

LG 15

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee
Local Government (Wales) Bill: Stage 1
Response from: South Wales Fire and Rescue Service

Committee Clerk
Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay,
CF99 1NA.

Dear Sir / Madam

Response to Consultation on the **Local Government (Wales) Bill**

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the consultation process for the above Bill.

The Service has considered the issues in relation to the specific impacts to the proposed provision (section 10(9)) to suspend the requirement under the Fire and Rescue Act 2004 for the Welsh Ministers to hold an inquiry if they wish to revoke or amend a Fire and Rescue combination order as a consequence of a voluntary merger, even if Fire and Rescue authorities may not agree with the proposed changes.

Yours faithfully

Paul Mason
Station Manager – Staff Officer (ELT)
For – CHIEF FIRE OFFICER

SOUTH WALES FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION ON THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (WALES) BILL

In relation to your latest correspondence dated 28th January 2015, and your inquiry into the general principles of the Local Government (Wales) Bill, please find the following observations from South Wales Fire and Rescue Services Perspective in relation to the proposed provision (section 10(9)) to suspend the requirement under the Fire and Rescue Act 2004 for the Welsh Ministers to hold an inquiry if they wish to revoke or amend a Fire and Rescue combination order as a consequence of a voluntary merger, even if Fire and Rescue authorities may not agree with the proposed changes:

We would not look to frustrate the legitimate wish of two or more local authorities to merge or delay any amendments to the orders, although as a Fire and Rescue Service our current Strategic Planning is provided for 2015 – 2020. This strategic plan outlines the strategic direction for the next five years and how we intend to meet the challenges over this time frame in order to continue to deliver a high quality service and meet the needs of our communities. It incorporates the longer term community and organisational challenges, with short term service improvements required to support and complement our longer term objectives. Although, it must be emphasised that the current planning framework also looks at the emerging issues both internal and external, ensuring

there is sufficient flexibility to amend and adapt to such emerging issues which have the potential to impact on the Service as a whole.

Our planning framework has been revised to bring together two distinct but complementary pieces of Welsh Government legislation. Firstly, the Fire and Rescue National Framework which requires each Fire and Rescue Authority (FRA) to publish a strategic plan setting out its medium to long-term strategic goals. Also as an “improvement authority” under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 we are required to set, consult and report against annual improvement objectives. By taking this approach our annual improvement objectives will focus on supporting the delivery of our long-term strategic aims. Furthermore the plan has paid due cognisance to the six priorities set out in the Fire and Rescue National Framework 2012 Onwards in developing our strategic objectives.

As a Service we have a statutory duty to demonstrate continuous improvement in the services we deliver to the public, which can be challenging at the best of times. However, we also know that the economy continues to impact on our budgets, with a worst case scenario predicting that we will need to make budget savings between £10m–£20m by 2020. With this in mind we have recently completed our fire cover review, to ensure our resources are correctly located according to the risks within our communities. This includes a holistic review and restructure of stations, personnel, appliances and equipment resulting in considerable savings to meet the continued austerity needs and reducing budgets we potentially face in the future. Our medium-term financial plan enables a measured and timely approach to addressing current funding challenges and is the foundation for our long-term planning assumptions.

These planning assumptions are robust and prioritised on the basis of the current structure, budget, size of the organisation and area covered by the organisation. If this was to change overnight as a consequence of a voluntary merger our plans would require a complete review and overhaul, which could result in the decision making process being flawed

as the planning assumptions would or could dramatically change in many facets. The difficulties in planning for the unknown are enormous and potentially costly to the said organizations involved.

As a minimum we believe the Fire and Rescue Services need to be consulted and be an integral facet of any decision making process due to the potential and significant implications in relation to future:

Budgets / Business plans

Personnel & Human Resource Issues

Appliances, Equipment, Resources & Assets

Fire Cover provisions, Organisational risk profiles, population, demographics, geographical area changes / boundaries

Relationships and Partnership networking, LSB's, current & future collaborations

The efficient and effective planning of the Fire and Rescue Service is paramount and a Welsh Government requirement which has the potential to be compromised if the proposal to disapply the requirement to hold a local inquiry where a variation to the boundaries of the Fire and Rescue authorities is made as a consequence of a voluntary merger.

The increased additional costs for such a voluntary merger are also an unknown quantity, which have the potential to adversely impact on organisations that are already placing additional burdens and increased capacity on a reducing workforce through lean systems approach.

Until the nature, scope and details of any variations to voluntary mergers are known and fully detailed, complete additional costs or not cannot be assessed. However, costs are likely to be significant for organisations with small and reducing budgets which are already committed.