National Framework for Fire and Rescue Services

Progress Report 2019

Foreword

I am very pleased to publish this report on our Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) in Wales. Formally, and as required by section 25 of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, it sets out how far the FRAs have acted in accordance with our National Framework for Fire and Rescue Services. In effect, that means it describes how well our Fire and Rescue Services have performed in pursuing our objectives to keep people and communities in Wales safe.

Overall, this is a story of significant achievement. Both fires and fire casualties are in long-term decline. There are many reasons for this, but I have no doubt that one of the most important is the work that the Service does to prevent fires and respond swiftly and effectively when they occur. It is a record all connected with the Service are justifiably proud of.

My report does identify some areas where the FRAs need to take action. Detailed analysis of data about the spread of dwelling fires and the casualties they cause reveal some concerns which need further investigation; and the Service still spends too much time responding to false alarms. They could do more to compare their costs with others and to identify any scope for savings. However these do not detract from the overall positive message.

Indeed, one of the biggest challenges the Service faces is to avoid being a victim of its own success. Fewer fires mean lower activity levels; and in rural Wales that trend is starting to raise questions about the sustainability of the Retained Duty System on which the Service relies in these areas. We cannot have some of our most valued and trusted public servants being under-utilised in this way. So the task for the future is to widen the Service's role, in ways which complement the skills, capabilities, values and respect firefighters already have. This will make best use of the Service and provide a broader and more valuable service to the people of Wales. There are potential challenges to achieving this aim, but it is one on which the FRAs will have the Welsh Government's full support.

Hannah Blythyn AM
Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government
Welsh Government

Data sources

This report makes extensive use of data about fire and rescue services in Wales and elsewhere. Unless otherwise stated, the data sources are as follows:

- **Wales:** StatsWales, https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Community-Safety-and-Social-Inclusion/Community-Safety
- **England:** UK Government fire statistics, www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/fire-statistics-data-tables
- **Scotland:** Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, https://www.firescotland.gov.uk/about-us/fire-and-rescue-statistics.aspx

We believe data are helpful in explaining how far Welsh FRAs have acted in accordance with the National Framework. To put that into context, in most cases we also use data to look back for several years before the Framework came into force. However, there are two important limitations to this.

Firstly, it is of course common to use data to measure the performance of public services. Examination pass rates or waiting times for hospital treatment may be a reasonable reflection of the quality of education or health services, for instance. However this is less true of the emergency services. Many of the data in this report reflect events which are completely beyond the control of FRAs. Schools and hospitals know how many pupils or patients they have, but no-one can predict when and where fires might happen, or whether casualties might arise. Furthermore, there are many influences on the overall risk of fire – such as smoking, ageing and weather patterns – which again FRAs cannot directly control. This means much of the data in this report do not directly or solely measure the performance of FRAs, or the quality of their services; they can only show broad trends and, perhaps, the extent to which FRAs have contributed to them.

Secondly, we make widespread use of comparative data for England and Scotland[1], to put the position in Wales into context. These data are directly comparable, usually because they come from the Fire Service's Incident Recording System, which is used universally across the UK. However, the size of Wales means we inevitably have many fewer fires and casualties than Scotland and (especially) England. Data for Wales thus tend to be more volatile – a few fires or casualties create a bigger proportionate change. This means differences between the nations need to be interpreted with caution, and meaningful trends often only appear over a period of several years.

Overall, the data we have used in this report should not be taken at face value to 'prove' that the FRAs are doing well or badly – or better or worse than their counterparts elsewhere. Where we believe the data reflect good (or less good) performance by the FRAs, we have explained why in the text.

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[1] Published data about fires and fire and rescue services in Northern Ireland are very limited and not necessarily comparable with those for the rest of the UK, so we have not used them. With few exceptions (such as the United States), data about fires and fire services in other countries are also very limited, and are generally not comparable at all with those for Wales, Scotland and England.

Part 1: Service provision

> *Framework Objectives:*
> - **Reducing Risk and Enhancing the Safety of Citizens and Communities**
> - **Responding Swiftly and Effectively to Incidents**

Overall, the number of fires in Wales has been declining for many years. There are several reasons for this. Some of them are grounded in wider social trends, such as a decline in the number of people who smoke; or in technological changes, such as the use of flame-retardant materials for furnishings. However, it is very likely that FRAs themselves have also contributed significantly to this trend. They have long worked to prevent fires and improve fire safety, for instance by raising awareness of fire risks in the home, and diverting people from fire-related crime. The Framework recognised this, and urged FRAs to continue and expand their work by targeting those most at risk of fire, and collaborating with other agencies.

Reducing the incidence of fire

Fire safety and prevention work clearly aims to reduce the incidence of fires of all types. Overall, the incidence of fire in Wales has remained largely static during the currency of the Framework. However, this follows years of steady decline, such that there are now only just over half as many fires as there were in 2005. The long-term trend in Wales is slightly greater than that in England and Scotland in recent years *(Figure 1)*. While the incidence of fire is subject to more influences than just FRAs' safety work, in headline terms that work plainly continues to achieve its objectives.
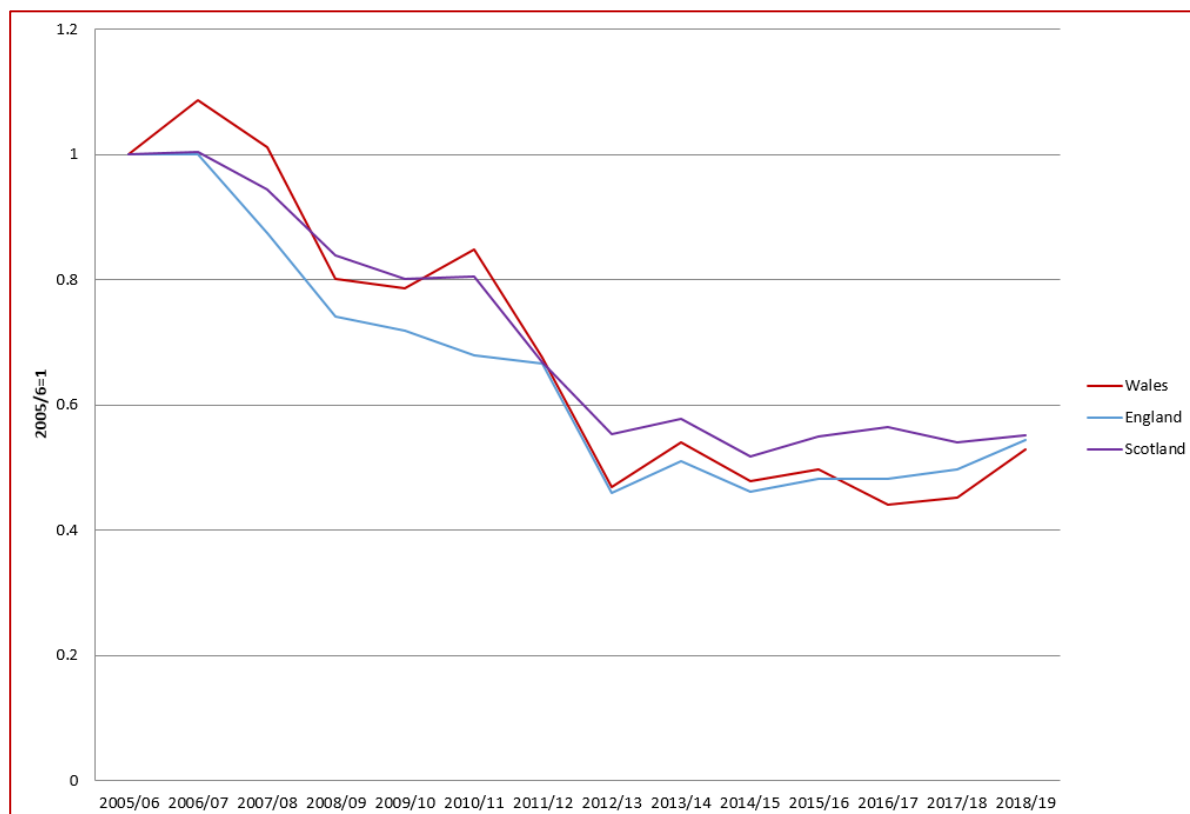

Figure 1: change in total number of fires

Deliberate fires

There was, though, a significant increase in the number of fires in 2018/19. This was wholly due to a very serious outbreak of fires affecting grassland, moorland and forestry during the exceptionally hot summer *(Figure 2)*. Such fires have long been a severe and endemic problem in some parts of Wales, and originate mostly from deliberate and malicious fire-setting. They can have a devastating effect on the natural environment and on wildlife and livestock, and cause significant community concern. Tackling them is often challenging, and the fire crews involved are unavailable to deal with other incidents which pose a greater threat to human life.

Following a particularly severe outbreak in April 2015, the FRAs worked with the police, local authorities, Natural Resources Wales and other agencies to develop a co-ordinated approach to reducing grass fires known as *Dawns Glaw*. This aims to raise awareness of the dangers of grass fires, to deter people from starting them, and to support co-ordinated action to deal with them. Although the incidence of grass fires remains heavily and unavoidably influenced by the weather, there is some evidence that *Dawns Glaw* has been successful. For instance, Easter 2019 was, like Easter 2015, unusually warm and dry; yet initial data indicate that there were only around half as many grass fires. We believe the FRAs and their partners are doing everything reasonably possible to address this issue.
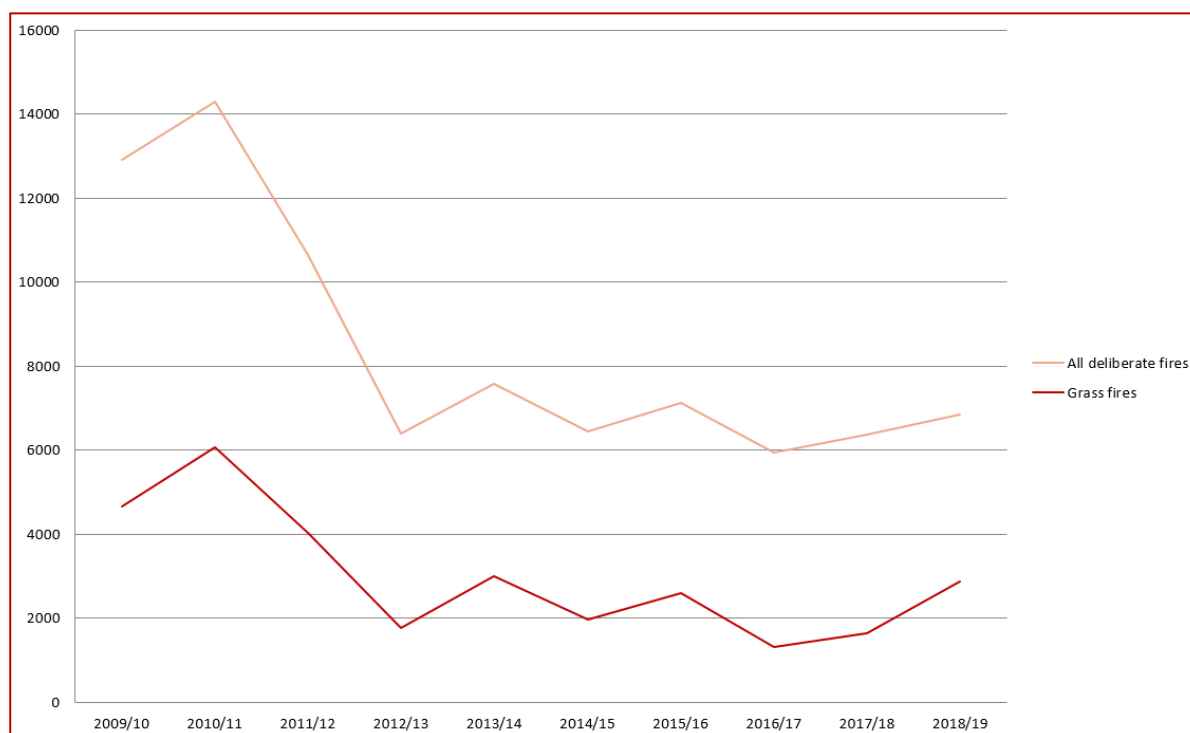

Figure 2: Deliberate fires, Wales

Dwelling fires

While grass fires cause widespread environmental damage, they generally pose little or no threat to human life.   *Dwelling fires*, by contrast, account for only 10-15% of all fires, but between 75-80% of fire casualties.   This is unsurprising: there are many potential causes of fire in the home, and people may be particularly vulnerable if, for instance, they are very old or very young, have sensory or mobility impairments or, most simply, if they are asleep.   Over 90% of dwelling fires start by

accident, for instance because people are distracted while they are cooking, or because an appliance or electrical installation fails, or becomes unsafe.

