

Putting out future fires

Prevention at South Wales Fire and Rescue
Authority

July 2025



About us

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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

- 1 We looked at the approach taken by South 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.
- 3 We completed our interviews in March 2025. This was before His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) had published [their report](#) on the Authority in May 2025. As a result, our findings do not draw on their report, such as their findings in relation to prevention.

Why this is important

- 4 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.
- 5 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.

- 6 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

- 7 The Authority needs to do more to target its resources where they are most needed. It has experience high staff turnover that has impacted how it can strengthen its approach. However, the Authority is making some potentially positive changes.

What we recommend

- 8 We have made two recommendations to support the Authority improve its approach. This includes assessing where gaps may exist in the Authority's current approach and planning to address these gaps. We also recommend that the Authority strength its understanding of the value achieved by its prevention activities to help further target actions to make the greatest impact.

Key facts and figures

- 31% – the decrease in dwelling fires between 2009-10 and 2023-24
- 53% – the decrease in fire fatalities and casualties from 2009-10 and 2023-24
- 10 – the number of risk factors used by the Authority to identify people at the highest-risk
- Three or more – the number of risk factors a household needs to be classed as high-risk
- 31% – the proportion of home safety visits targeted at high-risk households in 2024-25
- 25% – the proportion of home safety visits to households with no risk factors identified in 2024-25

Our findings

The Authority has a reasonable approach to identifying who is at risk, but some important gaps remain

- 9 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.
- 10 The Authority has not provided full details of how it identifies which factors put people at higher risk of experiencing a fire. The Authority appears to mainly use data from past fires. Analysing the reasons for past fires is a crucial part of understanding the factors that put people at risk of future fires. It is, however, an incomplete guide. For example, a population group may be at a higher risk of having a fire but not shown in the data clearly due to a small population locally. Data from the past is also not a good source of information on risks that are only newly emerging. The Authority is open to considering risk factors that are not on its list. However, it does not proactively assess what factors may be missing from past fire data.
- 11 The Authority uses both referrals from partners and data to identify households at risk of fire. In principle, the dual approach can be useful as one source may fill gaps in the other. However, there are factors that mean the Authority's approach is likely to be incomplete.

- 12 For example, the use of referrals to find higher risk households can have some weaknesses. The Authority needs the right partners involved to avoid limiting its activity. It also needs a network big enough to cover the whole area served. 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. Referrals can also require partners and officers to make difficult decisions about the level of risk faced.
- 13 During some interviews, we heard that the number of referrals from some key partners had recently decreased. In response, the Authority now has an officer to promote more referrals and to help make referrals more accurate. This may start to help mitigate some of the limitations of referrals, although this is at an early stage.
- 14 The Authority's use of data is promising in that it combines several different databases. Even so, there are many risk factors that the databases do not cover. Some data may also not be fully complete, accurate or timely. The Authority plans to investigate some of these limitations further. However, it has not fully assessed whether its approach risks biasing its work away from at-risk groups who are not visible in existing databases.
- 15 The Authority has taken limited steps to involve different stakeholders. It has consulted on some activity, like its Strategic Plan. However, this consultation had a broad scope and did not specifically look at how the Authority's approach to prevention could be made more inclusive. It also did not show that its consultation had included all groups with protected characteristics. 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 working to prioritise higher risk and more complex households, but its current choice may not help this

- 16 In principle, the Authority has set out a fairly clear approach to prioritising its prevention work. It categorises households based on their level of risk and how complex carrying out a home safety check would be. If the Authority considers a household to be more complex, it generally gives the household more specialised support. If it considers a household to be higher risk, it generally contacts the household more quickly. Effective prioritisation can play a key role in ensuring people at higher risk get the support they need before incidents happen.
- 17 However, the Authority only documented its approach to prioritisation very recently. Some documents shared with us were drafted while our audit was in progress. This raises the question of whether the Authority has consistently embedded the approach that it has set out on paper.
- 18 In some cases, it is less clear how the Authority's policies show its priority-based approach. It is not always clear that the policies the Authority follows show that it directs its resources to target those at highest risk. 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 higher risk, such as health conditions and the impacts of age, are likely to worsen over time. Some of the benefits of the initial visit may reduce over time, such as people forgetting advice or equipment no longer working. Repeating a visit may help focus the Authority's activity more effectively at reducing risk.
 - The Authority offers a home safety visit to anyone who requests one. Some of these may be people at low risk. This could reduce the Authority's focus on higher risk and more complex households.
 - The Authority prioritises households that are referred to them rather than those identified from data. This does not consider the risks posed by each household, which means it is not strategic nor clearly supportive of the Authority's approach.

- 19 More broadly, we did not find evidence that the Authority has compared its priorities against its overall appetite for risk. Nor was there evidence that the Authority has compared its approach against alternative ways of prioritising. 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?
- 20 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. Currently, the Authority cannot be sure that no households are exposed to a level of risk that it considers unacceptable.

