

'Safety First'

A Statement by the Welsh Assembly Government in response to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's White Paper: Our Fire and Rescue Service

Introduction

1. On 30 June the Rt. Hon John Prescott MP, Deputy Prime Minister, presented the White Paper – Our Fire and Rescue Service. The White Paper set out the Government's vision for the fire and rescue service of the future, committing the Government to changing the structure, working practices and procedures of the service to make it more efficient and effective. Significantly for Wales, the White Paper committed the Government to devolve responsibility for the service in Wales to the National Assembly for Wales as recommended in the Independent Review of the Fire Service completed in December 2002 (chaired by Sir George Bain). The White Paper made clear that devolution would be done in a way that was consistent with broader emergency and civil contingency arrangements and that the capacity for a UK-wide response to any terrorist or other threat is maintained.
2. Devolving responsibility for fire matters to the Assembly will provide a great opportunity to provide a long-lasting framework to reduce the number of deaths and injuries as a result of fire and other emergency incidents; to improve the communities in which the people of Wales live; to make Wales safer for visitors; and protect business in Wales.
3. In 2001, the last year for which figures are available, 987 people died or were seriously injured as a result of fire in Wales and 1,632 died or were seriously injured in road accidents. RTA deaths reduced by 21% last year and seriously injured by 3%. Over the same period, deaths in fires fell by just over 13.5% from 37 to 32 and fire injuries reduced slightly by just under 2%, falling from 974 to 955. Whilst the figures are encouraging, there is no room for complacency and we must now build upon the work already underway in the three fire authorities to further promote community fire safety. Work which has been, and will continue to be, supported by the Assembly Government. Whilst the fire and rescue services in Wales can offer no direct influence in the move towards reducing the number of road accidents, it nevertheless has much to contribute to the work being done by police and other agencies in promoting road safety awareness. The Service has a crucial role to play in rescuing people trapped in their vehicles, which it now does without the statutory duty and the recognition that brings. The opportunity to move towards a holistic approach to community safety through the proposal for a re-defined and statutory based rescue service fits totally with the philosophy and objectives of the Welsh Assembly Government.

4. In Wales, as in the rest of the UK, I want to see the numbers of people dying and seriously injured by fire reduced significantly to the point at which these totally preventable events are eradicated and in all parts of Wales the number of deaths and injuries in road traffic accidents and other emergency incidents falls radically.

Legislative process and devolution timetable

5. 'Our Fire and Rescue Service' recognises the close relationship already established between the Assembly Government and the three Welsh fire authorities and commits to devolving policy and operational responsibilities for fire fighting and fire safety issues to the Assembly. The Assembly Government welcomes this proposal, and I will seek powers to direct the fire service in Wales in relation to policy and operational priorities. The Assembly Government believes that it would not be practical for the Assembly to establish its own arrangements in relation to fire personnel terms and conditions of employment or pensions. It will therefore seek to follow the Westminster lead in this regard. However, the Welsh Assembly Government will participate in any process and discussion on these and ensure that there is a mechanism to input views where there is a specific Welsh interest. Additionally, I recognise the need to safeguard the UK's civil resilience capacity and wish to maintain close working relationships with colleagues outside of Wales to ensure the Welsh fire and rescue services are able to react and deal effectively with broader emergency and civil contingency arrangements on a UK-wide basis - and that best practice, whether that occurs in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland or England is shared with all fire services throughout the UK.

6. The Fire Services Act's of 1947 and 1959 are the current underpinning legislation for the fire service. These Acts provide fire services with statutory duties that relate almost exclusively to firefighting. Therefore there is no legal responsibility for carrying out the range of rescues we have come to associate with the fire service, or even the moral expectations we have of the service to carry out community fire safety. As a consequence implementing the changes proposed in the White Paper will require legislation.

7. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is preparing a Fire and Rescue Service Bill with a view to its introduction as soon as parliamentary time allows. On this basis the Assembly Government had previously sought the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's agreement to including provisions in relation to Wales within the proposed Bill. This timescale accounted for the need for the Assembly Government to fully develop policy in this area and make all necessary practical arrangements in relation to devolution. The Assembly Government has already introduced a number of community fire safety and other similar initiatives in Wales and has good relationships with the three fire authorities here. However, discussions on this are still underway and should the new legislation be significantly delayed, and in order to ensure that the fire services do not undertake unnecessary work which does not fit with developing policy in relation to Wales, we are considering the possibility of devolving responsibility on the basis of existing powers.

