

Sound the Alarm:

The Governance of Fire and Rescue Services

June 2024



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Sound the Alarm: The Governance of Fire and Rescue Services

June 2024



About the Committee

The Committee was established on 23 June 2021. Its remit can be found at:
www.senedd.wales/SeneddEquality

Current Committee membership:



**Committee Chair:
Jenny Rathbone MS**
Welsh Labour



Jane Dodds MS
Welsh Liberal Democrats



Joel James MS *
Welsh Conservatives



Julie Morgan MS *
Welsh Labour



Carolyn Thomas MS *
Welsh Labour



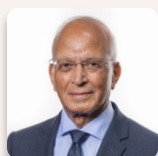
Sioned Williams MS
Plaid Cymru

* Joel James substituted for Altaf Hussain during Fire and Rescue related meetings on the following dates: 4 March, 18 March, and 22 April.

* Julie Morgan substituted for Sarah Murphy on 22 April.

* Carolyn Thomas substituted for Sarah Murphy on 18 March.

The following Members were also members of the Committee during this inquiry:



Altaf Hussain MS
Welsh Conservatives



Sarah Murphy MS
Welsh Labour



Ken Skates MS
Welsh Labour

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1. Introduction

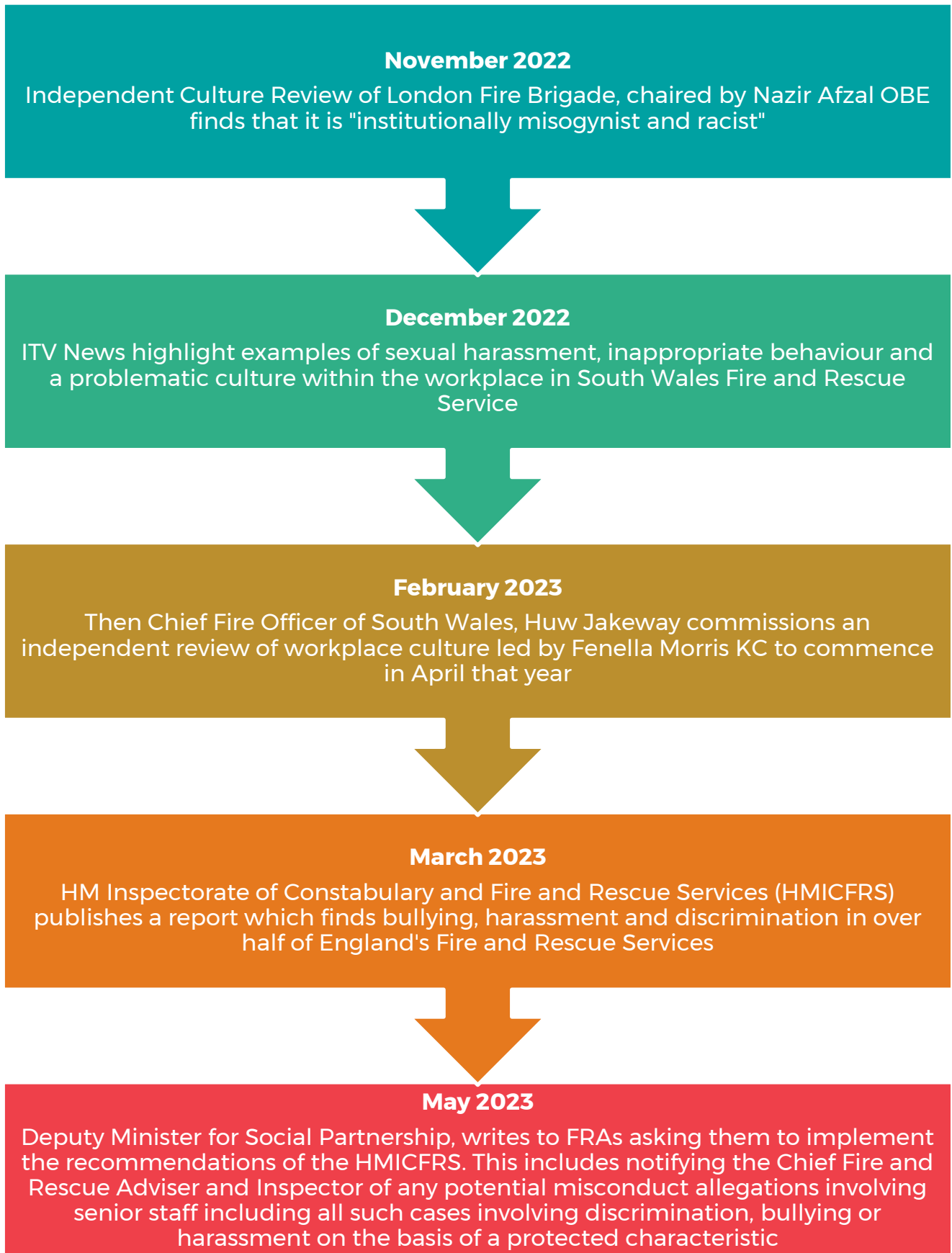
Our inquiry into the governance of fire and rescue services was prompted by the alarming findings of the Culture Review of South Wales Fire and Rescue Service by Fenella Morris KC. From the outset we would like to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of all who serve as fire and rescue service personnel, in whatever role, across Wales today. Putting your own safety at risk for the protection of others takes a level of commitment and bravery that should never be underestimated. For this, we are all in your debt.

For the most part, the service is staffed by teams of dedicated professionals who work tirelessly to keep our communities safe. However, everyone has the right to feel safe at work and the evidence highlights that this is not the case in too many fire services across England and Wales. Amidst allegations of bullying, harassment and discrimination in the workplace, the culture of our fire and rescue services are now in the spotlight for all the wrong reasons. That needs to change.

The Committee's role

- 1.** Throughout, we have sought to play a constructive role around the future shape and governance of the fire service. Despite receiving requests, we have been clear that we cannot look at specific allegations or individual cases of potential misconduct. Nor is it our role to seek to interfere in the disciplinary processes of external organisations.
- 2.** Instead our role has been to gather evidence, consider what we have heard and reach conclusions on behalf of the people and communities we are elected to represent.
- 3.** You can find more information including the terms of reference on the [inquiry homepage](#). Details of the evidence gathered is provided in the Annexes.

Figure 1 timeline of key events relating to workplace culture in fire and rescue services



2. Culture of the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS)

4. The Culture Review led by Fenella Morris KC (the Morris Review) catalogued “serious failings in policies, procedures, and systems” of South Wales Fire and Rescue Service (FRS).¹ In response to the report, the then Deputy Minister for Social Partnership, Hannah Blythyn MS (the Deputy Minister), issued a ministerial direction transferring the functions of the Fire and Rescue Authority (FRA) to four appointed Commissioners on 6 February 2024.² Figure 2 provides a timeline of the key events in the Welsh Government intervention.

The South Wales Fire Commissioners

5. The remit of the Commissioners’ work was set out by the Deputy Minister in the Terms of Reference and include:

- Implementing all the recommendations of the Morris Review by the deadlines set (which are between 1 and 18 months);
- Establishing a senior management team “untainted by the failings identified in the report”; and
- Establishing and implementing a process for re-examining any grievance cases that may have been improperly and unfairly dealt with in the past and to ensure a fair and just outcome.³

6. In terms of resources, the Commissioners confirmed that they would make use of existing staff and budgets from within South Wales FRS and would work together in person for one day a week plus online meetings and telephone calls “as required”.⁴

7. The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) said a meeting of the leaders of local authorities within the South Wales FRS geographical area had identified “a number of concerns and outstanding questions about the implications for councils” of the appointment of Commissioners and that communication with councils had been limited so far.⁵

¹ South Wales Fire and Rescue Service, [Independent Culture Review Publication](#), 3 January 2024

