

# Corporate Resilience Report – South Wales Fire and Rescue Authority

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# Summary report

# Summary

### What we reviewed and why

- 1 The Welsh Government's ambitions in the current National Framework for fire and rescue authorities (FRAs) calls for: 'sustained maximum effort in identifying and realising efficiencies, in maintaining high standards of governance, and in accounting transparently for delivery'. The **Fire and Rescue Service National Framework** describes what the Welsh Government expects of the FRAs and sets expectations for continuing improvement, efficiency and innovation.
- 2 For 2020-21, we undertook the review at each FRA in Wales to provide assurance on how well each Authority is addressing the financial and capacity challenges facing public bodies. The review enabled us to provide a commentary on how resilient and sustainable the Authority is. The review also considers the impact of COVID-19 and the risks for the recovery planning phase, providing assurance to the Authority on the risks it faces but also to the Welsh Government on the challenges facing the sector.
- 3 The review therefore establishes a baseline to evaluate the Authority against in how it ensures its medium-term resilience. Our review sought to answer the question: Is the FRA resilient and sustainable in the medium term?

## What we found this time

- 4 Overall, we found that **the Authority is resilient but needs to take some important decisions to ensure services are sustainable in the future**:
  - finance the authority has managed budgets well but some key risks need to be addressed to ensure they remain financially sustainable;
  - governance the Authority has appropriate governance systems but scrutiny of decisions and holding officers to account does not always give sufficient assurance; that all big corporate risks are being addressed;
  - workforce the Authority has a resilient workforce and has dealt well with immediate challenges, but there are some medium-term risks that need to be managed to ensure the service remains resilient;
  - assets the Authority has good examples of how it is integrating and maximising assets but there are some long standing challenges that need to be addressed regarding collaboration on estates; and
  - business continuity the Authority has well tested and exercised business continuity plans that have helped maintain its corporate and operational resilience in responding to the pandemic.

# **Proposals for improvement**

#### Exhibit 1: proposals for improvement.

The table below sets out proposals for improvement that we identify in this review.

#### **Proposals for improvement**

P1 Improve capital spending budget control by:

- reviewing past capital programmes to identify why delivery has not been as effective as it could be;
- agree actions to improve performance on delivery of the capital programme; and
- monitor and evaluate performance to ensure capital monies are fully utilised.
- P2 To support resilience the Authority should:
  - focus on identifying and developing skills it needs to deliver the services in the longer term, in particular for Greenbook non uniformed staff;
  - review station locations to identify opportunities to optimise emergency response arrangements;
  - evaluate the return on investment from engaging with key strategic partnerships; and
  - understand, agree and address barriers to further strategic collaboration with other emergency service partners.

# **Detailed report**

South Wales Fire and Rescue Authority has demonstrated its short-term resilience but needs to take some important decisions to remain resilient in the future

## The Authority manages budgets well, but some key risks to capacity need to be addressed to ensure it remains financially sustainable

#### Why is this important?

- 5 Determining financial resilience is not an exact science but what we do know is that organisations need a sound strategic approach to inform the decision-making. Findings from the 2019-20 Audit Wales review of financial sustainability in local government highlights weaknesses in medium-term financial planning.
- 6 In reaching our conclusions we found that:
  - South Wales Fire and Rescue Authority (the Authority) has satisfactory financial management systems and is working on improving a history of underspending capital budgets.
  - **Exhibit 2** shows the Authority performs well in manging expenditure within the budgets it sets.

Year	Budgeted Forecast (£000)	Outturn for year (£000)	% Underspend (-) / Overspend (+)
2017-18	70,206	70,544	0.51
2018-19	71,163	70,355	-1.10
2019-20	71,827	71,874	0.06
2020-21	74,880	74,792	-0.12

#### Exhibit 2 - the Authority has increasingly accurate budget forecasts

- total reserves held by the Authority have fallen by 47% from £18.7 million in 2017-18 to £9.8 million in 2019-20. Reserves as a proportion of budget stood at 13.1% at the time of our review.
- the majority of reserves are allocated for specific projects and work The Authority maintains general cash reserves at £3 million; 4% of net budget.

