

## North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority Executive Panel

Minutes of the Executive Panel meeting of North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority held on Monday 10 May 2021 via Zoom. Meeting commenced at 10.00am.

### Present

#### Councillors:

P Lewis (Chair)	Conwy County Borough Council
D Rees (Deputy Chair)	Anglesey County Council
M Bateman	Flintshire County Council
A Davies	Denbighshire County Council
M Ll Davies	Denbighshire County Council
M Dixon	Wrexham County Borough Council
V Gay	Flintshire County Council
J B Hughes	Gwynedd Council
R Parry	Conwy County Borough Council
R Roberts	Wrexham County Borough Council

### Also Present

S A Smith (Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive); G Owens (Deputy Clerk); K Finch (Treasurer); R Fairhead, H MacArthur and S Millington (Assistant Chief Fire Officers); S Morris (Assistant Chief Officer); T Williams (Corporate Communications Manager); A Davies (Members' Liaison Officer).

#### 1 APOLOGIES

#### Councillors:

R Griffiths	Anglesey County Council
A Tansley	Conwy County Borough Council
G G Williams	Gwynedd Council

#### 2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

2.1 There were no declarations of interest.

#### 3 NOTICE OF URGENT MATTERS

3.1 None.

#### 4 MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 15 FEBRUARY 2021

4.1 The minutes of the Executive Panel meeting held on 15 February 2021 were submitted for approval.

4.2 **RESOLVED to approve the minutes of the meeting as a true and correct record.**

## 5 MATTERS ARISING

5.1 There were no matters arising.

## 6 COVID-19 UPDATE

6.1 The Chief Fire Officer provided an update on the impact of COVID-19 on the Service.

6.2 In line with the national relaxation in activity in respect of COVID-19, the emergency phase has been scaled back and the Service is now moving to the recovery phase. Staff continue to work from home where possible therefore there is minimum activity in NWFRS premises; it is anticipated that this will remain the same in the medium term.

6.3 The Service has set up a Transitional Cell to consider post-COVID ways of working and although some pre-COVID activities will recommence it is recognised that, for some departments, new ways of working discovered during the pandemic will continue.

6.4 **RESOLVED to note the update provided.**

## 7 AUDIT WALES REVIEW OF CORPORATE RESILIENCE

7.1 The Chair welcomed Euros Lake and Nick Selwyn from Audit Wales who attended the meeting to present the Audit Wales review of corporate resilience.

7.2 In 2020-21, Audit Wales undertook a review of corporate resilience at each Fire and Rescue Authority (FRA) in Wales to provide assurance on how well each Authority is addressing the financial and capacity challenges facing public bodies. The report set out the conclusions of the review and makes proposals for how resilience and sustainability can be strengthened in North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority (the 'Authority').

7.3 The officers from Audit Wales delivered a presentation to Members and explained that due to COVID, Audit Wales had rescheduled its planned audit work in order to allow public organisations to deal with the COVID emergency; therefore had the opportunity to undertake a review of corporate resilience in each of the three fire and rescue authorities (FRAs) in Wales.

7.4 It was pleasing to note that the Authority had responded well during the pandemic and had demonstrated good resilience in the short-term. However, Audit Wales officers felt that the Authority does need to consider the longer term risks and challenges it faces in terms of resilience and set out the following:

- Finance – in order to remain financially sustainable and build upon the Authority's positive track record of managing budgets well, key risks to be addressed include managing demand-led pressures;
- Governance - the Authority has an appropriate governance framework and it was noted that the scheme of delegation had worked well during the pandemic therefore Members were asked to consider whether the Authority could consider empowering officers and devolving some decision-making in order for Members to concentrate on the bigger strategic risks facing the Fire and Rescue Service;
- Workforce - the Authority has a resilient workforce which has been evident throughout the pandemic, with good staff support and initiatives to maintain wellbeing. However, Audit Wales was of the opinion that workforce and succession planning remain challenging but welcomed the Future Leadership and apprenticeship programmes being extended and considered them to be key in planning for future resilience in the workforce.
- Assets - although the Authority has good examples of how it is integrating assets and developing its use of technology there are some long standing challenges that need to be addressed to help support future resilience. Audit Wales recommends that the Authority should review and regularly challenge its assumptions on assets including stations.
- Business continuity - the Authority's well tested business continuity plans helped maintain corporate and operational resilience in responding to the pandemic and the Authority has good processes in place to learn from recent experiences.

