

Alun Davies AC/AM
Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros Lywodraeth Leol a
Gwasanaethau Cyhoeddus
Cabinet Secretary for Local Government and Public
Services



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Ein cyf/Our ref DC ARD 05191 17

Cllr Meirick Lloyd Davies
Chair
North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority
Ffordd Salesbury
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21st February 2018

Alun Davies

When we met on 15 February, I agreed to write to you and your fellow chairs setting out the issues which I believe a reformed system of FRA governance and funding should address. I would welcome your comments on these issues, to help me shape that system.

As I said at our meeting, reform is not about correcting failure. Nor is it about criticising you, your fellow chairs, or your chief fire officers. The fault is with the system within which you work. Without doubting your efforts, I do not believe that that system best supports the high-quality services on which Wales depends. That system dates from the mid-1990s, when the Fire Service did little beyond fighting fires. It is little more than a regionalised version of the committees which ran the Service when it was part of the old county councils. The demands on the Service, the pressure on public finances, and expectations around good governance have all changed markedly since then.

Underlying my concerns is a lack of accountability. By that I mean a sense in which public bodies are answerable to those they serve. That might mean being directly accountable to the electorate, as local authorities are, or indirectly accountable via the Assembly, as the Welsh Government and other public bodies are. Such accountability is the best means of ensuring that public services meet public need. It forces public bodies to defend and justify their plans, their performance and their spending decisions; and it provides a powerful incentive to improve, innovate and become more efficient.

Put simply, FRAs are not properly or formally accountable in any adequate way. You and your fellow members are not elected in your FRA capacity, and together represent only around 6% of the population of Wales. Nor are you collectively answerable to your constituent local authorities, to the Welsh Government, or to the Assembly. That means there is no formal scrutiny of, or challenge to, your plans or your delivery of them; nor are those plans grounded in a democratic mandate. I reiterate that this is not your fault; and I know you seek to engage with the communities you serve despite these shortcomings. But that is not an acceptable or sustainable substitute.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

Therefore, I would welcome your views on **how, and to whom, FRAs as a whole should be accountable**. That might involve accountability to local authorities, to the Welsh Government and Assembly, or directly to the electorate. The choice should, perhaps, depend on how far fire and rescue services should be driven by local needs and priorities, and how far by common professional standards and national-level social changes and levels of risk. It should also take into account the growing diversification of FRAs' role, in particular to support the NHS.

A similar issue arises with your funding system, which gives you an extraordinary level of budget-setting autonomy. All fire services elsewhere in the UK, and indeed all other public bodies, are subject to some form of external control or approval of their budgets, and/or are answerable to the electorate for them. I accept that you have exercised this discretion sensibly, and indeed made some significant spending reductions. I also agree that funding for emergency services must be sustainable and must guarantee public safety. But without any process of external control, the pressure to identify and realise savings to which all other public bodies are subject is simply missing. It may be no coincidence that all three Welsh FRAs are in the top quartile for expenditure per capita in Great Britain, and have been for some time.

I would therefore welcome your views on **how FRAs should be funded to ensure accountability, efficiency and sustainability**. That may well turn on similar considerations to the governance issues I described above. It might be possible, for instance, for FRA budgets to be pooled by agreement with your constituent local authorities; or we could devise a model of formula-based central funding similar to the revenue support grant. Again, though, we need to take account of the diversification of the service. It may be hard to justify purely local funding when an increasing amount of an FRA's work is done in support of the NHS. If you feel that the NHS should make a consistent and agreed contribution to that work, I am happy to discuss that with my colleagues.

Finally, I am concerned about internal accountability within FRAs. Unlike local authorities, you have no formal split between executive and scrutiny roles. Nor could you have, as that split depends on there being a ruling group or coalition with a mandate to deliver. I am also not convinced that a membership consisting solely of councillors is best equipped to hold senior management to account. Councillors are plainly indispensable in representing local concerns. While I agree there is some sense of that in FRA business, for instance around possible station closures, much of that business is or should be concerned with maintaining professional standards, addressing changes in risk and understanding the strategic challenges facing the Service. This is not natural territory for many councillors, and is often unavoidably technical. It may well be that a different mix of membership would be better suited to the role; once again, that may become more important as the work of the Service becomes more diverse.

I fully accept that this may not be palatable to you. I am not calling into question your dedication to the role. But I would welcome your views on **whether, and if so how, the membership of FRAs should change to bring greater expertise to each Authority**. As I said, one obvious answer to that would be to make all FRA members public appointments, as in Scotland. Alternatively, we could have a mix of such appointments and councillor nominees, with the former perhaps in a co-opted or non-executive role.

Finally, I understand the reservations that you and your colleagues have about reform. I can only reiterate that I have no preconceived plan or hidden agenda. I am simply seeking to put the Service, its governance and funding on an accountable and sustainable footing which leaves it best able to confront current and future challenges. I am seeking your views in that spirit, and hope you will be able to contribute accordingly.

As we agreed, I will ask my office to arrange a further meeting for us to discuss this after Easter. But I will need then to move quickly to develop and implement the preferred option.

I am writing in identical terms to Tudor Davies and Rowland Rees-Evans.

Handwritten signature of Alun Davies in blue ink, consisting of two lines: the first line is a stylized 'Alun' and the second line is a shorter 'Davies'.

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