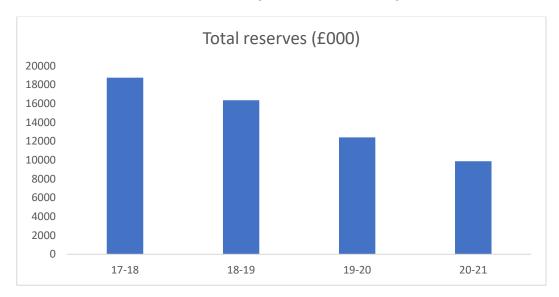


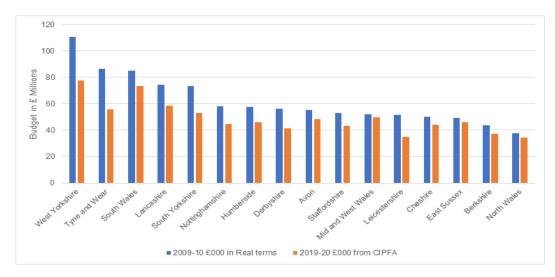
Exhibit 3 – total reserves have fallen by 47% in the last four years

in recent years the Authority has not spent all of its capital budget and there
have been some large underspends. We recognise that some of the reasons
for this is outside the Authority's control. Whilst this performance is
improving, the authority needs to review current performance and identify
opportunities to maximise the impact of its capital investment – Exhibit 4.

#### Exhibit 4 – capital programme underspends are significant

Year	Budgeted Forecast (£000)	Outturn for year (£000)	% underspend
2017-18	8,285	4,234	49%
2018-19	8,140	4,667	43%
2019-20	9,707	6,638	32%
2020-21	7,901	3,587	55%

our analysis set out in Exhibit 5 below shows that the Authority has seen its revenue budget increase by 7% in the last ten years. Our analysis shows that all FRAs have seen their budgets fall in real terms but proportionally Welsh FRAs have generally not experienced the same level of cuts when compared to their English counterparts. The FRAs compared are a mix of 2018-19 Chartered Institute of Public and Financial Accountants (CIPFA) family group and comparable urban FRAs.



#### Exhibit 5 - revenue increases compare favourably with other FRAs

- the Authority has updated its Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and annual plan. The three-year MTFS is based on a good assessment and understanding of the Authority's current operating environment including:
  - realistic pay, job evaluation, future levy contribution, and pension assumptions.
  - integrated treasury, cost of borrowing, reserves, income and inflation.
  - realistic costs of Brexit, climate change, Grenfell, and COVID-19 are included.
  - an integration of assumptions on budgeting, borrowing, reserves, and costs of Strategic Plan 2020-2030 activity.
  - COVID-19 and the pandemic have been a catalyst for change in financial planning and reform of governance arrangements.
- key areas of the organisation are regularly reviewed, and information fed into the MTFS to ensure finances reflect the changing organisational and operational environment. Corporate, area and functional risks are regularly scrutinised by the Finance, Asset and Performance Management Committee.
- for example, the scrutiny reviews in October 2020 of Fleet and Vehicles, information technology, MTFS assumptions, and the impact of the pandemic

on Revenue and Capital spending were all subject to review and oversight. Internal Audit have also been active in testing financial systems and testing cyber security.

- 7 However, we identified some risks to financial resilience. These include:
  - whilst the Authority has a good track record in managing revenue funding, and will need to continue to it will need to carefully consider its financial position in light of longer term and uncertain financial challenges facing public services and plan for a range of scenarios for things like pension, succession planning, and estates.
  - the Authority has to manage some difficult capacity challenges. For example, the high number of strategies, policies and Strategic Plan actions means the Authority has a high and unsustainable number of priorities. We found eight strategic themes and 56 strategic actions in the Authority's Strategic Plan 2020-2030, and 10 corporate policies underpinned by 93 Operating Procedures (OP). Prioritising lots of actions and trying to do too much can result in the Authority losing focus on its most important issues and responsibilities. Corporate priorities are now currently under review.
  - the last emergency cover review in 2014 is now out of date and the Authority needs to update this work to ensure station locations and shift patterns are being optimised. In particular, the local risk profile may have changed due to the pandemic. This is important because of the large amount of learning and data available from the pandemic.
  - the costs of engaging with Public Services Boards, regional partnerships and the two Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) are becoming increasingly unsustainable. Senior managers estimate they spend a quarter of their time attending partnership meetings at a cost of £173,000 in staff time (Audit Wales calculation).