Structure of the Welsh fire services

8. The fire service in Wales underwent a very substantial reorganisation in 1996, at the time of local government reorganisation, reducing the number of fire authorities and brigades they provide from eight to the current three – South Wales, Mid and West Wales and North Wales. I believe it is important to ensure stability in the fire and rescue services for the foreseeable future, both to maintain morale within the service and realise the capital investments made in recent years, therefore the Assembly Government has no plans to change the existing structure of fire authorities. To this end, neither do I wish to direct authorities in the short-term into working practices that they feel operate against their operational effectiveness and the interests of the communities they serve. For instance I have not yet seen the case for an amalgamation of control rooms. However, I do want the service to consider longer-term partnership and collaborative working arrangements that enhance operational effectiveness, both within their areas, across Wales and meet UK needs.

9. The South Wales Fire Service is currently one of the largest Fire Services in the UK and covers the heavily populated area of south Wales. The service is responsible for safety along the M4 (to junction 37), including, working with their counterpart in Avon, the Severn Bridges and Severn Rail Tunnel. Within its area it also has Cardiff International Airport, the Millennium Stadium and numerous heavily industrialised areas. The main Administrative Headquarters is located at [Lanelay Hall](#) in Pontyclun. In addition there are Fire Safety offices in Cardiff, Merthyr and Bridgend. Training facilities are scattered across the Brigade area with the main training centre at Pontyclun and specialist Real Fire Training centred at New Inn. Following the tragic deaths of firefighters attempting rescues at a house fire in 1996, subsequent inquiries strongly recommended a review of training and training facilities.

10. North Wales Fire Service provides fire protection for several important areas including the Snowdonia National Park and the Deeside and Wrexham Industrial Estates - two of the largest industrial developments in Europe. Other important areas include the Royal Air Force bases at Valley and Sealand, several small airports and nuclear power stations at Trawsfynydd and Wylfa. North Wales Fire Service is split into three divisions, Central, East and West, with Central Administrative Headquarters being located in Rhyl. Fire Safety Offices are located at Wrexham, Llandudno, Caernarfon, Porthmadog and Llangefni and with training facilities at Rhyl, Dolgellau, Menai Bridge and Wrexham.

11. The Mid and West Wales Fire Brigade serves an area making up almost two thirds of the landmass of Wales. Covering extensive industrial risks, heavily populated conurbations, such as Swansea, Port Talbot and Llanelli, extensive farming communities and extensive coastline and inland waterways, the M4 from junction 37 to its end at Pont Abraham. The Brigade is separated into six Command Areas, situated within the six constituent authorities, with the

Central Administrative Headquarters being located at Carmarthen. The Community Risk Reduction and Training and Development Departments are sited at Morriston, Swansea.

12. A map showing Fire Authority and Local Authority boundaries is provided on the annex attached.

The Future Welsh Fire and Rescue Services

13. While the Assembly Government has no plans to change the structure of the existing three authorities, I do expect them to continue to look for continuous improvement and be cost effective without diminishing their performance. Close relationships at both authority and operational level already exist with the Assembly Government, which provides a solid base for the devolution agenda. This is demonstrated in the developing field of community fire safety and the establishment of Firebrake Wales, (the Wales Community Fire Safety Trust).

14. Our approach to saving lives should be underpinned by the twin pillars of Prevention and Intervention based on the need to protect the community with preventative measures structured around community fire safety and intervention structured around a strong responsive and effective intervention strategy to deal with fires and other emergency incidents when they occur.

15. The present framework for standards of emergency fire cover in Wales have protected communities served by the fire authorities for nearly 50 years. These standards however have their foundations even earlier in the work of the 1936 Riverdale Committee and have been modified only slightly since then, with minimum requirements established by the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council (CFBAC) in 1947, with the present standards finally reviewed in 1985. These standards have been successful in preventing an incalculable number of deaths and injury from fire but we now need to build upon that success. The revised policy framework will provide modern preventative programmes, coupled with effective response strategies, designed to take account of the diverse nature of all risks within communities in Wales. To ensure that the new arrangements deliver tangible improvements for the people of Wales, the Assembly Government intends to set ambitious targets in the first five years for reducing deaths in fires by between 30% and 50% and working with other agencies aim towards a target of reducing deaths and injuries in road traffic accidents by a similar figure.

