

Affordable Fire and Rescue Services for North Wales

Consultation 2016 – Key Themes in Written Responses

1. Specific concerns about Wrexham

Some concern was expressed that removing a wholetime fire engine from a large town like Wrexham would leave the local population vulnerable and the Service unable to deal with its workload.

The Authority acknowledges the concerns in the Wrexham area, and has consistently stated that it was with great reluctance that it came to the conclusion that it would need to remove a wholetime fire appliance in order to secure the necessary savings.

However, the number of fire engines and their location is a matter for each Fire and Rescue Authority to determine for its own area, based on known risks and affordability. Comparisons show that one wholetime and one retained fire engine in Wrexham would not only match the provision at Deeside and Rhyl, for example, but would also be consistent with fire cover provision elsewhere in Wales and in other towns and cities of comparable size in the United Kingdom.

The Authority has a duty to ensure that its resources are used as effectively as possible to provide affordable services for the whole of North Wales. This proposal would ensure that a wholetime and a retained fire engine would still be based in Wrexham, and that no community would see its fire station close.

2 A number of responses raised similar or identical concerns about removing a fire appliance from Wrexham:

a) Anticipated population growth in Wrexham

There was concern that the Service might not be able to cope with an increased demand from the larger population that is projected for the county. People referred to an anticipated 20% increase in the county's population over the next few years.

According to updated figures released by Welsh Government in September 2016, the population of the current Wrexham County Borough Council area is projected to increase by around 13,300 (9.7%), reaching 150,000 by the year 2039. It would remain the second largest county in North Wales.

However, evidence shows that the number of fires in an area is determined by a much wider range of factors than just the number of people living there. Since the year 2000 the population of North Wales has grown by more than 30,000 people, but the number of fires has fallen by around 3,000 a year.

In addition, population growth is not exclusive to Wrexham. The same projections predict that Gwynedd's population will increase by just over 10,000 (8.4%), Conwy's by almost 2,000 (1.7%), Denbighshire's by around 2,500 (2.7%), and Flintshire's by around 2,100 (1.3%). On Anglesey, the construction workforce at the Wylfa Newydd power station would reportedly peak at around 12,000 people.

The Authority's plans must be capable of delivering services across the whole of North Wales, and decisions about the number and location of fire appliances have to take the needs of the whole area into account. Given that resources are finite, and the current levels of operational demand are declining, it is the Authority's view that existing provision, even with a reduction of one fire appliance in Wrexham, is adequate. It is recognised that there may need to be specific, temporary changes to provision in Anglesey for key phases of the Wylfa Newydd and associated projects.

b) Large industrial estate

A number of people referred to the Wrexham industrial estate as a reason for maintaining three fire engines in Wrexham.

The Authority recognises that industrial premises throughout North Wales (including those in Wrexham and Deeside) present a risk, but those risks are managed through strict regulations covering environmental and workplace safety. North Wales Fire and Rescue plans its services to ensure that it could respond to any of those premises in an emergency, and is also involved in fire prevention in its role as the enforcing authority for fire safety regulation.

Some sites, because of the nature of their operations, are designated COMAH sites and are strictly regulated. Of the 14 COMAH sites in North Wales (5 Top Tier and 9 Lower Tier), two are located in Wrexham county borough. These sites must be managed in a way that reduces the risk to workers and the public through design, process control, mitigation measures and emergency procedures to prevent major accidents and limit their

consequences if they do occur. If such an incident were to happen fire appliances from a number of fire stations in North Wales would be mobilised.

As the Authority's responsibilities apply to the whole of North Wales, fire engines and specialist appliances are strategically located to respond across the entire area. If one area's cover is depleted, appliances from another area are brought across to cover. So although fire appliances are allocated to a 'home' station, the situation across the whole of North Wales is kept under constant review to ensure the best possible coverage at any given time.

c) HMP Berwyn

Some responses referred to the opening of the new prison in Wrexham in February 2017, which will house 2,100 men under 'category C' security arrangements (i.e. for those who cannot be trusted in open prison conditions, but who are thought unlikely to try to escape).

As regards the potential for fires at HMP Berwyn, figures provided by the other two Welsh FRSs about their attendances at Cardiff and Swansea prisons (both Category B, a higher category), together with information from representatives of HMP Berwyn itself, do not suggest any levels of response activity which would impact in any significant way on the Service's workload.

Matters related to the fire safety arrangements in the prison are dealt with by Welsh Government's inspectors because prisons are Crown premises and do not fall under the jurisdiction of the local fire and rescue authority.

