



**Fire Officers' Association
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Jenny Rathbone MS

by Email

29th February 2024

Dear Ms Rathbone

Equality and Social Justice Committee Inquiry

Thank you for your letter dated 13th February regarding governance arrangements for South Wales Fire and Rescue Service. The Fire Officers Association does not have a branch representative in South Wales Fire and Rescue Service therefore we do not have intimate knowledge of the service or its fire and rescue authority. There are no tools available such as His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) to use to gain an insight into the service.

That said I have read the South Wales culture review report and conducted my own limited research into the South Wales Fire Authority using what is available. I also have approaching 40-years' experience of the fire and rescue service as an employee as well as many years representing the Fire Officer's Association and its members.

I therefore offer the following comment;

Having viewed a number of South Wales Fire and Rescue Authority meetings it is clear to me that many of the local Councillors do not possess the requisite skills to provide the level of oversight, scrutiny and challenge required when providing governance for a large (in fire and rescue service terms) public sector organisation. Many of the fire authority members make little or no contribution during the meetings and some fire authority members become confused with regard to the content of some of the papers. However well meaning, the current Fire and Rescue Authority members are not and are unlikely to be in a position to provide the level of effective strategic oversight needed to assist the organisation in achieving the cultural change required.

The Welsh Government's 2018 consultation on reform of fire and rescue services appears not to have delivered the outcomes intended by the Welsh Government. With regard to the number and quality of fire authority members (in SWFRS) there appears to have been no change whatsoever. Governance has not been strengthened therefore I can only conclude that the lack of effective strategic oversight has contributed to the current situation in South Wales. Unfortunately, this is not unique to South Wales as, all too often, we have encountered fire and rescue authorities around the United Kingdom that are unable to provide the level of strategic

direction and oversight required to avoid decisions being made that are not in the best interests of the service and the public.

You will be aware that in England in 2017 HMICFRS assumed the role of inspection of fire and rescue services. Before 2017 it was very difficult if not impossible to gauge the performance of fire and rescue services. A system of "Peer Review" was in place but this system of inspection had many flaws. HMICFRS with its long tradition of inspection of police forces brought a level of inspection never seen before in English fire and rescue services. The inspection regime provides the evidential rigour required for a modern fire and rescue service. It is also easy to monitor the relative performance of all English fire and rescue services unfortunately the same cannot be said for fire and rescue services in Wales. The HMICFRS system is not perfect but it is evolving after each round of inspections.

There is a need to strengthen the inspection regime in Wales and improvements will only materialise if the Welsh Government is able to invest in a HMICFRS type system of inspection which includes publishing the results.

In conclusion the Fire Officers Association is an independent fire and rescue service trade union with no political affiliation. Our role is to assist our members where necessary. Having worked in a fire and rescue service that at times had what can only be described as a "toxic" culture I think it is of paramount importance that we do what we can to assist the process that provides a more pleasant working environment that will add value to the organisation which can only benefit the service and the public they serve.

Yours sincerely



Ade Robinson
Chief Executive Officer
Fire Officers Association