We are therefore very pleased also to report a sustained reduction in the incidence of accidental dwelling fires in Wales, during a period of sustained population growth and housebuilding in many areas. This has not been as steep as the fall in all fires, but it has been more consistent (perhaps because the incidence of accidental dwelling fires is much less subject to the weather). Such fires have now fallen further in Wales than in England or Scotland *(Figure 3).*
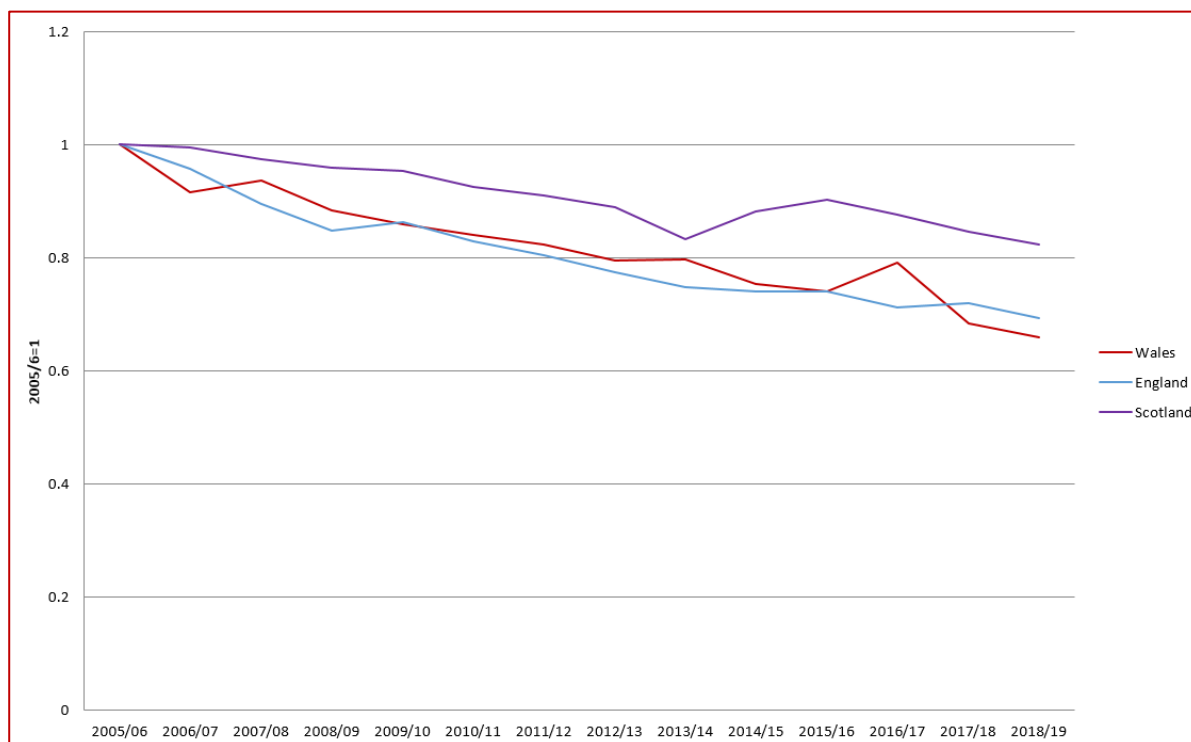

Figure 3: Change in the number of accidental dwelling fires

Around 75-80% of dwelling fires are caused by unsafe behaviour, not unsafe products or premises. So preventing dwelling fires relies largely on raising householders' awareness of fire risks, and advising them to avoid behaviours such as smoking in bed or using open chip pans. Supplying basic and cheap items, such as fireproof bedding or fuse-protected extension leads can also reduce some fire risks. Both in Wales and elsewhere, FRAs do this through a programme of "home fire safety checks" or similar[2]. These checks involve firefighters and community safety practitioners visiting people's homes to provide advice, and often supplying safety devices and equipment – which are provided free of charge due to extra funding from the Welsh Government.

As *Figure 4* shows, the number of such checks has declined somewhat in Wales recently, as FRAs focus more on those at the greatest risk of fire (see below). However, the scheme in Wales remains comfortably the most extensive in Great Britain.

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[2] Different titles are used across the UK; and where visits address non-fire risks such as tripping and falling too, the title "safe and well visit" is becoming commonplace.
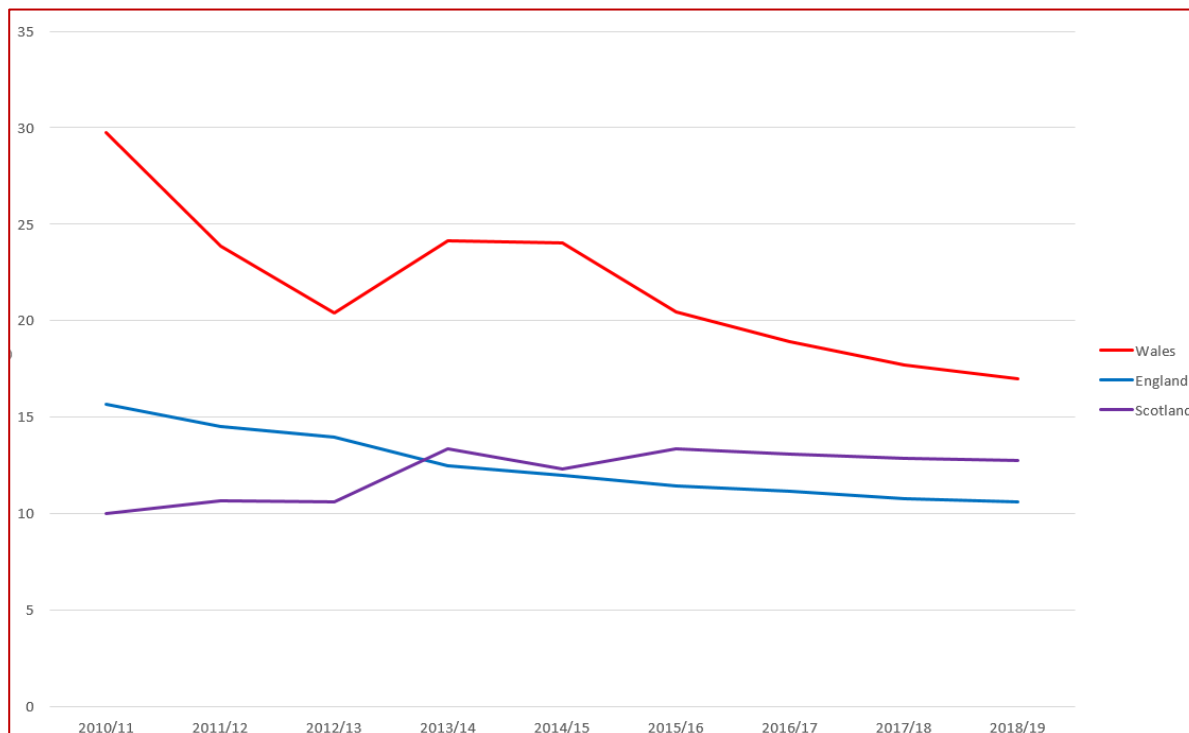
Figure 4: Home fire safety checks per 1,000 population

Targeting prevention

The risk of fire at home varies considerably across the population. Factors such as old age, certain disabilities and mental health issues, deprivation, smoking, alcohol or drug problems and single parenthood can greatly increase the risk of suffering a dwelling fire or of being unable to escape from it.

Therefore, FRAs now target their fire safety work on those most at risk, as the Framework advocated. Individual case studies reveal numerous instances where equipment the FRA provided as part of a check almost certainly prevented death or serious injury when a fire broke out.

This underlines that it is probably far more effective to undertake a lower number of intensive and tailored interventions for householders at high risk of fire, than a high-volume generic programme for the much greater number of people at low risk, who may well not have experienced a fire anyway. Identifying people at high risk is not always easy. It often requires collaboration with other agencies, such as the NHS, social services departments, police and third sector organisations.

Since 2015/16, the FRAs have carried out some 230,672 checks, of which 210,592 (or 91%) were for households with at least one of the risk factors we described above. Furthermore, during that period the number of checks for households with no risk factors has fallen significantly, while checks for those at highest risk have increased *(Figure 5)*. Overall, we are confident that the extent and focus of FRAs' home safety work continues to contribute to the sustained reduction in dwelling fires.
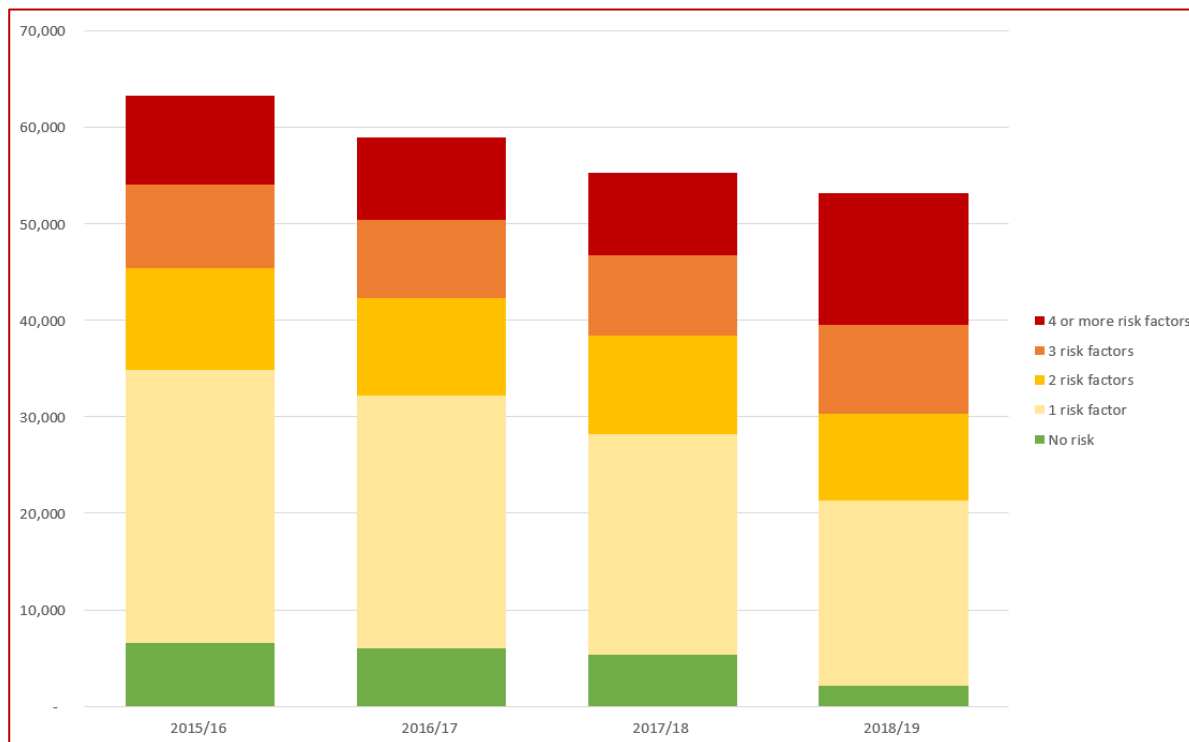
Figure 5: home safety checks by level of householder risk, Wales

Preventing other accidents

Often, people who are at high risk of fire also face other hazards around the home. Many of those hazards can also be tackled quickly and simply as part of a routine home check. For instance, trips and falls at home, especially by older people, are a very common cause of calls to the ambulance service and emergency admissions to hospital. Many of those admitted following such a fall never recover enough to return home. Yet many domestic trip hazards are easy to identify and correct.