7.5 Based on these five areas, Audit Wales had made three improvement proposals as follows:

- the Authority reviews the effectiveness of its governance arrangements to provide assurance that current arrangements support robust scrutiny, are holding officers to account and are focussed on addressing the big risks facing the Fire and Rescue Service;

- in order to improve succession planning the Authority should restart and build on its high potential candidates programme;
- in order to support resilience the Authority should review station locations to identify opportunities to optimise emergency response arrangements.

- 7.6 Mr Selwyn provided further clarification on the improvement proposals.
- 7.7 The first proposal around the governance arrangements is proposed for the Authority to evaluate and take forward positive lessons learnt from the pandemic and how governance services were delivered and using them to strengthen how decisions are made within the Authority in future.
- 7.8 It was noted that Audit Wales is very supportive of the Authority's future leaders apprenticeship programme and felt it was a positive step forward in identifying future leaders for the organisation but also to strengthen and address some of the workforce issues identified.
- 7.9 In terms of the third proposal, Mr Selwyn explained that this was around the asset base and considering how stations are used to provide the services that need to be provided. However, it was emphasise that this was not suggesting that stations should be closed or new stations opened, but was around understanding what the demand will look like in the future based on the learning from the pandemic and trying to best match how those services are delivered with the asset base available. This will enable the Authority to be in a stronger position if and when decisions are forced as a result of changes in public funding.
- 7.10 The Chair thanked Audit Wales for the report and positive comments made about the Service and prior to inviting questions from Members he responded to the three suggested proposals. In the early stages of the pandemic, Members had agreed to deal with Authority issues via correspondence; the Executive Panel had completed its work in terms of planning proposals for the following twelve months and it was then for officers to expand and develop those further. The Chair and Deputy Chair had regular update meetings with the Chief Fire Officer and all Members received regular written updates.
- 7.11 The Annual Governance Statement to be discussed later on the agenda is detailed and with timescales which the Chair considered to be a credit to the officers themselves.

- 7.12 In terms of succession planning, the Chair felt that the CFO had delayed this work for the right reasons in order for the new office holder to have the opportunity to put a new structure in place.
- 7.13 The Chair commented that, in part, the resilience of the Authority will be dependent upon the Welsh Government deciding on the future role of the firefighter and also the potential additional duties that will fall on the Authority following the Grenfell inquiry. The Chair also considered whether there will be beneficial effects for the RDS with more people working from home.
- 7.14 In response to a question about the nature of the reports for the other two FRAs in Wales, it was confirmed that the issues were quite similar and the proposals for improvement were quite generic across all three FRAs in Wales. However, it was noted that the funding position of NWFRA is different to the other two FRAs in Wales.
- 7.15 Cllr M LI Davies reiterated the Chair's words and suggested that the resolution of the report be amended to state that Members noted the findings and accepted the improvement proposals noted in paragraph 11 of the report. This amendment was agreed by Members and it was therefore **RESOLVED to note and accept the findings of the report.**

## 8 STRATEGIC RISK MANAGEMENT

- 8.1 ACO Morris presented the report which summarised the content of the Authority's strategic risk register.
- 8.2 Members were reminded that in accordance with the Authority's strategic Risk Management Policy, the Executive Panel receives a summary report on strategic risks at least twice a year. The Chair confirmed that he and the Deputy Chair had recently met with officers to view the full detail of the register.
- 8.3 It was noted that of the full range of risks, those currently considered to be the highest related to the Authority's level of resilience to either an attack on its computer systems or to a sudden loss of staff with specialist knowledge and/or experience. It was acknowledged that even with planned countermeasures, these are likely to remain at a high risk level.
- 8.4 **RESOLVED to note the identified strategic risks that are facing the Authority.**

## 9 ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT 2020/21

- 9.1 ACFO MacArthur presented the draft Annual Governance Statement for 2020/21.
- 9.2 In accordance with the CIPFA/Solace Delivering Good Governance in Local Government Framework (2016) (the Code) the Fire and Rescue Authority must publish an Annual Governance Statement (AGS).
- 9.3 It was noted that the AGS for 2020/21 had been prepared in accordance with the principles set out in the Code, which comprises seven key areas of governance and also includes a forward work programme for 2021/22. The AGS will be published as part of the production of the statutory financial statements for 2020/21. The external auditor will assess the document to confirm whether it is consistent with the financial statements and has been produced in line with the Code.
- 9.4 ACFO MacArthur referred to the positive comments made by Audit Wales about the Authority's governance arrangements; the Chair also praised the detailed action plan and timescales contained in the action plan.
- 9.5 **RESOLVED to recommend to the Fire and Rescue Authority the approval of the governance arrangements and action plan as outlined within the 2020/21 Annual Governance Statement.**

