

Putting out future fires

Prevention at North 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 North 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 good basic approach to its targeted fire prevention. This includes some areas of promising practice. However, it could do more to ensure it targets its resources so they are always focused where they are most needed.

What we recommend

- 7 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

- 33% – the decrease in dwelling fires between 2009-10 and 2023-24
- 43% – the decrease in fire fatalities and casualties from 2009-10 and 2023-24
- seven – the number of risk factors used by the Authority to identify people at the highest risk
- five or more – the number of risk factors a household needs to be classed as high risk
- 29.4% – the proportion of home fire safety checks completed in higher-risk households in the first nine months of 2024-25

Our findings

The Authority has a reasonable understanding of who is at high risk of fire, but could do more to ensure no one is missed

- 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 the most.
- 9 The Authority has taken several key steps to help it understand which people are at a higher risk. It draws on a range of sources to do this. The Authority combines these sources to identify households and reduce potential gaps between the different sources. It draws on:
 - data from previous fires;
 - referrals from 69 partner agencies;
 - referrals from the public and local fire crews; and
 - data from the NHS.
- 10 The Authority's use of NHS data is particularly promising. The Authority has developed a map to show where households with high-risk factors are located. It then records where a visit has taken place, so users can visibly see where officers have visited a high-risk house. It plans to enhance this further by adding data from actual incidents. This could help the Authority understand whether its prevention work is meeting its aims.
- 11 However, all data sources can have their limitations. NHS data can sometimes be incomplete. This means that it is important for the Authority to check with other sources to help identify higher-risk households.

- 12 Similarly, data from previous fires is not always a complete guide to future risk. 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.
- 13 Data may also not capture certain types of risk. For example, people that lived in isolated situations are known to be at a higher risk of fire. This would include people that do not access public services so would not be shown in the data. It may also mean that they are less likely to be referred to the Authority. This is a potential gap in any approach to find people facing higher levels of risk.
- 14 The Authority has recognised some of the potential gaps and challenges it faces in its approach. It is taking steps to address them. However, it lacks a complete, systematic approach to do this.
- 15 In addition, the process for deciding whether people are at high risk involves considerable judgement. Partner agencies play an important role in making these judgements. Referrals can have benefits and downsides, which officers have shown they are aware of. Their main benefit is to draw on partners' expert knowledge of the community. A potential downside is that partners may not make a referral, leading to a higher-risk person being missed. To help with this, the Authority has given partners training on how to make good referrals. This includes guidance on what is a higher or lower risk household and to complete forms accurately. This helps the Authority ensure the quality of the referrals it receives.
- 16 The Authority has taken steps to engage groups. For example, whilst it was developing its Community Risk Management Plan. However, the consultation only covered broad issues. It did not look at the specific changes the Authority could make to make its work more inclusive. 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 has a clear approach to risk targeting, but should check for unintended consequences

- 17 The Authority systematically looks to target its prevention work to those who face the highest risk of fire. It assesses the level of risk posed by each household and measures their risk level. The Authority generally gives the highest-risk households a faster and more specialised response. Prioritising by risk helps ensure that people that have a greater risk of fire get support before incidents happen.
- 18 The Authority repeats home safety visits to higher-risk households to continue to monitor their risk. It re-engages with higher-risk households around one to three years after their initial home safety visit. This is promising for several reasons. Many of the factors that increase the risk of fire among people, such as age or frailty, are likely to worsen over time. At the same time, the potential benefits of the initial visit will reduce, such as advice being forgotten or equipment breaking. Repeating visits helps to complement the Authority's approach to reducing risk and targeting those in the most need.
- 19 However, it is not clear that the Authority has assessed whether its targeting of activity always matches its risk appetite. The Authority has had to make tough decisions about:
 - 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 does not expose any households to a level of risk it deems unacceptable. This is particularly important as small changes can make a difference to the response from the Authority. For example, the difference between high and medium risks could change on something small, like a birthday being the week after not before an assessment. This could change the response given by the Authority.

- 21 The Authority's approach may lead to different outcomes for households with similar characteristics. For example:
- When the Authority repeats visits to households, it only includes those assessed as higher risk originally. This could mean that households that have increased in risk but were not assessed as higher risk originally could be missed. This is despite having just as much need.
 - The Authority's targeting approach is different between referrals and NHS data. A 75-year-old with no risk factors identified in data would qualify for a visit from a fire crew, but a 75-year-old with one or two risk factors identified from a referral would usually qualify for a phone call.

The Authority is striving to put its prevention approach into action and has taken promising steps

- 22 The Authority takes several steps to try to ensure its officers conduct high-quality home safety checks. Specialist officers visit higher-risk households. They are trained and have twice-yearly quality assurance checks. Fire crews visit medium and lower-risk households. Crews also have their work observed once a year by specialist officers. The Authority's quality assurance helps to ensure people at risk consistently receive key advice and support.
- 23 The Authority collects data on the home safety checks it completes. This can be split into higher, medium, and lower-risk households. During the first nine months of 2024-25, 29.4% of home safety checks completed by the Authority were higher risk.¹ This may seem low, however, it is due to the threshold the Authority has set for its own definition of a higher-risk household. If the Authority included households with three or four risk factors in its higher-risk category, the proportion of higher-risk home safety checks would rise to 46%. This would still not be most of its activity, which means the Authority could target its resources more. This is further suggested by the percentage fall in home safety visits compared with the previous year.

¹ 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.

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

- 24 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 £240,000 to purchase equipment. Other prevention activity is funded by the Authority's budget, funded by its levy on councils.
- 25 In recent years, the Authority has faced new pressures for funding its prevention work. This has included the loss of a Welsh Government grant for arson reduction, which supported prevention work. The Authority has also experienced increased prices for the home safety equipment it provides during its visits. To mitigate these challenges, the Authority needs to be clear on what activity is critical to fund from its own resources.
- 26 The Authority has modified its approach to getting new referrals to keep its workload manageable in this challenging context. The Authority has reinforced its message to partners that they should focus on making higher-risk referrals. It has reduced the pace of its efforts to generate other new referrals. This means the Authority has to tolerate some additional risk, as referrals are a key way the Authority assures itself that it is not missing higher-risk people.
- 27 The Authority has not yet had to stop providing home safety equipment due to its funding pressures. Instead, it has prioritised its work. The Authority is considering whether it will have to stop providing carbon monoxide alarms without additional funding. It is exploring potential partnerships to fund future equipment, but it is not confirmed. All external 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.

- 28 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.

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

- 29 The Authority has put in place the key parts of its system to monitor and report on its prevention work. Monitoring and reporting are key as they help the Authority understand what is working and what needs to change. The Authority has a performance dashboard that includes detailed information on the home safety checks completed and fire incidents. This data is also included in quarterly reports to senior leaders and the Fire Authority. A process is also in place to report fundings from any fatal incidents to support learning.
- 30 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.
- 31 The Authority sets 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. However, time targets may also deter officers from spending longer time in more complex cases.

- 32 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.
- 33 Scrutiny by the Authority's councillors has not supported learning. Councillors have asked questions to officers about the approach used towards prevention. 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.
- 34 The Authority does not have a detailed understanding of how its activity helps to prevent fires happening. 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 a 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** 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.

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 five officers from the Authority involved in delivering prevention activity.

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