

Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Authority – Corporate Resilience Report

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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 FRAs and sets expectations for continuing improvement, efficiency and innovation.
- 2 For 2020-21 we reviewed each Fire and Rescue Authority 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 Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Authority (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, and also to the Welsh Government on the challenges facing the sector.
- 3 The review therefore allows us to track how the Authority responded to the pandemic and is using the experience of the last 12 months to strengthen its resilience.
- 4 Our review sought to answer the question: Is the FRA resilient and sustainable in the medium term?

What we found this time

- 5 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 dealt with long standing weaknesses in its financial management systems. But some key risks need to be addressed to ensure it remains financially sustainable.
 - governance – the Authority has appropriate governance systems but can do more to streamline decision making and to address weaknesses in scrutiny.
 - workforce – the Authority has a resilient workforce and has dealt well with immediate challenges. But there are some big risks such as succession planning 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 to help support future resilience.
 - 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 identified in this review.

PFI1 To ensure the Authority is able to fill gaps in skills and capacity in the future it needs to:

- establish clear succession plans;
- assess the results of any new emergency cover review with workforce capacity needed to manage risk; and
- focus on developing skills it needs to deliver the services it wants to provide in the longer term.

PFI2 To support a resilient workforce the Authority needs to ensure it has appropriate specialist mental health services in place to support staff.

PFI3 To manage capacity and the demands of collaborative working the Authority needs to assess the return on investment from engaging with key strategic partnerships and agree how to improve its collaboration with other emergency service partners.

Detailed report

Mid and West 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 has dealt with long standing weaknesses in financial management systems, but some key risks need to be addressed to ensure they remain financially sustainable

Why is this important?

- 6 Determining financial resilience is not an exact science but what we do know is that organisations need a sound strategic approach to inform decision-making.
- 7 In reaching our conclusions we found that:
 - the Authority now has satisfactory financial management systems and has dealt with long standing weaknesses in financial management; and
 - the Authority performs well in managing expenditure within the budgets it sets, as shown in **Exhibit 2**.

Exhibit 2: summary of expenditure and budget forecasts

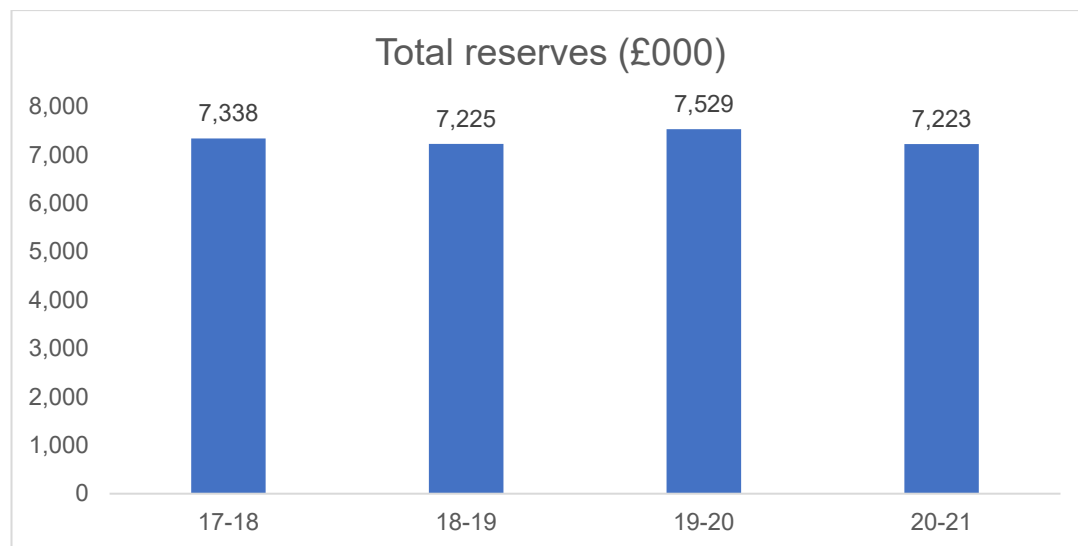
Year	Budgeted Forecast (£000)	Outturn for year (£000)
17-18	45,59	45,08
18-19	46,81	45,76
19-20	50,36	48,94
20-21 Estimated	52,68	–

Source: Audit Wales analysis of Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Authority accounts

- 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 expectations on pay, future levy contribution, and pension assumptions;

