Archwilio Cymru
Audit Wales

Delivering change, measuring impact?

Continuous improvement at South Wales Fire and Rescue Authority

August 2026

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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

1 We looked at the actions of the South Wales Fire and Rescue Authority (the Authority) to secure continuous improvement since the intervention made by the Welsh Government in February 2024.

2 We have focused on its actions to act on the Terms of Reference set for the commissioners appointed by the Welsh Government. This included acting on reports looking at its culture, operations, and arrangements to secure value for money. In doing this, we looked at the improvement objectives that the Authority has set, as required by the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure).

3 We also looked at the Authority's response to an inspection by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) published in May 2025.

Why this is important

4 Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) play a vital role in keeping communities safe. To do this, they must ensure that they provide a service that continually improves to keep up to date with evolving practice and make sure that the service they provide meets the changing needs of their communities. It is also important that the values and behaviours of those delivering fire and rescue services reflect the expectations of the public.

5 The Authority published an Independent Culture Review (ICR) in January 2024 that showed that it did not always meet these expectations. This followed other reporting by the Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser and Inspector for Wales (CFRAIW) and Audit Wales that also had found areas for the Authority to improve on.

6 The Welsh Government intervened in the Authority in February 2024. The then Deputy Minister for Social Partnership said that she did 'not have the confidence that the service has the internal capacity or capability to oversee its own recovery…As with management, Authority members cannot be both the problem and the solution'.[1] The Welsh Government replaced the councillors that had formed the Authority with four commissioners.

7 Acting on the findings of the ICR and other reports from external review bodies is key to the Authority demonstrating that it is working to secure continuous improvement for the benefit of its communities.

What we have found

8 The Authority has made progress in addressing its areas for improvement. However, it is not yet clear how its improvement activity will be funded or the difference it is making to local communities.

What we recommend

9 We make three recommendations to help the Authority to improve. These are about:

- simplifying its strategic direction and setting out how it will benefit its communities;
- costing its improvement actions and identifying how they will be funded; and
- strengthening how it assesses progress towards its aims and whether it is delivering value for money.

[1] Senedd Cymru, Plenary record, 6 February 2024

Auditor General's view

I am encouraged that the Authority has taken action to tackle the concerns raised about its culture and performance. I also recognise that this has been a difficult period for staff working in the fire and rescue service, who deliver such a vital public service in often very challenging circumstances.

The Authority has made a good start on its improvement journey, but it now needs to make sure this action results in real benefits for its local communities and provides value for taxpayers' money. To do this, the Authority needs to be clear on its priorities, their cost, and if these are leading to improved outcomes for the people of south Wales. It needs to make sure that its finances match with its ambitions.

I hope that this report and its recommendations will help the Authority to do this.

Catherine Mealing-Jones

Auditor General for Wales

Key facts and figures

- Since February 2024, four commissioners appointed by the Welsh Government have run the Authority. They replaced 24 councillors that used to form the Authority.

- 174 – the number of recommendations received by the Authority from external reviews.

- Eight – the number of strategic themes in the Authority's Strategic Improvement Plan.

- 15 years – the duration of the Authority's Strategic Improvement Plan.

- £19.4 million – how much the Authority estimates it may cost to deliver its nine transformation aims.

- £17.6 million – the total usable reserves not restricted by law that the Authority held at the end of 2024-25.

Our findings

Knowing what needs to improve

10 We recognise that the Authority's activity has been shaped by the Welsh Government. Through the terms of reference issued by the Welsh Government to the commissioners, this effectively prioritised what the Authority should focus on. The impact of this intervention and external reports, particularly the ICR, has also made this a challenging period for the Authority. As a result, it is to be expected that some areas for improvement are more developed than others.

The Authority knows where it needs to improve and has set this out

Evidence of what to improve

11 The Authority has focused on responding to the reports it has received from external review bodies. When bringing in commissioners, the Welsh Government pointed to the ICR and reports by Audit Wales and the CFRAIW to show that the Authority needed to improve. These reports included 174 recommendations for the Authority.[2] They gave a clear direction for what it needed to improve.

