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**Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
Section 41 Report – March 2024
West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority**

‘Making the West Midlands Safer, Stronger and Healthier’

Report by Councillor Rizwan Jalil

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Membership of the Authority

The Members of the Authority for the Municipal Year 2023-24 are as follows:

Local Authority	Councillor(s)
Birmingham	Councillor Basharat Mahmood* (Labour) Councillor Gurdial Singh Atwal (Labour) Councillor Sybil Spence (Labour) Councillor David Barrie (Conservative)
Coventry	Councillor Catherine Miks* (Labour) <i>Vice-Chair</i> Councillor Gavin Lloyd# (Labour)
Dudley	Councillor Ian Kettle* (Conservative) Councillor Wayne Little (Conservative)
Sandwell	Councillor Rizwan Jalil* (Labour) Councillor Parbinder Kaur (Labour)
Solihull	Councillor Peter Hogarth MBE* (Conservative)
Walsall	Councillor Vera Waters* (Conservative) Councillor Simran Cheema# (Labour)
Wolverhampton	Councillor Greg Brackenridge* (Labour) <i>Chair</i> Councillor Jas Dehar (labour)
Additional Member(s)	
Independent Member of the Audit and Risk Committee	Mr Mike Ager
Independent Member of Appointments, Standards and Appeals	Mr Ray Tomkinson (Standards Committee only)
Co-opted Members of the Authority	Professor Simon Brake Dave Brown
Police and Crime Commissioner: Represented by (if applicable):	Simon Foster Assistant PCC Wasim Ali Richard Castello – Head of Communications

*Section 41 member

Cllr Matt Ward (Labour) replaced Councillor Chris Bott (Labour) as of 18 September 2023, Cllr Simran Cheema replaced Cllr Matt Ward from 8 January 2024.

Service Performance against Strategic Plan Q3 2023/24 (up to end of December 2023)

Please note these are the latest figures for Q3 2023/24 (to the end of December 2023), so they may be subject to change as data is further interrogated.

Response times to the most critical and high-risk incidents remain within target, and are well within target for all other categories of incident. The total number of accidental dwelling fires is on target. Injuries from these fires is also on target, and the overall number remains low.

The total number of Safe and Well points is below target, but the average assessment point score per safe and well visit remains high, which positively indicates our success in targeting prevention activity to the most vulnerable.

Deliberate fires in derelict buildings is well above target – this continues to be an area of particular focus for the service and all our command areas are looking to work with partners to address the risks associated with these fires, including securing (e.g. boarding up) properties when they become derelict, and working with building owners to ensure they are safe from fire.

False alarms due to equipment – normally as a result of faults – are above the desired target for both domestic and non-domestic premises. While the service continues to work with repeat offenders and Alarm Receiving Centres to drive down these types of incident, we have also taken steps to reduce our overall attendance at false alarms to reduce costs and ensure our resources remain available for emergencies. We have already introduced a more proportionate level of response – a smaller vehicle crewed with one or two people - to hospitals and other managed forms of building such as university accommodation, unless there’s a confirmed fire. This has allowed us to keep resources available while ensuring we can support premises to meet their fire safety duties.

Indicator	Target	Performance
Risk Based Attendance Standard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Category 1 (high risk) – 5 minutes Category 2 – 7 minutes Category 3 – 10 minutes Category 4 – 20 minutes 	Category 1 (high risk) – 4.55 Category 2 – 5.35 Category 3 – 5.10 Category 4 – 6.18
Accidental dwelling fires	347	330
Injuries from accidental fires in dwellings (requiring hospital treatment)	9	9
Safe & Well points achieved by the Brigade (visits to higher risk people bring a bigger point score)	65,000	39,368
Deliberate fires in dwellings	43	46

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Deliberate rubbish fires	267	279
Deliberate fires in derelict buildings	17	24
Accidental fires in non-domestic premises	81	86
False alarm calls due to fire alarm equipment – dwellings	1,292	1,459
False alarm calls due to fire alarm equipment – non-domestic	336	395

Sandwell area performance and key statistics

In addition to the service level performance indicators above, specific statistics are available for the Sandwell area for Q3 2023/24 (to the end of December 2023). As above, these are the latest figures, so they are subject to change as data is further interrogated.

Indicator	Performance	Notes
Accidental Dwelling Fires	26	Positively, accidental dwelling fires are well below target, improving on Q1 and Q2 figures.
Deliberate Rubbish Fires	39	This is over target but there is no evidence of specific trends in relation to these fires.
False Alarms (Equipment) – Dwellings	135	As with the service as a whole, this remains above target
False Alarms (Equipment) – Non-domestic	44	As with the service as a whole, this remains above target
Safe and Wells completed	576	Encouragingly, 59.5% of all SAW are referred from partners.
Average Assessment Points*	7.97	While slightly below the service average, average assessment points remain high, and is up from 7.84 in Q2.

* Assessment points measure the vulnerability of the individual or family we undertake a SAW with – the more vulnerable someone is, the more points that visit will garner. WMFS is committed to targeting our interventions at the most vulnerable in our communities.

WMFS activities during the last six months

1. Death of Chief Fire Officer Wayne Brown.

On 24 January 2024, we were devastated to learn that our Chief Fire Officer Wayne Brown had been found dead at his home address. His death has not been treated as suspicious. Wayne had served with West Midlands Fire Service since 2019, firstly as Deputy Chief Fire Officer, and then as Chief Fire Officer from December 2022. Prior to that Wayne had distinguished 27 year career with London Fire Brigade.

