



Your Services Your Choices

**PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON HOW TO
MAINTAIN EXCELLENT, AFFORDABLE FIRE
AND RESCUE SERVICES IN NORTH WALES
IN 2016-17 AND BEYOND.**

Autumn 2015

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INTRODUCTION

This public consultation is about the fire and rescue services provided in North Wales. North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority is inviting anyone with an interest to give their views on how fire and rescue services should be developed in North Wales in the next few years.

We all understand that there is less money for public services to use than we would like, but accept that the situation is unlikely to improve for a number of years. Anyone involved in public services will know how hard it is to continue to provide the services that people expect when the money isn't available.

At North Wales Fire and Rescue we have gone beyond the phase of reducing internal costs, finding ways of economising and cutting waste. Our revenue budget is made up of county council contributions. Making savings has meant that our services now cost the equivalent of £46 per head of population – the same as they did in 2010-11. But we still have to think about how many more years we can continue with the same level of contributions. And if our costs were to rise, where would the money come from?

The fire and rescue service has done a remarkable job on reducing demand for its services by focussing on fire prevention. People are much better now at avoiding fires than they were even ten years ago. But what should that mean for the future size and shape and purpose of the fire and rescue service? People expect an emergency response when they are in need, but providing a service 'just in case' costs money.

People can start to think about fires in their own geographical area, forgetting that they might also need fire and rescue services while they are visiting other areas, or travelling. As an Authority for the whole of North Wales our concern is for the whole area and the whole population. Similarly, as an Authority working alongside other public service providers we recognise that we have to play our part in reducing costs. It's a very difficult balance to make, but we think that we have come up with a way of doing just that – looking after the whole population of North Wales without costing the earth.

We hope you agree with us, but we want to know if there is anything else we haven't considered that would make a difference. Obviously, we would also welcome your comments if you support our plans.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF NORTH WALES FIRE AND RESCUE

North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority is one of three fire and rescue authorities in Wales. It was established in 1996 to provide fire and rescue services in Anglesey, Gwynedd, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire and Wrexham.

The Authority is made up of 28 elected county councillors who are nominated by their own county council to serve as members of the Authority. In this capacity Members are expected to act in the best interests of the whole of North Wales, not just their own county area.

The Authority makes decisions about the level of fire and rescue services that will be provided in North Wales, and sets its annual budget to match that level of service.

What services does North Wales Fire and Rescue provide?

- Fire prevention and community safety education
- “Blue light” response to fires and non-fire emergencies
- Enforcement of fire safety in non-domestic premises
- Planning and response to large scale and serious emergency situations

How much does North Wales Fire and Rescue cost to run?

Around £32million per year - the equivalent of £46 per year for every North Wales resident.

Who pays for North Wales Fire and Rescue?

The six county councils in North Wales all contribute towards a central fund that is used to provide fire and rescue services.

How do I take part in this Public Consultation?

Think about what the impact of what we are proposing to do, and let us know your views **BEFORE 11th December 2015**.

THE PROPOSED OBJECTIVES FOR 2016-17

Draft Objective 1 – Carry on helping to keep people safe from fire in their homes

This is not the first time that we have adopted this as our first objective, but by doing so it reflects the importance that we place on this aspect of our service delivery.

The place where people are most likely to be killed or injured by fire is in the home. It is where people are most relaxed and least alert to danger, where they worry least about their own safety from fire. They fall asleep, get distracted and forget to check. In workplaces and public buildings there are laws that require the people responsible for those places to formally plan and reduce risk from fires. But people don't tend to think in the same way about their fire safety measures when they are at home.

So although we have made significant in-roads and seen a remarkable reduction in the number of dwelling fires that occur, there is still more to do. We would not want to see financial constraints preventing us from continuing to focus on helping to keep people safe in their own homes.

In 2016-17, therefore, we will continue to keep fire safety in the home as our first and most important objective.

[INSERT GRAPH OF SUCCESS AND HOW WE WOULD LIKE IT TO CONTINUE]

Draft Objective 2 – Working hard to make our budget go further so that we don’t have to ask the county councils for any higher contributions

We know that money is in short supply for running public services, and the forecasts are that things are unlikely to get better for a number of years. We have worked hard to cut our spending by economising where that’s possible and becoming more efficient in the way we do things.

