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Scrutiny and Member Engagement in Fire and Rescue Authorities – Good Practice

Mid and West Wales, North Wales and South Wales Fire and Rescue Authorities



The Welsh Fire and Rescue Authorities have developed individual approaches to internal scrutiny and Member engagement in the light of their particular circumstances but the new Authorities would benefit from reviewing these to apply good practice principles.

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Status of this document

This document has been prepared for the internal use of Mid and West Wales, North Wales and South Wales Fire and Rescue Authorities as part of work performed in accordance with statutory functions, the Code of Audit and Inspection Practice and the 'Statement of Responsibilities' issued by the Auditor General for Wales.

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Summary

1. Member engagement and scrutiny emerged as a medium or high risk in all three Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) during the inaugural Joint Risk Assessment. We understand that the Welsh Assembly Government will be consulting on wider public service scrutiny later this year. Consequently, 'scrutiny' in this report refers to the internal scrutiny of decisions and performance by Members of the Fire and Rescue Authority, and does not include the contribution of the Fire and Rescue Authority to more formal scrutiny of the wider Welsh public service, for example through Local Service Boards or the local authorities from which FRA Members are drawn.
2. Fire and Rescue Authorities differ from Members' 'home' local authorities in terms of the number of Members, political control and the absence of a separate executive. Although FRAs do not operate formal scrutiny according to statutory requirements, the principles of good governance, accountability and effective scrutiny of decision-making remain important. Our work in the previous FRAs suggests that there are questions about the adequacy of structures and whether Members have ownership of key strategic decisions and the right information to scrutinise decision-making effectively. There are also questions about the extent to which there is a clear programme of issues for scrutiny and the extent to which there is a clear understanding of the role of members in the FRA context, particularly given the extent of member turnover. The recent Council elections on 1 May will change the membership of the three FRAs in Wales.
3. As a consequence of these factors, we decided to undertake a good practice project to identify whether Welsh FRAs could learn lessons to engage members more effectively in scrutiny and strategic decision-making. We examined arrangements in the three Welsh FRAs, compared them with good practice principles and considered good practice from FRAs in England. We undertook a member and senior officer focus group and circulated a questionnaire to all Members and senior officers.
4. We concluded that the Welsh FRAs have appropriately developed individual approaches to internal scrutiny and member engagement in the light of their particular circumstances but that the new Authorities would benefit from reviewing these to apply good practice principles.
5. This report seeks to provide a range of principles and questions that FRAs need to ask themselves in order to refine their approach to scrutiny. Recognising the very different approaches already in existence and the particular circumstances of each FRA, we decided to adopt this principle-based approach rather than providing a single over-arching model for scrutiny.
6. Alongside this overarching good practice report, we have produced local reports for each FRA, summarising our local findings on Member engagement and scrutiny.

Recommendations

- R1 The new FRAs should assess their scrutiny arrangements against the questions set out in Part 2 of this good practice guide. They should use the results of this assessment to determine their own approach to scrutiny that is consistent with their individual circumstances and appropriate to a FRA. In doing this, Authorities should not simply import the local authority model but apply the most useful principles of it, recognising the need to establish:
- clear responsibility for detailed and robust scrutiny activity, usually through the Audit Committee of the Authority, that is independent of the full Authority and improves performance, decision-making and governance;
 - arrangements that clearly specify the relationships between scrutiny and decision making in the full Authority;
 - the potential to link the audit committee function and scrutiny of performance; and
 - the need to establish a realistic annual programme of scrutiny priorities, which might most appropriately relate to business planning cycle, including the Joint Risk Assessment, departmental business plans, risk reduction planning and the Authority's statutory Improvement Plan.
- R2 The FRAs should include scrutiny and Member engagement in the induction programmes for Members of the new Authorities, using this report to inform that induction.

