


Report to	Executive Panel	
Date	17 June 2024	
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Subject	The Charter for Families Bereaved through Public Tragedy	

PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1 This report sets out for Members of the North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority (the Authority) the background, details and requirements of the Charter for Families Bereaved by Public Tragedy (the Charter).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 2 The Charter for Families Bereaved by Public Tragedy strives to ensure that public bodies respond to public tragedies with openness, transparency, and accountability. The Charter comprises six commitments aimed at fostering a culture of honesty and respect in public service.
- 3 This report outlines the measures proposed to meet these commitments and recommends that the Executive Panel endorse the ratification of the Charter at a future Authority meeting. Adopting the Charter will involve collaboration with both internal teams and external stakeholders to ensure comprehensive readiness and effective implementation.

RECOMMENDATION

- 4 It is recommended that Members:
 - i) endorse the ratification of The Charter for Families Bereaved through Public Tragedy at a future full Authority meeting, under the following terms:
 - the Chair of the Authority signs the Charter on behalf of North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority;
 - the Chief Fire Officer signs the Charter on behalf of North Wales Fire and Rescue Service; and
 - that due regard is given to the Public Sector Equality Duty (section 149 of the Equality Act 2010) during implementation and adoption of the Charter.

BACKGROUND

- 5 The Hillsborough tragedy occurred on 15 April 1989, resulting in 97 deaths from a crush at the FA Cup semi-final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest at Hillsborough Stadium in Sheffield. It was the worst disaster in British sporting history, deeply affecting hundreds of individuals, the city of Liverpool, and holding national and international significance.
- 6 In December 2012, the High Court quashed the original inquest verdict following the Hillsborough Independent Panel report, leading to a new inquest in Warrington (31 March 2014 to 26 April 2016). The jury concluded that 96 Liverpool supporters were unlawfully killed. In July 2021, Andrew Devine was also ruled unlawfully killed, becoming the 97 victim.
- 7 In 2017, then Home Secretary Theresa May asked the Right Reverend James Jones KBE to detail the Hillsborough families' experiences. Bishop James, former Bishop of Liverpool (1998 to 2013), wrote 'The Patronising Disposition of Unaccountable Power' on 1 December 2017 to ensure the Hillsborough families' experiences were placed on public record and their suffering is not repeated.
- 8 The report documented their experiences since 1989, provided key recommendations for systemic changes, and proposed the Charter for Families Bereaved through Public Tragedy.
- 9 The Charter calls for a cultural shift in public bodies' engagement with bereaved families, ensuring the lessons of the Hillsborough disaster and its aftermath are learned to prevent those who are affected by public tragedy in the future from having the same experience.
- 10 Many organisations across the UK have already signed the Charter, embedding the Charter within their organisational policies and procedures relating to professional conduct, behaviours and standards.
- 11 The Welsh Joint Emergency Services Group (JESG) and Local Resilience Forums have undertaken steps to explore this important initiative. They aim to adopt the recommendations captured through the Charter, and to develop a pan-Wales implementation across local resilience forums, emergency responders, health, local authorities, and the voluntary sector.

- 12 An executive workshop was held at South Wales Police Headquarters on 14 May 2024 that brought together representatives including:

Welsh Policing (Inc. British Transport Police), Welsh Fire Services, Welsh Ambulance Service, Local Authorities, University Health Boards, Public Health Wales, Welsh Government, Welsh Local Government Association, Armed Forces, Natural Resources Wales, HM Coroners, HM Coastguard, Coal Authority, St Johns Ambulance, Transport for Wales, Office for Police Crime Commissioners, Red Cross, Mountain Rescue and the Health Safety Executive.
- 13 The workshop was opened by CFO Dawn Docx in her capacity as JESG Chair and was attended by Cllr Dylan Rees as Authority Chair, Assistant Chief Fire Officer Justin Evans and Group Manager Adam Leatham.
- 14 The workshop explored the Charter, facilitating conversations to understand how organisations can individually and collectively contribute, focusing on organisational readiness, response and recovery arrangements against the six points of the Charter. Bishop James provided a keynote speech emphasising the importance of honouring the legacy of those who have suffered in public tragedies.
- 15 At the conclusion of the event, organisations committed to working together to better serve the public and support those affected by public tragedy. A consensus was reached on discussions taking place within respective organisations and to incorporate the Charter within the Strategic Intentions of the Welsh Local Resilience Forums.

