

Meeting: Fire Services Management Committee

Date: 9 December 2022



Wildfires

Purpose of report

For discussion/ direction.

Summary

This paper supplements the presentation by Paul Hedley, National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) Lead for Wildfires, and provides an overview of the current issues around wildfires for discussion. The paper also includes suggestions for future work in this area for consideration and direction.

Is this report confidential? No

Recommendations

Members are asked to consider how the FSMC can best contribute towards furthering work in this area.

Members are asked for the views on the following recommendations:

1. That FSMC work with the NFCC to push for more national capacity to support Fire and Rescue Services (FRS) in fighting wildfires.
2. That FSMC support and promote NFCC's work around wildfires including an updated and enhanced Wildfire Prevention Toolkit and National Training Packages.
3. That FSMC amplifies national messages around wildfire awareness and safety and encourages government to launch a national awareness campaign around the risks of wildfires.
4. That FSMC considers developing a position on the sale of disposable barbeques.

Contact details

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Wildfires



Background

1. As of September, there have been 972 wildfires in the UK this year which is four times, and over 700 incidents, more than in 2021 and nearly seven times more than in 2020. The criteria for classification as a wildfire are one or more of the following.
 - ≥ 1 Hectare (10,000m²)
 - ≥ 4 Appliances or vehicles
 - ≥ 6 hours duration
 - Flame Length of ≥ 1.5 m
 - Serious Risk to Life, Environment, Infrastructure, Property
2. Whilst most wildfires in the UK affect open, rural areas like heath and moorland, record breaking temperatures and extremely dry conditions brought devastating wildfires which, on the UK's hottest ever day on 19 July, destroyed over 60 homes, 41 of those in London. This has highlighted the significant wildfire risk that exists at the Rural / Urban Interface (RUI).
3. On the 19 July when temperatures and wildfire incidents peaked, Fire Services across the country were under intense pressure with fifteen services declaring major incidents with many more struggling to cope. Major incidents are usually larger, more complex incidents, endanger lives, threaten larger areas, and require additional levels of co-ordination across a range of emergency services and other agencies. London Fire Brigade also recording their busiest day since the Second World War, attending more than 1,110 incidents.
4. The increasing risk from wildfire has been seen across Europe, as well as Australia and the USA. Southwestern Europe has faced another year of high levels of wildfire activity, especially in Southwestern France, Greece, Portugal and Spain. Wildfire activity in August contributed a total cumulative burnt area in the EU over the summer months (4 June to 3 Sept) of 508,260 hectares, compared to a 2006-2021 average of

215,548 hectares for the same period, according to data from the European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS). Damage to soil also increased the risk of flash flooding and soil erosion.

5. This increased wildfire activity is also reflected in carbon emissions and impacting on carbon minimising targets. According to data from the CAMS Global Fire Assimilation System (GFAS), total wildfire emissions in the EU and the United Kingdom between 1 June and 31 August in 2022 are estimated at 6.4 megatonnes of carbon, the highest level since 2007.
6. The causes of wildfires in the UK at least are understood to be mostly the result of human activity. Sparks from cigarettes, shards of glass from broken bottles magnifying the sun and inappropriate use of disposable barbeques close to dry grass have all been identified as potential causes of wildfires as well as deliberate acts. There is currently not enough data to say which of these, or other behaviours are the most significant in causing wildfires incidents.

Issues for the UK

7. With the frequency of severe weather events like heatwaves expected to continue to increase – wildfires are expected to become more frequent both in the UK and elsewhere they are a significant and growing challenge for Fire and Rescue Authorities.
8. There are some specific issues for the UK that are considered below.

Resources and resilience

9. Wildfires have different characteristics to other types of fires and as such often need a multi-agency response and, in many cases, require specialist teams and equipment.
10. Resources that are required include firefighters, knowledge, skills and equipment, which can be sourced internally, but are also likely to require input from other FRSs or from external agencies. It may also be necessary to request National Resilience assets and/or military aid.

