



Wednesday, 10 April 2024

(1) **MEMBERS OF THE AVON FIRE AUTHORITY**

Councillors B Massey, S Smith, L Brennan, R Eddy, R Hardie, P Hulme, P May, R Moss, R Payne, O Saini and D Thomas

(2) **APPROPRIATE OFFICERS**

(3) **PRESS AND PUBLIC**

Dear Member

You are invited to attend a meeting of the **Policy and Resources Committee** to be held on **Thursday, 18 April 2024** commencing at **10:30 hrs.**

The meeting will be held at **Main Conference Room (above Reception), Admin Building, Police and Fire Headquarters, Valley Road, Portishead, BS20 8JJ.** Parking is available on site.

In order to ensure COVID-19 guidance is adhered to risk assessments have been undertaken for live meetings to identify and put in place, the measures required ensuring that meetings take place safely. Further information is available on our website www.avonfire.gov.uk and Democratic Services.

Please note that this meeting will be video recorded and published on our YouTube channel (see the Notes on the next page).

Yours sincerely

Amanda Brown
Clerk to the Fire Authority

PROVIDING AVON FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE



Clerk to Avon Fire Authority
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Notes

Attendance Register – Attendance will be recorded by the Democratic Services Assistant and recorded within the Minutes of the Meeting.

Code of Conduct – Declaration of Interests: any Member in attendance who has a personal interest in any matter to be considered at this meeting must disclose the existence and nature of that interest at the commencement of that consideration, or when the interest becomes apparent. A Member having a prejudicial interest must withdraw from the meeting room or meeting whilst the matter is considered.

Contact: for any queries about the Meeting please contact Democratic Services on 0117 926 2061 ext. 231; or by e mail at the.clerk@avonfire.gov.uk; or in person at Police and Fire HQ, Valley Road, Portishead, Bristol, BS20 8JJ (by appointment during normal office hours only).

Emergency Evacuation Procedures: these will be advised at the start of the Meeting if appropriate.

Exempt Items: Members are reminded that any Exempt Reports as circulated with this Agenda contain exempt information and should therefore be treated accordingly. They should not be disclosed or passed on to any other person(s). Members are also reminded of the need to dispose of such reports carefully and are therefore invited to return them to the Clerk at the conclusion of the Meeting for disposal.

Inspection of Papers: any person wishing to inspect Minutes, Reports, or a list of the background papers relating to any item on this Agenda should contact Democratic Services as above.

Public Access: under Standing Order 21 and providing 2 clear working days' notice has been given to the Clerk (the.clerk@avonfire.gov.uk) any resident or representative of a business or voluntary organisation operating in Bristol, South Gloucestershire, Bath and North East Somerset or North Somerset Council may address the Fire Authority or one of its Committees (for no more than 5 minutes) by submitting a written petition or statement. If preferred, the Chair or Clerk can read out a written statement on the individual's behalf. There is a time limit of 30 minutes for all Public Access statements.

Reports: reports are identified by the relevant agenda item number.

Substitutes (for Committees only): notification of substitutes should have been received from Group Leaders by the Clerk prior to the meeting.

**A G E N D A - Policy and Resources Committee Thursday, 18
April 2024 10:30**

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| 13. | Date of Next Meeting Thursday 25 July 2024 at 10.30hrs | |
| 14. | Exclusion of the Press and Public | |
| | <p>To resolve that the public be excluded from the meeting during the following items of business on the grounds that they contained exempt information pursuant to Schedule 12A, Part 1 of the Local Government Act 1972 and that in accordance with Schedule 12A, Part 2, paragraph 10 of the Local Government Act 1972 the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.</p> | |
| 15. | Confidential Minutes of the Ordinary meeting of the Policy and Resources Committee held on 13 December 2023
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AVON FIRE AUTHORITY

POLICY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE (PRC) MINUTES

13 DECEMBER 2023

MINUTES OF MEETING

PRESENT: Cllrs Brennan, Hardie, Hulme, Massey (Chair), Payne, Saini and Smith

The meeting started at 11.30hrs.

33. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Eddy, May, Thomas and Walker.

34. EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURES

Members were advised by the Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive (CFO) that in the event of an emergency, to exit the room and meet in the rear yard.

35. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

None received.

36. PUBLIC ACCESS

Matt Senior from the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) read out a Statement which is available on the Avon Fire Authority (AFA) website.

The CFO responded to the statement: 'I would like to acknowledge the Public Access Statement and also thank the FBU for their support during the trials of the scenario planning which will be covered in paper 12 on the agenda.

Following on from the budget statement on local authority spending, the medium-term financial plan now shows a deficit of over 3 million pounds over the next three years, which is greater than originally anticipated which is covered in paper 12 on the agenda. To ignore the deficit is not an option I have available to consider.

I have a duty to present to you as the Fire Authority a balanced budget for you to comply with the Authorities statutory duties.

Any alternative options in finding such efficiencies are far worse and will have a significant impact on our attendance times and service delivery to our communities. The progress report requested by Members demonstrates that our response times and service provision can still be met by not reducing the number of appliances or closing fire stations, and maintain a risk based safe system of work'.

37. CHAIR'S BUSINESS

The Chair welcomed attendees to the meeting.

1. Members and Officers introduced themselves and the Chair outlined that the meeting was taking place at Severn Park Training Centre. The meeting would also be recorded and uploaded to the AFA YouTube channel.
2. The Chair explained the voting system for the meeting, i.e., votes against a motion would be recorded first, followed by abstentions, then votes in favour.

38. MINUTES OF THE POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE HELD ON 29 SEPTEMBER 2023

The minutes of the Policy and Resources Committee held on 29 September 2023 were moved by Cllr Massey and seconded by Cllr Smith.

It was RESOLVED -

That the minutes of the Policy and Resources Committee held on 29 September 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

39. PEOPLE SERVICES STRATEGY 01 APRIL 2024 – 31 MARCH 2025

The Committee received a report from the Assistant Chief Fire Officer, Service Delivery Support (ACFO SDS).

Members were advised that this was a new strategy for the introduction of the newly formed People Services Department consisting of Learning and Development (L&D), Diversity, Inclusion, Cohesion and Equality (DICE), Human Resources (HR) and Health & Safety (H&S) with additional support from Resource Planning Unit (RPU), Corporate Communications and Service Transformation.

This strategy would be delivered within a one-year timeframe and focused on the successful integration of the new operating model and its associated themes within People Services. By April 2025, the Service would be well positioned to formulate and execute a more comprehensive, long-term strategy.

This strategy was the first People Services Strategy, which reflected the aims of the department during the first year of the new operating model for the four departments.

A Member asked whether the new strategy would become part of the new Service plan. The ACFO, SDS confirmed that the objectives and key results had been written in line with the Service Plan.

The recommendation was moved by Cllr Massey and seconded by Cllr Hulme.

It was resolved that the Committee –

a) Considered the strategy and approved its publication.

40. UPDATE ON PENSION ADMINISTRATOR IMPLEMENTATION OF IMMEDIATE DETRIMENT REGULATIONS

The Committee received a report from the Pension Advisor which provided a summary of the current position of pension administration and the implementation of rectification following the McCloud and Sargeant legal cases as well as the Matthews second option which went ahead from 1 October 2023.

In respect of the Matthews case, the Pensions Advisor had identified those on-call firefighters in scope and had written to them asking them to contact the Pension Advisor as soon as possible. It was noted that the Calculator, to prepare their calculations, would not be available until January 2024.

With regards to the McCloud cases, all firefighters must be provided with two sets of figures. One on the rectification basis and one on the current basis, which had caused considerable problems with the administrator resulting to delays in figures being issued. The Pension Advisor explained that he was advised in August that the software system was almost up and running, which was frustrating. Without the software, this involved manual calculations of every individual, 'undoing' their pension contributions for 7 years, and re-applying them which is time consuming. There was a delay for people receiving their pensions in November, all figures have been issued for December.

The Pension Advisor confirmed that he had written to everybody affected but had been reliant on Bristol City Council (BCC) and B&NES for information.

The CFO reminded Members that the AFA had decided to pause processing ID cases until October 2023. We had also carried out a case-by-case assessment for those facing financial hardship. Whilst legislation was passed on 1 October 2023, the Service was led to believe that an electronic calculator would be provided. However, this did not happen, and this had caused some compression with a number of stakeholders involved that required the data. The two options were to receive benefits up until 31 March 2022 in their legacy schemes or receive their pension benefits from 2015 with the 2015 scheme. This involved manual calculations in the absence of the electronic systems so that they could make a more informed decision.

A Member surmised that it was not clear when this situation would be resolved and asked for confirmation that no firefighter was in financial hardship because of this.

The Pension Advisor advised that legally the process must be completed by March 2025 and as far as he was aware, no one was in financial hardship.

A Member asked whether members who had previously retired over the last few years, were still waiting for the timescales to catch up with them. The Pension Advisor advised that there was a priority order where ill health retirements and members who had died would be processed first and would then look at the most recent cases then older ones.

The CFO advised that there was an 18-month window from 1 October 2023 to rectify members choice. All members had received a pension, but it is their option to decide which pension benefits they received. These could not be processed all at once, so a plan has been put together to deal with those most affected.

A Member asked whether once the software was available, would that speed the process up. The Pension Advisor confirmed it would and he had prompted BCC not to archive information as we would require salaries and contribution information going back over the last seven years. The Pension Advisor had seen a demonstration from the new administrator and was confident that there would be an improvement seen.

It was resolved that the Committee –

a) Noted the current position with Immediate Detriment and Remedy.

b) Noted the letter sent to all retirees (Appendix 1)

c) Considered the potential tax implications and costs associated with HM Treasury revaluation rates for active members of the FPS 2015 (Appendix 2).

41. SERVICE PLAN – DRAFT OBJECTIVES FOR CONSULTATION

The Committee received a report from the Corporate Assurance and Planning Manager.

The purpose of the report was to inform the PRC on progress towards developing the AFA's Service Plan (SP) for 2024-2028.

The SP 2024-2028 would set out the AFA's strategic aims and priorities, acting as a point of reference for our staff, partners, and communities. It would highlight the areas that we considered were important, enabling us to execute our core Service activities excellently while delivering continuous improvement.

Public consultation on the draft SP objectives was planned to commence in January 2024 and run for a period of six-weeks.

The final draft of the SP would be presented to the AFA for review and approval at its meeting on 20 March 2024. This will be accompanied by the consultation report, collating feedback from key stakeholders, and our Strategic Assessment 2024, which would document the identification and analysis of risks.

Members were advised that the objectives were underpinned in Appendix 1, delivery of these objectives were achievable and would be effectively planned and monitored.

The Station Manager, Community Risk Management Planning provided an overview of the four headers Prevention, Protection, Response and Resilience. Members were advised that the Service had worked hard to ensure that our communities owned the plan, and the language was accessible.

A Member confirmed that at the AFA meeting later in the day, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) report would be discussed. Would that action plan eventually become part of the Service Plan. The Head of Corporate Assurance, Planning & Continuous Improvement (Head of CAP&CI) confirmed that this would be anticipated in the long term and there was currently an increased focus on governance arrangements. The Service was looking to accelerate these areas of improvement and there was a number of actions and priorities that did overlap, the Service did not want to create an alternative action plan. Going forward, as the HMICFRS action plan progresses, the Service would look for it to become part of the Service Plan.

The CFO added that we had introduced a continuous improvement framework, which would be the overarching infrastructure to monitor progress, and sit under 'one umbrella' in relation to HMICFRS actions and the Corporate Plan over the next four-year period.

A Member referred to the objective of 'Improving health and wellbeing of communities' and questioned whether this should be a key objective for a Fire and Rescue Service (FRS). The CFO commented that our objectives were aligned to the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) strategy under Prevention. Health and equalities are directly correlated and linked to vulnerabilities from fire. The Service would work with other agencies to support and reduce vulnerability from fire.

Reference was made to Improving our Service, Objective two, action four around acquiring Severn Park. The CFO advised that the final decision had not yet been made, project work was ongoing and would be brought back to the AFA at an appropriate time.

A Member asked what steps the Service was taking in terms of increased engagement for the public consultation. The Corporate Assurance and Business Planning Manager confirmed that the Service was improving communication to share our vision and objectives with local communities. The format would be reviewed to make it easier to use and encourage more participation.

The CFO added that the engagement strategy aimed to consult communities around our proposals. The Service internet site would also be rebuilt to increase accessibility. We had also employed a DICE engagement officer to engage with communities around their needs and how we could shape our Service.

The recommendation was moved by Cllr Massey and seconded by Cllr Hardie.

It was resolved that the Committee –

a) Approved the draft Service Plan 2024-2028 objectives and actions in Appendix 1 for public consultation.

b) Noted the consultation strategy in Appendix 2.

42. 2023/24 CAPITAL PROGRAMME UPDATE AS AT 31 OCTOBER 2023

Members received an update from the Statutory Finance Officer (SFO) who reported an overview of the 2023/24 to 2025/26 Capital Programme and updated on spend against the Programme for 2023/24 Financial year up to 31 October 2023.

The Capital Programme approved for 2023/24, included adjustments for the final 2022/23 carry over, of £6.332m. An adjustment of £350k to Fleet, to take account of reprofiled (pulled forward) costs, had increased this to £6.682m.

The updated 3-year Capital Programme was shown in Appendix 2, demonstrating the net-nil impact of the £350k pull forwards on the Fleet line, with the total Capital Programme remaining at £12.457m across the three years.

Members were advised that there was actual expenditure of £172k against the IT budget. The projected underspend against this budget, of £130k, would not be carried forward to the next financial year.

Members were advised that for future years, the SFO was reviewing the capital programme to present in February 2024. It was noted that the current capital programme does not include station development at Bath and Weston-super-Mare. These projects were being reviewed and considered as part of the updated capital programme, and should they be included the result would be an increase in prudential borrowing to fund.

In response to a Member's question, the Director of Corporate Services (DoCS) advised that these stations were part of the Estates strategy. They were in a poor state and ongoing maintenance costs were higher. A timetable and request for decision would be going to a future AFA meeting.

A Member asked about the underspend on ICT and added that around only half of the budget had been spent and was the initial budget incorrect. The Head of Finance advised that the budget had been increased due to the IT replacement plan, which was the maximum that could be invested through the capital programme.

The DoCS advised that the Service needed to invest more into our IT integration which would be included in the reports at the February meeting. A discussion will be required around reprofiling our ICT spend going forward. The current IT

allocation within the capital programme contained a provision for hardware only, but more significant investment would be required going forward.

It was resolved that the Committee –

a) Noted the 2023/24 current Capital spend position and reviewed issues within the updates provided to gain assurance on the 3-year approved Capital Programme.

43. 2023/24 REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING AS AT 31 OCTOBER 2023

Members received a paper from the SFO which provided the latest Revenue Monitoring Report for the current financial year, based upon spending for the seven months ending 31 October 2023.

The 2023/24 Net Revenue Budget was approved at the AFA meeting on 17 February 2023. It was important that the Authority and the relevant committees received regular budget monitoring reports which provided a forecast of spending against this budget.

The latest report forecasted that spending against the net revenue budget would be £132k underspent. This compared to the budgeted break-even position.

Members were advised that the Service was in a fortunate position and that we had been able to use the underspends in certain areas of the revenue budget to help offset the overspends against other cost categories. However, this was a one-off situation and there would still be challenges in future years.

It was resolved that the Committee –

a) Noted the forecast spending position against the 2023/24 Revenue Budget.

44. PROGRESS REPORT ON CHANGES TO CREWING MODELS AND FLEET IN RESPONSE TO BUDGET SHORTFALL OPTIONS PAPER

The Committee received a report from the CFO who advised that in May 2023, he commissioned a project to identify efficiencies to address the savings required to meet forecast funding pressures in the Medium-Term Financial Plan and maintain a balanced budget. Funding pressures became known following the confirmation of the unfunded Grey Book pay award and uncertain future funding settlements for 2024/25 onwards.

Approval for the recommendations was sought at the Fire Authority meeting on 4 October 2023. At this meeting some amendments to the recommendations were agreed along with an additional recommendation to return to the Policy and Resources Committee (PRC) with a report outlining progress on the implementation of these recommendations to this meeting.

Currently the Local Government financial settlement for the next financial year was unknown, it was anticipated that the settlement would be communicated to Avon Fire & Rescue Service (AF&RS) in late December 2023.

A number of time task analysis scenario training events were hosted at Hicks Gate Fire Stations domestic fire training building. A comparison of riding 5 firefighters and 4 on the second appliance versus 4 firefighters on both was completed to see if there were critical delays or safety implications to safe systems of work in the early stages of fireground set up and subsequent firefighting activities.

The CFO thanked the FBU for their involvement and engagement during the trials.

The Station Manager, Efficiency and Savings updated Members that the scenario training had taken place with the attendance of key stakeholders including incident command, the FBU and operational crews. Member's attention was drawn to Appendix 1, the Brigade Response Option System (BROS) which provided further details of the trials.

Members were advised that since October, the assumptions had been updated in respect of current inflation rates, which forecasted an increased shortfall from £2.5m to £3.7m.

The trials took part at Hicks Gate Fire Station using BROS guidelines which was a Government lead system and the FBU were advocates of. The template was a domestic fire scenario and time analysis was completed comparing 5 personnel against 4. In conclusion, the data supported that the riding of four personnel on all appliances could be achieved with a safe system of work within AF&RS.

A Member asked for clarification whether the exercises were desktop or physical. It was confirmed that the training took place at Hicks Gate using a life critical incident scenario. The Station Manager, Efficiency and Savings advised that during the trials the question asked was 'what the average response looked like for our crews'. Initially the response times were compared with four and five personnel on the first appliance followed by the average response time of the second appliance. In a subsequent desktop exercise, the timing of the second appliance was adjusted using the data received from the Performance Improvement Team, to establish whether there was a point, with the second appliance average response time, where there would be a detrimental effect to our safe systems of work. From the data obtained, using the average timings, there was not a point where the Service would be putting our staff in that danger.

The Member asked regarding the FBU's point about on a crew of four, there would not be personnel available to control the Breathing Apparatus (BA) board. The Station Manager, Efficiency and Savings advised that the second appliance had always ridden with four personnel. The Member added that if the Service attended an incident with four personnel, were there life saving actions that we can do to save life? It was explained that the crew could prevent escalation i.e. removing a chip pan from a kitchen. The CFO assured Members that there would be no

circumstances where the Service would ask a firefighter to step out of current policy and procedure, safety would not be compromised.

The CFO added if we had a crew of four first in attendance, if there was a rescue that needed to be carried out and confirmed persons reported, the Service had operational guidance and procedure, for the crew to deploy into that building to carry out a lifesaving activity, whilst waiting for the second crew to arrive.

The Member summarised that if a crew of five arrived first on scene, they would also carry out the rescue but with a control board operative. The CFO confirmed that both procedures involved a control board. A breathing apparatus board would be used to keep control on where personnel were and how much air they had left. Both procedures were the same whether four or five personnel were in attendance.

A Member asked whether increasing the use of four crew as opposed to five, increased the likelihood of a less effective safe response, in terms of crews and those effected. The Station Manager, Efficiency and Savings confirmed that four different scenarios were run with different crews each time, looking at the difference between having four and five crews in the first appliance. Looking at the point when BA entered the building, there was less than 75 seconds difference between having five and four on the appliance.

A Member enquired whether Unions had been involved and consulted during trials. The CFO confirmed that the FBU attended, observed the trials and provided feedback.

It was also asked if the process to run with four crew was taking place, why was this not the norm? The CFO responded that in essence we do have standard crewing of five and four. Throughout COVID-19, the Service worked with the FBU and agreed four would ride on every appliance. This still happened when there are crewing deficiencies.

The Member also mentioned that it appeared that most of the trials were carried out in a 'perfect world', is the reality different in an emergency situation? The CFO advised that there was data from other FRS who had undertaken similar trials, however, it was difficult to predict every variance and there were certain circumstances that we could not plan for.

A Member advised that since the AFA meeting in October, he had spoken to firefighters at his local station. The Member pointed out that he believed that the Service could not underestimate the strength of feeling on this issue. There was a feeling that this would adversely affect the ability to deal with an incident. If the ability is impaired, the response time was irrelevant. They asked if the average response time for the second appliance, was the same across all of the Avon area? The CFO advised that our station locations were aligned to the risk profile. We did take an average attendance time of eight minutes for the first appliance in attendance. We also take an average attendance time of the second appliance based on the different variances, which could be less.

The Member asked if we currently run on five, but actually have a crew of four because of crew shortages, then would the move to four mean appliances would not be able to run due to crew shortages. The CFO advised that riding with a crew of four is not new to the sector and had been adopted in other areas of the country, which is why we had undertaken the trials, which was the least-worse scenario. If the CFO was to recommend to the AFA that fire stations were closed or appliances taken off the run, this would have an impact on response times and would have less appliances. The reality was that the AFA is faced with over a £3m funding deficit over the next 3 years, which was not an ideal situation. The CFO was proposing to Member options that allowed us to maintain our average attendance times.

It was resolved that the Committee –

a) Noted the continued development towards the implementation of a crewing model that reflected 4 personnel on every pumping appliance at wholtime stations. Crewing would be maintained on 5 at Hicks Gate where we have Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for National Resilience.

45. TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME

The Committee received a report of the Transformation Programme Manager Officer Manager (PMO) on behalf of the Head of Transformation.

The total budget approved by the Fire Authority in February 2021, for this programme equated to £2.473m funded through approved reserves of £1.964m and through the approved Capital Strategy. The programme budget is on track, with no overspends anticipated.

There were currently four priority areas of work in the Transformation Programme: Improvements to the Firewatch IT system, policy reviews, Flexi Duty System review and smart tablets for digitalising station activities and enabling access to update and view site specific risk information.

It was confirmed that 75% of work packages were on track, with some work on hold due to waiting for other dependencies to complete. Others were on hold due to more pressing urgencies, but all anticipated to be complete by March 2025.

It was advised that over the last couple of months significant progress had been made to bring the Service policies up to date. Following a review, some had been removed from the library as were procedures rather than policies. It was hoped that the number of policies could be reduced to 38.

The recently launched a policy hub and had moved away from PDF to Microsoft SharePoint, which had a useful search mechanism feature and would inform policy owners when policies were due to be refreshed. It was anticipated that the policy hub would be brought up to date within the next few months.

It was resolved that the Committee –

a) Noted the report, scrutinised its contents, and made any recommendations or suggestions it saw fit.

46. CONSIDER PROCUREMENT FORWARD PLAN £250K-£1M (SNAPSHOT 29.11.2023) AND APPROVAL TO PROCEED FOR BUSINESS CASES OVER £1M.

Members received a spreadsheet from the Head of Procurement who confirmed that the Fire Authority authorised changes to Contract Procedure Rules (CPR) on 25 April 2023 as part of the Governance review changes.

CPR 3.3 stipulated that a procurement plan would be considered by this committee on a quarterly basis. The plan would show ongoing and potential procurements with a contract value above £250k, giving Members an indication of forthcoming higher value procurements, noting those contracts with an estimated value of over £1m which would require a business case to PRC.

Members were advised that items included proposed procurements for 2024/25. Those highlighted in yellow were likely to come to PRC with a business case to consider as over £1m, prior to a tender taking place.

47. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

RESOLVED – that the date of the next meeting be held on Thursday 18 April 2024 at 10.30am.

48. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

The recommendation was moved by Cllr Massey and seconded by Cllr Smith

To resolve that the public be excluded from the meeting during the following items of business on the grounds that they contain exempt information pursuant to Schedule 12A, Part 1 of the Local Government Act 1972, and that in accordance with Schedule 12A, Part 2, paragraph 10 of the Local Government Act 1972, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

49. COMMAND AND CONTROL SYSTEM BUSINESS CASE

Following an introduction from the CFO, the Committee received a report from the Group Manager Control.

Chair

The meeting ended at 13.40hrs.

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AVON FIRE AUTHORITY

MEETING:	Policy and Resources Committee
MEETING DATE:	18 April 2024
REPORT OF:	Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive
SUBJECT:	Re-engagement, Re-employment and Abatement Policy

1. SUMMARY

The Policy and Resources Committee is tasked with discharging the Fire Authority's responsibilities for pension matters. The Committee is asked to consider approving a new Re-engagement, Re-employment and Abatement Policy (RRAP) to expand Avon Fire & Rescue Services' (AF&RS) ability to reemploy/re-engage AF&RS operational personnel following a competitive process, where that is in the best interests of the Service and provided the member of staff accepts an abatement of their pension.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 The Committee is asked to:

- a) Approve a new AF&RS Re-engagement, Re-employment and Abatement Policy.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 Several Fire and Rescue Services are asking their Fire Authorities to reconsider internal policies relating to the re-engagement or re-employment of operational staff, including senior officers, as the sector has an increasing number of vacancies being advertised and a shortage of suitable applicants.

3.2 The targeted application of re-engagement/re-employment and allowing staff to abate their pensions, allows a service to re-engage/re-employ to roles that prove hard to fill due to the specialist skills and experience required, the

length of time it takes to develop them and the limited numbers available to recruit from the market.

- 3.3 Many staff within the historic Firefighter Pension Schemes (FPS 1992 and 2006) are finding themselves in a position where their tax liabilities related to their pension funds are such that they are deciding to take retirement earlier than they would otherwise have planned. This has had a nationwide impact on the fire sector and availability of personnel to fill some vacancies until operational staff on the 2015 pension scheme have caught up in terms of experience and rank.