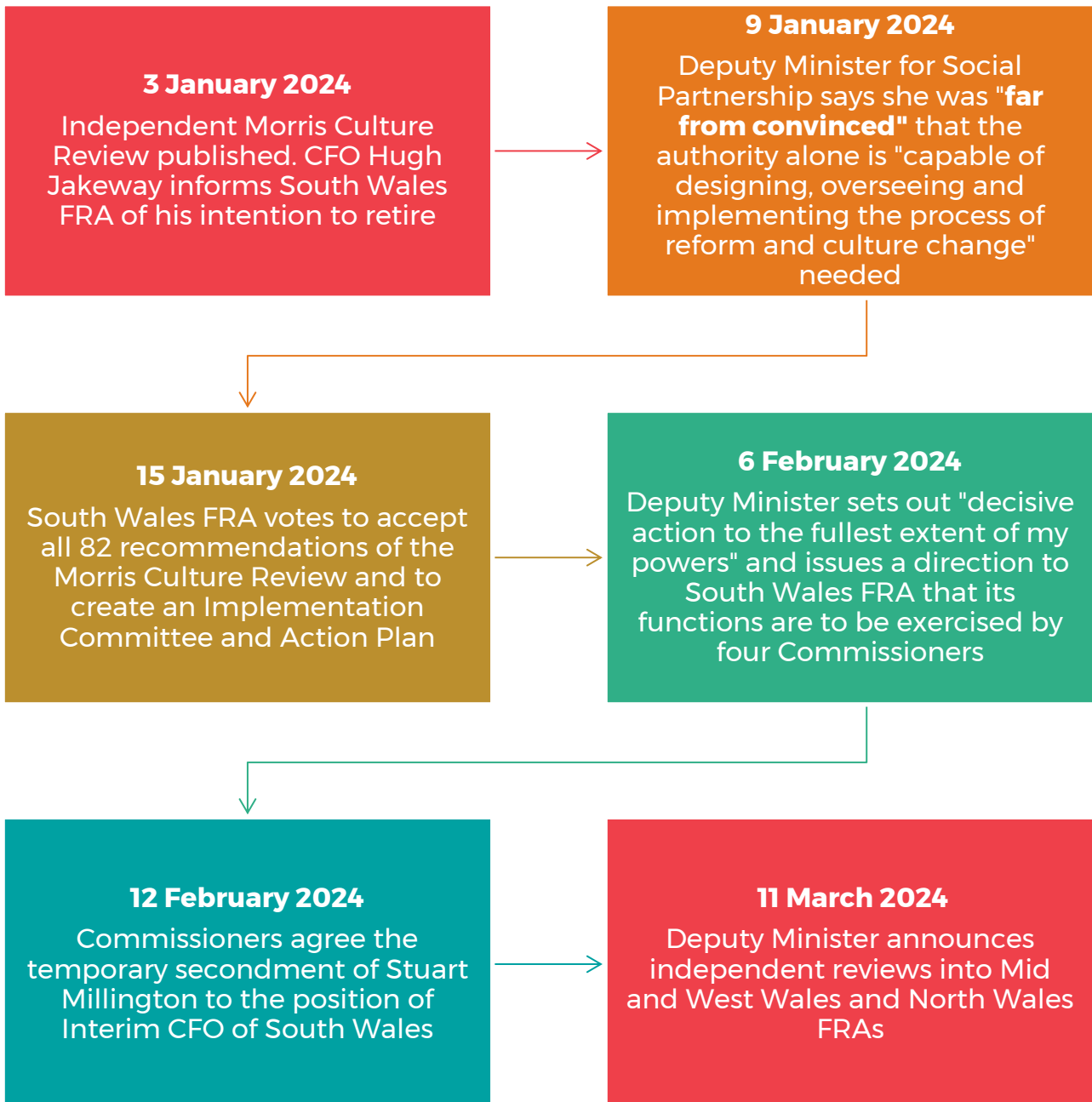
² Welsh Government, [The South Wales Fire and Rescue Authority \(Exercise of Functions\) \(Wales\) Directions 2024](#), 6 February 2024

³ South Wales Fire and Rescue Service, [Commissioners, Who Are We?](#)

⁴ ESJ Committee, [Correspondence from the South Wales Fire Commissioners regarding Fire and Rescue Services](#), 27 March 2024

⁵ Written evidence, [FRA10 Welsh Local Government Association](#)

Figure 2 timeline of the key events in the Welsh Government intervention



8. In correspondence following the oral evidence session, the Cabinet Secretary told us that whilst Commissioners were making progress, “wider issues in the management and processes” of South Wales FRS had been uncovered and that it was “too soon to give an accurate estimate of how long it might take” but that the Welsh Government was keen to bring the intervention “to a successful and sustainable conclusion as soon as possible and before the end of this Senedd term.”⁶

The appointment of the Interim Chief Fire Officer

9. One of the first decisions of the Commissioners was to place the then Chief Fire Officer (CFO), Huw Jakeway, on administrative leave pending his retirement in April 2024.⁷ According to the Deputy Minister, this necessitated the appointment of an Interim CFO because “there was an operational vacuum that needed to be filled”.⁸ However, this was contested by both the former Chair of South Wales FRA, Councillor Stephen Bradwick, and by the Fire Leaders Association who stated that the operational vacuum had been created as a result of a decision by the Commissioners to place Mr Jakeway on special leave earlier than was originally intended (his retirement in April 2024).⁹

10. On 12 February 2024, Assistant CFO at North Wales FRS, Stuart Millington, was appointed by the Commissioners for an initial 6-month period on a secondment basis. Several organisations expressed concerns regarding this appointment.

11. Both the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) and the Fire and Rescue Services Association (FRSA) expressed their surprise at the decision with the FBU passing a vote of no confidence in the appointment to express dissatisfaction.¹⁰ Matt Wrack of the FBU questioned the decision-making process and confirmed that his union had “had no involvement, nor discussion, nor consultation about the appointment”.¹¹

⁶ [Correspondence from the Cabinet Secretary for Culture and Social Justice regarding fire and rescue services and actions following 22 April meeting](#), 21 May 2024

⁷ Equality and Social Justice Committee, [Correspondence between the Fire Leaders Association and the First Minister relating to Fire and Rescue Services inquiry](#), 15 April 2024

⁸ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 42](#), 26 February 2024

⁹ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 205](#), 11 March 2024; ESJ Committee, [Correspondence between the Fire Leaders Association and the First Minister relating to the Fire and Rescue Services inquiry](#), 22 April 2024

¹⁰ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 237](#), 4 March 2024

¹¹ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 159](#), 4 March 2024

12. Cerith Griffiths on behalf of the FBU said:

“I was quite shocked at the appointment, given that we know that he now faces an employment tribunal. And we're talking about somebody who's coming in to lead an organisation through a period of cultural change, and he was brought in on the back of quite a number of complaints.”¹²

13. Unison’s Peter Crews said the appointment was “naïve” and “reinforced staff’s perception that its senior leadership are not thinking about the current situation, and not taking it seriously enough”.¹³

14. On the other hand, the CFO for North Wales, Dawn Docx, explained that the Commissioners had sought her permission for the secondment and described Mr Millington as an “able and competent” officer. She said “even if he hadn't gone to South Wales, I know that there were a number of fire and rescue services in England that were trying to attract him.” She added “it’s unfortunate, the comments that have been made”.¹⁴

15. Matt Hardingham of the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) told us that his organisation was looking at how to “best support South Wales FRS and its interim chief fire officer on the improvement journey” and praised the level of commitment Mr Millington was giving to the role.¹⁵

The appointment process

16. We asked the Commissioners for more information regarding the process for appointment. They explained that:

- There was a “pressing need” to appoint an interim CFO to fill an immediate gap in on-call cover arrangements; and
- Concerns about the effectiveness of the existing leadership team meant someone from outside South Wales FRS was needed – but they should be a person with experience of the FRS in Wales generally.¹⁶

¹² ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 25](#), 4 March 2024

¹³ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 159](#), 4 March 2024

¹⁴ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 200-202](#), 11 March 2024

¹⁵ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 240](#), 4 March 2024

¹⁶ ESJ Committee, [Correspondence from the South Wales Fire Commissioners regarding Fire and Rescue Services](#), 27 March 2024

17. With regards to the process they confirmed:

- One of the four Commissioners, Vij Randeniya (former CFO of West Midlands Fire and Rescue Service) led a process to identify suitable and available individuals in Wales.
- Mr Randeniya asked Dan Stephens, the Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser and Inspector (CFRAI), and the CFOs at Mid and West Wales FRS and North Wales FRS to help identify names of potential secondees who met the criteria.
- They sought candidates with operational competence at Assistant Chief Fire Officer and above.
- All four Commissioners were involved in reviewing the available individuals. We understand that the final list had two potential candidates.
- No Welsh Government Minister or officials (other than the CFRAI) were involved in identifying individuals or approving the secondment.¹⁷

Concerns regarding previous conduct

18. Although some of the concerns were regarding process, most of the potential misgivings about the appointment were as a result of questions relating to Mr Millington's alleged previous conduct and the potential impact of these on the perceptions of staff and the public.¹⁸

19. Although it was reported in the media that Mr Millington's past conduct meant that he was under ongoing investigation for allegations of bullying, his substantive employers – North Wales FRS – stated that this was incorrect and that the investigation had concluded.¹⁹ At the same time, we established that there were ongoing proceedings at employment tribunal to which Mr Millington was a party. A preliminary hearing of the tribunal met on 9 May 2024.²⁰

¹⁷ ESJ Committee, [Correspondence from the South Wales Fire Commissioners regarding Fire and Rescue Services](#), 27 March 2024

¹⁸ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 23](#), 4 March 2024;

¹⁹ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 207-209](#), 11 March 2024

²⁰ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 58 and 59](#), 22 April 2024