11. Over the summer the volume and intensity of the wildfires had a significant impact on FRS ability to offer mutual aid to support to other services. This was exacerbated by the fact that wildfires affected almost all FRAs.
12. Funding cuts and the subsequent reduction in frontline firefighter numbers over the last decade means mutual aid arrangements are critical to how FRSs plan for and respond to large scale, complex incidents. If widespread wildfires become common place, FRSs will not be able to rely on mutual aid and will need to rethink Risk Management Plans.
13. National capability is also limited. There are currently 47 Wildfire Tactical Advisers (WTAs) from 23 FRS. As was the case in the summer with widespread outbreaks of wildfires, these resources cannot be depended on if WTAs are needed to provide support in their home authorities.
14. NFCC have outlined the need for central capability dedicated to wildfires. The national resilience response that exists at the moment has only moved forward because of good will from FRSs, and so central capability would also require funding.
15. The challenge of increasing budgetary pressures will impact on FRS ability to invest in new specialist protective kit and tools, and even in different types of response vehicles.

Public perception

16. Public perception of the risk of wildfires is low in the UK, which may be because wildfires have until recently been low frequency events and largely been confined to open rural areas such as moorland, and have not resulted in loss of life.
17. Low perception for this type of hazard means there is a risk both that people will not know how to prepare for or respond to a wildfire, but also that they may not be aware how certain behaviour might contribute to the risk of wildfires starting.
18. Over the summer FRSs as well as the LGA put out communications highlighting risks of fires in hot weather and urging the public to extinguish and dispose of cigarettes properly and not to have barbecues in parks and public spaces or on balconies.

19. Disposable barbecues, if used correctly, do not, in themselves, pose a wildfire risk; it is when they are left unattended, or used recklessly, that the risk occurs. The latest data from the Home Office for 2021-22 suggests that about 0.5 per cent of accidental primary fires can be attributed to barbecue use. That data does not differentiate between the use of a barbecue in somebody's home or garden and its use elsewhere. It also does not describe the type of barbecue responsible.
20. Whilst there is limited detailed data on the role that disposable barbecues play in wildfire incidents, there is evidence that they have been responsible for a number of serious incidents and they have been identified as a particular area of concern for several FRS. We are aware that some FRS, including London's Fire Chief Andy Roe, have called for an outright ban on their sale.
21. NFCC have highlighted the importance of a thorough investigation to ensure that the source of ignition for a wildfire is known. Whilst some fires can be directly attributed to disposable barbecues, in some cases they were aware that disposable barbecues had been found at the scene of a fire but were not confirmed as the cause of the fire. They also identified particular issues around the disposal of cigarettes and glass, both of which are known to have caused wildfires, alongside consistent issues with sky lanterns.
22. Dorset council have written to the LGA requesting support for a nationwide campaign to encourage all UK supermarkets to stop selling disposable barbecues and to explore national legislation relating to disposable barbecues. In Dorset out of 93 heathland fires recorded between April and August 2022) 25 of these reports disposable barbecues or campfires are mentioned as being a possible cause. The council has successfully led a joint campaign working in partnership with the Dorset and Wiltshire FRS, Urban Heaths Partnership, Litter Free Dorset and a range of other organisations to prevent wildfires happening from disposable barbecues and campfires. This has resulted in many local shops and a few supermarkets, such as Southern Co-op, agreeing to stop selling disposable barbecues.

23. At the national level, supermarkets and retailers have different policies relating to the sale of disposable barbecues for example for example a total ban on sales (eg Marks & Spencer, Waitrose and Aldi) or using National Park designation as criteria – meaning that if the supermarket is in - or within close proximity to - a National Park then they will not sell disposable barbecues (eg Tesco, Iceland, Morrisons, Co-op). Many large supermarkets also temporarily stopped the sale of disposable barbecues due to the risk of wildfire this summer.

24. Landowners including councils and National Parks can ban the use of disposable barbecues on their land. For example Bradford Council, Calderdale Council & Kirklees Council have all brought in Public Space Protection Orders (PSPO's) relating to bans on barbecues, fires, sky lanterns, fireworks and other dangerous items from moorland across the district.