The three Welsh Fire and Rescue Authorities have developed individual approaches to internal scrutiny and Member engagement in the light of their particular circumstances

7. Fire and Rescue Authorities operate on very different statutory basis to their constituent local authorities. In the absence of an executive model, the FRAs are not required to establish formal overview and scrutiny committees as exist in the unitary authorities. Fire and Rescue Authorities also have a smaller number of Members than their constituent local authorities, which means that they need to consider how best to use the capacity provided by their Members. Members have other roles and responsibilities within their home authorities as well as serving on the FRAs. As Members of the FRA, they have different roles and responsibilities that are consistent with the legislation. There also tends to be higher turnover of Members of the FRAs as a result of changes in the home authorities.
8. While it would be inappropriate to apply wholesale the models used in constituent local authorities, the principles of effective scrutiny apply to FRAs and should contribute to improved decision making and accountability. There have been examples within other organisations in the Welsh public service where weaknesses in governance have led to significant failings in management and performance, which serve to highlight the importance of governance in general and effective scrutiny of decision making.
9. Recognising the importance of the principles of effective scrutiny, each FRA has established its own approach to scrutiny and the engagement of its Members. The approaches have emerged in response to the strategic, operational, structural and political imperatives which apply in each FRA.
10. The approaches taken reflect the fact that scrutiny should not be regarded in isolation from other key elements of governance. In particular, scrutiny should link with:
 - performance management;
 - decision-making, governance arrangements and structures;
 - Member training and clarity of Member roles and responsibilities;
 - audit, inspection and external review; and
 - business planning, risk management and best value duties.

11. Exhibit 1 describes the approaches to scrutiny and Member engagement in all three FRAs in Wales. This shows that:
- Mid and West Wales FRA has developed the most comprehensive and independent scrutiny arrangements through the establishment of its Performance Review and Audit Committee (PRAC) with a wide ranging terms of reference, and also uses Task and Finish Groups, reporting to PRAC, to undertake a programme of scrutinising departmental business plans;
 - North Wales FRA has a large Executive Panel which meets between full Authority meetings and deals with matters referred to it by the Authority; and
 - South Wales FRA deals with decision making within full Authority meetings and uses informal Member and officer working groups to deal with specific issues, supported by a Finance, Audit and General Purposes Committee.
12. All three approaches have their merits but also exhibit scope for further development through the application of good practice principles and a review of the arrangements within the new FRAs constituted after the local government elections of 1 May 2008.

Exhibit 1: The three Welsh Fire and Rescue Authorities have adopted different approaches to scrutiny

Fire and Rescue Authority	Approach to scrutiny and Member engagement	Comments
Mid and West Wales	<p>The Authority established its Performance Review and Audit Committee (PRAC) in June 2007, composed of 9 Members with responsibility for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • scrutiny of the performance and improvement plan; • scrutiny of the Operational assurance self assessment; • to receive and consider periodic reports from the Member Risk Reduction Planning group; and • scrutiny of the annual Joint Risk Assessment and Improvement Plan and making recommendations to the Authority about them. <p>The FRA has set up a Risk Reduction Planning Members' working group, which Sir Graham Meldrum commended last year. There is an emerging programme of scrutiny with PRAC task and finish groups scrutinising six departmental business plans a year, which members involved have commended as a valuable way of</p>	<p>There is a clear scrutiny role for PRAC.</p> <p>Task and Finish Groups have been beneficial for both Members and officers. Member development days have been positive and have sought to address scrutiny, among other key strategic issues facing the Authority.</p> <p>The terms of reference of PRAC are wide and the FRA will need to monitor whether they are too broad.</p>