FRAs are therefore increasingly broadening the scope of their home safety work to include risks like trip hazards, as well as providing advice about matters like crime prevention, healthy eating and drug misuse. In broadening the scope of this work, FRAs are building on the very high degree of respect most people have for firefighters, which can mean that messages from them are better received than those from other agencies. Overall, 35% of home checks in 2018/19 involved non-fire-related activity, up from 31% in 2015-16. This amounts to good progress which we hope to see sustained in coming years.

Safety in non-domestic premises

Buildings other than dwellings are subject to a different and more robust approach. FRAs have powers to inspect, regulate and enforce fire safety measures under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 ("the FSO"). This is specialised work, usually done by highly trained inspectors rather than front-line firefighters.

Most non-domestic buildings, like shops and offices, have a low risk of fire or fire casualties, for instance because there is no significant source of fire present (like cooking), or because no-one sleeps there. However, others – such as hospitals, hotels, care homes, licensed premises and factories – are at higher risk.   FRAs rightly target their inspections on the latter group; so only higher risk premises are inspected each year.

We fully support that approach, and have no reason to doubt the quality and effectiveness of the FRAs' work. It has, though, acquired much greater prominence as a result of the Grenfell Tower fire in London: common areas of blocks of flats are also covered by the FSO. Following the Grenfell tragedy, our FRAs moved quickly to inspect at-risk tower blocks in Wales, to reassure residents, and to take effective enforcement action in those premises which proved to be unsafe. We strongly commend them for that, and for the central role they have played in developing a longer-term response.

However, the process of learning lessons from Grenfell has already identified concern that the FSO does not work well for residential properties; it was designed primarily for workplaces. It also appears not to interact well with other forms of control like building regulations or the law on housing standards. The power to amend or replace the FSO only became devolved when the Wales Act 2017 came fully into force in April 2018. We will use that power to act on the lessons of Grenfell appropriately and fully.

Emergency response

While preventing fires and promoting fire safety is clearly vital, it can never eliminate the risk of fire altogether. Emergency response therefore remains at the heart of the work of the Welsh Fire and Rescue Services. When fire does break out, the Service aims to respond swiftly and effectively. The Framework recognised that, and urged FRAs to maintain high standards in this area.

As the incidence of fire falls FRAs increasingly have scope to respond to other types of incidents too. The skills and values that firefighters possess are often just as applicable to dealing with other threats to life, and the Framework also recommended that FRAs continue to develop their work in this area.

Fire casualties

Broadly speaking, while fire safety work aims to prevent fires from breaking out, responding to fires aims to minimise their severity. One way of assessing this is to look at the incidence of human casualties – people who are killed or injured by fire, heat or smoke. That is particularly important for dwelling fires, which, as noted, are by far the most dangerous. In many cases, an effective response is one which allows people to escape, or to be rescued, before they are injured or killed – recognising that in other cases, casualties may have arisen before the Service is even aware of the fire.
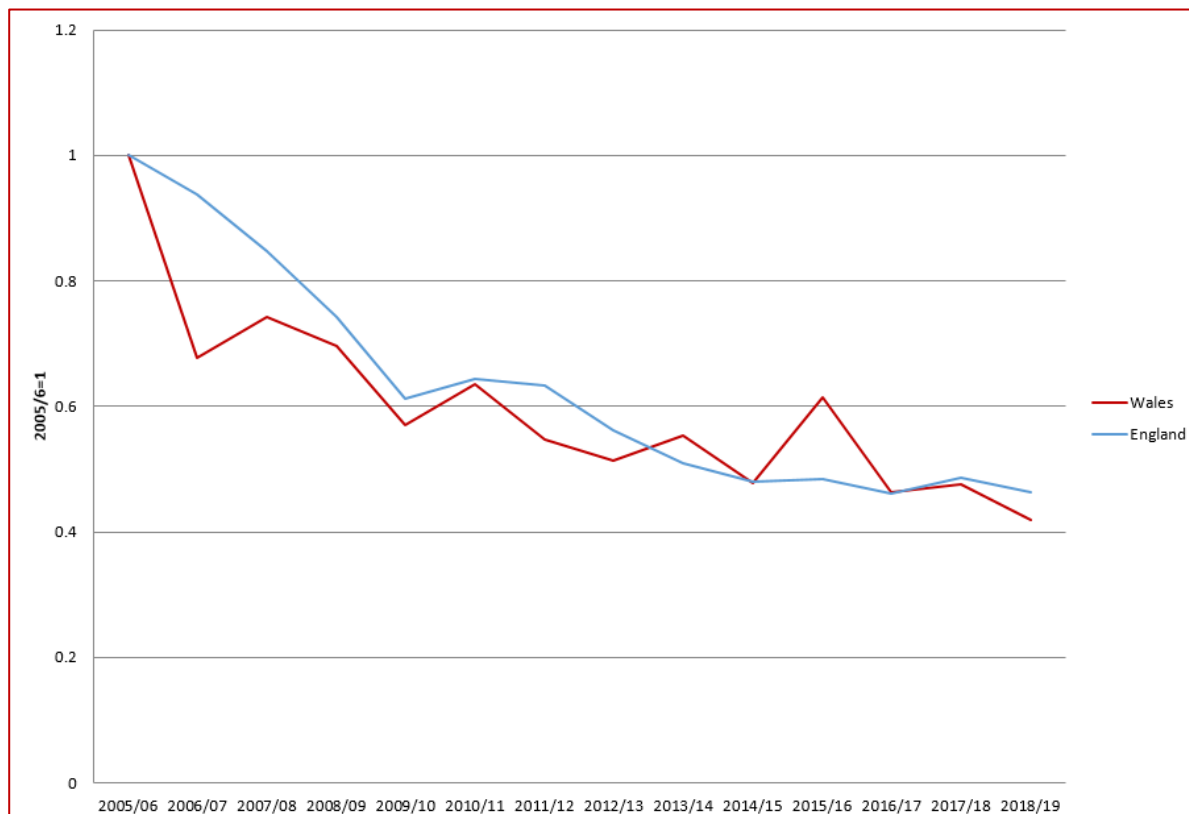
Figure 6: Change in hospitalised fire casualties

As *Figure 6* shows, fire casualties requiring hospital treatment[3] have declined markedly over the last 12 years, and at a similar rate to England (NB that data for Scotland are not available for all of this period).   That is clearly a success.

However, that simply reflects the overall reduction in the number of fires described above. If there are fewer fires, there will clearly be fewer casualties, all things being equal. Furthermore, the fall in casualties has been more modest in recent years.

This is particularly true of dwelling fires. As we described above, the number of such fires has fallen significantly. But dwelling fire casualties have not fallen as fast. So comparing the number of dwelling fires to the number of hospitalised casualties in such fires shows little change over time in Wales or England *(Figure 7)*.   In other words, if a dwelling fire does break out, people in Wales are actually no safer than they were nine years ago.

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[3] Casualty data often include people who appear to be uninjured by a fire but who the Service advises to seek medical advice as a precaution. The number of such 'precautionary checks' has risen very markedly in recent years, perhaps reflecting a greater level of medical knowledge and training among firefighters. Without disputing the advice given in these cases, this trend tends to distort the overall picture. The data here thus count only fatalities, and casualties who actually received hospital treatment.
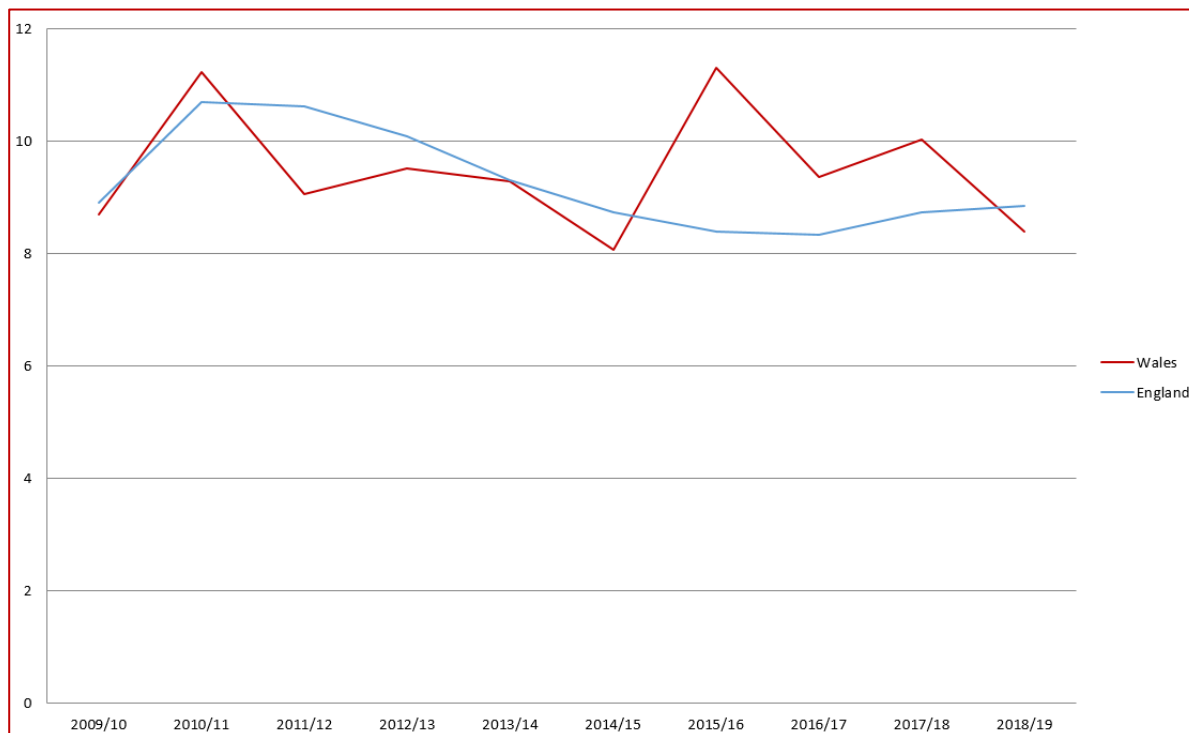
Figure 7: hospitalised casualties per 100 dwelling fires

That does not necessarily mean the Fire and Rescue Service has not improved the effectiveness of its response over this period. Any such improvement may be masked by social trends such as ageing, which means a greater proportion of the population may find it harder to escape from a fire uninjured. There is also recent evidence of casualties being due to people re-entering a burning building to retrieve valuable possessions such as mobile phones[4]. However, we might also expect developments such as more widespread ownership of smoke alarms, sprinklers in all new homes and greater awareness of fire risks to reduce the ratio of casualties to fires. Overall, this is a cause for concern, and one which FRAs should investigate further.