- integrated data and information on treasury, cost of borrowing, reserves, income and inflation;
 - realistic assessments of the likely impact and cost of Brexit, climate change, Grenfell, and COVID-19 is included; and
 - integrating the conclusions of the MTFS with the Authority’s Corporate Plan 2020-2025.
- financial management is improving. Our review of committee papers and accounts finds clear evidence the FRA is operating in accordance with its MTFS. For example, estimates and budget monitoring reports show high levels of accuracy in financial planning.
 - for 2021-22 the Authority changed its budget setting process. In September 2020 the Authority approved the MTFS first providing the framework for supporting the budget setting process. The MTFS is now monitored throughout the year and formally updated annually.
 - reserves are stable, as shown in **Exhibit 3**. Data in **Exhibits 1 and 2** is taken from the 2018-19 and 2019-20 accounts along with the Fire Authority report on 2020-21 budget estimates.

Exhibit 3: reserves are well managed

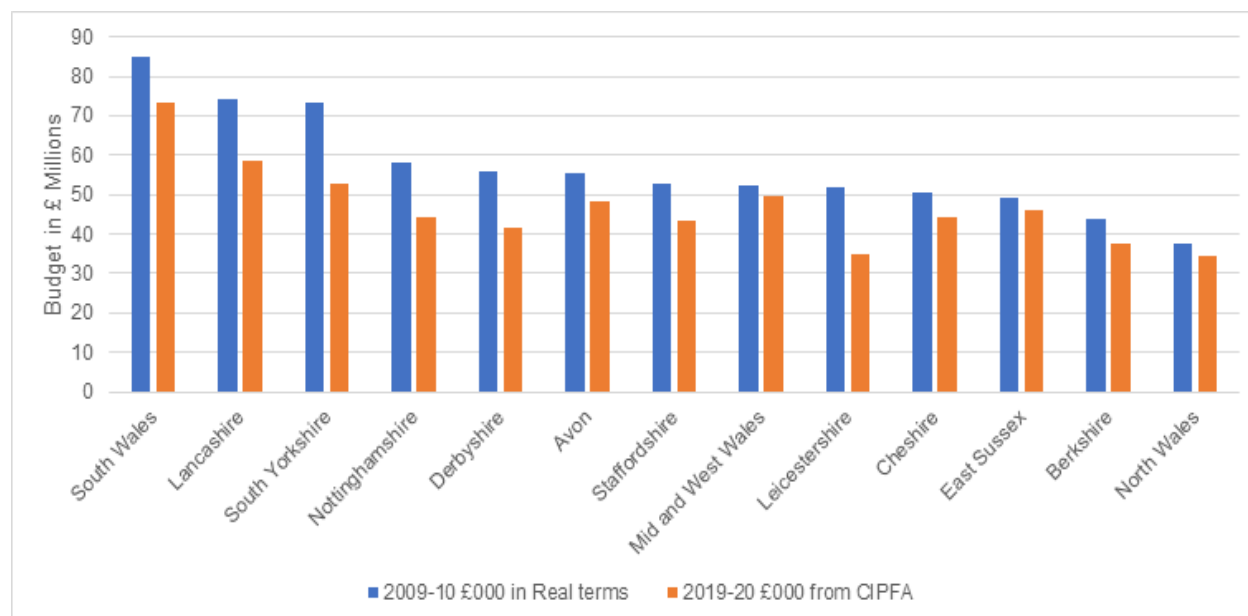


Source: Audit Wales analysis of Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Authority accounts

8 Data in **Exhibit 4** is taken from the Authority’s accounts and budget books for the respective years and our analysis shows all Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) have seen their budgets fall in real terms but proportionally Welsh FRAs have generally not experienced the same level of cuts. **Exhibit 4** shows budget changes with reference to other comparable FRAs. The FRAs compared are a mix of 2018-

19 Chartered Institute of Public and Financial Accountants (CIPFA) family group and comparable semi-rural FRAs.

Exhibit 4: budget increases compare favourably with other FRAs



Source: Audit Wales analysis of CIPFA data 2019-20 and named Fire and Rescue Authority accounts for 2009-10

9 However, risks to financial resilience include:

- the Authority has to manage some difficult capacity challenges. For example, the high number of strategies, policies and Corporate Plan actions means the Authority has a high and unsustainable number of priorities. We found 42 strategic actions in the Corporate Plan 2020-2025, and a high number of key strategic and corporate policies. 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 was commissioned in 2015 and the Authority may need to update this work to ensure station locations and shift patterns are being optimised. In particular, learning from responding to the pandemic should be used to ensure services remain financially sustainable. This is important because the large amount of learning and data available from the pandemic presents an opportunity for the Authority to pause and reflect. The outcomes from the 2015 work were reported in late 2016-17, and whilst a number of actions have been realised and further reviews are

undertaken on a themed basis eg review of flood and water assets currently ongoing, a full review was not rerun.

