

Protect our communities, our planet and our future

We need our world to be sustainable into the future. The work of the National Fire Chief Council's (NFCC) Sustainability, Climate Change and Environment group is to ensure that the fire and rescue sector supports sustainable, safe communities.

Words: Ben Brook, Chief Fire Officer, Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service

Climate change is a leadership challenge that is both large and daunting. The fire and rescue sector, alongside all public sector organisations, has a legal duty to act, with the Climate Change Act 2008 committing the UK government to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 100 per cent of 1990 levels (net zero) by 2050.

A moral duty to act

The fire and rescue sector has a moral duty to act. Rising temperature will have the greatest impact on the most vulnerable in our communities. For example, rising temperatures will reduce food and water availability. The fire and rescue sector is already responding to new risks such as wildfires, electric vehicles, lithium-ion batteries and highly insulated homes and buildings. Climate change is already having an impact on fire and rescue service-related risk and vulnerability and the communities we support.

Sustainability

Traditional thinking may lead us to conclude that the answer lies in changing heating systems and insulating buildings, moving to an electric fleet and planting trees. This work is essential and must be done, contributing to net zero. Sustainability is broader, deeper and wider.

The United Nations 17 Sustainability Goals broaden our thinking and provide a broad set of outcomes which defines what it means to be sustainable. The fire and rescue sector may not be able to contribute to all these outcomes, but many are relevant. Fire and rescue services can also indirectly influence change within their role and their statutory functions and can have more impact in collaboration and find synergy with other organisations.



Chief Fire Officer Ben Brook with one of his service's electric vehicles.

Fire and rescue services do not exist to be sustainable, to protect the climate or the environment, they exist to reduce risk and vulnerability through prevention, protection and response activities. We have the choice as to whether to deliver prevention, protection and response activities in a sustainable way. Protecting the environment, mitigating impacts and adapting to climate change are all parts of creating a sustainable future.

The impact on the fire and rescue sector

Sustainability, climate and the environment cut across fire and rescue services core statutory functions of prevention, protection and response. In relation to prevention, the most vulnerable to fires and other emergencies may be disproportionately affected by climate change.

1.2 billion people live somewhere that will be uninhabitable because of heat by 2050. This will result in a transient population and increased numbers of vulnerable people in need of help. In relation to protection, building construction, heating and insulation methods will change creating new and emerging risks.

The need for change

Our response activities will also change, responding to more extreme flooding, storm and wildfire events. Hot and dry periods could lead to changes in soil structures and risk of building collapse. The way that we respond to incidents may need to change to ensure that the least impact is made on the environment.

How we enable our prevention, protection and response activities will also need to change. To support net zero targets, our buildings will need to change, our vehicles and equipment will need to be fuelled in different ways, our procurement needs to take account of sustainability. We may need to think again - is a focus on electric vehicles right or should we equally focus on only making journeys when essential? We need to choose the right approach.

Next steps

The NFCC is in the early stages of the development of this toolkit. It will only be as effective as the quality of its content, and its value and use by the sector. To contribute or get involved in this work please contact: Casey.Drake@kent.fire-uk.org.

We can only make a difference if all leaders commit to protecting our communities, protecting our planet and protecting our future, considering it in everything that is done. It is not a stand-alone concept or priority, but as an integrated area of focus and way of thinking that cross cuts everything we do. This is the basis of a panel discussion that I will be joining at The Emergency Services Show on 21 September.

www.nationalfirechiefs.org.uk

NFCC toolkit

To help the sector share a range of research, data, information, and case studies, the NFCC has developed a sustainability toolkit. It contains:

- **Data and research**

Help to take an evidence-based approach to understanding, delivering, and evaluating fire and rescue activity around sustainability, climate and the environment

- **Stakeholders, partnerships and funding**

Good practice from a wide range of key partners involved in this area of work. There is also grant funding available to support activity

- **Case studies**

A repository of fire sector case studies which have been evaluated, providing examples of good practice and lessons learnt

- **Evaluation methodologies**

Access to a range of evaluation methods and tools to ensure that the fire sector understands the value and impact it is making

- **Maturity model**

Thoughts on developing a maturity model that is focused on sustainability, climate and the environment.