INFORMATION

- 16 There are no certification processes for the adoption of the Charter; it is recommended that the Charter is adopted quickly and quietly with notifications to relevant groups. Bishop James and his advisors have previously advised against media promotion suggesting a process of adoption that includes policy, culture and training.
- 17 Aspects of the Charter are already embodied in the rules, obligations and codes that apply to public services and those in public office. The charter reaffirms a commitment to a continuing culture of honesty and transparency in public service and the wider public sector, in line with the existing frameworks and the underpinning values of the Seven Principles of Public Life (the Nolan Principles), including in response to public inquiries.

18 These are the six principles of the Charter:

- In the event of a public tragedy, support the activation of emergency plans and deployment of resources to rescue victims, to support the bereaved and to protect the vulnerable;
- Place the public interest above our own reputations;
- Approach forms of public scrutiny – including public inquiries and inquests – with candour, in an open, honest and transparent way, making full disclosure of relevant documents, material and facts. Our objective is to assist the search for the truth. We accept that we should learn from the findings of external scrutiny and from past mistakes;
- Avoid seeking to defend the indefensible or to dismiss or disparage those who may have suffered where we have fallen short;
- Ensure all members of staff treat members of the public and each other with mutual respect and with courtesy. Where we fall short, we should apologise straightforwardly and genuinely; and
- Recognise that we are accountable and open to challenge. We will ensure that processes are in place to allow the public to hold us to account for the work we do and for the way in which we do it. We do not knowingly mislead the public or the media.

19 Adopting this Charter, and honouring its principles, will provide the Authority with a framework to support bereaved families and the community in the aftermath of a major incident. With a clear commitment to people, and to providing services that meet their needs before, during and after an event.

20 Further work is required to consider North Wales Fire and Rescue Service's (the Service) readiness and activities that might need to be put in place to allow for the adoption and mobilisation of the Charter. This will involve colleagues from the Service's Transformation Team, Corporate Communications Team, Human Resources Team, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Committee, and Staff Culture Engagement Forum, as well as collaboration with external stakeholders such as local resilience forums, emergency responders, health services, local authorities, and voluntary organisations.

21 Organisations attending the Executive workshop held on 14 May 2024 have committed to further joint development work over the coming months with a collective signing of the Charter likely to be scheduled late 2024.

- 22 The Authority and the Service are required to have due regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty (section 149 of the Equality Act 2010) when taking decisions. This, in broad terms, involves understanding the potential impact of policy and decisions on different people, taking this into account and then evidencing how decisions were reached.
- 23 The Public Sector Equality Duty requires decision-takers in the exercise of all their functions, to have due regard to the need to:
- eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other prohibited conduct;
 - advance equality of opportunity between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it; and
 - foster good relations between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
- 24 To meet these requirements equality impact assessments will be completed to consider any equality impacts from the adoption and mobilisation of the Charter.

IMPLICATIONS

Well-being Objectives	Direct implications towards meeting the Authority's long-term improvement and well-being objectives. The Charter aligns with the Authority's commitment to support and care for the community, especially in times of crisis. By ensuring a compassionate and transparent response to public tragedies, the Authority can strengthen community trust and resilience, contributing to overall well-being and social cohesion.
Budget	There are no immediate known budget implications associated with adopting the Charter. However, implementing the Charter's commitments may require allocation of resources for training, policy and procedure adjustments, and enhanced communication efforts. These costs are expected to be manageable within the existing budgets and are offset by the benefits of reduced legal risks and improved public trust.
Legal	The Charter commits the Authority to openness, transparency and accountability, which can reduce the likelihood of legal claims based on allegations of cover-ups or withholding information. Fostering a culture of candour and learning from past incidents demonstrates a commitment to legal and ethical standards,
Staffing	There is no expected impact on staffing levels as a result of adopting the Charter.
Equalities/Human Rights/ Welsh Language	The adoption of the Charter will further strengthen the Authority's work to deliver a community centred approach in the aftermath of an incident, including any necessary adjustments, aids or support to allow a person or persons to receive Services without disadvantage.
Risks	The Charter provides a framework for consistent and ethical conduct, which helps in managing risks related to public trust and legal scrutiny.