- despite presenting highly detailed financial reports to members, data is only shown alongside targets or the previous year's performance, and there is no comparison or benchmark with others. This makes it hard to judge how well the Authority is performing with other comparable FRAs and in delivering against current corporate priorities.
- we found some gaps in funding for some key corporate services. There is no central budget for publicity which does not enable the Authority to proactively undertake any direct and regular prevention promotion work. Promoting the prevention service is dependent on departments identifying budget to support campaigns they wish to pursue, which restricts tailoring to each audience and limits the opportunity to plan ahead. In addition, Information Communications Technology (ICT) services get paid an annual lump sum in their budget irrespective of demand or risk.

The Authority has appropriate governance systems but can do more to maximise the impact of scrutiny

Why is this important?

- 10 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.
- 11 In reaching our conclusions we found that:
- 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.
 - the Authority maintained its committee meeting timetable and held its annual general meeting (AGM) in June. The Authority updated its governance and decision-making policies in October 2020 and completes an Annual review of all scrutiny recommendations. We also see a step change in improvement in member development programmes, more training options being available, and less duplication with members' host councils.
 - our review of documentation and interviews found good examples of the Authority demonstrating the principles and values of good corporate governance. For example, in pay negotiations, ethical investment and borrowing, supporting local firms, paying contractors early to help their cash flow, and seeking additional assurances from construction suppliers.
 - COVID-19 has supported some quicker short-term delegated decision making. For example, in using delegated powers to act quickly to buy new,

and update existing, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to support remote working, supporting online committee meetings, and in boosting internal collaboration.

- a detailed external review of how the Authority responded to COVID-19 dated September 2020 finds a high number of positive examples of effective management activities and successful adaptation of cells and the Critical Incident Team structures.
- Internal Audit is providing assurance that governance arrangements are working. They concluded reviews of:
 - fixed assets and their accounting;
 - cyber security;
 - data protection and data sharing; and
 - the resilience of corporate systems during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 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;
 - functional and response services cost data;
 - localised council performance data;
 - data rich health, safety and welfare performance management reports; and
 - weekly members' updates which include workforce data.

12 However, risks to corporate resilience include:

- we found limited examples of where scrutiny is adding value to financial decisions or operational performance, and the formal internal scrutiny of decisions by members is not always as effective as it could be. Despite the quality and quantity of committee reports and papers, coupled with Member training and support, the formal internal scrutiny of decisions by Members is not always as effective as it could be. For example, Committee reports could make clearer links with current strategic aims. Members may benefit from an overall summary of what reports add up to at the start of each introductory committee report.
- our review of committee papers and reports found numerous inconsistencies on how progress on strategic aims is reported. For example, whilst reporting of performance indicators against strategic aims is good, we find too many reports for the Performance, Audit and Scrutiny Committee do not show how evaluations and risk management reports contribute to meeting strategic aims. The committee reports of the meeting on 18 January 2021 added up to 230 pages, some of which were heavy going and it is hard to judge what impact these reports are making. We recognise that some of these reports

were statutory audit reports and some papers are in Welsh but we still find an overwhelming volume of material for Members to digest.

- the Authority finds long-term planning difficult. For example, despite having a sound framework for the 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 and anecdotal evidence.

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

Why is this important?

- 13 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 is also important to build and maintain resilience.
- 14 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.'
- 15 In reaching our conclusions we found that:
 - the Authority can effectively plan, organise and develop its workforce to deliver its responsibilities. [The Corporate Plan 2020-2025](#) provides the right starting point from which to measure progress and is flexible enough to deal with changing circumstances. Over the last three years the Authority has reduced the number of strategic aims from nine to four.
 - the Authority can develop its workforce to deliver its responsibilities in the short term supported by a strong 'can do' culture of problem solving. A positive workforce culture continues to evolve and grow and corporate values are clearly understood. Staff surveys show positive attitudes to change and satisfaction with the Authority.
 - corporate capacity has been boosted with effective staff wellbeing arrangements, much improved occupational health activity, and backup to corporate services by uniformed staff. New staff in finance and ICT have supported corporate resilience in a critical time during the pandemic.

