



Equality and Social Justice Committee report - *Sounding the Alarm: the Governance of Fire and Rescue Services*

Welsh Government Response

July 2024

Conclusion 1

The controversy regarding the appointment of the Interim CFO for South Wales has potentially reinforced negative perceptions amongst FRS staff of senior management. It is vital that every effort is made to restore confidence in the intervention through meaningful engagement with staff in all aspects and at every stage of the process for achieving cultural change.

Welsh Government Response

Accept. We have emphasised the importance of this to the Commissioners, who are committed to effective engagement with all staff throughout their tenure. This has included an overhaul of internal communications within South Wales Fire and Rescue Service (SWFRS) and a programme of personal visits by Commissioners to fire stations and other locations.

Recommendation 1

We recommend that the Welsh Government works closely with the Fire Commissioners (and in due course the other services in North and Mid and West Wales) to bring fresh individuals with skills and experiences from outside the sector and, where desirable, beyond Wales into key posts, especially posts that have the most impact in terms of wider organisational culture. To fulfil this recommendation the Welsh Government should work with the Fire Commissioners to:

- *Consider how to attract candidates from a more diverse range of backgrounds with a particular focus on attracting women leaders into senior management roles.*
- *Consider using the recruitment of a new Chief Fire Officer for South Wales as an opportunity to potentially recruit someone from outside the sector into that role.*
- *Ensure that staff within South Wales FRS are engaged meaningfully in a spirit of social partnership in the recruitment process.*

Welsh Government Response

Accept. As above we, have worked with the Commissioners on this and will continue to do so. The Commissioners fully support the need to encourage a diversity of applicants and to engage with staff in the selection process.

Applications for the post of permanent Chief Fire Officer / Chief Officer in SWFRS closed on 27 May. Advertising the alternative role of Chief Officer was expressly aimed at attracting candidates from a non-firefighting background. The Commissioners announced the appointment of Air Vice Marshal Dr Fin Monahan as the permanent Chief Fire Officer on 10 July.

All shortlisted candidates for this post were subject to an engagement exercise involving panels of staff members and union representatives, as part of the selection process. The Commissioners took the same approach to appointing the Director of Transformation in April.

We will also engage with the other FRAs to ensure this approach is used across Wales.

Recommendation 2

The Welsh Government, in respect of the North Wales and Mid and West Wales Culture Reviews, should align the Terms of Reference as closely as possible to the parameters of the Morris Review to aid comparison between any potential issues within each organisation. We would hope that this recommendation can be implemented immediately, and that the Reviews can be completed in a reasonably timely fashion.

Welsh Government Response

Accept in principle. We have emphasised the importance of the reviews of culture and values in Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue (MWWFRS) and North Wales Fire and Rescue Service (NWFRS) being thorough and independent and conducted by the same provider, to facilitate comparisons.

MWWFRS and NWFRS set the terms of reference for those reviews in discussion with us, and we will continue to work with them to ensure they deliver full and robust assurance. We expect both to be completed in early 2025.

The scope of both reviews takes into account the work of Ms Morris KC for SWFRS but does not exactly mirror her terms of reference. For instance, they cover a 3-year rather than a 7-year time period. This is because, unlike SWFRS, both organisations appear to have made some progress on their own account already.

Recommendation 3

The Welsh Government should make clear its expectations that current or former staff members coming forward during this period in any of the FRSs will be adequately supported and treated fairly in line with established HR practice. In order to give this assurance, the Welsh Government should consider whether additional expertise and/or resource may be necessary to support the HR functions necessary in the coming months. This recommendation should be implemented immediately with an updated provided by November 2024.

Welsh Government Response

Accept. The importance of investigating historic grievances has been raised and accepted by all three FRSs, as does the need to provide those raising them with appropriate support from their employer, their union or elsewhere.

There has been no approach seeking Welsh Government expertise in this area from the FRSs so far but if such a request were made we would consider positively.

Conclusion 2

The Welsh Government should clarify the CFRAI's role so that it is more responsive to all issues affecting the fire and rescue service.

Welsh Government Response

Accept in principle. The CFRAI's formal and statutory role already embraces cultural issues and all other matters relating to the FRS. It is simply that his detailed reviews to date have focused on operational matters. The CFRAI has also required the FRSs to

provide him with regular summaries of all misconduct cases, and immediate notification of cases of gross misconduct and/or those involving senior staff.