The Authority has taken steps to strengthen how it implements its approach to prevention but it remains a work in progress

- 21 The Authority has been working to strengthen the training and quality assurance that it provides for staff who conduct home safety work. It is developing a more structured training programme for specialist home fire safety workers who handle the most complex cases. As part of this, it has identified specialist agencies who can potentially help deliver training on different topics. This is a promising step, as it can help ensure staff have the expertise they need to deliver high quality advice. Fire crews, who cover cases that the Authority considers less complex, also receive training on home fire safety. The Authority has also started to put in place quality assurance, although this is still limited.

- 22 There has been a high level of officer turnover in some key roles related to prevention. Several of the key officers that we interviewed were in temporary, not permanent roles. If officers frequently move roles, it can be harder to build expertise, relationships, and consistent processes. The use of temporary roles was raised as a concern also by the Authority's Independent Culture Review, published in January 2024.
- 23 The Authority collects data on its home safety checks. This includes the proportion of checks completed in higher risk households. In 2024-25, around 31% of the Authority's checks targeted higher risk households.¹ In the same year, around 25% of checks targeted households with no risk factors. These results raise questions on whether the Authority could do more to focus its work on higher-risk households. Officers outlined that they are seeking to increase the proportion of higher risk checks in future.

The Authority needs better analysis to help it make spending choices

- 24 As noted above, we did not find evidence that the Authority has systematically compared its priorities against alternatives or against its overall appetite for risk. This makes it hard for the Authority to be sure that it is making the best choices about how to spend its prevention budget. It is also harder for the Authority to make informed choices about whether the overall size of its prevention budget is appropriate.
- 25 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. The Authority has frequently used its own budget to fund spending above the level funded by grants.

¹ The Authority defines a household as being higher risk if they have three or more risk factors. 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 who may use different definitions.

- 26 This context means difficult decisions, such as balancing staff costs and non-staff costs. The Authority has substantially fewer specialist fire safety officers than other FRAs in Wales. For instance, the Authority may need to control how many referrals it generates, to keep specialists' workloads manageable. Despite these difficult trade-offs, we did not find evidence that the Authority has assessed the best balance between staff and non-staff costs.
- 27 In recent years, the Authority has faced new pressures for funding its prevention work. It has experienced increased prices for the home safety equipment it provides during its visits. For example, the Authority is considering whether to stop providing carbon monoxide alarms during visits. To mitigate these challenges, the Authority needs to be clear on what activity is critical to fund from its own resources.

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

- 28 Learning from what works is key to help the Authority improve its prevention approach. Officers described some of the approaches the Authority uses to monitor and learn. This included regular reporting to senior management and informal discussions with the Commissioners on aspects of performance. They described capturing data on fire incidents and learning lessons from fire deaths. However, we did not see full documentary evidence of these processes, which limits the assurance that they provide.
- 29 The Authority could build on this further to help inform its approach. This could include equality data. The Authority cannot currently review the households it has visited by protected characteristics or socio-economic indicators. 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.

- 30 The Authority sets a target number of checks and target 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. However, time targets may also deter officers from spending longer time in more complex cases.
- 31 The Authority could also make more use of its incident data, including near misses. Incident data can give insights not only on who may be at risk, but also on ways to strengthen the home safety check process. We found some examples where the Authority had adapted the process in response to lessons on incidents. It could make this learning process more systematic. In particular, it is important to check whether any lessons can be learnt from cases where a home safety check has taken place, but an incident still occurs.
- 32 Scrutiny by the Authority has not supported learning. Asking key questions on how fires are being prevented can provide a different perspective to officers. However, this has been limited. Scrutiny from non-officers can help provide a different view on activity and help identify improvements to support achieving value for money.
- 33 The Authority's learning focuses on fires that have happened rather than those that it has prevented. Dwelling fires and casualties have substantially fallen since 2009-10. However, the Authority is not clear on how its activity has contributed to this. Measuring the impact of prevention when an event that has not happened is clearly incredibly hard. The NFCC has completed an assessment of the benefits of prevention work across in England.² 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.

² NFCC, [Economic and Social Value of the UKFRS](#), July 2023

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 higher risk of fire who are in isolated situations and adopt any effective approaches. This should include the use of data.
 - 1.3** Involve communities with protected characteristics to ensure an inclusive approach.
 - 1.4** Add quality assurance steps to reduce the risk of partners not referring people with a higher risk of fire.
 - 1.5** Assess whether people at higher risk may be missed from current data used and whether there are alternative approaches to find them.
 - 1.6** Compare the partners it works with to other FRAs to ensure the 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.

Appendices

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. The timing of our fieldwork means that it was completed before HMICFRS had published their report on the Authority in May 2025. As a result, our findings do not draw on their report, such as their findings in relation to prevention.

The Welsh Ministers used their powers to intervene in how the Authority is governed in February 2024. This was in response to how the Authority's Independent Culture Report has impacted on this work. Four Commissioners now govern the Authority rather than councillors appointed by principal councils. The impact of the report has also meant the Authority has experienced a significant turnover in key officer roles. Where this has impacted on our evidence base, we have noted it above.

Audit questions and criteria

Questions

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

- the Authority's understanding of who is at a high risk of fire;
- 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 six officers from the Authority involved in delivering prevention activity.

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