4. **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 All re-engagement/re-employment offers would be on the basis that the employee must accept pension abatement, which in effect would mean the reduction or freezing of a pension annuity whilst re-engaged/re-employed. No cost would therefore be incurred by the Service by the requirement in the regulations to pay sums into the pension fund equivalent to the abatement which would otherwise apply.

5. **KEY CONSIDERATIONS**

- 5.1 The Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive (CFO/CE) would like to consider with the Committee expanding the Services' ability to re-engage/re-employ operational personnel only on a full-time basis, to provide appropriate value for money for the Service, and upon the basis that the individual's pension income would be abated appropriately. The proposal is that a new policy treats all operational staff the same, would follow external and internal advertisement and a fair recruitment process, with successful candidates' contracts' being limited in time **up to, and no more than** a 24-month fixed term contract, with no ability to renew contracts.
- 5.2 The Service would **not** seek to exercise its discretion under the pension regulations **not to abate** an individual's pension, so any re- engagement/re-employment offer would be on the basis that the employee **must** accept pension abatement, which in effect would mean the reduction or freezing of a pension annuity whilst re-engaged/re-employed. No cost would therefore be incurred by the Service by the requirement in the regulations to pay sums into the pension fund equivalent to the abatement which would otherwise apply.

5.3 The benefits of extending the ability to re-engage/re-employ staff are:

- Retention of expertise, skills, and experience
- Retention of organisational knowledge
- Reduced costs associated with recruitment and training.

5.4 The potential disadvantages are:

- Inhibiting promotion and succession planning opportunities
- Barrier to improving diversity of the workforce by maintaining the status quo.

Current position

5.5 AF&RS previously had a Re-employment and Re-engagement Framework which was reviewed by the Employment Committee on 8 November 2018 and revised in August 2019. It is proposed that the existing Framework be replaced with the new AF&RS RRAP at **Appendix 1**, submitted to this Committee for approval.

5.6 The AF&RS RRAP reflects the Fire and Rescue National Framework for England published in 2018, in that the National Framework contained provisions regarding the re-engagement of Principal Officers (defined as Brigade or Area Manager level and above). The National Framework stated that Fire and Rescue Authority's (FRA) '*must not re-appoint*' principal fire officers after retirement to their previous, or a similar post, save for in '*exceptional circumstances*' when such a decision is necessary in the interests of public safety.

5.7 However, the proposed new AF&RS RRAP would allow decisions to be made at CFO/CE level to reflect the new Scheme of Delegation which underpins the Authority's commitment to '*operational independence*'. The Scheme of Delegation provides for the CFO/CE to '*exercise all matters of day-to-day administration and operational management of services and functions.*'

5.8 Therefore, in exceptional circumstances and in the interests of public safety, a Principal Officer (PO) may be re-appointed at the discretion of the CFO/CE. However, there will be no automatic right to re-engagement/re-employment and there will be no right of appeal following the CFO/CE's decision.

5.9 The reason why the re-appointment was necessary, and alternative approaches were deemed not appropriate, must be published and the PO's pension **must** be abated until they cease to be employed by AF&RS.

- 5.10 The Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 requires the Secretary of State to prepare a Fire and Rescue National Framework (s 21) and FRAs '*must have regard to the Framework in carrying out their functions*'. There is concern within the Fire Sector that a new Framework is overdue, and the 2018 version requires an overhaul. There is no update from the Home Office as to when a new Framework might be issued.
- 5.11 Details regarding the current restrictions within the policy are set out below under the headings: 're-engagement' and 're-employment'.

Re-engagement

- 5.12 This is where an operational employee retires and returns to the '*same or similar job*' to that undertaken prior to retirement, irrespective of whether there has been a change in terms/conditions, hours, location etc.
- 5.13 AF&RS RRAP states that any re-engagement is only in exceptional circumstances, in the interests of public safety, and it has not been possible to fill the role through internal and external advertisement. The decision can only be made by the CFO/CE and any re-engagement will be **up to, and no more than** a 24-month fixed term contract without option to extend and abatement of pension must apply.

Re-employment

- 5.14 This is where an operational employee retires and returns to a 'substantially different role'. For all staff levels, applications will be accepted if the vacancy is advertised externally and if successful, re-employment will be on the advertised terms for the role, pay and pension, however the role will **be up to, and no more than** a 24-month fixed term contract. Abatement of pension must apply. A reduction or change in hours, job title, grade/rank or work location is not considered a substantial difference.

Pension Abatement

- 5.15 Abatement means that upon return to work following retirement from any FRA a retiree cannot receive annual remuneration (salary and pension combined) more than their remuneration received immediately prior to retirement. If the total amount of salary and pension upon re-engagement/re-employment exceeds the remuneration received prior to retirement the pension must be reduced/abated accordingly (this could mean that the individual receives a reduced pension annuity or only receives their pension lump sum, and their pension annuity is in effect 'frozen' until they cease the employment). It should be noted that the rules of abatement do not apply in the Firefighters Pension Scheme 2015 (only the 1992 and 2006 Schemes).

Firefighters' Pensions England Scheme Advisory Board/Local Government Association – Guidance on abatement

- 5.16 A factsheet on Abatement was issued by the SAB/LGA 18 May 2018 and, following an LGA FPS coffee morning on 25 January 2022, the LGA issued an updated 'Informal Abatement Guidance for FRAs' on 1 May 2022. A copy can be provided, on request.
- 5.17 The Guidance explains that HMT requires public service pensions to be abated in certain circumstances. Pension abatement remains an option within the 1992 and 2006 schemes, and it is therefore a matter for the scheme manager to decide. The Guidance sets out the relevant regulations to the pension schemes and the only cost to the Fire Authority in permitting reengagement/re-employment is where the Service decides to exercise its discretion '*not to abate*' an individual's pension; the Regulations provide in these circumstances that an equivalent payment would need to be paid by the Service into the pension fund account if abatement is not applied to the retiree's pension (in whole or in part). This is not an option being considered by AF&RS.

6. RISKS

- 6.1 Not having a robust process in place to determine outcomes relating to Pensions could potentially lead to a case being taken to the Pensions Ombudsman. A recent case, [determination PO 25374](#), found that Warwick Fire Authority did not follow a reasonable process when deciding to apply abatement. The cost of not implementing abatement would need to be funded from the Fire Authority budget, as this will not be funded centrally.

7. LEGAL/POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 Guidance from the Firefighters' Pensions England Scheme Advisory Board/Local Government Association explaining the relevant provisions of the Firefighters' Pension Schemes is set out in the body of this paper.
- 7.2 A link to the Fire and Rescue National Framework for England is provided as background papers.

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 8.1 The Fire and Rescue National Framework for England 2018 includes a section on 'Re-engagement of Senior Officers' which can be found on page 18 at the following link:

[Fire and rescue national framework for England - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

9. APPENDIX

1. Draft AF&RS Re-engagement, Re-employment and Abatement Policy.

10. REPORT CONTACT

Simon Shilton, Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive.



www.avonfire.gov.uk

Re-engagement, Re-employment, and Abatement Policy

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1 Introduction

1.1 Policy Statement

On 6 April 2006, the Government relaxed the [rules on pension commutation](#) whilst continuing in employment. As a result, Avon Fire & Rescue Service (AF&RS) has elected to exercise the discretion allowed within these provisions and will enable employees in the [Fire-fighters' Pension Scheme \(FPS\)](#) to retire from the scheme, commute their lump sum pension and be re-engaged, or re-employed following a break in service of at least one month.

1.2 Definitions

Re-engagement is where an operational employee retires and returns to the 'same or similar job' to that undertaken prior to retirement, irrespective of whether there has been a change in terms/conditions, hours, location etc. Re-engagement at Area Manager or above is only in exceptional circumstances, in the interests of public safety, and has not been possible to fill the role through internal and external advertisement. The decision can only be made by the CFO/CE and any re-engagement must be limited to a time limited fixed term contract without option to extend and abatement of pension **must** apply.

Re-employment is where an operational employee retires and returns to a 'substantially different role.' For all staff levels, applications will be accepted if the vacancy is advertised externally and if successful re-employment will be on the advertised terms for the role, including duration pay and pension. Abatement of pension **must** apply. A reduction or change in hours, job title, grade/rank or work location is not considered a substantial difference. The salary and the pension in payment (plus inflation) cannot be more than the salary on retirement. If there is an excess, then the pension in payment will be reduced to bring the level back in line with the salary on retirement.

Abatement means that upon return to work following retirement from any Fire and Rescue Authority (FRA) a retiree cannot receive annual remuneration (salary and pension combined) more than their remuneration received immediately prior to retirement. If the total amount of salary and pension upon re-engagement/re-employment exceeds the remuneration received prior to retirement the pension must be reduced/abated accordingly (this could mean that you will receive a reduced pension or only receive your pension lump sum, and your pension annuity is in effect 'frozen' until you cease employment). **It should be noted that the rules of abatement do not apply in the Firefighters Pension Scheme 2015 (only the 1992 and 2006 Schemes).**



2 Scope

The aim of this policy is to provide information to personnel contemplating retirement so they may consider whether they wish to continue working, withdraw their lump sum and abate their pension.

This policy does not apply to the [Firefighters' Pension Scheme 2015](#).

3 Responsibilities

- The Head of Human Resources has overall responsibility for keeping the provisions within this policy in line with employment/pension legislation and best practice.
- Line managers, the Human Resources (HR) Department and Trade Union Representatives are responsible for providing advice and guidance to employees on the application of this policy.
- Employees should make themselves aware of its content and ensure that all aspects are adhered to and to ensure the effectiveness of this policy.
- Employees considering re-engagement or re-employment are responsible for obtaining their own independent advice on the tax and other financial implications of re-engagement or re-employment. AF&RS will not accept liability for tax or other financial charges incurred by individuals.

4 Core Code of Ethics

AF&RS has adopted the Core Code of Ethics for Fire and Rescue Services. The Service is committed to the ethical principles of the Code and strives to apply them in all we do, therefore, those principles are reflected in this Policy.

5 Equality and Inclusion

AF&RS has a legal responsibility under the Equality Act [2010](#), and a commitment, to ensure it does not discriminate either directly or indirectly in any of its functions and services, nor in its treatment of staff, in relation to race, sex, disability, sexual orientation, age, pregnancy and maternity, religion and belief, gender reassignment or marriage and civil partnership. It also has a duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled applicants, employees, and service users.

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6 Fire and Rescue National Framework for England

- 6.1 The Fire and Rescue National [Framework](#) for England 2018 states *'Fire and rescue authorities must not re-appoint principal fire officers after retirement to their previous, or a similar, post save for in exceptional circumstances when such a decision is necessary in the interests of public safety. Any such appointment must be transparent, justifiable and time limited.'*
- 6.2 However, in the exceptional circumstance and in the interests of public safety, a Principal Officer ¹(PO) may be re-appointed at the discretion of the CFO/CE, as reflected in the new Scheme of Delegation which underpins the Authority's commitment to 'operational independence'. The Scheme of Delegation provides for the CFO/CE to *'exercise all matters of day-to-day administration and operational management of services and functions.'*
- 6.3 The reasons why the re-appointment was necessary, and alternative approaches were deemed not appropriate, must be published and the PO's pension **must** be abated until they cease to be employed by AF&RS. Any re-engagement will be **up to, and no more than** a 24-month fixed term contract.

7 Policy Principles

The aim and objectives of this policy are to provide information to employees contemplating retiring, accessing their lump sum and pension, and being re-engaged/re-employed by AF&RS.

Fire and Rescue Services could exercise its discretion not to abate when it occurs in accordance with the regulations of the Firefighters' Pension Schemes. **However, it should be noted that this discretion will not be exercised by the CFO/CE, and therefore re-engaged/re-employed staff MUST accept pension abatement.**

8 Protected Pension Age (PPA)

The minimum age at which a pension can be taken was increased on 6 April 2010 from 50 to 55. Therefore, some members taking a pension and/or lump sum benefit before the normal minimum pension age may be liable for a tax charge (unless retirement was on the grounds of ill-health).

Members paying into a scheme that allowed them to take their benefits without consent before the age of 55 were entitled to keep their earlier normal minimum pension age, providing they were a member of that scheme on 5 April

¹ 'Principal Officers refers to those officers at Brigade or Area Manager level, and above, or those with comparable responsibilities to those roles'.



2006. This is known as the member's '[Protected Pension Age \(PPA\)](#)'.

PPA can be lost however during re-engagement/re-employment and in other circumstances including where the main purpose (or one of the main purposes) for early entitlement to benefits is to avoid paying tax or national insurance contributions.

An example of how this applies during re-engagement or re-employment:

The [FPS](#)1992 is exempt from this provision, and members have a protected right to access their benefits before age 55, in accordance with the rules of the scheme. These protected rights will be lost, and the individual may be liable to tax on their pension benefits if, after taking pension benefits, the individual is employed by:

- the same employer,
- any person connected with that employer; or
- an employer who is part of the same pension scheme.

UNLESS one of the following re-engagement or re-employment conditions apply:

- Compulsory recall by the Armed Forces.
- Break in employment of at least six months.
- Break in employment of at least one month and scheme rules provide that benefits may be abated (withdrawn in whole or in part); or
- Break in employment of at least one month and the re-engagement or re-employment is materially different.

For full details, see the following [HMRC guidance \(Pensions Tax Manual\)](#).

If you are considering re-engagement after accessing pension benefits, it is advisable to contact HMRC regarding tax and national insurance, as it will have an impact on your tax code.

It is important to stress that it would be advantageous to discuss your intentions or the request for re-engagement or re-employment as early as possible with the HR Department before the proposed retirement date.



9 Retirement process

If you are thinking about retiring from the Service (other than through ill-health or injury), there are issues you need to consider ensuring you make the right, and informed decision for you. There are also processes you need to follow to avoid delays to payments and other complications.

Before you make a formal notification to retire, if you wish to obtain an estimate of what your retirement benefits would be, please send your request to pensions@wypf.org.uk. Please note that there may be a charge applied by the Pension Administrator if you request more than one estimate within a twelve-month period. If after receiving the estimate you wish to retire, you will need to give notice in writing to your Line and HR Managers.

The Pension Administrator will contact you upon receipt of your retirement confirmation notice from AF&RS and send you all the necessary documentation and information required to finalise your retirement.

Please check the retirement notice periods on your employment contract and give yourself enough time to complete the above processes to avoid any delays to your pension.

10 Full and early retirement

Although each FPS has a fixed retirement age, you can also opt to retire early which may lead to a reduction in the pension paid.

The retirement ages to consider are:

1. **FPS 2015**
 - Fixed/Normal retirement age of 60 for active members. At the age of 60, you will be paid your full pension if you have sufficient service.
 - If you are a deferred member, your fixed retirement age will be equal to state pension age (SPA). You can check your current SPA at www.gov.uk/calculate-state-pension.
 - Possibility of retiring early at or after the age of 55. In these circumstances, the pension you receive will be reduced, to reflect early retirement.

Please note – Different rules apply if you are a transitional member of the 2015 scheme and wish to retire early. This is because you are awarded a two-part pension, one part built up in your original final salary scheme (FPS 1992 or FPS 2006) and the other in the 2015 scheme.



The rules of each scheme apply separately to each part of your pension, and there are some special transitional rules built into the 2015 scheme on how service and salary should apply.

2. [FPS 2006](#)

- Fixed/Normal retirement age of 60 for active members. At the age of 60 you will be paid your full pension if you have sufficient service.
- If you are a deferred member, your fixed retirement age will be age 65.
- Possibility of retiring early at or after the age of 55 (with a reduction).

3. **FPS 2006 (Retained Modified Scheme – Protected Special Members):**

- Fixed/Normal retirement age of 55 for active members. At the age of 55 you will be paid your full pension if you have sufficient service
- If you are a deferred member, your fixed retirement age will be age 60
- No possibility of retiring early unless on ill-health grounds (at any age)

4. **FPS 1992**

- An ordinary pension is payable to an active Firefighter at age 50 or over with at least 25 years' service
- A short service pension is payable to an active Firefighter at age 55 or over to members with less than 25 years' service but more than two years' service
- No possibility of retiring early unless on ill-health grounds (at any age)

11 Applying for re-engagement or re-employment

With effect from 6th April 2010 the tax rules in relation to re-engagement or re-employment and abatement have altered. These are explained fully in [FPS Guidance Note 1/2010](#). In summary, these changes mean that staff wishing to abate **must have a break in employment of at least one month**.

Staff will incur additional tax charges on all pension benefits, including the lump sum if they do not meet these re-engagement or re-employment conditions and have a month's break in service. Staff are eligible to claim their pension during the month break in service. If legislation or tax advice alters in future this position will be reviewed by AF&RS and any changes to this policy will be negotiated and communicated to staff.



The following sets out the criteria for re-engagement or re-employment. It should, however, be clearly understood that the granting of requests for re-engagement/re-employment will be the exception rather than the rule and staff development/promotional opportunities should always be considered.

There are two ways to be re-employed:

1. **Applying for an Advertised Role** – Recruit to a particular role and a current employee who is shortly due to retire, or previous employee applies through a competitive process.
2. **Employee Initiated Application** - The employee makes a generic application when approaching retirement to obtain employment with AF&RS.

11.1 Applying for an advertised role

A current (i.e., an employee is shortly due to retire) or previous employee applies in the usual manner to an advertised role. A full recruitment and selection process will be applicable.

11.2 Employee Initiated Application

If you are nearing retirement and wish to apply for re-engagement or re-employment, having met the FPS conditions for eligibility, you should confirm this in writing to your line manager stating what proportion of your pension (if any) you wish to commute to provide a lump sum payment upon retirement. Your line manager should forward the request to HR.

Based upon the proportion of your pension you wish to commute up to the maximum, the estimate will include:

- the amount of your lump sum payable upon retirement.
- your annual pension entitlement, which will be fully abated.

It is important to stress that it would be advantageous to discuss any request as early as possible before the proposed retirement date, however a decision regarding the request will normally be given within 8 weeks of the request being made. **You must obtain a pension estimate before applying for re-engagement or re-employment.**

If you are currently employed and wish to make a generic application, you are required to apply for re-engagement or re-employment (**Appendix 1**) to the relevant Line Manager, **at least 3 months before your retirement date**. Where there is more than one applicant, a shortlist and selection process relevant to the



requirements of the post will take place.

Your Line Manager will complete the relevant section of the application form and will send this to HR for review.

The decision, whether to re-engage/re-employ or not; is at the discretion of the CFO/CE, there is no automatic right to be re-engaged/re-employed by AF&RS and there is no right of appeal following the CFO/CE's decision.

The CFO/CE decision will be based upon:

- Clear financial benefit to AF&RS
- Impact on terms and conditions of service
- Staffing requirements, in particular any shortage of specialisms
- Transitional requirements of organisational restructuring
- The fitness, health, absence record, disciplinary and skills of the operational employee
- Need and suitability for filling the post on a full-time basis, including ability to maintain competency
- Resilience of staffing options

If you are successful in your application for re-engagement/re-employment, you will be able to make the necessary arrangements for processing your retirement, and you should also advise HR of your intention to be re-employed.

11.3 Principals of re-engagement/re-employment

Where staff are re-engaged or re-employed following retirement into operational roles, the following will apply:

- Employees can only apply for re-engagement/re-employment on a full-time basis.
- Employees will be re-engaged/re-employed at the same rates of pay as other employees of the same role.
- Re-engaged/re-employed Contract of Employment will be **up to, and no more than 24 months**, with no ability to renew.
- A new Contract of Employment will be issued and therefore employees will lose any entitlement to service-based enhancements, this will include the loss of Continuous Personal Development (CPD) payments.
- AF&RS, in considering requests for re-engagement/re-employment, will treat each application on a case-by-case basis.
- The employees on-going pension payments will be abated on the principle that the annual rate of pay on re-engagement/re-employment, plus the annual rate of pension payable under the FPS does not exceed



the annual rate of pay they received immediately prior to retirement.

- The length of time elapsed between retirement and re-engagement/re-employment would result in the following training plans:
 - 1 month – No retraining unless re-employed into a new role.
 - 6 months – Incident Command Re-assessment and a one day covering the core skills for the role in line with the [National Fire Chiefs Council \(NFCC\)](#) Fire Standards or service policy. A service induction would need to occur.
 - Longer than 6 months – on a case-by-case basis. A service induction would need to occur.

Where employees are re-employed following retirement into corporate roles (i.e. Green Book roles) then the Recruitment and Selection Policy; and Procedure will apply, including [Green Book terms and conditions](#).

11.4 Break in service

If your request is approved, you will first have to resign/retire from your current position (or positions) before being re-engaged/re-employed and will be required to have a break in service of at least 1 month (or 6 months on the Protected Pension Age for 1992 scheme members), as detailed in Section 8 of this policy.

Individuals who have previously retired from the Service and are subsequently re-engaged/re-employed should be aware that abatement may be relevant and are advised to contact the Pension Administrator, whilst also seeking independent financial advice.

HR will write to you to confirm the effective date of your retirement. HR will issue a new employment contract which will detail your new start date for employment purposes (one month after the retirement date).

Your re-engagement/re-employment is **not** subject to a successful medical at the application stage. You will continue to have periodic medicals at the prescribed intervals in line with all other uniformed personnel.

Upon re-engagement/re-employment, you will be provided with details of the [New Firefighters' Pension Scheme \(NFPS\)](#). Eligibility for this scheme is restricted to operational Fire-fighters, Crew Managers and Watch Managers only. Under the pension rules, operational is defined as attending operational incidents as part of your role, office-based posts (Community Safety etc) are not included. However, staff who are temporarily in a corporate role and who then return to be operational may apply to join the NFPS from the date they become operational and thus qualify for entry to the scheme.



You should be aware that you will be automatically entered into the new scheme unless you advise HR immediately and complete the opt-out form to prevent contributions being taken from salary. Refunds are not permitted under the scheme and therefore prompt action is essential.

Personnel who are not eligible to join the NFPS may apply to join the [Local Government Pension Scheme](#) (LGPS). However, the pension abatement rule (K4) still applies, and the FPS pension would be abated until the end of employment with AF&RS.

12 Abatement Rule (K4)

“In-Service” abatement is covered by Treasury policy and precludes personnel from drawing their pension and continuing in the same employment. When abating your pension, you will need to consider the loss of PPA following re-engagement/re-employment, as detailed in Section 8 of this policy.

12.1 Abatement

Pensioners who are re-engaged/re-employed following retirement will be subject to the Abatement Rule (K4) set out in the [FPS, Consolidated Order 1992 \(Revised December 2006\)](#), Page 47. Once employed by AF&RS, your pension will be reduced or suspended during the period of re-engagement or re-employment. The reduction is on a £ for £ basis and is also known as ‘Abatement.’

Abatement does not apply in the Firefighters Pension Scheme 2015.

For example, if you earned £25,000 prior to abatement (full time 42 hours a week) but return on a part time basis working 50% less hours a week (21 hours) your salary will reduce to £12,500 and therefore you can also receive a top up of pension of up to a maximum of £12,500 to bring your total income (salary plus pension) to the level it was at immediately prior to abatement.

12.2 An example of how abatement will work:

Final salary before retiring	£25,000
FPS (1992/2006)	£12,500
Maximum allowed without affecting your pension	£12,500

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Please note that:

- If returning in a uniformed or corporate role, your pension will be abated until you cease employment.
- Taking up employment outside of the Fire and Rescue Service will **NOT** affect your Firefighter retirement pension in any way.

If you are re-engaged/re-employed in any capacity with **any** Fire Authority and are already in receipt a Firefighters pension, you must:

- Inform the Fire Authority and Pension Administrator that you are receiving a Firefighters pension; and
- include your salary, grade, and hours when you write to the Pension Administrator.

A scheme member must inform the Pension's Administrator in the event of a change in employment terms and conditions that may affect the amount of pension benefit in payment such as:

- Promotion
- Increase/reduction in salary for any other reason
- Change in hours of employment
- Any other material changes in their contract of employment
- Re-engagement or Re-employment ceases.

If you subsequently apply for an available post at a lower grade, your application will be considered on a case-by-case basis in accordance with the appropriate policy.

If approved, and the pay in the new role is below the remuneration you received immediately prior to retirement, you should notify HR and the Pension Administrator, who will decide as to whether you qualify for payment of part of your annual pension (under the Abatement rule K4).

On final retirement when re-engagement/re-employment comes to an end, pensioners who have had their pension abated, will receive their full Firefighter pension. Those who made further pension contributions will receive separate retirement benefits of a pension and lump sum entitlement based on the length of service and pensionable pay in the re-engagement/re- employment.

It is crucial that you familiarise yourself with the potential implications of abating your pension, including the impact upon any future application for ill health retirement and the effect upon death in service entitlement. The Pension Administrator will be able to provide information on these matters, however the final decision to abate your pension will be your responsibility.



13 Changes to the FPS 1992 and the Firefighters Compensation Scheme (FCS)

On the 1 April 2019, changes were made to the FPS 1992 and the [FCS](#) which are outlined below:

13.1 Surviving Partner's Pension

The 1992 scheme and the compensation scheme rules on survivors' pensions have been changed following a legal judgment. This judgment considered the restriction of service within the calculation of the surviving partners' pension for civil partners and same sex marriage unlawful.

