

Report to	<b>North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority</b>
Date	<b>17 October 2022</b>
Lead Officer	<b>Dawn Docx, Chief Fire Officer</b>
Contact Officer	<b>Shân Morris, Assistant Chief Officer</b>
Subject	<b>COVID-19 Inquiry preparation</b>



## PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1 This report is to inform Members of work being undertaken by North Wales Fire and Rescue Service (the Service) to collate and archive evidence of North Wales Fire and Rescue's preparations and response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 2 The public inquiry into the UK's preparation and response to the COVID-19 pandemic has now commenced. This Inquiry has powers to compel the production of documents and to summon witnesses to give evidence under oath.
- 3 The Authority has not received notification as to whether or not it will be contacted by the Inquiry, but by taking action now to collate the relevant information the Authority should be better placed to give evidence if asked.
- 4 Separately, in the event that any proceedings or claims are made against the Authority as regards its response to the pandemic, it will be important to be able to contextualise and justify the decisions it took at the time.

## RECOMMENDATION

- 5 That Members note the information contained in this report.

## BACKGROUND

- 6 The COVID-19 pandemic arose from an outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in Wuhan, China in December 2019. The virus spread worldwide, leading the World Health Organisation to declare this outbreak a public health emergency of international concern on 30 January 2020, and a pandemic on 11 March 2020.

- 7 On 12 May 2021 the Prime Minister confirmed that the UK Government would establish a public inquiry into the pandemic. This Inquiry is established under the Inquiries Act 2005 so has powers to compel the production of all relevant documents and to summon witnesses to give oral evidence in public under oath.
- 8 On 15 December 2021 the Prime Minister appointed Baroness Heather Hallet to Chair the Inquiry with the aims of:
  - examining the COVID-19 response and the impact of the pandemic in England, Wales, Scotland and N. Ireland; and
  - identifying the lessons to be learned from the above, to inform preparations for future pandemics across the UK.
- 9 The Inquiry's terms of reference set out how it proposes to examine and report on preparations and the response to the pandemic up to and including the Inquiry's formal setting-up date of 28 June 2022.
- 10 Given the breadth of the subject, the Inquiry's work has been grouped into Modules so that evidence can be obtained and analysed by different teams working in parallel.
- 11 Modules will be announced and opened in sequence, with anyone wishing to take a formal role in the Inquiry invited to apply to become 'core participants' for each module, rather than throughout the Inquiry as a whole.
- 12 The first three modules and associated preliminary hearings are planned for this year, but substantive public hearings will not begin until late Spring 2023.
- 13 Having considered the picture from a UK-wide (and also English) perspective the same overarching and strategic issues will be considered again by the Inquiry from the perspective of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

## **INFORMATION**

- 14 A project has now commenced within the Service to:
  - prepare to provide written documents and/or to support witnesses (who could be current or former Authority Members, officers or employees) if summoned to give evidence to the Inquiry;
  - archive information regarding the Service's response to the pandemic;
  - inform the Authority's preparedness for future pandemics.

- 15 The timescales set for this project are to undertake an initial review by December 2022 and to complete the project in its entirety by June 2023.

## IMPLICATIONS

<b>Wellbeing Objectives</b>	Learning from this project will help inform the Authority's preparedness for future pandemics. This will contribute to both the resilience of the workforce and to the health, safety and well-being of people in North Wales.
<b>Budget</b>	In the event of any future insurance claim, civil or legal proceedings against the Authority for actions taken or not taken during the pandemic period, the Authority will be better placed to defend its position.
<b>Legal</b>	As above, and also the Authority will be in a better position to respond to the Public Inquiry if asked.
<b>Staffing</b>	None.
<b>Equalities/Human Rights/Welsh Language</b>	None.
<b>Risks</b>	As no additional resources dedicated to this project, timescales may slip.