North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority is financed mainly by contributions from the six unitary authorities in North Wales in proportion to their population. Its annual revenue budget is currently set at just under £32million.

£	Contribution 2011/12	Contribution 2012/13	Contribution 2013/14	Contribution 2014/15	Contribution 2015/16
Anglesey	3,236,545	3,219,270	3,216,231	3,198,669	3,200,523
Gwynedd	5,588,685	5,525,827	5,507,985	5,588,255	5,602,787
Conwy	5,240,568	5,206,959	5,198,570	5,283,704	5,289,891
Denbighshire	4,549,039	4,569,316	4,593,630	4,342,155	4,360,740
Flintshire	7,051,716	6,981,590	6,955,089	7,018,721	7,033,548
Wrexham	6,266,101	6,269,049	6,300,506	6,340,507	6,398,354
TOTAL	31,932,654	31,772,011	31,772,011	31,772,011	31,885,843
Cost per head of population	£47	£46	£46	£46	£46

After freezing our annual budget for three years, we realised last year that we would have to increase it slightly. However, we gave an undertaking to the North Wales county councils that we would aim to limit any increase in the money that we would ask them to contribute towards our running costs to a maximum equivalent of £1 per head of population.

That undertaking remains, but because we recognise the financial pressures facing the county councils, we propose to do even better than that. We intend, through careful planning, to freeze our annual budget at this year’s level for another three years. Potentially, that could reduce county council contributions for fire and rescue services to as low as the equivalent of £45 per head of population per year – the same as it was in 2008-09.

We do not expect this to be easy to achieve. Having already cut £3million from our annual running costs, our capacity to absorb unavoidable cost increases for the next three years is limited. We estimate that these unavoidable increases

could be in the region of another £2million. However, we recognise the value of supporting the delivery of a broad range of excellent public services in North Wales and therefore we wish to collaborate as much as possible to ensure the safety of people in North Wales.

Draft Objective 3 – Still protecting ALL our communities, but with better planning

Back in 2012 as part of our annual consultation we asked you whether you would prefer to:

- a) keep a fire station open because it was close to your home, but accepting that it was not available for several hours a week, or
- b) have a fire station that is always ready to respond, but accepting that it is several miles further away from your home.

What we were starting to tackle was the problem of an outdated duty system that makes it difficult to attract and keep enough retained (part time) firefighters to provide cover, particularly at certain times of day. This is partly because the level of commitment required (to stay within 4 or 5 minutes of a fire station for up to 120 hours a week) is becoming less realistic at a time when people tend to work and socialise away from where they live.

We were also concerned about the cost, time and effort it takes to maintain and manage a problematic duty system that has a high turnover of staff who realise that their primary employment has to come first, or that the pressure of the work commitment is too great on their personal or family life.

Although only a few people responded in 2012, your responses were useful. The majority favoured the second option – having a fire station further away, but definitely available – but there was a sense of nervousness about what ‘several miles further away’ might mean and no appetite for closing any fire stations. The idea of being ‘definitely available’ was appealing, but people seemed to need more information before being able to support us on the ‘further away’ aspect.

WHAT HAPPENS NOW IF I RING 999?

Your call is passed to a fire control operator who takes the details of the incident. Using mapping and mobilising computer programs, the control operator will identify the nearest available fire engine and send the details of the incident to the crew of that fire engine.

If the responding crew members are wholetime firefighters on a wholetime shift station, they will mobilise immediately. There are wholetime shift stations in Wrexham, Deeside and Rhyl.

If the responding crew members are wholetime firefighters on a wholetime day crewed station and the call comes in between the hours of midday and 10pm, they will mobilise immediately. There are wholetime day crewed stations in Colwyn Bay, Llandudno, Caernarfon, Bangor and Holyhead.

If the responding crew members are retained firefighters or day crewing firefighters between 10pm and midday, they will make their way to the fire station (aiming to do so in under 5 minutes) and mobilise from there. There are retained fire stations in 36 locations around North Wales, and a further 8 fire engines mainly crewed by retained personnel located at the 8 wholetime stations listed above.

WHERE DOES THE FIRE ENGINE COME FROM NOW?