Fire and Rescue Authority	Approach to scrutiny and Member engagement	Comments
Mid and West Wales (continued)	<p>understanding key aspects of the business. Mid and West Wales has set up joint officer and member scrutiny groups to consider key priority issues, including efficiencies and strategic procurement. A member champion has been nominated to review the constitution for the new Fire and Rescue Authority.</p> <p>The Modernisation Committee of Mid and West Wales FRA has considered member engagement and has led work on member development and the implementation of the WLGA members' charter.</p>	
North Wales	<p>The full Authority meets four times a year, supported by an Executive Panel (the Panel) which meets in the interim periods between the FRA meetings. The Panel has 14 Members and its role is to consider issues referred to it by the Fire and Rescue Authority and to make recommendations in return. It also makes recommendations to the Fire Authority regarding key strategies and policies, including the Risk Reduction Plan. Its terms of reference include the role of acting as the Fire and Rescue Authority's Audit Committee.</p> <p>The FRA is presently exploring the role of Members, considering the development of 'champions' to represent various issues. The Authority is implementing the WLGA Members' Charter.</p>	<p>The current arrangements include the majority of members.</p> <p>There is a risk that the Members not involved in the Executive Panel are disengaged from the executive decision making and scrutiny processes.</p> <p>There is a potential conflict between decision-making and scrutiny within the Panel.</p> <p>Members who are not on the Panel do not receive any development training which could help them develop their knowledge of current issues facing the Authority.</p> <p>There is no separate Audit Committee.</p>
South Wales	<p>The FRA is supported by a Finance, Audit and General Purposes Committee (FAGPC) whose primary role is to receive and make reports on finance and financial audit matters to the Fire Authority and to review internal and external audit reports. The Committee is chaired by the deputy</p>	<p>There is an Audit Committee function.</p> <p>All Members feel included in the decision-making process through the full Authority.</p> <p>Working groups of officers</p>

Fire and Rescue Authority	Approach to scrutiny and Member engagement	Comments
South Wales (continued)	<p>Chairman of the FRA and the Chairman also attends meetings.</p> <p>Working groups of officers and Members have been used for specific issues, such as the headquarters move, review of Standing Orders, the environment and the Authority's approach to the WLGA Members' Charter.</p> <p>The Authority is developing its website which should improve the current poor availability of information about the Authority's activities.</p>	<p>and Members are seen to have worked effectively on particular issues.</p> <p>Although the Authority believes that its approach is inclusive and gives all Members the chance to participate in scrutiny, decision making through the full Authority without some form of independent scrutiny may compromise the ability of all Members to scrutinise fully decisions and provide their input.</p> <p>While the attendance of the Chair showed his personal commitment, it is inconsistent with best practice whereby the audit and scrutiny function should be independent of formal decision making by the Authority. This could compromise the effectiveness of scrutiny activity and accountability if the audit committee was considering an issue that the Chair had previously sanctioned or approved.</p>

Source: Wales Audit Office fieldwork.

The new Authorities would benefit from reviewing their approach to internal scrutiny to ensure the application of good practice principles

13. Our survey of Members and senior officers achieved a relatively low response rate but our analysis identified useful themes to inform the further development of scrutiny and member engagement which are set out in Exhibit 2.

Exhibit 2: key messages from our survey of members and senior officers

The headline findings of our survey of members and senior officers were that:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Members and officers were positive about the authorities' aims and objectives although there were mixed views about the decisiveness and speed of decision making;
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> respondents were positive about the role of the FRA except in relation to public participation in FRA meetings;
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in respect of scrutiny within the FRA, the survey identified negative views about co-opting Members, training, support structures, development of ways to involve the public and clarity about members' role in policy development;
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> there were mixed views about officer delegation; and
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> there was a perceived need to make more effective use of ICT and the media.

Source: Wales Audit Office survey of members and senior officers and FRAs.

14. As well as these areas for potential improvement in the existing arrangements for internal scrutiny, we found examples of good practice in scrutiny and Member engagement, within Welsh FRAs, FRAs in England and local government. The new FRAs might wish to apply these good practice principles in establishing their own arrangements. This part of the report therefore sets out those principles, presents examples of their application and questions which the new Authorities could address when reviewing their approach to scrutiny.
15. We have arranged these using the following seven principles of effective scrutiny:
- genuine officer and Member commitment, involvement and participation (Exhibit 3);
 - focusing on the right things(Exhibit 4);
 - organising what you do (Exhibit 5);
 - the right level of support (Exhibit 6);
 - independent and objective perspectives (Exhibit 7);
 - learning and development (Exhibit 8); and
 - getting the right outcomes and impact (Exhibit 9).