Spread of fire

Another way of assessing the effectiveness of response is to consider how well fires are contained. If the Service is alerted promptly to a fire, if it responds quickly with an appropriate level of crewing and equipment, and if its firefighting effort is effective, then fires are more likely to be extinguished before they can spread. Fires which are swiftly contained pose less risk to life and cause less damage to property. Again, this is particularly true for dwelling fires.

FRAs' record here is less strong. The data show that the proportion of dwelling fires in Wales which spread beyond the room in which they started has increased over time *(Figure 8)*. By contrast, the position has remained largely unchanged in England, and improved in Scotland despite an increase in uncontained fires there last year.

FRAs obviously have no control over how and where dwelling fires break out, or how quickly they are reported, and that will influence these data heavily. For instance, fire will spread more quickly in a timber-framed and/or open plan house or

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[4] For instance from the LIFEBID research project led by the University of Greenwich in conjunction with over 20 Fire and Rescue Services across the UK: https://fseg.gre.ac.uk/lifebid/index.html.

flat than one which uses only stone or brick, and/or which has a more traditional design. In some cases a fire may have spread before the Service is even aware of it.   However that is true across the UK; and the speed and effectiveness of a firefighting response probably also has at least some influence. While we would be slow to conclude that these data necessarily reveal problems with that response, this trend is a cause for concern, and FRAs should investigate and act on it.
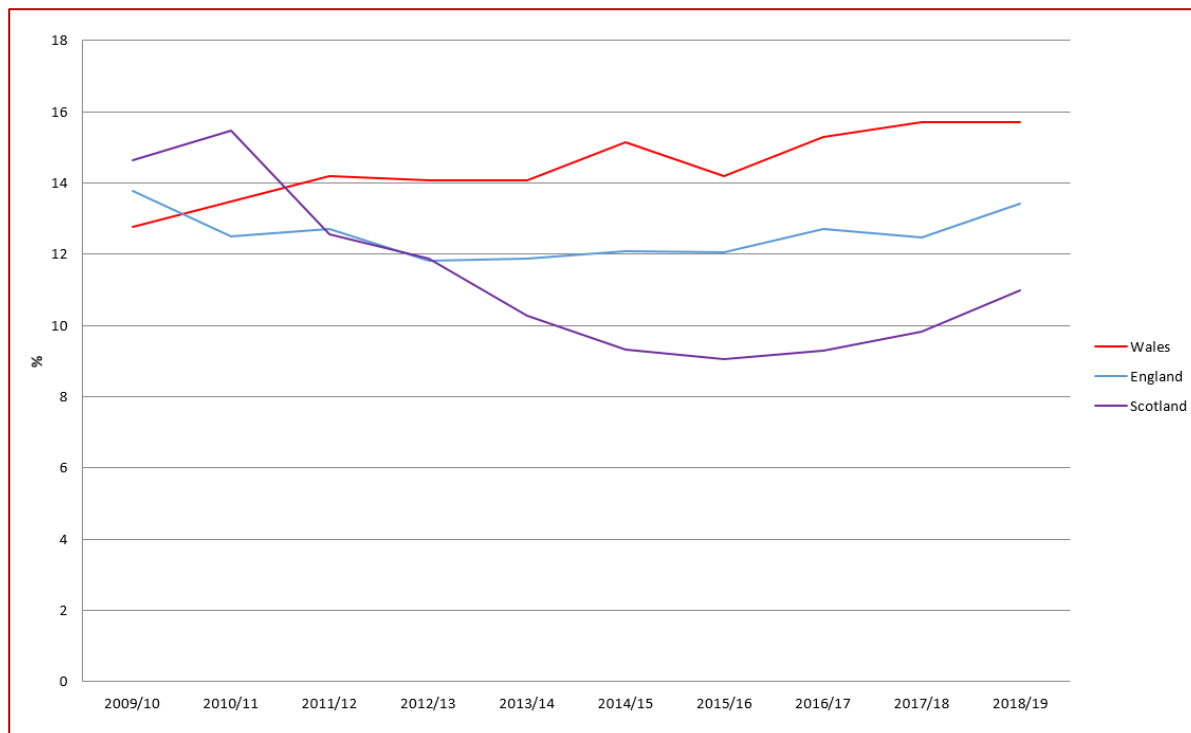

Figure 8: dwelling fires spreading beyond room of origin

Emergency medical response

It has long been recognised that, as the number of fires falls, there may be capacity and ambition for the Fire and Rescue Service to respond to other types of emergencies. In particular, there is a growing recognition that the Service can play an invaluable role in responding to certain types of medical emergency in support of the ambulance service.   While most firefighters are not trained to the same level as paramedics, they are still highly skilled at dealing with some life-threatening conditions. In cases of cardiac arrest, for instance, swift intervention is critical to the patient's survival – and the nearest available fire appliance may often be closer than the nearest available ambulance. . Firefighters also provide invaluable support to paramedics at such incidents including through undertaking high quality cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

The Framework recognised that this so-called "Emergency Medical Response" (EMR) was vital to the future direction of the Service in Wales, and urged FRAs to continue to develop their activities in this area. We are very pleased to report that they are doing so. As *Figure 9* shows, EMR incidents had been a rapidly increasing proportion of all incidents to which the Service responds. Many of these incidents will undoubtedly have saved lives, and/or will have allowed ambulances to be deployed for patients who need the attention of fully trained paramedics.
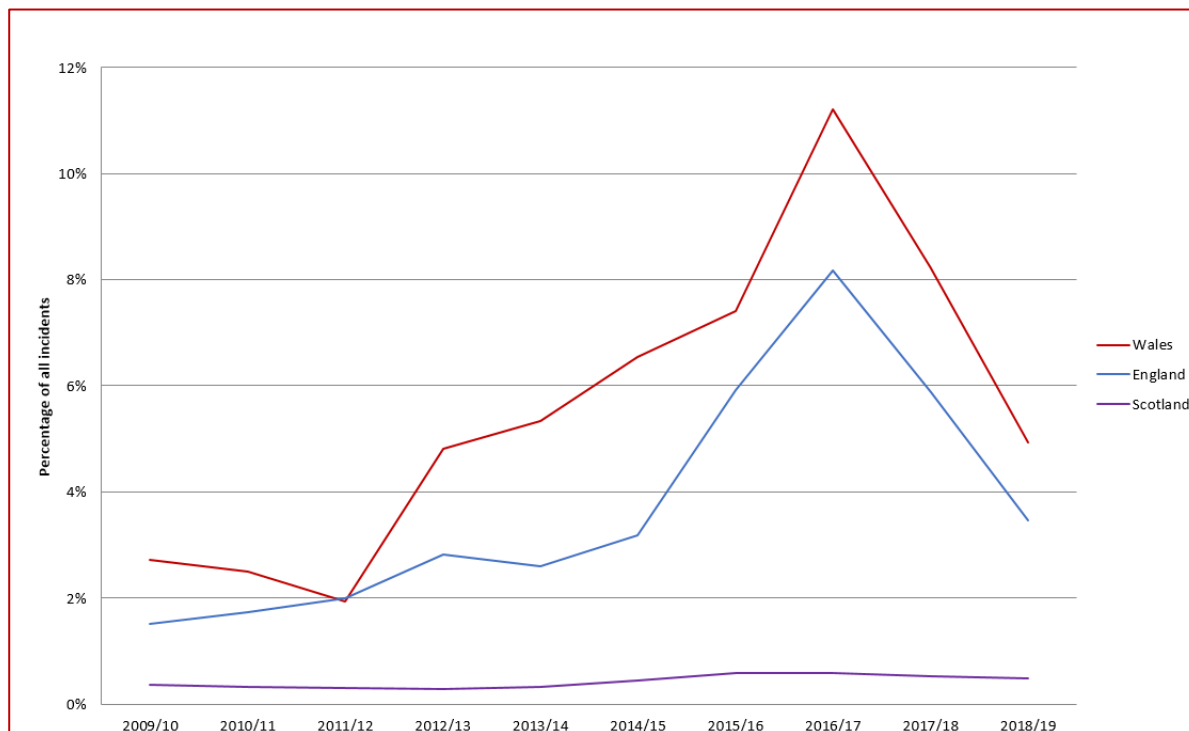
Figure 9: emergency medical response incidents

As the graph shows, though, EMR has stalled since 2017-18 because of unresolved UK-wide pay negotiations between employers' representatives and the Fire Brigades Union. Those negotiations are not a matter for government, nor are the Welsh FRAs directly involved. We would, though, urge both sides to reach a settlement which fairly rewards firefighters for their expanded duties, and allows this life-saving work to continue. At the same time, there needs to be an effective strategic relationship between the NHS and the FRAs to inform and shape this activity; and we have convened discussions at senior management level to that end. Making progress on these matters is critical to the sustainable future of the Service.

Flooding and water rescue

Flooding is a serious risk in many parts of Wales. Around 208,500 properties are at risk of flooding from rivers or the sea and around 163,000 properties are at risk from surface water flooding. Changes in our climate, such as more severe storms and wetter summers and winters, will increase that risk. Furthermore, Wales has a high rate of death from drowning, normally in standing bodies of water rather than floodwater. Children, and especially boys, may be at particular risk[5].

The Fire and Rescue Service has long responded to flooding and water rescue incidents. They have done so on a purely voluntary basis, despite being the only non-maritime emergency service with the required capability. The number of incidents to which the Service responds clearly depends at least in part on weather conditions, but many of them are very serious and life-threatening.

The risks in Wales and the importance of maintaining the Service's capability led us to make flood response and water rescue a statutory duty for the Service in April 2017. This largely formalised the existing position, although we also provided £2 million extra funding for boats, high-volume pumps and other rescue equipment.

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[5] See Public Health Wales, *Thematic review of deaths of children and young people through drowning*, available online here.

While flood response is also statutory in Scotland and Northern Ireland, Wales is the only part of the UK with a comprehensive duty covering both flooding and rescue from standing bodies of water. We were pleased that this change was supported both by FRAs and by firefighters' unions, and believe it will preserve and enhance a vital part of the Service's capabilities.

National Resilience

Finally, FRAs are also responsible for responding to a range of national-scale disasters and other very serious incidents. This so-called "national resilience" capability embraces matters such as chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear incidents, building collapses and terrorist attacks. Incidents of this scale and seriousness call for specialised equipment and dedicated crews which would be beyond the means of any individual FRA acting alone. In recognition of this the capability is planned and managed on an all-Wales basis and funded by means of a special Welsh Government grant.