# The Authority has appropriate governance systems but scrutiny of decisions and holding officers to account does not always give sufficient assurance that all big corporate risks are being addressed

- 8 Creating an effective organisation and the right culture is also only possible with strong leadership, accountability and an effective governance structure. A resilient public body is also one that embraces open dialogue and uses its scrutiny function to focus on challenging officers to help achieve the organisation's desired outcome.
- 9 In reaching our conclusions we found that:
  - South Wales Fire and Rescue Authority (the Authority) has maintained corporate resilience and sustained response services although it has more to do to deal with some long-standing cultural issues exposed by the pandemic. For example, in maximising the impact of formal scrutiny mechanisms.
  - the Authority is improving decision making on financial and workforce matters and aims to take action to deal with the weaknesses in scrutiny arrangements. Scrutiny arrangements have been recently reviewed and an options appraisal was presented to Members in September 2020. As a result, the latest Fire Authority report on improving scrutiny highlights new terms of reference and co-opting independent non-voting members to the Scrutiny committee where specialist skills are required.
  - the pandemic has not stopped the Authority from scrutinising and Governance and decision-making policies updated in September 2020.
  - the Authority has maintained its committee meeting timetable and held its Annual General Meeting (AGM) virtually by video conference in June. During the lockdown and response phases of the pandemic, Members received weekly updates from senior managers.
  - the FRA promotes the principles of good corporate governance through member training, commissioning policies, staff and Members involved in developing corporate values, and annual policy updates. Examples of the Authority demonstrating the principles and values of good corporate governance include the way in which pay negotiations involved staff representative bodies, and the project plan for completion of the Job Evaluation for green book non-uniformed staff, its ethical investments that support local firms, additional assurances on construction suppliers.
  - we have seen a step change in the clarity and quality of committee reports. Reports considered by the Finance, Audit & Performance Management Committee from September onwards are clearly written, data rich, and strategic in content.

- COVID-19 has accelerated change and improvement in delegated decision making, technology and agile working, remote committee meetings, and internal collaboration.
- the Authority uses relevant and reliable data and information about its resources to support decision making and manage finances including:
  - data rich committee papers supported by Member training on data analytics.
  - more accurate functional and response services cost data.
  - localised council performance data.
  - forward looking with further work on the Future Trends data.
  - data rich Health, Safety and Wellbeing Annual Reports.
  - dedicated HR and Equalities committee and monthly workforce wellbeing reporting during lockdowns.
  - weekly members updates which include workforce data.
- the Authority uses its Business Management Information System (BMIS) to good effect and is integrating financial data, risks, workforce planning, Incident Recording System (IRS) data, and performance data to give a clear and instant picture of performance. The Authority has demonstrated its BMIS system to other Fire and Rescue Authorities across the UK and this has been a catalyst for improvement for others. BMIS has also been developed throughout the pandemic to provide officers with real time data to make informed business critical decisions. This included the creation of a critical incident team dashboard that was showcased by Audit Wales in their recent Covid learning events.
- 10 However, risks to corporate resilience include:
  - despite the quality and quantity of committee reports and papers, coupled with training and support, the formal internal scrutiny of decisions by Members is not always as effective as it could be. We found few examples where scrutiny was adding value to decisions or operational performance. For example, in discussing and challenging performance information at the meeting of the Finance, Audit and Performance Management (FAPM) Meeting on 28 January 2019 and 15 March 2021. Whilst we can see a general improvement in discussion and questioning by Members, our review of all Fire Authority and FAPM online meetings found similar shortcomings.
  - despite having a generally sound MTFS the accuracy of forecasting data is affected by the annual cycle of levy from local authorities. In addition, the annual community safety grant settlements from the Welsh Government mean budget forecasting has to be based on best estimates. This is outside of the control of the Authority.