Exhibit 3: Genuine officer and Member commitment, involvement and participation

Effective scrutiny activity requires officers and Members to be committed to, and participate in the process	
Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> officers and members alike must be committed to effective scrutiny and have clear responsibilities for making the arrangements work effectively; scrutiny activity in the Fire and Rescue context should be Member-led; as well as reading reports, Members involved in scrutiny should consider visits to departments, front-line locations or services to enhance their understanding; and in undertaking scrutiny activity in the Fire and Rescue context, Members should work together in a consensual and constructive way.
Examples of their application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in Mid and West Wales FRA, Members of PRAC reported the benefits of spending time in the departments whose business plans they scrutinised through Task and Finish Groups, leading to improved understanding of corporate support functions and more effective scrutiny through speaking to departmental staff; and in South Wales FRA, Members and officers have worked together effectively in working groups on key issues such as the headquarters move.
Comments from our survey of Members and senior officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'The scrutiny role needs to be extended to ensure adequate checks and balances are in place to effectively manage the services.' 'The FRA has largely maintained the decision making role and therefore Members of the FRA have not felt the same need to scrutinise decisions that they themselves have made.' 'I do believe that members of the public should be able to ask questions - subject to notice periods etc.'
Questions for FRAs to consider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does your Authority have effective arrangements for Member-led scrutiny of key issues affecting it? Is there clarity about how scrutiny will take place and how this relates and reports to the full Authority? Are your senior officers committed to, and engaged in, the scrutiny process to improve decision making and governance? Are Members committed to, and engaged in, the scrutiny process to improve decision making and governance?

Exhibit 4: Focusing on the right things

Effective scrutiny requires a focus on the most important priorities, especially in the light of the limited capacity available to FRAs	
Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • there should be a clear work programme for scrutiny, setting out a small number of focused priorities over and above routine decision making within the full Authority; • the selection of priorities is especially important in FRAs because of their relatively small size and Member capacity; • in selecting these priorities, there should be a consideration of the results of the Joint Risk Assessment, priorities within the Authority's Improvement Plan and the findings of internal and external audit reports; • the selection of priorities should consider the likely impact and biggest contribution to improvement within the FRA.; • members and officers should be consulted, and contribute to, the scrutiny work programme, as well as representatives of key partner organisations from within the Welsh public service, especially community safety and health; and • in looking at specific service areas or departments, start with the strategy, then consider the quality of management and then service delivery.
Examples of their application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Mid and West Wales FRA, PRAC has set up Task and Finish Groups to scrutinise business plans for six departments each year. The scrutiny process involves visits to the departments and Members taking written and oral evidence from the departments before providing a written report to PRAC. These reports are combined into an overall report to the full Authority. Over time, this will become a rolling programme of scrutiny and could be developed to lead more in depth scrutiny of key issues to emerge from the reviews of departmental business plans. • South Wales FRA operates working groups on an ad hoc basis to help support decision making in key areas. • In North Wales, the Executive Panel deals with specific priorities referred to it by the full Authority. • Throughout Wales, Members undertake visits to stations and other local activities. • The Audit Commission's CPA report on Merseyside FRA commended Members' frequent visits to stations to interact with staff and partners. • Merseyside FRA set up a Performance and Audit Committee in 2007/08 which consists of five Members and meets five times per year. The Committee was formed to give Members dedicated opportunity to examine, discuss and approve all proposed Authority Plans, statistical, governance and other returns, prior to submission to auditors and publication.
Questions for FRAs to consider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you got an annual programme of scrutiny which prioritises scrutiny activity according to key improvement priorities, risks, audit reports and the views of officers and Members? • Is the plan Consistent with the capacity available for scrutiny? • Will scrutiny report at the appropriate time to inform and improve key decisions made by the full Authority?

