

Putting out Future Fires

Prevention at Mid and West Wales Fire and
Rescue Authority

July 2025



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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

- 1 We looked at the approach taken by Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Authority (the Authority) to targeting its fire prevention work. We focused on the targeting of the most vulnerable people to help reduce fires and reduce serious injury or death.
- 2 Prevention work by the Authority has many approaches. We focused our work on looking at how the Authority works with individual households. We did not focus on other prevention work, such as youth education or wildfire reduction. We also did not look at prevention to reduce the Authority's rescue activity, such as road safety activity.

Why this is important

- 3 Prevention is critically important as it has the potential to save lives and stop serious injuries from happening. It also has the benefit of avoiding damage to people's homes and the disruption caused by loss of property. This can have benefits for individuals, families, and wider communities.
- 4 Targeting efforts at the most vulnerable people can also be a sign of good value for money being achieved by the Authority. This is because the Authority's limited resources are being focused on the greatest community risks.
- 5 Vulnerability can also be linked to various forms of disadvantage. Targeting efforts at vulnerable people helps to show that the Authority is acting in line with legal duties placed on it for equality. Prevention is also one of the five ways of working to help the Authority show it is acting in line with the sustainable development principle.

What we have found

- 6 The Authority has a solid basic approach to targeted fire prevention. However, it could build on this further, to ensure it always directs its prevention resources to the people at the highest risk.

What we recommend

- 7 We have made two recommendations to support the Authority's approach. We recommend that the Authority assess where gaps may exist in its current approach to identifying people at the highest risk and plan to address them. We also recommend that the Authority strengthen its understanding of the value achieved by its prevention activities to help further target actions to make the greatest impact.

Key facts and figures

- 32% – the decrease in dwelling fires between 2009-10 and 2023-24

- 44% – the decrease in fire fatalities and casualties between 2009-10 and 2023-24

- Nine – the number of risk factors used by the Authority to identify people at the highest risk

- Two or more – the number of risk factors required of a person to be at the highest risk

- Over 300 – the number of partners that refer people at the highest-risk to the Authority for home-safety visits

Our findings

The Authority has a reasonable approach to identifying people at risk, but some gaps remain

- 8 To identify people at risk, Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) need to understand two elements. Firstly, the factors that are likely to make people be at a higher risk of fire. Secondly, how to identify the individuals who experience these factors. Understanding both is key to FRAs targeting activities, like home safety visits, towards those who need them most.
- 9 The Authority's approach to identifying risk factors has a solid basis. The Authority knows the factors that make people more likely to experience fires from guidance issued by the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC). It combines this with data from fires that have taken place in the past. This means the Authority draws on insights from actual fires in its area and wider in Wales. This is a clear base to its approach.
- 10 The Authority relies heavily on referrals from others to identify people at risk of fire. This carries both strengths and weaknesses. The main strength of referrals is that the Authority can draw on partners' expert knowledge of the community. To use this strength, the Authority has built a network of over 300 partner agencies and works with them to increase referrals received.
- 11 However, referrals also have some weaknesses. The Authority needs the right partners involved to avoid limiting its activity. If partners do not make a referral, the Authority could miss a higher-risk person. People living in isolated situations are also less likely to be known by partners or by community members, placing them at greater risk. The Authority has taken steps to try and address these weaknesses, such as its 'be a good neighbour' initiative. These offer a foundation for the Authority to build on in the future to reduce the potential for people to be missed.

- 12 The Authority does not have a process to check its referrals against datasets of people at higher risk. Using community data could reduce the chance for people to be missed. Other FRAs have used datasets, such as health data, to understand who lives in a home and their risk factors, such as age. Data cannot mitigate all weaknesses but can be a useful complement. The Authority recognises the value of data and is looking to trial data in its approach.
- 13 The Authority has worked with partners to help make its approach more inclusive. For example, it has worked with partners to deliver home safety visits where partners have already built trust with hard to engage communities. Community involvement by the Authority helps to ensure a more complete understanding of the area and its risks. Involving people with protected characteristics may help find currently unknown risk factors that place people at greater risk. Involvement can also help the Authority ensure its home safety visits are inclusive in their delivery. The Authority is aware of new risks within communities through national data and knowledge sharing across the UK.