## The Authority has a resilient workforce and has dealt well with immediate challenges, but there are some risks that need to be managed to ensure the service remains resilient

- 11 At the heart of a resilient organisation is a resilient workforce, building effective teams that are made up of highly motivated staff who can adapt to changing circumstances. Characteristics of a resilient workforce include passionate, energetic staff with high levels of morale and low staff turnover. Access to effective training opportunities, career progression and fair pay can also help create a more resilient workforce. Planning and shaping the workforce to meet current and future demands are also important to build and maintain resilience.
- 12 Chapter 6 of the **Fire and Rescue Service National Framework 2016** states: 'Fire and Rescue Authorities must ensure their workforce is able to continue to diversify to respond to organisational change...and ensure that strategic, improvement and operational plans take full account of the workforce's capability to deliver them.'
- 13 In reaching our conclusions we found that:
  - the Authority can effectively plan, organise and develop its workforce to deliver its responsibilities. The Authority's People Strategy 2020-30 is well linked to other corporate plans and the Medium Term Financial Strategy.
  - our interviews and the Authority's staff surveys found a strong 'can do' culture of problem solving and clear set of organisational values that are now mainstreamed into the day-to-day work of the Authority.
  - organisational capacity has been boosted with effective staff wellbeing arrangements and effective occupational health activity. Staff surveys show positive attitudes to change and workforce job satisfaction at 87%, which is the highest ever recorded.
  - our interviews and document reviews found a strong focus on health, safety and wellbeing and well considered policies. For example, the Authority has dedicated support from a Cardiff University Hospital psychologist and psychiatric team. The occupational health service now has trained and qualified mental health professionals giving support.
  - the Authority has retained its Investors in People (IiP) accreditation and have also achieved a new award focusing on staff wellbeing. The Authority has received a Gold People Award and a Silver Wellbeing Award which highlighted the supportive culture and focus on staff wellbeing. The People Award specifically highlights progress with workforce planning.
  - job evaluation of support and green book (non-operational) staff d is nearing completion. Only four appeals were received by the Authority and job evaluation caused minimal disruption and was well planned.

- staff unanimously told us internal communication is good. Communications have been tailored to each function and the Authority makes good use of video and social media communications both internally and externally.
- the Authority is boosting capacity in key areas such as workforce data analysis, staff training, volunteering, ICT support, and occupational health. A new remote Employee Assistance programme has been commissioned and senior managers are bringing new ideas and added vitality.
- recruitment processes have coped well and not been adversely affected by the pandemic. All advertised posts have been filled. Over 80% of recruitment exercises have been held virtually rather than being delayed or cancelled. Internal appointments for watch and station managers have worked well with the 'live' assessments and exercises carried out in COVID-19 secure and social distanced locations.
- the latest data for 2020-21 shows a big reduction in sickness absence by 9.5% with the number of Shifts/Days Lost reducing to 16,811 which is a reduction of 12.1% on data from 2019-20. On-call firefighter and station availability was the highest ever recorded at 98% availability in the summer of 2020 and for the whole year 2020-21 was 90.6%.
- the Authority's volunteering schemes are a clear success. The Authority has help from volunteers in a variety of roles to support community safety initiatives and support events, and to help with Safe and Well visits. The increasing number of volunteers also have a more diverse mix and more closely represent the communities the Authority serves.
- 14 However, risks to corporate resilience include:
  - the Authority's workforce is resilient enough to respond to periods of significant change but could do more to ensure smooth succession planning due to changes in pension regulations and guidance. Retirement and skills profiles are regularly reviewed, both departmentally and organisationally. but different scenarios should be profiled and longer notice periods for staff agreed.
  - ensuring the long-term resilience of the on-call retained duty system. Fifteen years ago, the Authority changed the way it pays its on-call firefighters by moving away from a 'pay as you go' system to an annual salary. However, our interviews found agreement amongst senior managers and front line staff that the on-call duty system needs overhauling and change. In addition, the diversification of roles in line with the next iteration of the FRS National Framework and current Welsh Government thinking will equally have an impact on the workforce.
  - senior managers recognise there is more to do to work with partners to understand the social and economic impact on all communities from COVID-19. This may have far reaching consequences in terms of latent mental health issues and impact on poverty. To help with this thinking, the Authority is updating its Future Trends report which will consider future scenarios.

