

OFFICIAL



WMFRA

**West Midlands Fire and
Rescue Authority**

**Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
Section 41 Report
March 2025**

'Making the West Midlands Safer, Stronger and Healthier'

Report by Cllr Rizwan Jalil

Membership of the Authority

The Member of the Authority for 2024-25 is as follows:

Local Authority	Councillor(s)
Birmingham	Councillor Basharat Mahmood* (Labour) Councillor Gurdial Singh Atwal (Labour) Councillor Hendrina Quinnen (Labour) Councillor David Barrie (Conservative)
Coventry	Councillor Catherine Miks* (Labour) – <i>Vice-Chair</i> Councillor Gavin Lloyd (Labour)
Dudley	Councillor Cathryn Bayton* (Labour) – <i>Chair</i> Councillor Adam Aston (Labour)
Sandwell	Councillor Rizwan Jalil* (Labour) Councillor Khayam Khan** (Labour)
Solihull	Councillor Peter Hogarth MBE* (Conservative)
Walsall	Councillor Ken Ferguson* (Conservative) Councillor Simran Cheema (Labour)
Wolverhampton	Councillor Jasbinder Dehar* (Labour) Councillor Ben Evans (Labour)***
Additional Member(s)	
Independent Member of the Audit and Risk Committee	Mr Mike Ager
Independent Member of Appointments, Standards and Appeals	Mr R Tomkinson (Standards Committee only)
Co-opted Members of the Authority	Professor Simon Brake Dave Brown – ABCA
Police and Crime Commissioner: Represented by (if applicable):	Simon Foster Assistant PCC Wasim Ali

*Section 41 member

** Replaced Cllr Bill Gavan July 2024

*** Replaced Cllr Greg Brackenridge October 2024

Service Performance against Strategic Plan

The below tables indicate service performance against a number of the annually agreed performance targets included within the Authority Strategy agreed in February 2024. These figures are for the year to date at the end of the last full quarter – December 31 2024. Green indicates within target range of better, red indicates outside target range. A full summary of performance data for 2024/25 will be provided in the Authority’s Annual Report, expected to be published in June 2025.

Indicator	Target	Performance
Risk Based Attendance Standard	Category 1 (high risk) – 5 minutes Category 2 (medium risk)– 7 minutes Category 3 (low risk) – 10 minutes Category 4 (secondary fires) – 20 minutes	Category 1 – 4:48 Category 2 – 5.32 Category 3 – 5:06 Category 4 – 6:30
Accidental dwelling fires	1045	1032
Injuries from accidental fires in dwellings (requiring hospital treatment)	35	38
Safe & Well Visits	6,388	5,759
% of Safe and Wells referred by Partner organisations	50%	52%
Deliberate fires in derelict buildings	127	99
Accidental fires in non-domestic premises	323	301
False alarm calls due to equipment problems in dwellings	4918	5699

Local Authority performance and key statistics

In addition to the service level performance indicators above, specific statistics are available for the Sandwell area for the year to date up to the end of quarter three 2024/25 (31 December 2024). More recent figures would be less accurate.

Indicator	Performance	Notes
Accidental Dwelling Fires	121	This is 8 below the three year average.
Accidental non-domestic fires	26	This is 15 below the three year average
False Alarms in dwellings (Equipment)	464	This is 80 above the three year average. Although there are no clearly identified trends in causes of this increase, crews continue to target “repeat offenders” with the aim of reducing false alarms.
Safe and Wells completed	700	This is below target for the borough, but 60.7% of safe and wells are referred from partners.

News and Updates

Governance improvement

1. Monitoring Officer Section 5 Report – October 2024

WMFRA’s Monitoring Officer issued a Section 5 report in October 2024. A section 5 report is issued when a monitoring officer believe that a proposal, decision or omission by the authority has, or is likely to, break the law. The Section 5 report covered two of the areas:

- Cancellation of WMFRA Audit and Risk Committee meeting in July 2024
- Suspension of a Statutory Officer

The recommendations of the Section 5 report were accepted in full, and steps have already been taken to implement a number of those recommendations, to include the creation of a Statutory Officer Protocol to more clearly define the roles, responsibilities and relationships between Statutory Officers.