- the monitoring of staff wellbeing in health and wellbeing quarterly updates shows strong recent performance in supporting staff during the pandemic. The Authority has developed support for mental health and provides Trauma Risk Management (TRiM), Occupational Health referrals, 1-2-1 Counselling, a 24-hour confidential helpline, and online seminars to promote good mental health.
- the Authority is boosting capacity in key areas such as workforce data analysis, staff training, ICT support, and occupational health.
- the latest data shows a big reduction in sickness absence falling from an average per firefighter of 8.7 shifts lost in 2019-20 to 1.7 shifts in quarter three of 2020-21. On-call firefighters and station availability is the highest ever recorded at 98% availability.
- 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.
- recruitment processes have coped well and not been adversely affected by the pandemic. All advertised posts have been filled. Over 90% 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 socially distanced locations.

16 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 and maximise the success of its equalities policies. The Authority could do more to match workforce plans to Emergency Cover Review findings, and potentially re-run the Emergency Cover Review in light of learning from the response phases of COVID-19.
- ensuring the long-term resilience of the on-call retained duty system. The Authority still pays its on-call firefighters by using a 'pay as you go' system, and some FRAs are moving away from this to give staff greater assurance about the money they will earn and to help fill vacancies. In addition, the removal of funding by one partner for some aspects of medical emergency response – also known as 'co-responding' – is considered by the Authority as having a detrimental effect on staff recruitment and retention.
- our interviews found agreement amongst senior managers and front-line staff that the on-call duty system needs overhauling and change. More consideration is also needed to plan for any opportunities for role enlargement and the diversification of roles in line with the next iteration of the FRS National Framework and current Welsh Government thinking.
- succession planning is challenging due to a number of factors. Detailed calculations by the Authority shows that up to 55 staff could retire or leave in 2021-22. Staff could leave from all departments and particularly hardest hit

could be community safety services and in middle management. Other than recruitment costs, the full budget implications are not yet estimated. This could have a significant effect on resilience given the potential for staff to leave with little notice being given and the costs of replacing people.

- the costs of engaging with Public Services Boards and their sub-groups, regional partnerships and the two Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) are becoming considered increasingly unsustainable. Senior managers estimate they spend a great deal of time attending partnership meetings.
- senior managers also 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 amongst staff. Similarly, staff 'soldiering on' in responding to the pandemic, increases the risk of latent stress issues emerging later.
- the Authority still has some workforce pressure points including ICT training an ageing workforce and equipping new managers to succeed in their roles. We also see scope for ensuring the experienced and knowledgeable managers who are the 'go to' for staff are not overwhelmed by queries and requests for help, assistance and support.

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 to help support future resilience

Why is this important?

- 17 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.
- 18 In reaching our conclusions we found that:
- the Authority manages its technology and assets economically and effectively to ensure they remain sustainable and needs to overcome the barriers in sharing assets.
 - the pandemic has helped to accelerate better use of digital and Information Communications Technology (ICT) assets and capabilities. Despite some initial teething problems, senior managers we spoke to think ICT has been moved on by three to five 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 all staff. More work is planned to ensure all staff have more suitable ergonomic friendly chairs and equipment.

- new ICT technology has enabled agile and remote working. New firefighting technology is in place, including lighter battery-powered cutting equipment to extricate passengers out of vehicles involved in road traffic collisions. All new portable firefighting equipment is suitable for people with less physical strength and different body shapes.
- the Authority is making clear progress on environmental management including:
 - a [Sustainability and Environmental Strategy 2020-2025](#) which sets out key actions and is well linked to the Corporate Plan 2020-2025 and asset framework;
 - more accurate environmental baseline data including energy, water use and waste information;
 - growing its 'green' fleet which now includes two new hydrogen and 18 dual-fuel fire appliances;
 - progressing its commitment to make all new 'white' fleet dual fuel by 2025;
 - increasing the use of biodegradable and sustainable products; and
 - involving staff and partners in its Green Travel plan and now having a cycle to work scheme in place for all staff.
- as a result, the Authority can demonstrate it met all environmental targets in 2020-21.
- the Authority has ambitious plans to share and open up more of its buildings for use by others, including the public. Sharing assets forms part of maintenance and building options appraisal. The Authority is sharing 20 fire stations and its Joint Public Service Centre which hosts the fire control centre. The Authority believes it could share more fire stations with other emergency services if there was a commitment to make this work from its partners.