It is hard to assess the effectiveness of a capability which, thankfully, is rarely needed in full. However, we are pleased that the Welsh capability has consistently been rated very highly in exercises and peer reviews. We have also been impressed by recent steps the FRAs have taken to improve the strategic management of this capability.

> *Conclusions:*
> - **FRAs have succeeded in the overall aims of continuing to reduce the incidence and severity of fire.**
> - **There have been particular successes in tackling the menace of deliberately-set wildfires, in continuing to reduce dwelling fires, in responding to floods and medical emergencies, and in regulating fire safety in non-domestic premises.**
> - **However, there are a few concerning trends – in particular the rate of casualties in dwelling fires, and the number of such fires which spread beyond the room of origin. FRAs should take steps to understand and address these trends.**

Part 2: Corporate issues

Framework Objectives:
- **Being clearly and publicly accountable for delivery and funding, manifesting the highest standards of governance**
- **Maintaining downward pressure on costs and taking all opportunities to realise efficiencies**
- **Working effectively with partners to improve efficiency and citizen and community wellbeing**

Standards of governance

Good governance is essential to the management of any public organisation. It helps ensure public funds are properly and efficiently spent, and the organisation designs, develops and delivers appropriate types and levels of service. Accountability to the public is a vital component of this. By inviting public debate, scrutiny and challenge, organisations generate very valuable information about people's expectations and experiences, and about the services they, and their communities, most need.

There are particular challenges in doing so in an emergency service context. While the FRAs' safety, prevention and education programmes have a wide reach, in any given year, the great majority of people do not directly receive an emergency response from the Fire and Rescue Service – and none of them welcome the circumstances in which they do. That may both limit and colour people's perceptions of what the Fire and Rescue Service does, and how well it does it. Gratitude at having one's life or property saved from fire or other threats is always merited; but that does not necessarily mean the service is always performing as well as it might.

There are also particular challenges for how FRAs manage their own affairs. The business of preventing and responding to fires and other incidents does not readily lend itself to many of the conventional techniques of corporate planning and performance management. Fire and Rescue Services are generally concerned with incidents or hazards which are not of their making and not under their control. By contrast, most other public bodies provide a reasonably consistent and predictable volume of standard services to an identifiable client group.

However, that just strengthens the need for FRAs to plan and manage their services effectively, and to explain their roles clearly to those they serve. That is all the more true in a time of change such as the Framework described.

Planning effectively

The statutory context for FRA planning is complex. At a corporate level it includes requirements under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 and the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2014, as well as the National Framework for Fire and Rescue Services itself. There are also more specific requirements relating to (for instance) equalities, civil contingencies and the Welsh language. These requirements are not necessarily consistent or complementary: they relate to different matters and operate on different timescales.

Given that complexity, FRAs have done well to produce business and strategic plans which are clear, comprehensive and well-structured. Without exception, they integrate corporate and operational considerations fully, and include clear narrative setting out what the service proposes to achieve and why.

However, some plans could do more to relate objectives to levels of local risk and changes in it; and to explain how past performance has shaped future intentions. The coverage of some of the aspects of diversification which the Framework set out is also sometimes lacking, especially in relation to support for the NHS – although we accept that there are constraints on FRAs' ability to commit fully in this area, not least the issues around firefighters' pay and conditions to which we referred earlier.

Members and scrutiny

While Fire and Rescue Services are under the day-to-day control of officers acting under delegated authority from the FRA, members are ultimately responsible for the governance and strategic direction of FRAs. The Framework called for their roles to be sustained and strengthened, whether to take decisions or to provide effective scrutiny of those who do. There is also a potential role for FRAs' constituent local authorities in scrutinising FRAs' plans and budgets.

We are disappointed that progress in this area has been limited. For instance, the Framework advocated a clear separation between executive and scrutiny roles within FRAs. While North Wales FRA has long operated on these lines, the other two do not.

However, the potential for progress is limited by legislation. The Local Government Act 2000 – which establishes a clear separation between executive and scrutiny functions in local authorities – does not apply to FRAs. While it might be possible to create something broadly similar, that separation ultimately relies on there being a ruling political group or coalition with an electoral mandate to discharge. That does not and cannot exist within an FRA.

Engaging with the public

While there are no Wales-wide data about public satisfaction with the Fire and Rescue Service, other evidence suggests a strong level of support. For instance:
- South Wales FRA carried out a public satisfaction survey in 2015, in which 80% of respondents rated its services as "very good", and only 4% as "poor" or "very poor".
- Mid and West Wales FRA has also run a public opinion survey for the last three years, which shows a satisfaction rate of over 80%.
- The Welsh Government funds many of the FRAs' community fire safety programmes and uses case studies from recipients of those programmes to monitor delivery and impact. Those are invariably positive.
- There have been very few recent complaints to the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales about FRAs. The Ombudsman did not uphold any of them[6].

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[6] Source: Public Services Ombudsman for Wales Annual Reports, http://www.ombudsman-wales.org.uk/en/publications/Annual-reports.aspx

This all points to a service which the public hold in high regard. This is something of which all in the Fire and Rescue Service should be proud. However, it is not the same as the sort of public engagement which the Framework advocated. This was concerned more with building understanding of the Service's broadening role and of the progress it makes in delivering that.

Overall, it appears that all three FRAs have made good attempts to engage with the public on these matters. Their performance plans and reports are generally concise and accessible, avoiding jargon and seeking to explain priorities and decisions. However, and as noted above, there could be more emphasis on the non-fire aspects of FRA's work, which we are not convinced are yet widely understood by the public. Equally, FRAs could sometimes do more to present information in a local context, for instance by using a wider range of data and/or setting out what they have done (and propose to do) for different parts of their areas.

Public accountability is not helped by the FRAs' statutory improvement regime, in the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009. This was designed for local authorities to determine priorities from within the much wider range of services they provide and the electoral mandates which their members have. For FRAs it is more a matter of delivering a relatively narrow range of services in ways that reflect objectively-determined local risk.   The current Local Government and Elections Bill therefore contains powers for us to develop a new regime designed specifically for FRAs. We will do so in full consultation with them, and will aim to have this in place alongside a new National Framework in 2021.

Financial matters

Like all public bodies, FRAs need to operate as economically and efficiently as possible, to minimise the burden on the public purse. That is especially so during the current times of austerity.

There are unusual challenges facing FRAs in this regard.   While the long-term decline in the incidence of fire is a genuine success, it cannot lead to an equal reduction in firefighting resources or expenditure on them: the Service still needs to be able to respond to any incident at any time. Unlike many other organisations, FRAs cannot manage demand for their responsive services by using waiting lists or prioritising some recipients over others. Many parts of rural Wales are already served only by single-appliance retained duty (on-call) stations, meaning there is little scope for savings in those areas without a degradation of service.

Nonetheless, financial pressures remain severe; and the funding model for FRAs in Wales underlines the need for efficiency. FRAs levy contributions on their constituent local authorities, which are themselves under exceptional strain. FRAs need to be consistent in their approach and relieve those pressures by setting contributions at the lowest level which is safe and sustainable. The Framework set out some ways in which they could do so.

Overall and relative expenditure

The average annual cost per head of fire and rescue services in Wales is now just under £50. In real terms (that is, adjusting for inflation) it has fallen by just under £9

per head, or around 15%, since 2005. However, in the past few years there has been no significant change.

This contrasts with real-terms expenditure by local authorities. While this has declined in the past few years, FRA expenditure has fallen further and for longer – indicating that FRAs have made relatively lower demands on local authority budgets, although the gap is starting to close (*figure 10*). In overall terms, it is clear that FRAs have maintained at least some downward pressure on their costs, as the Framework recommended.
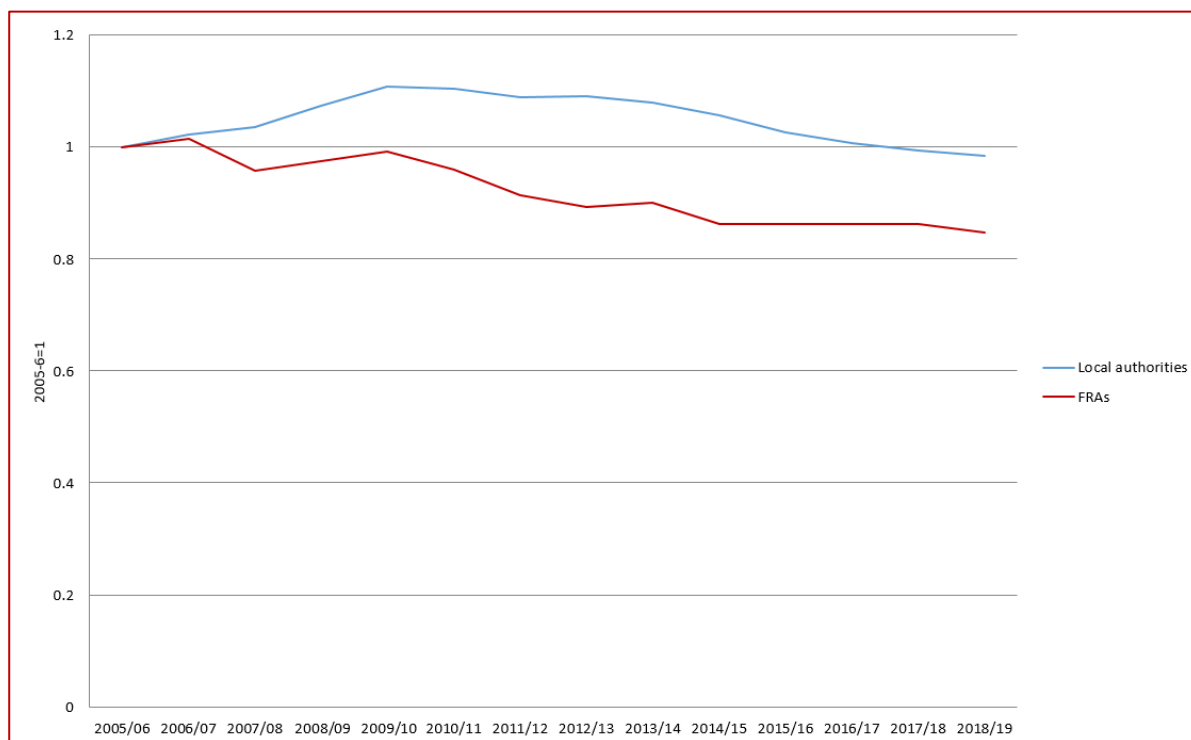

Figure 10: change in Welsh local authority and FRA expenditure per head, current prices

This is perhaps unsurprising. The incidence of fire has fallen faster during this period; and while it would be wrong to expect that to mean an equal reduction in FRA expenditure, some decrease in costs was reasonably likely. For instance, the cost of employing most of Wales's many retained duty system (RDS) firefighters is proportionate to the number of incidents they attend.   By contrast, demand for many local authority services is rising: the largest ones (education and social services) experience higher demand simply as a result of population growth.

It is clear that the three FRAs have taken steps to identify and realise savings. That much is clear from the overall decline in costs. It may in particular reflect the work we described in Part 1 to review FRA operational capabilities and arrangements, and align those with known and predicted levels of risk. This is important work, but can be locally controversial if it leads to closures of fire stations or withdrawal of appliances. We are clear that these are decisions for FRAs; but we encourage them to continue to keep front-line capabilities under review, and to engage fully with local communities to allay any concerns. FRAs have also worked together to secure efficiencies, for instance through the National Issues Committee (NIC).