20. With regards to previous alleged misconduct relating to bullying, North Wales CFO Dawn Docx told us:

“The complaint had been investigated, and we had received the report, and of the complaints that were made, three were upheld and four were partially upheld, and they were actually learning points. So, as far as saying that we were in the middle of an investigation, no—it was complete, and knowing what those points were, I didn't feel that it was any barrier whatsoever for Stuart to be appointed as the interim chief fire officer.”²¹

21. The Chair of North Wales FRA added that the complaint had been “very thoroughly investigated” and responded to earlier testimony from the FBU:

“Yes, there was a media storm regarding the appointment, and it was incorrectly stated that he was still under investigation, but I noticed that, when you last sat, Cerith Griffiths, executive council member for the FBU, stated:

'We're willing to work with whoever' is appointed to lead the service forward in south Wales. Well, that begs the question of why, then, did the FBU look to vote for a no-confidence motion in the appointment of Stuart Millington, when they should have been saying, 'We will work with you to move the organisation forward'.”²²

22. The Cabinet Secretary, Julie James MS, confirmed that the Commissioners knew “prior to appointing Mr Millington, that a complaint had been made about him in 2023; and that had been subject to a full external investigation and that had concluded there was no disciplinary case to answer.”²³

23. From May 2023 onwards, each FRS in Wales had agreed arrangements to the Welsh Government request to notify the CFRAI of any allegations involving senior staff that have the potential to constitute misconduct, including all such cases involving discrimination, bullying or harassment on the basis of a protected characteristic.²⁴ In response to our questions regarding these specific allegations,

²¹ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 204](#), 11 March 2024

²² ESJ Committee, Record of proceedings, [paragraphs 208 to 210](#), 11 March 2024

²³ ESJ Committee, Record of proceedings, [paragraph 58](#), 22 April 2024

²⁴ [Welsh Government Evidence Paper on Fire and Rescue Authority Governance](#), 22 April 2024, pages 46 - 48

CFRAI Dan Stephens explained that whilst aspects of the grievance against Mr Millington were upheld, none had “met the threshold for discipline” and that he had “no concerns to raise in the disciplinary space to the commissioners.”²⁵

24. We took evidence from Dawn Docx, Dylan Rees, the Cabinet Secretary and Dan Stephens between February and the end of April 2024. Our session with Vij Randeniya and the correspondence we received setting out the appointment process is from March 2024. Information disclosed in Plenary on 30 April 2024 and reported in the media following the preliminary tribunal on 9 May 2024 appears to contradict some of the evidence concerning the complaints against Mr Millington.²⁶ Whilst it is not our place to comment on active proceedings, multiple media organisations reported the findings of an Independent Investigator’s report undertaken in October 2023 which found: “evidence to support a prima facie case” that Mr Millington’s actions “may amount to bullying and harassment” and/or “discrimination/harassment on the ground of trade union activity”.²⁷

25. We wrote to North Wales FRA, the Fire Commissioners, the Cabinet Secretary and the CFRAI on 15 May 2024 inviting them to consider whether any additional clarifications were necessary in light of the findings of the Independent Investigator’s report. In response North Wales FRA outlined their approach to handling misconduct according to ACAS guidance, adding that “the mitigating factors” that were “taken into consideration by the Clerk* to North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority when determining the next steps to resolve the issue” [in relation to Mr Millington] had not been publicised.²⁸

²⁵ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 86](#), 22 April 2024

²⁶ Welsh Parliament, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 40](#), 30 April 2024

²⁷ BBC News, [Top fire officer's behaviour criticised in report](#), 9 May 2024; ITV Cymru Wales News, [Fire boss tribunal hears details of 'bullying and harassment' complaint](#) | [ITV News Wales](#), 10 May 2024

*NB: in this instance the Clerk was exercising their duties as Monitoring Officer. The Monitoring Officer is a statutory role within each FRA and whose responsibilities include the promotion and maintenance of high standards of conduct, provision of training to FRA Members and receiving, acting upon and where appropriate investigating complaints of alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct

²⁸ [Correspondence from North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority regarding fire and rescue services inquiry request for clarification](#), 21 May 2024

26. The Cabinet Secretary's response said:

"To clarify matters, my officials have since made further inquiries of Chief Fire Officer (CFO) Dawn Docx of North Wales FRS. She has confirmed that NWFRS commissioned an independent investigation into allegations against Mr Millington last year, in line with its established procedures for complaints or grievances involving senior staff. That report was presented to CFO Docx on completion, who in turn referred it to the Monitoring Officer to take a final decision independently of North Wales FRS. The Monitoring Officer concluded that the findings of the report did not justify disciplinary proceedings against Mr Millington. As CFO Docx said in her oral evidence to the Committee on 11 March, she then considered the matter closed and did not see it as any bar to Mr Millington's appointment as interim CFO in South Wales."

27. The Commissioners' response confirmed that although aware of the report, they did not receive a copy and had not seen its contents. Vij Randeniya said that the Commissioners were "content to trust the information provided in good faith by CFO Docx, DCFO Forshaw, and the Monitoring Officer, that the matter was closed as 'not meeting the threshold for disciplinary action' and that both parties had been advised of 'learning opportunities'".²⁹

28. The Cabinet Secretary also confirmed that her officials had not seen, nor would expect to have seen the contents of the Independent Investigator's report and that neither she nor the Deputy Minister had been briefed on its contents.³⁰

29. With regards to Mr Millington's position, the Cabinet Secretary stated that it would not be useful "to put him out of the post he's been put into at this point" but that she wanted to explore the issue and the advice received by the Commissioners with them and agreed to share the minutes of meetings with the Committee.³¹ The Cabinet Secretary also highlighted the benefits of greater

²⁹ [Correspondence from the Fire Commissioners regarding fire and rescue services inquiry request for clarification](#), 22 May 2024

³⁰ [Correspondence from the Cabinet Secretary for Culture and Social Justice regarding fire and rescue services and actions following 22 April meeting](#), 21 May 2024

³¹ ESJ Committee, Record of proceedings, [paragraphs 61 and 62](#), 22 April 2024; [Correspondence from the Cabinet Secretary for Housing, Local Government and Planning regarding fire and rescue services and actions following 22 April meeting](#), 21 May 2024

diversity in decision-making and noted that all current members of the senior management in South Wales were men.³²

Potential impact on perceptions

30. A key message from the trade unions was that staff perceptions influenced the behaviour of staff. For example, Unison told us how certain behaviours had reinforced staff perceptions that a complaint would not be handled fairly when reported. Peter Crews explained that one of the reasons that staff felt this way was because of personal and family relationships at certain levels of management and that an individual investigating a case might be part of the same family or closely connected friends.³³

“It’s called the ‘Ski Club’, unfortunately, where levels of management are all friends and they all go away together and they just felt it was an uncomfortable situation. And Unison recognises, ‘[...] we’ve all got colleagues in work [...] like that, never mind what role you hold. But I don’t think any work was done with staff at all different levels to encourage people to come forward and to reinforce that, actually, if they did raise concerns, they would be dealt with fairly. So, the perception was there was no point in raising concerns, and the other issue with that is they felt there would be payback, so if they did raise any concerns, their career would be affected by it. Whether that’s the reality is one issue, but the problem of it is it did seem ingrained.”³⁴

31. This view was echoed by Cerith Griffiths of the FBU. He said that building confidence “that their issues are going to be dealt with, that their voices are going to be heard” would be “crucial going forward”.³⁵

32. Meanwhile Kathryn Billing, CFO of Cornwall FRS on behalf of Women in the Fire Service, stated that “any fire and rescue authority and Chief Fire Officer must want to lead reform and culture change” and that this required resources and political leadership to achieve.³⁶

³² ESJ Committee, Record of proceedings, [paragraph 63](#), 22 April 2024

³³ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 147](#), 4 March 2024

³⁴ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 148](#), 4 March 2024

³⁵ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 125](#), 4 March 2024

³⁶ Written evidence, [FAR09 Women in the Fire Service](#)

Our view

On the intervention in South Wales

The appointment of Commissioners to take over a public service usually indicates extraordinary circumstances or failings. Reading the findings of the Morris Review left us with no doubt that the Welsh Government's decision to intervene was justified. The Morris Review states that, in terms of improving its culture, South Wales FRS has "much further to go".

We want to support, rather than impede, the work of the Commissioners in turning things around – this remains one of our guiding principles. However we must acknowledge that this has not been the smoothest of starts. From the somewhat chaotic circumstances of former South Wales CFO Huw Jakeway's departure to a lack of clarity and mixed messaging in respect of key decisions, all must share in the responsibility for this including Welsh Ministers and their officials whose general oversight of the service has clearly fallen short at times.

The controversy regarding the appointment of the Interim CFO has come up repeatedly during our scrutiny. In particular the circumstances around the appointment have merited further clarification.