Exhibit 5: Organising what you do

Scrutiny activity needs to be well organised, with an approach that is supportive and positive	
Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • when involved in scrutiny meetings, officers and Members should prepare properly to ensure that they ask the right questions; • member support officers can help Members by providing ideas for questions and sharing good practice from previous scrutiny work; • documentary evidence and performance information should be gathered before Members question officers at scrutiny examination meetings; • the Chair should be clear about the way scrutiny should be undertaken and encourage a positive and constructive approach along non-party lines; and • there should be a clear remit and clear outcomes for scrutiny activity.
Examples of their application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • North Wales FRA is presently exploring the role of Members, considering the development of 'champions' to represent various issues. • Mid and West Wales FRA has set up joint officer and Member scrutiny groups to consider key priority issues, including efficiencies and strategic procurement. A Member champion has been nominated to review the constitution for the new FRA. • South Wales FRA has recognised the value of Member involvement in task and finish groups, with a recent successful example being the headquarters move. • Kent and Medway FRA uses joint officer/Member working group and panel processes to enable robust scrutiny of corporate risks. • Kent and Medway FRA has reviewed its committee structure to reflect changes in the nature and volume of business being undertaken by the Authority. A Members' review group has been established to review the effectiveness of the new arrangements and has circulated a questionnaire to all Members to obtain feedback on a range of key issues.
Questions for FRAs to consider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are members properly briefed and supported by suggested questions? • Do member support officers learn from effective examples from previous scrutiny work? • Do Members have access to an appropriate level of documentary and performance information in advance of meetings? • Does the Chair facilitate a positive and constructive approach to scrutiny which promotes improvement in performance and governance? • Are there clearly articulated outcomes for scrutiny activity?

Exhibit 6: The right level of support

Members need to be well supported by officers in discharging their scrutiny activity	
Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • there needs to be dedicated officer support for Members to ensure that members are best placed to scrutinise and to organise the scrutiny activity; • officers should provide Members with an appropriate volume of key information – documentary and data – to enable them to scrutinise effectively; and • information and Communications Technology can be used to share information to support scrutiny, brief Members and inform them about future work priorities.
Examples of their application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mid and West Wales FRA runs regular Member development days, at which officers and external speakers have presented key information on priority areas such as the budget, sustainability and Member engagement and scrutiny.
Questions for FRAs to consider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there dedicated officer support to ensure Members are best placed to scrutinise effectively and to organise scrutiny activity? • Do officers provide Members with the appropriate information in terms of quality and quantity? • Is ICT used effectively to disseminate information that can brief Members involved in scrutiny?

Exhibit 7: Independent and objective perspectives

Scrutiny activity should provide independent and objective perspectives to improve decision-making and performance	
Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scrutiny activity should be independent and objective, which means that it needs to be based on evidence and provide support for the decision making process. • Effective questioning is key to deriving the full value from scrutiny activity. • A balanced range of perspectives should be sought within the evidence gathering process. • There should be an independently chaired Committee discharging the functions of an Audit Committee; the Chairman should not be a member of this Committee. The Committee should report back to the full Authority.
Examples of their application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Audit Commission has highlighted how Kent and Medway FRA has benefited from the local activity of Members, for example the way in which Member support and station visits have helped officers drive through plans for improvement and change; and • Mid and West Wales FRA described the learning that arose from Member scrutiny of six departmental business plans each year.
Comments from our survey of members and senior officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'There is a clear need for separate scrutiny arrangements.' • 'There is no effective scrutiny activity in place.' • 'Members often appear to struggle with the occasional conflicting priorities of the FRA with the needs of their own Authority.' • There is an 'unwillingness to take difficult decisions, revisiting decisions too easily, including decisions on relatively minor issues.'
Questions for FRAs to consider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the Authority have arrangements that enable independent and objective scrutiny of performance and decision making? • Are Members able to ask the right questions to scrutinise and support improved services and performance? • Do Members have the right information and access to a balanced range of perspectives to help them scrutinise?

