

GWASANAETH TÂN AC ACHUB
Canolfarth a Gorllewin Cymru



Mid and West Wales
FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

Meriel Singleton
Deputy Committee Clerk
Committee Service
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1NA

*Gofynner am/
Please ask for:* Assistant Chief Fire Officer
P Bates

Rhif Est/Extn. No. 4403

E-bost/E-mail: p.bates@mawwfire.gov.uk

Fy Nghyf/My Ref: PB/CR/ORM-01-26

Eich Cyf/Your Ref:

Dyddiad/Date: 9 July 2009

Dear Meriel

Thank you for your letter of the 18 June 2009 inviting the Fire and Rescue Service to take part in next week's discussion within the Assembly's Sustainability Committee on the issue of flooding. As discussed within my email to you on 23 June 2009, the Fire and Rescue Service is delighted to take part and I will be representing the three Services in Wales.

As you may know, I am the Chief Fire Officers Association lead for flooding in Wales and sit on the Wales Flood Group and the newly formed Flood Enhancement Project co-ordinated in England by DEFRA. Whilst this project is Anglo-centric it has direct read across and synergy with the work going on in Wales.

As you request, I set out below brief details of the Fire and Rescue Service role, statutory duties (or in this case lack of them) and our statutory powers to act in relation to flood rescue and flooding in its widest context.

Roles and responsibilities:

Rescue operations within the inland marine environment are incredibly diverse, ranging from a single person in the water in difficulty, through to wide area flood events leaving many thousands trapped. Inland water events are further complicated by emergencies involving inland watercraft, from small sailing boats to floating restaurants holding several hundred people. In addition to any rescue tasks required, inland flood events pose a significant threat to public health, property and infrastructure, both through direct damage and the spread of hazardous materials. However, despite the community risks arising, there is no consolidated statutory duty to manage these risks, or to respond to any resulting emergencies.

Currently, the Police have a duty to co-ordinate any emergency responses to inland water incidents, Fire and Rescue Services to respond to fires and hazardous material releases, and the Environment Agency for flood defences. A myriad of other bodies and agencies, from local drainage boards and planning authorities, through to voluntary organisations, may have a role that impacts inland water events.

Local Resilience Forums, working under the Civil Contingencies Act, are now tackling these multi-agency and multi-disciplinary issues, taking responsibility locally for assessing risk, drawing up contingency plans, and providing the crisis management team to deal with any resulting emergency. However, the historical lack of clarity in relation to inland water events represents a significant and continuing concern for us and communities alike.

Prif Swyddog Tân / Chief Fire Officer R. Smith, M.A., M.I.Fire.E.

Y Pencaedlys, Heol Llwyn Plisgwydd, Caerfyrddin, Sir Gâr SA31 1SP

Headquarters, Lime Grove Avenue, Carmarthen, Carmarthenshire SA31 1SP

0870 60 60 699 01267 220562 mail@mawwfire.gov.uk www.mawwfire.gov.uk

Historically, most Fire and Rescue Services have responded to inland water incidents in one form or another. This involvement has ranged from a full inland water rescue capability to more traditional operational duties such as extinguishing fires on inland vessels, pumping out of properties after minor flood events, or rescues from vehicles that have crashed into rivers or drainage ditches.

Recent discussions around a potential future Fire and Rescue Service statutory duty for responding to major flood events, has unfortunately served only to cause confusion and misunderstanding, both within the Service and for other major stakeholders. The prospect of a new statutory duty supported by central funding has led some English Fire Authorities to put off local investment in inland water safety training and equipment, even though its predominant use was to respond to local risks identified through the risk reduction planning process, many of which were non-flood related.

The current national situation is that the Civil Contingencies Secretariat is responsible for assessing risks to the nation, and lead government departments are responsible for assessing risk management options and building capability. In the case of major flooding events, the Department for the Environment, Sustainability and Housing (DESH) is the lead department and their assessment of both risk, and options for building capability to address it, are still under evaluation.

In relation, particularly to flood rescue some practical issues are readily apparent;

- No single Government Agency has overall responsibility for inland water incidents.
- If Fire and Rescue Services were given statutory duty for major floods only, or if the Assembly and/or DESH chose to build capability through an agent other than Fire and Rescue Service to conduct rescues during major flooding events on its behalf, responsibility for societal risks outside of the major flood arena would remain confused.
- People at risk of drowning from minor floods, vehicle entrapment, leisure vessel or any of the other many inland marine risks could be considered outside the scope of any new statutory duty. Whilst this situation may be convenient for legislators and assist in minimising any new financial burdens, it would be considered nonsensical by members of the public, would lead to inefficient and ineffective delivery of services and an expensive duplication of effort and a potential waste of resources.
- In simple terms, it can surely not be acceptable for people at risk of drowning from a major flood event to be covered by a new statutory duty for Fire and Rescue Services, or DEFRA, whilst others exposed to the same risk in the inland marine environment, but from a different causation, are not.
- Given the costs of training, equipment, and the need to support multi-agency command and communications through the national incident command system, an entirely new body or agency to deliver inland water rescue capability is not considered financially feasible.

Regardless of who eventually is given the statutory duty for carrying out rescues during major flooding events, the Fire and Rescue Service will be amongst the first rescue agencies on the scene of any incident, and will be fully involved throughout the emergency phase of the event. In recognition of the wider rescue role conferred by the Fire and Rescue Service's Act, and our ability to react more responsively to locally identified risk, our inland water rescue capability has grown significantly.

Although lack of clarity around the statutory position has resulted in inconsistent expansion of water rescue capabilities to date, our existing role and infrastructure means that we can quickly put either traditional or specialist resources on the ground to assist affected communities. Regardless of whether Fire and Rescue Services statutory responsibilities are extended further, it will be a major contributor to the resolution of major flooding events through Local Resilience Forums and command systems at Gold, Silver and Bronze levels.

The simple reality on the ground is that Fire and Rescue Services are the only viable body with the skills and infrastructure to deliver a comprehensive inland water rescue service.

Governments Response to Pitt

Sir Michael Pitt in his review of the lessons learned from the summer 2007 floods recommended in his report that:

The Government should urgently put in place a fully funded national capability for flood rescue, with Fire and Rescue Authorities playing a leading role, underpinned as necessary by a statutory duty.

The Government agrees the need for a properly funded national capability for flood rescue.

The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has set up a project, working with the UK Search and Rescue Strategic Committee and relevant partner organisations (including the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, Royal National Lifeboat Institution, the Fire and Rescue Service, Royal Air Force and the Police) to improve significantly flood rescue capability and co-ordination between the agencies concerned. That will include delivering some additional assets where appropriate.

The project will agree, across all the relevant organisations, common standards for training and accreditation and for flood rescue assets. The United Kingdom Search and Rescue Strategic Committee will provide technical and operational advice to the project.

The priority for the Government is to put in place a co-ordinated multi-agency flood rescue capability as soon as possible. In light of the findings of the project on a national capability for flood rescue, the Government will consider further how the role of the organisations involved might be clarified or enhanced, and whether there is a need for statutory underpinning for the role of any of the agencies involved.

I hope the few brief comments above are useful, and I very much look forward to seeing you on the 15th July. Before then, if I can be of any further assistance please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely



Paul Bates
Assistant Chief Fire Officer
Director – Operational Risk