We found the lack of clarity and the defensive, bordering on dismissive, tone of several individuals responding to these concerns troubling. In our view the questions surrounding the appointment have risked reinforcing some of the negative perceptions amongst staff and the public about senior management and the commitment to change. Moreover, some of our Members in their roles representing constituents have also received representations from staff directly. While it has not been possible for the Committee to accept these as formal evidence to the inquiry, these testimonies have nevertheless given us reason to believe, anecdotally at least, that staff confidence in the process has been undermined.

Conclusion 1. The controversy regarding the appointment of the Interim CFO for South Wales has potentially reinforced negative perceptions amongst FRS staff of senior management. It is vital that every effort is made to restore confidence in the intervention through meaningful engagement with staff in all aspects and at every stage of the process for achieving cultural change.

On the evidence received regarding the appointment process

Our concerns have been compounded by the evasiveness we encountered from some who presented evidence to us. Dawn Docx, Cllr Dylan Rees, Dan Stephens and Vij Randeniya all downplayed the allegations in a way which appears at odds with the findings of the Independent Investigator's report. Given the difficulties in reconciling these apparent tensions, we wrote to North Wales FRA, the Fire Commissioners, the Cabinet Secretary and the CFRAI on 15 May 2024 inviting them to provide greater clarification or context in light of the Independent Investigator's findings.

Whilst we appreciate the extra information they provided, it did not change some of our overall impressions and doubts. In particular we were surprised that none of the evidence received prior to our requests had mentioned the role of the Monitoring Officer in the proceedings, given their key role in the process and as the final arbiter. We conclude that this lack of candour is symptomatic of a wider cultural problem among fire and rescue leaders. It reinforces our concerns regarding their judgement and leads us to question whether they fully grasp the scale of the challenge ahead. Given the need to restore confidence, particularly with staff, some may need to reflect on their positions.

On the diversity of management

It is perhaps unsurprising that in a sector historically dominated by men, women are in the minority of roles in most settings. The figures suggest that in South Wales FRS this imbalance between the number of men and women in senior roles was so pronounced that it is likely the misogyny identified in the Morris Review went unchallenged. Given the significant impact that the hierarchy attached to uniformed as opposed to non-uniformed roles had on culture according to the Morris Review, we find the following particularly illuminating:

- Across the organisation, 71% of senior management were men and 29% were women.
- In "uniformed" senior management positions, 100% of senior managers were men, none were women.
- In "non-uniformed" senior management positions, 53% were men, and 47% were women.³⁷

³⁷ Figures quoted provided by [South Wales FRS](#) and correct as of May 2024

Both the lack of women in senior roles and the distinctions attached to uniformed and non-uniformed roles need to be addressed as part of a wider programme of change. To embed cultural change into the structures of the fire and rescue service going forward, improving the diversity of both the profile and the skills and experiences of management should be a key priority.

Recommendation 1. We recommend that the Welsh Government works closely with the Fire Commissioners (and in due course the other services in North and Mid and West Wales) to bring fresh individuals with skills and experiences from outside the sector and, where desirable, beyond Wales into key posts, especially posts that have the most impact in terms of wider organisational culture. To fulfil this recommendation the Welsh Government should work with the Fire Commissioners to:

- Consider how to attract candidates from a more diverse range of backgrounds with a particular focus on attracting women leaders into senior management roles.
- Consider using the recruitment of a new Chief Fire Officer for South Wales as an opportunity to potentially recruit someone from outside the sector into that role.
- Ensure that staff within South Wales FRS are engaged meaningfully in a spirit of social partnership in the recruitment process.

We consider 6 months to be a realistic timescale for this recommendation and expect it to be completed by December 2024.

Other FRS areas

33. Several organisations including the FBU, the FRSA and Women in the Fire Service have expressed concerns that the cultural issues in South Wales are likely to be replicated in the other FRSs.³⁸ Tristan Ashby on behalf of the FRSA said:

"[...]We know that there will be similar outcomes in terms of the investigations, should they take place, and that the only difference will be the depth and the breadth."³⁹

34. Women in the Fire Service said it had been “questioning for decades the need for change and supporting women” arguing that “there is now a clear national and collective drive for culture change within the fire sector”.⁴⁰

35. The Cabinet Secretary told us that “while the other two FRAs have taken a broadly more positive approach” to implementation of various recommendations the Welsh Government “cannot have complete assurance about this matter” and that progress remained slow.⁴¹

Culture Reviews of North Wales and Mid and West Wales FRSs

36. Allegations regarding potential misconduct in the other FRSs continued to surface in the media as our inquiry progressed, notably in coverage by ITV Wales News.⁴² During this period Members also received representations from current and former staff members in other FRS areas which anecdotally added to concerns.⁴³

37. During the Statement on South Wales FRS on 9 January 2024 the Deputy Minister said that while the government were “not ruling anything out” rather than hold separate reviews into the other FRSs she would continue to hold them to account for implementation of the HMICFS report recommendations from March 2022.⁴⁴ This was still the Welsh Government’s policy during our evidence session on 26 February 2024.⁴⁵ On 11 March 2024 the Deputy Minister announced a change and confirmed that both Mid and West Wales FRS and North Wales FRS

³⁸ Written evidence, [FAR09 Women in the Fire Service](#), [FAR07- Fire and Rescue Services Association](#)

³⁹ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 25](#), 4 March 2024

⁴⁰ Written evidence, [FAR09 Women in the Fire Service](#)

⁴¹ [Welsh Government Evidence Paper on Fire and Rescue Authority Governance](#), 22 April 2024

⁴² ITV Wales News, [North Wales Fire staff describe 'toxic culture'](#), 29 February 2024

⁴³ As with representations received from South Wales, it was not possible for the Committee to accept these as formal evidence.

⁴⁴ Welsh Parliament, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 147](#), 9 January 2024

⁴⁵ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 132](#), 26 February 2024

would carry out independent reviews. The Deputy Minister said this decision had been taken as a result of “correspondence from current and former employees of both organisations, including allegations of bullying, sexual harassment and favouritism in promotion”.⁴⁶

38. Following the announcement, the North Wales FRA Chair, Dylan Rees said he: “disagreed completely with some of the allegations that have appeared in the press recently, which seems to suggest that North Wales is in the same situation as South Wales.”⁴⁷

39. The CFO of North Wales FRS, Dawn Docx, highlighted progress that had been made including staff surveys and updated whistleblowing policies:

“I am well aware that the culture in the fire and rescue services is not perfect [...] We are fortunate in North Wales that 21.2 per cent of all our staff are women, and I am very proud to say that of our service leadership team, 50 per cent of them are women, and that makes a big difference to the culture of service.”⁴⁸

40. Roger Thomas, CFO at Mid and West Wales welcomed “independent oversight and scrutiny” and they would embrace “external scrutiny from organisational culture specialists”.⁴⁹

41. The Cabinet Secretary set out her clear expectations that the terms of reference for both inquiries needed to be “fit for purpose” and said:

“I don't believe that the other fire and rescue services think they're in a position to have a review that simply underlines what they're already doing. We quite clearly have a problem in one of the fire and rescue services, and they will want to, I'm sure, be certain that they don't have that problem themselves.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Welsh Government, Written Statement, [Culture and values in Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service and North Wales Fire and Rescue Service](#), 11 March 2024

⁴⁷ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 168](#), 11 March 2024

⁴⁸ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 187](#), 11 March 2024

⁴⁹ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 218](#), 11 March 2024

⁵⁰ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 23](#), 22 April 2024

42. On the issue of complaints, Councillor Dylan Rees, Chair of the North Wales FRA, welcomed the rising number received in North Wales as a sign of progress.⁵¹ He later said:

“The difficulty we have is that we don't know if some of these 'complaints', in inverted commas, are historic complaints with people who are dissatisfied with something that's happened some time ago and want to use the opportunity they see that they have now to try and still pursue that complaint. It's difficult for us to actually evaluate the extent that that is happening.”⁵²

43. Both Unison and the FBU noted the silencing effects, a lack of faith in the complaints procedure can have and which had been found to be the case in South Wales by the Morris Review. This had led, according to Cerith Griffiths, to an unwillingness to “raise heads above the parapets”.⁵³

44. The Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust (WAST), which is itself taking steps to improve its organisational culture following a review in 2022, emphasised the role of trust. WAST said that its experience had found that the absence of trust was having a “silencing effect” on colleagues within the ambulance service and that dominant social norms have “normalised discriminatory behaviour masked as banter, perpetuated by the strong sense of identity and belonging present”.⁵⁴ It said organisations needed to focus on listening to staff and “owning” past mistakes in order to recover and begin the process of cultural change:

“In recognising the impact that certain incidents may have had on individuals, a sincere and unreserved apology has been extended by the Trust Board. In so doing, the intention is not to be defensive but to genuinely acknowledge and learn from these experiences. This acknowledgment is a crucial step in fostering a culture of trust and collaboration within WAST. By taking ownership of organisational shortcomings and committing to continuous improvement, the aim is to build a workplace where everyone feels secure, respected, and supported.”⁵⁵

⁵¹ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 113](#), 11 March 2024

⁵² ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 266](#), 11 March 2024

⁵³ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 5 and 7](#), and 142, 4 March 2024

⁵⁴ Written evidence, [FAR06 Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust](#)

⁵⁵ Written evidence, [FAR06 Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust](#)

Our view

On the culture in other FRS areas

Given how events have transpired in South Wales FRS we think it is right and proper that culture reviews have been announced for the other FRS areas in North, and Mid and West, Wales. We must allow those reviews the time and space they need to carry out their investigations. However, the Welsh Government should consider aligning the Terms of Reference of those reviews to the parameters of the Morris Review as closely as possible, so that each organisation is judged by consistent standards and metrics.