## The Authority has good examples of how it is integrating and maximising assets but there are some long standing challenges of collaboration on estates

- 15 After employee costs, the largest cost to fire and rescue authorities is what they spend on their buildings and vehicles. Good asset management is therefore critical to a Fire and Rescue Authority being able to demonstrate resilience and that it is providing value for money from this valuable resource. Good asset management can ensure that buildings fully support services that are delivered from them.
- 16 In reaching our conclusions we found that:
  - the pandemic has helped to accelerate better use of digital and Information Communications Technology (ICT) assets and capabilities and that lockdown has accelerated digital service delivery. Despite some initial teething problems, senior managers we spoke to think ICT has been moved on by 5 years. Improvements include a step change in the quality of the Authority's website and access to community safety information, new phones and laptops, video conferencing facilities in each fire station and agile working arrangements for appropriate staff.
  - the Authority is making clear progress on environmental management including:
    - a new and much improved Environmental Strategy 2020-30 linked to the Strategic Plan and MTFS which benefited from the involvement of staff and external experts.
    - more accurate environmental baseline data including energy and water use.
    - installation of high-quality building management systems across all sites, to record and monitor gas, water and electricity consumption.
    - all buildings now have some form of intelligent energy controls of lights, air conditioning, and heating.
    - procurement arrangements include the requirement to buy only recyclable and reusable equipment.
    - installation of 12 electric vehicle charging points and new infrastructure ready for the new dual fuel white vehicle and fire appliance fleet by 2030.
  - as a result, the Authority can demonstrate it met all environmental targets in 2020-21.
  - the Authority has ambitious plans to share more of its buildings and open more to public use. Sharing assets is a key consideration of the maintenance and building options appraisal. The Authority is sharing 12 fire

stations and its fire control building. The Authority plans to extend this to two other stations in 2021-22.

- 17 However, risks to corporate resilience include:
  - increasing the number of fire stations with shared facilities and sharing other assets still has some way to go. Our review of emergency partners' asset management plans and our Authority interviews highlight some frustration with lack of reciprocity on estates with emergency services partners and local councils. Different levels of commitment from partners is impacting on delivery of the Authority's estates plans.
  - the Authority recognises it can do more to tighten up some aspects of its ICT services, in particular to tailor staff and Member ICT training, and update its ICT Disaster Recovery plan. We were told about the need to give additional support to watch managers recently promoted to station managers due to the level of ICT skills needed.
  - taking stock of and evaluating the impact of introducing agile working very quickly. For instance, whilst all fire stations have large screen video conferencing facilities, and staff have smart phones and laptops, there is more to do on ensuring these are fully used. Whilst this is a much-needed cultural change, more work is planned to ensure all staff have more suitable ergonomic friendly chairs and equipment.

### The Authority has well-tested business continuity plans that helped maintain its corporate and operational resilience in responding to the pandemic

- 18 Fire and Rescue Services are required to have appropriate business continuity arrangements in place, so that a required level of response can be maintained at all times.
- 19 The main principles of business continuity are to identify critical activities and any threats to them, developing a plan which sets out how the Authority will maintain services, and to train staff and exercise plans, so the Authority can be confident planning arrangements will work. Effective business continuity should be embedded into organisations to that its application becomes second nature to staff
- 20 In reaching our conclusions we found that:
  - the Authority has effective business continuity plans in place that have been well tested during the pandemic and now better support corporate as well as operational resilience.
  - statutory services have been maintained and response services have not been affected by the pandemic. Most significantly the public should not have experienced any significant difference in service when phoning 999 for help.