The FPS 1992 and the FCS have been changed to remove the restriction on service from 6 April 1988 used in the calculation of a survivor's pension to a civil partner or same sex marriage. This change applies retrospectively. This has the following effect:

1. If you are a:

- Firefighter member (whether you are active, have left or retired) and
- in a civil partnership or same sex marriage.

The survivor's pension payable on your death will automatically be calculated based on your full service with no restriction applied.

2. If you are in receipt of a:

- Firefighters' survivor's pension from the 1992 scheme, and or
- Survivor's pension from the compensation scheme (under the rules of the compensation scheme).

A survivor's pension is only paid where the former Firefighter died from the effect of a qualifying injury or of infirmity of mind or body occasioned by a qualifying injury; and were civil partnered or in a same-sex marriage, your pension may have been calculated based on restricted service from 6 April 1988 only. Your pension in payment may need to be recalculated to include the firefighter member's full service.

3. If a family member or friend, who has subsequently died was in receipt of a:

- Survivor's pension from the Firefighters scheme, and or
- Survivor's pension from the compensation scheme (under the rules of the compensation scheme).



A survivor's pension is only paid where the former Firefighter died from the effect of a qualifying injury or of infirmity of mind or body occasioned by a qualifying injury) as a result of being in a same-sex marriage or civil partnership with a member of the Firefighters scheme, the pension may have been calculated based on restricted service from 6 April 1988 only.

For some scheme members who have had a reduction to their pensionable pay before retirement, changes (below) which came into effect from 8 October 2018 could affect how we work out your pension.

13.2 Split Pensions (two pensions)

A split pension, also known as two-pensions, may apply if you have had a reduction to your pensionable pay. You may be entitled to a split pension if you are a 1992 or 2006 Scheme member.

A split pension is worked out at retirement. The first part of your pension is based on the higher rate of pay before the reduction and increased by an equivalent to the [Pensions Increase Act](#). The second part of your pension is worked out using your pensionable pay at retirement. The two parts are added together and measured against what you would have had as a single pension. **You will receive whichever pension is higher.**

The recent changes confirm that the first part of your split pension should be increased by an equivalent to pensions increase, from the day after your pay reduced to the date you retire. Further increases would not be applied until age 55 or unless you retired on ill health.

13.3 Partial Retirement

Under the NFPS 2015 there is an option for partial retirement once you have reached age 55 if you wish to draw your pension but continue your employment as a Firefighter without a break and build up additional pension. However, the 1992 and 2006 schemes require a member to **fully retire** in order to be able to claim those benefits.

Your NFPS 2015 pension would be paid (subject to an early payment reduction if you have not reached age 60). A new pension record would be set up and you will build up a pension based on your continuing membership. This second pension will become payable, on similar terms to your first pension, when you retire.

The date on which you take partial retirement is subject to appropriate notice to HR unit and agreement by the CFO.



13.4 Flexible Retirement (Corporate Staff only)

Flexible retirement is only available to members of the LGPS. **Members of the Firefighters Pension Schemes (FPS) cannot apply for flexible retirement.**

The Regulations, introduced in late 2005, enables a corporate member of staff who is a member of the LGPS, aged 55 or over, to reduce their hours of work or Hay grade, and elect to take their retirement benefits early, whilst still continuing in employment and continuing their LGPS membership. This is at the discretion of the CFO.

DRAFT

PREVENTING PROTECTING RESPONDING

Version: Version 1 Issue Date: [IssueDate] Next Review: [NextReviewDate]



14 Appendices

Appendix 1 – Draft Application for re-engagement or re-employment (Employee Initiated).

Part 1 – To be completed by individual requesting to be re-engaged/re-employed

Name	
Current/Previous Job Title	
Post Applying For	
New Hours/Working Pattern/Duty System	
Date of Leaving	
Date of Request	
Signature	

Part 2 – To be completed by the Station Manager or Line Manager if the applicant's role is Station Manager or above.

Please provide details of the individual's fitness, health, absence record, disciplinary and skills of the individual

--



Re-engagement or re-employment supported	Yes	No
Name		
Signature		

Part 3 – To be completed by the Area Manager or above

Please provide details of approval/rejection based on financial benefit, impact on terms and conditions, staffing requirements, transitional requirements, organisational requirements.

Re-engagement or re-employment supported	Yes	No
Name		
Signature		


Document Control Information:

Policy Title:	Re-engagement, Re-employment, and Abatement Policy		
Policy Owner:	[DocumentOwner]		
Policy Owner [Role]:	[Document Owner (Role)]		
Issue Date:	[IssueDate]		
Next Review Due:	[NextReviewDate]		
Audience:	[Audience]		
Version Number:	Version 1		
Impact Assessment No.	[Impact Assessment Number]	Date of IA:	[ImpactAssessmentDate]

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Review Date	Version No	Summary of Changes

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AVON FIRE AUTHORITY

MEETING:	Policy and Resources Committee
MEETING DATE:	Thursday, 18 April 2024
REPORT OF:	Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive
SUBJECT:	Immediate Detriment - Immediate Choice - Interest Issue

1. **SUMMARY**

- This paper concerns an issue which has arisen since the ‘Update on Pension Administrator Implementation of the Immediate Detriment Regulations’ report considered at the 13 December meeting.
- The issue relates to those staff who have already retired and are waiting to receive their Immediate Detriment (ID) remedy benefits in accordance with legislation passed on 1 October 2023.
- The Service must provide to those eligible retirees ‘Immediate Choice Remediable Service Statements’ (IC-RSSs) setting out new pension figures and arrears due; the template for those statements was published in December 2023.
- HM Treasury (HMT) has agreed a compensation arrangement for those retired members who qualify for the Immediate Detriment remedy, plus interest of 8% on arrears of pension/lump sum (which is not treated as compensation).
- The Local Government Association recommended on 25 January 2024 that Services should pause the rollout of IC-RSSs whilst clarification was sought on the taxation of interest payments, as there was a risk that figures in IC-RSSs may be over-stated.
- His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC) announced on 23 February that it intends to impose a tax charge for any interest rate payments above a ‘commercial rate’ (defined as Bank of England base rate + 1%).
- The Service is advised that after the current Parliament recess (from 15 April 2024 onwards) HMT are preparing to publish a Written Ministerial Statement to instruct scheme managers to ‘exempt’ interest payments from tax before changes can be made to tax legislation.

2. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

2.1 The Committee is asked to:

- a) Instruct the scheme administrators of the Firefighters Pension Scheme to continue to 'pause' the issuing of IC-RSSs to eligible retirees, until 30 June 2024, in the hope that HM Treasury and HMRC provide clarity/possible exemption on tax to be applied to interest payments and the GAD calculator will be ready to use for consistency in calculating figures.
- b) In the event that clarity is not forthcoming from HM Treasury and HMRC by 30 June 2024, authorise the pension scheme administrators to start issuing IC-RSSs with a view to processing remedy payments to eligible retirees without any calculation/payment of interest on arrears, so that aspect is calculated separately after the tax issue is clarified.
- c) Request that an update on this issue is reported to the Committee meeting on 25 July 2024.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 This report focuses on impacted staff who have already retired (retirees) but are not yet receiving their full pension benefits under the ID remedy. There are approximately 36 previous members of staff in this position, in addition, all members that retired under ID are affected by the interest issue. Some of these individuals may have retired before the Authority initially decided to apply ID and/or may have had complexities which previously could not be resolved manually, such as contribution rate relief.
- 3.2 Legislation was passed on 1 October 2023¹ which put in place the mechanism and ability to rectify the pensions of all members of public service pension schemes with regards to age discrimination following the McCloud and Seargant cases. There is a statutory obligation on schemes to remedy ID pensions by 31 March 2025.
- 3.3 The Update provided to the December PRC meeting explained that there had been a delay in the rollout of software to calculate remedy figures, which was expected to be in place in early 2024. The Government Actuary's Department (GAD) calculator software incorporates the interest rate calculation, but not the split of interest which has since been imposed by HMRC.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 There are no additional financial implications, save for the added work which will be required by the Service's pension administrators to potentially work on cases twice if they need to calculate interest payments at a later date, when the tax position has been clarified.

¹ The Firefighters' Pensions (Remediable Service) Regulations 2023.

5. KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- 5.1 The timetabling of IC-RSSs was agreed by the Scheme Advisory Board, when it was suggested that priority cases, such as ill health pensioners, should be dealt with first with a deadline of 31 March 2024, with remaining beneficiary pensioners to receive IC-RSSs by 31 May 2024. The fire sector asked that the deadline for both cohorts be pushed back to June 2024.
- 5.2 HM Treasury (HMT) agreed a compensation arrangement for those retired members who qualify for Immediate Detriment payments, plus interest of 8% on arrears of pension/lump sum (which is not treated as compensation). However, there are a number of issues to be resolved, including the recently announced position of His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) (on 23 February) that it intends to impose a tax charge for any interest rate payments above a 'commercial rate' (defined as Bank of England base rate + 1%).
- 5.3 The Local Government Association (LGA) recommended on 25 January 2024 that Services should 'pause' the rollout of IC-RSSs whilst clarification was sought on the taxation of interest payments and other issues, as there was a risk that figures in IC-RSSs may be over-stated.
- 5.4 The LGA have approached the Scheme Advisory Board with three potential solutions to the 'tax on interest' issue. Those three options are:

Option 1

- 5.5 Continue to pause the issuing of IC-RSSs until full clarity has been given on all outstanding process issues and the GAD calculator is ready. The drawbacks of this option are:
- (i) This pause could potentially be for months,
 - (ii) Some members are due significant sums of money in pension/lump sum arrears and could potentially be facing hardship, continuing with the pause could add to such hardship, and,
 - (iii) The Pension Ombudsman might not look too kindly on an indefinite pause and could instruct Fire and Rescue Authorities to process cases and pay additional compensation.

Option 2

- 5.6 Lift the pause to issuing IC-RSSs and instruct pension administrators to pay the arrears of pension/lump sum (including 8% interest) and put the pension right going forward). However, the drawbacks on this option are:
- (i) Without the GAD calculator being finalised, it is possible that administrators will take different approaches to calculating tax which could result in inconsistencies.

- (ii) Without clarity on the event reporting process from HMRC, administrators will not be able to mandate the tax on the members' behalf meaning that the member will have to deal with HMRC directly to pay the necessary tax via self-assessment. For most members this will be the first time that they have had to self-assess tax and it is possible that they will need advice from a specialist which will be costly and time consuming.
- (iii) Without clarity on whether interest should be calculated gross or net, it is possible that administrators will take different approaches to calculating tax which could result in inconsistencies and potential re-work once clarification has been provided.

Option 3

- 5.7 Lift the pause, instruct pension administrators to pay the arrears of pension/lump sum and put the pension right going forward, but exclude interest on such arrears for the time being. This is the approach recommended by the Scheme Advisory Board. This approach would allow calculations to be made by ignoring the interest element, however, it would create an additional burden as pension administrators would need to re-open every case and undertake separate interest calculations once clarification on tax has been provided.
- 5.8 In view of the drawbacks outlined above, the Service recommends to the Committee a hybrid approach, namely, to continue the pause in issuing IC-RSSs (Option 1) for 10 weeks until 30 June 2024 in the hope that after the Parliament recess (from 15 April 2024 onwards) HMT publish a Written Ministerial Statement to instruct scheme managers to 'exempt' interest payments from tax before changes can be made to tax legislation. The LGA have provided template letters which can be sent by the Service to both ill health and beneficiary cases advising them of this delay.
- 5.9 In the event that the tax position is not clarified by 30 June 2024, then the administrators should implement Option 3 by issuing IC-RSSs from 1 July 2024 onwards, excluding interest payments until the tax position is clarified. This will mean additional work for pension administrators, who will need to re-open and calculate interest in every case. An update will be provided to the Committee's next meeting on 25 July 2024.

6. RISKS

- 6.1 The Firefighter Pension Scheme risk register informs the overarching Corporate Risk Register at CR15 Pensions. The risk rating of 20 is currently amber due to the mitigations in place, including the recent transfer of administration of Firefighters' Pension Scheme to the West Yorkshire Pension Fund and the implementation of the Government's Actuary's Department (GAD) calculator.

7. LEGAL / POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The legal issues relating to the remedy for Immediate Detriment are set out in the body of this paper.

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Paper 8 entitled 'Update on Pension Administrator Implementation of Immediate Detriment Regulations' to PRC meeting on 13 December 2023, at the following link:

https://avonfireintranet.moderngov.co.uk/PRC_papers_13_December_2023

9. REPORT CONTACT

Simon Shilton, Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive.

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AVON FIRE AUTHORITY

MEETING:	Policy and Resources Committee
MEETING DATE:	Thursday, 18 April 2024
REPORT OF:	Chief Fire Officer / Chief Executive
SUBJECT:	Service Improvement

1. **SUMMARY**

- A Service Improvement Team has been established, bringing together the HMICFRS Round 3 Inspection response, remaining Transformation work packages and the Efficiency & Savings work programme.
- This is the first combined report of Service improvement activities and contains the twelfth update to committee of the Transformation Programme.
- It sets out a progress update relating to the HMICFRS Round 3 and Spotlight Report action plans, Transformation projects, and the Efficiency & Savings Programme.
- Provides an update on HMICFRS revisit activities.

2. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

2.1 The Policy and Resources Committee is asked to:

- a) Note the content of the report and make any recommendations or suggestions it sees fit.

3. **BACKGROUND**

3.1 HMICFRS carried out its third full ('Round 3') inspection of Avon Fire & Rescue Service between May and August 2023 which included an assessment of effectiveness, efficiency and how it looks after its people.

3.2 At the AFA meeting on 10 February 2021, Members approved the funding and expenditure for the Service Transformation Programme.

3.3 During the AFA meeting on 04 October 2023, due to funding pressures, members approved the continued development and implementation of a crewing model that reflects 4 personnel on every pumping appliance at wholtime stations, except for Hicks Gate which will be maintained on 5 due to Key Point Indicators (KPIs) for National Resilience.

- 3.4 Following the decision at the AFA meeting on 20 March 2024 to approve Option 2 (3) and remove the revenue contribution of £500k to the capital programme, the implementation of the crewing model described in paragraph 3.3 will be delayed until the 2025/26 financial year.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The total budget approved by the Fire Authority in February 2021, for the Transformation programme equates to £2.473m funded through approved reserves of £1.964m and through the approved Capital Strategy.
- 4.2 With the budget in place for the remainder of the programme, the Head of Service Transformation works with the Head of Finance and the appointed Finance Business Partner to ensure correct scrutiny of budgetary management and reporting is in place.
- 4.3 The Efficiency & Savings programme work will feed into the Medium Term Financial Plan and budget setting for future years. This progress report does not have any direct financial implications.
- 4.4 Reporting of progress made in the HMICFRS action plan does not have any direct financial implications.

5. KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- 5.1 Progress made against HMICFRS reports, Transformation, and Efficiency & Savings is now recorded by Responsible and Action Owners using a newly designed Improvement Register and Performance Dashboards. Progress is monitored by the Service Improvement Team and reported to both the Service Improvement Board and Service Leadership Team on a regular basis.

Service Improvement Board

- 5.2 To ensure that the service improvement programme in relation to the HMICFRS Causes of Concern, is delivered within the agreed expectations of the actions plans, a Service Improvement Board (SIB) has been established.
- 5.3 The SIB will provide additional oversight and assurance of the strategic intent to deliver the service's commitment to making our communities safer and the organisation stronger in its actions for improvement against all HMICFRS Causes of Concern.
- 5.4 The full SIB Terms of Reference are included in **Appendix 1**
- 5.5 The Service has engaged with external stakeholders and invited them to join the SIB, acting as a critical friend providing professional challenge and strategic assurance of actions delivered.

- 5.6 External board members include representatives from a Unitary Council, Stand Against Racism and Inequality (SARI), Bristol Women’s Voice, National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) and the Local Government Association (LGA)
- 5.7 The board first met in January 2024 and has met three times to date. Initially meeting monthly while the board became established, it will now meet bi-monthly allowing time for actions to be completed and begin to embed within the Service.

HMICFRS action plan

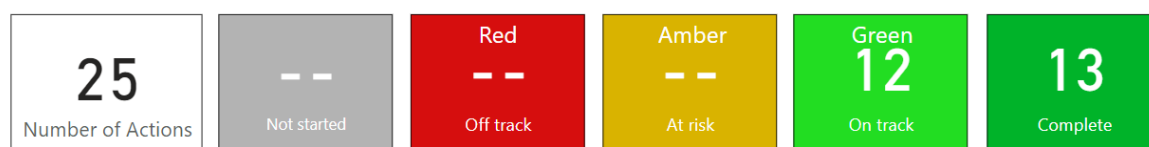
- 5.8 In response to the HMICFRS Round 3 report (**Appendix 2**) the Service has created an action plan which is sub-divided into three sections; accelerated causes of concern, causes of concern, and areas for improvement. A dashboard summary of progress against each of these is set out below.

Accelerated Causes of Concern

Mobilising Software

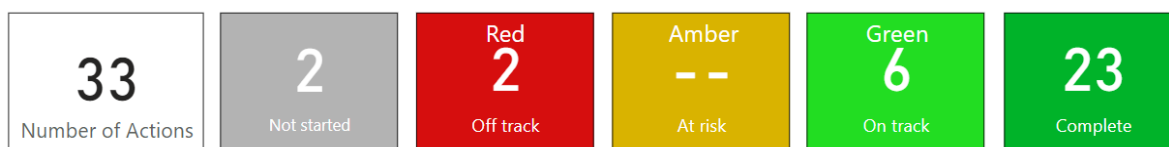


Site Specific Risk Information (SSRI)

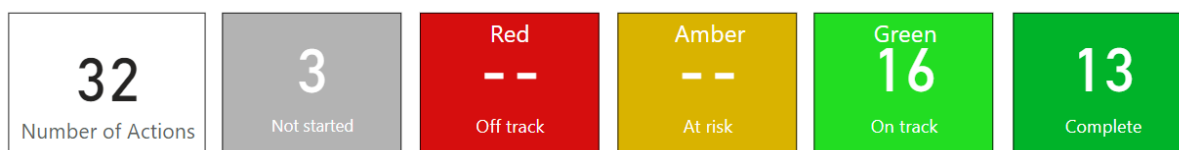


Causes of Concern

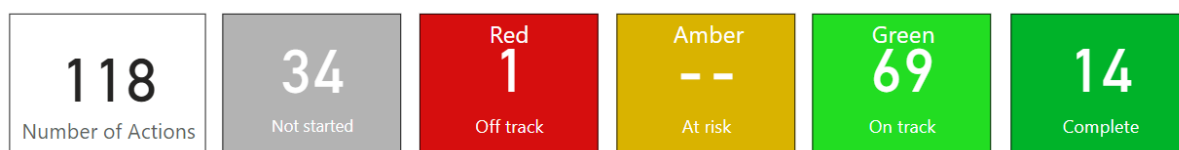
Prevention



Culture



Areas for Improvement



5.9 There are 31 Areas for Improvement identified in the HMICFRS Round 3 report. The Service has identified 118 actions in response.

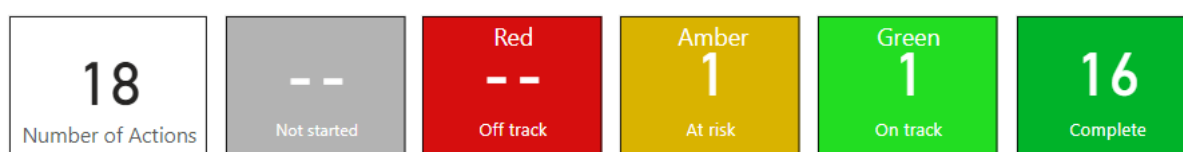
5.10 Currently there are three actions 'off track'.

- a) Both 'Prevention' cause of concern actions relates to delays in delivering prevention training to crews. This is due to those crews prioritising SSRI accelerated cause of concern activities. The current planned completion date for the training is 30.11.24. Efforts are being made to get these actions back on track.
- b) The third action off track relates to an area for improvement action to review automated systems to reduce administration updating SSRI information. This has been delayed due to a delay in the rollout of the rear-mounted mobile data terminals (MDT) in front line appliances. Testing of a rear mounted MDT on an appliance is now underway. The full rollout will be undertaken once testing has been satisfactorily completed.

HMICFRS Spotlight report – Values and Culture

5.11 On 30.03.23 HMICFRS published a report (**Appendix 3**) into values and culture of all 44 fire and rescue services in England, and draws on evidence inspectors have gathered since 2018. HMICFRS published recommendations to be addressed by both national bodies as well as fire and rescue services with the aim of improving values, culture, fairness and diversity. There are 18 recommendations directed at fire and rescue services.

5.12 Below is the Service dashboard of progress against those recommendations.



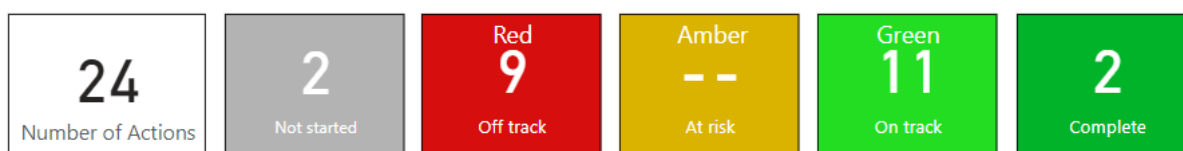
- 5.13 The action at risk is the recommendation that: *By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should have plans in place to ensure they meet the "Fire Standards Board's 'Leading the Service' standard and its 'Leading and Developing People' standard.* This had an original completion date of 01.06.23.
- 5.14 It has been determined that additional resources are required to fully review Fire Standards and conduct a detailed gap analysis exercise to support the initial gap analysis conducted by Values & Culture Lead. A project team was established in March 2024 to take this work forward.
- 5.15 A workshop was undertaken at the February 2024 Service Leadership Team meeting to identify where the Service already meets the 'Leading the Service' Fire Standard. A revised completion date of 30.09.24 has been agreed.
- 5.16 The Service response to the recommendations will be published on its new website shortly.

Round 3 Re-visits by HMICFRS.

- 5.17 HMICFRS carried out their first re-visit between 04.12.23 and 08.12.23.
- 5.18 The Service received a letter from HMI Wendy Williams on 08.03.24 (**appendix 4**) advising that two further re-visits would take place in 2024. The first took place on 19.03.24 and 20.03.24 and focussed on the accelerated cause of concern relating the mobilising system. The Service will be advised by letter of the outcome of that revisit in due course.
- 5.19 A further revisit is planned for the period 02.09.24 to 13.09.24 which will focus on the three other causes of concern.

Transformation

5.20 Work package dashboard



High Priority work

- 5.21 There are currently three priority areas of work in the Transformation Programme: Improvements to the Firewatch IT system, policy reviews, and the Flexi Duty System review.

Firewatch IT system

- 5.22 A 'development' system has been delivered to the Service with the latest version (7.8) of the Firewatch software. This version does not have new functionality but has a completely different 'look and feel' as it is web-based. It does have 'single sign on' which when deployed will mean users no longer need to log into the system with a username and password. This will remove a bugbear for staff and reduce administration around resetting forgotten passwords and security related password changes.
- 5.23 Engagement with stakeholders is underway to determine how much training and guidance material will be needed to navigate this web-based version.
- 5.24 The Performance Team are evaluating the work required to update the reporting from this latest version of the software.
- 5.25 Training and implementation plans are being developed for On-Call crews covering the new software version 7.8 and mobile app. This will enable the Service to cease using the current (and failing) Rappel system. This work is being supported by the On-Call Support Officers, enabling a short window of time between the launch of version 7.8, and the rollout of the mobile app.
- 5.26 Version 7.8 is anticipated to be implemented by the end of May and the mobile app by the end of June 2024.

Policy Reviews

- 5.27 There are now only two Service policies which do not have a future review date.
 - i. Secondary Employment Policy
 - ii. Secondary Contract Policy
- 5.28 Work is taking place to bring these last remaining policies into date and launching the associated toolkits. It is anticipated that this work will be complete by 30.04.24.
- 5.29 With effect from 01.04.24, policy reviews will become core business, using the processes and tools developed by the Transformation Team in collaboration with stakeholders. The Policy Administration Co-ordinator role moves to the Corporate Assurance Team on that date, and I am delighted to be able to confirm that Izzy Simmons will be remaining with the Service for at least another 12 months to continue this valuable work and ensure the substantial progress made on bringing Service policies into date is maintained.

Flexi Duty System Review

- 5.30 Due to several reasons, there has been limited progress made on this area of work since the last report. However, this will be addressed over the next two months.
- 5.31 The content and design of the consultation document to be shared with Flexi Duty Officers and the Fire Brigade Union (FBU) regarding the proposals presented to the Service Leadership Board will be finalised with the work package sponsor and issued during April 24.
- 5.32 The consultation is planned to run for a period of four weeks to give sufficient time for them to be fully considered and a response given. The responses will be collated for consideration and to determine next steps.

Work packages with the status 'off track'

- 5.33 There are currently nine work packages which are off track based on the original completion date. The table below sets out the reasons why and progress made so far.