Recommendation 2. The Welsh Government, in respect of the North Wales and Mid and West Wales Culture Reviews, should align the Terms of Reference as closely as possible to the parameters of the Morris Review to aid comparison between any potential issues within each organisation. We would hope that this recommendation can be implemented immediately, and that the Reviews can be completed in a reasonably timely fashion.

On handling of complaints

It was concerning that some of the evidence seemed to downplay or undermine the credibility of those coming forward as “settling scores” or waging personal vendettas, given the context of the Morris Review. The use of a physical gesture to denote inverted commas during the discussion on complaints by the Chair of the North Wales FRA is a case in point. While there is always a risk that some will try to abuse the system, a healthy organisational culture has to be built on mutual respect and trust. A lack of mutual trust can have a silencing effect on individuals’ willingness to “raise their heads above the parapet”. Senior leaders have an important role in setting the tone in that regard. Given that some of the more serious allegations only came to light as a result of the bravery of whistleblowers, it is crucial that every effort is made to support them and staff more generally.

Recommendation 3. The Welsh Government should make clear its expectations that current or former staff members coming forward during this period in any of the FRSs will be adequately supported and treated fairly in line with established HR practice. In order to give this assurance, the Welsh Government should consider whether additional expertise and/or resource may be necessary to support the HR functions necessary in the coming months. This recommendation

should be implemented immediately with an updated provided by November 2024.

The Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser's role in terms of culture

45. The Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser and Inspector for Wales (CFRAI) advises the Welsh Government on operational preparedness, performance, and structure and organisation of the fire and rescue service. This includes undertaking specific “thematic” reviews as deemed necessary by Welsh Ministers.⁵⁶

46. The current CFRAI, Dan Stephens, told us at our first ministerial session on 29 February 2024 that “cultural issues of a service are not something that a chief fire and rescue adviser would routinely inspect for”.⁵⁷

47. The FBU described this as “odd” and “somewhat surprising”.⁵⁸ Matt Wrack said:

“If you look at the history of the service and the debate on diversity within it, going back to the 1990s, the then inspectorate, which covered England and Wales at the time, did do thematic reviews, including on equality and diversity in the fire and rescue service. I don't understand why someone, today, when that debate's been going on, and stalled to some degree for 40 years, would say that that's not part of his role.”⁵⁹

48. Conversely, North Wales CFO Dawn Docx said that the role is “limited to matters in which the fire and rescue authorities in Wales are discharging their functions, and technical matters relating to those functions. So, in many ways, it wouldn't necessarily pick up cultural issues, and it is a part-time role.”⁶⁰

49. Interim Deputy CFO at South Wales FRS, Dewi Rose told us that since the HMICFRS March 2023 report, he had provided “regular updates to the fire adviser on the progress against the spotlight report, including the number of complaints, disciplines, grievance and whistleblowing complaints we've had”.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Welsh Government, [Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser and Inspector for Wales](#)

⁵⁷ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 25](#), 26 February 2024

⁵⁸ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraphs 47 to 52](#), 4 March 2024

⁵⁹ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 52](#), 4 March 2024

⁶⁰ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 331](#), 11 March 2024

⁶¹ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 255](#), 11 March 2024

50. During the second ministerial session on 22 April 2024, Dan Stephens told us that he had undertaken an “identical review” to that of the HMICFRS into legacy discipline cases in March 2023 and that the Deputy Minister was briefed on its findings in May 2023.⁶²

Our view

We find the revelation that issues of culture were not considered a routine part of the CFRAI’s role troubling. This suggests a narrowness or a lack of clarity surrounding the CFRAI’s role which should be addressed. In particular the role should be responsive to all issues within the FRSs including cultural issues and the Welsh Government should consider making this more explicit as a priority.

Conclusion 2. The Welsh Government should clarify the CFRAI’s role so that it is more responsive to all issues affecting the fire and rescue service.

⁶² ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 13](#), 11 March 2024

3. Current governance arrangements

51. A key question has been the extent to which governance arrangements may have contributed to the cultural failings identified in the Morris Review. Legally, a Fire and Rescue Authority is a single entity. While a distinction is made between the FRA and the Fire and Rescue Service (usually intended to mean the personnel employed by the FRA, a majority of whom are uniformed), an FRS does not formally exist.⁶³ These arrangements stand in contrast to, for example, arrangements for policing whereby Police and Crime Commissioners set the budget and strategic direction and Police Chief Constables who are office holders in their own right and have separate operational powers and duties.

52. On the issue of governance, the NFCC argued that its importance “cannot be overstated” and that “corporate failings will always have a link to governance”.⁶⁴

Role of FRAs in governance

53. The 2014 Commission on Public Service Governance and Delivery found that the three FRAs “do not and cannot scrutinise the services and chief officers effectively as they are ultimately and legally responsible for all decisions” about the fire service. They said there would be clear benefits for the FRAs to “focus on scrutiny” and “for chief officers to become directly responsible for service planning and delivery”.⁶⁵

54. In the case of South Wales, the Fire Officers’ Association (FOA) said it was clear that members of South Wales FRA lacked the “requisite skills to provide the level of oversight, scrutiny and challenge required when providing governance for a large (in fire and rescue service terms) public sector organisation”. The FOA argued that many FRA members “make little or no contribution” during meetings and some fire authority members “become confused with regard to the content” of papers. They concluded that the members of the FRA were “unlikely to be in a position to provide the level of effective strategic oversight needed to assist the organisation in achieving the cultural change required”.⁶⁶

⁶³ Law Wales, [Constitution of Fire and Rescue Authorities](#), 15 June 2021

⁶⁴ Written evidence, [FAR04 North Wales Fire and Rescue Service](#)

⁶⁵ Welsh Government, [Commission on Public Service Governance and Delivery Summary Report](#), January 2014

⁶⁶ Written evidence, [FAR01 – Fire Officers Association](#)

55. With regards to fire and rescue services more generally, Tristan Ashby of the FRSA described them as “in a sorry state” and argued that FRAs are “clearly not up to the task”. He added that many fire authority members find “the male dominance of services and the disciplinarian regime reassuring” and were “well-meaning amateurs, with no experience of driving through cultural change in any organisation, let alone an emergency service.”⁶⁷

56. Conversely the submissions from the FRAs themselves sought to downplay the role of governance with both North Wales FRA and Mid and West Wales FRA quoting the findings of the Morris Review that “there are sufficient legal structures in place for effective governance of the Service”.⁶⁸

57. North Wales FRA argued against the focus on governance:

*“It is too simplistic to think that an organisation’s culture is directly controllable by adjusting some aspect of “governance arrangements” or through structural change. Attitudes and behaviours are often deep rooted. It takes time to foster ‘good’ ethical attitudes and behaviours.”*⁶⁹

58. North Wales added their view that the Commissioners must be “allowed sufficient time” to implement recommendations and draw conclusions “without adding any more layers of complexity to the situation”.⁷⁰

59. The Cabinet Secretary noted that the Morris Review had partly addressed governance issues and its findings regarding the sufficiency of legal structures. However, the Cabinet Secretary stated that while true in a “formal” sense, how an organisation approaches governance “is concerned with more than the existence of statutory powers”.⁷¹ She acknowledged that whilst it would not be fair to expect FRA members to be aware of every detail of management practice or to blame them for individual acts of misconduct” they must share a degree of responsibility when “failings on the scale of those identified by Ms Morris KC emerge.”