16. I want a fire and rescue service for Wales which meets the needs of Wales and the different parts of Wales. However, I also want to be in a position to share experiences with colleagues in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland. The Assembly Government also wants a structure for the fire service in Wales that can play its part in national and international issues.

National Framework for Wales

17. The Welsh Assembly Government agrees that the new fire and rescue service requires a national framework to set in context its work and overall direction of the service. However, I do not believe that adopting the English Framework on an England and Wales basis is appropriate. We will therefore seek to establish our own national framework, which shares a common structure with the English model and in some cases replicates either the English or Scottish models where this is desirable (e.g. in the case of major capital procurement such as communication systems) in order to maintain the ability to respond on a UK-wide basis to major threats, but which reflects the local needs and priorities of the three Welsh fire authorities.

18. In common with its English and Scottish counterparts the Welsh Framework will set out a clear statement of the Assembly Government's policy and direction for the fire and rescue service in coming years and will be the template for future planning and budgeting by the authorities.

19. The Welsh Framework will recognise the regional identities within which the three fire authorities operate and expect them to plan and deliver their contribution to the framework having regard to local priorities. However, included in the framework will be an emphasis on collaborative working to deliver national goals. I am impressed with the extensive collaborative arrangements already in place in Wales, but I expect the three authorities to build on this and establish greater inter-agency partnerships, particularly where there are common goals, to deliver both a co-ordinated strategy for handling individual incidents and to ensure that strategic activities and structures for handling inter-area and inter-agency operations are maximised and cost effective.

20. In line with our inclusive approach to policy development, we will consult on our proposals for the Welsh Framework as it is developed.

Advisory Bodies

21. The Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council (CFBAC) has provided a forum for fire service stakeholders and provided advice to the Secretary of State for the past 50 years. However, it is the UK Government's view that this has become increasingly bureaucratic and the White Paper now proposes to replace CFBAC with requirements to consult, that take account of the topic and most appropriate form of consultation and the establishment of small informal, strategic, high-level and high-quality advisory groups.

22. In Wales, in order to deliver our national policy framework I will establish a Community Fire Safety Committee representative of all the key stakeholders in the fire and rescue community to act as an advisory body to the Assembly Government and to monitor and review the performance of the fire and rescue services. In addition, I expect this Committee to maintain close links with the rest of the UK fire community, including with the Practitioners Forum (which

held its first meeting on 1 September), where there are UK-wide issues, to ensure that we have adequate arrangements to maintain an interface with and are able to represent the interests of Wales, upon that forum. In this way we will ensure co-ordination of the adoption (where appropriate) of developments in fire and rescue. Including matters relating to the operational efficiency; health; safety and welfare; training and equipment; and other technical needs of fire and rescue staff, who are at the front line of this important community public service, and whom we rely upon to deliver our policy framework.

23. The White Paper further proposes the development of a Business and Community Forum to engage with wider stakeholders in fire policy development. In Wales we already have well developed networks to promote community fire safety in the form of the Community Fire Safety Working Group, which has produced two well received reports into the issues of domestic fires and arson in Wales. Rather than create additional Groups, I intend to build on the existing structure and widen the remit to encompass all fire policy matters devolved to Wales, co-opting additional membership as necessary.

24. I will be consulting on our proposals for future advisory bodies in Wales and how these should operate, represent the views of interested parties at a local, national and UK level.

Integrated Risk Management Plans

25. The graph above is a Wales specific version of the White Paper's figure 3. Utilising ODPM's financial values for fire stations with wholetime and/or retained crewing a cost has been shown as a line across each of the current risk category groups. The number of fire deaths is shown as columns within each specific category. It can be seen that in Wales the highest proportion of spending is directed to the risk category with the highest number of fire deaths.