- virtual fire prevention and protection work have continued and the Authority has managed its referrals and its inspection programme for high-risk premises. Face-to-face visits resumed in August 2020.
- business continuity plans are well linked to the Authority's annual functional plans: Strategic Plan 2020-2030, Corporate Risk Register, People Strategy, Asset Management Framework, Environmental and Carbon Reduction Plan, and the MTFS.
- other aspects of business continuity planning that worked well include:
  - adapting the tried and tested UK FRS response and recovery Cell structures and Critical Incident Team processes.
  - previous business continuity plans were overly focused on operational resilience, and have now been updated to include all functions and corporate services.
  - well-tested business continuity plans have held the Authority in good stead to deal with the pandemic. They took the opportunity during quieter periods of demand during lockdown to conduct exercises in high-risk locations across South Wales such as the airport, universities, and Barry incinerator.
  - staff wellbeing is now mainstreamed into Business Continuity Planning.
- the Authority has maintained a strong focus on community resilience during lockdowns. Remote home-safety checks and tailored business support have generally worked well based on feedback mechanisms and survey data. The Authority has updated fire prevention advice on its new website including carbon monoxide safety and domestic violence. An excellent range of home education resources have supported teachers and students working from home.
- 21 However, risks to corporate resilience include:
  - the Authority recognises it has more to do to reduce the numbers of false alarms which now account for 43% of all response activity. Numbers doubled during lockdown in the first two quarters of 2020-21. However, overall for the year the numbers compare more favourably. For 2019-20 there were 4,494 Automatic Fire Alarms compared to 4,440 in 2020-21 is a reduction of 1.2%. This still represents 43% of all fire and rescue service activity.
  - we also found opportunity to involve younger people in developing fire and road safety guidance for young adults.

# Appendices

# Appendix 1 – Methodology

We asked:

- does the FRA have robust and effective financial management systems?
- does the FRA have suitable governance and scrutiny arrangements to ensure effective decision making on financial and workforce matters?
- is the FRA workforce resilient to respond to periods of significant change both now and in the future?
- does the FRA manage its technology and assets economically, efficiently and effectively to ensure they remain sustainable in the longer term?
- does the FRA have effective business continuity plans in place that have been tested and support corporate resilience and help create sustainable services?

We undertook the review during November 2020. What we did:

- consolidated our cumulative audit knowledge and experience;
- reviewed committee papers from the last 12 months, and data and key documents;
- carried out reviews of the Authority and Services combined website;
- interviewed 53 members of staff including focus groups with front line staff, Members, Senior Management Team and the Workforce Planning team;
- kept in regular contact with our financial audit staff and the Chief Fire and Rescue Advisor for Wales;
- carried out horizon scanning to identify best practice in the UK including interviews with Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services, North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service, Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Authority, and London Fire Brigade; and
- gave verbal feedback to the Chief Fire Officer and Deputy Chief Fire Officer at the end of fieldwork.

Our 2018-19 and 2019-20 Well-being of Future Generations audit work found examples of collaboration and engagement and also identified areas where the Authority needs to strengthen its work. It was clear that all three Fire and Rescue Authorities are facing significant corporate challenges. What we said last time relating to corporate resilience:

- Well-being of Future Generations Pilot Work May 2018: South Wales Fire and Rescue Authority have demonstrated a strong commitment to collaborate with partners. However, there is a particular challenge for the Authority in considering how they respond strategically to nine Public Services Boards.
- collaboration on safe and well visits and deliberate fire setting report April 2019: The Authority has positive examples of how it has taken account of the Sustainable Development Principle when taking steps to meet objectives, but further work is required to widen and mainstream how it is delivering the five ways of working.
- review of involvement May 2020: Overall, we conclude that the Authority has a generally good approach to involvement with partners and communities but needs to improve its impact by evaluating current approaches to strengthen future activity.

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