The Authority seeks to prioritise people at higher risk, but its current policies may not always achieve this

- 14 The Authority has a reasonably clear approach to prioritising its prevention work. It categorises households based on their level of risk. Higher-risk households qualify for quicker, more specialised support. Effective prioritisation can play a key role in ensuring people at higher risk get the support they need before incidents happen.
- 15 However, in some cases, it is less clear how the Authority's policies show its priority-based approach. For example, the Authority does not have a policy to revisit homes after making a safety visit. However, many of the factors that can make individuals a higher risk, such as health conditions and the impacts of age, are likely to worsen over time. This may mean that the benefit of a visit may be lost without repeating it in a suitable period, such as two years. Where people have moved or a partner has sent a referral, the Authority may revisit homes which does reduce this risk. However, repeating visits to other higher-risk homes or other changes may more clearly show the targeting of resources to reduce greater risk.

- 16 The Authority's priority-based approach would also be more clearly shown by its response to requests for home safety visits. The Authority currently offers a visit to anyone who requests one and thinks they are unable to fit their own smoke alarm, but this may mean homes with no risk factors are visited.¹ All homes are visited that are referred by partners. The Authority does change its approach by risk factors, such as higher-risk homes having more specialist officer visits. However, officers have still responded to homes with comparatively little risk of fire. This may mean the Authority uses its resources to reduce community risk in a comparatively small way.
- 17 The Authority has not clearly shown it has thought about the trade-offs in its prioritisation approach. In developing its approach, the Authority has had to decide:
- Which risks factors to focus on?
 - Which risk factors to disregard?
 - How to split homes between low, medium, and higher risk?
 - Who qualifies for what equipment?
- 18 It is important for the Authority to be confident that its approach consistently directs resources to those most in need. At the same time, the Authority must also balance this with not exposing other homes to a level of risk it considers unacceptable. We recognise that these are tough decisions for the Authority and individual officers to make.

The Authority could further strengthen how it implements its approach

- 19 Training and quality assurance are important to make sure home safety visits keep people safe. The Authority has training processes in place. However, observed home safety visits by the Authority focus on new starters only. This may mean that quality issues with officers who have not recently received training may develop. The Authority does aim to call 10% of all homes visited in the previous month to check on visit quality. Ensuring quality home safety visits helps the Authority make every contact with higher-risk people count.

¹ Where someone requests a visit but reports they are able to fit their own alarms, the Authority will send them a home safety pack instead of a visit.

- 20 The Authority targets most home safety visits at higher-risk homes but could challenge itself further. In 2024-25, the Authority's data showed 56% of the homes visited were assessed as higher risk.² Whilst this is a majority, to show it is fully targeting its limited resources where it can have the most impact, the Authority could more clearly show this by increasing this proportion.

A stronger understanding of value for money could help the Authority to make spending choices

- 21 Public sector funding challenges have meant tough decisions across the sector. Home safety equipment has been funded by grants awarded to the three Welsh FRAs. In 2023-24, the Authority received £330,000 to purchase equipment. Other prevention activity is funded by the Authority's budget, funded by its levy on councils.
- 22 In recent years, the Authority has faced new pressures in prevention costs. For example, inflation led to higher costs of home safety fire equipment. As a result, the Authority stopped providing carbon monoxide alarms as additional funding could not be found. All grant funding comes with a risk that it may end or reduce in value. To mitigate this risk, the Authority needs to be clear on what activity is critical to fund from its own resources.
- 23 When making tough decisions in this context, the Authority needs to assess the value of its activity. This could be, for example, through identifying the extra risks faced by higher-risk people without a home safety visit. This would help the Authority understand the cost against the benefit of any proposed savings. It would also inform choices by the Authority on the total share of its resources it dedicates to prevention. This could include considering different ways of preventing fires compared to its current approach. As the Authority does not yet have a method to do this, it cannot fully demonstrate how it considers value for money when allocating resources for prevention.

² The assessment of low, medium, and higher risk is that defined and assessed by the Authority. As a result, this data should not be compared to data from other FRAs which may use different definitions.