Reference	Description	Progress	Reason for delay
WP22	Managing job applications for corporate roles	50%	On hold due to stakeholder capacity in 2023/24. Recruitment taking place. This work is expected to recommence in July 2024.
WP27	Interviews and offers – corporate roles	50%	
WP29	How we welcome and induct new corporate staff	70%	
WP41	Overhauling the Discipline Policy	90%	Content complete – toolkits being built during April. Revised policies and toolkits to be launched by end of April 2024 along with a new Professional Standards Board
WP42	Overhauling the Grievance Policy	90%	
WP43	Introducing a Mobile Data and Device Management Policy	80%	Brief delay in completing the consultation work. Publication is expected by the end of April 2024
WP44	Review of Flexible Working Hours Policy (flexi-time scheme for corporate staff)	20%	On hold in 2023/24 due to reduced capacity in the Transformation Team. This work is expected to recommence in July 2024.
WP45	Agile working approach	20%	
WP50	Approach to those leaving the Service	25%	On hold in 2023/24 due to reduced capacity in the Transformation and HR teams. This work is

			expected to recommence in August 2024.
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5.34 It is still anticipated that all the above work packages will be completed by the 31.03.25 when the programme is due to end.

Efficiency and Savings

5.35 The completion of an internal recruitment process has resulted in the Efficiency and Savings Team being fully established with three members as of 01 March 2024.

5.36 Designing the programme of work has so far been the area of focus with progress being made in the following areas:

- i. Planning the implementation and transition to a crewing model of 4 riders across wholetime stations (except hicks Gate).
- ii. Planning a review of resource management processes to identify improvements in resource allocation and workforce planning.
- iii. Planning the introduction of a flexible rostering system for wholetime staff at station 03 Yate.

6. RISKS

6.1 The outcome of the HMICFRS Round 3 inspection report and associated action plans are relevant to the following corporate risks: CR01 – Performance targets; CR02 – Prevention and protection; CR03 – Response and rescue; CR04 – People capacity, capability and resilience; CR06 – Control and mobilising; CR08 – Financial capacity; CR11 – Financial systems; CR16 – Health, safety and wellbeing; and CR18 – Business continuity management.

6.2 Transformation Programme risks are contained in the Corporate Risk CR19 – Change and Transformation.

6.3 A proposal to amend CR19 to incorporate HMICFRS, Transformation and the Efficiency and Savings Programme is being presented to the Service Leadership Team (SLT) on 24.04.24.

6.4 The Efficiency and Savings Programme is also relevant to CR20 – Funding and Resource Pressure Risk.

7. LEGAL / POLICY IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Transformation is included as Key Objective 7 in the Service Plan 2023-2026 and as such contributes to the Service Plan Priority of making our Service Stronger.

7.2 Improving Our Service is Key Objective 5 in the Service Plan 2024-2028 (Transformation is now a component of this objective).

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS

8.1 AFA report 20.03.24 (Updated 2024/25 Revenue Budget and MTFP, item 10)

8.2 AFA report 04.10.23 (Budget Shortfall Options, item 8)

8.3 PRC report 13.12.23 (Transformation Programme update, item13)

8.4 PRC report 13.12.23 (Progress Report on changes to crewing models, item 12)

8.5 PRC report 29.09.23 (Action plans in response to HMICFRS Accelerated Causes of Concern, item 11)

9. APPENDICES

1. Appendix 1 Service Improvement Board Terms of Reference
2. Appendix 2 HMICFRS Round 3 Inspection Report
3. Appendix 3 HMICFRS Spotlight Report – Values and Culture
4. Appendix 4 Letter from HMI Wendy Williams

10. REPORT CONTACT

Luke Gazzard, Area Manager Efficiency, Savings and Improvement, Service Improvement Team 0117 926 2061

Ian Potter, Head of Service Transformation & HMICFRS Service Liaison Officer (SLO), Service Improvement Team, 0117 926 2061

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Terms of Reference for the Service Improvement Board

To ensure that the service improvement programme in relation to the HMICFRS Causes of Concern, is delivered within the agreed expectations of the actions plans, a Service Improvement Board (SIB) has been established.

The SIB will provide additional oversight and assurance of the strategic intent to deliver the service's commitment to making our communities safer and the organisation stronger in its actions for improvement against all HMICFRS Causes of Concern.

The SIB does not hold any budgetary oversight in respect to its purpose. The SIB is chaired by the CFO who can consider areas for investment that may be highlighted by the SIB as a result of its role and oversight.

The SIB's main objectives is the oversight of the delivery of actions relating to the HMICFRS causes of concern only but may have oversight of relevant Areas for Improvement as determined by the Head of the Improvement Team.

Membership

AF&RS Service Leadership Board, representation from NFCC, SARI, Bristol Women's Voice, Chief Executive - North Somerset Local Authority, Representation from the Local Government Association (LGA) in the Southwest, AF&RS Head of improvement, Head of Transformation, and Corporate Communications Team. Additional contributors from the improvement team may also be required to attend for particular agenda items.

Attendance may also be necessary from a representative from the Staff Engagement Network to offer views on the impact of actions at service delivery level.

Member engagement is through the scrutiny and oversight outlined within the Fire Authority's constitution through the Policy and Resources Committee (PRC).

Strategic leads may seek tactical and operational support and attendance from their lead officers for particular agenda items.

Main Responsibilities

- Act as professional and strategic support to the SLB
- Undertake the role of a critical friend
- Provide additional external strategic assurance to the delivery of actions within the CoC action plans
- Provide professional challenge that support strategic outcomes
- Offer sector experience and knowledge to shape and refine strategic objectives

- Give due consideration to HMICFRS revisits or correspondence when providing professional challenge.

Meetings

Meetings will be held monthly at Portishead HQ and by Microsoft teams to minimise impact on partner support. Meeting frequency will be reviewed as and when necessary by the SIB.

Acronyms

HMICFRS – His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabularies and Fire and Rescue Services

SIB – Service Improvement Board

SLB – Service Leadership Board

CFO – Chief Fire Officer

AF&RS – Avon Fire and Rescue Service

NFCC – National Fire Chiefs Council

SARI – Stand Against Racism and Inequality

CoC – Cause of Concern

HQ - Headquarters



Fire & Rescue Service 2023–25

Effectiveness, efficiency and people

An inspection of Avon Fire and Rescue Service

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Changes to this round of inspection

We last inspected Avon Fire and Rescue Service in May 2021. And in December 2021, we published our inspection report with our findings on the service's effectiveness and efficiency and how well it looks after its people.

This inspection contains our third assessment of the service's effectiveness and efficiency, and how well it looks after its people. We have measured the service against the same 11 areas and given a grade for each.

We haven't given separate grades for effectiveness, efficiency and people as we did previously. This is to encourage the service to consider our inspection findings as a whole and not focus on just one area.

We now assess services against the characteristics of good performance, and we more clearly link our judgments to [causes of concern](#) and [areas for improvement](#). We have also expanded our previous four-tier system of graded judgments to five. As a result, we can state more precisely where we consider improvement is needed and highlight good performance more effectively. However, these changes mean it isn't possible to make direct comparisons between grades awarded in this round of fire and rescue service inspections with those from previous years.

A reduction in grade, particularly from good to adequate, doesn't necessarily mean there has been a reduction in performance, unless we say so in the report.

This report sets out our inspection findings for Avon Fire and Rescue Service.

More information on [how we assess fire and rescue services](#) and [our graded judgments](#) is available on our website.

Overall summary

Our judgments

Our inspection assessed how well Avon Fire and Rescue Service has performed in 11 areas. We have made the following graded judgments:

Outstanding	Good	Adequate	Requires improvement	Inadequate
		Public safety through fire regulation	Best use of resources	Understanding fire and risk
		Responding to major incidents	Future affordability	Preventing fire and risk
			Right people, right skills	Responding to fires and emergencies
			Promoting fairness and diversity	Promoting values and culture
			Managing performance and developing leaders	

In the rest of the report, we set out our detailed findings about the areas in which the service has performed well and where it should improve.

HMI summary

I have serious concerns about the performance of Avon Fire and Rescue Service in keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks. On 16 August 2023, I published two accelerated causes of concern as I consider they pose a potential risk to public safety:

- The service doesn't have an effective system to gather and record relevant and up-to-date risk information to help protect firefighters, the public and property during an emergency.
- The service's [mobilisation](#) system, which records information and dispatches resources to emergency incidents, isn't reliable and crashes on some consoles during emergency 999 calls. This unnecessarily delays the mobilisation of resources and results in the public receiving a slower response to emergencies.

Despite demonstrating some improvements over the years since our inspections began, I am disappointed to report that I have two further concerns. The principal findings from our assessments of the service over the past year are as follows:

- I have concerns in relation to the culture of the organisation. The service has shown an intent to improve the culture, with some staff reporting improvements across the service. However, more needs to be done. We found evidence of behaviours that weren't in line with service values. We were told about cultures among some teams where staff demonstrate unacceptable behaviours, such as using sexist or inappropriate language and disguising this as banter. And, worryingly, some staff don't have the confidence to report these issues. We were told that there is a disconnect at different levels of the service, such as between middle and senior management, and information isn't always filtered down to the whole workforce.
- I have concerns about the way the service prevents fires and other risks. The service doesn't have a prevention strategy, which should drive its day-to-day activities. We found that those occupants who may be at greater risk from fire weren't always prioritised and [home fire safety visits \(HFSVs\)](#) were arranged on the basis of location and convenience, as opposed to risk. At the time of our inspection, we found resources in prevention were stretched. As a result, we are concerned that some [vulnerable people](#) have been waiting since November 2022 to receive a HFSV, which should provide them with advice on how to stay safe from fire.
- In our previous inspection, we found that the service was embarking on a significant change and its transformation programme aimed to progress many areas, including improving its IT infrastructure and making sure its policies were up to date and reviewed. We are disappointed to report that many of these work packages have failed to progress, which has resulted in the performance of the service declining.

- The service hasn't made the progress we expected since our 2021 inspection. And this is reflected by the service only doing enough to close 3 of the 22 areas for improvement. This is due to insufficient governance, oversight and assurance processes being in place.

In view of these findings, I have been in regular contact with the chief fire officer as I don't underestimate how much improvement is needed.

At the time of publication, in response to the two accelerated causes of concern, the service has provided an action plan that details how it intends to address the recommendations. But this report will focus on our findings at the time of our inspection, which took place for seven weeks from 30 May 2023. We will revisit the service in the week commencing 4 December 2023 to review the progress made against addressing the two accelerated causes of concern and associated recommendations.



Wendy Williams

HM Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Service in numbers



Profile

	Avon	England
Area		
Square miles	514	50,370
Population (thousands)		
30 June 2021	1,172	56,536
Population density		
Thousands per square mile	2.3	1.1



Cost

Funding		
Year ending 31 March 2022	£45.4m	£2.5bn
Expenditure per population		
Year ending 31 March 2022	£43.28	£41.88

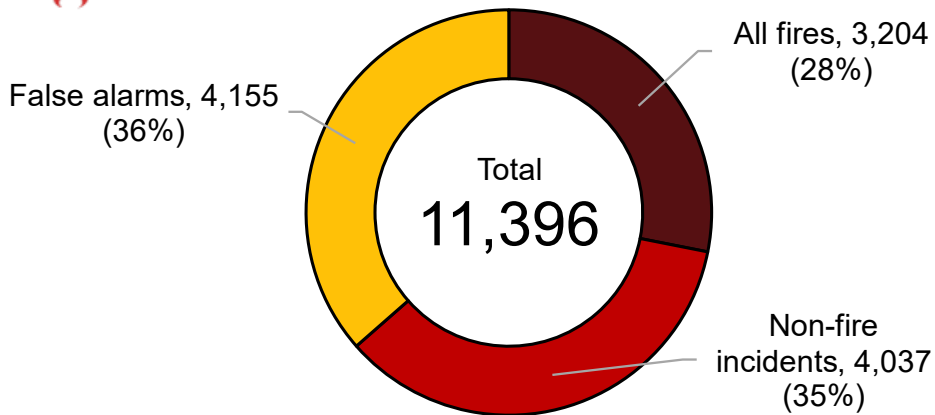


Response

Incidents attended per 1,000 population		
Year ending 31 December 2022	9.7	11.1
Home fire safety checks carried out by fire and rescue service per 1,000 population		
Year ending 31 March 2022	3.3	7.7
Fire safety audits per 100 known premises		
Year ending 31 March 2022	0.6	2.0
Availability of wholetime pumps		
Year ending 31 March 2022	93.0%	
Availability of on-call pumps		
Year ending 31 March 2022	80.0%	



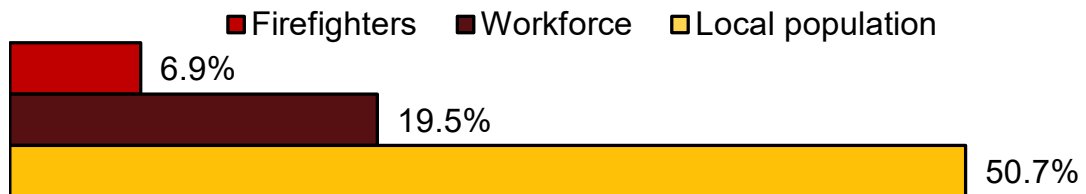
Incidents attended in the year to 31 December 2022



Workforce

	Avon	England
Five-year change in total workforce 2017 to 2022	-0.7%	0.2%
Number of firefighters per 1,000 population Year ending 31 March 2022	0.57	0.62
Percentage of firefighters who are wholetime Year ending 31 March 2022	70.9%	65.2%

Percentage of firefighters, workforce and population who are female as at 31 March 2022



Percentage of firefighters, workforce and population who are from ethnic minority backgrounds as at 31 March 2022



References to ethnic minorities in this report include people from White minority backgrounds but exclude people from Irish minority backgrounds. This is due to current data collection practices for national data. For more information on data and analysis in this report, please view the [‘About the data’ section of our website](#).

Understanding the risk of fire and other emergencies

Inadequate

Avon Fire and Rescue Service is inadequate at understanding risk.

Each fire and rescue service should identify and assess all foreseeable fire and rescue-related risks that could affect its communities. It should use its protection and response capabilities to prevent or mitigate these risks for the public.

Cause of concern

On 16 August 2023, we published some of our findings as an [accelerated cause of concern](#).

The service still doesn't have an effective system to make sure it gathers and records relevant and up-to-date risk information to help protect firefighters, the public and property during an emergency. We found examples of risk information available not being effective, accurate or up to date. Concerningly, most operational staff haven't been given the support they need to collect risk information, and there is limited strategic oversight in place to improve the risk information process.

Recommendations

By 19 September 2023, the service should provide an action plan to demonstrate how it will meet our recommendations, and it should have an effective risk information process in place. The service should make sure:

- it has identified all those premises that require a site-specific risk visit;
- staff are trained in how to carry out a site-specific risk visit and identify site-specific risk information;
- it has effective quality assurance and strategic oversight arrangements in place;
- temporary risks, including individual vulnerabilities that are added onto the risk information system, are managed appropriately;
- risk information is uploaded in a timely manner; and
- [fire control](#) has access to relevant and up-to-date risk information, including evacuation strategies, in high-rise residential buildings.

We set out our detailed findings below. These are the basis for our judgment of the service's performance in this area.

Main findings

The service still doesn't use the data it collects well

The service has assessed a suitable range of risks and threats using a thorough community risk management planning process. In its assessment of risk, it uses information it has collected from a broad range of internal and external sources and datasets. Since 2022, the service has developed a community risk report that assesses incident data and data from the community and national risk registers.

While there is a range of datasets available to the service, we found that it still didn't effectively use this data to support its prevention and response activities.

As part of the service's risk-based inspection programme, the protection department has identified 1,944 very high-risk premises that require fire safety audits (there are over 110,000 commercial premises and almost 200 high-rise buildings in the service area).

We recognise that a very high-risk premises identified from the risk-based inspection programme may not necessarily require a site-specific risk information (SSRI) record. But the service told us that it has only completed 489 SSRI visits. An SSRI visit is used to gather information, such as the hazards and risks associated with a premises, to assist response crews in the event of an emergency. Considering the demographics of the service area, we aren't confident that all buildings and places of risk have been identified.

The service has introduced its data warehouse for its protection function and aims to introduce this more widely in the longer term. But it needs to improve the way data is used across all functions.

When appropriate, the service has consulted and held constructive dialogue with its communities and other relevant parties to understand risk and explain how it intends to mitigate it. But it knows it can do more.

The service uses external and internal communications channels to encourage community involvement. These have included an online survey, use of social media and a virtual meeting. Although responses to its most recent survey doubled compared to the previous year, the service recognises it could do better when working with all community groups and partners.

There are no prevention, protection or response strategies in place to implement the Service Plan 2023–2026

The service refers to its [community risk management plan](#) as the Service Plan 2023–2026. After it has assessed risks, the service records its findings in the service plan. This plan describes how the service intends to use its prevention, protection and response activities to mitigate or reduce the risks and threats the community faces, both now and in the future. The service has two strategic priorities:

1. making our communities safer; and
2. making our service stronger.

The service plan provides information such as the achievements in the past 12 months, its performance and the resources it has available. It details the organisational priorities for prevention, protection and response. The service also has an action plan that it uses to monitor progress.

However, we found that senior leaders decided to remove the strategic plans. Without strategies across prevention, protection and response, there is limited detail explaining how the service intends to implement these priorities. For example, we expect the strategic plans to set out how the service intends to mitigate or reduce the risks and threats the community faces, both now and in the future. The plans will then drive the day-to-day activities.

We are concerned about the way the service identifies, gathers and maintains risk information

During our 2021 inspection, we highlighted the following areas for improvement:

- The service should make sure it gathers and records relevant and up-to-date risk information to help protect firefighters, the public and property during an emergency.
- The service should make sure staff are trained in how to carry out site-specific risk visits and identify SSRI.

We were disappointed to find that the service had made limited progress in addressing these two areas for improvement, and we have therefore escalated this to a cause of concern. We recognise that the service has identified an additional 200 premises that require SSRI records. But the service has only completed 489 SSRI visits, which is low in comparison to other services. And considering the demographics of the service area, we aren't confident that it has identified all buildings and places of threat.

The operational assurance team members we spoke with were enthusiastic and wanted to create improvements. But the team is under-resourced and there are limited strategic oversight arrangements in place to improve the risk information process. For example, we found that the service's operational risk inspection policy, which outlines the processes to manage risk information, hadn't been updated since August 2013.

We were told that IT systems aren't effective, which is hampering progress in this area. It can take up to four weeks for risk information to be uploaded onto [mobile data terminals](#), which is too long.

The service has limited capacity to record new and emerging risks and limited support to assure and challenge the quality of the risk information it receives.

We found that most staff were still not trained in how to carry out a risk information visit. Worryingly, the service told us that [on-call](#) firefighters complete SSRI visits in high-rise residential buildings that have highly flammable cladding, with no training or quality assurance processes in place.

The service collects some information about the highest-risk people, places and threats it has identified. But the information we reviewed was limited, inaccurate or out of date. For example, we found high-risk buildings in the area (including high-rise residential buildings) that had no risk information recorded.

Staff don't routinely use the risk information available to them

Concerningly, some operational staff told us it was more of a risk to use the risk information during their response. They also said they didn't find it useful and, therefore, didn't use it as a result.

We sampled a broad range of risk information the service collects, including information on an airport, an NHS hospital and a university.

The service doesn't make the risk information it collects readily available throughout the service, and not all staff understand it. The service needs to do more to make sure that staff in prevention, protection and response roles can access the information they need.

Not all buildings identified as a risk have records containing appropriate information. And the service isn't meeting its own standards in terms of reinspection frequency. This means the service can't effectively identify, reduce and mitigate risk. Some records we sampled hadn't been updated since 2016. But the service told us that at the time of our inspection, the longest overdue SSRI record was 22 days.

We were particularly concerned that some firefighters and emergency control room staff we spoke with were unable to show us that they could access, use and share risk information quickly to help them resolve incidents safely. In our last inspection, we found that [fire control](#) staff weren't always aware of the evacuation strategies for the high-rise residential buildings in the service area. Disappointingly, limited progress has been made in this area. This will affect the quality of the information provided to residents in those buildings in the event of a fire.

The service has a formalised process to exchange risk information with others when necessary. For example, we were told that response staff are alerted to hoarding risks, which is where a person has collected so many belongings in their house that it poses a fire risk. But many staff are unclear about whose responsibility it is to make sure vulnerability information is kept up to date and accurate. The service doesn't have clear management arrangements for this. The service should introduce an effective system to make sure its vulnerability information is reviewed when required and kept up to date.

We did find the service had an effective process in place to share urgent risk or health and safety information.

The corporate risk register needs to be refined

The service has a corporate risk register that outlines its significant risks, which are scored according to level of risk. But some of the risks don't contain enough detail, and some should be separated rather than grouped together. For example, the 'response and rescue' risk covers several risks, including recruitment, operational degradation, industrial action and capability for specific incident types, such as a marauding terrorist attack. Having all these examples recorded and managed as one single risk means that specific elements that may have a higher or lower risk score could be missed.

Some of the significant findings from this inspection and related documentation aren't identified on the corporate risk register. These include the issues we have identified concerning the [mobilisation](#) system.

The service learns from national incidents, but more needs to be done locally

The service's operational degradation plan, which is dated 2020, uses incident data from the previous five years (1 April 2014 to 31 March 2019). But the service could do more to inform its service plan and future plans.

We found some evidence that the service is communicating risk information. It uses feedback from national operational activities to inform its planning assumptions. The service has a risk management department, which shares [national operational learning](#) and [joint organisational learning](#). This helps the service learn from others as well as share its learning with others.

However, we found that local operational learning, including how the service identifies learning from the incident debriefing process, still needed to improve. Operational staff could only demonstrate limited learning. We also found that prevention and protection teams weren't always involved in the debrief process when they should be.

Preventing fires and other risks

Inadequate

Avon Fire and Rescue Service is inadequate at preventing fires and other risks.

Fire and rescue services must promote fire safety, including giving fire safety advice. To identify people at greatest risk from fire, services should work closely with other organisations in the public and voluntary sectors, and with the police and ambulance services. They should share [intelligence](#) and risk information with these other organisations when they identify vulnerability or exploitation.

Cause of concern

Prevention activity isn't a sufficiently high priority for the service, and there is no prevention strategy, which should drive its day-to-day activities. The service doesn't adequately prioritise [home fire safety visits \(HFSVs\)](#) on the basis of risk. We found that HFSVs were arranged based on staff's availability as opposed to risk. We found several HFSVs that were outstanding for a significant period of time due to resourcing issues.

Recommendations

Within 28 days, the service should develop an action plan to:

- develop and implement a prevention strategy that prioritises the people most at risk of fire and makes sure that work to reduce risk is proportionate;
- make sure there are strategic oversight arrangements in place and detailed key performance indicators for HFSVs;
- address the HFSVs backlog in a way that is both timely and prioritised on the basis of risk;
- make sure it quality assures its prevention activity so staff carry out HFSVs to an appropriate standard;
- make sure staff carry out HFSVs and wider prevention activities competently; and
- make sure the prevention department has enough resources to implement all its prevention activity and review whether [wholetime](#) firefighters can offer more capacity to prevention.

Area for improvement

The service should evaluate its prevention work so it understands what works.

We set out our detailed findings below. These are the basis for our judgment of the service's performance in this area.

Main findings

The service has no prevention strategy

The service doesn't have a prevention strategy, which should set out how it targets those most at risk from fire in its communities. So it isn't clear how prevention activity links to the risks and strategic priorities in its service plan or how the service should prioritise its day-to-day activities. Without a prevention strategy, there is limited information to inform the public where the greatest risks lie and no clear rationale for the level of activity needed to prevent fires and other risks.

Prevention work generally happens in isolation. We found little evidence of the service's prevention, protection and response functions exchanging relevant information. For example, we found that prevention information was sent informally via telephone or email (using personal email addresses) rather than following the formalised process. We were also disappointed to find that prevention staff weren't always included in debriefs after fatal incidents and may be missing out on key

learning opportunities. As a result, members of the public, including vulnerable people and others, may not be getting the support they need.

The service doesn't always prioritise those most at risk

Although the service has a risk-based approach that assesses prevention activity, this information isn't used to prioritise those most at risk. We found those occupants who may be at greater risk from fire weren't always prioritised. HFSVs are arranged based on location and the availability of staff rather than risk. The service should review whether this approach is suitable because it means a lower-risk visit may be prioritised over a higher-risk visit.

The service carries out a limited range of interventions that don't always match the level of risk in its communities. [Wholetime](#) firefighters complete HFSVs (within 28 days) for occupants with two or fewer vulnerabilities. Specialist prevention staff complete all other HFSVs (within 14 days) for those who are at greater risk.

We found resources in prevention were stretched and 249 HFSVs were overdue. We were concerned to find that at the time of our inspection (in June 2023), some vulnerable people had been waiting since November 2022 for an HFSV, which should give them advice on how to stay safe from fire. The service has some performance measures for prevention but risks like these aren't being logged and recording methods need to improve. This means that not all senior leaders are aware of these overdue HFSVs, which include visits to highly vulnerable people.

The service has recently changed the way HFSVs are booked to make it more efficient. This has caused some frustration for operational staff because local crews used to arrange HFSVs. They now have a lack of control in planning their working programmes.

We found that HFSVs completed by wholetime firefighters were typically arranged between 2pm and 4pm and between 6pm and 8pm. HFSVs should be arranged based on the needs of the public rather than the convenience of staff.

The service needs to be much more flexible and proactive. Prevention activity should be better prioritised across the service. It should also consider whether wholetime firefighters should complete HFSVs for occupants with more vulnerabilities, instead of the current practice of only completing HFSVs for occupants with two or fewer vulnerabilities.