19 However, risks to corporate resilience include:

- making shared assets a reality and increasing the number of fire stations with shared facilities still has some way to go. Our review of emergency partners' asset management plans and our Authority interviews highlight some frustrations with a lack of reciprocity on estates with emergency services partners and local councils.
- 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 some 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.

- asset management is still too short-term focused. For example:
 - despite a large investment in a new fleet, the fleet replacement plan is two years behind schedule, the infrastructure to support the new dual-fuel fleet is still not in place; and
 - our detailed review of asset management policies and data finds the Authority has more to do to clarify the scale and costs of the long-term asset maintenance programmes.

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

Why is this important?

- 20 It is a requirement of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 and the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 that Fire and Rescue Services (FRS) have appropriate business continuity arrangements in place, so that a required level of response can be maintained at all times.
- 21 The main principles of business continuity are in identifying 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 so that its application becomes second nature to staff.
- 22 In reaching our conclusions we found that:
- the Authority has effective business continuity plans in place that have been well tested during the COVID-19 pandemic and now better support corporate as well as operational resilience.
 - 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 Mid and West Wales such as Pembroke Dock, universities, and airfields. Business continuity plans are well linked to the Authority's annual functional plans, Corporate Plan 2020-2025, Corporate Risk Register, People Strategy, Asset Management Framework, Environmental Plan and the MTFS.

- statutory services have been maintained and response services have not been affected. Most significantly, the public should not have experienced any significant difference in service when phoning 999 for help.
- 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. An external review found that these worked well.
 - previous business continuity plans were overly focused on operational resilience, and have now been updated to include all functions and corporate services.
 - 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 winter safety and fire prevention advice on its new website including carbon monoxide safety and dealing with domestic violence. An excellent range of home education resources have supported teachers and students working from home.

23 However, risks to corporate resilience include:

- virtual fire prevention and protection work has meant the Authority was keeping on top of its referrals and inspection programme for high-risk premises. Face to face visits resumed in October 2020. However, a high number of referrals in November 2020 required the Authority to redirect its resources towards fire prevention and community safety activity.
- we saw evidence of a good flow of information and sharing of business continuity plans from the Authority to partners, but this is not always reciprocated.
- our detailed review of the Authority's website and social media outputs identified opportunities to strengthen messaging and outputs targeted at young people to ensure information is tailored to their needs.

Appendix 1

Methodology and findings from previous audits

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 data and key documents including 59 corporate strategies and policies.
- Reviewed committee papers from the last 12 months.
- Carried out a review of the Authority and Services combined website in April and then in October to see what had changed.
- Interviewed 73 members of staff including focus groups with front line staff, Members, Senior Management Team, Finance, and Workforce Planning managers.
- Kept in regular contact with the Chief Fire and Rescue Advisor for Wales.
- Liaised with our financial audit staff.
- Undertook some reality checking by testing the Authority's website, and social media.
- 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.
- Gave verbal feedback to Chief Fire Officer and Deputy Chief Fire Officer at the end of our fieldwork.

What we found in previous years' audits relating to corporate resilience

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 previously relating to corporate resilience:

- Local Government Services to Rural Communities report, November 2018:
A shortage of on-call retained fire fighters is leaving some stations in rural areas potentially under-resourced. Currently there are more than 400 on-call retained fire fighter vacancies across the three Welsh Fire and Rescue Authorities.
- Collaboration with Carmarthenshire CBC & Joint Public Service Centre April 2019: the Authority has positive examples of how it has taken account of the Sustainable Development Principle when taking steps to deliver its objectives. But further work is required to widen and mainstream how it is delivering the five ways of working.
- Review of Involvement May 2020: the Authority engages well with stakeholders in arson reduction and road safety, but needs to develop an integrated corporate approach to involvement activity.
- Annual Improvement Report 2017-18: proposals for improvement: the Authority should review and update its policy and guidance for white fleet vehicles, and strengthen governance arrangements on Vehicle tracking.
- We made no recommendations or proposals for improvement in our Annual Improvement Report 2018-19.



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