[Read the full Section 5 Report as published here. Appendices can be accessed here.](#)

2. External Auditor Report – November 2024

WMFRA’s External Auditors, Grant Thornton, issued a report in November 2024 which made for sober reading, and the Authority have accepted all of the statutory and key recommendations contained within it. Although there is additional context around a number of the issues described, it is clear that there have been failings in the Authority’s governance processes and overrides of control.

Steps have already been taken to resolve some of these matters and the authority and officers are working hard to address all other recommendations to ensure such errors and breaches do not occur again. Specific areas of that report are covered below.

Qualifications held by former Chief Fire Officer

As the External Auditor's report makes clear, former Chief Fire Officer Wayne Brown's CV was inaccurate and he did not have the MBA that was listed when he applied for the role of DCFO and CFO. This was not picked up when he was first recruited as DCFO in 2019 and was not checked during his application for the role of CFO as he was an internal candidate. This is a clear failing of internal processes and extremely disappointing. This matter was being initially investigated alongside further detailed checks of the CV. Based on this it is very likely a formal investigation would have been agreed by Fire Authority, but CFO Brown sadly died before this could be implemented.

However, steps were quickly taken to ensure that all relevant qualifications were in place for other senior officers, our overall recruitment processes were reviewed and strengthened, and we have utilised an expert external recruitment firm to support recruitment to senior officer posts since then to ensure a robust process.

Suspension of a Statutory Officer

It has been recognised that the suspension of a statutory officer was not in keeping with the Authority's constitution. The Constitution will be reviewed as part of forthcoming Corporate Governance Improvement Board and the elements relating to suspension of senior officers will be reviewed in line with External Auditor recommendations.

The Fire Authority has now commissioned an independent legal firm to investigate the matter and determine whether the suspension is reasonable, and to bring the relevant investigations to a conclusion.

Direct appointments made by former Chief Executive Officer

The decision to appoint two senior officers without an open process was in some respects contrary to the constitution and good governance as is the fact that one such role was newly created without consultation with the Authority. The Authority and Service will strengthen our processes to ensure that such appointments are undertaken openly and properly, even when they are for temporary positions.

The two individuals that were appointed directly have now left the service. WMFRA are grateful for their support and their work to ensure the effective leadership of the service. Neither were themselves responsible for any issues with their recruitment processes.

Failure to formally appoint a statutory officer

The Authority failed to formally appoint the new Section 151 Officer following their recruitment as Head of Finance and Procurement. Although the main role does not require fire authority involvement as it is below the level of Brigade Manager, the Authority should have formally confirmed the post holder as Section 151. Clear approval processes have been put in place to ensure all such appointments are formally approved in future, and this will be reviewed and further clarified in the Constitution as part of the Corporate Governance Improvement Board work.

3. LGA Corporate Governance Improvement Board

The Authority requested support from the LGA in October 2024 given significant concerns raised about the Authority's governance, and the subsequent Section 5 and External Auditor reports. The Authority welcomed the LGA's decision to instigate a Corporate Governance Support Board (CGIB) in February 2025,

The independently chaired Board will utilise peer support to help the authority identify areas for improvement in our governance processes and structure. The board will be able to work with members and officers to find areas of improvement in the WMFRA Constitution, processes and policies. The Board will publish publicly at quarterly fire authority meetings the relevant findings and actions from its work and the Independent Chair will attend to present that report.

[Find full details in the CGIB report considered by the Authority on 17 February 2025 here.](#)

4. HMICFRS Inspection

Between October 2024 and January 2025 WMFS was subject to the long-planned third round of His Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) Inspection. HMICFRS staff were on site between November and December undertaking interviews and desktop reviews. This also includes station visits and focus groups with managers, networking groups and staff. The strategic briefing, where Senior Managers and the Chair/Vice-Chair meet with the inspection team to provide an overall briefing on the service, performance and priorities took place on 5 December.