As regards increased activity in the vicinity of the prison from staff and visitors, we do not anticipate any particular difficulties with traffic congestion or from prison visitors staying overnight in the Wrexham area, but we will be keeping this under review and if we identify a problem we will be working with the relevant authorities to resolve it.

d) Incidence of arson

A number of responses to the consultation referred to Wrexham being particularly badly affected by arson, and figures sent to us by the Police and Crime Commissioner showed that there were 174 police recorded arson incidents in Wrexham county over the preceding year.

Deliberate fires attended by the fire and rescue service do not necessarily meet the definition of criminal acts of arson, but nevertheless about one third of all fires attended by the Service in North Wales every year have been started deliberately.

In 2009/10 the Service attended 1,536 deliberate fires. Through effective prevention work, including with a combined police and fire arson reduction team, by 2015/16 that figure had more than halved to 703. Of those 703 deliberate fires, 42% were in the Wrexham county borough area, with the remainder in other parts of North Wales.

Looking specifically at fires in the Wrexham county borough, the graph illustrates how the number of deliberate fires in that area has stabilised since 2013/14, but also how the number of fires in total has declined in recent years.

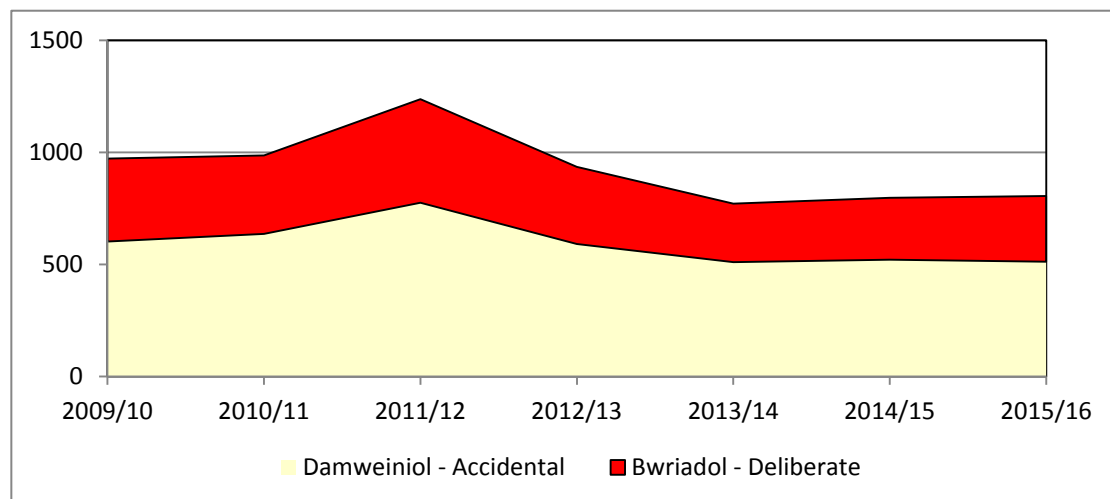


Figure 1: Accidental and deliberate fires in Wrexham

The Service mobilises resources to attend fires irrespective of whether those fires were accidental or deliberate (this would not be determined until after the Service had attended). So when considering the Service’s capacity to deal with the higher number of deliberate fires in Wrexham county borough, this must be viewed in the context of the total number of fires in the area, which has reduced by comparison with a few years ago.

Though highly significant for the prevention work undertaken by the Authority, the motive behind why a fire started is not a material consideration for planning its operational response.

3 Attending incidents over the border

Fire and Rescue Authorities are required by law to make reciprocal arrangements with neighbouring Fire and Rescue Authorities to attend incidents near the borders. Some respondents were concerned that the Authority might not have considered its arrangements with Shropshire, Cheshire and Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Services, and that these arrangements may not be sustainable if there were service reductions on both sides of the borders. Having discussed this with neighbouring Fire and Rescue Services, we are not aware of any changes in their plans that would have a material impact on these arrangements.

Under the provisions of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 (the Act), each fire and rescue authority must enter into a Reinforcement Scheme with other fire and rescue authorities for the purpose of securing mutual assistance to respond to fires, road traffic collisions and other emergencies. These arrangements are routinely used for attending incidents on the borders between two fire and rescue authority areas, and any decision to attend such incidents would be made on the basis of the availability of sufficient resources at the time of the request.

However, there is no requirement to employ firefighters specifically to provide cover outside the Authority's area, although the Act does make provision for fire and rescue authorities, if they wish, to enter into contractual Discharge of Functions Schemes with other fire and rescue authorities to provide services on their behalf. North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority (FRA) has never regarded the level of cross-border demand as indicating a need to enter into such a scheme with its neighbouring FRAs, either as the recipient or as the provider of fire and rescue services. We do not anticipate that removing a wholetime fire appliance from Wrexham would affect this position.