[2] By source, the Authority had 82 ICR recommendations, 87 CFRAIW recommendations, and five Audit Wales recommendations. These are set out in **Appendix 2**.

12 The Authority has set an ambition to go further than just responding to the recommendations it has received. Officers used the findings of each report to find further areas to improve in addition to just acting on the recommendations in them. The Authority has set out a transformation programme with nine aims designed to help the Authority to be more effective.[3] It also reviewing its approach to risk management to identify areas for improvement.

13 The Authority has proactively chosen to compare itself to English FRAs to help identify where it needs to improve. It invited HMICFRS to inspect its effectiveness, efficiency, and people. As HMICFRS also inspects the 44 English FRAs, this helped the Authority to understand how it compared to many FRAs, and not just the other two FRAs in Wales. This shows the Authority's commitment to identifying its weaknesses and taking action to address them.

14 However, the Authority has not made full use of other information that may also help it. The Authority collaborates with other FRAs on a range of initiatives. However, it has not shown how comparing itself and working with other Welsh FRAs has informed its improvement planning. It also has not taken account of the findings of Audit Wales reports when thinking about how it needs to improve. Similarly, while it receives them, it has not used performance reports and other information, such as health and safety data, to identify areas for improvement. We also previously found weaknesses in the Authority's approach to involving local communities in the development of its well-being objectives. By not drawing on a broad range of evidence, the Authority risks missing opportunities to identify where and how it needs to improve.

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[3] The Authority's transformation programme aims are set out in **Appendix 2**.

Setting improvement objectives

15 The Authority has set improvement objectives to tackle the weaknesses it has found. It approved a Strategic Improvement Plan (SIP) in March 2025 that set eight improvement themes for the next 15 years.[4] It also approved an Annual Improvement Plan (AIP) that sets out what it will do to achieve its themes each year. These clearly show that the Authority has had regard for the seven aspects of improvement as required by the Measure.

16 The Authority takes a short-term approach to improvement planning. For example, it sets out the actions it will take each year rather than setting them out over the lifetime of its plan. It does not set out what it intends for the Authority to deliver over the 15 years that the plan covers. This risks the Authority adopting short-term solutions that do not provide value for money over the longer term.

The Authority's strategic direction is unclear because its multiple plans do not link together or define what success would look like

17 The Authority has created multiple plans that do not link together. As well as the SIP, AIP, and transformation aims, the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) also published a strategy in June 2025.[5] The Authority did not approve the FRS strategy despite it being responsible for setting the organisation's strategy. There are no clear links between the FRS strategy and the SIP, but both include the Authority's 'transformation aims'. Departmental plans try to link to both the SIP and the FRS strategy, but the links are not always clear or easy to understand. This means that the Authority does not have a clear strategic direction.

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[4] The Authority's improvement themes are included in **Appendix 2**.

[5] The term 'Fire and Rescue Service' means the part of the organisation that provides the actual service to communities. The Authority is responsible for setting the strategy for the service, providing resources, and overseeing how it delivers. The Authority is the legal body and has duties placed on it in law.

18 The Authority is also not clear on which plan takes priority. We heard differing views about which document provided the key strategic direction for the Authority. It is also not clear how these documents link together. This has the potential to confuse those working in the Authority as well as wider audiences. By not setting clear priorities, there is a risk that the Authority will focus its resources, both in terms of officer time and money, in the 'wrong' areas. This in turn risks the Authority not securing value for money.

The Authority does not know how much it will cost to deliver its plans or how it will fund them

19 The Authority has not clearly set out the costs of all of its planned improvements. For example, none of the Authority's specific improvement plans set out how much they will cost to deliver. It expects that planned improvements will be funded from existing service budgets where efficiencies can be made. When not possible, departments can request the use of reserves. This means that actions may be planned with funding not already in place. The Authority also does not have a medium-term financial plan. By not costing its plans or knowing if it can fund them, the Authority increases the risk that they will not be deliverable. This also increases the risk that it will not be able to deliver the improvements it has identified that it needs to make.