⁶⁷ Written evidence, [FAR07: Fire and Rescue Services Association](#)

⁶⁸ Written evidence, [FAR02: Mid and West Wales Fire Authority](#); [FAR04: North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority](#)

⁶⁹ Written evidence, [FAR04: North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority](#)

⁷⁰ Written evidence, [FAR04: North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority](#)

⁷¹ [Welsh Government Evidence Paper on Fire and Rescue Authority Governance](#), 22 April 2024

60. The Cabinet Secretary highlighted decisions to reject the CFRAI's recommendations on improving performance and the approval of substantial pay increases for senior officers during 2023 as potential evidence that South Wales FRA "may not have been an environment which was conducive to holding management effectively to account."⁷²

Reforming governance arrangements in FRAs

61. There have been numerous attempts to reform FRAs over the past decade with only limited success. Ade Robinson of the FOA, for example, told us that the Welsh Government's 2018 consultation on reform "appears not to have delivered the outcomes intended" and that there had been "no change whatsoever" in the "number and quality of fire authority members (in SWFRS)."⁷³

62. The FRSA outlined their views on the "vested interests" which are potential barriers to reform:

"[...] local authority members who do not wish to lose control of their positions; chief fire officers who enjoy the lax governance arrangements; those unwilling to change duty systems or broaden roles as the current system inhibits development of the firefighter role; those in other emergency services who do not wish to become too closely aligned with fire and rescue service, which they see as tainted; other emergency services whose leaders are unwilling to explore the full benefits of collaboration."⁷⁴

63. During the 2018 consultation for reform, the WLGGA said that it "did not believe, at that time, that significant changes were needed, nor that the case for change had been made".⁷⁵

64. The NFCC referred to several governance models which are used across the UK (e.g. Police and Crime Commissioners, different mayoral models) and said it is often not the type of governance but the quality of that governance and of those in leadership roles which make the greatest impact.

⁷² [Welsh Government Evidence Paper on Fire and Rescue Authority Governance](#), 22 April 2024

⁷³ Written evidence, [FAR01 - Fire Officers Association](#)

⁷⁴ Written evidence, [FAR07 - Fire and Rescue Services Association](#)

⁷⁵ Written evidence, [FAR10 - Welsh Local Government Association](#)

65. This view was shared by the Auditor General, Adrian Crompton, who said there is no “gold standard” and emphasised that “in any system of governance, structure matters, but what matters more is the individual behaviour and performance of the people who are involved in that system.”⁷⁶ Mr Crompton highlighted the risks of “shaping a regime in direct response to a failure and a crisis—a risk that we, therefore, go down a particular channel that seems absolutely appropriate at the time but isn't necessarily the right one for the longer term.”⁷⁷

66. The Welsh Government said its concerns regarding governance had “been articulated several times in recent years”, however, all FRAs “have strongly resisted all proposals for governance change on the basis that they believe the current arrangements work well.” In the Cabinet Secretary’s view “developments since then principally but not only in South Wales FRA, demonstrate the consequences of defective governance and poor accountability”.⁷⁸

67. The Cabinet Secretary identified several potential problems with how FRAs are currently constituted including:

- That FRAs are not “clearly accountable to any outside body” and are not meaningfully accountable to the electorate.
- FRAs derive their funding from levying contributions on their constituent local authorities, at rates which each FRA alone decides. There is no right for local authorities or the Welsh Government to cap or consent to such levies.
- A lack of separation between executive and scrutiny functions.
- A large and unwieldy membership with FRAs varying between 24 and 28 members.
- A lack of expertise among FRA members creates a potential “imbalance between the expertise of senior officers and the capacity of those responsible with holding them to account”.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 21](#), 11 March 2024

⁷⁷ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 70](#), 11 March 2024

⁷⁸ [Welsh Government Evidence Paper on Fire and Rescue Authority Governance](#), 22 April 2024

⁷⁹ [Welsh Government Evidence Paper on Fire and Rescue Authority Governance](#), 22 April 2024

Our view

On the role of governance

We reject the argument that governance arrangements of FRAs were peripheral or played no part in contributing to the failings of South Wales FRS. Failings on the scale of those identified by the Morris Review are almost certainly a reflection of deficiencies in the overall governance of an organisation. We suspect that those trying to claim otherwise are doing so primarily out of self-interest. And whilst we acknowledge the other FRAs in Wales may be able to demonstrate a commitment to change within current arrangements, the evidence suggests that some immediate changes should be considered given the seriousness of the findings.

Conclusion 3. We agree that weaknesses in the governance arrangements for South Wales FRS contributed to the failings identified in the Morris Review and that as a consequence, changes to the governance arrangements should form part of the Welsh Government response.

On barriers to reform of FRAs

There are few reasons for opposing reform of the FRAs in principle. While we are mindful of potential pitfalls that shaping a regime in direct response to a crisis may create in the longer-term, and accept that timescales for major reform need to be realistic, no change at all is not a credible option. We note that previous reforms have failed to materialise in the face of objections of various parties at different stages.

In its engagement with the sector, the Welsh Government is committed to social partnership which includes regular meetings of the Fire and Rescue Social Partnership Forum. Underpinning this approach is, as set out in the Social Partnership and Public Procurement (Wales) Act 2023, the need to seek compromise and consensus. However there appears to have been little prospect of compromise or consensus during previous attempts at reform. If these objections persist we remain unclear as to how the Welsh Government intends to reconcile these potentially competing pressures and would welcome a clarification in that regard.

Conclusion 4. We would welcome clarification from the Welsh Government on how it intends to reconcile the potentially competing pressures of the need for reform on the one hand, and the lack of consensus or possibility of compromise on some aspects of those reforms on the other.

Role of the Welsh Government

68. Under the legislation that devolved responsibilities for fire and rescue to Wales, the Welsh Government must prepare a Fire and Rescue National Framework. Under section 21 of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 (“the 2004 Act”) the Framework “must” set out priorities and objectives for FRAs and “may” contain guidance to FRAs in connection with the discharge of any of their functions.⁸⁰

69. The 2004 Act also requires Welsh Ministers to report at least every two years on the extent to which FRAs have acted in accordance with the National Framework for Fire and Rescue Services. There is no requirement to lay the report before the Welsh Parliament, unlike equivalent arrangements for the Secretary of State who must report to the UK Parliament (for FRAs in England).⁸¹

70. The Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 confers powers on the Welsh Ministers to set performance indicators and performance standards, against which an FRA’s performance can be measured.⁸²

71. Several witnesses including the NFCC, Audit Wales, Mid and West Wales FRA, and North Wales FRA pointed out that the National Framework is several years out of date.

72. Dawn Docx described the National Framework as “the vehicle to drive change for the fire and rescue services” and called on the Welsh Government to use its powers.⁸³

73. The NFCC added that significant events such as the pandemic, and the reviews of the Grenfell Tower Fire and the Manchester arena attack had happened since the last publication and that a review of the National Framework would be “timely”.

⁸⁰ Legislation.gov, [Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004](#).

⁸¹ Legislation.gov, [Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, section 62\(2\)](#).

⁸² Legislation.gov, [Local Government \(Wales\) Measure 2009](#).

⁸³ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 292](#), 11 March 2024

74. The Welsh Government explained that their ambitions for the next iteration of the National Framework included modernisation of the fire and rescue service and its ambitions in terms of broadening the role of firefighters. The Deputy Minister said that the delay in updating the National Framework was partly as a result of the need to give FRAs more time to implement the CFRAI's recommendations in relation to these ambitions.⁸⁴

Fire Standards Board in England

In 2018, the Fire Standards Board (FSB) was established to oversee and commission professional standards for fire and rescue services across England.

The Fire Standards Board told us that although it is not mandatory for English Services to comply with the Fire Standards, England's National Fire Framework makes clear that Services are expected to pay due regard to them. They highlighted several standards which they felt were relevant to those issues highlighted by the Morris Review, including: Leading the Service; Leading and Developing People; Communications and Engagement; Code of Ethics Standard and Safeguarding.⁸⁵

Our view

On the National Framework

We note that evidence received from across the sector suggests that an update to the National Framework would not only be welcome but is overdue. At the same time we also note the Welsh Government's argument that this delay is partly as a result of the need to give FRAs more time to implement previous recommendations made by the CFRAI in relation to broadening the role of firefighters.

We think that there is an urgent need to update the National Framework so that it reflects recent developments and call on the Welsh Government to set out a timetable for agreeing a new National Framework in response to this report.

⁸⁴ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 59](#), 26 February 2024

⁸⁵ Written evidence, [FAR03: Fire Standards Board](#)

Recommendation 4. The Welsh Government should urgently update the National Framework to take account of recent events and the outcomes of several reviews. As part of the process the Welsh Government should:

- Set out the timetable for agreeing a new National Framework;
- Consider establishing a suite of performance indicators and performance standards to accompany the Framework; and
- Proactively lay copies of future implementation reports before the Senedd.

The new Framework and performance indicators should be in place by May 2025 at the latest.