26. The three fire authorities in Wales (along with their counterparts in England) are in the process of preparing plans to move towards a life risk based approach to fire safety more responsive to locally identified needs and better able to deliver community safety. Integrated Risk Management Plans (IRMPs) will be published by 31st October by each Fire Authority in Wales outlining how they intend to improve community safety, save lives and reduce injuries and loss at a personal, societal, commercial, economic, environmental and heritage level. IRMP's shift the focus away from the present standards of fire cover based on the protection of property towards a focus on planning aimed to:

- identify existing and potential risks to the community within the authority area;

- evaluate the effectiveness of current preventative and responsive arrangements;
- identify opportunities for improvement and determine policies and standards for intervention and prevention; and
- determine resource requirements to meet these policies and standards.

27. A close and productive relationship has been developed between the three Welsh fire authorities and the Assembly will seek to ensure that these IRMP's properly reflect the need to achieve the ambitious targets we have set in terms of lives lost and that there is an improvement in those areas of greatest need in our communities across the whole of Wales.

28. There is incontrovertible evidence that the introduction of a fire safety regime in commercial and business premises has led to a significant reduction in deaths and injuries from fire in the workplace and the overwhelming majority of deaths and serious injury from fire now occur in the home. There is a need to invest in fire prevention measures in residential areas if we are to effectively reduce the number of deaths and injuries as well as maintain an effective and speedy response when incidents occur. The Community Fire Safety Working Group reports mentioned earlier are examples of the way forward.

29. All parties in Wales are committed to the principle of IRMP, but we recognise that there will be important matters of detail where views will differ. Whilst the statutory responsibility for producing IRMPs rests with the three fire authorities, I will consult on the detail and the implementation having regard to Welsh priorities and the developing policies in relation to community fire safety and arson.

Performance Indicators (P.I.s)

30. The current national fire service PIs are a mixture that measure inputs primarily (cost, crewing levels, absenteeism) with some output measures and relatively few outcome measurements. It is my view that the outcomes required of the fire and rescue services are a matter for the Assembly Government to determine, however, the managerial actions required to achieve them are matters for fire authorities and Chief Fire Officers. Consequently, whilst some of the existing PIs may be useful to managers they are unhelpful to a wider audience. With the devolution of policy responsibility for fire to the Assembly, I will ensure that the management and measurement of performance relates to outcomes, rather than inputs, consistent with the Wales Programme for Improvement rather than a continuous performance assessment approach.

31. In setting performance indicators for Wales I want to ensure that targets are in place which are relevant not only to Welsh needs but local geographical and environmental considerations having regard for the diverse environments in which the three Welsh fire authorities operate. I shall not prescribe, but develop these in consultation with the three fire authorities, other organisations with an interest in the field and the communities served by the fire service in

Wales.

32. In monitoring the work of the fire service I share the Government's view

that public money must be invested efficiently and that a rigorous process of quality assurance is essential. I will look to Audit Wales to take on the role of quality assurance and inspection, to support improvement. In undertaking this work, the Assembly Government anticipates that Audit Wales will establish and maintain a close working relationship with the Audit Commission, who will undertake this role in England, and work with the redefined Fire Service Inspectorate to support its activities.

Training, personal development and equality

33. The Assembly Government acknowledges that a well equipped and highly trained workforce is essential to the way the fire service operates in Wales. I welcome the introduction of the Integrated Personal Development System (IPDS). This is a new way of selecting and developing staff to ensure that they are equipped and able to carry out their work safely and effectively. The strategic aim for Wales will be to deliver an IPDS system within the principles of Best Value. The project, controlled by a Project Manager, will involve a number of groups collaborating across the three Brigades to develop systems that will support the implementation of IPDS throughout Wales. This will take into account local variations where necessary.

34. As part of the on-going discussions on the future shape of the service in Wales I will consider the current and proposed future training requirements of the service. Linking these to local, Wales-wide and training provision provided on a UK-wide basis. In the case of the latter two, where applicable, in order to foster closer working relationships between the three authorities and wherever possible achieve economies of scale.

35. I welcome proposals to reform the Fire Service College to provide a centre of excellence and to ensure that it is at the forefront of introducing new management and personnel systems and the promotion of the delivery of services through the internet. I will seek to ensure that the fire service in Wales benefits from this new direction by maintaining links with the College for strategic developmental training. I will also look to the three fire authorities in Wales to develop training strategies that maximise opportunities for collaboration within Wales, between the fire authorities and other services, where this provides a practical and effective solution to individual service's training needs. This will be informed by the examinations that are underway within the service in Wales to identify potential collaborative opportunities.