Fire casualties have decreased but the Authority needs to be clear on the prevention activity that works

- 24 Learning from what works is key to help the Authority improve its prevention approach. The Authority has a process to learn from serious fires. This has led to changes in processes as officers learnt from experience.³ It was less clear how the Authority learns from less serious incidents, like near misses. We recognise the difficulty in resourcing this against other funding pressures. However, all incidents may offer insight into areas for improvement in preventing incidents overall.
- 25 The Authority could also increase the opportunities for learning through the data it collects. The Authority collects limited data on those individuals it visits for safety checks. This means that it is not possible to look at data on home safety visits or incidents by protected characteristics or other metrics. This makes it harder for the Authority to monitor risks associated with some communities. It also makes it harder for it to demonstrate acting in line with the Public Sector Equality Duty and the Socio-Economic Duty.
- 26 The Authority sets notional time targets and records times for completing home safety checks. This means that the Authority has evidence of how long it takes for cases to progress and achieve an outcome. This may be useful in monitoring and planning activity. Time targets may also deter officers from spending longer time in more complex cases. However, officers are told to take the time needed for complex cases.
- 27 The Authority's learning focuses on fires that have happened rather than those that it has prevented. Measuring the impact of prevention when an event that has not happened is, clearly, incredibly hard. As a result, the Authority does not have a detailed understanding of how its activity helps to prevent fires happening. The NFCC has completed an assessment of the benefits of prevention work across in England.⁴ It estimated that home safety checks had a gross return on investment of 267% for every pound spent between 2016 and 2019. No recent comparative analysis on a Welsh or Authority level has been completed.

³ We reviewed this process in relation to prevention activity. We did not review it in detail, so make no conclusion on the completeness or quality of the process.

⁴ NFCC, [Economic and Social Value of the UKFRS](#), July 2023

- 28 Scrutiny by the Authority's councillors has not supported learning. Positively, the Authority provides training to new councillors to help them understand community safety activity. However, councillors do not clearly and frequently scrutinise the prevention activity delivered by the Authority. Scrutiny from non-officers can help provide a different view on activity and help identify improvements to support achieving value for money.

Recommendations

- R1** We found risks in the how the Authority identifies people with a higher risk of fire. We recommend that the Authority should assess where it may have gaps in its approach and should address these gaps to ensure its actions target people with the highest risk. In doing this, the Authority should:
- 1.1** regularly look for risks outside of past incident data.
 - 1.2** trial approaches to identify people with a higher risk of fire who are in isolated situations and adopt any effective approaches. This should include the use of data.
 - 1.3** add quality assurance steps to reduce the risk of partners not referring people with a higher risk of fire.
 - 1.4** compare the partners it works with to other FRAs to ensure completeness of its approach.

- R2** We found that the Authority needs to strengthen its understanding of the value added by its prevention activity. This is to support more clearly the targeting of resources to show the value for money achieved. To do this, the Authority should:
- 2.1** develop ways to assess the contribution of prevention activity in reducing fires, fire deaths, and serious injuries – particularly for those at a higher risk of fire.
 - 2.2** develop a structured approach to assessing the costs, benefits and risks of its approach and alternatives. This should reflect the Authority’s risk appetite and equality duties.
 - 2.3** use its structured approach to review its definitions of low, medium, and higher risk cases and the resources allocated.
 - 2.4** collaborate with the other Welsh FRAs to establish common definitions to enable comparisons and learning between authorities. This should also consider the views of the Welsh Government.

1 About our work

Scope of the audit

We looked at the approach taken by the Authority to targeting its fire prevention work. We focused on the targeting of the most vulnerable people to help reduce fires and reduce serious injury or death. We focused our work on looking at how the Authority works with individual households.

We did not focus on other prevention work, such as youth education or wildfire reduction. We also did not look at prevention to reduce the Authority's rescue activity, such as road safety activity.

We completed our fieldwork between January and May 2025.

Audit questions and criteria

Questions

To understand the Authority's approach, we looked at:

- the clarity of the Authority's policy and approach;
- the partners the Authority is working with to prevent fires;
- the resources used by the authority to prevent fires; and
- the evaluation by the Authority of its activity.

Criteria

What we looked for was informed by a range of sources. This included the Fire and Rescue National Framework and guidance issued by the NFCC. We also used our knowledge of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act to understand how the Authority showed how it acted in line with the sustainable development principle.

Methods

Our methods included:

- Data analysis – we analysed data provided by the Authority and available from the Welsh Government in relation to prevention work.
- Document review – we read documents provided by the Authority in response to our audit questions. This also included plans and grant documents for all three Welsh FRAs, as well as national guidance.
- Interviews – we interviewed five officers from the Authority involved in delivering prevention activity.

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