Wayne's funeral took place on 1 March 2024 at Southwark Cathedral, London with a service held simultaneously at St Martin in the Bullring, Birmingham. Our thoughts remain with Wayne's family, friends and colleagues.

Deputy Chief Fire Officer Jo Bowcock, supported by the senior management team, has stepped into the role of Acting Chief Fire Officer until such time as an interim CFO can be appointed.

The service's [online book of condolence](#) remains open for those that wish to read the tributes paid or leave one of their own.

2. WMFRA agrees 2024/25 Budget.

On 19 February 2024, West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority agreed its budget for the year 2024/25. The Net Revenue Budget Requirement for 2024-25 has been set at £133.634 million. This includes a 2.99% increase in the first service precept, with the precept for a Band D property now sitting at £75.20 – still one of the lowest of any FRS in the country.

Like most public services across the country, WMFRA faces increasing pressures through the effects of inflation, single year settlements and the continuing impact of the cost of living. The budget targets future savings to address a £1.9m gap in the budget, while ensuring that vital services provided to the community remain a priority to make the West Midlands safer, stronger and healthier.

[The full budget report can be found on the WMFRA CMIS site.](#)

3. Service Strategy and Community Risk Management Plan documents agreed.

WMFRA have also approved the service Strategy and the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) for 2024-2027. The new three-year Strategy builds upon previous iterations to set out a number of strategic goals more clearly for the service, with specific performance indicators against each.

The CRMP has been created following a period of public consultation in summer 2023. The document draws on public, partner and staff feedback as well as a thorough analysis of risks in the West Midlands to set out how our prevention, protection and response activities and resources will be used to tackle fires and other emergencies.

[The CRMP and Strategy reports can be found on the WMFRA CMIS site.](#) Full versions of both documents will be published on the WMFS website in early April 2024.

4. Fire Service issues warning on high carbon monoxide fuels.

WMFS have issued an urgent warning after a number of families were affected by Carbon Monoxide (CO) after using poorly labelled wood-charcoal fuels. The charcoal is advertised as being suitable for use indoors to fuel incense, shisha pipes or to light other fuels, but producing large quantities of CO. At one incident, crews detected CO concentrations as high as 600 parts per million – a potentially fatal level.

Communities have been advised, when using wood charcoal products:

- to check the safety labels of any products they use.
- not to burn these products in an unventilated environment.
- to not use the product if they are unsure about its safety.
- to install carbon monoxide alarms in their home in the same room as any fuel-burning appliance.

[WMFS has more information about this issue on their website.](#)

5. WMFS respond to flooding in West Midlands and further afield.

WMFS Firefighters responded both within the West Midlands and in neighbouring services during flooding caused by heavy rain and storms in January 2024.

This included a dramatic rescue by a member of the public of a mother and child trapped in fast moving water in [Hall Green, Birmingham](#), as well as deployment to [Nottinghamshire](#) and Worcestershire following flooding on the rivers Trent and Severn.

In all cases, communities are reminded to avoid entering floodwater whether on foot or in their cars.

6. WMFS launches safe battery disposal campaign with Sandwell Council.

Sandwell Council, Serco and WMFS have joined together to warn residents of the dangers batteries and electrical items going into bins pose and advising them on how to dispose of them. The move follows a spate of fires in the back of refuse and recycling vehicles, and at waste facilities across the country due to batteries being disposed in household bins.

As well as traditional batteries, many everyday household items including laptops, mobile phones, electric toys, e-cigarettes, bluetooth devices, shavers, electric toothbrushes and power-bank chargers contain hidden batteries. This can make them hard to notice or separate. Lithium-ion batteries in particular, which carry the highest risk of combustion, have become increasingly popular in recent years.

[WMFS provides more information on battery safety on their website.](#)

7. Service triumphs at Excellence in Fire and Emergency Awards 2023.

The Excellence in Fire and Emergency Awards in December 2023 saw WMFS take home two awards for the second year running, with Julie Farruggia crowned Neurodiversity Champion of the Year and the late Iain Hughes recognised for his fundraising efforts with the Unsung Hero Award.

The service was also nominated for Resilience and Learning from Major Incidents for work at Babbs Mill, where four young boys lost their lives, Project of the Year for the service's Fire Control National Operational Guidance team and Team of the Year for our work at Babbs Mill.

8. WMFS crowned UK's most inclusive employer for a second year running.

For an unprecedented second year in a row, WMFS has been named as the UK's Most Inclusive Employer. The accolade was announced at an awards event in London in December 2023.

Now in its eighth year, The Inclusive Top 50 UK Employers List shines a light on best practice across all strands of diversity including age, disability, gender, LGBT+, race, faith and religion.

In 2022, WMFS jumped to the No 1 spot after being placed ninth in 2021.

[Read more about this prestigious accolade on the WMFS website.](#)

National Fire and Rescue Service developments

9. Government response to Fire Reform White Paper published.

In December 2023 the Home Office published the long-awaited response to the Fire Reform White Paper, which had been first published in May 2022. The response outlines the range of consultation responses received from fire authorities and other stakeholders, as well as the government's proposals to either take forward or pause other proposals.

It describes the government's plans to create a College of Fire and Rescue to raise standards and develop best practice, as well as nurturing future leaders. It sets out their intention to legislate to create Operational Independence for Chief Fire Officers, but also that they won't be mandating governance change. There is also a focus on people and development, including the wider role out of consistent background checks for fire service employees and consideration of consistent entry requirements between services.

[The full consultation response can be found on the gov.uk website.](#)