Suggestions for the future and future work

25. The paragraphs below set out suggestions for future work around wildfires for discussion and direction by the Board.

26. Paul Headley will outline the work the NFCC is leading on to improve our resilience and response to wildfires including an updated and enhanced Wildfire Prevention Toolkit and National Training Packages. The LGA will continue to work closely with the NFCC to promote this work with our members.

Awareness campaigns and promoting good practice

27. Increasing public awareness and understanding about wildfire and their risk of and what we can do to mitigate risks is an area that the LGAs work could support, subject to Members views.

28. Amplify national messages as we did over the summer. We could encourage government to launch a national awareness campaign around risks of wildfires which would ensure consistent messaging.

29. As outlined above, whilst some retailers have removed disposable barbecues from sale voluntarily and others have targeted bans, this may not go far enough. Dorset council

have requested the LGAs support to set up a meeting with all UK supermarkets to discuss the real cost of disposable barbeques to help them to better understand the issue and encourage them to support a nationwide campaign to stop selling disposable barbeques.

30. The LGA could pull together case studies of successful local campaigns, such as the work Dorset and partners have done with supermarkets to restrict the sale of disposable barbeques, and public awareness campaigns elsewhere like [Be Moor Aware](#) in West Yorkshire which highlights the impacts that moorland wildfire has on communities and how the public can help to prevent future wildfires across West Yorkshire.

31. For our Fire Conference 2023 we will be looking at how we can reflect the challenges of climate change and their impact on Fire Services resilience. As part of the conference and the publication that launches alongside it, we hope to reflect practical examples of how councils and their partners can promote awareness about wildfires and drive behavioural change, and we could highlight local campaigns with supermarkets further with a view to include it as an example of good practice. We are also hoping to invite an international keynote speaker to talk about what we can learn from the experience of Southern Europe over the past few years.

Legislation

32. We are keen to ensure that our work addresses the breadth of issues, for example around the disposal of cigarettes and glass, both of which are known to have caused wildfires, alongside consistent issues with sky lanterns. We are however aware that individual Fire Services, such as the London Fire Brigade has advocated for a total ban on disposable barbeques and so would be grateful for Member's steer on our response to this and whether we should call for legislation in this area.

33. In considering this issue members should be aware that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has commissioned research to look at the impact of disposable barbecues and sky lanterns (as well as helium balloons). This research will look at the risks and impacts - including fire - arising from the use of these items, analyse the existing controls on the use and sale of these items and make

recommendations for government intervention which would further mitigate against any significant risks. The LGA has had an initial discussion with the researchers in recent weeks and reflected concerns that have been raised with us. Members may want to consider waiting for the publication of this research to inform any decision.

34. An alternative to banning the sale of barbecues and one which is used in Australia are Total Fire Bans (TFB). These are linked to weather warnings and are declared on days when fires are most likely to threaten lives and property. On a Total Fire Ban day, it is illegal to light an open-air fire or conduct any activity that could start a fire with fines issued to those breaking rules (and where certain exemptions do not apply).

Implications for Wales

35. Fire and rescue related policy is a devolved matter and much of the Committee's work will focus on changes for Fire and Rescue Authorities in England, with the Welsh Local Government Association leading on lobbying for Welsh Fire and Rescue Authorities.

Financial Implications

36. None.

Equalities Implications

37. The UKCCC (Climate Change Commission) Health Equity Report highlights how direct and indirect impacts of climate change will widen existing health inequalities in the UK. The Group warns the most vulnerable will be hit hardest.

Next steps

38. Members are asked to consider how the FSMC can best contribute towards furthering work in this area.

39. Members are asked for the views on the following recommendations:

- Work with the NFCC to push for more national capacity to support Fire and Rescue Services (FRS) in fighting wildfires
- Support and promote NFCCs work around wildfires including an updated and enhanced Wildfire Prevention Toolkit and National Training Packages.

- Amplify national messages around wildfire awareness and safety and encourage government to launch a national awareness campaign around risks of wildfires.
- Consider the LGAs position on the sale of disposable barbeques.