All of these efforts have been effective and made in good faith. However, the current governance and finance arrangements could mean that the pressure to identify and realise savings is not as great as it should be. FRAs have routinely

engaged with local authorities in setting their budgets, but we are aware that a number of councils are dissatisfied both with the level of contributions sought, and with the system under which FRAs have autonomy to set that level as they see fit. They expressed that dissatisfaction clearly when they responded to our 2018 White Paper. Although the data show that FRAs have usually set modest and reasonable budgets, their ability to do so without any form of control or democratic accountability has no parallel elsewhere in the public sector. It is likely to reduce pressure on FRAs to identify and realise savings.

It is also possible to compare expenditure with that in England. There, the cost per head of delivering fire and rescue services[7] tends to be significantly lower than in Wales (*figure 11*)[8].
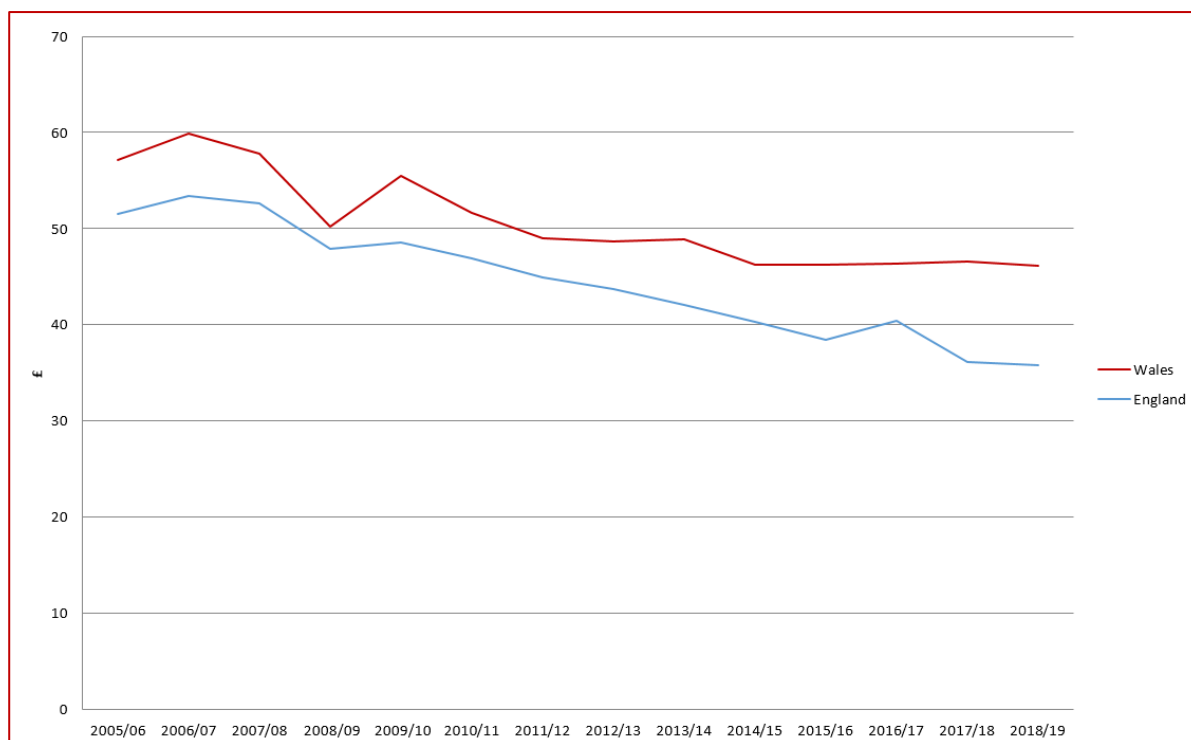

Figure 11: FRA service delivery expenditure per head, current prices

There may well be pressures which unavoidably drive up costs in Wales. For instance, providing fire and rescue services in rural Wales means maintaining many small fire stations to ensure coverage of the whole area. However, that is also true of many parts of England; and the on-call firefighters who crew such stations are always going to cost less than their wholetime equivalents. The more likely explanation is the different funding model for English FRAs. This relies partly on direct central government funding, which the UK Government has cut significantly in recent years.

Reducing expenditure is not an end in itself, particularly for safety-critical emergency services. There are many involved with fire and rescue services who believe that the cuts in expenditure in England have gone too far. However, this comparison does indicate that there may be unrealised potential to reduce costs in

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[7] Some English FRAs are still constituted as part of county or unitary councils, and thus have much lower corporate overheads (as most of these are accounted for by the council as a whole) and lower total costs per head. We have allowed for this by only including costs of service delivery in the comparative chart.

[8] NB that comparable data for Scotland are not available.

Wales. The Framework urged FRAs to explore this in depth, and to compare their overall and unit costs with similar FRAs in England. Benchmarking in this way can be a very fruitful means of identifying ways to improve efficiency. While some work is needed to identify comparable FRAs and their expenditure, this should not be challenging. We are aware that one FRA has done some work in this area on the cost of rural fire stations, but there is probably scope to do more.

Reducing waste

At the time the last Framework was published, all three FRAs responded to more false alarms than to actual fires. Such responses are of no benefit at all; they prevent firefighters from dealing with genuine incidents, safety-critical training or carrying out fire safety and prevention work, and put firefighters and other road users at risk from unnecessary 'blue light' journeys. Most such incidents arise because of malfunctioning or badly installed automatic fire alarm (AFA) systems in non-domestic premises which automatically alert the Service to a non-existent fire.

This is widely recognised as a major burden on the Service across the UK. The Framework urged FRAs in Wales to emulate some of their counterparts elsewhere, and take steps to reduce their attendance significantly. A report from the Chief Fire and Rescue Advisor in 2015 made similar points. While responsibility for AFA false alarms lies ultimately with the owners and occupiers of the buildings in which they occur, there is still safe and proven action which FRAs can take to reduce their attendance at them. Certainly it should be easier to reduce false alarm attendances than to reduce actual fires. Yet the actual reduction has been much less. There has been some progress in this area, especially in North Wales. However, there remains much more to be done to tackle this problem; Wales as a whole has performed significantly worse than England in this area (*Figure 12*)[9]. False alarms actually increased in 2018/19, although that was largely due to more 'good intent' false alarms (when someone makes a call to 999 in the mistaken belief that a fire exists) rather than faulty automatic false alarms; and the Service cannot be faulted for responding to all such calls.

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[9] NB that data from Scotland are not available for the whole of this period.

1.2

1.0

0.8

2005/6=1

0.6

Wales

England

0.4

0.2

0.0

2005/06 2006/07 2007/08 2008/09 2009/10 2010/11 2011/12 2012/13 2013/14 2014/15 2015/16 2016/17 2017/18 2018/19
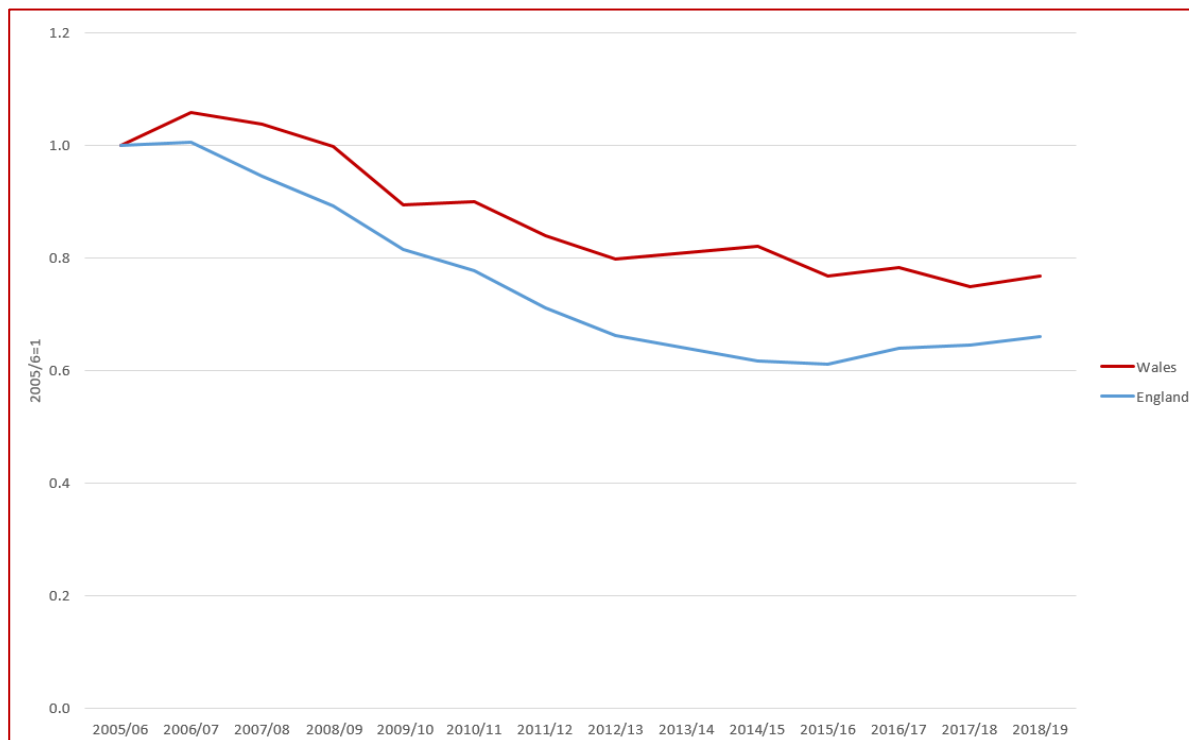
Figure 12: change in number of false alarm attendances

It is hard to put a cash cost on false alarms. Wholetime firefighters who attend them are of course paid anyway, although most retained firefighters are paid only for the incidents (including false alarms) that they attend.   However, there is plainly a significant waste of resource when staff and appliances are involved in so much unproductive activity, alongside the needless disruption caused to businesses and public service premises where these alarms occur.

It would not be sensible or safe for FRAs to refuse to respond to all automatic fire alarms. The fire safety defects in buildings which have come to light since the Grenfell Tower fire mean that any changes to response policies must be subject to a robust risk assessment with appropriate control measures applied as necessary. Nonetheless, false alarms continue to outnumber fires across Wales as a whole. We remain convinced that at least two of our FRAs can and should do more to reduce their attendance at them and the waste of resources that this creates. We expect to see such action during the rest of the lifetime of this Framework.

Collaboration

The Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 highlights collaboration as one of the five key approaches to sustainable development. The National Framework recognises that effective collaboration is key to providing accessible, effective services. This is true where FRAs have lead responsibility for a particular service or where they have the potential to support wider public services, putting the needs of citizens before organisational boundaries.

The Framework therefore sought action from FRAs to review their collaboration activity at all levels, with particular reference to minimising duplication, and seeking opportunities to support the wider public sector both in terms of prevention and emergency response.   The Framework also recognises the role collaboration can play in achieving efficiencies.

