

ATTENDANCE AT THE LGA ANNUAL CONFERENCE AND EXHIBITION 2007 13/14 MARCH 2007

I attended the 2007 LGA Fire Conference on the 13/14 March, accompanied by Service Officers.

Members will recall that they had previously determined to attend this Conference based on the strength of the Conference Agenda, and to remove it from the list of Standing Conferences. Overall, the Agenda was predominantly England focused, although nearly all the key issues debated had relevance for the Wales Fire and Rescue Services.

The Conference opened with a Panel session which was conducted "question time" style. A variety of questions came from Members attending, and there was a lively session (the Panel consisting of a mixture of Senior Members, Civil Servants and Officers).

The Local Government Association is currently developing a 10 year vision, a piece of work which is being conducted in collaboration with the Chief Fire Officers Association and the Department for Communities and Local Government in England. Many of the issues raised in Conference sessions relating to this vision are similar to the issues that we are currently debating in Wales, and it was useful to be exposed to these debates and discussions. I would suggest that the Authority would do well to take a look at this vision when it is published to see what applicability it would have in Wales and to see whether this could form a basis of discussions between this Authority, the other two Authorities and the Welsh Assembly Government, as well as with the WLGA.

The afternoon of the first day of the Conference presented some particular examples of Leaders carrying through change in their Fire and Rescue Services "against the odds". The Chief Fire Officer of Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service talked of his experience of managing through a local dispute and the new Chief Fire Officer of Durham and Darlington gave her view of her experiences following her appointment as the first outside appointment (and the first woman) to be appointed as Chief Fire Officer. A challenging presentation was made by the Head of Diversity from the Audit Commission. The presentation challenged the Service to make improvements in both its own internal practice and in undertaking work to recognise the full diversity of the communities that we serve.

The day closed with meetings of the various political groups, (I was somewhat surprised to find there was no meeting arranged for the Neath Port Talbot Rate Payers Group!). Workshop sessions which were held on Day 1 were repeated on the morning of Day 2. From my perspective they were somewhat disappointing, although I did find some benefit from the workshop regarding the role of Elected Members in providing leadership in the future. This workshop was facilitated by the English Improvement and Development Agency, and I am sure that WLGA/Syniad would be able to run a similar session for us at a future Members' Seminar.

The second day contained an interesting presentation relating to the volunteer firefighting arrangements in the United States of America. The presenter tried to draw a comparison with the Retained Duty System in the UK, although I was more struck by the differences than by the similarities. Sir Ken Knight, the Commissioner of the London Fire Brigade, gave a challenging presentation concerning the Fire and Rescue Services responsibility to address the issues raised by climate change. This did not only cover the ground I expected such as ensuring effective use of energy

etc, but also addressed issues relating to sustainable procurement and to our responsibilities for ensuring sustainable buildings (e.g. through the installation of sprinkler systems).

The Conference concluded with a presentation from the English Minister Angela Smith MP. Whilst she did address a number of issues that would be of English interest only (e.g. Regional Management Boards), it was clear that England shares our determination in Wales to continue to move from the “operational response only” approach to the more holistic approach that we are now committed to. She stated her view that the lowest level of fire deaths and injuries statistics for fifty years have not come about by accident, I know that this is a view that we share in the Mid and West Wales Fire Authority.

I would like to thank Members for the opportunity to attend this Conference, which although somewhat England focused was I think of interest and benefit to this Authority.

Councillor Pam Spender