We recognise that HFSV processes are being updated. But staff aren't completing HFSVs to a consistent standard. We also found that post-fire activity wasn't always recorded, even though the service sent reminders to its operational staff.

Since 2018/19, the service has consistently completed fewer HFSVs per 1,000 population than the national rate. And we found that wholetime firefighters didn't have any targets or expectations in place. The service should review how wholetime firefighters can offer more capacity and flexibility to preventative activities.

The service has been slow to train staff in HFSVs and wider prevention work

During our 2021 inspection, we highlighted an area for improvement that the service should make sure that staff carry out HFSVs and wider prevention activities competently. During this inspection, the new recruits we spoke with had received some prevention training. But the service has made limited progress in addressing the area for improvement. We have therefore escalated this to form part of the cause of concern recommendations.

At the time of our inspection, the service had started to train all wholetime firefighters in prevention. But this isn't due to be completed until February 2025. This is because there are limited resources within the prevention team. It could mean that the benefits of providing HFSVs to vulnerable people to protect them from fire and other emergencies aren't maximised. And they may not be receiving advice tailored to their needs.

The service doesn't quality assure HFSVs

The quality assurance of prevention activities is limited. We reviewed a small sample of files and found inconsistencies in the records that operational staff were completing. We understand there are constraints with the service's IT infrastructure. But we found there was a lack of an audit trail and that post-fire prevention work wasn't being completed. In the files we sampled, none of the incidents had a post-fire HFSV recorded. We also found that there were limited records of whether vulnerable people had been referred to other organisations or whether the service acts on the referrals it receives from partners.

We sampled a small selection of HFSV records related to the addresses that firefighters were due to visit. The HFSV records contained minimal details and none of the records we sampled showed what vulnerabilities the occupants had. This doesn't help crews in preparing for visits.

The service should review the effectiveness of its safeguarding training

Staff we interviewed told us of occasions when they have identified [safeguarding](#) problems. Most staff told us that they feel confident and trained to act appropriately and promptly.

The service has an e-learning package that all staff complete. But some staff told us that the e-learning package isn't effective, and some were unsure of the safeguarding process.

Furthermore, its safeguarding children and vulnerable adults policy was issued in 2018 and at the time of our inspection, was in the process of being reviewed.

The service is improving the way it works with partners

The service works with some local organisations. For example, with housing associations, care providers and the British Red Cross. We found that the service had recently provided training to a social care provider, which approximately 195 of the provider's staff members had attended.

The service recognises that it needs to increase the number of HFSV referrals from partners and is reviewing how it can achieve this.

As a result of IT constraints, we found limited evidence of the service referring vulnerable people to other organisations when it couldn't meet their needs. We also found limited evidence of the service receiving referrals from other organisations and acting appropriately on those referrals. Because of limited resources, the service isn't providing feedback to those partners that have made referrals to confirm the actions it has taken. The service doesn't routinely exchange information with relevant organisations about people and groups at greatest risk. This means it isn't using all available opportunities to prevent fires and other emergencies in its communities.

The service is good at tackling fire-setting behaviour

The service has a range of suitable and effective interventions to target and educate people with different needs who show signs of fire-setting behaviour. This includes a fire-setters' intervention scheme, through which a small team gives tailored support to young people to address fire-setting behaviour.

We found that the service prioritised HFSV referrals where there is an arson risk. Specialist prevention staff aim to carry out visits within seven days of receiving arson-risk referrals (but the visits are often completed sooner) and to fit equipment such as arson-proof letter boxes.

When appropriate, the service routinely shares information with relevant organisations to support the prosecution of arsonists.

The service doesn't evaluate all its prevention activities

During our 2021 inspection, we highlighted an area for improvement that the service should evaluate its prevention work so it understands what works. The service hasn't made enough progress in addressing this, so this area for improvement will remain.

We were told that the service has considered its approach to evaluation and is awaiting publication of the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#) evaluation model. The service has evaluated some prevention activities, such as its visits to schools. However, we found limited progress in other areas. For instance, it still hasn't evaluated its HFSV model. The service can't be assured that its activity is effective or that all its communities have appropriate access to prevention activity that meets their needs.

We were disappointed to find that prevention staff were stopped from attending an operational debrief that involved a fatality. The service doesn't routinely use feedback to improve what it does. As a result, the service is missing opportunities to improve its prevention work for the public.

A well-resourced schools programme is in place

The service has a dedicated team that visits schools to raise awareness of fire safety and wider prevention work, such as water safety. The schools are prioritised depending on the local risk. Operational staff also complete school visits. They will receive further support as part of the service's wider prevention training programme, which is due to be completed by February 2025.

The service has data-sharing agreements with the water safety partnership in both Bath and Bristol. The partnership supplies the service with incident data. Since our last inspection, the service has published its road safety strategy. The service told us that road safety activities take place. For example, it has presented key road safety messages at the City of Bristol College.

Protecting the public through fire regulation

Adequate

Avon Fire and Rescue Service is adequate at protecting the public through fire regulation.

All fire and rescue services should assess fire risks in certain buildings and, when necessary, require building owners to comply with fire safety legislation. Each service decides how many assessments it does each year. But it must have a locally determined, risk-based inspection programme for enforcing the legislation.

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure it has an effective quality assurance process so staff carry out audits to an appropriate standard.

The service should make sure it effectively addresses the burden of unwanted fire signals.

The service should make sure it has effective arrangements for providing specialist protection advice out of hours.

We set out our detailed findings below. These are the basis for our judgment of the service's performance in this area.

Main findings

The service should develop an overarching protection strategy

The service has an enforcement strategy and a risk-based inspection programme. But it doesn't have an overarching protection strategy that is clearly linked to the risks it has identified in its service plan. It isn't clear what level of activity it aims to take or how it evaluates the benefits of its protection activity for the public.

Protection work generally happens in isolation rather than across the whole service. We note that wholetime firefighters have recently started to receive fire safety training. But at the time of our inspection, they weren't carrying out any fire safety work. And we found that the service's protection, prevention and response functions didn't routinely exchange information.

The service has refined its risk-based inspection programme

During our 2021 inspection, we highlighted an area for improvement that the service should assure itself that its risk-based inspection programme prioritises the highest risks and includes proportionate activity to reduce risk. During this inspection, we were pleased to see the progress the service has made and have discharged this area for improvement.

The service uses a new methodology and datasets to calculate risk scores. It focuses on the highest-risk buildings in the service area. The service told us that it is on schedule to inspect all 1,944 very high-risk premises within the 3-year cycle it has set itself.

In spring 2020, the Home Office identified 187 premises over 18 metres high in the service area. In our 2021 inspection, we were disappointed to find that the service had only inspected 14 of them.

In this inspection, we were pleased to find that all 187 high-rise buildings had been inspected within the time frames the Home Office had set.

The quality of completed fire safety audits is inconsistent

We reviewed a range of audits that the service had carried out at different buildings across its area. These included audits carried out:

- as part of the service's risk-based inspection programme;
- after fires at premises where fire safety legislation applies;
- after enforcement action had been taken; and
- at high-rise, high-risk buildings.

Not all the audits we reviewed were completed in a consistent, systematic way or in line with the service's policies. For example, in some of the files we sampled, the fire safety inspector had changed the outcome of the fire safety audit without providing the necessary justification. We also found that the post-fire safety audit process wasn't always followed.

We found limited evidence of the service making relevant information from its audits available to operational teams and control room operators.

The service needs to make sure it has up-to-date processes and policies in place. Some staff are unaware of the time frames for responding to concerns that have been raised.

The service doesn't always carry out quality assurance

We found examples where quality assurance had taken place during a fire safety inspection. However, the service accepts that not all of its fire safety inspectors' work has been quality assured.

This area was also highlighted during our previous inspection. We encourage the service to make sure, as soon as possible, that its quality assurance process is effective, and that staff carry out audits to an appropriate standard.

The service takes appropriate enforcement action

The service consistently uses its full range of enforcement powers. When appropriate, it prosecutes those who don't comply with fire safety regulations. We reviewed recent fire safety audits that had led to enforcement action.

The service prosecutes for fire safety failings when required. There are appropriate resources and processes in place to investigate and, when necessary, to prosecute. The service told us that it had completed one successful prosecution in the last year.

In the year ending 31 March 2022, the service issued 326 informal notifications, no alteration notices, 18 enforcement notices, 10 prohibition notices and undertook no prosecutions. It completed three prosecutions in the five years from April 2017 to March 2022.

From the small number of files we sampled, we found that the service doesn't regularly follow up on prohibition notices to check compliance. This sends the wrong message to those who don't take fire safety legislation seriously. The service should make sure appropriate processes are in place to follow up on prohibition notices after they have been served.

There are enough staff to meet the requirements of the service's risk-based inspection programme

We were pleased to see that the service has enough qualified protection staff to meet the requirements of its risk-based inspection programme.

Staff get the right training and work to appropriate accreditation. Regular [continuing professional development](#) is carried out.

A restructure means the service has new team leader roles. We were also encouraged to find that the number of fire safety inspectors had increased.

At the time of our inspection, the service had 11 fire safety inspectors who had achieved their [Level 4 Diploma in Fire Safety](#). A further four had almost completed their qualification. The service also had eight fire safety inspectors who were working towards their Level 3 or Level 4 Certificate in Fire Safety.

This helps it provide the range of audit and enforcement activity needed, both now and in the future.

The service is adapting to new legislation

Since our last inspection, the [Building Safety Act 2022](#) and the [Fire Safety Regulations 2022](#) have been introduced to bring about better regulation and management of tall buildings. The service is supporting the introduction of the [Building Safety Regulator](#) by seconding a fire safety inspector to support this work. It expects these arrangements to have a limited negative effect on its other protection activity.

The Fire Safety Regulations 2022 introduced a range of duties for the managers of tall buildings. These include a requirement to give the fire and rescue service floor plans and to inform them of any substantial faults to essential firefighting equipment, such as firefighting lifts. We found the service had good arrangements in place to receive this information. When it doesn't receive the right information, it takes action.

The service works effectively with others in enforcement

The service works closely with other enforcement agencies to regulate fire safety and it routinely exchanges risk information with them. Fire safety inspectors regularly complete joint visits with local authority housing teams.

We were pleased to find that fire safety inspectors supported large events in the service area. For example, the service supported Bristol City Council with a major concert by visiting the venue in advance and reviewing the fire safety measures the organisers had put in place.

The service regularly responds to building consultations on time

The service responds to all building consultations on time. This means it consistently meets its statutory responsibility to comment on fire safety arrangements at new and altered buildings. The building consultations are sent electronically, and an officer is assigned to provide the response.

The service has good relationships with the local authorities. If any urgent consultations need to be reviewed, the assigned contact agrees the time frame for the review.

Since our last inspection, the service has improved its communication with businesses

During our 2021 inspection, we highlighted an area for improvement that the service should make sure it works with local businesses to share information and expectations on compliance with fire safety regulations. During this inspection, we were pleased to see the progress the service has made and have discharged this area for improvement.

The service proactively works with local businesses and other organisations to promote compliance with fire safety legislation. For example, it produced a business awareness video that was later used by the National Fire Chiefs Council. The service has also worked with landlords and provided fire safety information to some ethnic minority communities. The service provides information for businesses on its website. It also manages two [primary authority partnership schemes](#), which give advice to large and small businesses about compliance with fire safety legislation.

However, despite the increased involvement with local businesses, the service recognises that it can do more.

The service needs to do more to manage unwanted fire signals

The service is taking only limited action to reduce the number of unwanted fire signals. We were told that firefighters and fire safety inspectors responding to an unwanted fire signal carry out limited action and intervention. As a result of a recent retirement, there isn't a process to monitor the data on a regular basis. And the service's unwanted fire signals policy has passed its review date.

This means fire engines may not be available to respond to incidents because they are attending false alarms. It also creates a risk to the public if more fire engines travel at high speed on the roads to respond to these incidents.

In 2021/22, the service only attended 38 percent of automatic fire alarm calls, which is much lower than the national rate of 64 percent. The service needs to make sure a clear process is put in place and that staff understand their roles.

The service accepts it needs to get better at managing unwanted fire signals and a review is underway.

The service still doesn't have enough fire safety cover at all times

In our last inspection, we raised an area for improvement that the service should make sure it has effective arrangements for providing specialist protection advice out of hours.

The service has introduced a pool of specialist fire safety staff who can be called on, but this depends on the goodwill of staff. There is no backup plan or guarantee that individuals will respond 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The service's duty system still doesn't provide enough expertise when responding to certain fire safety concerns.

Wholtime firefighters have only recently started to receive fire safety training. Without appropriate training, firefighters may not identify instances where they could need to escalate a fire safety issue. Outside office hours, there may be dangerous situations where access to premises needs to be prohibited or restricted. Only a limited number of staff on the rota system have the specialist protection knowledge required to authorise this decision.

We aren't satisfied that the current arrangements for providing specialist fire safety advice out of hours are as robust as is reasonably required. There are successful '24/7 models' in place nationally that don't require disproportionate resources. We expect all services to have the capability to respond to fire safety concerns at all times. Therefore, this area for improvement will remain.

Responding to fires and other emergencies

Inadequate

Avon Fire and Rescue Service is inadequate at responding to fires and other emergencies.

Fire and rescue services must be able to respond to a range of incidents such as fires, road traffic collisions and other emergencies in their areas.

Cause of concern

On 16 August 2023, we published some of our findings as an [accelerated cause of concern](#).

The service's [mobilisation](#) system, which records information and dispatches resources to emergency incidents, isn't reliable and crashes during emergency 999 calls. This unnecessarily delays the mobilisation of resources, which results in the public receiving a slower response to emergencies.

Recommendations

By 19 September 2023, the service should develop an action plan to make sure:

- the mobilisation system is effective and that it doesn't result in the public receiving a slower response to emergencies;
- it has strategic oversight arrangements in place and that any faults are recorded regularly and escalated to senior leaders where necessary; and
- [fire control](#) staff are provided with regular updates and welfare support is put in place.

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure incident commanders know how to command fire and rescue service assets assertively, effectively and safely at incidents and have completed their two-yearly incident command assessment.

The service should make sure its [mobile data terminals](#) are reliable so firefighters can easily access up-to-date risk information.

The service should make sure its operational staff have good access to relevant and up-to-date cross-border risk information.

The service should make sure it has an effective system for learning from operational incidents.

The service should assure itself it has procedures in place to record important operational decisions made at incidents and that staff understand these procedures well.

We set out our detailed findings below. These are the basis for our judgment of the service's performance in this area.

Main findings

The service has no response strategy

The service doesn't have an overarching response strategy. The operational response plan lacks detail and isn't clearly linked to the risks the service has identified in its service plan.

In 2018, the service commissioned an external organisation to review its resources and station locations. The review was extended in 2021 to include the analysis of risk and demand. The service has committed to further developing this work and is reviewing the number and type of fire engines it sends to emergency incidents.

This work will help the service understand how best to use its resources to reduce risk. It will provide a rationale for the location of its fire engines and response staff as well as for its working patterns. It will also make sure the service can respond flexibly to fires and other emergencies with the appropriate resources. We look forward to reviewing the progress of this work but note that it has been ongoing for some time.

The service is meeting its response standards, but its response times are slower than those of other similar services

There are no national response standards of performance for the public. But the service has set out its own response standards in its service plan. There are three categories: emergency critical; emergency non-critical; and non-emergency.

The service aims to attend emergency [critical incidents](#), such as house fires, within eight minutes. The service uses an average (mean) for the relevant year to see if it has reached its target.

The service meets its standards. It told us that, in the year ending 31 March 2023, the average emergency critical response time was 7 minutes 12 seconds.

Despite this, the service is slower when compared with other predominately urban services. For example, in 2021/22:

- the service's average call-handling time was 1 minute 54 seconds for [primary fires](#) – the average for predominately urban services is 1 minute 22 seconds and the national average is 1 minute 21 seconds;
- the service's average crew turnout time was 1 minute 25 seconds – the average for predominantly urban services is 1 minute 3 seconds and the national average is 1 minute 34 seconds; and
- the service's average overall response time to primary fires was 9 minutes 19 seconds – the national average is 8 minutes 50 seconds.

The service hasn't set itself a target for the number of fire engines that need to be available to support its service plan. The service told us that in the year ending 31 March 2023, overall availability was 83.8 percent.

There are longstanding issues with the mobilisation system

We are concerned about the longstanding issues with the mobilisation system. During emergency 999 calls, the mobilisation system, which records information and dispatches resources to emergency incidents, isn't reliable and crashes. This causes unnecessary delay in the mobilisation of resources and results in the public receiving a slower response to emergencies.

For example, we were concerned to hear about a particular ambulance service request for an emergency response to a serious road traffic collision. While the fire control operator was recording the information to dispatch resources, the system crashed. This resulted in the fire control operator having to use a different console and restart the whole process as other operators were busy taking other calls.

These concerns have placed unnecessary stress on fire control staff. We were told that multiple health and safety '[near miss](#)' forms were completed to report this issue as it has adversely affected staff welfare, but these have been overlooked or ignored.

Fire control staff didn't know who was dealing with the issue, and limited updates have been provided.

We were informed that this issue was caused by an update to the mobilisation system. At the time of our inspection, the service told us that the mobilisation system had crashed or frozen on 20 occasions in the past 12 months. But members of staff told us this has happened many more times and some staff have stopped reporting the problem. In 2021/22, the service received 20,979 emergency calls. Although the system has crashed on comparatively few occasions, the actual number of times this has happened is believed to be much higher than reported. In the circumstances, even one delay is too many because it could put the public at risk. The service doesn't record how long the system is down on each occasion, so it can't assure itself that the issue hasn't had a detrimental effect on the response the public receives.

Worryingly, at the time we discovered these problems, they hadn't been appropriately escalated and prioritised and weren't on the service's corporate risk register. The service has limited plans in place to address them.

The service should assure itself that incident commanders are up to date with their competency accreditation

Not all incident commanders in the service have been assessed regularly and properly. So the service can't assure the public that it can safely, assertively and effectively manage all the incidents it could face. In the small number of records we sampled, we found that incident commanders' competency accreditation had expired, which included the accreditation of a senior leader. The service told us it risk assesses each individual whose accreditation has expired. But this process isn't set out in policy and the decision isn't formally recorded.

The service's incident command policy is out of date and should be reviewed.

As part of our inspection, we interviewed incident commanders from across the service. Not all of them were confident in explaining how they complete [risk assessments](#), make decisions and record information at incidents in line with national best practice. We found that risk assessments weren't routinely completed during an incident. Several files we sampled showed that fire control sent repeated prompts to incident commands to complete the risk assessments, but these reminders were often overlooked or ignored.

In our last inspection, we found that incident commanders didn't carry out any ongoing training to maintain their competencies in between their two-yearly assessments. Limited progress has been made in this area. The service would benefit from providing its incident commanders with continuing professional development in between their command competency assessments.

The service has invested in a team that is dedicated to working on implementing national operational guidance. But we found that operational assurance or monitoring wasn't regularly carried out to make sure that staff command incidents in line with operational guidance.

Firefighters can't always access risk information

We sampled a range of risk information records for residential and commercial risks. This included the information in place for firefighters who respond to incidents at high-risk, high-rise buildings and the information held by fire control.

The information we reviewed wasn't always up to date or detailed. It hadn't always been completed with input from the service's prevention, protection and response functions when appropriate.

Concerningly, we were told by firefighters that on one occasion when they were reviewing the risk information on their way to an incident, a completely different building was displayed that had no relevance to the incident they were attending. We were also told of an occasion when firefighters attended a fire on a ship. The risk information record said it had two floors and a slated roof, which was clearly inaccurate.

Many operational staff told us that the mobile data terminal used to access risk information often crashes and isn't reliable. This is a regular cause of frustration.

The service shares information about cross-border risks and major risks through a national database, which flexible duty officers have access to. However, specific cross-border risk details aren't available to fire control staff and firefighters.

In our 2021 inspection, we raised an area for improvement that the service should make sure its operational staff have good access to relevant and up-to-date cross-border risk information. We were disappointed to find that little progress had been made. Therefore, this area for improvement will remain.

Fire control staff are more involved in response activity

In our previous inspection, we found that the service hadn't reviewed its ability to provide fire survival guidance to many callers simultaneously, as we would have expected. This was identified as learning for fire and rescue services after the [Grenfell Tower Inquiry](#).

We were pleased to see that the service's control staff are integrated into its command, training, exercise, debrief and assurance activity. We found an increase in the number of exercises that fire control staff took part in, including testing the management of high-rise incidents and fire survival guidance. We also found that fire control staff were part of the debrief process after a fire in a high-rise building.

The operational debrief process should be improved

In our 2021 inspection, we raised an area for improvement that the service should make sure it has an effective system for learning from operational incidents. We also raised this in our first inspection in 2018. Disappointingly, not enough progress has been made, so this area for improvement will remain.

The staff we spoke with who deal with operational debriefs were passionate and eager to make positive changes. The service has introduced a new debrief process and, as part of our inspection, we reviewed a range of emergency incidents and training events. These included major incidents at high-rise residential buildings.

We found some examples of safety-critical information and operational learning from incidents being communicated across the service. However, we also found that actions resulting from the debriefs weren't routinely followed up and there was a lack of strategic oversight of the process. For example, several learning points identified at the debrief were assigned to departments, but the actions weren't completed in a timely manner. We also found that risk assessments weren't routinely completed by incident commanders, as required. But this information was missing from any learning points.

Many firefighters we spoke with told us that they couldn't recall any operational learning in the past 12 months and that the onus is on the individual to make sure they read the information available to them. However, many staff told us that they find it difficult to locate the relevant pages to read or record any operational learning. We found that immediate debriefs were completed at incidents where staff can discuss any learning points. But lower-level learning isn't recorded or shared across the organisation. And, disappointingly, we found that prevention or protection teams weren't involved in the debrief process when appropriate.

The public is kept informed of ongoing incidents

The service has good systems in place to inform the public about ongoing incidents and help keep them safe during and after incidents. These include:

- corporate communications officers and flexible duty officers who have received media training and are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week;
- using social media; and
- arrangements with [local resilience forum \(LRF\)](#) partners to inform the community about ongoing incidents.

Responding to major and multi-agency incidents

Adequate

Avon Fire and Rescue Service is adequate at responding to major and multi-agency incidents.

All fire and rescue services must be able to respond effectively to multi-agency and cross-border incidents. This means working with other fire and rescue services (known as intraoperability) and emergency services (known as interoperability).

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure it has an effective method to share fire survival guidance information with multiple callers and that it has a dedicated communication link in place.

The service should make sure it participates in a programme of cross-border exercises, with learning from them recorded and shared.

We set out our detailed findings below. These are the basis for our judgment of the service's performance in this area.

Main findings

The service is well-prepared to respond to major and multi-agency incidents

The service has effectively anticipated and considered the reasonably foreseeable risks and threats it may face. These risks are listed in both local and national risk registers as part of its community risk report 2022. They include severe weather and flooding risks. The service has effective means of declaring a major incident and responding to it.

It is familiar with some of the significant risks in neighbouring fire and rescue service areas, which it might reasonably be asked to respond to in an emergency. But it has more to do. For example, firefighters and fire control staff don't always have risk information available from all neighbouring services.

The service should make sure it is well-prepared to form part of a multi-agency response to a terrorist incident and that its procedures for responding are understood by all staff and are well tested. We spoke with some staff who didn't know what their roles are in response to incidents like a marauding terrorist attack.

The service has the resources to support a major incident

In our last inspection, we focused on how the service had collected risk information and responded to the Government's building risk review programme for tall buildings.

In this inspection, we focused on how well-prepared the service is to respond to a major incident at a tall building, such as the tragedy at Grenfell Tower.

At the time of our inspection, the service had recently introduced new procedures and policies for safely managing this type of incident. However, we found that not all staff at all levels properly understood the policies and procedures in place. We found evidence that some training and exercising had taken place to test them, but the service hadn't trained all its operational staff.

At this type of incident, a fire and rescue service would receive a high number of simultaneous fire calls. We found that the systems in place in the service weren't robust enough to receive and manage this number of calls.

The service relies too heavily on paper-based systems. These systems are open to operator error. They also mean that staff in the emergency control room, at the incident and in assisting control rooms can't share, view and update actions in real time. These systems could compromise the service's ability to safely resolve a major incident at a tall building.

The service works well with other fire and rescue services

The service supports other fire and rescue services responding to emergency incidents. For example, in summer 2022, the service supported Norfolk Fire and Rescue Service because it experienced major fires and called on [national resilience assets](#). It is intraoperable with other fire and rescue services and can form part of a multi-agency response.

The service has resources to support a major incident, such as a mass decontamination unit, a high-volume pump and an [urban search and rescue](#) team. Staff are clear about when and how to deploy these resources.

Cross-border exercising needs to be co-ordinated

Although cross-border exercises take place, they are usually arranged locally and there isn't a co-ordinated approach across the service. We spoke with some firefighters who haven't completed any recent cross-border exercises despite being located near to a border with another service area. The service has no cross-border policy or process in place.

We raised this in our last inspection. We encourage the service to have a cross-border plan and to make sure there is appropriate oversight so that all exercises can be planned, tracked and debriefed and that the learning is shared. The service currently uses limited learning from these exercises to inform risk information and service plans.