20 As it has not costed its plans, the Authority has set its budget on a 'business as usual' basis. Officers described how its strategic and financial planning are separate activities and are not linked.[6] This has led to the Authority using its reserves in the previous financial year to fund extra spending that was not included in its budget. It also means that it has not fully thought about how much extra funding it would need to levy on principal councils.[7] This risks the Authority making continued and potentially unsustainable use of its reserves.

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[6] Our financial sustainability report includes recommendations that the Authority addresses this weakness. We have included these recommendations in **Appendix 2**.

[7] Welsh FRAs are funded mostly by charging a levy to principal councils. This is calculated by splitting the amount the FRA needs to fund its budget (less any grants it expects to receive or planned use of reserves) between the councils that the FRA covers in proportion to their population. In South Wales, the Authority's costs are shared between 10 councils.

21 Where the Authority has tried to estimate some costs, it is unclear how it will fund them. For example, it estimated the costs of delivering its transformation aims as being £19.4 million to deliver. This is greater than the £17.6 million usable reserves not restricted by law that the Authority had at the end of 2024-25.[8] As a result, there is a significant risk that its plans are undeliverable.

22 The Authority has identified some savings that it will achieve from its transformation activity. For example, the business case for its Digital, Data, and Technology Strategy identified some savings that will reduce the additional costs of its digital transformation. Estimating costs and potential savings for all of its planned improvements, would help the Authority understand if they are affordable.

[8] We publish this data as part of our local government financial sustainability data tool. Our definition of usable reserves may differ to that used by different bodies.

Knowing that it is improving

The Authority does not know if its actions have improved services or value for money

Performance reporting to the Authority

23 The Authority has not set out how it will know if and when its improvement activity has been successful. The SIP and FRS strategy do not set out how the Authority will know if it has achieved its ambitions. The Authority believes that implementing the recommendations it has received in various external reports will mean that is has been successful. It also believes it does not need to assess the impact of implementing these recommendations as these are set out in those reports.

24 The Authority's reporting also focuses on its actions but not their impact. For example, the Strategic Change, Transformation, and Culture Committee gets reports on the progress of completing ICR and CFRAIW recommendations. Each report sets out the activity since the last update and the number of recommendations completed. It also does not provide any context on, for example, which recommendations are priorities, or more difficult to address.

25 By not clearly setting out how it will measure and monitor the impact of its actions, it is difficult for the Authority to know if its actions are having a positive impact on its communities and helping it to achieve value for money.

26 The Authority does not generally set out what it has spent on its improvement activity. Some of the costs of delivering its transformation programme and, for example, the cost of the commissioners compared with the previous Authority are included in its financial reports. But it does not set out or explain the overall costs of its transformation activity in its financial reporting. This also makes it more difficult for the Authority to know if it has achieved value for money.

27 The Authority has, however, set up clear processes to monitor progress in addressing recommendations from external reports. It has two Service Improvement Boards (SIB) to monitor actions – one for the ICR and another for the CFRAIW reports. It has also put in place a monitoring system for the Commissioners to review and sign off its response to recommendations as complete. This enables the Authority to track which recommendations are complete.

Performance measurement

28 The Authority has begun to strengthen its performance measurement arrangements, but these are still largely focused on measuring its activity rather than outcomes. The Authority has recently created a performance management framework to monitor its performance. As part of this, the Authority has explained the number of key performance indicators (KPIs) it measures and links them to each SIP improvement theme. Prior to this, the Authority only collected the indicators it was required to by the Welsh Government.

29 However, its indicators mostly measure the Authority's activity and outputs rather than their impact. For example, the availability of appliances and number of fires attended. This makes it difficult for the Authority to measure and monitor the impact of its performance and its improvement activity.

