

## **FRA consultation feedback**

This summary is drawn from meetings held with FRA Chairs, Chiefs and additional personnel, along with the WLGA, held on 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> June 2018. Conversations were confidential and, consequently, views have been summarized, rather than being attributed to individuals. The summary has been divided into four sections: responses to the prospect of reform, accountability, finances and FRA member capacity.

### ***Responses to the prospect of reform***

Chiefs and Chairs emphasized that they are not resistant to change and provided many examples of how they embraced it. However, they raised a series of concerns regarding the suggestion that fire and rescue governance in Wales might be reformed. Several queried the lack of a clear evidence and rationale for reform, feeling that perceived problems with the current system had not been clearly identified. This made it difficult for interviewees to estimate the added value that might be gained through any change. Some interviewees raised concern about changing a system that operates well and “breaking a system which is not broken”. For example, it was identified that accountability for fire was highly sufficient, given the scale and budget for the service, relative to systems of accountability for other public services that operate at a much larger scale. Interviewees emphasized the importance of the electoral link via local authorities and provided examples of how this was currently operationalized to deliver accountability, transparency, consultation and information (see below). Further, the suggestion that there was a need for a more direct form of accountability to underpin fire service governance was met with some skepticism, given other models, such as the Scottish approach or a potential one-Wales fire and rescue service, were not perceived to facilitate a direct relationship between citizens and responsible politicians, via an electoral link.

When reflecting on other models of governance, interviewees acknowledged issues present in other forms of FRA, e.g. county council models, where it can be difficult for fire and rescue to gain sufficient profile and attention in committee and council discussions. However, they also raised concerns regarding the professional board system in Scotland, questioning the legitimacy of board members and their expertise and accountability in the role. They also queried whether recent decisions to move to a national service level in other areas had been successful in Wales. Questions were raised too about the approach to governance whereby elected members sit alongside those who have been appointed and there was a query around the cost involved with supporting this kind of system, where governors often attract an allowance of £300 per day. Overall, there was a key emphasis on the level of democratic value within the existing system and queries were raised about the added benefits and potential trade-offs that might occur through any major shift to an alternative governance model.

When asked about the role of the National Issues Committee and whether that could be more significant, there was some positive feedback in terms of progress on shared procurement and aspects such as operational alignment but there was some concern that the drive for integration and collaboration sometimes outweighed local needs, e.g. the procurement of certain appliances was on occasions more costly when procured through collaboration. There was a view too that the NIC was set up by the FRSs in Wales to help and support aspects of the service at an all-Wales level when perhaps Welsh Government had a different conception of the role of the NIC. There was a suggestion in one meeting that the role of the NIC could be broadened to include a scrutiny committee element. It was further suggested that this sub-committee might include representatives from partner services, such as health and social care, reflecting the collaborative public service agenda. The Public Service Boards will also be important here in assisting with the collaborative, integrated agenda and interviewees all reported that they were pleased to be a statutory member.

## ***Accountability***

In relation to accountability, interviewees provided many practical illustrations of local democratic accountability working through FRAs. For example, Chiefs, deputies, chairs and treasurers visit local councils regularly to discuss budget-planning arrangements, service performance and operational priorities, while FRA members help to ensure that all plans and other documentation, such as performance updates, are distributed in local councils for feedback and discussion. The local and community-based knowledge that councillors bring to the FRA was seen as a major advantage. The way that councillors provide an important check and balance through their efforts to demonstrate the local consequences of strategic actions was also highlighted, although this can sometimes slow down decision-making. FRAs have also begun to live stream their meetings with a view to enhancing transparency and connecting with citizens. In terms of accountability for performance, FRAs demonstrated confidence in their current performance review processes and felt assured that they were able to judge FRS performance accurately and within a broader context. One suggestion made for improvement here was that perhaps the Wales Advisor's role could be enhanced to take on the development of comparable performance information as well as the themed reviews already undertaken.

Some respondents felt that there were aspects of the current approach within the governance of the FRS where direct accountability links could be enhanced, for example, by establishing a clearer connection to local authority executive decision-makers. Suggestions included the following:

- a member of the Cabinet from each of the local authorities could sit on the FRA. This had been the practice historically and re-introducing it would link the local authorities to the FRA more effectively;
- a member of the FRA from each local authority could sit on their respective cabinet;
- the Chair of each of the FRAs could be a cabinet member from one of the authorities in the area;
- Chairs could serve for a maximum of two terms each of four years and in the second term, to focus on succession planning for the next chair with appropriate training for the chair's role.

It was felt that these suggestions for improvement could enhance accountability, whilst also assisting with the development of key skills around scrutiny and questioning for members of the FRA who may have wanted to be a member of their Council cabinet (see later). However, there may be obstacles to the suggestions outlined above due to the limitations within the current councilor allowance system. In light of this, having a member of the FRA on the cabinet of each authority with responsibility for fire was more widely supported than having a member of the cabinet on each of the FRAs.

### ***Finances***

Many respondents held the view that budgets have been managed well and appropriately, with care taken by the FRAs in terms of the amount of funding sought. Despite this, some issues with the current system were acknowledged. For example, local authorities claim to be subsidizing the FRS by 16% and treasurers in local councils have raised concerns about whether the current system creates incentives for FRSs to reduce public spending. Chiefs remain concerned that there should be a floor in addition to a ceiling that guards against a particularly radical FRA chair making unsustainable cuts in the budget.