## 10 PERFORMANCE AND GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS

- 10.1 ACO Morris presented the report which gave an update about performance and governance arrangements for fire and rescue authorities (FRAs). The report also proposed an approach that would support the Authority's ability to accommodate anticipated changes to performance and governance arrangements whilst maintaining compliance with existing requirements.
- 10.2 Members had been given an update on the introduction of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 at the last Authority meeting. The Act makes provision for making changes to the performance and governance arrangements of FRAs. It was noted, however, that in order for those changes to be implemented the Welsh Government must publish a new Fire and Rescue National Framework, introduce new performance management arrangements and dis-apply the Local Government Measure 2009 in respect of FRAs. No specific date has been set after which, or on which these changes will be introduced. The Authority will therefore need to prepare for the changes whilst continuing to comply with current legislative requirements for Improvement and Well-being Planning.

10.3 The Authority has already published a Corporate Plan 2021-24 comprising seven long-term objectives supported by fifty-five planned actions. Rather than follow the familiar pattern of developing and consulting on new objectives for 2022/23, the report recommended that the Authority pursues its existing objectives and uses the forthcoming months to focus on key aspects of its existing Plan.

10.4 **RESOLVED to**

- (i) note the information provided in this report;**
- (ii) agree that, in anticipation of the changes to the performance and governance arrangements for Welsh fire and rescue authorities, focus for the time being on pursuing the long-term objectives and planned actions already set out in its Corporate Plan 2021-24.**

11 EMERGENCY SERVICES MOBILE COMMUNICATION PROGRAMME (ESMCP)

11.1 ACFO Fairhead gave Members an update about the Emergency Services Mobile Communication Programme (ESMCP).

11.2 Members were reminded that the aim of this project is replace the current national radio and data communication system used by the emergency services in the UK known as Airwave. Airwave is a nationally procured contract which was due to end in December 2019. The ESMCP was established by Her Majesty's Government and is being led by the Home Office to deliver a replacement service. The project has faced many delays since its inception 2012 and therefore the Airwave contract is likely to be extended until around 2026. The costs involved will increase as the system becomes out-dated and the equipment breaks down.

11.3 Welsh Government as a Funding Sponsor Body is being consulted along-side the emergency services in Wales and it was noted that to date WG has funded the extension of the contract.

11.4 It was noted that North Wales Fire and Rescue Service is represented on the all Wales ESN Strategy Group chaired by a Chief Constable. ACFO Fairhead detailed the significant risks involved for North Wales including concerns around delivery of good quality and resilient mobile phone coverage, the resourcing required to locally deliver and the cost of solution especially whilst using both the Airwave and ESN solutions simultaneously.

11.5 Members expressed grave concerns about the 'debacle' of this project, the considerable delay and the funding required for extending the Airwave contract. The Chief Fire Officer confirmed that to date the Welsh Government has funded that cost pressure and it has been highlighted as a risk to the Authority for some considerable time. It is anticipated that Welsh Government will continue to fund Airwave until 2026.

11.6 **RESOLVED to note the information provided and that further information on budget implications will be presented when available.**

12 THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES (CORONAVIRUS) (MEETINGS) (WALES) REGULATIONS 2020

12.1 The Deputy Clerk gave Members an update about The Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Meetings) (Wales) Regulations 2020 introduced due to the pandemic in April 2020 and which expired at the end of April 2021.

12.2 Members were reminded that the Regulations made provision in relation to local authority meetings, and the publication of and access to certain local authority documents. Those Regulations had now been incorporated into the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 and included more detailed narrative about improving public access to local authority meetings including attendance of members at meetings and public participation at community council meetings. Therefore, the Authority can continue to hold virtual meetings, should it so wish, and the constitution and the standing orders will be amended to reflect the changes introduced in the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act.

12.3 **RESOLVED to note the update.**

Prior to closing the meeting, the Chair referred to it as being the Chief Fire Officer's last Executive Panel meeting. On behalf of the Executive Panel members, the Chair wished to place on record thanks to the Chief Fire Officer for his guidance and support at meetings over the years.