Exhibit 8: Learning and development

Authorities should seek to achieve continuous improvement in their scrutiny activity by learning from their own and others' good practice	
Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • scrutiny can be developed by observing scrutiny undertaken by other FRAs or Councils; • peer review of scrutiny activity can be a useful means of learning about and developing the scrutiny function; • filming scrutiny sessions can be a useful element of Member and officer development; and • members should seek anonymous feedback from officers involved in scrutiny to identify strengths and areas for further development.
Examples of their application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mid and West Wales FRA has run Member development days, which have addressed scrutiny and member engagement. • Kent FRA has provided Member training about roles, responsibility and risk, and have invited external experts to speak, for example a CIPFA representative to deal with accounts and the key issues for members to look for. • All three of the Welsh FRAs are at various stages of adopting, or considering the adoption of, the WLGA's Members' Charter. This will provide personal development plans and definitions of Member competencies, and should provide a basis on which to develop scrutiny further.
Questions for FRAs to consider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there systems to enable the Authority to learn from good practice in scrutiny elsewhere? • Has the Authority considered observing other scrutiny activity elsewhere, or inviting peers to review their own Members' scrutiny? • Are there systems to provide Members with anonymous feedback on the scrutiny process that involve officers taking part?

Exhibit 9: Getting the right outcomes and impact

Scrutiny should deliver tangible improvements and impact, and set up systems to ensure the implementation of recommendations	
Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • scrutiny work should lead to firm recommendations for improvement, reported to the full FRA for decisions; • FRAs should include follow-up procedures to ensure the implementation of recommendations arising from scrutiny activity; • recommendations should be practical and realistic, but should also consider longer-term and more radical approaches where this is appropriate; and • scrutiny work should allocate clear responsibility to specific officers for the implementation of recommendations.
Examples of their application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Modernisation Committee of Mid and West Wales FRA has considered Member engagement and has led work on Member development and the Members' charter; and • in South Wales, Member involvement in the working group dealing with complex issues around the new headquarters has been described positively.
Questions for FRAs to consider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does scrutiny activity lead to clear, practical recommendations to the full Authority? • Is there clear officer accountability for implementing each recommendation? • Do scrutiny committees follow-up their recommendations to track implementation? • Are there systems and structures to enable corrective action where the recommendations of scrutiny have not been implemented effectively?



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A Review of Scrutiny Arrangements within the Fire and Rescue Authorities of Wales

Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Authority

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Summary

1. Member engagement and scrutiny emerged as a medium or high risk in all three Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) as part of the inaugural Joint Risk Assessment (JRA) which is a key element of the Wales Programme for Improvement (Fire).
2. 'Scrutiny' in this report refers to the internal scrutiny of decisions and performance undertaken by members of the Fire and Rescue Authority, rather than the contribution of the Fire and Rescue Authority to more formal scrutiny within the wider Welsh public service, for example through Local Service Boards or the local authorities from which FRA members are drawn.
3. Scrutiny is less developed in FRAs than it is in local authorities. There is scope to develop further the existing structures, particularly opportunities to develop members' ownership of key strategic decisions and provide the right information to enable effective scrutiny. There is also scope to improve the selection of issues for members to scrutinise and to develop a clearer shared understanding of the potential scrutiny role of members in the FRA context.
4. There is scope to share good practice within Wales and to learn from good practice in FRA member engagement and scrutiny from outside Wales. Consequently this project looked at member engagement and scrutiny across the three Welsh FRAs, as well as considering examples of effective scrutiny in England. Alongside this local report, we have developed a good practice report on member engagement and scrutiny in fire and rescue authorities.
5. We considered whether FRA's can learn lessons to engage members more effectively in scrutiny and strategic decision making. We undertook a member and senior officer focus group and circulated a questionnaire to all Members and senior officers.
6. Mid and West Wales FRA is improving its approach to scrutiny. It has formed the Performance Review and Audit Committee (PRAC) and is seeking to gain the Members' Charter being implemented by the Welsh Local Government Association. While PRAC has been a positive development and is continuing to improve its approach, there is scope for further refinement in scrutiny.