4 Attendance times

Some people who responded to the consultation were concerned that it would take the Fire and Rescue Service longer to reach a fire if there was one less fire engine in Wrexham.

It is worth noting that attendance times at a UK level have increased gradually over the past 20 years. A recent publication by the Home Office (Statistical Bulletin 01/17) recognised that the exact cause is difficult to determine, but that it may be attributed to road traffic levels, health and safety and 'drive to arrive' policies, and closer questioning of the caller before mobilising. Whatever the reason, the analysis of attendance times in England showed that there has been an average increase of around 6 seconds per year since 2010/11 for attending primary fires (the more serious type of fires that harm people or cause damage to property). However, it also showed that despite this steady increase over the past 20 years, there was no associated pattern of increased fire casualties or greater fire damage. There is no reason to believe that the situation is any different in Wales.

When the Service receives a 999 call, the Service's Control operators use complex electronic and paging systems to assist in mobilising the appropriate fire appliance(s) to an incident. This takes both skill and experience, and is designed to get a fire appliance to the incident as soon as possible.

The Authority recognises that removing a wholetime appliance may affect the calculated response times, which is one reason why it was reluctant to take the decision to do so. However, other potential savings options involving the removal of front-line resources would almost certainly result in much longer attendance times both locally and across the Service. The Authority cannot emphasise enough the importance of fire prevention, and will continue with its work to support people in ensuring that they have the right knowledge and equipment to stay safe from fire.

5 Disproportionate effect of service reductions

Some people opposed to removing a wholetime fire engine from Wrexham saw it as an unfair reduction in service in just one area, especially as the financial strategy meant that the county borough council would still be asked to contribute more to meet the annual running costs of the fire and rescue service. Some went so far as to suggest that service reductions should not be confined to just one county area, and that every county should take a share of service reductions.

The Authority provides fire and rescue services for the whole of North Wales. No part of North Wales is entirely or exclusively reliant on the fire resources based in its own areas. Fire engines and other specialist appliances routinely cross from one area to another and some services, such as the Control room, are provided centrally rather than from six different locations. The financial contribution made by county councils is for fire and rescue services in their area, but is not limited to only the resources based within their area.

Removing a fire engine from Wrexham would constitute a service reduction for the whole of North Wales, not just for Wrexham, but it would also mean a smaller increase in financial contributions than would otherwise be required if the Authority decided not to make any service reductions.

In addition, the annual contribution pays for all the services delivered, including prevention work in the community, fire safety audits of premises, Control room services and central overheads such as for training, ICT and property maintenance. Wrexham benefits from resources based in other parts of North Wales and vice versa. Calculating the annual contributions on the basis of how many fire appliances are based in a county area and billing separately for other costs would be disproportionately inefficient and expensive.

6 Firefighter safety

Firefighter safety was raised in some responses. The Authority takes the safety of its staff seriously, and insists on very high standards of health and safety management. The Authority is committed to keeping its firefighters as safe as possible and has a good record in this key area.

How many fire appliances and firefighters to send to an incident is carefully pre-planned and managed, and resources can be increased or decreased as the officer in charge of the incident determines at the time. Firefighters are protected by high quality personal protective equipment. The way incidents are tackled is also carefully pre-planned and managed, and only full crews would be mobilised to incidents: the Service would never place its firefighters at risk by mobilising too few personnel to be able to tackle an incident safely. A large or protracted incident in one location would draw resources from other locations, either to attend the incident or to stand by further afield to fill gaps in cover.

The removal of a fire appliance would not change the way the Service's highly trained and equipped firefighters tackle operational incidents, or the nationally recognised Incident Command System (ICS) arrangements that it has adopted for managing those incidents.

7 Financial calculations

A number of responses related to the financial calculations and decisions made by the Authority.

i) Additional costs

Some responses pointed out that additional costs would be incurred for callout fees for retained crews to attend incidents instead of the removed wholetime crew from Wrexham, and wondered whether this had been taken into consideration for the overall savings calculation.

This is an issue that officers are aware of. It is difficult to predict costs which are based solely on the levels of activity, particularly where that activity has been shown to be dependent on such variables as the weather. This item will be actively kept under review although it is not expected that the impact on the required savings target will be significant.

ii) Making savings earlier

Two of the county council responses (Gwynedd and Denbighshire) questioned the size of the increase in contributions being proposed for the first year, and reasoned that the Authority should reduce its costs sooner than the proposed third year (2019/20).

