

Report to	North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority	
Date	17/12/2018	
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Subject	Response to Public Consultation and Draft Improvement and Well-being Objectives 2019/20	

PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1 To summarise the response to North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority's 2018 public consultation which was undertaken as part of the process of developing its improvement and well-being objectives for 2019/20; and to propose, for Members' approval, draft improvement and well-being objectives for 2019/20.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 2 The Fire and Rescue Authority (FRA) is required to publish improvement and well-being objectives and to have involved the public and other stakeholders in the process of developing those objectives.
- 3 This report summarises the response to the Authority's 2018 public consultation, and proposes maintaining the Authority's current improvement and well-being objectives into 2019/20.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4 That Members:
 - (i) note the response to the Authority's public consultation conducted between September and November 2018; and
 - (ii) approve the development of a draft Improvement and Well-being Plan 2019/20 based on a continuation of the Authority's current improvement and well-being objectives:
 - to support people to prevent accidental dwelling fires and stay safe if they do occur; and
 - to facilitate high quality, responsive and better integrated fire and rescue services so that prevention activity and emergency response continue to be available when and where required, affordably, equitably and on the basis of risk.

BACKGROUND

- 5 FRAs in Wales are required to publish improvement objectives in accordance with the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009, and well-being objectives in accordance with the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. For the purposes of the Authority's planning processes these are treated as one and the same in that shorter term improvement objectives can also serve as steps towards achieving longer term well-being objectives.
- 6 By law the Authority must endeavour to improve its services in the short term and also consider the well-being of future generations of people in the area. It must develop well-being objectives for itself that contribute to meeting Wales's well-being goals, and take steps to achieve those objectives.
- 7 The Authority set itself two long-term improvement and well-being objectives in 2017 and retained these into 2018/19. These are:
 - to support people to prevent accidental dwelling fires and stay safe if they do occur; and
 - to facilitate high quality, responsive and better integrated fire and rescue services so that prevention activity and emergency response continue to be available when and where required, affordably, equitably and on the basis of risk.
- 8 As part of its planning process, the Authority is expected to conduct a public consultation on the objectives that it is considering, and to take the response into consideration when finalising its plans.
- 9 In developing its objectives the Authority has for several years run consultation exercises when the general public and others with an interest are encouraged to give their views on aspects of fire and rescue services in the area. In some years the Authority has asked about specific proposals that it has already drafted and in others it has invited more general views about the future development of fire and rescue services.
- 10 Following a series of Members' Planning Working Group meetings in 2018, the FRA decided to consult publicly on funding of fire and rescue services in 2019/20.
- 11 The Authority is required to undertake an annual process of setting a budget sufficient to cover its estimated running costs in the following financial year. This process of setting a balanced budget for 2019/20 has been made unusually difficult for the Authority because of the challenging financial environment, some unavoidable cost increases in 2019/20 and the impact of previous decisions regarding the use of the Authority's financial reserves to cover its running costs.

- 12 Having carefully considered the alternatives for ensuring a balanced budget in the year 2019/20, the Authority indicated that it was not minded to pursue large scale savings because it judged that the level of risk would be too high at this time. It had not ruled out making savings, but the scale of those savings in 2019/20 would stop short of, for example, closing fire stations or making firefighters redundant.
- 13 At the start of the public consultation the gap between the Authority's estimated costs in 2019/20 and the level of financial contributions made by the county councils in 2018/19 had been calculated at almost £1.9 million.
- 14 Initial planning assessments of the budgetary requirement for 2019/20 have continued to be reviewed and a revised assessment is the subject of a separate report by the Treasurer (agenda item 9).

INFORMATION

Public Consultation 2018

- 15 The public consultation ran between September and November 2018 and comprised a range of engagement materials including:
 - a 36-page document providing comprehensive explanation and information;
 - an online questionnaire, with the option of submitting written responses if preferred; and
 - a bilingual video highlighting the role of the fire and rescue service and promoting the public consultation.
- 16 Communication methods included:
 - a press release with a link to the consultation materials and information about how to take part;
 - letters with a copy of the consultation document issued to all stakeholders who had registered to receive such correspondence;
 - supporting messages on social media directing people to the consultation, maintaining awareness and highlighting the closing date;
 - a bespoke landing page on the Authority's website to make it easier for people to find all the relevant information from one place; and
 - articles and reminders in staff newsletters encouraging staff to respond.