Mid and West Wales is improving its approach to scrutiny

7. The Fire and Rescue Authority is supported by a range of committees dealing with matters such as Personnel and Standards. There is a larger Resources committee consisting of fourteen members dealing mainly with financial issues.

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8. The FRA has remodelled the former Performance Policy Review Committee into the new Performance Review and Audit Committee which has updated the terms of reference that the Fire and Rescue Authority agreed in July 2007. Its purpose now includes the following:
 - scrutiny of the performance and improvement plan;
 - scrutiny of the Operational assurance self assessment;
 - to receive and consider periodic reports from the Member Risk Reduction Planning group; and
 - scrutiny of the annual Joint Risk Assessment and Improvement Plan and making recommendations to the Authority about them.
 9. The Authority has developed some effective mechanisms for member engagement and scrutiny which include:
 - i. The Risk Reduction Planning members' working group, which Sir Graham Meldrum commended last year.
 - ii. The emerging programme of scrutiny with PRAC task and finish groups scrutinising six departmental business plans a year, which members involved have commended as a valuable way of understanding key aspects of the business. This programme could be developed to lead more in depth scrutiny of key issues to emerge from the reviews of departmental business plans.
 - iii. The establishment of joint officer and member scrutiny groups to consider key priority issues, including efficiencies and strategic procurement. A member champion has been nominated to review the constitution for the new Fire and Rescue Authority.
 10. The Members and senior officers who took part in the focus group demonstrated a clear awareness of the need for effective scrutiny. However, as a single service authority – albeit with a large range of duties as both a fire and rescue service – the wholesale adoption of the local authority model of scrutiny would not be the most appropriate approach for the FRA.
 11. The Authority is in the process of adopting the WLGA 'Wales Charter for Member Support and Development within Fire and Rescue Authorities' and an action plan is to be considered by the PRAC in the early part of 2008.
 12. Members attending the focus group felt that scrutiny of Members' decisions is different from the arrangements that prevail in Councils as the Fire and Rescue Authority has no Executive. However, they added that the remit of PRAC should help develop more effective scrutiny of decisions and facilitate a more robust examination of key proposals contained with the Improvement Plan and Risk Reduction Plan. The PRAC will also receive and scrutinise the report of the Peer Assessment Team's operational assessment as part of WPI (Fire).

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13. At the time of our focus groups, there had been no specific scrutiny training within the FRA as resources are limited although all members have received training as part of their scrutiny roles within the constituent local authorities. The FRA has provided training to members involved in the PRAC Task and Finish Groups referred to in paragraph 9ii. The FRA has also run member development days, whose agenda has included scrutiny and member engagement, the budget and sustainability.
 14. There was a strong view that the Mid and West Wales FRA should maintain its own approach to scrutiny, as each of the three services within Wales has to respond to different pressures, organisational structures and approaches.
 15. Only five members returned our questionnaire which is too small a sample to provide a meaningful quantitative analysis. An analysis of responses from all three FRAs in Wales will be included in our national good practice report which provides examples which each individual Authority could adapt to its own particular circumstances.

Recommendations for further refinement of scrutiny

16. The FRA should consider:
 - i. Providing a programme of ongoing training and development for members of the PRAC to assist existing and new members in fulfilling an effective scrutiny function.
 - ii. After the new PRAC and task and finish group arrangements have been in place for a year, commissioning a peer review of the scrutiny function exercised by PRAC.
 - iii. Developing the scrutiny of departmental business plans by PRAC to lead to more in depth scrutiny of key issues to emerge from the reviews of departmental business plans.
 - iv. PRAC receiving sufficient information to enable robust scrutiny of decision making to take place. For example, members of PRAC could undertake specific development activities to augment their understanding of the key priority issues for scrutiny. This could involve targeted visits to parts of the Authority's visits but any such visits should be subject to clear objectives and add value to the scrutiny process.



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