The rationale for leaving the reduction until the third year was that this would avoid some of the costs and challenges associated with compulsory redundancies of firefighters. If 24 firefighter posts were removed sooner, it would not allow sufficient time to reduce the size of the workforce gradually, so increasing the costs incurred by the Authority. Additionally, this would increase the risk of poor industrial relations, potentially leading to even more costs if industrial action followed in response to such plans.

iii) Limiting increases in contributions from county councils

Two county councils (Gwynedd and Wrexham) also suggested that any percentage change in contributions to the Fire and Rescue Authority should not exceed the average percentage change in the allocation of central funding from Government to the county councils (the Local Government finance settlement).

This suggestion is not practicable given the Authority's history of freezing its budget (with one minor exception) since 2010/11 despite increases in the Local Government grant in those years, albeit low. This has ensured that the Authority has made a significant contribution to the overall reduction in public spending in that period.

Regrettably, the point has now been reached when to follow the average percentage increase in local authority spending would render the Service's budget unsustainable, and would require service reductions on a far greater scale than is being proposed in the consultation. The Authority is unwilling to take this step.

iv) Alternative sources of savings and income

Some responses suggested that the savings being proposed by removing a wholetime fire engine from Wrexham could be found from elsewhere, for example by reducing senior management and support staff posts; making efficiencies through collaborating or amalgamating; getting additional funding from government; seeking public contributions; or by generating income, especially for delivering new services.

Many of the suggestions made in the responses reflected matters that the Authority has already explored over a number of years of seeking to make efficiencies. Information provided in the consultation document showed the actual amounts spent under different headings by the Authority in 2015/16. It also explained that the number of places where £900,000 per year could be saved are exceedingly limited. Transferring senior management responsibilities to more junior staff without additional pay, for example, would be impossible, and transferring support roles to staff on operational pay scales would be unaffordable.

The Service already collaborates both nationally to identify cost savings and locally to improve the lives of local people, but this does not necessarily translate into large cost savings for the Authority. Amalgamating fire and rescue authorities would mean redistributing the cost of delivering services across a larger area, but would not reduce the cost of front line delivery without reducing services.

The Service operates the nationally recognised Incident Command System (ICS) which defines the levels of command required to support safe and effective systems of work at operational incidents. At an extraordinary meeting in December 2014, the Authority decided to reduce the number of operational officer posts from 32 to 28, but accepted the Chief Fire Officer's advice that any reduction below 28 would create an unacceptable risk to the Authority and to the safety of operational personnel involved at incidents.

External funding from any source would need to be sustainable to maintain firefighter posts from year to year. Sudden removal could mean costly and unplanned redundancies of firefighters.

In relation to creating additional income by charging partner organisations for delivering new services, this would simply increase overall costs to the public purse. Notwithstanding recharging for additional costs incurred by the Authority, the thinking behind offering additional services is about providing better services to the public and using up available capacity between busy times – it is not about taking money from partner organisations in order to generate additional income.

v) Newly opened Fire and Ambulance facility

A number of responses were critical of the timing of opening a new joint Fire and Ambulance Service facility in Wrexham, with some suggesting that the money spent on that building should have been put to better use.

Although the difference between this type of capital spending was explained in the consultation document, there still seems to be a lack of understanding about capital budgets (a borrowing facility similar to a mortgage and not paid as money to the Authority every year) and revenue budgets (actual money in the bank available to spend during the year, and replenished each year). So although money was available for the building construction, it would not have been available for salaries.

In addition, the decision to move to a new facility was made nearly a decade ago, with the Authority contributing towards the cost of the development from an early stage, at a time when financial difficulties of the level currently being experienced would have seemed very unlikely. To have withdrawn from the project after making such a financial commitment would have attracted justifiable criticism as well as leaving the personnel at Wrexham occupying a building that was no longer fit for purpose.

The Authority's decision to proceed with the new Resource Centre has delivered a state of the art, combined facility that is already realising operational benefits to the community.

8 Open decision-making

Some responses wished to see the members of the Fire and Rescue Authority being more open about their decision-making, and subjecting their spending plans to greater scrutiny by their peers on the county councils.

Fire and Rescue Authority meetings are open to the public, with papers and reports available from the website. The county councillors nominated to sit on the Authority provide points of contact and information for each county council. The Authority itself meets as a full Authority, but also has an Executive Panel and an Audit Committee that meet separately.

9 Support for Objectives 1 and 4

There was general support for keeping people safe in dwellings, with recognition of the value of collaboration between organisations to help protect the more vulnerable households.

There was also cautious support for extending the FRS role, but with the proviso that this should not impact on core services or increase the overall cost of providing fire and rescue services.