- 17 Officers met with the Chief Executives and Finance Directors of the North Wales county councils to discuss and explain the Authority's position; and the Chair and/or Deputy Chair of the Authority and Officers attended meetings of all six county councils to deliver a presentation and answer questions from councillors.
- 18 The online questionnaire presented three questions regarding:
- whether people thought it reasonable for the county councils to contribute all or some of the additional £1.9 million required to set a balanced budget in 2019/20;
 - what people thought of the possibility that this could potentially add £6 or £7 a year to an average Band D council tax bill; and
 - how the Authority could potentially reduce its running costs in future.
- 19 Of the 193 questionnaires completed via the online hub:
- 61% of the respondents thought it reasonable to ask the county councils to pay the additional £1.9 million and would prefer for that amount to be collected from the county councils than see local fire and rescue services being reduced.
24% of respondents agreed that it was reasonable to ask county councils for the additional funding but thought that the Authority should also try to reduce its running costs.
15% did not think that the county councils should pay anything close to an additional £1.9 million even if that meant losing some fire and rescue services in the area.
 - 45% of the respondents thought that adding £6 or £7 to the average Band D council tax bill next year would represent excellent value and would be worth paying.
32% of respondents considered an additional £6 or £7 to be acceptable, but no more.
9% of respondents considered an additional £6 or £7 to be slightly too much to ask for.
14% of respondents considered an additional £6 or £7 to be far too much to ask for.
 - 24% of respondents did not think the Authority should be expected to reduce its running costs.
61% of respondents thought that the Authority should try to reduce its costs, but only to the extent that it would not reduce the availability or quality of front line services.

13% thought that the Authority should try to reduce its costs and accept that some front line services might have to be scaled back a little.

3% thought that fire and rescue services should cost as little as possible, even if that meant closing fire stations and making firefighters redundant.

20 Eleven written replies were also received from: private citizens, county councils, a town council and the Fire Brigades Union (FBU).

- One respondent praised the dedication of retained firefighters in their area; one said they would be happy to spend an additional £6 or £7 on their council tax to maintain the level of fire cover; one suggested broadening the role of the fire and rescue service; one suggested some income generation/cost saving measures adopted by county councils that the FRA might wish to consider; and one emphasised the reassurance that a continuously available fire and rescue service provided.
- The Fire Brigades Union supported an increase in contributions and although it recognised that the Authority should try to reduce its costs, it thought that this should stop short of reducing the availability or quality of front-line services.
- Of the responses from the county councils, one emphasised the need for the Authority to seek ways of reducing its costs; and another - whilst appreciating the service provided by the Authority and accepting the proposal to increase contributions - referred to the extremely challenging financial environment and to a past decision by the Authority not to pursue a course of action that could have made significant savings. This council was disappointed at what it perceived to be a lack of proposals to make savings, and asked that the Authority look again at the balance between making savings and increasing the level of contributions from county councils.
- Another county council wanted the Authority to keep seeking efficiencies but did not want fire cover or other responsive services to be reduced to an unsafe level, or essential preventative services to be compromised, and referred to the shared interest - as partners - in public safety.
- One council was happy to confirm that the increase in contribution had been incorporated into its budget planning without any adverse comments from its Members.

- One council empathised with the Authority's position and commented that it entrusts the Authority to use judgement in balancing budget efficiency and service continuity and quality, and to reach its own informed decision.

21 A draft response to the replies received will be presented for consideration by the Executive Panel at its next meeting in February 2019.

22 Following the end of the consultation an informal workshop was held on 16 November 2018 for Members to consider the response to the consultation and the 2019/20 budget.

Improvement and well-being objectives for 2019/20

23 On the basis of the response to the public consultation, and notwithstanding any decision by the Authority regarding its revenue and capital budgets for 2019/20, the Authority is well-placed to continue to pursue its two existing long-term well-being objectives.

24 The shorter term steps towards achieving those objectives, however, are contingent on budgetary and resourcing decisions and will need to be drafted accordingly.

25 It is proposed, therefore, that Officers provide for the Executive Panel in February 2019 a first draft of the Authority's Improvement and Well-being Plan 2019/20 based on the Authority's existing long-term objectives and incorporating a supporting set of shorter-term objectives. Final approval for the Plan can then be sought at the full Authority meeting in March 2019.

IMPLICATIONS

Wellbeing Objectives	Direct implication for setting the Authority's long-term well-being objectives and the shorter-term steps towards achieving them.
Budget	Detailed plans for 2019/20 will depend on the level of financial resources available.
Legal	Supports compliance with improvement planning and well-being legislation.
Staffing	None identified.
Equalities/Human Rights/Welsh Language	The impact of specific actions will be assessed at the appropriate point in their development.
Risks	Reduces the risks of legal non-compliance and of failing to budget and plan appropriately.