Inspection and audit

75. The NFCC, the FBU, the FOA and FRSA all emphasised the importance of robust regimes for inspections and audit in providing assurance regarding the performance of FRSs to the public.⁸⁶

76. The FOA called on the Welsh Government to “invest in a HMICFRS type system which includes publishing the results”.⁸⁷

77. Mid and West Wales FRA questioned the mandate for any proposal to strengthen the inspection and audit regime.⁸⁸

78. The FRSA called for the Welsh Government to set clear guidelines and for teams to be drawn from outside Wales to prevent them from being too close to those being inspected.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Written evidence, [FAR08: National Fire Chiefs Council](#); ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 121](#), 4 March 2024

⁸⁷ Written evidence, [FAR01: Fire Officers Association](#)

⁸⁸ Written evidence, [FAR02: Mid and West Wales Fire Authority](#)

⁸⁹ Written evidence, [FAR07: Fire and Rescue Services Association](#)

79. Mark Hardingham of NFCC said that changes in England meant there was “periodic, ongoing and routine inspection of fire services across all of their functions”. In likening the regime to an Ofsted inspection, the NFCC Chair stated that an FRS then receives a score across different areas and can receive additional support in areas of concern. This informs quarterly meetings with the inspectorate, local government and UK government where fire services report on progress and continuous improvement.⁹⁰

80. With regards to the role of the CFRAI in inspections, the FOA, FRSA, and others argued for keeping the CFRAI role separate from any inspections regime.⁹¹ The FRSA added that the CFRAI does not currently have the resources to undertake a robust inspection regime that they are advocating.⁹²

81. North Wales FRA expressed concerns that capacity would be a challenge, as “there would be a need to remove employees from front line service delivery to produce the evidence and prepare for the inspections”.⁹³

82. A focus on the inspection regime was highlighted as only part of the solution. The FOA, NFCC, North Wales FRA and the Welsh Government all highlighted that HMICFRS’s had failed to detect some of the poor workplace cultures and practices that have since come to light in England as part of its inspection programme, for example in Wiltshire and Dorset.⁹⁴

Our view

On inspections and performance

We note that many of the responses emphasised the role of routine inspection in assessing performance and that in England inspections had been used as a tool to successfully drive up standards. Routine inspections are not a panacea however, and there are several practicalities that would need to be considered further before an inspections regime in Wales could be established. These include how to resource the inspectorate and how to ensure that inspectors were not too close to those being inspected when there are only 3 FRSs in total, two of which are small by UK standards.

⁹⁰ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 300 + 301](#), 4 March 2024

⁹¹ Written evidence, [FAR01: FOA](#), [FAR07: Fire and Rescue Services Association](#)

⁹² ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 296](#), 4 March 2024

⁹³ Written evidence, [FAR04: North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority](#)

⁹⁴ Written evidence, [FAR01: FOA](#), [FAR08: NFCC](#), [FAR04: North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority](#); [Welsh Government Evidence Paper on Fire and Rescue Authority Governance](#), 22 April 2024

With regards to the role of the CFRAI we note that the majority of evidence was in favour of maintaining the separation between this role and any potential future inspections regime.

Conclusion 5. Resolving the practicalities of establishing an inspections regime in Wales should be considered further alongside wider reform of governance arrangements.

Role of Audit Wales

83. Under the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004, the Auditor General is required to audit the accounts of FRAs annually and determine whether each FRA has arrangements in place to secure value for money in the use of its resources.⁹⁵ Audit Wales must publish an annual improvement report in respect of these audits and may carry out special inspections in certain circumstances.

84. The Auditor General is expected to report on a broader review of the governance of the three FRAs including their ability to “make effective decisions” and the quality of decision-making in summer 2024.⁹⁶

85. Adrian Crompton described the current audit regime as “clunky” and said it is “over-prescriptive in places” but that there did not appear to be any “glaring omissions” in what he is able to do. He also said he wanted more detail on what the Welsh Government had in mind for strengthening the audit regime and hoped that it would not be used to “take away the discretion for an independent auditor general to focus the resources of Audit Wales”.⁹⁷

86. Audit Wales highlighted that other parts of the Local Government Measure 2009 had been repealed for local government but still existed for FRAs. They questioned whether the provisions of the 2009 Measure still add value and supported planned rationalisation (of the Measure).⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Legislation.gov, Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004

⁹⁶ Written evidence, [FAR05 – Audit Wales](#)

⁹⁷ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 72](#), 11 March 2024

⁹⁸ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 51 and 69](#), 11 March 2024

Our view

On the role of Audit Wales

We note that the audit regime that Audit Wales operates in relation to FRAs is more limited than for many other public bodies. However, we are interested in understanding the extent to which the Welsh Government could reasonably expect cultural failings of the type found in South Wales FRS to have been picked up by a broader definition of auditing. This answer is important in considering options for any potential future reform.

Conclusion 6. The Welsh Government should set out its views on whether a broader definition of auditing would pick up on the cultural failings of the type found in South Wales FRS and if so, how it would do so, in its response to this report.

Conclusion 7. We welcome the review of governance arrangements being undertaken by Audit Wales and look forward to considering its findings.

4. Options for future reform

87. Although the focus of this inquiry was on governance, we received less evidence on the options or preferences in relation to reforming these arrangements than we expected.

Reform within current arrangements

88. Within existing governance arrangements, the Auditor General said a “clearer split between executive authority and responsibility and a board, in a more classical sense” would be worth examining. The Board would then oversee the work of the FRs including holding them to account and taking joint ownership of major strategic decisions such as setting the budget.⁹⁹

89. The WLGA set out its key principles for any reform which included that FRAs should remain “in the local government family” and on the same boundaries; that local authorities should continue to nominate members of FRAs.¹⁰⁰

90. Dawn Docx called for more academic research around the benefits of different governance models: “because undoubtedly some models do bring swifter decision making or deeper scrutiny, or more effective performance management, and I think, before we go down a particular route, we need to be able to look and see the benefits of these different models for ourselves.”¹⁰¹

Reducing the size of FRAs

91. Many stakeholders including the FRSA, the Auditor General and North Wales FRA agreed that the size of FRAs was a factor that could negatively impact the performance of the authority and its scrutiny functions.

92. The FRSA argued that while larger authority sizes could allow for more diversity of views, meetings had become “unwieldy” and “often incoherent” and that “accountability is diluted and lost in the sheer numbers”.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 76](#), 11 March 2024

¹⁰⁰ [Welsh Government Evidence Paper on Fire and Rescue Authority Governance](#), 22 April 2024

¹⁰¹ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 288](#), 11 March 2024

¹⁰² Written evidence, [FAR07: Fire and Rescue Services Association](#)

93. The Auditor General and Dylan Rees of North Wales FRA outlined how the size was potentially making things more “unwieldy” with implications for accountability and governance.¹⁰³

94. The Cabinet Secretary agreed, telling us that FRAs have between 24 and 28 members in an arrangement which is “distinct to Wales” and by comparison:

“West Midlands FRA serves a population which is slightly less than that of the whole of Wales, yet has a membership of 15 councillors from its seven constituent councils and three co-optees.”¹⁰⁴

Improving capacity and expertise

95. The FRSA, the Auditor General and the Chair of North Wales FRA also recognised the benefits of appointing external members to FRAs to bring in greater expertise and specialisms. The Auditor General also said external members could be used to bring a “focus on national priorities as well as local accountability”.¹⁰⁵

96. In addition to outside expertise, the FRSA and the NFCC emphasised the training and development needs of existing FRA members to better understand their roles.

97. The FRSA highlighted that current arrangements allow situations whereby the “CFO acts as the professional adviser to the authority” and that accountability becomes “seriously diluted” as a result. They added that “too often the chair becomes too entangled with senior leadership team” and that they “should not be friends but should maintain a cordial but critical distance”.¹⁰⁶

98. The NFCC said training and development to help elected members understand their role and what is expected of them was particularly important.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 20 and 229](#), 11 March 2024

¹⁰⁴ [Welsh Government Evidence Paper on Fire and Rescue Authority Governance](#), 22 April 2024

¹⁰⁵ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 21](#), 11 March 2024

¹⁰⁶ Written evidence, [FAR07: Fire and Rescue Services Association](#)

¹⁰⁷ Written evidence, [FAR08: National Fire Chiefs Council](#)

99. The WLGA told us that training and development “for members of the FRAs is provided by the FRSs in Wales through their comprehensive Member Development Strategies and Training Programmes” and will cover areas such as ethics and code of conduct, induction training for Chairs and Vice Chairs, budget planning, scrutiny training, communications and social media.¹⁰⁸

Our view

On reform of current governance arrangements

We were disappointed not to receive more evidence on the question of what good governance of the sector could look like. Furthermore we are concerned that it indicates complacency and a lack of introspection on the part of many within the sector.

FRAs in their current form are an anachronism and change is needed both in response to the Culture Review and to bring them more into line with other public bodies. In the short term the Welsh Government should prioritise improving the capacity of FRA members to hold the FRSs to account through changes to the make-up of FRAs and the support they receive.

With regards to the knowledge and expertise of FRA members we note that the option of co-opting members has rarely, if ever, been used. We agree that FRAs should be required to coopt members with outside expertise in equality, diversity and inclusion at the earliest opportunity. This should be alongside measures to improve the quality of training, development and induction of FRA members. In particular we note concerns that FRAs lack an understanding of their role and as such would welcome a rapid review into the training and development provided to FRA members. Subject to the outcome of the rapid review, the Welsh Government should consider making modules relating to scrutiny functions and cultural issues, mandatory for all FRA members.