Interviewees had mixed views on the most appropriate funding arrangement in terms of promoting transparency. Some felt a more transparent precept arrangement for the funding of the fire service would be useful whereas others suggested this might require transparency within every local authority service, and that might be unworkable.

Some interviewees felt that introducing a precept and communicating this to council tax payers could be popular, especially with the Directors of Finance in the local authorities. A benefit of this system is that it allows the service to plan into the future as they will have knowledge of the funding they are due to receive. A Welsh Government imposed cap on this funding could be put in place too in order to manage resources and to ensure that the precept was within limits. Making the FRS service a precepting authority was perceived to be a positive step for some

interviewees in terms of both accountability and transparency and some council leaders, it was felt, would welcome this policy change.

Introducing a precept would go some way to meeting the concerns of some individuals about the current system where there is a view that the FRS receives a higher level of funding than local authorities where there was greater accountability and transparency around finances.

Risk was raised by a number of interviewees in relation to the finance of the service. Whilst it was highlighted that FRS is cautious in seeking funding under the combination order, under statute the service needs to be resourced due to the chance of a fire occurring. Many interviewees expressed the view that the service has to be funded on the basis of risk rather than demand and that any spare capacity which they have allows the service to innovate and change, particularly in relation to developing preventative services, early intervention and educational activity across a range of public services in order to meet the needs of the public. Further, whilst operational call profiles have been reducing over many years, interviewees expressed the ever increasing need to invest in training and the competence of staff, particularly operational personnel. This is statutory duty for FRAs.

Finally on the existing budgetary approach, one historical practice that was outlined involved budgets for each FRS being 'signed off' at a regional level. This no longer happens since the city-regions have been put in place. There was a view that this activity could be re-instated to make the financial settlements more transparent than currently.

### ***FRA member capacity***

Interviewees spent some time discussing FRA member capacity and skills. Many FRAs provide induction and training for members, and in several authorities, they provide training ahead of meetings. Often this is designed to enhance the technical capacity of members and increase service-based knowledge to support their

decision-making. In some authorities, members are asked about their training needs once every quarter and their requests are responded to. Further, the member development programme in one FRA has been identified as 'sector leading' and attracted attention outside of Wales and is being used to develop members of English FRAs. There is clearly potential to adopt or adapt this to other FRAs in Wales.

While there was agreement that the capacity of FRA members was variable, there was also a feeling that this is somewhat unavoidable and a situation that occurs at all levels of political governance. In these cases, often additional training and support was being provided behind the scenes.

Nevertheless, interviewees relayed several examples of Chiefs being challenged by members of the authority within meetings. Interviewees provided examples of extended discussions in FRA meetings on issues of significant importance (e.g. large animal rescue) and Chiefs indicated that they often entered meetings without knowing how decisions might play out in the authority.

The nomination of FRA members from each local authority on the basis of their political affiliation rather than their capacity and skills was highlighted as a potential issue. The reality was that in at least two of the FRAs, geographical representation in decision making was seen to be more important than politics.

When asked whether there might be a role for co-opted members on FRAs, responses were mixed. Some interviewees felt that there could be a role for co-optees on committees but not on the full authority. There was also concern regarding former fire service personnel who might be too operational in their focus should they be co-opted. The idea that co-optees with management skills that might supplement FRA capacity, e.g. in areas like finance and HR, was rejected on the grounds that FRS already employ officers with those kinds of specialists and members already have access to them.

The issue of the joint working which the FRS undertake with other services was also raised. For example, there was a view that as the service changes to assist and incorporate health and social care aspects, there might be a need for co-opted expertise from these areas, perhaps on certain FRA committees or the NIC (as mentioned above).

A final suggestion concerned the establishment of an all Wales Leadership Academy to enhance the existing skills base and improve the governance and scrutiny skills of FRA members. However, there was a counter view that many FRA members had already attended the WLGA Leadership Academy. Other respondents indicated that the LGA provided some useful capacity building and intelligence gathering opportunities for members.

### ***Summary of Suggestions for Improvement***

1. A member of the FRA from each local authority could become a member of the Cabinet or Cabinet members could sit on the FRA;
2. Chairs could serve for a maximum of two terms each of four years and in the second term, to focus on succession planning for the next chair with appropriate training for the chair's role;
3. FRAs could be awarded the authority to precept to improve transparency;
4. The annual budgets for the service could be 'signed off' by a regional body such as the NIC;
5. The Wales Advisor's role could be enhanced to take on the development of comparable performance information as well as the themed reviews already undertaken;
6. Consistency around member role specifications could be ensured, with clarity around the scrutiny and challenge role, and an indication of the level of member development and support;
7. A stronger link might be developed between FRA members and the existing WLGA Leadership Academy;
8. The terms of reference of the NIC might be reviewed to incorporate a scrutiny sub-committee that might provide an overview of performance across Wales;
9. Members with expertise from outside of the fire service, from areas such as health and social care, might be co-opted onto FRA or NIC scrutiny sub-committees.

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