36. I also welcome many of the ODPM's proposals to reform the working practices and recruitment and development opportunities provided by the service and want to ensure that these are conducive to the future needs of the service in Wales and are reflective of the

Assembly Government's priorities for equality and diversity in all public services.

Fire Safety

37. Legislative Fire safety has evolved over the last 100 years and now constitutes some 70 plus pieces of legislation. Whilst undoubtedly, Fire Safety Law has contributed to safer workplaces, it is fair to say that with the current responsibilities for employers being set out in so many pieces of legislation, it is not always clear to employers and others what they are responsible for under law. The proposed reform of Fire Safety Legislation is therefore something to be applauded. Although industry and commerce are familiar with the concept of risk assessment in the workplace, the ramifications of a fire can involve many more people than other accidents and will need careful consideration.

38. The overriding concern must be to raise awareness for those responsible for workplaces and places where the public go for pleasure, shopping or entertainment of their responsibility to ensure the safety of the public and their employees.

39. We will continue to be involved in this major change in Fire Safety legislation and through it ensure the safety of people in Wales.

First Responder

40. Mid and West Wales Fire has been operating First Responder schemes within its rural areas since 1998. The schemes are a partnership between the Fire Brigade and Ambulance Service and provide a supplementary life saving service to local communities. Firefighters trained in resuscitation -including the use of defibrillators- render first aid assistance to life threatening conditions pending the arrival of Ambulance paramedics. Mid and West Wales currently operate five schemes and further locations have been identified to expand this very valuable service within its area.

Other initiatives

41. The Assembly Government has taken a strong lead in developing community fire safety policies for Wales, since it established the Community Fire Safety Working Group in 2001.

42. The reports produced by the Group made a range of recommendations to increase domestic fire safety and reduce the incidence of arson in Wales. This is the second year of funding a range of initiatives arising out of 'Wired for Safety' and, as an example, by March

2004 will have ensured that 60,000 social houses in Wales have been fitted with hard-wired smoke detectors. Policies in relation to 'Up in Flames' are being developed including the specific recommendation that the Welsh Assembly Government adopts proposals for a comprehensive arson strategy for Wales. To implement the recommendations the community fire safety budget has been increased for 2003-04 to £4m and I propose increasing it to £5m for 2004-05.

43. Complementing our work in this field the Assembly Government and the fire services, have established the Wales Community Fire Safety Trust, now called Firebrake Wales. Firebrake's overall remit is to improve the quality of life in Wales by reducing the numbers of preventable fire deaths and injuries. It will do this by pursuing three distinct areas of activity through promotional campaigning and public education; research to better understand the causes of fire death and injury; and grant giving to support local fire safety initiatives.

Funding

44. The fire service is funded by the 22 unitary authorities, which receive unencumbered support through Standard Spending Assessments. These are constructed from a number of service-level components including, education, social services, fire etc. The component for the current year, 2003-04, is £110.522m and is allocated on a per capita basis. Capital funding approvals for the fire services currently come direct from ODPM (although the revenue costs of these have to be met from the RSG settlement). However, devolution will also see this responsibility pass to the Assembly Government. This will require further discussion as part of the devolution process and pending decisions on the introduction of Prudential Borrowing, which, when introduced, will also cover capital funding within the fire service.

Conclusion

45. This paper is not a comprehensive evaluation of the implications of devolution of the fire service. There are many matters that require detailed consideration, including the level of the Assembly's responsibility for civil contingency planning in relation to the fire service. The statement does not deal with the detailed operation of the service and its relationship with the Assembly Government, but sets out the broad direction for the future on the basis of a clear objective of 'safety first'.

46. The fire service enjoys the total support of the Welsh Assembly Government and I believe all the people of Wales. The courage of our firefighters is not open to question. They regularly risk their lives and in some tragic circumstances have paid dearly, to ensure our continued safety. We therefore have a responsibility to ensure that we recognise their valuable contribution to society; provide them with the necessary infrastructure to undertake their job safely and efficiently; and promote a fair and equitable system for all working within the service in Wales. Put simply, we want the public in Wales to be safer and we want our firefighters to

return to their stations after incidents without injuries.

47. This paper is the beginning of the process, it provides a blueprint for future development and has been produced with the support of the three Welsh fire authorities, FBU and other organisations working in the field.

ANNEX



