equality and diversity data from the FRAs. The Cabinet Secretary indicated that she would like to see data that was more extensive than standard grouping of staff in post, for instance data on new external appointments/recruits.

10. The Commissioners indicated they would share the equality and diversity data that they had collated with the Cabinet Secretary.

Future Engagement

11. The Cabinet Secretary indicated that she would keep abreast of the progress that the Commissioners were making and also keep them updated on broader discussions that she was having with wider stakeholders, including local government. The Cabinet Secretary confirmed a structure for that engagement would be put in place which would include her chairing some of the monthly Intervention Board meetings.