



The WLGA and Fire & Rescue Services in Wales - A Developing Relationship

Report by Steve Thomas – Director WLGA

Purpose

- **At a recent meeting of Chief Fire Officers and WLGA Director, a number of options were discussed regarding developing the relationship between WLGA and Fire and Rescue Authorities in associate membership.**
- **It was also agreed that a report would be produced which could be discussed by the 3 authorities about the relationship with the WLGA in light of the Fire and Rescue National Framework for Wales and the new relationship with the LGA.**

Background

1. Negotiations have been concluded over a revised relationship between Welsh member authorities and the Local Government Association. WLGA Coordinating Committee received an update report in December 2004. The LGA Executive (November 2004) and General Assembly (December 2004) approved amendments to the constitution governing the new Welsh corporate member arrangements.
2. Welsh Authorities can choose to remain in full LGA membership or to become Welsh Corporate Members.
3. All 25 Welsh member authorities (local authorities and fire and rescue authorities) have indicated to the WLGA that they wish to proceed with a revised Welsh corporate membership arrangement as of 1st April 2005.
4. Welsh National Park Authorities and Police Authorities are also entitled to adopt the new Welsh corporate membership. However, the National Park authorities are already corporate members of the LGA via the Association of National Park Authorities (ANPA) and Welsh Police Authorities receive equivalent services via their membership of the Association of Police Authorities.

5. The Welsh corporate membership provides a revised relationship with the LGA, with:
 - a reduced subscription fee to the LGA;
 - an SLA governing specific lobbying and representation on non-devolved policy areas; and
 - full access to LGA events, information products and publications.
6. Welsh Corporate Members will have reduced voting rights within the LGA; however, they will still be entitled to vote on the election of Chair, Vice Chair and Deputy Chair, expenditure and subscriptions and on non-devolved matters directly relevant to their statutory duties and responsibilities.
7. It is therefore anticipated that through the new corporate arrangement Welsh members' relationship with the LGA will be enhanced, and the services improved, notably via a specific SLA governing LGA activity on non-devolved issues. Welsh members would also have an opportunity to 'buy' additional services from the LGA at a future date if appropriate, through an additional SLA via the WLGA.

What does this mean for Welsh Fire and Rescue Services within LGA structures?

8. The devolution of fire and rescue services has occurred at the same time as the new emerging relationship with the LGA. What this means in practice is an evolving and changing relationship which will inevitably see a significant shift of emphasis from England to Wales.
9. The LGA unlike the WLGA has a board structure which places fire and Rescue Services within the following context and key bodies
 - a. **A Safer Communities Board**, consisting of 17 members covering the areas of community safety, anti-social behaviour, public protection, the fire service and emergency planning. The Safer Communities Board has strategic responsibility for fire and other community safety and public protection issues. It consists of 17 members but has only one member from Wales nominated by the independent Group who is Councillor Graham Brown from Powys.
 - b. The **Fire Forum** remains open to members of all fire authorities with representation determined in proportion to size. It is a forum for debate and development of national policy options, scrutinising progress, raising and responding to fire and rescue service issues and consulting with the Fire Directorate of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. It has the ability to create

sub-groups to look at specific issues or reflect different types of authority.

- c. Negotiations on pay and conditions are managed on a United Kingdom basis by the **National Organisation of Employers of Local Authority Fire and Rescue Services**. The constitution of that body has recently been reformed to include 14 members 9 of which are appointed by the LGA. The secretariat is provided by the Employers Organisation (but see below).
- d. High level policy and service condition matters are discussed directly with government in the **Central Local Partnership sub-group on fire** which meets at least twice a year. It is co-chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister and the chairman of the LGA and is currently attended by group leaders and principal group spokespeople on fire.

10. Levels of engagement of Welsh representation with the above bodies vary with minimal engagement with A and D highlighted above.

11. Clearly the **Fire forum** is a body that has importance and comparative discussions on the future of the service and other policy development across England and Wales should remain a factor. But with the publication of the "Fire and Rescue National Framework for Wales" and the emergence of a new "partnership umbrella" the key focus will be within Wales. We fully accept however that the 3 Welsh Fire authorities will wish to maintain a full interest in the wider national frameworks and avoid the dangers of insularity. The WLGA leadership has already had discussions with the LGA leadership on these issues and it is hoped that agreement around the themes of this paper can provide further clarity.