Earlier parts of this report have covered the extent to which FRAs collaborate with other agencies in providing front-line services and contributing to wider outcomes. At a corporate level, all three FRAs acknowledge the importance of collaboration in their strategic plans, and all also participate as full members of public service boards (PSBs), which set and pursue shared objectives at a local authority level. At an all-Wales level there are now mechanisms in place for joint strategic planning with the Welsh Ambulance Service and with the NHS generally. These mechanisms may not always work smoothly; for instance, we are aware that FRAs can find attending all of the PSBs in their areas burdensome, but there can be no doubt about the commitment to collaboration at this level.

Collaboration for Efficiency

Collaboration can of course also improve efficiency, by sharing the costs of common services or facilities. FRAs collaborate amongst themselves to this end, largely through the National Issues Committee (NIC), which they established in 2012. The NIC aims to promote collaboration and cost sharing across a range of operational and support services, and has almost certainly realised substantial savings by doing so.

The FRAs also look to make savings by sharing facilities with other organisations. The most prominent recent example is the merger of the South and Mid and West Wales FRA Control Rooms into South Wales Police Headquarters (the Joint Public Service Centre). This is expected to save up to £1 million per year across the two FRAs, as well as providing a more integrated and effective service. North Wales FRA has shared a control room with North Wales Police for many years.

It is also becoming more common for fire stations to be shared with other emergency services. The new Wrexham station is, for instance, a major facility jointly occupied by North Wales FRS and the Welsh Ambulance Service; while the new station in Llandrindod Wells is shared with Dyfed Powys Police; and the refurbished station in Abertillery is occupied by all three emergency services. Again, such developments both save costs and potentially improve services to local people. We strongly encourage further such developments as the existing estate falls due for replacement or refurbishment.

Conclusions:
- **FRAs do well to navigate sometimes complex planning and reporting requirements, and maintain a high level of public satisfaction and support. However, the current legal framework prevents them from being fully accountable.**
- **Service costs have fallen, but the absence of external or democratic control over budgets means one of the main drivers for efficiency is missing.**
- **In particular, FRAs should do much more to identify possible savings through benchmarking their costs. Two of them also need to do more to minimise the waste of resources caused by responding to false alarms.**
- **The FRAs' commitment to collaboration at both strategic and operational levels is clear, and likely to continue to improve both efficiency and service standards.**

Part 3: The Workforce

Framework Objectives:
- **Valuing and developing the workforce to the highest standards**

The workforce is fundamental to all that the Fire and Rescue Service does. Providing both emergency response and preventative services relies wholly on the skills, commitment and dedication of firefighters, control room staff and support staff. Changing the role of the Service equally means building on those skills and capabilities in an effective, sustainable and inclusive way. The Framework thus placed a strong emphasis on valuing and developing the workforce.

Capacity and Workload

As we noted in Part 1, the incidence of fire is in long-term decline. While that has been partly offset by a rise in other incidents to which the Service responds, such as medical emergencies, the overall workload is in decline too.

This does not mean the number of firefighters can, or should, fall in the same proportion. The Service needs to respond to any incident, at any time; and major incidents can easily consume most firefighting resources within a wide radius. However, the long-term decline in fires may well mean that the risk within many communities is also lower, and thus the level of firefighting capacity can safely fall to some extent. Accordingly, there have been some modest reductions in firefighter numbers, as *figure 13* shows, although numbers have stabilised more recently. This is a matter for the FRAs, who must assess medium to long-term levels of risk in the communities they serve and adjust their capacity accordingly.
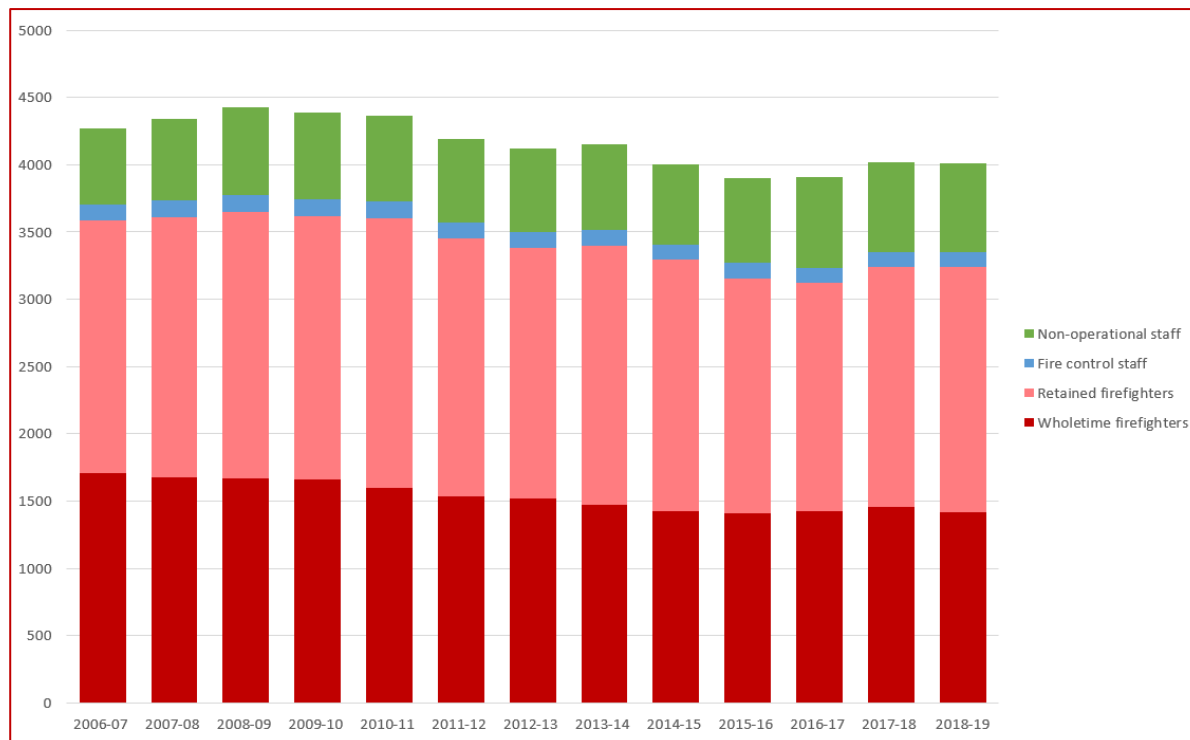

Figure 13: FRA employees by role, Wales

As a result of this approach, incident numbers have fallen much faster than firefighter numbers. This means that the number of incidents to which a typical firefighter responds has also fallen, as *figure 14* shows.
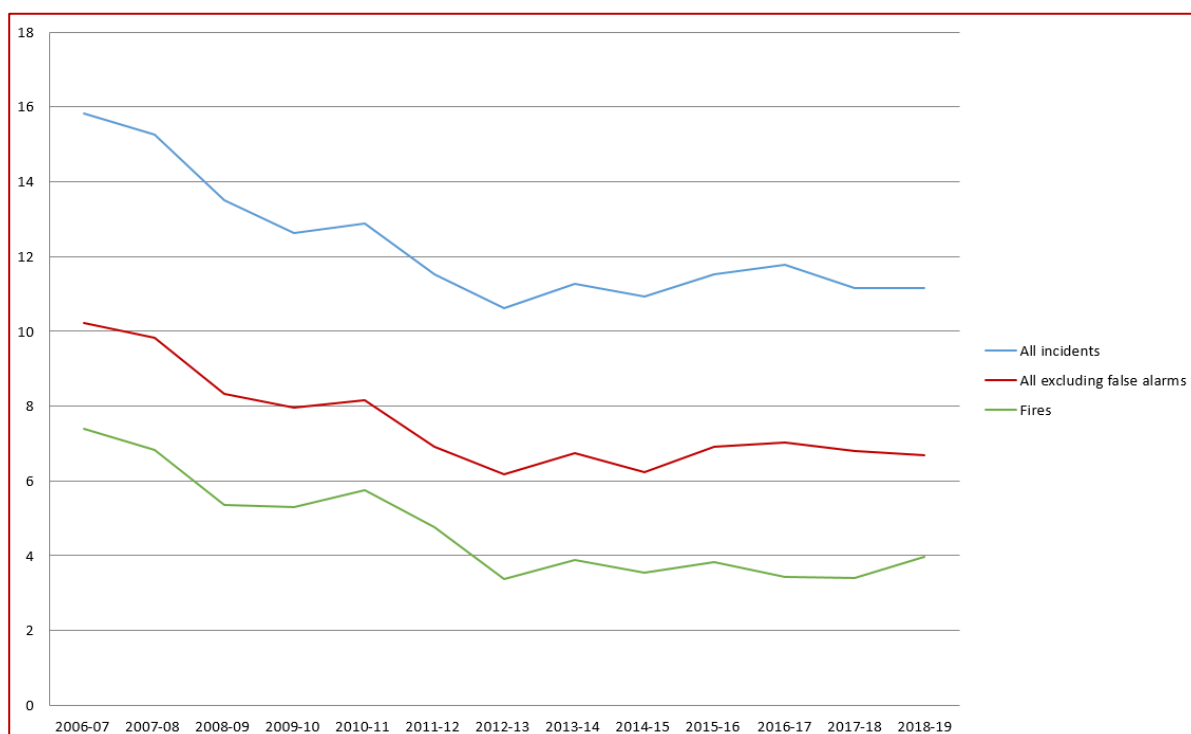

Figure 14: annual incidents per firefighter, Wales

These data are simply the ratio of incidents to firefighters, and should be interpreted with caution. They do not mean that a typical firefighter only responds to a handful of fires a year: firefighters normally respond to fires in groups of at least five, often more. And firefighters are also heavily involved in community fire safety, prevention and education, which is not captured in these data. However it is clear that, at least in terms of emergency response, the Service's workload is in steady decline.

This undoubted success has several important consequences. Firstly, it underlines the potential – which we described earlier in this report – for the Service to respond to a wider range of non-fire incidents. Secondly, it means that to maintain operational effectiveness, firefighters are having to train more rather than rely on experience gained at actual incidents – an issue we examine further below. Thirdly, this trend is starting to have particular effects on firefighters who work under the retained duty system (RDS).

RDS firefighters do not work set hours or shifts. They are called in from their homes or workplaces to attend incidents as they arise. Most of them are paid only for the hours they are called upon, plus training time (although those in South Wales receive a fixed salary); they also receive an annual 'retaining fee'. They are particularly prevalent in rural areas and small towns, where the low risk of fire cannot justify maintaining whole time crews.

Declining incident volumes mean declining incomes for most RDS firefighters. Of 106 solely RDS fire stations in Wales, 74 typically respond to less than one fire or road accident per week, and 33 of those 74 to less than one per fortnight. Yet the commitment to be on call and available for duty at a few minutes' notice for (normally) 120 hours per week remains the same. We are aware that, for many

RDS firefighters, this is increasingly hard to justify; and that recruiting and retaining them is becoming increasingly challenging. Nonetheless, these less busy stations are often the only presence the Service has in a large area; they cannot safely be allowed to close. A stark illustration of that came in October 2017, when one of the least busy stations in Wales (Llanwrtyd Wells) responded to a serious dwelling fire in which six people died but three survived.

This is a major challenge which will need to be overcome if we are to continue to sustain fire and rescue services in rural Wales; and it appears likely that it will need some fundamental rethinking of the RDS rather than incremental changes to it. We will work with the FRAs, firefighters' unions and others to that end.