Most incident commanders were familiar with the Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles

Most incident commanders we interviewed had been trained in and were familiar with [Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles](#). The service showed us strong evidence that it consistently follows these principles. This included multi-agency exercising to test these principles with Avon and Somerset Police in a joint flooding exercise carried out in Wales. And the service and the police recently worked closely together in an armed response scenario at Avonmouth docks.

We sampled a range of debriefs the service had carried out after multi-agency incidents. Although the service needs to improve local learning, we were encouraged to find that it was identifying any problems it had with applying the principles and taking appropriate, prompt action with other emergency services.

The service is proactive in its work with partners

The service has good arrangements in place to respond to emergencies with partners that make up the Avon and Somerset LRF. The service shares its headquarters site with Avon and Somerset Police, which helps with building effective working relationships.

The service is a valued partner in the LRF and is represented at its strategic and tactical co-ordinating groups and subgroups.

It takes part in regular training events with other members of the LRF. For example, in the year ending March 2023, the service completed 55 multi-agency exercises and 51 national resilience training events. It uses the learning to develop planning assumptions about responding to major and multi-agency incidents.

The service makes use of national learning

The service makes sure it knows about national operational updates from other fire and rescue services and joint organisational learning from other organisations, such as the police service and ambulance trusts. It uses this learning to inform planning assumptions that it makes with partner organisations.

National operational learning and joint organisational learning are shared through a single point of contact in the service. An example of learning includes an occasion when the police had breached fire doors in a high-rise residential building, which had caused ventilation issues.

Making best use of resources

Requires improvement

Avon Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at making best use of its resources.

Fire and rescue services should manage their resources properly and appropriately, aligning them with their risks and statutory responsibilities. Services should make best possible use of resources to achieve the best results for the public.

The service's revenue budget for 2023/24 is £48.9 million. This is a 9.25 percent increase from the previous financial year.

Areas for improvement

The service needs to show a clear rationale for the resources allocated between prevention, protection and response activities. This should reflect and be consistent with the risks and priorities set out in its service plan.

The service should have effective measures in place to assure itself that its [wholetime](#) workforce is productive and that their time is used as efficiently and effectively as possible to meet the priorities in the service plan.

The service should assure itself that all processes in place to support performance management are effective.

The service should make sure it effectively monitors, reviews and evaluates the benefits and outcomes of any collaboration activity.

We set out our detailed findings below. These are the basis for our judgment of the service's performance in this area.

Main findings

The service's resourcing plans need more work

The service sometimes uses its resources well to manage risk, but there are several weaknesses that need to be addressed. For example, its service plan details the resources available in prevention, protection and response. But without comprehensive strategies, the service doesn't have enough information to determine what level of resource it needs to meet future risk. We also found:

- a lack of capacity and support within the team that manages risk information and operational debriefs;
- not enough resources in prevention, which has led to a backlog of HFSVs; and
- too few staff in fire control, which means it has experienced regular staff shortages in the previous 12 months.

The service has introduced dual-response vehicles at some on-call stations to help with staff shortages. This is where the crew of a fire engine is made up of firefighters from different nearby on-call stations who respond simultaneously. Some on-call firefighters we spoke with were frustrated with the lack of action to mobilise this vehicle. For example, for a fire at a school, the request for firefighters from different on-call stations to crew the dual-response vehicle was refused and a wholetime fire engine was sent instead. However, the dual-response vehicle could have provided a quicker response.

The service hasn't evaluated its mix of crewing and duty systems. It hasn't completed a recent analysis of its response cover and can't show it deploys its fire engines and response staff to manage risk efficiently. However, we recognise that this work is in progress, and we look forward to seeing how this develops.

At the time of our inspection, we found that the service relied too much on overtime. It has high levels of overtime costs compared with other services. We also found that the incident command vehicle was unavailable 8 times in the previous 12 months because of staff shortages.

The service's financial position has improved after a rise in the local council tax precept and an increase in central government funding. Its work on improving its financial planning has included scenario planning. The service has got better at recognising pressures and future risks. This has helped it to build its financial plans on sound scenarios and make sure the service is sustainable. Financial controls reduce the risk of misusing public money.

The service has made limited progress in making sure wholetime firefighters are used more productively

In our 2021 inspection, we raised an area for improvement that the service should have effective measures in place to assure itself that its wholetime workforce is productive and that their time is used as efficiently and effectively as possible to meet the strategic priorities in the service plan. Disappointingly, not enough progress has been made, so this area for improvement will remain.

The service has appointed a senior leader to undertake an efficiencies, productivity and savings review. We understand the service has undertaken an analysis of the current working day to identify options to improve effectiveness and efficiency. We also recognise that problems with IT infrastructure are affecting the service's ability to collect meaningful data. However, the service doesn't understand how it uses its wholetime firefighters. It doesn't collect data on how they spend their time across day and night shifts. And the service doesn't make the most of its capacity.

In our last inspection, we identified that:

- it carried out fewer HFSVs than the national average;
- it had carried out fewer fire safety audits in the previous three years compared with the national average;
- wholetime firefighters weren't carrying out any protection work; and
- a low number of SSRI records had been completed.

We were disappointed to find that there had been limited progress since our 2021 inspection, and these findings remain. The service should broaden its focus on productivity to make sure that its staff are as efficient as they can be. This includes considering new ways of working.

The service's performance arrangements are weak

We found that the service's arrangements for managing performance were weak and didn't clearly link resource use to its service plan and its strategic priorities. There are insufficient governance, oversight and assurance processes in place. For example, senior leaders weren't aware of the number of overdue HFSVs, which include visits to highly vulnerable people.

The service doesn't have clear processes to manage the performance of its workforce. Limited training is provided to managers to make sure they can confidently manage performance. Some managers told us that they don't manage the performance of their teams because they are afraid of upsetting their staff. We were also told that there aren't any capability processes in place for those not performing well. And there are no performance measures in place for HFSVs. The service needs to do much more to make sure that its performance management processes are effective.

We were told that the service has found it difficult to recruit for some posts because wholetime firefighters don't want to leave their station or the favoured shift system. This means some departments are under-resourced, which has led to a lack of progress in addressing the areas for improvement we identified in our last inspection.

The service collaborates with others but needs to review and evaluate this work

We were pleased to see that the service meets its statutory duty to collaborate. It routinely considers opportunities to collaborate with other emergency responders. For example, it works with the ambulance service to help enter premises if there are concerns for occupants' welfare. We also found the service has supported the police by using its drone to search for [missing persons](#).

The service has a collaboration and partnerships register, which lists the details of all the agreements and includes a brief overview of each arrangement.

The service needs to do more to monitor, review and evaluate the benefits and results of its collaborations. Its current reviews and evaluation are limited in scope, and the service doesn't use them to learn from or change decisions or to make sure it achieves value for money.

However, we were encouraged to see that the service is publishing its new evaluation process which, if effectively implemented, will address these issues. We look forward to seeing how this develops.

The service has effective business continuity arrangements in place

The service has good continuity arrangements in place for areas in which it considers threats and risks to be high. It regularly reviews and tests these threats and risks so that staff know the arrangements and their associated responsibilities.

The service has appropriate business continuity plans in place for industrial action. It has assured itself and can demonstrate that it has adequate resources available for future periods of industrial action. The plans are detailed and comprehensive and set out the service's planning assumptions. These include where fire engines will be located, actions to be taken during industrial action and the recovery phase and the communication channels to be used with the workforce. It has tested these plans and used learning to update them.

The service has sound financial management processes in place

The service has a good process for financial planning and budgeting. This is supported by external and internal audits. Reviews consider all the service's expenditure, including its non-pay costs. Middle managers are now more involved in budget setting and are asked to review their financial budgets regularly.

Expenditure is regularly reviewed through the [fire and rescue authority](#) scrutiny arrangements. The service has developed a capital prioritisation and steering group, which consists of managers across the service who review capital expenditure. Managers are tasked with providing business cases for any significant expenditure.

The service has made savings and efficiencies. These haven't had a negative effect on its operational performance and the service it gives the public. For example, the service has a savings register, which shows it has saved £25,000 annually by paying its IT invoices upfront. The service has also saved significant energy costs through its renewable energy sources across its estate.

Making the fire and rescue service affordable now and in the future

Requires improvement

Avon Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at making the service affordable now and in the future.

Fire and rescue services should continuously look for ways to improve their effectiveness and efficiency. This includes transforming how they work and improving their value for money. Services should have robust spending plans that reflect future financial challenges and efficiency opportunities, and they should invest in better services for the public.

Areas for improvement

The service should assure itself that its IT systems are resilient, reliable, accurate and accessible and that strategic oversight arrangements are in place to manage its IT infrastructure.

The service should assure itself that it has the capability and capacity it needs to achieve future change.

We set out our detailed findings below. These are the basis for our judgment of the service's performance in this area.

Main findings

The service's IT infrastructure is failing staff and holding the service back

During our 2021 inspection, we highlighted an area for improvement that the service should assure itself that its IT systems are resilient, reliable, accurate and accessible. The service has made limited progress in this area, so this area for improvement will remain.

We also said in our previous inspection that investment had been made and senior leaders were more focused on IT developments. However, during this inspection, we were disappointed to find that poor IT infrastructure was still holding the service back. Staff can't work effectively or efficiently. This is also preventing the service from making some important improvements.

There are insufficient governance, oversight and assurance processes in place to improve this. Staff are frustrated that the problems with technology still haven't been resolved. We found evidence that many IT systems are out of date and don't work efficiently and effectively. Many systems are standalone and don't allow effective data sharing between prevention, protection and response teams. Staff can't always easily access the information they need to do their jobs. We found that some IT issues weren't being escalated to senior leaders. The service should make sure it has appropriate strategic oversight arrangements in place.

We found issues with:

- how risk information is collected and recorded;
- the mobile data terminals that are mounted on fire engines;
- the mobilisation system to dispatch resources;
- an update that resulted in the system being restricted for up to two weeks, which affected prevention and protection teams;
- the appraisal system not functioning; and
- the recording of firefighter availability – firefighters told us that this system has crashed on several occasions.

The service has invested in its IT infrastructure. Since our last inspection, it has rolled out Microsoft 365 and Microsoft Teams to improve staff's day-to-day work. But there is significantly more to do.

The service doesn't have the capability and capacity to make future change

During our 2021 inspection, we highlighted an area for improvement that the service should assure itself that it has the capability and capacity it needs to achieve future change. The service has made limited progress in this area, so this area for improvement will remain.

In our last inspection, we highlighted that the service had invested in a transformation programme that aimed to improve its policies and processes through use of digital technology. However, many of those aims have proven to be ineffective because of insufficient governance, oversight and assurance processes.

Disappointingly, we found several key policies across the service that had passed their review dates or were in draft form. This is an area we highlighted in our previous inspection. There has been a lack of strategic oversight and assurance measures in place to progress this.

For example, we found that the grievance policy was last published in January 2007, and there hadn't been any meaningful review since then. In this inspection, we were disappointed to find that no progress had been made and the same grievance policy from January 2007 was still in place.

We found that the transformation team was hindered in how much progress it could make. Some staff were frustrated with the lack of progress made in some areas. This is because subject matter experts in the respective departments carry out policy reviews to make sure the information is accurate and relevant. However, we found that because of limited resources and IT constraints, the reviews weren't always completed. The service has extended the transformation programme until March 2024.

The service has identified its future financial challenges

The service has developed a sound understanding of future financial challenges. The higher-than-anticipated pay awards have created a significant budget shortfall and contingency funding has been used to cover the increase in 2023/24. The service needs to save £2.4m by 2026/27. It has plans to mitigate its main or significant financial risks. For example, £520,000 of savings have already been identified in 2023/24 from employee costs, fuel and procurement.

At the time of our inspection, the service had appointed a strategic leader to undertake an efficiencies, productivity and savings review to bridge this gap. But the plans are still in their early stages.

The underpinning assumptions about the service's future financial challenges are relatively robust, realistic and prudent. They take account of the wider external environment and some scenario planning for future spending reductions. These include financial modelling on income and expenditure variables, such as the projected pay award levels, non-pay inflationary levels, contingency budgets and income levels. The service has also considered the rise in capital construction costs resulting from inflationary pressures because it has plans to develop and modernise some of its fire stations.

The service has clear arrangements in place for the use of its reserves

The service has a sensible and sustainable plan for using its reserves. It sets its minimum general reserves requirement at £1.5m, which represents just under 3 percent of its annual revenue budget. The level of earmarked reserves is risk-assessed every year to provide continuity and adequacy.

The service's plans for the use of its reserves include the modernisation of its estates among other projects.

In our 2021 inspection, we were pleased to report that the service had successfully secured a [Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme](#) grant of £823,670. It was the only fire and rescue service to receive a grant. The service has used this to install heat pumps, thermal efficiency, solar thermal and solar photovoltaic systems, and battery storage. In addition, it has invested in electrical vehicle charging points across its estate and 25 electrical vehicles.

We found that the service mainly used paper-based systems for managing the fleet. Some vehicles have a telematics system but because of the limitations of the IT system, the service doesn't use the information effectively. The service hasn't completed any recent [benchmarking](#) exercises to see how its estates and fleet compare with those of other services.

The service's ten-year estates and fleet strategies are under review. It is important for these strategies to continue to link to the service plan and medium-term financial plan to support key decisions about the future of its estates and fleet.

The service continues to generate some income and make cost savings

The service actively considers and exploits opportunities for generating extra income. It has been successful in receiving a grant to access the expertise and skills needed to put in place a heat decarbonisation plan for buildings.

The service anticipates that its newly built fire station, Avonmouth, will have minimal energy costs. The service has also significantly reduced energy costs through its renewable energy sources across its estate.

Promoting the right values and culture

Inadequate

Avon Fire and Rescue Service is inadequate at promoting the right values and culture.

Fire and rescue services should have positive and inclusive cultures, modelled by the behaviours of their senior leaders. Services should promote health and safety effectively, and staff should have access to a range of well-being support that can be tailored to their individual needs.

Cause of concern

The service has shown an intent to improve its culture, with some staff reporting improvements across the service. However, more needs to be done. We found evidence of behaviours that weren't in line with service values. We were told about cultures among some teams where staff demonstrate unacceptable behaviours, such as using sexist or inappropriate language and disguising this as banter. And worryingly, some staff don't have the confidence to report these issues. We were told that there is a disconnect at different levels of the service, such as between middle and senior management, and information isn't always filtered down to the whole workforce.

Recommendations

Within 28 days, the service should develop an action plan to:

- make sure that its values and behaviours are understood and demonstrated at all levels of the organisation;
- assure itself that senior and middle managers act as role models and show they are committed to service values through their behaviour;
- make sure that staff are trained and supported to identify and challenge inappropriate behaviour;
- assure itself that staff are confident using its feedback processes to raise their concerns; and
- make sure that the appropriate support is provided to those raising workforce concerns.

Areas for improvement

The service should assure itself that managers are appropriately trained and understand the well-being provisions available to them and wider staff.

The service should proactively monitor working hours (including overtime and secondary contracts) to make sure staff don't work excessive hours.

The service should assure itself that managers are appropriately trained to manage staff absence.

The service should make sure it has effective absence and attendance procedures in place.

We set out our detailed findings below. These are the basis for our judgment of the service's performance in this area.

Main findings

The service's values aren't routinely demonstrated by all staff

We are concerned that some behaviours we were told about don't meet the standards expected. The culture of the organisation doesn't always align with its values. And there isn't a strong culture of challenge. The service has a clearly defined set of values, but it should improve awareness of them at all levels.

We were told about several examples of poor behaviour that staff have experienced, such as:

- sexist or homophobic language and inappropriate language being disguised as banter;
- poor cultures among some operational teams, where staff have made it clear that they won't work in these areas;
- corporate staff being undermined by operational staff and some on-call staff not feeling valued; and
- operational staff not attending mandatory HR-related training despite being on duty.

Worryingly, we found that some staff didn't have the confidence to challenge poor behaviour or report this to their line managers.

Most staff we spoke with during our inspection were committed. But some felt frustrated with the middle management level and above. We were told that there is a disconnect at different levels of the service, such as between middle and senior leaders. Some staff told us that information isn't always filtered down effectively from senior leaders and that some leaders aren't approachable.

We spoke with some staff who were frustrated with the number of changes at middle management level. At 1 fire station, there had been at least 4 different station managers in the previous 12 months. This doesn't help to build an effective working relationship between staff and line managers.

The chief fire officer wrote to all females across the service after media reports of poor culture in the service. Although this was a positive step, some females we spoke with felt that these were "just words" and there was a lack of follow-up or action. They feel that their line managers don't know what to do when approached with an issue or what support they should provide. Disappointingly, we heard from one female member of staff whose line manager told her not to approach them if they had any problems. We also heard from other staff who have raised workforce concerns but haven't been provided with appropriate support.

At the time of our inspection, the service introduced its 'being the best that you can be' framework, which sets out the expectations for leaders. The service has also introduced a zero-tolerance statement and a dignity and respect toolkit. However, managers and wider staff aren't trained and supported to identify and challenge inappropriate behaviour. Senior leaders recognise there is a lot more to do in terms of improving the organisational culture.

The service continues to have good well-being provisions in place, but some managers still aren't trained to understand them

The service continues to have well-understood and effective well-being policies in place, which are available to staff. A significant range of well-being provision is available to support both physical and mental health. For example, the service has:

- specialist trauma practitioners, who are trained to help people who have experienced a traumatic (or potentially traumatic) event;
- 'blue light' champions and family liaison officers; and
- access to an external workplace counselling service.

During our 2021 inspection, we highlighted an area for improvement that the service should assure itself that managers are appropriately trained and understand the well-being provisions available to them and wider staff.

The service has recently recruited a health and safety and well-being manager. Staff spoke positively about the changes that have taken place. For example, we heard how some staff have received emails to let them know what well-being provisions are available and how to access them. We were encouraged to find that 97 percent (223 out of 231) of respondents to our staff survey agreed that they feel able to access services to support their mental well-being.

Some staff we spoke with felt that the specialist trauma practitioners don't always provide the necessary support after an initial discussion has taken place. Although most staff spoke positively about well-being provisions, some expressed their concerns about how the service deals with staff mental health. The service still needs to make sure managers are appropriately trained and understand the well-being provisions available to them and wider staff. Therefore, this area for improvement will remain.

The service's approach to health and safety needs to improve

The service's health and safety policy is out of date. The 'statement of intent' was signed by the previous chief fire officer and the policy needs to be updated. Of the 20 health and safety records we sampled, we found that 9 records had no health and safety training recorded.

The service doesn't actively monitor staff who have secondary employment or dual contracts to make sure they comply with the secondary employment policy and don't work excessive hours. Its secondary contract policy has passed its review date. There is no designated responsibility to monitor the number of hours staff work. For example, for those on dual contracts, we heard that rest periods before and after wholetime shifts weren't always adhered to by staff in order to maintain their on-call availability. We found many cases where staff were working excessive hours and they weren't properly monitored.

The service's absence management process is ineffective

During our 2021 inspection, we highlighted an area for improvement that the service should assure itself that managers are appropriately trained to manage staff absence. During this inspection, we were disappointed with the lack of progress in this area, so this area for improvement will remain.

Most managers we spoke with haven't received the relevant training. The attendance management policy has passed its review date. There has been a lack of oversight and control to make sure the service has an effective absence management process in place.

We spoke with managers who are frustrated because they haven't been provided with the appropriate support to manage staff absence. For example, we spoke with a supervisory manager who considered that they have a member of staff who is continuing to exploit the absence management process and taking regular time off work. But, with the lack of guidance, training and support, the manager is constrained in how they can manage the situation.

The service has seen an increase in the number of days firefighters were unable to work due to short-term sickness, from 855 days lost in 2020/21 to 2,127 days lost in 2022/23. Over the same period, the number of days firefighters were unable to work due to long-term sickness has stayed broadly the same.

Getting the right people with the right skills

Requires improvement

Avon Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at getting the right people with the right skills.

Fire and rescue services should have a workforce plan in place that is linked to their [community risk management plans](#). It should set out their current and future skills requirements and address capability gaps. This should be supplemented by a culture of continuous improvement, including appropriate learning and development throughout the service.

Areas for improvement

The service should put in place a credible succession plan, for the whole organisation.

The service should assure itself that all staff are appropriately trained for their role.

We set out our detailed findings below. These are the basis for our judgment of the service's performance in this area.

Main findings

The service still hasn't addressed workforce planning

During both our 2018 and 2021 inspections, we highlighted an area for improvement that the service should put in place a credible succession plan for the whole organisation. Disappointingly, more needs to be done in this area. Therefore, this area for improvement will remain.

The service does some workforce planning, but it doesn't take full account of the skills and capabilities it needs to effectively carry out its service plan. We found limited evidence that the service's planning allows it to fully consider workforce skills and overcome any gaps in capability. For example, in our last inspection, we found that staff numbers in fire control went below the service's standard staffing levels on

several occasions. Disappointingly, this is still the case. At the time of our inspection, the service told us that staff numbers in fire control went below the standard staffing levels on 96 shifts in the past 12 months.

The service also needs to do more to improve the way it considers its future needs and succession planning. Succession planning is monitored through the leadership of the transfers, appointments and promotions board. But this mainly focuses on wholetime operational roles. The service makes forecasts, such as retirement profiles. However, it uses limited other data, and not all departments across the service are considered, including those staffed by on-call firefighters.

We found that wholetime firefighters were reluctant to leave their operational roles because of the favoured shift system. This creates a challenge when recruiting into non-operational roles in prevention, protection and response. We also heard from many staff who are frustrated with the number of times their line managers have changed.

Not all staff are appropriately trained for their roles

During our 2021 inspection, we highlighted an area for improvement that the service should assure itself that all staff are appropriately trained for their roles. We said that operational staff hadn't received appropriate training on prevention or how to carry out an SSRI visit. In addition, we said that most managers we spoke with hadn't received appropriate training in how to resolve workforce concerns or how to carry out a performance development review. Disappointingly, during this inspection, we were told that because of a lack of resources, there has been limited progress in making sure all staff are appropriately trained for their roles. Therefore, this area for improvement will remain.

The service doesn't treat risk-critical training as a high enough priority. We found incident commanders at middle manager level and above whose competency accreditation had expired but who were still available for incident command duties.

The service told us it is the individual's responsibility to make sure their competency accreditation is in date. But there is limited strategic oversight of training records to make sure they are accurate and up to date. For example, we were told that managers' core competencies are in date, but the training system the service uses doesn't reflect this. We were also told that, as a result of IT constraints, recording any training is a time-consuming process. Although there is a system in place to review workforce capabilities, it is ineffective and there is a risk that staff may lack important skills for the future.

Some learning and improvement take place

We found that 80 percent (185 out of 231) of respondents to our staff survey felt that they can access the right learning and development opportunities. Specialist staff in prevention and protection receive continuing professional development days. This supports staff learning in specialist roles.

We spoke with several firefighters who had recently joined the service. They spoke positively about the learning and development available to them and the support they have received from their teams, which includes being assigned a mentor who provides additional support.

Despite the positives, we found the performance development system wasn't functioning as it should by supporting staff who identify further learning and development opportunities. There aren't adequate processes in place to help staff access the resources they need to do their jobs effectively.

The learning created from operational debriefs isn't always easily accessible to staff, so they aren't able to continually learn from incidents or training exercises that have taken place. We were also told that prevention staff are stopped from attending operational debriefs, meaning they are unable to access further learning. This is likely to affect what the service can offer the public.

Ensuring fairness and promoting diversity

Requires improvement

Avon Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at ensuring fairness and promoting diversity.

Creating a more representative workforce gives fire and rescue services huge benefits. These include greater access to talent and different ways of thinking. It also helps them better understand and engage with local communities. Each service should make sure staff throughout the organisation firmly understand and show a commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). This includes successfully taking steps to remove inequality and making progress to improve fairness, diversity and inclusion at all levels of the service. It should proactively seek and respond to feedback from staff and make sure any action it takes is meaningful.

Areas for improvement

The service should make sure it has effective grievance procedures. It should identify and implement ways to improve staff confidence in the grievance process.

The service should make sure it resolves discipline and work-related concerns promptly and that officers investigating these concerns have the specialist skills required.

The service should make sure all staff understand the benefits of equality, diversity and inclusion and their role in promoting it.

The service should make sure it has robust processes in place to undertake [equality impact assessments](#) and review any actions agreed as a result.

The service should make sure it improves the way it collects equality data so it can better understand its workforce demographic and needs.

We set out our detailed findings below. These are the basis for our judgment of the service's performance in this area.

Main findings

The service needs to improve its approach to seeking and acting on feedback and challenge

More work is needed to build trust and confidence between senior leaders and the workforce by improving the way the service seeks challenge, gathers feedback from all staff and responds to staff concerns. Staff told us that they feel there is a disconnect between senior and middle managers and that information isn't always filtered down to the workforce.

The service has processes in place to gather feedback and respond to staff concerns. These include senior leaders and managers carrying out station and departmental visits and the increased use of staff bulletins. The service also has a staff engagement network. Staff can use this to give feedback or suggest improvements on any matters related to their work.

However, staff have limited confidence in the service's feedback processes and don't think they are effective. For example, a staff member feared that they would be labelled a "troublemaker" if they raised any concerns. Staff also told us that they don't provide senior leaders with feedback as nothing will happen as a result.

In our staff survey, 42 percent (96 out of 231) of respondents said that they don't have confidence in the process for providing feedback at all levels. Representative bodies and staff associations reported that they would like better communication from the service.

