



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government

WRITTEN STATEMENT BY THE WELSH ASSEMBLY GOVERNMENT

Title: Technological Advances in the Fire and Rescue Services in Wales
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The Fire and Rescue Services have always been forward looking and dedicated to reduce deaths and injuries whether due to fire, road traffic collisions or any other serious emergency events. This has been achieved year-on through not only by reviewing and improving operational procedures, but through the development and use of ever evolving technological advances in communication, fire-fighting and rescue equipment.

Major incidents of serious loss of life in fires have always been the driver for new fire legislation, building standards and operational procedures. Catastrophic events of recent years such as the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, 2001 (9/11), the London Underground or huge fires such as Buncefield have been the catalyst for major technological advances for the Fire and Rescue Services throughout the UK and particularly for Wales.

The 9/11 attack where 2,751 people died, including 343 firefighters, exposed the serious lack of inter-operable communication between the emergency services. This accelerated the implementation of the new digital trunked radio system called Firelink for the Fire and Rescue Services in Wales, Scotland and England; and the New Dimension Programme. The Welsh Assembly Government opted to join the Firelink contract in 2006, investing £45m over ten years.

Firelink will provide a resilient radio voice and data system that will give the Fire and Rescue Services and the other blue-light services the ability to communicate with each other, not only locally but across borders, into England and Scotland.

Firelink meets a key business need to provide streamlined, effective and efficient communications at major incidents, demonstrated through greater collaboration and inter-working among Fire and Rescue Services by enabling communications between any control centre and any appliance without loss of voice or data. Firelink also provides the supporting communication with the New Dimension Programme assets.

It is hoped that the system will be fully operational by the end of 2009 and will deliver not only high quality voice transmission but data to frontline responding appliances, providing key information on premises, vehicles, risks and operational procedures, whilst mobile. The location of vehicles also will be automatically transmitted to control room staff to ensure the quickest and most efficient response.

The implementation of Firelink has also stimulated new technological ideas on how to make the three control rooms in Wales resilient in the event of spate conditions or catastrophic failure of one or more control rooms. Consequently, funding has been granted by the Welsh Assembly Government to the three Fire and Rescue Services to upgrade or provide a new state-of-the-art command and control system common to all three Fire and Rescue Services, in preparation for the project to make the three

control rooms resilient. The project is now underway following grant funding of £1.87m from the Welsh Assembly Government. This will mean that all Welsh fire appliances and rescue vehicles can be mobilised from any of the three primary control rooms and the Emergency Co-ordination Centre for Wales in the Assembly Government.

The project will exploit the collaborative venture to introduce new technologies that will enhance the 999 emergency (fire and rescue) service in Wales both from the public caller and control room operator perspective.

Technological advances have also made it possible to bring together the Police and Fire and Rescue Services in a joint emergency services command and control centre at St Asaph, North Wales, which went live in October.

This will pave the way for and compliment the longer term objectives of the Joint Emergency Services Group project for emergency service control rooms in Wales.

The roll-out of the New Dimension Programme is now almost complete with Welsh Fire and Rescue Services hosting Incident Response Units for mass decontamination; an Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) capability; High Volume Pumps for dealing with flooding or where large volumes of water are needed for major fires; and Detection and Identification of Hazardous Materials (DIM) capability.

All of this equipment has been designed, developed and built to very high technical standards to deal with modern-day demands. An intensive high level training programme for firefighters to use this specialised equipment has been implemented to utilise the equipment effectively. A purpose-built All-Wales Training Centre funded by the Welsh Assembly Government, has been built in Earlswood, Briton Ferry, to facilitate the highly technical training for the USAR capability.

The value and success of this programme has been demonstrated on many occasions, such as the Welsh response to major flooding in Yorkshire, Gloucester and Tewkesbury; fighting the massive fire at Buncefield and collapsed buildings in various locations. As well as the High Volume Pumps, the DIM capability is mobilised regularly to identify potentially hazardous materials that could cause serious harm.

All of these projects are leading examples of modern technological advances and collaboration between the Fire and Rescue Services and Government.