

Awdurdod Tân ac Achub Gogledd Cymru

North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority

Cadeirydd yr Awdurdod Tân ac Achub
Pencadlys y Gwasanaeth Tân ac Achub
Ffordd Salesbury, Parc Busnes Llanelwy
Llanelwy, Sir Dinbych. LL17 0JJ
Ffôn: 01745 535250
www.gwastan-gogcymru.org.uk



Chair of the Fire and Rescue Authority
Fire and Rescue Service Headquarters
Ffordd Salesbury, St. Asaph Business Park
St. Asaph, Denbighshire. LL17 0JJ
Telephone: 01745 535250
www.nwales-fireservice.org.uk

To: petitions@senedd.wales

NWFRA
21 December 2023
Ask for: Lisa Allington
01745 352 688

members.services@northwalesfire.gov.wales

Dear Mr Sargeant,

Re: Petition P-06-1363 Save our Fire and Rescue Service

I am writing in response to your letter on behalf of the Petitions Committee dated 25th October 2023, in connection with the petition highlighted above and the Fire Authority's Emergency Cover Review.

Firstly, to provide Members with clarity regarding consultation timelines, the Emergency Cover Review (ECR) Consultation ran from the 21st of July to the 30th of September 2023. It generated good engagement from the people of North Wales with a total of 1,726 responses. More than 400 people attended community engagement events and more than 480 attended Equality, Diversity and Inclusion sessions. The deadline for consultation responses was midnight on the 30th of September and the North Wales Fire Authority ECR Working Group have met on several occasions since then to discuss the consultation outcomes and options. A full Fire Authority meeting took place on Monday the 18th of December 2023, during which FA Members decided not to progress with any of the options proposed and to continue with the current level of emergency cover. The options considered included the options as consulted on, a variation of option 1 and an option developed and proposed by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU).

Secondly, I would like to take this opportunity to respond to some of the concerns raised in the petitions supporting correspondence ref: P-06-1363 Save our Fire and Rescue Service, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 03.10.23.

Clwyd West MS Darren Millar contacted us regarding his concerns in September 2023 and was provided with further data and analysis in response to these. The impacts of each option on the Clwyd West constituency, Denbighshire and North Wales as a whole, were summarised, including the following:

The consultation options aim to provide a more equitable emergency response across our communities, considering the wide range of incidents that NWFRS respond to, including flooding, wildfires, road traffic collisions, house fires, industrial incidents, water rescues and so on.

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Seasonal population changes were considered during the consultation option development and whilst NWFRS's incident volume shows some degree of seasonality with March, April and May tending to be busier than the winter months, there is no evidence of incident peaks related to holiday period population movements or variations.

Mr Millar also referenced alternative options proposed by firefighters that maintained the current response model in Rhyl. I would like to reassure Mr Millar and the Petitions Committee Members that staff and the main firefighters' representative body the FBU, were engaged throughout option development, consultation and post consultation option refinement.

In addition to Mr Millar's response, I have some concerns regarding the accuracy of the information which is referred to as additional reading, and I will attempt to address these in the order that they appear in the P-06-1364 correspondence. The Authority is required to set a balanced revenue budget which must be approved by the full Authority before the commencement of the financial year.

The budget setting process for 2023/24 highlighted the significant budget challenges and financial constraints being experienced across the public sector and recognised the need to identify measures to further reduce the budget requirement.

The Authority approved the net revenue budget for 2023/24 of £43.314 million at its meeting of 16th January 2023 following a series of Member planning meetings. This represents the amount to be levied against constituent local authorities and although it represented a year on year increase of 9.9%, it included the requirement to deliver £1.4million of in year savings and address the impact of the Welsh Government's decision to remove financial support of £0.4 million towards the emergency services national network.

A further amendment was made following the reallocation of £1.08 million of Welsh Government funding which was moved from hypothecated grant received directly, into the revenue support grant issued to local authorities. This change is cost neutral to the local authorities although the net budget to be levied increased to £44.394 million.

The pay negotiations for firefighters concluded in February 2023 for both the 2022/23 and 2023/24 financial years with an increase of 7% and 5% respectively. This is payable from July each year and is above the planning assumptions used when setting the 2022/23 and 2023/24 budgets. All pay awards are subject to national negotiations, the timescales of which are outside of the control of the Authority.

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Consequently, the underlying financial challenge faced by the Authority for 2023/24 is a recurring shortfall of £2.4 million. In the short-term, it is proposed that the cost pressure will be managed through temporary changes to service delivery in respect of response times and prevention work, deferring expenditure and the use of reserves.

The actions taken avoided the need to raise a supplemental levy during 2023/24 and allowed Fire and Rescue Authority Members the opportunity to consider the options arising from the Emergency Cover Review to provide future financial awareness and stability.

The new training facility that is referenced, is not intrinsically linked to the Emergency Cover Review. Our main training facility at Dolgellau fire station continues to be used for operational training; however, it requires significant investment to extend its medium-term life span for risk critical breathing apparatus and firefighting tactics training and cannot be considered as a long-term option. We want to continue to improve our training provision and be able to provide the very best training facilities for our firefighters, which will in turn ensure we can provide the best possible response and protection services to our communities across North Wales and be able to respond professionally and safely to a wide variety of different types of incidents.

We have identified a site for a new training centre in Denbighshire on the A55 corridor and the final details of the business case continue to be developed.

The suggestion that there is a culture of spending and wastage is simply not true. NWFRS have extended the use of their fire appliances some two years above that of neighbouring FRs. We work collaboratively across the three Welsh FRs during larger procurement projects to ensure we source the best value when purchasing equipment and PPE. NWFRS enter onto national frameworks when possible to get the most cost effective, proven solution for the equipment we utilise and we regularly review and extend the useable lifespan of the equipment we supply our firefighters within safe and legal parameters.

The Fire Authority's Budget Scrutiny Group review in great detail department and staffing costs across the Service and have indeed identified potential savings against the 2024/25 budget forecast made prior to the Emergency Cover Review consultation. The decision made by the Fire Authority on the 18th of December, not to progress with any of the ECR options proposed and to continue with the current level of emergency cover, will mean the budget for 2024/25 can now be agreed.

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It is heartening that we will be able to achieve this without the loss of any firefighter jobs and without the loss of any of our fire stations. We now will turn our attention to working with our stakeholders to explore how we can work together, within our budget, to provide alternative improvements to emergency cover that meet the needs of our communities across North Wales.

The Emergency Cover Review has been moving at some pace since the close of consultation, with additional meetings beyond the standard schedule taking place, so I apologise for the delay in response.

I hope that this information is useful to Members and if you have any further queries, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Kind Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Dylan Rees'.

Cllr Dylan Rees
Chair of the Fire Authority