30 In total, the Authority has 83 KPIs. However, these are not evenly spread between its improvement themes. For example, its 'response' theme has 22 indicators whilst its 'protecting and enhancing our environment' theme only has one. We recognise that the number of indicators for each theme may well need to differ, and the number of indicators is not on its own an indication of a strong or weak approach. However, there is a risk that the Authority has more comprehensive performance data for some themes than others, reducing its ability to monitor its performance. The Authority intends for its KPIs to develop and be refined over time.

Progress made

The Authority has taken significant actions to improve

31 The Authority has taken a range of actions to improve its performance and governance. The Authority has reported that it has completed 43% of the recommendations received from external reports.[9] It has made a lot of progress in responding to the ICR (78% completed) and the CFRAIW report on operational training (100%). We recognise the Authority has also introduced many other new initiatives, such as a drone programme and efforts to increase home safety visits. Although it does not publicly report on its progress against recommendations made by Audit Wales and HMICFRS, which makes it difficult for the public to understand how the Authority is addressing them.

32 The Authority is aware of improvements that it still needs to make and is putting in place arrangements to help deliver them. Both officers and the commissioners are clear where it needs to make further improvement. The Authority has put in place some key building blocks to help deliver them, including a programme and project management team. It has also created a full-time Director of Finance post to help strengthen its capacity for financial planning and management. It has also taken steps to improve its governance. For example, it has created a governance framework that sets out how, where, and why decisions are made. It has also commissioned research from a university to create an improved constitution.

33 Being clear on what future actions will be needed, and putting in place arrangements to deliver them increases the likelihood of the Authority securing continuous improvement in the future.

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[9] A breakdown of the recommendations completed is provided in **Appendix 2**.

Recommendations

R1	The Authority should simplify its approach to strategic planning to make clear, and then communicate to internal and external stakeholders:
1.1	its strategic direction and priorities (**paragraph 17**);
1.2	how its various plans and strategies link together (**paragraphs 17 and 18**); and
1.3	how its various plans and strategies will have a positive impact for the people of South Wales over the longer term (**paragraphs 16 to 18**).

R2	To ensure that its improvement actions are deliverable the Authority should:
2.1	make sure it understands the resources needed to deliver them (**paragraphs 19 to 22**); and
2.2	make sure its actions are compatible with the resources it has available (**paragraphs 19 to 22**).

In addressing this recommendation, the Authority should take account of the recommendations we made in our financial sustainability report (**Appendix 2**).

R3 To help it to know whether it is delivering continuous improvement and value for money, and to support public accountability for this the Authority should:

3.1 set out the intended impact of its improvement activity (**paragraphs 16 and 29**);

3.2 set out how it will **measure**, and then monitor, the impact of its improvement activity (**paragraphs 23 to 25 and 29 to 30**);

3.3 publicly and regularly report progress towards, and the impact of addressing, all of the external recommendations referenced in this report (**paragraphs 25 to 27 and 31**).

Appendices

1 About our work

Scope of the audit

We looked at the Authority's arrangements to secure value for money and continuous improvement following the intervention of the Welsh Government in February 2024. We focused on the Authority's response to the Terms of Reference set by the Welsh Government for the four commissioners it appointed. This included acting on the findings of:

- reports by the CFRAIW;
- the ICR; and
- reports by Audit Wales.

We also looked at the Authority's response to the inspection report made by HMICFRS in May 2025.

We did not repeat the work of previous reports but looked at the actions taken in response to them.

Audit questions and criteria

Questions

We reached our conclusions on the Authority's arrangements by answering three questions. Firstly, we asked whether the Authority knows what it needs to improve. Secondly, whether the Authority has processes to know if it is improving. Thirdly, we considered whether the Authority is making progress in delivering its planned improvements.

Criteria

We use the audit criteria to help us answer our questions on the Authority's arrangements. They help us to understand what arrangements should or could look like in context.

We shaped our criteria by looking at guidance for securing continuous improvement issued by the Welsh Government. We also drew on our knowledge of the sector, the sustainable development principle, and value for money. We develop our knowledge of FRAs by completing both performance and financial audits.