There are 44 fire stations in North Wales, and 54 fire engines. How many of those fire engines are actually available, however, fluctuates from hour to hour according to the availability of firefighters.

For safety reasons, we insist on a minimum of four firefighters to crew a fire engine. If we don't have four available with the necessary skills and command experience, then that fire engine is said to be 'off the run', or unavailable. If we know in advance that we don't have a crew of four retained firefighters available, we might send a wholetime firefighter to make up a mixed crew if a call does come in, but there are limits to how often that can happen.

The 9 fire engines in North Wales that are crewed by wholetime firefighters are always available because wholetime firefighters work set shifts and their availability is known in advance. It can happen, though, that they are attending another incident when a call comes in.

The remaining 43 fire engines may or may not be available. We cannot guarantee how many will be available at any one time. It is not unusual for half of them to be unavailable, and availability can actually dip for a short while to as low as 15 fire engines to cover the whole area.

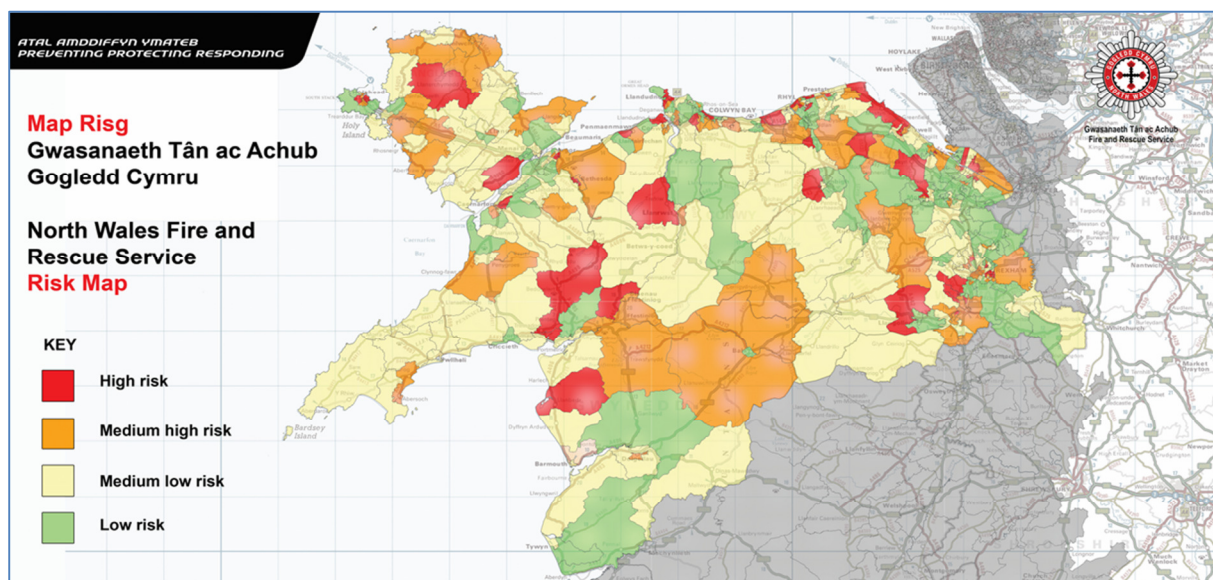
Why? Because we rely on retained firefighters being available to crew them, and because of the 'retained' nature of their employment contract with us they have to fit their availability to attend an emergency incident around their primary employment and other aspects of their daily life.

If individual retained firefighters know they are not going to be available and within 4 or 5 minutes of the fire station, they let us know so that the control mobilising system can be kept updated. So if the first choice of fire engine is unavailable or already out on another call, the control operator selects the next available fire engine to send.

So as things stand now, although a member of the public would know where their nearest fire station is, they would not know where the nearest available fire engine was at the time of their call.

We listened to the comments we received in 2012, and developed our thinking further. We analysed the distribution of risk across North Wales, both in terms of particular times and in terms of locations, and then tried to match that distribution.

We knew already that the majority of incidents happen in areas with higher populations - that's no surprise. However, when we analysed the *likelihood* of something happening – the risk – we saw a very different pattern of distribution. If we were to locate our resources only in areas of higher population density, then that would be to disregard the risk for anyone living, working, visiting or travelling in the other parts of North Wales.



