

## **Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill – Additional evidence from fire and rescue authorities regarding section 162**

### **Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Authority**

Thank you for your e mail of the 25<sup>th</sup> February. I respond on behalf of the Members of Mid and West Wales Fire Authority. Yet again I must express my dismay and disappointment at the unrealistic and inappropriate timescales set by the Welsh Government in requiring a response to what is an extremely important and complex matter. Matters of this significance require adequate time to consider and respond to. Yet again the time scales set fail to acknowledge or address this, and reflect poorly upon the way in which this whole matter has been conducted.

I can confirm that subsequent to providing evidence to the Committee, as far as I am aware, I, nor any officers or Members of Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Authority have discussed this matter with the Welsh Government.

I would wish to categorically state that the rationale set out in the attached letter from the Minister has not provided any assurances regarding the concerns of Fire Authority, and that the Fire Authority does still wish to see the provisions in Section 162 removed from the Bill.

The Minister's letter does not meaningfully address the valid concerns set out by all the Welsh Fire Authorities, particularly of Mid and West Wales, that the removal of the requirement for a public inquiry diminishes public involvement in a public service that directly and significantly impacts upon one of, if not the most important areas of their lives, namely the protection of their and their families lives and property. No good reason for this is set out in the letter, and yet again reveals the apparent intention of the Welsh Government to ignore public involvement in this vital area, and to ignore the considerable evidence that the public are extremely satisfied with the entirety of the administration and delivery of this vital emergency service.

For the Minister to refer to the FRA's being able to 'force' public inquiries is incorrect. That requirement is a statutory provision, prudently and reasonably inserted by the architects of the Combination Order, and reflecting the Nolan principles of objectivity, accountability and openness. Removing this requirement would clearly jeopardise these legitimate objectives for no good reason. It is the view of the Fire Authority that there would be significant local public interest in any changes to such a vital public service, and that furthermore, any attempt to downplay the potential significance of changes as being 'minor' is again misconceived, and also a potential loophole to enable significant changes to be made in the absence of the existing sensible and cogent public safeguards. The Minister's response fails to properly and meaningfully deal with these concerns.

Furthermore I would wish to reiterate the points already made to the Minister and the Committee, namely that it is unfair and inappropriate to draw parallels with general local government services in removing the need for a public inquiry. Fire Services have always been, and will always remain

unique, particularly in terms of guarding public safety and wellbeing, and any attempt to thwart or dilute public input into changes into a well performing service should only be undertaken for very good reasons. None have been put forward, and therefore, the Fire Authority remains resolute in its view that there should be no changes to the current safeguards embodied in the requirement for holding a public inquiry into any proposed changes to the Combination Order.

Yours sincerely

Councillor Jan Curtice

Chair