Methods

Our findings are based on document reviews and interviews with senior officers and three commissioners of the Authority. We completed this work alongside our audit of the Authority's arrangements to secure value for money in planning to achieve financial sustainability. We also drew on findings from this work, where relevant.

2 Context

Reports received by the Authority and its reported progress

Exhibit 1 sets out the reports and recommendations that the Welsh Government set out as the reasons that led it to intervene and appoint commissioners. In addition, it also includes the report of HMICFRS that the Authority requested following the intervention.

It also includes the number of recommendations that the Authority has reported that it has completed at the time of drafting this report. We have not reviewed the evidence that the Authority believes shows that it has acted on the recommendations.

It shows that the Authority has made more progress on the recommendations from the ICR and CFRAIW review of operational training. As the Authority does not report its progress in acting on HMICFRS and our recommendations, it is difficult to fully assess its overall progress.

Exhibit 1: reports made to the Authority and progress in delivering them

Report	Recommendations made	Recommendations completed	
Audit Wales – Fire False Alarm Reduction May 2023	5	5	100%

Report	Recommendations made	Recommendations completed	
CFRAIW – Learning from Grenfell Tower Inquiry February 2021	71	29	41%
CFRAIW – Broadening the role of firefighters December 2021	4	3	75%
CFRAIW – Operational training October 2022	6	6	100%
HMICFRS – Inspection report May 2025	49	21	43%
SWFRA – Independent culture review January 2024	82	70	85%
Total	217	134	62%

Source: South Wales FRA

Note: We have counted both causes for concern and areas for improvement as recommendations made by HMICFRS.

The table does not include reports from the CFRAIW and Audit Wales that the Authority has received since the intervention began. This is due to the relatively short time it has had to respond to their findings.

The Authority received a further inspection on its fire control by the CFRAIW in December 2025. As the Authority shares a joint fire control facility with Mid and West Wales FRA, the findings apply to both FRAs. The report made five recommendations.

It has also received six further recommendations from Audit Wales since the start of the intervention. We have issued the following reports and recommendations:

- governance of FRAs (September 2024) – one recommendation;
- setting of well-being objectives (May 2025) – three recommendations; and
- prevention of fires in high-risk homes (July 2025) two recommendations.

Financial sustainability recommendations

Our financial sustainability report made three recommendations. They were:

- The Authority should improve its understanding of its financial position to inform the development of a sustainable financial strategy. This should include costing its planned transformation activity and benchmarking financial assumptions with other organisations.
- The Authority should develop a sustainable medium-term financial strategy to support the delivery of its corporate objectives and statutory responsibilities.
- To enable effective oversight and to support decision making, the Authority should regularly report on the implications of its financial position for the delivery of its corporate objectives.

Improvement themes

The Authority has eight improvement themes that are:

- effective working;
- prevention;
- protection;

- response;
- protecting and enhancing the environment;
- communication and engagement (internal, external, consultation, social partnership);
- valuing and developing our people; and
- innovation transformation.

Transformation programme aims

The Authority’s transformation programme has nine aims that are:

- communication and engagement;
- digital transformation;
- diversity, inclusion, cohesion, and equity;
- ethics, values, and behaviours;
- governance and strategy;
- leadership;
- policies and procedures;
- safe and positive environment; and
- talent management.

About us

The Auditor General for Wales is independent of the Welsh Government and the Senedd. The Auditor General's role is to examine and report on the accounts of the Welsh Government, the NHS in Wales and other related public bodies, together with those of councils and other local government bodies. The Auditor General also reports on these organisations' use of resources and suggests ways they can improve.

The Auditor General carries out their work with the help of staff and other resources from the Wales Audit Office, which is a body set up to support, advise and monitor the Auditor General's work.

Audit Wales is the umbrella term used for both the Auditor General for Wales and the Wales Audit Office. These are separate legal entities with the distinct roles outlined above. Audit Wales itself is not a legal entity.

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