So based on the principle of needing to protect the whole of North Wales at all times, not just the areas with a higher resident population, we looked at how to distribute our fire and rescue crews to best effect.

We realised that the answer did not lie with the fire stations (i.e. the actual buildings) but with the planning and management of our fire crews. We were also thinking about how we could address the problem of availability of retained crews and saw that there was an opportunity to keep fire stations open but to group together the crews that work from them so that we could be more certain about the availability of at least one fire crew in an area.

We also wanted to make sure that we took account of the differences in risk profile at different times. Many people are out at school or work during the

day, and those who are at home are usually awake and alert. At other times, there are more people at home, and they tend to be more relaxed and less alert. As we described for Objective 1, this time of being at home and relaxed is when the risk increases. So we worked out that while 20 'crewing groups' could cover the area during times of relatively lower risk, 38 'crewing groups' would be a much better level of provision for those times of relatively higher risk.

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IN FUTURE IF I RANG 999?

Your call would still be passed to a fire control operator who would take the details of the incident. The control operator would still identify the nearest available fire engine(s) and send details of the incident to the crew members.

The availability of individual retained firefighters would still fluctuate, but by using the 'crewing groups' we would have much better control over ensuring that at least 20 fully-crewed fire engines would be available and strategically distributed across North Wales during times of lower risk, and at least 38 fully crewed fire engines at times of higher risk. This would be a very big improvement.

Individual retained firefighters would still need to let us know when they were going to be unavailable or out of reach of a fire station so that we could keep an eye on which fire engines could be mobilised. But by being part of the new 'crewing groups' they should find that they can find a better balance between their fire service commitment and their other commitments.

With the introduction of new, modern alerters, we have the ability to allow firefighters to work more flexibly so that they would not be limited to only responding from one particular fire station. Wholtime and retained firefighters regularly work together as part of the same crew. We would continue to insist on having an absolute minimum of four firefighters to take out a fire engine (for safety reasons), but there would be more opportunities to allocate any additional firefighters to crew other fire engines – probably in the same crewing group but potentially in a neighbouring one. At the moment the process can be quite wasteful of available resources. For example, if nine retained firefighters happen to be available, the last four or five to reach the fire station might only arrive in time to see the fire engine driving away. If this happens repeatedly firefighters can become frustrated and disillusioned by missed opportunities to put all their training into practice.

In future, a member of the public would know that at least twenty fire engines would be available at times of lower risk and at least thirty-eight would be available at times of higher risk.

Fire engines may not necessarily come from their nearest fire station, but that would be no different from now. The additional certainty is what makes this proposal so much better than the current arrangements.

Objective 4 – Exploring the possibility of doing more things for our communities

Over the years, the fire and rescue service has very successfully transformed itself into an organisation that does a lot more fire prevention work alongside its fire and rescue emergency response work. But it could do more. Some fire and rescue authorities in other parts of Britain have already started to diversify their work, by, for example, taking on co-responding with the ambulance service and broadening out their work to help people stay safe in their own homes beyond just advising on fire safety.

Given our success in driving down demand for extinguishing fires, we think that the time is right to review what else we can add to the list of services that we provide. We want to make sure that we remain available to respond to any fire or rescue emergency, but we would like to explore the possibility of using the resources we have available as productively as we can by helping to keep our communities safe from more than just fire. At a time when public services are under strain, it seems the right thing to do. It also makes good sense for us to at least explore how we could support other parts of the public sector as we all collectively aspire to help look after our local communities.

[INSERT PHOTO OF COMMUNITY SAFETY WORK]

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT OUR IDEAS FOR IMPROVEMENT?

North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority will be submitting an estimate of its required level of funding for 2016-17 to the county councils in North Wales in December 2015, and confirming the final figure by the middle of February 2016.

We would like to have our plans ready for the start of the 2016-17 year, but before we make our final decisions we want to know what people think about our proposals. Is the Authority right to keep the prevention of fire deaths and injuries as its first objective? Is it realistic to expect it to keep its budget low AND to broaden out the range of services that it offers? Would you support the new crewing groups that we are proposing to introduce? If not, why not?

