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Last autumn I asked my Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser to produce a report on efficiency in the Fire Service. I am publishing this report today.

<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/people-and-communities/communities/safety/fire/lgmeasure/fire-rescue-service-efficiency/?lang=en>

I asked for this report because the Fire and Rescue Service is not and cannot be immune from the severe financial pressures affecting the public sector; and must take all viable steps to secure efficiencies. I know the three Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) in Wales have taken this agenda seriously and have secured some notable savings in recent years.

The Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser's report bears this out. It recognises the savings made to date by FRAs in Wales, and cites a number of examples which show progress on matching resources to risk. The report also recognises the positive contribution of FRAs to the significant reduction in fires in Wales, and the resulting reduction in deaths, injuries and damage to property.

However, there is scope to do more. The cost of the Service per head and per incident remains relatively high in Wales. While there may be some unavoidable reasons for this, all public bodies need to review their costs critically and continually, and to realise savings wherever opportunities arise.

FRAs are unlike many other public bodies in some important ways. They have to maintain the capacity to respond swiftly and effectively to fires and other emergencies at all times. This may limit the scope to make savings, especially in more rural areas of Wales, where it can be hard to change operational cover without endangering public safety. FRAs also effectively set their own budgets, and fund them by levying charges on Local Authorities. This gives them considerable flexibility – but they must exercise this prudently. In particular,

they should avoid inadvertently requiring Local Authority services to bear greater cuts by continuing to increase their levies on Local Authorities. As a result, FRAs are not formally accountable for their funding decisions to other tiers of government, to the Assembly, or to the electorate. Nor are they directly subject to the budget cuts which we have had to make elsewhere. This means it is vital for leaders within the fire sector themselves to take the initiative in securing greater efficiency.

This report sets out some ways in which they might do so. Firstly, it calls for further action to reduce the incidence of fire. This has to be the overarching aim. The Service's record so far has been good, but it needs to continue, and to reflect emerging social trends – including an aging population in particular and the impact of this on future risk patterns. This means a greater and more sustained shift from responsive firefighting services to preventative fire safety services, which in turn has implications for the funding, delivery, capacity, capability, management and culture of the Service.

Secondly, the report advocates continuing focus on the costs of service provision. This does not mean closing fire stations, which may be difficult in much of Wales. It does, though, mean adopting best practice from elsewhere, and ensuring resources are deployed as efficiently and effectively as possible. For example, all three Services currently respond to more false alarms than to actual fires, incurring unnecessary costs and preventing appliances and crews from dealing with genuine incidents. More can and should be done to tackle this problem: I am pleased one FRA has recently decided to implement a risk based approach to responding to automatic fire alarms.

Thirdly, the report stresses the need for continued collaboration between the three FRAs. Their National Issues Committee is already a viable means for pursuing this, and has secured some savings already. But this can go further. Evidence from elsewhere in the UK shows merging FRAs can realise very significant savings. While I have ruled this out here, I expect to see collaborative savings on a similar scale if structural change is to remain off the agenda. I also hope to see further savings from FRAs' developing relationship with the Ambulance Service, and with other partners.

The Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser report makes 4 recommendations to support these findings. These include recommendations to the Welsh Government about providing clarity on our future vision and expectations for the Service,

I fully accept this and the other recommendations. During 2015 I will consult on and then implement a new statutory Fire and Rescue National Framework setting out priorities and objectives for FRAs. The Framework will develop the themes which the Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser has identified. I anticipate it will set out six broad principles for the Service:

- Continually and sustainably reducing risk and enhancing safety of citizens and communities;
- Responding swiftly and effectively to incidents;

- Being clearly and publicly accountable for delivery and funding, and manifesting the highest standards of governance;
- Maintaining downward pressure on costs and taking all opportunities to realise efficiencies;
- Working effectively with partners to improve efficiency and citizen and community well-being;
- Valuing and developing the workforce to the highest standards.

None of this should be contentious, nor should it be taken as a criticism of a Service with a proud record of improving citizen and community safety. The report calls largely for current trends within the Service to be maintained and enhanced. But doing so will require concerted and continual effort by FRA members, officers and firefighters. I look forward to working with the Service to make this a reality.