# WRITTEN STATEMENT

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# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE** | **Broadening the role of firefighters** |
| **DATE** | **06 December 2021** |
| **BY** | **Hannah Blythyn MS, Deputy Minister for Social Partnership** |

In March of this year, I and the then Minister for Health and Social Services informed the Senedd of our plans to develop a broader role for the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS), in particular to support the NHS. Discussions between senior FRS and NHS managers had identified clear potential for firefighters to respond to certain medical emergencies and to people who had fallen but were uninjured, and to help prevent falls in the home. Doing so should lead to better health outcomes and yield significant savings.

Since then, detailed discussions have continued on the vital scoping and specification of this role. We, the FRS and the NHS, need to be absolutely clear about the tasks which firefighters might be called upon to do, that they can carry out those tasks effectively, and that them doing so will yield positive outcomes. I remain confident that we and our partners will produce a comprehensive specification that will make a real and beneficial difference.

We also need to be assured that the FRS has the capacity to take on a broader role without jeopardising its core functions. Without that assurance there would be a potential risk to the safety both of firefighters and of those to whom they respond. To address that, our Chief Fire and Rescue Advisor, Dan Stephens, has recently completed an in-depth review of the FRS’s capacity and capability to assume a broader role. We are publishing the report today, and it is available at [Fire and rescue service capacity: thematic review | GOV.WALES](https://gov.wales/fire-and-rescue-service-capacity-thematic-review)

Dan Stephens’ report concludes that there is clear scope for broadening the role. Even at our busiest fire stations, appliances are deployed to emergency calls for around 7-8% of the time. That is, of course, something to be proud of; it reflects the great success the FRS has had in preventing fires in recent years. But it also makes clear that there is, in principle, scope to build on this.

The report also shows that fire incidents peak during the evening, for instance as a result of domestic cooking fires. By contrast, cardiac arrests and falls tend to occur more in the morning. Falls prevention work – which would be a natural extension of the FRS’s current programme of home fire safety visits – would also take place mostly during the daytime. Accommodating such a role may look relatively straightforward.

However, the challenge that the Chief Advisor has analysed in detail, is that firefighters’ jobs encompass much more than simply responding to fires. They need recurrent training to ensure high levels of competence in the wide range of equipment and techniques they need to use, and to maintain that equipment in prime condition. Firefighters also need to undertake risk reduction work, including fire safety visits to homes, schools and other places, and gathering information about premises at particular risk of fire. All of this is essential for the FRS to provide a swift, safe and effective response to fires and other emergencies. Currently, this activity can be, and is, conducted in between emergency responses; taking on a broader role could, potentially, significantly reduce the time available for these essential tasks.

One way to resolve this would be to undertake training and other station-based activities during the quieter periods of the night shift. Currently, wholetime firefighters work a 15-hour night shift, and within that there is a 7-hour period between midnight and 7am when firefighters may rest if they are not responding to emergency calls. This time could be used for training, freeing up time during the day shift to discharge a broader role. To do that would necessitate shortening the length of the night shift, as without the current rest period the 9-hour interval between successive night shifts would create an unacceptable risk of fatigue.

Consequently, changes to current working practices may be necessary if the FRS is to take on a broader role safely. Indeed, the Chief Advisor’s report has concluded that such changes may be necessary in any event, as the report presents evidence that not enough time currently is given to training and risk reduction work. There are also concerns that existing shift patterns may not comply with HSE guidance on managing the risk of fatigue that need to be considered urgently.

These are matters for our Fire and Rescue Authorities, not for the Welsh Government. But I would expect them to consider the findings of the review carefully, and to take all appropriate action arising from it. Keeping our firefighters safe is clearly among their top priorities, and this report contains important recommendations in that respect.

The changes that the report considers and outlines would also be significant for the workforce. Accordingly, both myself and my officials have already discussed these issues with the Fire Brigades Union and with other representative bodies and will continue to work with them and the FRAs in our wider aim of broadening the Service’s role. I would expect Fire and Rescue Authorities to agree any changes to working practices with firefighters and their representative bodies, in a clear spirit of social partnership.

This is a challenging and ambitious agenda, but one which offers real potential to maximise the public value of our Fire Service. I will provide Members with a further update in due course.