[INSERT RESPONSE CONTACT DETAILS. Closing date 11th December 2015.]

SOME QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Q. Where will my nearest fire station be?

We are not proposing to close any fire stations, so your nearest fire station will still be where it is now.

As happens already, the nearest available crew(s) will be mobilised to incidents, but what we are proposing is a more closely managed system based on having a minimum of 20 fire crews strategically placed and available during times of lower risk, and 38 fire crews strategically placed and available at times of higher risk.

Compared to what is available now, that represents a significant improvement.

Q. Why don't you just close some fire stations?

There are several reasons why we have not taken this route. Firstly, keeping the building is not the main expense – the main costs are to do with employing staff. So closing fire stations would not save very much at all in terms of revenue costs. Secondly, we see the fire stations themselves as community assets that could potentially be developed so that other public or voluntary sector organisations could share the space with us. And thirdly, the existing fire stations provide us with the flexibility to move our crews around according to changing risk profiles. In time we may be forced to reconsider, but for now it makes good sense to keep all 44 fire stations open.

Q. If the fire engine has to come from further away, how can you say that that is an improvement?

It has always been the case that if the fire engine in the nearest fire station is “off the run” (unavailable) or already out on another call, then the next nearest available one would be mobilised. People have been able to see the fire station and the fire engine and may have wrongly assumed that there would be a crew of firefighters available to crew it if needed.

How far away the next available fire engine is would depend on a number of factors including the current distribution of fire stations, the local road network, simultaneous demand in the area, and the availability of individual firefighters with the right combination of skills and command experience to make up a safe, functioning fire crew.

The improvement would come from having better control over the availability of fire crews. Under these new proposals we would be able to keep 20 strategically placed fire crews available at times of lower risk and 38 available at times of higher risk.

Q. Other services are centralising their resources as a way of cutting costs – why doesn't the fire and rescue service do the same?

We know that we attend more incidents in areas where the population is highest, but we want to protect the whole of North Wales, not just the larger towns. When we undertook an assessment of risk across the whole area it showed that there are areas of relatively higher risk distributed throughout North Wales, and that the risk profile of different areas do change. For this reason, we want to retain the flexibility to respond to varying levels of risk, and as far as possible to organise our fire crews to match the level of risk.

Q. Why don't you just employ more retained firefighters?

Simply employing more does not solve the problem if those additional firefighters are not available either. In some areas people travel miles from home to go to work, so putting them too far from their allocated fire station to remain 'on the run'. In some areas, the profile of the local population means that despite our repeated attempts at recruiting people as retained firefighters we have not managed to attract sufficient interest from people who can pass the stringent fitness and other entry tests. Also, all too often firefighters leave because there have been changes in their primary employment which means that they can no longer be available when we need them to be. So even when we have been able to recruit and train people we see a high turnover of staff.

Q. Why don't you employ more wholetime firefighters?

Employing more wholetime firefighters would solve the problem of availability, but it would be extremely hard to justify the cost of increasing the total number employed at a time when the public services are under financial pressure.

We have been trialling some new part-time wholetime duty contracts as an alternative to the retained duty contracts and we hope to continue to explore more sustainable and affordable contracts in future.

Q. Isn't this just a reduction in the standard of service that I receive?

No. The four proposals should give reassurance to the public that we will:

1. continue to put the emphasis on their safety by helping to prevent fire deaths and injuries;
2. play our part in helping the county councils in their financial planning at this time of tight public sector budgets;
3. keep fire stations open and improve the availability of fire crews;
4. find ways of doing even more, different things to improve public safety.

In addition to that, we will continue to abide by the seven commitments that we have already made in our Dwelling Fires Response Charter to:

1. Take the lead in driving down the number of dwelling fires that occur and in reducing their impact on people.
2. React quickly and efficiently every time we receive an emergency 999 call to attend a dwelling fire.
3. Attend dwelling fires swiftly and properly equipped to deal with them.
4. Deal with dwelling fires effectively, efficiently and professionally.
5. Help to restore normality to communities in the aftermath of dwelling fires.
6. Investigate the causes of dwelling fires and hold relevant people to account when appropriate to do so.
7. Strive to maintain high standards and improve aspects of what we do.