Delivering a first class, transparent inspection has been identified as one of the service's priorities, and the service and authority are committed to engaging constructively with HMIC to ensure we can learn and improve. Key deliverables were:

- Ensure absolute transparency and honesty throughout the inspection process
- Provide the opportunity for as many of our staff to be involved, including an increased staff engagement with inspectorate surveys.
- Use the inspection as a means to highlight our strengths as well as identify opportunities for improvement.
- Be open and honest with our communities about our performance
- Utilise the inspection as a means to engage our key partners and stakeholders
- Be responsive to the needs and expectations of the inspection team
- Provide high quality and timely information to the support the inspection process

HMICFRS expect to report their full findings in May 2025, which will be made publicly available. The Authority are pleased to have received positive feedback from HMICFRS about the level of engagement from staff, and no significant areas of concern have been raised with senior officers or the authority from the inspection process.

5. Best Value Inspection

The Fire Minister, the Right Honourable Dame Diana Johnson MP, wrote to the Authority and Service to confirm she would be commissioning a Best Value Inspection (BVI) of our governance in the near future. This will be based on the well-established Best Value methodology and will likely look at a range of areas under the Best Value themes.

The Authority and Service responded to the Minister on 8 November to welcome the BVI as an opportunity to make any identified improvements and provide reassurance to our communities. As with HMICFRS inspection, the service is committed to delivering a first class, transparent inspection and providing any support that is needed to the inspectors.

The inspection will be led by an appointed lead inspector with relevant expertise, appointed by the Home Office, who may be supported by assistant inspectors as required.

Other news

6. Chief Fire Officer Simon Tuhill joins service

The Authority was pleased to welcome Chief Fire Officer Simon Tuhill to the service in January 2025. This follows a robust recruitment process undertaken by the external recruitment experts Gatenby Sanderson, with support from the service's Head of Human Resources and HMI Roy Wilsher OBE QFSM from HMICFRS.

Simon initially worked in the pharmaceutical and medical industry. He began his fire service journey in London Fire Brigade in 1998 and over a career based mainly in central London, attended large and major incidents including the 7/7 bombings, for which he received a commendation, and the Grenfell Tower fire. In 2020, he joined Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue Service as Area Commander and became Assistant Chief Fire Officer. He subsequently moved to Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service as Deputy Chief Fire Officer.

During his time in Northamptonshire, which serving as Interim CFO, Simon guided the service through significant organisational and political turbulence, stabilising and working closely with staff to improve the service.

[Read more here.](#)

7. Fatal e-bike fire in Coventry sparks family-led safety campaign

The deaths of a young West Midlands couple, who perished along with their two dogs in a fire caused by an e-bike battery, has sparked a public safety campaign, after a coroner ruled their deaths as accidental.

In November, a catastrophic property fire in Coventry claimed their lives and those of their beloved dogs, Tyagi and Medusa. The fire started when an e-bike's lithium-ion battery ignited

and rapidly escalated into an intense blaze, described by Binley firefighter, Dell Haughton, as the most severe fire he's witnessed in his 21 years of service.

The tragedy has prompted Natasha and Karlo's grieving families to collaborate with West Midlands Fire Service (WMFS) to share their story and raise awareness.

[Watch the testimony of Natasha and Karlo's family and WMFS firefighters, and read more about battery safety here.](#)

8. West Midlands firefighter awarded the Humanitarian Medal for international rescue work

A retiring West Midlands firefighter received one of the first Humanitarian Medals in recognition of his outstanding work with UK International Search and Rescue (UK ISAR). Watch Commander Shammi Rana, formerly of Bickenhill's Technical Rescue Unit, was honoured for his dedication to disaster response following the devastating earthquake in Morocco in September 2023.

In February he attended Buckingham Palace and received the Humanitarian medal from the King as one of the first-ever recipients of the award. It recognises aid workers, rescuers, and emergency services personnel deployed by the UK government to international disasters and conflicts.

[Read more about Shammi's award here.](#)