12. In terms of the **National Organisation of Employers of Local Authority Fire and Rescue Services** this is a key body and a Welsh voice in this most sensitive of areas remains paramount. We wait to hear what the implications for this body are in light of the decision to reorganise the Employers' Organisation and place it more firmly within the LGA. But clearly part of the reason for this change was that the fire dispute from 2002-2004 created a range of concerns and difficulties about the handling of fire matters both inside and outside the LGA.

The current relationship with WLGA

13. The 3 fire authorities are associate members of the WLGA and play an active role in our deliberations and policy development.

14. There are in place various mechanisms which cement the relationship-

- Places within WLGA structures which guarantee a dedicated Fire and Rescue Spokesperson, representation on the Coordinating committee, representation on the Partnership Council with the National Assembly (WLGA provides the secretariat to this) and representation on the national pay body
- Regular meetings between Chief Fire Officers and WLGA Director, Head of Equalities and Social Justice.
- There is Chief Fire Officer who acts at the WLGA Advisor on Fire and Emergency Planning (currently Mr Brian Fraser).
- Policy support provided by approximately 20% of generic WLGA policy officer, further support provided to F&R authorities, such as equalities training.
- In terms of the new "partnership umbrella", the WLGA will agree representation with the fire Authorities in terms of the Wales fire and Rescue Service Advisory Committee and the Community fire Safety committee within the governance arrangements set out in the National Framework for Fire and Rescue Service in Wales.

What arrangements now need to be put in place between the Fire and Rescue Authorities and the WLGA to complement the above?

15. Obviously in light of the LGA changes and the devolution effect the relationship with WLGA assumes a new importance. WLGA itself has launched a new "Draft Manifesto for Local Government" which proposes some new and radical options in terms of governance frameworks and a Assembly supported review of local service delivery. The now published fire and rescue National Framework for Wales sets out the governance arrangements within which all stakeholders will together progress the agenda for fire and rescue. Representatives from the three fire and rescue authorities have a prominent role in these arrangements.
16. WLGA would wish to link more formally into the Wales Fire and Rescue Service Forum, with its political leadership, the WLGA Director and its Head of Equalities and Social Justice attending the meetings on a regular basis. There may also be some potential to provide administrative support for the forum should this be requested.
17. We should also be seeking on a more formalised basis to hold tripartite meeting between the Minister for Social Justice and Regeneration with the Leader of the WLGA, Presiding Officer and relevant spokesperson and the chairs of the fire authorities with the relevant chief Officers in attendance. This should occur at minimum on an annual basis.
18. There needs to be greater dialogue in light of budget pressures between the fire authorities and the 22 unitaries as a whole. Similarly a new understanding should emerge of the wider role of fire and rescue

services in the community leadership framework. One option could be an annual discussion with, and presentation by, the fire and Rescue Services to both the Coordinating Committee and the WLGA/SOLACE meeting which brings together the 22 Chief Executives of the unitary authorities.

19. The WLGA would welcome a discussion on the level of support that is currently provided by the WLGA to the fire and rescue authorities, who may wish to consider, in the future, the appointment of a dedicated WLGA Fire & Rescue Policy officer in line with approach taken by Police Authorities. This post is half funded between the WLGA and 4 Police authorities and has considerably cemented relationships over the past two years. The officer works on all Home Office and WAG community safety issues and takes part (and organises bi laterals with Assembly ministers). A secondment from Fire authorities' resources into the Wlga could be another option. Currently WLGA fire policy work is undertaken by a policy officer as part of a wider policy brief (devoting approximately 20% on fire issues). Fire policy is also part of the portfolio of the WLGA's Head of Equalities and Social Justice and the WLGA Director.
20. In conclusion there is a real need to enter active dialogue on these issues. The WLGA would welcome a view on the suggestions put forward in this paper and any other ideas that the fire authorities may have in terms of developing the current relationship. The relationship between our respective bodies has always been strong and productive and this can act as a firm foundation for our future partnership.

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