



Wildfire Ready Herefordshire

Council and Parishes Working Together

Summary of Proceedings

Date: Monday 7 September 2026

Time: 17:30–just after 19:00

Format: Microsoft Teams

Audience: Parish and town councils and partner organisations

Purpose of the event

Herefordshire Council brought together parish and town councils, Council services and specialist partners to consider the growing risk of wildfire and how communities can strengthen their preparedness.

The event was based on a simple principle: wildfire resilience is a shared endeavour. Statutory responders retain their respective responsibilities, while parish and town councils bring invaluable local knowledge of communities, places, access routes, vulnerable settings, local assets and trusted communication networks.

The event was not intended to place new requirements on parishes. Rather, it provided an opportunity to understand the respective roles of different organisations, share learning and identify practical and proportionate steps that communities can take before an incident occurs.

Welcome and introduction

The event was chaired by Cllr Elissa Swinglehurst, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Culture and Environment. She highlighted the particular relevance of wildfire preparedness to rural Herefordshire, with its farming communities, woodland, open countryside and dispersed settlements.

The Chair emphasised that wildfire consequences can extend well beyond the area burned, potentially affecting health through smoke, disrupting roads and utilities, threatening homes and businesses and, in more serious incidents, requiring evacuation and community support. She also recognised the distinctive contribution of parish and town councils: their detailed understanding of local communities, trusted relationships, local assets and practical knowledge of places that statutory organisations cannot replicate.

Wildfire as a public health issue

Zoe Clifford, Director of Public Health, outlined why wildfire should be regarded not only as a fire and rescue issue but also as a public health and community-resilience issue. Her presentation considered the changing pattern of wildfire risk, the importance of prevention given the role of human activity in many wildfire ignitions, and the potential health and wider community consequences.

These include exposure to smoke and fine particulate matter, respiratory and cardiovascular effects, injury, evacuation, disruption to health and care services and longer-term impacts on mental wellbeing. Particular attention was given to people who may be disproportionately affected, including older people, young children, pregnant women, people with existing respiratory or cardiovascular conditions, people receiving care and support, isolated rural residents and those who may have difficulty evacuating.

“The strongest wildfire preparedness is built before the smoke is even in the air.”

Climate change and adaptation

Mary Burton, Climate Adaptation Officer, described the changing climate context for Herefordshire and the Council's wider climate-adaptation work. She highlighted hotter and drier summers, more frequent extreme-weather events and the importance of considering mitigation and adaptation together.

Practical measures discussed included managing vegetation around properties, reducing combustible material, conserving and storing water, rain gardens and other measures that can help communities and households become more resilient. Mary also highlighted support and resources available to communities and invited parishes to engage with the Council's climate-adaptation work.

Learning from flood resilience

Steve Hodges, Group Manager, Flood Risk Management, reflected on Herefordshire's substantial experience of working with communities affected by flooding and the lessons that can be transferred to wildfire preparedness.

Three themes were particularly important: local knowledge, trusted communication and early action. Communities often know which locations are most vulnerable, which routes may become inaccessible, who may require assistance and which local people and assets could safely help.

The familiar Before–During–After approach used in flood planning provides a useful framework for wildfire preparedness: understand risks and resources beforehand; know how to communicate and seek support during an incident; and support recovery, learning and improvement afterwards.

Fire and Rescue Service perspective

David Swallow, District Commander for Herefordshire, Hereford & Worcester Fire and Rescue Service, NFCC Wildfire Deputy Lead and Wildfire Tactical Advisor, provided the specialist Fire and Rescue Service perspective.

He described the changing wildfire picture nationally and locally, including concern about significant wildfire years occurring more frequently and the increasing importance of fires at the rural–urban interface, where vegetation fires can directly threaten homes and communities.

A major theme was land management. Effective management of vegetation and fuel loads can reduce wildfire severity and improve the ability of firefighters to protect property. David discussed wildfire risk assessment, fire breaks and the concept of creating defensible space around properties. He also described HWFRS's developing wildfire capability, including specialist vehicles, equipment, training and work with agricultural partners to improve access to water supplies.

Herefordshire's arrangements and parish preparedness

Dr P Badrinath, Interim Consultant in Public Health Medicine, brought together the County and community perspectives. The draft Herefordshire Council Wildfire Response Plan was introduced as an operational addendum to existing arrangements rather than a new standalone command structure.

It links with the Heat Health Plan, emergency communications, evacuation and rest-centre arrangements, business continuity, highways and wider multi-agency arrangements. The Fire and Rescue Service leads

firefighting and fire-ground operations. The Council's role becomes particularly important where wildfire creates wider consequences for people and communities, for example public health impacts, evacuation and welfare needs, disruption to essential services, communications and recovery.

The Parish Wildfire Planning Template was introduced as a voluntary practical tool that can either stand alone or complement an existing Community Emergency Plan. It encourages parishes to understand local risks, map important places and assets, consider vulnerable settings and access issues, nominate local leads, establish communication arrangements and consider what they would safely do before, during and after an incident.

Parish arrangements should remain simple, safe and proportionate. Parish volunteers do not fight wildfires or enter hazardous fire or smoke areas.

Discussion and questions

The presentations generated a lively discussion, with questions and contributions from parish and town council representatives. Several practical themes emerged.

Theme	Key points from discussion
Vulnerable residents	Parishes asked how people needing additional support could be identified while respecting data protection. Local knowledge, Talk Community networks and known vulnerable settings were highlighted, while recognising that further thought is needed on how information can be maintained appropriately.
Livestock and farming	Participants raised practical issues relating to livestock, hazardous materials, farm access, water supplies and evacuation. Further engagement with farming organisations such as the NFU was suggested.
Prevention and land management	There was strong interest in vegetation management, defensible space, woodland risk and making prevention more explicit within parish planning materials.
Water for firefighting	Knowledge of accessible local water sources, including agricultural storage and reservoirs, was recognised as potentially valuable to Fire and Rescue Service operations.
Communications	Discussion covered how information would flow as an incident escalates and how parish arrangements and local intelligence could support established emergency-service and multi-agency structures.
Funding and insurance	Participants asked about incentives for prevention. No established wildfire equivalent to flood-specific insurance arrangements was identified, although examples of risk-reduction measures influencing agricultural insurance were noted.

Key messages from the evening

- Prepare before an incident occurs.
- Build on existing community emergency arrangements rather than creating unnecessary parallel plans.
- Local knowledge is a major resilience asset.
- Prevention and good land management are fundamental.
- Know local access routes, vulnerable settings, communication networks and useful community assets.
- Share verified information and maintain trusted communication channels.
- Community action must always remain safe and complement, not replace, the work of statutory responders.
- Review, exercise and learn from plans so that they remain useful and current.

Next steps

The post-event pack will provide participants with presentations and supporting resources, including the Parish Wildfire Planning Template and additional briefing material. Parish and town councils are encouraged to review the template in the context of their own communities and existing emergency arrangements and to share feedback, questions and relevant local intelligence.

The Chair noted that feedback on the template and emerging local plans will help deepen understanding and improve future arrangements, and that follow-up engagement may be useful.

County arrangements provide the framework; local knowledge makes preparedness real.

Note: This document is a concise summary of the proceedings and discussion. It is not a verbatim transcript.