The service isn't dealing with workforce concerns effectively

During both our 2018 and 2021 inspections, we highlighted an area for improvement that the service should make sure it has effective grievance procedures. It should identify and implement ways to improve staff confidence in the grievance process. During this inspection, we were surprised and disappointed to find that no progress had been made in this area. Therefore, this area for improvement will remain.

We reported in our last inspection that the current grievance policy was published in January 2007 and that it hadn't had any meaningful review since. During this inspection, we found that there hadn't been any progress in this area and that the same policy dated January 2007 was still in place. We recognise that the service has commissioned an external organisation to review the grievance policy, but limited

progress has been made in this area. Staff told us they don't raise workforce concerns because they have no confidence in the process.

In our previous inspection, we also raised an area for improvement that the service should make sure its bullying, [harassment](#) and discrimination policy is up to date and is understood by all staff. The service has published a revised values, ethics and behaviour framework and a new dignity and respect policy. There are also toolkits to support staff to carry out self-learning. But the toolkits aren't compulsory learning for staff, and it is up to staff whether they read the information.

In our staff survey, 16 percent (37 out of 231) of respondents told us that they have felt bullied or harassed at work in the last 12 months and 16 percent (36 out of 231) told us that they have felt discriminated against in the last 12 months.

Although the service has policies and procedures in place, staff have limited confidence in how effectively it can deal with cases of bullying, harassment and discrimination as well as discipline. We found that staff didn't have confidence in the managers investigating cases and that they didn't feel the resulting sanctions were appropriate. We were also told that some cases took too long to investigate, and limited communication was provided to all those involved. Worryingly, those staff who raised concerns told us that they have received limited support from the service.

The service proactively commissioned an independent external review of historic discipline and grievance cases. At the time of our inspection, it was considering the findings of the review. The service is progressing the recommendations of the London Fire Brigade [Independent Culture Review](#) and the spotlight recommendations in our report [Values and culture in fire and rescue services](#). The service needs to make sure that the actions it has completed in response to the values and culture report, which outlines several recommendations, are consistent with the findings of this report.

The service is addressing disproportionality in recruitment and retention

There is an open, fair and honest recruitment process for staff or those wishing to work for the fire and rescue service. The service has an effective system to understand and remove the risk of disproportionality in recruitment processes. For example, one of the practical assessments to become a firefighter is to carry out a 'ladder lift', which tests upper and lower body strength and co-ordination. The weight to be lifted is 35 kg. But the service found that the ladders it uses aren't this heavy and changed this assessment to a 30 kg weight to make it more realistic. This means that the test for those applying to be a firefighter will now better match what they would experience in the role.

We were pleased to find that the service had introduced neurodiversity passports to support staff. We heard from staff how reasonable adjustments had been provided during the interview process.

The service told us that the last wholetime recruitment campaign led to 24 new firefighters. Six of those identified as being from an ethnic minority background and one was female.

The service advertises recruitment opportunities both internally and externally, including on the National Fire Chiefs Council website, social media and its own website. However, more could be done to encourage applicants from diverse backgrounds, including into middle and senior management roles.

For the whole workforce in 2021/22, 5.3 percent were from an ethnic minority background compared to 18.4 percent in the local population and 8 percent throughout all fire and rescue services. And 19.5 percent were women, which is higher than the average of 18.6 percent throughout all fire and rescue services.

The proportion of firefighters from an ethnic minority background increased from 4 percent (25 people) in 2020/21 to 4.8 percent (29 people) in 2021/22. The proportion of female firefighters increased from 5.6 percent (38 people) to 6.9 percent (46 people) over the same period.

The service has improved its approach to EDI, but it needs to do more

The service has published its dignity and respect policy and has introduced a toolkit to support staff. Since our last inspection, the team that manages EDI has only recently reached full capacity.

During our 2021 inspection, we raised an area for improvement that the service should make sure all staff understand the benefits of EDI and their role in promoting it. During this inspection, we were pleased to find that most staff had completed their e-learning training. A face-to-face package has also been introduced for on-call firefighters and most have received the appropriate training. The package will be rolled out to the rest of the workforce for completion by spring 2024.

Despite this, the service needs to understand how effective the training is and whether the intended objectives are being met. Some staff we spoke with told us that the training may have the opposite effect to that intended. But they were too afraid to provide any feedback because they didn't wish to offend anyone. We were told that the service is in the process of evaluating the training to make sure it is effective and that the desired outcomes are achieved.

The service has wrapped fire engines with key messages to show support for celebrations such as Pride and Black History Month. Although most staff support this, we found that a minority didn't, and this has had a negative effect on some teams. The service should continue to communicate with members of its workforce to make sure they understand the benefits of EDI and their role in promoting it.

In our previous inspection, we raised an area for improvement that the service should make sure it has robust processes in place to undertake [equality impact assessments](#) and review any actions agreed as a result. Although the number of completed equality impact assessments has increased, we found that there was still a lack of oversight to make sure actions are completed as a result. This may mean the service doesn't properly assess or act on the impact on each [protected characteristic](#). Therefore, this area for improvement will remain.

The service recognises that it needs to improve the way it collects equality data so it can better understand the people in its workforce and their needs. The service has only recorded equality data for a low number of staff members who have declared it, but it is forming a plan to address this. The service told us that equality monitoring for all staff will be undertaken, along with communications to explain how the data will be used. Its aim is to significantly increase the level of reporting and staff confidence in this process.

While we found that exit interviews weren't always carried out, they are offered to members of staff leaving the service. The service may be missing opportunities to work with staff to find out what does and doesn't work in the organisation and to identify any potential improvements it could make.

Managing performance and developing leaders

Requires improvement

Avon Fire and Rescue Service requires improvement at managing performance and developing leaders.

Fire and rescue services should have robust and meaningful performance management arrangements in place for their staff. All staff should be supported to meet their potential and there should be a focus on developing staff and improving diversity into leadership roles.

Areas for improvement

The service should improve all-staff understanding and application of the performance development review process.

The service should make sure its selection, development and promotion of staff is open and fair.

The service should put in place a system to actively manage staff careers, with the aim of diversifying the pool of future and current leaders.

We set out our detailed findings below. These are the basis for our judgment of the service's performance in this area.

Main findings

The service's performance and development review system isn't working

During our 2021 inspection, we highlighted an area for improvement that the service should improve all-staff understanding and application of the performance development review (PDR) process. During this inspection, we were disappointed to find that no progress had been made in this area. Therefore, this area for improvement will remain.

The service continues to have an inconsistent process in place for performance and development. Not all staff have specific and individual objectives or have had their performance assessed in the past year. We found the IT system that manages the PDR process wasn't working and that staff needed to complete their PDRs manually. Most staff told us that they feel PDRs hold limited value. They said that PDRs aren't reviewed and feel it is a tick-box exercise. The process hasn't been changed since our last inspection. Many questions aren't user-friendly. We found that managers hadn't received appropriate training on how to carry out PDRs. This means PDRs may not be effective.

Staff don't have confidence in the promotion process

The service needs to do more to make sure its promotion and progression processes are fair. In our previous inspection, we raised an area for improvement that the service should make sure its selection, development and promotion of staff is open and fair. We were told that the service aims to have HR representatives on all promotions and recruitment panels, but because of a lack of resources, this isn't always achievable. We were also told that interviewers aren't always performed by staff with the appropriate training to carry out interviews, which may allow for inconsistencies in the process. Operational staff felt that the promotion process relies heavily on the interview itself. And those who aren't successful aren't offered development programmes to increase their chances next time they apply. Of the respondents to our staff survey, 50 percent (115 out of 231) disagreed that the promotion process in their service is fair. Therefore, this area for improvement will remain.

The service doesn't have strong succession-planning processes in place to allow it to effectively manage the career pathways of its staff, including roles needing specialist skills. We were told that departments such as HR and learning and development don't always work together effectively. For example, the service hasn't planned well for the number of drivers required. We found evidence of the incident command vehicle not being available because of staff shortages.

The service doesn't manage temporary promotions well. We found evidence of temporary promotions being in place for longer than they should be. This is a source of frustration for some staff. We recognise that changes are being made to better manage staff pathways and look forward to seeing how this develops in the future.

We spoke with fire control staff who are frustrated that they haven't been able to progress in other areas of the service because they have been told they need to provide resilience within the core fire control function. The service should consider succession planning for fire control staff and allow them to develop and progress in other areas of the service. In our last inspection, we highlighted that crewing levels in fire control went below minimum staffing levels, and we were disappointed to find the same in this inspection.

The service should aim to diversify the pool of future leaders

The service needs to encourage applicants from diverse backgrounds into middle and senior-level positions. It has introduced corporate roles in the business fire safety department. And it has also successfully advertised and filled positions with external candidates.

We were pleased to see that the service is 1 of 7 fire and rescue services (out of 44) in the country that have adopted the National Fire Chief Council's direct entry scheme. This will help the service to recruit from a wider pool of candidates with a broader set of backgrounds, skills and experiences.

The service needs to do more to develop leadership and high-potential staff at all levels

The service needs to improve the way it actively manages the career pathways of staff, including those with specialist skills and those with potential for leadership roles.

The service is introducing a leadership academy, which is an 18-month programme that focuses on leadership. The service has career pathways and has subscribed to the external programmes Springboard and Stepping Up. These aim to unlock potential and develop talent, particularly among women, ethnic minority staff and staff with disabilities. The service should consider putting in place more formal arrangements to identify and support members of staff to become senior leaders.

At the time of our inspection, the service had undertaken a gap analysis to effectively implement the Fire Standards Board's fire standards, [leading the service](#) and [leading and developing people](#) (December 2022). We look forward to seeing how this develops in future.

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Values and culture in fire and rescue services

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Scope

This report focuses on the values and culture of all 44 fire and rescue services (FRSs) in England and draws on the evidence collected through our inspections of FRSs since 2018. We define values as principles or standards of behaviour, and culture as ideas, customs and behaviours. We define 'poor', 'unacceptable' and 'inappropriate' cultures and behaviours as those which have or have the potential to negatively affect others. These behaviours include bullying, harassment and discrimination.

We have particularly focused on issues that have been seen in more than half (at least 26) of FRSs and are having a detrimental impact across the sector. These include:

- bullying, harassment, and discrimination;
- lack of fairness and diversity; and
- reporting and handling of concerns, including allegations of misconduct.

We know that the culture in an FRS can be heavily influenced by the behaviour of individuals, including those in positions of senior responsibility. We have, therefore, reviewed the competence of leaders from station level to chief fire officers in all services. This includes how they are trained and developed and how they behave. We have reviewed the training given to managers and staff to help them perform their roles effectively. Those who oversee FRSs' performance – including elected members of fire and rescue authorities and police, fire and crime commissioners – have a responsibility for scrutinising services and making sure they promote positive cultures.

It is vitally important that services promote equality, diversity and inclusion in the workplace to make sure they are as fair and diverse as possible. When equality, diversity and inclusion are incorporated well into a service, staff feel included, valued and able to speak freely. This creates a positive professional culture in which staff can provide a safe and effective service for the public.

This report examines what is working well, what needs to change and the barriers to making improvements.

To help services to improve and learn from each other, we have highlighted some examples of promising and innovative practices we found during our inspections.

We use:

- [promising practice](#) to describe activities that we found to be working well in a service where there are positive measurable outcomes which have been observed or monitored;
- [innovative practice](#) to describe new ways of working in a service that may not have been formally evaluated but that have the potential to produce more positive outcomes but haven't been subject to any testing or monitoring.

Foreword

Fire and rescue services (FRSs) carry out a vital public service, helping people in our communities every day. But since we started inspecting them in 2018, we have repeatedly found evidence of poor values, culture and behaviour, including bullying, harassment and discrimination, in many of the 44 FRSs in England.

While some services have made some improvements since our first round of inspections in respect of values and culture, too many need to do more. It is well documented that compassionate and fair working cultures are vital to staff well-being, productivity, efficiency, retention and motivation.

I, therefore, welcome the commissioning of this spotlight report by the Minister of State for Crime, Policing and Fire. It is an opportunity to pay much-needed attention to this area and to take action to improve the values, culture, fairness and diversity of FRSs which are still so clearly in urgent need of change.

We have repeatedly expressed concerns that the culture evident in too many FRSs is unacceptable and needs to change. This led us to recommend that the sector should have a code of ethics. The code was developed by the [Fire Standards Board](#) in partnership with the [Local Government Association](#) and the [Association of Police and Crime Commissioners](#). The Fire Standards Board published the code in May 2021.

Some individuals within the sector have argued that such behaviours are confined to ‘pockets’ of services. We disagree. In previous reports, we have described how some of what we found is toxic. We have been criticised by some for using this language. Again, we disagree. Our evidence shows that such concerns are widespread, and this report brings together evidence from a number of sources.

As an independent inspectorate, when we believe services or their senior leaders are failing to demonstrate and promote positive values and cultures, we will continue to bring this to the public’s attention.

Between February 2021 and August 2022, we carried out our second full round of inspections. Based on our findings on values and culture, we issued:

- [causes of concern](#) to five services;
- requires improvement or inadequate grades to 17 services; and
- 66 [areas for improvement](#) across 35 services.

On the basis of our findings on fairness and diversity, we issued:

- causes of concern to five services;
- requires improvement or inadequate grades to 26 services; and
- 72 areas for improvement across 32 services.

Even services that we have graded as good in these areas have some staff who behave inappropriately. Therefore, the service can still be issued with an area for improvement. Grades represent a snapshot of evidence that was available to us at a point in time. And, of course, inspection may not uncover every instance of inappropriate behaviour, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination. This spotlight report has helped us to review these issues in greater detail and in a more systemic way than individual FRS inspections ordinarily allow us to.

Between 28 June 2018 and 1 February 2023, we received 842 submissions to our [independent reporting line](#) from staff in every single service in England. A substantial number (218) of them related to these themes.

In February 2023, we asked every service to give us information about all allegations of gross misconduct currently under investigation or consideration from the last year. We also asked for cases of alleged misconduct and other grievances and complaints where the alleged behaviour of individuals calls into question the culture and values of the organisation.

The information provided shows that inappropriate language/behaviour and bullying and harassment associated with a protected characteristic accounted for more than half of the cases. Almost half of the case information shared by services related to closed cases. Investigations into some of these cases resulted in:

- approximately a quarter of individuals leaving the service, of which almost half left through retirement or resignation; and
- police involvement in one in ten cases.

Because the responses we received contained varying levels of detail, we aren't confident that this presents a complete picture. We also have concerns about the adequacy of reporting, investigation and outcomes in respect of the handling of conduct and misconduct matters. It is important to note that just because a service has misconduct cases, it doesn't necessarily mean its culture is poor.

Services must make sure that they are psychologically safe places to work in. This includes offering secure ways for staff to raise concerns and give feedback, without fear of repercussion and in the knowledge that concerns and allegations will be robustly investigated. We believe that further inspection is required in this area.

Our findings about two services (Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service and London Fire Brigade) were serious enough to contribute to their being placed in our 'engage' enhanced monitoring process. Our inspection reports for these services were

published in July 2022. In late 2022, London Fire Brigade published a report [Independent Culture Review of London Fire Brigade](#). The review's disturbing findings, as well as recent media disclosures, have quite rightly heightened public, sector and staff awareness and concerns about these issues.

Unacceptable behaviours sadly exist throughout society, and no workforce is completely immune to bullying, harassment and discrimination. But in those organisations with a responsibility to keep the public safe, and where public trust and confidence are so important, it is right that higher standards are demanded. There is no place in FRSs for any person who is unfit to fulfil a role that protects the public. Not only do communities need to be able to trust FRS staff, but in highly pressured scenarios and in a working environment where colleagues spend so much time together, staff need to be able to trust and depend on one another for their own safety.

In recent years, there have been increasing concerns about the extent of shocking behaviour by police officers. Much of this behaviour, including the investigation into allegations of bullying and harassment at Charing Cross police station ([Operation Hotton](#)) attracted adverse media reporting. These, and many other incidents, have led many to conclude that a police culture of misogyny and predatory and improper behaviour has been allowed to develop and thrive.

We reported on the link between organisational culture and 'prejudicial and improper behaviour' in policing in our 2022 report, [An inspection of vetting, misconduct, and misogyny within the police service](#).

The report defines prejudicial and improper behaviour as:

"Any attitude and/or behaviour demonstrated by a police officer or police staff that could be reasonably considered to reveal misogyny, sexism, antipathy towards women or be an indication of, or precursor to, [abuse of position for a sexual purpose](#)."

While this definition relates to misogyny, for our purposes, we apply prejudicial and improper behaviour more broadly to cover all [protected characteristics](#). The report contains examples of inappropriate behaviour, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination, towards both force staff and members of the public. It stated that:

"During the inspection, we heard numerous examples, mainly from female police officers and staff, of such attitudes and behaviour towards them. This was usually, but not exclusively, from their male colleagues. When police officers and staff don't treat colleagues with respect and courtesy, it suggests that they may be more likely to behave in a similar way towards the public and towards vulnerable women."

I have no reason to believe this link doesn't also apply to fire services. This report contains examples of inappropriate behaviour, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination, towards both service staff and members of the public.

Recent allegations against staff in several services, which have been featured in the media, are both shocking and saddening. These have only deepened my concern that we are looking at the tip of an iceberg.

Posts by popular, albeit unofficial, fire and rescue-specific social media accounts appear to portray misogyny, racism and homophobia as banter. One Instagram account had over 7,500 followers at the time of writing this report (though at the time of publication it appears to have been deleted). While there is no way of knowing how many of these followers are current FRS staff, the account was aimed at firefighters, so it is fair to assume a substantial number of them were from services. This is concerning, considering there are only 44,350 FRS staff in total in England, 34,960 of which are firefighters.

While following these accounts doesn't mean that all members hold such views, membership implies support (at least tacit support) for such behaviours. I urge staff to think carefully about the message that this sends to their colleagues and the public. Societal norms and 'laddish' cultures are no excuse – bullying, harassment and discrimination have detrimental effects on staff, services and the communities they serve.

The public trust emergency service staff with their lives and call for their support at times of greatest need; they have a right to expect a certain standard of behaviour from them. As Sir William Macpherson commented in the [Stephen Lawrence Inquiry](#):

“The argument that there is some excuse for poor behaviour because the culture of the Service can only be expected to mirror that of wider society and its behaviours, since that is from where we draw our personnel, is simply specious. We demand exemplary conduct from those we employ.”

It is evident that the development of informal subcultures has led to staff being sometimes expected to conform to certain ways of thinking and behaving. This has led to the prevalence of 'in groups' and 'out groups' – for example, in some [watch](#) arrangements. We explain this in more detail in our [section on subgroups](#). This need for conformity risks reducing space for or recognition of individual thought or personal preference; something we found aligns with the findings of our *An inspection of vetting, misconduct, and misogyny within the police service* report, where some female police officers and staff told us they felt they needed to acquiesce to prejudicial and improper behaviour. The findings also highlighted that people may be ostracised if they are seen to speak out against their peers. As we have said repeatedly, the culture across too much of the fire sector is stagnant and needs to be brought into the 21st century.

The lack of workforce diversity in every FRS throughout England also inhibits the ability to tackle these cultural issues. According to data gathered by the Cabinet Office in 2018, compared to other public sector staff, firefighters were the least ethnically diverse workforce. In the four years between 2014 and 2018, FRSs made the least improvement in diversity.

But FRSs should focus on more than just recruitment as a way of improving diversity. Making sure workplaces are inclusive for all and improving staff understanding of equality, diversity and inclusion will also help them to retain staff and to encourage those with talent and potential to progress through the organisation, irrespective of background. This is an essential building block to the cultural and behavioural improvements that are so clearly needed.

The public has a right to know that not only will they receive an effective service from those working in FRSs but that the staff they encounter are safe and suitable to work, not only in terms of operational competence but also in respect of conduct. Our report *An inspection of vetting, misconduct, and misogyny within the police service* found that effective background checks can help prevent a culture of misogyny and predatory behaviour from developing and thriving.

But currently, there are insufficient standards in relation to background checks for FRSs to follow, and there are no legal obligations for them to check new or existing staff. Although many FRSs do choose to carry out Disclosure and Barring Service checks, it is currently for services to decide if or how they conduct any background checks; this creates an unacceptable risk which must be addressed.

The [Independent Cultural Review of London Fire Brigade](#) contains a worrying number of examples of appalling behaviour towards members of the public, including searching through women's drawers looking for underwear and sex toys during [home fire safety visits](#). We currently have no way of knowing how many unsuitable people are in these trusted roles, especially those that are public-facing.

A recent review of FRS background check arrangements found that these varied from service to service. As a result, we have little assurance that all FRS staff, many of whom are working directly with some of society's most vulnerable people, are safe and suitable to carry out these roles. The [Fire Standards Board's safeguarding standard](#) states that FRSs must "implement appropriate and proportionate processes that minimise the risk of recruiting people who may be unsuitable to work with those who are at risk of harm". Chief fire officers and the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#) have, in the past, called on the Government to introduce, as a minimum, Disclosure and Barring Service checks for all new staff; this is no longer simply desirable, it is an essential first step.

Although consistent background check processes may not prevent all unsuitable individuals from working in FRSs, a statutory requirement and a background check standard are needed as a bare minimum to mitigate this issue and help services make informed decisions about who works for them.

Some staff told us that they didn't trust the processes for raising concerns and described a culture where they have been, or fear they will be, targeted because of reporting. This may mean that however good FRSs are at taking appropriate action to remedy concerns, including handling misconduct allegations appropriately, they might miss cases which should be investigated.

The recommendations made in this spotlight report are intended to assist FRSs to improve values, culture, fairness and diversity. Our recommendations are aimed at both national bodies that have the power to make changes and at FRSs. These recommendations and improved values and culture must also be supported by those organisations we don't inspect, such as fire and rescue authorities and trade unions.

I urge:

- leaders of FRSs to accept the findings set out in this report and our service reports in full;
- the relevant bodies to prioritise these recommendations;
- national organisations with influence to consider how they can work with and support FRSs to act on the findings set out in this report; and
- staff at every level of every FRS to reflect on our findings and take whatever personal steps necessary to treat those they work with, and members of the public, with the utmost dignity and respect.

To the FRS staff who have shared their experiences with us: thank you. While it isn't for the inspectorate to investigate specific allegations, without your insight, we wouldn't have been able to write this report. Such insight continues to be invaluable, including through our staff surveys and during our inspections.

I would also like to extend my thanks to those who are already doing all they can to improve the cultures nationally and in their services. To go against the grain can take real courage. Please continue; your efforts aren't going unnoticed.

There are many thousands of professional people working in fire and rescue who provide a great service to their communities. It continues to concern me that some members of the service don't treat each other or members of the public with respect and in some cases, have intentionally caused harm.

It is time for this behaviour to stop.



Roy Wilsher OBE QFSM

HM Inspector of Fire and Rescue Services

Our recommendations

Raising concerns

Recommendation 1

By 1 October 2023, chief fire officers should make sure their services provide a confidential way for staff to raise concerns and that staff are aware of whistleblowing processes.

Recommendation 2

By 1 October 2023, National Employers, the [Local Government Association](#) and the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#) should review any current independent arrangements whereby staff can raise concerns outside their FRS. They should then ensure that all FRS staff have access to an independent reporting line that can be used as a confidential way to raise concerns outside their own FRS.

Recommendation 3

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should review the support available for those who have raised concerns and take any action needed to make sure these provisions are suitable.

Recommendation 4

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should assure themselves that updates on how concerns are being handled are shared with those who have raised them. The updates should be given in an accessible way that encourages trust and confidence in the service response. Consideration should be given to creating a professional standards function to handle conduct concerns in service (or from an external service) to have oversight of cases, to make sure they are conducted in a fair and transparent way and to act as a point of contact for all staff involved.

Recommendation 5

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should make sure they provide accessible information for all staff and members of the public on how they can raise concerns and access confidential support (including through external agencies). Chief fire officers should also make sure accessible information is provided on how concerns and allegations will be investigated in a way that ensures confidentiality and is independent of the alleged perpetrator.

Background checks

Recommendation 6

By 1 January 2024, the Home Office, working with the Ministry of Justice, should make sure that the Government incorporates fire and rescue authority employees within the [Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 \(Exceptions\) Order 1975](#) so that they are eligible for the appropriate DBS checks.

Recommendation 7

By 1 May 2024, the Home Office, working with the fire and rescue sector, should make sure that the [Police Act 1997 \(Criminal Records\) Regulations 2002](#), or a similar appropriate legislatively enabled solution, makes detailed provisions for fire and rescue services.

Recommendation 8

By 1 December 2023, the [Fire Standards Board](#), in liaison with the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#), should review the existing relevant standard(s) and underpinning guidance. It should:

- clearly state the requirements for background checks undertaken by services;
- clarify the minimum requirements (including levels of DBS checks) for all roles, particularly roles where staff have access to vulnerable members of the public;
- define the standards required to embed a culture across fire and rescue services that empowers all members of staff and local communities to report concerns; and
- be subject to review following any legislative change.

Recommendation 9

By 1 January 2024, chief fire officers should:

- immediately review their current background checks arrangements, and make sure that suitable and sufficient background checks are in place to [safeguard](#) their staff and communities they serve; and
- make sure that appropriate DBS check requests have been submitted for all existing, new staff, and volunteers, according to their roles as identified by the [Fire Standards Board](#).