How best to give effect to the full scope of that role can be considered in a revised system of inspection allied to a new set of governance arrangements.

Conclusion 3

We agree that weaknesses in the governance arrangements for South Wales FRS contributed to the failings identified in the Morris Review and that as a consequence, changes to the governance arrangements should form part of the Welsh Government response.

Welsh Government Response

Accept. Work to develop new governance arrangements in the sector is already under way, involving key stakeholders.

Conclusion 4

We would welcome clarification from the Welsh Government on how it intends to reconcile the potentially competing pressures of the need for reform on the one hand, and the lack of consensus or possibility of compromise on some aspects of those reforms on the other.

Welsh Government Response

Accept. A broad consensus about the need for governance reform is emerging. This was reflected in evidence which the Chairs of NWFRA and MWWFRA gave to the Committee and in the recent discussion the Cabinet Secretary had with the Leaders of all local authorities in the SWFRA area. We will work in social partnership to build on that and develop an effective model.

Recommendation 4

The Welsh Government should urgently update the National Framework to take account of recent events and the outcomes of several reviews. As part of the process the Welsh Government should:

- *Set out the timetable for agreeing a new National Framework;*
- *Consider establishing a suite of performance indicators and performance standards to accompany the Framework; and*
- *Proactively lay copies of future implementation reports before the Senedd.*

The new Framework and performance indicators should be in place by May 2025 at the latest.

Welsh Government Response

Accept in principle. We will develop and introduce on a new National Framework for Fire and Rescue Services. There may be challenges with meeting the Committee's suggested deadline due to the consultative and legislative processes required, and because

performance indicators have to be introduced at the start of a financial year, but we will look to complete the work as soon as possible.

Conclusion 5

Resolving the practicalities of establishing an inspections regime in Wales should be considered further alongside wider reform of governance arrangements.

Welsh Government Response

Accept. Audit and inspection are important components of any effective governance and accountability mechanism and this is something that will be covered by the governance reform work, informed by the Committee's report and the Audit Wales review of FRA governance.

Conclusion 6

The Welsh Government should set out its views on whether a broader definition of auditing would pick up on the cultural failings of the type found in South Wales FRS and if so, how it would do so, in its response to this report.

Welsh Government Response

Accept in principle. The broader need for robust assurance about culture and values in the FRS will be considered as part of the wider programme of governance reform.

Conclusion 7

We welcome the review of governance arrangements being undertaken by Audit Wales and look forward to considering its findings

Welsh Government Response

The Welsh Government will also consider the findings of the Audit Wales report fully.

Recommendation 5

The Welsh Government should improve the capacity of FRA members to hold FRSs to account by:

- *reducing the overall size of membership of FRAs;*
- *exploring proposals to draw FRA members from local authority cabinets;*
- *looking at proposals to formally separate the executive functions of the authority from the scrutiny functions of the Chair and Board;*
- *encouraging the co-opting of members with outside knowledge and expertise in equality, diversity and inclusion on to each FRA; and*
- *providing specific advice and training to FRA members on the implications of the Morris Review in the immediate term and conducting a rapid review of training and*

induction provided to FRA members with a view to enhancing provision and making future training mandatory.

Welsh Government Response

Accept. Many of the Committee's specific points have already been raised in discussion with the WLGA and others on governance reform. These will all be important considerations as the governance review is taken forward.

Recommendation 6

The Welsh Government should urgently explore options for more radical reform to the structure and delivery of fire and rescue services in the long term. This should include:

- *Beginning the process of examining what the core future functions of fire and rescue services should be in 2035 or 2040;*
- *Exploring the advantages and disadvantages of creating a single Wales-wide fire and rescue service; and*

Developing a longer-term policy position (ideally in the form of a White Paper) by the end of 2025 so that they can be considered in advance of Senedd elections expected in 2026.

Welsh Government Response

Accept. Besides the issues identified by the Committee, such a statement could usefully also address other strategic challenges such as the sustainability of rural services, the climate emergency and the findings of the second phase of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. The form that such a statement took would depend on the progress made in addressing what are long-term and complex issues between now and the end of next year.