Broadening the role

Part of the answer to the RDS problem – and indeed the declining emergency response workload for the Service generally – may well be to broaden firefighters' roles. As we explained in Part 1, there is significant scope for firefighters to respond to a wider range of emergencies and to promote safety more broadly. Much is already happening in this area: for instance, many RDS stations in Mid and West Wales respond to more medical emergencies than they do to fires. This provides a valuable service to local communities and makes serving as an RDS firefighter more personally and financially rewarding.

However, wider progress in this area will depend on employers and unions across the UK reaching agreement on firefighters' pay and conditions. These negotiations are taking place, as always, under the auspices of the National Joint Council (NJC), and neither the Welsh Government nor the Welsh FRAs have any direct role in them. Despite that, an agreement is critical to the sustainable future of the Service, and we are pleased that both sides of the NJC recognise that a broader role is both necessary and desirable. They are, though, still some way apart on what that role might entail and the level of pay which would be appropriate as a result.

Broadening firefighters' roles will, though, mean much more than simply amending their contracts of employment. Firefighters' unions have already expressed concern that their members must be properly trained, equipped and supported to deal with a wider range of incidents, and we fully endorse that. A wider range of tasks will call for different skills, procedures and equipment; in the longer term it may well also mean changes to the Service's structures, processes and culture. This will entail a properly-managed and lengthy process of organisational development, as the Framework recognised. While the absence of a pay agreement means it is too early to expect progress in this area, FRAs should not underestimate the work involved.

Safety and wellbeing

Firefighting is unavoidably a very dangerous and stressful occupation: many incidents to which the Service responds present potentially fatal threats to firefighters. Keeping them as safe as possible is and always will be among the Service's top priorities, and one which is reflected fully in its equipment, training and operational processes. A tragic fatality during a waterborne training exercise in September 2019 was the first time for many years that a Welsh firefighter had been killed on duty.

The inherent hazards that firefighters face mean they may well experience higher levels of absence due to illness and injury than employees generally. As *Figure 15* shows, overall absence levels have fluctuated in recent years, but are now slightly higher than they were in 2005.

This may seem curious given the decline in incidents to which firefighters respond. Certainly, they are less exposed to risks of injury in fires than they were. Indeed, the marked decline in incidents since 2010 is associated with an equally marked increase in sickness absence.
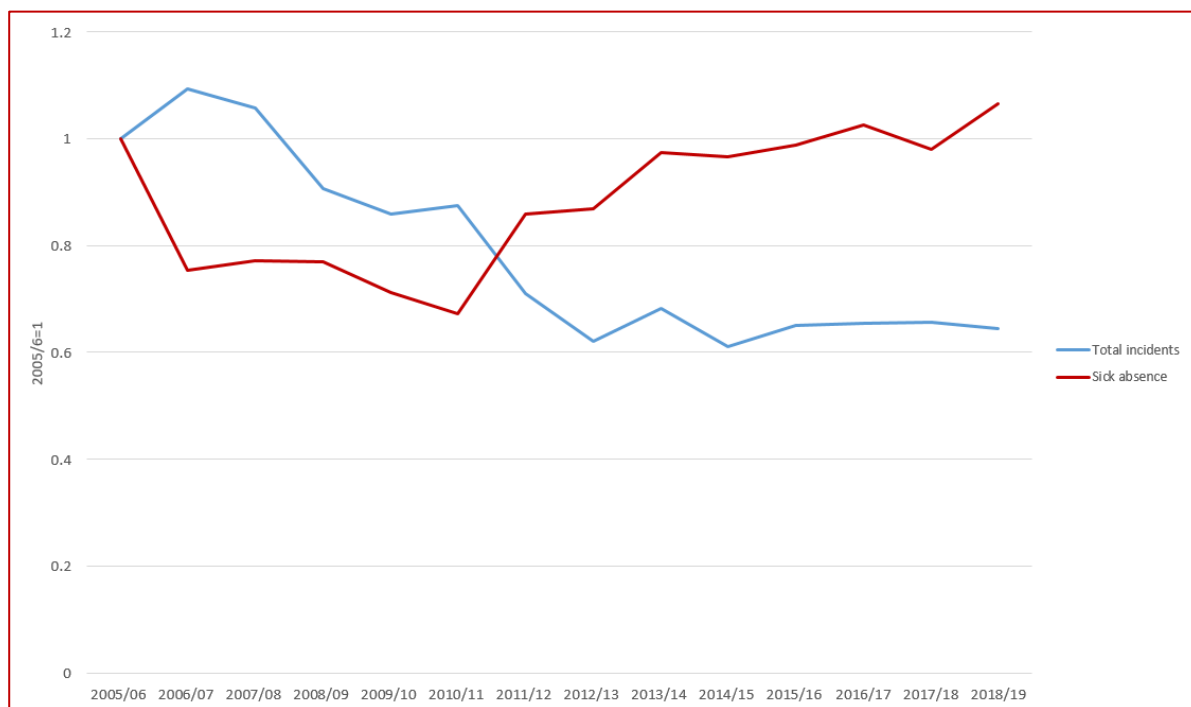

Figure 15: change in sick absence per FTE firefighter and total incidents (excluding false alarms), Wales

This could just be a coincidence, although it has been sustained over some eight years. While any inferences are highly speculative at this stage, it could also reflect that, as they are less exposed to real incidents, firefighters increasingly have to rely on training and simulation to maintain their operational skills. Training is of course designed to be as realistic as possible, while remaining safe for participants. However, it may not fully represent the stress associated with responding to a genuine emergency. Firefighters who are less often exposed to such stress may be more likely to suffer from mental health problems following actual serious incidents, and we are aware of concerns within the Service that this is so. While we are entirely satisfied that FRAs provide appropriate support to firefighters who experience stress-related problems, this is a potentially concerning trend which merits close monitoring.

Another important way in which FRAs keep firefighters safe is by learning lessons from serious incidents, and applying those to training and operational processes. In 2017-18, the Chief Fire and Rescue Advisor undertook an in-depth review of how well firefighters do this[10]. Broadly speaking, the review found that all three FRAs' procedures were sound, with some detailed room for improvement. It will be important for the FRAs to act on these findings.

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[10] https://gov.wales/chief-fire-and-rescue-adviser-thematic-review

Finally, older firefighters may face particular difficulty in continuing to meet the Service's stringent fitness standard, especially now that the pension age in the new 2015 pension scheme has been increased to 60. As the Framework recommended, all three FRAs continue to apply the same fitness standard, in the interests of transparency and fairness. They also support older firefighters who may struggle to maintain fitness, and we are not aware of any cases in which firefighters have been dismissed on such grounds. The Welsh Government also modified the terms of the new pension scheme to allow those who decide to retire from age 55 onwards (whether on fitness grounds or otherwise) to receive a higher pension. However, most firefighters who were at least 45 in 2012 still have a pension age of 50-55, meaning that the oldest firefighters to whom the changes apply are now only 52. Furthermore, a recent court case has called into question how the new pension scheme must be brought into effect[11]. So it may be some years before the full impact of these changes is felt.

Conclusions:
- **The capacity of the Service has fallen slightly, but not as fast as the number of incidents to which it responds.**
- **This is very probably prudent, but may create collateral problems, in particular for RDS firefighters, who face declining earnings. Difficulties in recruiting and retaining them could call the sustainability of rural fire and rescue services into question.**
- **The Service's record in keeping firefighters safe remains strong. However, FRAs need to continue to monitor sick absence rates closely.**
- **This may be particularly important as regards stress-related absence, which may increase as the number of incidents continues to fall.**

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[11] Sargeant and others v Home Secretary and others, (2018) EWCA Civ 2088

Glossary

Accidental fire A fire with an accidental **cause**. This can include inadvertent or negligent human actions or omissions, faulty equipment or power supplies, or natural phenomena such as lightning strikes.

ADF Accidental **dwelling fire**. A domestic fire that is started by accident.

AFA Automatic fire alarm. A system, commonly fitted to non-domestic buildings, which automatically notifies the Fire and Rescue Service of a suspected fire; or an alarm signal generated by such a system. Many such signals prove to be **false alarms**.

Arson The crime of setting fire to property or land. Arson may be *simple* (set only with the aim of causing damage), *reckless* (where the arsonist ignored a clear risk to human life) or *with intent* (where the arsonist intended to endanger human life). The maximum sentence is imprisonment for life, although that would normally only be passed for the most serious cases of arson with intent.

Cause The reason why a fire started – for instance, an electrical fault or someone discarding a cigarette. Not to be confused with **source**.

CFO Chief fire officer. The senior officer in each **FRA**, with overall responsibility for the **FRS**.

Chimney fire A fire which is confined to a domestic or non-domestic chimney or flue. If the fire spreads beyond this space to the rest of the building, it becomes a **primary fire**.

Control room An **FRS** facility for receiving calls to 999 and dispatching appropriate crews and appliances to a reported incident.

Deliberate fire A fire which is deliberately started. Many such fires are **arson**, but not all. For instance, farmers and landowners can lawfully clear land of undergrowth by setting fire to it at certain times of year.

Dwelling fire A fire which occurs in premises normally used as permanent living accommodation (ie, excluding hotels, mobile caravans, prisons and so on).

EMR Emergency medical response. The practice of fire crews responding to medical emergencies other than those caused by fire.

False alarm A report of a fire which proves to be unfounded. Most are due to **AFAs** incorrectly detecting and reporting a fire. Others are *good intent* false alarms, where a person reports a fire s/he genuinely believes to exist, but which proves not to; and *malicious* false alarms, where a person makes a 'hoax call' knowing that there is no fire present.

FRA Fire and Rescue Authority. The organisation responsible for providing fire and rescue services in a specified area.

FRS Fire and Rescue Service. That part of an **FRA** which actually delivers fire and rescue services, as distinct from the members of the FRA, support staff and so on.

FSO The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, which governs fire safety in non-domestic premises.

FTE Full-time equivalent. The level of staff capacity expressed as a number of full-time posts. For instance, two part-time staff each working half of full-time hours equate to one FTE employee.

Grass fire Informal term for a fire, normally a **deliberate fire**, affecting open grassland, moorland or forestry.

NIC National Issues Committee. The body set up by the three Welsh **FRAs** to co-ordinate joint decision-making and procurement, with a view to achieving greater consistency and efficiency.

NJC National Joint Council. The UK-wide body for negotiating firefighters' pay, terms and conditions; its members comprise employer and union representatives.

Primary fire A serious fire that endangers life or property. In more detail, a primary fire is any fire which (a) occurs in a non-derelict building or vehicle; and/or (b) involves human casualties and/or rescues; and/or (c) requires the attendance of five or more fire appliances.

RDS Retained duty system. The staffing arrangement under which firefighters report for duty when needed, coming in from their home or normal place of work rather than working full-time. RDS firefighters are thus sometimes described as 'on-call'.

Room of origin The space within a building where the **source** of a fire is located. Includes rooms in the conventional sense as well as stairwells and landings, attics, ceiling and roof voids, basements and cellars, and other structures such as garages and workshops, if they are attached to the premises and accessible from the inside of it.

RTC Road traffic collision. An accident involving one or more vehicles on a public road.

Secondary fire Any fire which is not a **primary fire** or **chimney fire**.

Source The location or object where a fire started. Not to be confused with **cause**. For instance, a cooker might be the source of a fire, but its cause could be either a person being distracted when cooking and allowing food to catch fire, or a fault with the cooker itself.

SSI Special service incident. An incident other than a fire or a **false alarm** to which the **FRS** responds. Examples include **RTCs**, **EMR** incidents, floods and animal rescues.