¹⁰⁸ Written evidence, [FAR10 - Welsh Local Government Association](#)

Recommendation 5. The Welsh Government should improve the capacity of FRA members to hold FRSs to account by:

- Reducing the overall size of membership of FRAs;
- Exploring proposals to draw FRA members from local authority cabinets;
- Looking at proposals to formally separate the executive functions of the authority from the scrutiny functions of the Chair and Board;
- Encouraging the co-opting of members with outside knowledge and expertise in equality, diversity and inclusion on to each FRA; and
- Providing specific advice and training to FRA members on the implications of the Morris Review in the immediate term and conducting a rapid review of training and induction provided to FRA members with a view to enhancing provision and making future training mandatory.

Training and ongoing support on the implications of the Morris Review should be provided to FRA Members immediately and by August 2024.

Notwithstanding the outcomes of the culture reviews into Mid and West Wales and North Wales all other aspects of the recommendation should be implemented within 18 months and no later than by the end of 2025.

Broadening the role of fire and rescue services

100. Since 2001 there has been a significant decrease in all categories of fires in Wales and the UK. Figures show a downward trend of almost 70 per cent since 2001-02. Over the last ten years numbers have been relatively stable staying at around 10,000 to 13,000 a year.¹⁰⁹ The overall decline has been attributed to a combination of factors including the success of prevention work by FRSs, the decline in indoor smoking, and better product safety standards.

¹⁰⁹ StatsWales, [Statistical Bulletin Fire and rescue incident statistics 2022-23](#), 26 October 2023

101. The significant decline in incidents has led to a debate around the future role of fire and rescue service personnel. The extent of the debate is contested and we heard concerns, for example from former Chair of South Wales FRA, Cllr Steven Bradwick that the Welsh Government were “using the review to do other things like changing the firefighters’ work patterns.”¹¹⁰ However, the question of whether firefighters’ roles could be broadened to support other activities and emergency responses has been under consideration for some time.

102. In 2021 the CFRAI’s thematic review into broadening of the role of firefighters found that there is “capacity for the FRS to provide support to the NHS from within its existing resources.”¹¹¹ In particular he found that there was “significant capacity within the wholetime shift system which predominantly falls between 2200 - 0700 on the night shift when there is limited or no programmed activity” and when incidents are at their lowest.¹¹² In the CFRAI’s view, this spare capacity is evidence of the need to focus more time on training, exercising and risk reduction “irrespective of any agreement on broadening of the role.”¹¹³

103. WAST told us that both services interact at an operation level on a daily basis and highlighted the response to the pandemic as an example of close working relationships.¹¹⁴

104. Mid and West Wales FRA stated that little progress was being made at national or regional level and that it was the only FRA proactively undertaking action locally.¹¹⁵ Roger Thomas, pointed to several examples of close collaboration, including dealing with 4,000 calls a year to take the pressure off the Welsh ambulance service.¹¹⁶

105. The FRSA said it had always been in favour:

“[...] managed correctly by broadening the role, you can actually improve recruitment and retention and have a wider reliance on on-call firefighters that is beneficial to the community.”

¹¹⁰ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 220](#), 11 March 2024

¹¹¹ Welsh Government, [Broadening the Role of Firefighters in Wales](#), 2021

¹¹² Wholetime shifts are constituted as follows: 2 x 9 hour days, followed by 2 x 15 hour nights, followed by 4 days off as referenced in [Broadening the Role of Firefighters in Wales](#), 2021

¹¹³ Welsh Government, [Broadening the Role of Firefighters in Wales](#), 2021

¹¹⁴ Written evidence, [FAR06: Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust](#)

¹¹⁵ Written evidence, [FAR02: Mid and West Wales Fire Authority](#)

¹¹⁶ ESJ Committee, Record of Proceedings, [paragraph 233](#), 11 March 2024

106. North Wales FRA however argued that it is “very difficult for FRAs to unilaterally introduce broadening the role” without putting the “necessary funding and governance mechanisms in place”.¹¹⁷

Our view

On future reform of the fire and rescue service

The nearly 70% decline in the incidence of fire across the board since 2001-02 is a considerable achievement and stands as testament to benefits of the preventative approach. This reduction provides an opportunity to ask some fundamental questions regarding the role and purpose of fire and rescue services in the long term. We believe that form should follow function and note that the piecemeal approach so far has led to only glacial progress. Moreover the question of function cannot be considered in isolation given the interconnectedness of public services particularly emergency services. We accept that there will always be more urgent demands and that reform of any service comes with opportunity costs. However, in an era of dwindling resources the Welsh Government can no longer avoid exploring more radical measures to reform the structure and delivery of public services.

Of the radical proposals mooted, the merging of FRAs with Police and Crime Commissioners was one that we discounted as a non-starter due to the fact that policing is not devolved in Wales. We also did not receive sufficient evidence to support merging fire and rescue services with the Welsh Ambulance service even though greater collaboration between the two is anticipated.

On the options for reform, we think that the Welsh Government should focus on questions about the fundamental role of the fire service in 10, 15, and 20 years from now and how those services could be delivered. Securing a mandate for any future reforms will be key. Therefore to ensure that proposals can be debated as part of the democratic process we think it would be beneficial if the exploratory work could be concluded by the end of 2025 so that they can be considered before the next Senedd elections due in 2026.

¹¹⁷ Written evidence, [FAR04: North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority](#).

Recommendation 6. The Welsh Government should urgently explore options for more radical reform to the structure and delivery of fire and rescue services in the long term. This should include:

- Beginning the process of examining what the core future functions of fire and rescue services should be in 2035 or 2040;
- Exploring the advantages and disadvantages of creating a single Wales-wide fire and rescue service; and
- Developing a longer-term policy position (ideally in the form of a White Paper) by the end of 2025 so that they can be considered in advance of Senedd elections expected in 2026.

Annexe 1: Oral evidence sessions.

The following witnesses provided oral evidence to the committee on the dates noted below. Transcripts of all oral evidence sessions can be viewed on the Committee's [website](#).

Date	Name and Organisation
26 February 2024	<p>Hannah Blythyn, MS, Deputy Minister for Social Partnership Welsh Government</p> <p>Liz Lalley, Director, Risk, Resilience and Community Safety Welsh Government</p> <p>Dan Stephens, Chief Fire and Rescue Advisor and Inspector for Wales Welsh Government</p>
4 March 2024	<p>Matt Wrack, General Secretary Fire Brigade Union</p> <p>Cerith Griffiths, Executive Council Member Fire Brigade Union</p> <p>Peter Crews, Branch Secretary (covering South Wales Fire & Rescue) UNISON</p> <p>Tristan Ashby, Chief Executive Officer Fire and Rescue Services Association</p> <p>Mark Hardingham, Chair National Fire Chiefs Council</p> <p>There was also a private briefing with the South Wales Fire Commissioners:</p> <p>Vij Randeniya Former Chief Fire Officer for the West Midlands</p> <p>Baroness Wilcox of Newport Former Leader of Newport City Council</p> <p>Kirsty Williams Former Member of the Senedd and Minister for Education</p>
11 March 2024	<p>Adrian Crompton, Auditor General for Wales Audit Wales</p> <p>Gary Emery, Audit Director Audit Wales</p>

Date	Name and Organisation
	<p>Martin Peters, Head of Law and Ethics Audit Wales</p> <p>Councillor Dylan Rees, Chair North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority</p> <p>Dawn Docx, Chief Fire Officer North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority</p> <p>Councillor Gwynfor Thomas, Chair Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Authority</p> <p>Roger Thomas, Chief Fire Officer Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Authority</p> <p>Councillor Steven Bradwick, former Chair South Wales Fire and Rescue Authority</p> <p>Dewi Rose, Temporary Deputy Chief Fire Officer South Wales Fire and Rescue Authority</p>
18 March 2024	<p>Jason Killens, Chief Executive Officer Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust</p> <p>Angela Lewis, Director of People and Culture Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust</p>
22 April 2024	<p>Julie James, MS, Cabinet Secretary for Housing, Local Government and Planning Welsh Government</p> <p>Liz Lalley, Director, Risk, Resilience and Community Safety Welsh Government</p> <p>Dan Stephens, Chief Fire and Rescue Advisor and Inspector for Wales Welsh Government</p>

Annexe 2: List of written evidence

The following people and organisations provided written evidence to the Committee. All Consultation responses and additional written information can be viewed on the Committee's [website](#).

Reference	Organisation
FAR01	Fire Officers Association (FOA)
FAR02	Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Authority
FAR03	Fire Standards Board (FSB)
FAR04	North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority
FAR05	Audit Wales
FAR06	Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust (WAST)
FAR07	Fire and Rescue Services Association (FRSA)
FAR08	National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC)
FAR09	Women in the Fire Service
FAR10	Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA)

Additional Information

Title	Date
Additional information from North Wales Fire and Rescue Service	May 2024
Additional information from Mid and West Wales Fire Service	May 2024
Additional information from South Wales Fire Service	May 2024