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Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
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Dear Ann

Following Assembly questions in Plenary on 2 July and to the First Minister on 15 July, you raised issues in relation to the fire services interaction with young people, through initiatives such as the Young Firefighter schemes and the proposal by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister to close the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council and your concern to ensure that Wales does not lag behind the rest of the UK following devolution of the fire service to Wales.

The Assembly Government has taken a strong lead in developing community fire safety policies for Wales, since it established the Community Fire Safety Working Group in 2001. The Group has now produced two reports 'Wired for Safety' considering the issue of domestic fires and 'Up in Flames', which was published in February and considered the issue of arson. The report makes a number of recommendations to reduce the incidence of arson in Wales and specifically that the Welsh Assembly Government adopts proposals for a comprehensive arson strategy for Wales. To implement the recommendations from 'Up in Flames' we have increased our community fire safety budget for 2003-04 to £4m.

The report recognises the important role youth organisations have to play and the need to engage young people to achieve the objective of reducing arson in Wales. The report includes the recommendation that: youth led initiatives can have a significant bearing on arson levels, therefore ways should be examined to widen the scope of and foster greater interaction between fire service led initiatives (such as Young Fire-fighters) and the local Young People's Partnerships established under our Extending Entitlement agenda.

The report considers that fire holds a strong fascination for children who may experiment with lighting fires as part of their play and draws the conclusion that it is children aged between 5 and



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12 years old who are predominantly responsible for deliberate grassland or rubbish fires, which make up a significant part of the fire brigades' workloads. The report highlights the work currently underway, with the Welsh Fire Brigades offering short-term educational programmes for families upon request, which seek to address the fire setting behaviour of young children between 4 and 12 years old. This programme has returned good results with about 85% success rates recorded from an estimated 200 referrals each year. For the worst offenders there are also specialist centres, which provide residential based treatments, which are funded by Social Services.

The report also states that there is good anecdotal evidence that youths that are in the Youth Justice System have fire setting as part of their principal offending behaviour. Several schemes have been developed by fire officers in Wales to work with young offenders to confront their fire setting behaviour and in some cases this involves the secondment of a fire officer into Youth Offending Teams. The schemes involve an educational element, which informs the youths about the unforeseen consequences of fire, they show how fast a fire can develop, how deliberate fires affect society at large and how serious fire related injuries can be. This education is supplemented by team and confidence building exercises, first aid skills, training and the use of fire fighting equipment. There is also exposure to real fire conditions in a safe training context. The positive public image and "street" credibility of the fire-fighter appears to make this form of arson intervention acceptable by the otherwise cynical offender.

Youth Training Schemes, such as Young Firefighters, have become an extremely popular and integral strand of many fire brigades' community fire safety strategies. This work is undertaken as part of the Fire Services Youth Training Association, whose aim is to contribute to the development of young people by encouraging them to adopt the positive culture of the Fire Service. It is committed to supporting the delivery of safe and effective development programmes that will enable young people to develop: as individuals, taking a positive and effective role in their communities; working with people to become effective team members; and achieving specified tasks and objectives. In Wales seven Young Firefighter Schemes have been established and the initiatives enjoy widespread support within the Fire Service, with many firefighters, often giving up large amounts of their own time to help organise local schemes. In Wales, Young Firefighter Schemes are run in conjunction with Local Authority Youth Initiatives and schools. Many young firefighters are selected by head teachers after demonstrating early signs of deterioration of work or antisocial behaviour. The scheme allows young people in these circumstances to recover their self-confidence and reintegrate in the school curriculum.

This is important work and work which will need to be expanded if our vision of an all-Wales arson strategy is to become a reality. To this end 'Up in Flames' also sets short and medium term targets of seeking to increase the number of young people involved in Fire Service and other organisations' youth initiatives in Wales, with a particular emphasis on working with disaffected youths in deprived areas.

Officials are currently working with colleagues in the Fire Service and other organisations active in the field to consider how best to take forward the recommendations in Up in Flames. There will be a central role in this work for Firebrake Wales, a joint initiative by the Assembly Government and Welsh Fire Services, established in January 2003. Firebrake's overall remit is to improve the quality of life in Wales by reducing the numbers of preventable fire deaths and injuries. It will do this by pursuing three distinct areas of activity through promotional campaigning and public education; research to better understand the causes of fire death and injury; and grant giving to support local fire safety initiatives.

Officials reconvened the Community Fire Safety Working Group on 4 July to consider how best to take forward the development of an all-Wales Arson Strategy, as recommended in the Group's report into arson – 'Up in Flames'. However, the Group will need to undertake further work before we have fully developed policies in this field. For instance, in order to deliver the considerable expansion of youth schemes called for by 'Up in Flames' it would be unreasonable to expect fire personnel to undertake this additional extra work relying purely upon their goodwill.

Turning to your comments regarding the closure of the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council. This was set up under the Fire Services Act 1947 to provide advice to the Secretary of State and to provide a forum for fire service stakeholders to reach consensus on major policy issues. It is ODPM's view that the organisation has become increasingly bureaucratic over the years and should be replaced with a requirement to consult on a topic basis and the establishment of small, informal, high level and high quality groups of people with relevant experience to advise on future issues. It is for ODPM to consider the future of the Advisory Council. For our part we are still considering, in consultation with partner organisations, the devolution process and the future shape of the devolved fire service in Wales. However, I have consistently maintained that our first priority will be safety first and in shaping the devolution process this will be our overriding concern. I shall be making a statement to the SJ&R Committee on 24 September, the statement will form the Assembly Government's response to the White Paper. It would be inappropriate for me to go into any detail in advance of this.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'A. J. ...', located below the main text.