# WRITTEN STATEMENT

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# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE** | **National Framework for Fire and Rescue Services – Progress Report** |
| **DATE** | **18 July 2019** |
| **BY** | **Hannah Blythyn AM, Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government** |

The Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 requires me to report at least every two years on the extent to which Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) have acted in accordance with our National Framework for Fire and Rescue Services. FRAs) have acted in accordance with our National Framework for Fire and Rescue Services. Former Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Children, Carl Sargeant made the last such report in July 2017. I will make a further and more detailed report in the autumn, once data for 2018-19 are available.

The 2017 report came in the immediate aftermath of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, which remains a strong and poignant reminder of the grave threat that fire poses, and the vital importance of our fire and rescue services. We had a further demonstration of that last summer, when the unprecedented heatwave brought with it a serious recurrence of the menace of grass fires across Wales. All of us rely on the professionalism, dedication and bravery of our firefighters to keep us safe, even if we never have to call on them directly.

In that area they have been conspicuously successful. The overall incidence of fire is in sustained long-term decline, with numbers down by more than half since responsibility was devolved in 2005. There has been particular success in reducing the number of fires that are started deliberately – not only to grassland, but also to waste, abandoned vehicles and derelict buildings. Fire casualties have also fallen steadily, and fires in dwellings – which pose by far the greatest threat to life – had fallen further and faster here than anywhere else in the UK by March 2018. While these trends are partly due to wider social changes, such as a decline in smoking, the FRAs rightly deserve credit too, for their increasing focus on preventing fire and improving fire safety.

I would also like to pay tribute to how the FRAs responded in the aftermath of the Grenfell fire. Our firefighters and fire safety officers moved swiftly to reassure residents of high-rise blocks, and to identify buildings where extra safety measures were needed. Senior fire officers continue to play a central and vital role in designing our new system of fire safety regulation, which I am confident will learn all the lessons of Grenfell and minimise the risk of a similar incident in Wales.

Improving fire safety and responding swiftly and effectively to fires and other emergencies are among the main priorities in our Framework, and in headline terms the FRAs are achieving them. However, there are some indications of more detailed issues, for instance around the containment of dwelling fires and the rate of casualties in them. I will report further on these in the autumn, after further research and analysis has taken place.

The success in reducing the incidence of fire also creates a challenge. It cannot mean an equal decline in firefighting and rescue capacity - that would not be safe, as there remains a need to be able to respond swiftly and effectively to emergencies at any time. Nor would it be fair to the firefighters on whom we rely. Instead, the fire service needs to adapt and to broaden its remit. That is why our Framework sets out the need for FRAs to change, so as to deal with this challenge as well as with others, such as austerity and an ageing population.

There has been some good progress in this area. Uniquely in the UK, our FRAs are now under a duty to respond to flooding and other water-related incidents; two of the three now have a highly-regarded specialist capability to respond to terrorist attacks; and, especially in Mid and West Wales, firefighters now respond to medical emergencies in support of the Ambulance Service, saving many lives. It is clear that the FRAs are collaborating effectively, and thus discharging another of our Framework priorities.

For this broadening of the role to develop fully, though, firefighters’ terms, conditions and pay all need to change. That has been the subject of long-running UK-wide negotiations between employers and unions. Whilst both sides agree on the case for change, and the need for pay to reflect a broader role, they are still some way apart on the detail. We have made it clear to both sides that we stand ready to support an affordable deal that works for Wales and for Welsh firefighters; but we can only do so once there is an agreement between employers and unions.

If and when that happens, though, it will only be the start of the process. Broadening the role does not just mean reviewing firefighters’ contracts and pay rates. It will involve far-reaching changes to FRA resources, capability, training and culture. That will be a further challenge, but meeting it is essential to the sustainable future of the Service.

That is especially so in rural areas. Outside our largest towns and cities, most firefighters are “retained” – they are called in as needed from their homes or workplaces and paid accordingly. But the declining incidence of fire means there is less for them to do, leading to lower incomes and job satisfaction. Of 106 retained fire stations in Wales, 74 typically respond to less than one fire or road traffic collision per week, and 33 of them to less than one per fortnight. Yet the commitment to be on call and available for duty at a few minutes’ notice, normally for 120 hours per week, remains the same. Many on-call firefighters find this increasingly hard to sustain, and recruiting and retaining them is becoming difficult. Unless we broaden the remit of firefighters and increase both the financial and personal attractiveness of these roles, the long-term viability of fire and rescue services in rural areas will be under serious threat.

Overall, I am satisfied that FRAs are doing as much as they can to value and develop the workforce – another of our Framework priorities. But there are greater and longer-term challenges in this area that are probably beyond the scope of any single FRA to solve. We will continue to work with them and with firefighters’ unions to make consensual and sustainable progress.

The other two objectives in our Framework relate to efficiency and accountability. These are plainly important, but the current statutory arrangements within which FRAs have to operate do not and cannot generate the sort of assurance I would wish to see. It would therefore be unfair to reach any substantive conclusions now.

Late last year, we consulted on proposals for reform in this area. That generated many responses which supported the broad case for change overall, but showed little consensus on the detail. The FRAs raised a number of concerns and I have had further discussions with the Chairs since the end of the consultation. While the Welsh Government remains committed to reform in principle, the two proposals about which the FRAs had the greatest reservations will not proceed. That meanswe will not be drawing FRA members from council cabinets, nor will we be requiring FRAs to agree their budgets with local authorities.

I plan to visit each of the FRAs over the summer and will reflect further on the direction that reform will take. I will make a further statement in the autumn.