Recommendation 10

By 1 September 2023, chief constables should make sure they are appropriately using their Common Law Police Disclosure powers in circumstances involving employees of fire and rescue services.

Misconduct handling

Recommendation 11

By 1 December 2023, the [Fire Standards Board](#), in liaison with the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#), should review the existing relevant standard(s) and supporting guidance to clearly state how services should handle staff disclosures, complaints and grievances.

Recommendation 12

By 1 March 2024, chief fire officers should provide assurances to HMICFRS that they have implemented the standard on staff disclosure, complaint and grievance handling.

Recommendation 13

By 1 December 2023, the [Fire Standards Board](#), in liaison with the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#), should review the existing relevant standard(s) and supporting guidance to clearly state how services should handle misconduct and safeguarding-related allegations and outcomes. These should include requirements to:

- conduct and complete investigations, whether or not the staff member under investigation leaves;
- consider whether the incident requires immediate dismissal;
- provide training for staff who are carrying out investigations; and
- ensure the diversity/neutrality of the investigation panel/person.

Recommendation 14

By 1 March 2024, chief fire officers should provide assurances to HMICFRS that they have implemented the standard on misconduct allegations and outcomes handling.

Recommendation 15

By 1 October 2023, the Home Office should work with the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#) and fire and rescue service employers to make sure there is a process to handle misconduct allegations against chief fire officers. The Home Office should immediately notify HMICFRS of any allegations and outcomes that it is aware of.

Recommendation 16

By 1 October 2023, the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#) should develop and manage a national barred list that holds details of staff who have been dismissed for gross misconduct (including staff who have already left services). It should ensure that this list is referred to in all appointment processes to prevent those who are barred from rejoining another service. After the College of Fire and Rescue has been established (see recommendation 25), it should take responsibility for managing the list.

Recommendation 17

With immediate effect, chief fire officers should notify HMICFRS of any allegations that have the potential to constitute staff gross misconduct that:

- involve allegations of a criminal nature that have the potential to affect public confidence in FRSs;
- are of a serious nature; or
- relate to assistant chief fire officers or those at equivalent or higher grades.

Recommendation 18

By 1 August 2023, chief fire officers should provide assurances to HMICFRS that all parties are supported in relation to ongoing investigations.

Recommendation 19

By 1 July 2023, the Home Office should examine whether any appeal processes for fire and rescue misconduct cases are appropriate.

Leadership

Recommendation 20

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should have plans in place to ensure they meet the [Fire Standards Board's leading the service standard](#) and its [leading and developing people standard](#).

Recommendation 21

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should make sure there is a full, 360-degree feedback process in place for all senior leaders and managers (assistant chief fire officer equivalent and above) in service.

Recommendation 22

By 1 September 2023, chief fire officers should make sure there is a full, 360-degree feedback process in place for all other leaders and managers in service. The process should include gathering feedback from a wide range of sources including colleagues and direct reports.

Recommendation 23

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should seek regular feedback from staff about values, culture, fairness and diversity, with due regard to the [leading and developing people standard](#). They should show how they act on this feedback.

Recommendation 24

By 1 October 2023, chief fire officers should put plans in place to monitor, including through the gathering and analysis of staff feedback, [watch](#) and team cultures and provide prompt remedial action for any issues they identify.

Management and leadership training and development

Recommendation 25

By 1 January 2025, the Government should establish a College of Fire and Rescue, as proposed by the [White Paper Reforming our Fire and Rescue Service](#). There should be no further delay to its implementation.

Recommendation 26

By 1 October 2023, as a precursor to the development of the College of Fire and Rescue, chief fire officers and the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#) should work with the Home Office to consider how they can improve the training and support they offer to staff in management and leadership development. This should include authority members in respect of their assurance leadership roles and should ensure that opportunities are offered fairly across all staff groups.

Diversity data

Recommendation 27

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should make sure their equality impact assessments are fit for purpose and, as a minimum, meet the requirements of the [National Fire Chiefs Council equality impact assessment toolkit](#).

Recommendation 28

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should review how they gather and use equality and diversity data to improve their understanding of their staff demographics, including applying and meeting the requirements of the [National Fire Chiefs Council equality, diversity and inclusion data toolkit](#).

Recommendation 29

By 1 December 2023, the Home Office should publish greater detail on the protected characteristic data it collects about FRS staff, including joiners and leavers, by rank and role.

Recommendation 30

By 30 December 2024, the Home Office should align the data it collects on protected characteristics with the [Office for National Statistics harmonised standard](#) and publish this data.

Recommendation 31

By 1 December 2024, the Home Office should collect and publish experimental statistics on public complaints and conduct matters in relation to FRS staff, similar to that which it currently publishes on police forces in England and Wales.

Improving diversity

Recommendation 32

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should, as a priority, specify in succession plans how they intend to improve diversity across all levels of the service. This should include offering increased direct-entry opportunities.

Recommendation 33

By 1 August 2023, chief fire officers should develop plans to promote progression paths for existing staff in non-operational roles and put plans in place to reduce any inequalities of opportunity.

The Core Code of Ethics

Recommendation 34

With immediate effect, chief fire officers should review their implementation of the [Core Code of Ethics](#) and make sure it is being applied across their services.

The Fire and Rescue National Framework for England

Recommendation 35

By the end of this Parliament, the Government should consider the findings and recommendations in this report when refreshing the [Fire and Rescue National Framework for England](#).

Summary

We have repeatedly expressed concern about values and culture in the fire and rescue service since we began inspections in 2018

Since our first fire and rescue service (FRS) inspections in 2018, failure to demonstrate positive values as well as evidence of poor behaviours (such as bullying, harassment and discrimination) and culture have been a recurring theme throughout our reports. In 2018 and 2019, in our first round of inspections (Round 1), our findings were stark. We found long-standing and apparently deep-rooted issues relating to values, culture, fairness and diversity. The situation was described to us by some in the sector as an “old boys’ club”.

As a result, we recommended that England’s FRSs would benefit from a code of ethics. In May 2021, part-way through our Round 2 inspections, the [Fire Standards Board](#) in partnership with the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#), the [Association of Police and Crime Commissioners](#) and the [Local Government Association](#), established the [Core Code of Ethics for Fire and Rescue Services](#) and a [Code of Ethics Fire Standards Code](#). We are encouraged that many services are working to implement these.

Not enough progress has been made

Everyone has a right to be treated with dignity and respect at work and to feel safe. While some progress has been made, it is clear that there is more to be done to improve values and culture in FRSs. The scale and pace of progress must improve.

From February 2021 to August 2022, we carried out our second full round of inspections (Round 2). We continued to find that:

- some services need to get better at promoting positive professional cultures;
- most services need to do more to improve equality, diversity and inclusion; and
- progression opportunities for staff aren’t equal, which is hindering the potential for greater diversity of thought in services’ leadership teams.

In our first round of inspections, we issued requires improvement or inadequate grades to half (22) of the 44 services in relation to our findings on their values and cultures. In our Round 2 inspections, although we found that around a quarter (12) of services had improved, we issued requires improvement or inadequate grades to just under half (17) of FRSs and to around a fifth (8) which had deteriorated.

Causes of concern are currently in place in relation to values and culture in five services.

In Round 2, we issued requires improvement or inadequate grades in relation to fairness and diversity to over half (26) of the services. In our first round of inspections, we issued these to roughly the same number (28) of services. Similarly, causes of concern are currently in place in relation to fairness and diversity in five services.

We continued to find examples of bullying, harassment and discrimination in some services

We were deeply concerned by some of our findings in our Round 2 inspections. For example, staff survey results provided examples of bullying, harassment and discrimination in all services. This often included staff behaving towards each other in inappropriate and unacceptable ways.

In at least 11 services, we found evidence of racism, sexism and homophobia and a culture where staff, including managers, didn't always feel confident to challenge poor behaviour, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination. Many people we spoke to told us they felt they couldn't challenge ideas or poor behaviour without detriment and that staff were scared to speak out. We also heard that those who did speak out were sometimes victimised. However, this wasn't always the case – some services handled concerns appropriately.

Some examples of unacceptable behaviours include:

- a senior officer referring to a Black colleague using the 'n-word' and putting it down to "having a laugh";
- two male firefighters joking with a female firefighter that they were "going to rape her" and the three of them acting out the rape together;
- homophobic abuse written on a firefighter's locker;
- no action being taken by senior leaders against reported or witnessed discriminatory or bullying behaviour;
- inappropriate language about female members of staff;
- bullying new recruits and humiliating them; and
- staff feeling it is unsafe to report inappropriate behaviour.

Further examples are included in our detailed findings.

We moved two services into our engage phase of enhanced monitoring

Our findings about the values, cultures, fairness and diversity at Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service and London Fire Brigade were serious enough to contribute to the services being placed into our engage process of enhanced monitoring. We will continue to monitor values and culture and other issues in these services.

Defining the problem

What do we mean by values and culture?

For this report, values are defined as principles or standards of behaviour and culture is defined as ideas, customs and behaviours in fire and rescue services (FRSs).

What do we mean by equality, diversity and inclusion?

Equality, diversity and inclusion are closely linked to values and culture. In this report, it is defined as ensuring fair treatment and opportunity for all. It aims to eradicate prejudice and discrimination against an individual or a group of individuals' protected characteristics.

Why are values and culture important?

It is well documented that staff well-being, productivity, efficiency and motivation are linked to compassionate and fair working cultures. It states in the [Fire and Rescue Service Equality and Diversity Strategy 2008–18](#) that:

“They [FRSs] must drive how we treat each other as members of the Service; how we treat each of our customers; how we interact with the diverse communities we serve, and how we deliver our services to those communities. To be an effective Service our policies, practices and procedures must be fair, providing equality of opportunity to all employees and an appropriate and effective service to all parts of the community.”

Ensuring staff safety, well-being and productivity

Our evidence shows that some FRS staff have behaved poorly over many years and that this has negatively affected other staff and, in some cases, the public. Where these behaviours go unchallenged, there is a risk that they are accepted and normalised.

FRS staff at times work under pressure and in dangerous scenarios. They need to be able to trust and depend on one another for their own safety. In extreme examples, the effect of a poor culture can mean that individuals don't believe they can rely on colleagues to protect them.

Providing a safe and effective service to the public

Values and culture have an effect on the quality of service provided. Research by NHS England has found evidence of a clear link between staff experience and patient satisfaction ([Links between NHS staff experience and patient satisfaction: analysis of surveys from 2014 and 2015](#)). And in 2011, [research funded by the Department of Health](#) showed:

“Good management of NHS staff leads to higher quality of care, more satisfied patients and lower patient mortality. Good staff management offers significant financial savings for the NHS, as its leaders respond to the challenge of sustainability in the face of increasing costs and demands.”

While such extensive research isn't available for the fire and rescue sector, it is reasonable to suggest there may be a similar link between services' effectiveness and their cultures.

In our second round of inspections, almost two thirds (12) of the 17 services that we issued a requires improvement or inadequate grade in relation to values and culture were also issued requires improvement or inadequate grades for their effectiveness. And a key finding of the 2015 [Independent review of conditions of service for fire and rescue staff in England](#) (the Thomas review) was that culture and trust are at the centre of many of the changes needed to create a high-performing service aligned with the needs of the people it serves.

The [Independent Cultural Review of London Fire Brigade](#) includes examples of firefighter behaviour towards members of the public that are completely inexcusable. As one member of staff in the review commented: “It's now reached a point with me that I tell my female friends not to let male firefighters in the house. I would advise any single woman not to let them in to check smoke alarms.”

Alongside the allegations recently covered in the media, it is clear why some members of the public might mistrust FRS staff and why the standing and reputation of services might be damaged. No one should feel they can't rely on or trust their FRS. Cultures must improve to make sure that the public trusts FRS staff to provide a quality and safe service for all.

Services have legal obligations

All public sector organisations have a legal obligation to deal effectively with bullying, harassment and discrimination. As far as possible, they must prevent it and tackle it properly when it happens.

This obligation includes fostering good relations between those who have protected characteristics (as defined in the [Equality Act 2010](#)) and those who don't. FRSs are no different and penalties for breaking the law can be severe. Services should carry out this duty in everything they do. This includes making sure their equality impact assessments are fit for purpose.

Culture is linked to discrimination

During our second round of inspections, all but one of the services that we issued a requires improvement or inadequate grade in relation to values and culture were also issued requires improvement or inadequate grades in relation to their fairness and diversity.

As Sir William Macpherson, who led the [1999 inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence](#), pointed out, individuals tend to conform to the norms of occupational cultures.

We cover in the main body of this report how [watches](#), which operational staff in most services are a part of, can particularly lead to the development of subcultures, which in turn can foster unacceptable behaviours, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination. We have reported on the negative side of [watch cultures](#) in some FRSs (which is similar to the negative side of canteen culture referenced in the *Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*).

These cultures and subcultures can shape perceptions of certain communities or those with protected characteristics and negatively affect how they are treated, both as colleagues and as members of the public receiving a service.

This has been going on for far too long.

Methodology

Our approach

On 16 January 2023, we published the [terms of reference](#) for this review. We aimed for publication by April 2023. We adopted a targeted approach to researching, gathering and analysing evidence. As part of our terms of reference, we considered the following specific themes, which align with our inspection framework:

- values and culture, including bullying, harassment and discrimination
- training and skills
- fairness and diversity
- leadership.

We focused predominantly on evidence collected from our second round of fire and rescue service (FRS) inspections and prioritised the services which:

- were issued a cause of concern or area for improvement in these areas;
- were issued an outstanding grade in these areas; or
- have shown examples of innovative or promising practice in these areas.

We also reviewed evidence relating to:

- how services are using the [Core Code of Ethics](#);
- [watch cultures](#); and
- the influence of other factors or organisations.

We used the following sources of evidence:

- our service inspection reports
- our evidence gathering templates
- our independent reporting line
- our staff survey (to which we received 11,486 FRS staff responses)
- our national reports
- our policing reports on similar matters
- relevant external research in this area
- relevant literature sources, including evidence from other sectors
- publicly available evidence on how FRS cultures may be influenced.

This approach meant we could consider in detail and at a sector level both positive and negative cumulative evidence. It also supported the identification and analysis of trends and behaviours across services.

Our findings

As set out in the [summary of findings](#), issues concerning values and culture in fire and rescue services (FRSs) aren't new. We have been reporting our concerns in this area since 2018 when we carried out our first round of inspections (Round 1), and we have described the culture in some services as toxic. While we found, in our second full round of inspections (Round 2), that some services' values and culture had improved since then, the grades and [causes of concern](#) we issued highlight a continued need for change.

In our second round of inspections, we were particularly concerned to find that there are still unacceptable levels of bullying, harassment and discrimination in some services.

Improvements in some services' values aren't always reflected in staff behaviours

In Round 2, it was encouraging to find that many services have invested in attempts to improve their values and culture and that most do have a clear set of values.

Approximately a quarter of services (12) have made some progress with their values, communication with staff and visibility of leaders since our first round of inspections. The services that have made these improvements have seen these changes result in improved behaviours among staff.

In one service, staff talked positively about the service's approach to values and the introduction of a behavioural competency framework. For example, the main staff communications, including the intranet, staff magazine and manager information sheet, are based on the service values. In this service, the new behavioural competency framework and employee code of conduct had been sent to every employee. We saw behaviours that reflected the values at all levels in this service.

In Round 1, another service received a cause of concern for its values and culture. This was removed in Round 2. The progress it has made also translated into a grade improvement. This service fosters positive cultures, and we found limited examples of bullying and harassment.

But in many services, efforts to improve values and culture haven't always translated into improvements in staff behaviours.

This finding is reflected in the outcomes of our Round 2 staff survey, to which we received 11,486 FRS staff responses. The survey showed that 94 percent of respondents are aware of their service's statement of values, but only 52 percent of respondents thought their service was extremely or very effective at providing a positive culture that reflects the service's values.

Services need to find ways to bridge the gap between their values and how they proactively promote them to staff. To make improvements to cultures that staff can feel, services need to make sure that staff adhere to these values through regular use and demonstration by managers. If they aren't already, services might find helpful solutions by looking outside the sector, such as to NHS organisations that are performing highly in this area.

Bullying, harassment and discrimination are, to varying degrees, still problems in all services

We identified examples of poor behaviour, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination, in all services we inspected in Round 2. The services with the worst examples and toxic cultures are the ones to which we issued causes of concern. But there are many other services with serious issues, ranging from examples of inappropriate behaviour, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination, to cases of gross misconduct and criminal conduct. Information shared by services in relation to misconduct, grievance and complaint cases shows that over half involved inappropriate language/behaviour and bullying and harassment associated with a protected characteristic. Some of the specific examples reported to us include:

- no action being taken against reported discriminatory behaviour. This includes a firefighter who reported a senior officer for a racist comment and felt that his account of events was questioned. He was then questioned and told the alleged offender "wouldn't behave in such a way". The senior officer then threatened "to make his life hell";
- a senior officer referring to a Black colleague using the 'n-word' and putting it down to "having a laugh";
- homophobic abuse found written on a firefighter's locker;
- men using women's toilets and women not feeling confident to challenge this;
- no action being taken by managers who witnessed bullying behaviour and inappropriate comments;
- a perception among staff that women are appointed due to their gender, rather than on merit. Several people expressed this view, with individual experiences described using inappropriate language, including "if you menstruate or have a vagina, you're more likely to get the job" and "you have to be a woman to get on";
- staff not wishing to work in specific areas of the service because of poor behaviours;
- humiliating staff during training sessions if they made mistakes;

- staff being ‘shouted down’ by senior teams if they challenged decisions;
- staff feeling it is unsafe to report inappropriate behaviour and that their concerns wouldn’t be listened to or acted on appropriately or confidentially;
- staff being reluctant to speak up about or challenge inappropriate behaviours as they felt that doing so would affect their prospects, have adverse consequences for them or lead to a ‘negative mark’ against their name and being told it would be “career suicide” to do so;
- staff being reluctant to raise issues with middle and senior management, as they were told they would be moved if they did; and
- a watch manager refusing to support positive action to promote the FRS as a career for under-represented groups.

The results of our Round 2 staff survey provide another indication that there is a problem in relation to staff behaviours.

- In the 17 services that we issued requires improvement or inadequate grades in relation to values and culture, we found that reports of bullying, harassment and discrimination were higher. Of the staff from these services who responded to our survey, 15 percent reported experiencing bullying or harassment and 20 percent reported experiencing discrimination, compared with 11 and 14 percent from those we issued good or outstanding values and culture grades to.
- These reports came from FRS staff at all levels but were most often about alleged cases of senior staff bullying more junior staff (75 percent of 1,478 reports of bullying and 85 percent of discrimination reports in the staff survey). This was also reflected in the information we received relating to misconduct allegations.
- Some groups of staff, such as those with under-represented protected characteristics, are more likely to experience bullying and harassment. (For more detail, see the section titled [Most services need to do more to improve their equality, diversity and inclusion](#) (EDI).)

Services need to do more to address these problems.

Subgroups, including watches, can foster unacceptable behaviours and poor cultures

We have seen and heard the potentially damaging effects of subgroups and subcultures within FRSs leading to the development of significant ‘in groups’ and ‘out groups’. The example of [watch cultures](#) is covered below. Other examples identified during our inspections, such as the differences in staff experience between operational and non-operational staff are also highlighted elsewhere in this report.

Similarly, Fire Brigades Union slogans, such as ‘member with backbone’ printed on t-shirts and the term ‘scab’ used openly on social media, have the potential to also cause rifts. This undermines the positive effect that a strong staff association

can bring. These all risk harming the culture in a service by ostracising people who don't conform rather than supporting colleagues to, for example, raise concerns.

During our first round of inspections, we expressed concerns about the effect of watches on service cultures. Watches are common across services and are a long-standing workforce model.

The way watches operate is unique to the fire service and often results in staff working on the same team together for many years. Operational staff work, train and eat in close proximity to each other and often sleep at the station overnight. They are considered families by some operational staff, but they can exclude others and affect individuals not seen to fit in. We heard that it takes a strong leader to be a watch commander who doesn't become part of the watch subculture.

We found that, in some services, watches had created their own subcultures, which were contrary to service values and are impenetrable for new staff. As a result, we found some watches had normalised certain unacceptable behaviours, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination. They were resistant to change, and members of the watch were reluctant to seek professional support out of fear of being viewed as weak.

The [*Independent Culture Review of London Fire Brigade*](#) drew the same conclusion. Examples of this behaviour from brigade watches featured in the report include continually mocking people's religion, taking bets on who would be the first person in a team to sleep with a woman and filling people's helmets with urine. And, as pointed out in the foreword, there are similarities between watch culture and the canteen culture described in the [*Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*](#).

During our Round 1 inspections, we advised that FRSs should carefully review the future of watches and consider the advantages of alternative working arrangements. The [*Independent review of conditions of service for fire and rescue staff in England*](#) also found that watch cultures need to change – this report was published eight years ago and yet we are still finding problems in this area.

In our Round 2 inspections, at one service, a firefighter told us they had witnessed two male firefighters joking with a female firefighter that they were "going to rape her", and the three of them acted out the rape together. We also found instances where new recruits joined the service with a positive attitude and no apparent disposition to certain behaviours but soon felt the need to assimilate into the prevailing culture to "fit in".

In another service, staff told us that the culture in general was "toxic" and behaviours on watches were "pack-like". And they told us that on watches, people didn't always challenge inappropriateness towards race.

In another service, we heard of station managers making off-the-cuff comments and inappropriate banter about female and gay staff. There was an expectation that female staff should make the tea. Bullying of new recruits led to one on-call firefighter needing to move station.

We also found instances of:

- on-call firefighters being treated differently from wholetime firefighters;
- people who challenged inappropriate comments being shunned by colleagues who said their comments were banter; and
- watch managers refusing to support positive action.

Some services have revised their working arrangements with positive results. Other services would do well to consider whether watches are still the most appropriate way to manage teams. They should also consider how those teams can be made more inclusive and how behaviour of the type set out in this section of the report can be eliminated.

Staff can feel unable to challenge or report poor behaviours

Non or under-reporting of bullying, harassment and discrimination is common in organisations with poor cultures. As a result of the subgroups and subcultures previously mentioned, we were told that a lack of action by some services in previous cases led to a belief that reporting wouldn't help. Some staff reported to us that they don't trust the processes and described a culture where they have been, or fear they will be, targeted as a result of raising concerns. When staff have challenged inappropriate behaviour, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination, they have been told they must have misheard or that it was merely banter.

One firefighter reported feeling that their "card would be marked" if they raised concerns. They told us that there was an "us and them" atmosphere between firefighters and senior managers. They felt that the service may not reach an appropriate outcome in response to a grievance.

In one service, a female firefighter reported bullying to the assistant chief fire officer, as she felt unable to formally report it through the correct leadership channels.

In several services, we found a worrying trend of staff not raising concerns if they felt they weren't part of an 'old boys' club'. We also heard from staff who felt others could get away with inappropriate behaviours, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination, "if they know the right people". Some groups of staff we met in some services reported that they didn't have the confidence to challenge poor behaviours, and we were told that managers dealt with reports either inconsistently or not at all. In another service, after a firefighter's reports regarding a senior officer making a racist comment were dismissed, he was threatened. He was told "friends investigate friends" in services and that it was "career suicide" to challenge the status quo.

In another service, the staff told us that on watches, people didn't challenge inappropriateness towards race: "So people lie and stick together in pack mentality, even though they know it's wrong, as they're afraid of being ostracised."

We found evidence of low trust in grievance processes in 13 services. In one service, we were told the main reasons for staff not raising grievances were concerns about being labelled as a troublemaker and feeling there would be no action taken.

In another, staff told us some senior leaders didn't try to identify and resolve workforce concerns. They detailed examples of raising concerns with senior managers, with no positive results for staff.

And in yet another service, staff told us that some longer-serving members of staff sometimes used language or displayed behaviours that didn't align with service expectations (we found this in more than one service). Newer members of staff told us that they were willing to challenge this, which has helped to change the organisational culture. Staff also told us that, while the service is trying to tackle the issue, they felt that the culture wouldn't really change "until the older generation retires". However, some watch cultures are so strong that they survive beyond the retirement of staff members who behaved inappropriately. Staff told us of racist, sexist and homophobic comments and behaviours which had gone unchallenged or been dismissed as banter.

Our Round 2 staff survey found that in services with good or outstanding grades around values and culture, staff felt more able to challenge than in services with requires improvement or inadequate grades. Similarly, in good or outstanding graded services, staff felt more confident about how to give feedback to all levels.

Staff from ethnic minority backgrounds who have experienced bullying or harassment are less likely to report it than White members of staff. The results of our staff survey showed that 62 percent of respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds didn't report it, compared to 41 percent of White respondents.

Many staff members who didn't report bullying or harassment said this was because they believed nothing would be done. Services need to make sure they understand why some staff believe this and take action to rectify the issue.

Some managers are unable to deal with or challenge inappropriate behaviours

One potential reason why some staff might be reluctant to raise concerns is that they have little faith in their manager's ability to handle them in the right way. In our Round 2 inspections, we found that some managers didn't manage or challenge bullying or inappropriate behaviours, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination, even if they witnessed them.

One station (middle) manager told us that they didn't feel confident raising grievances, as they believed it would adversely affect their position and future career. Managers need to know that if they raise concerns, they will be supported and that they won't face adverse consequences. Support, including giving managers the necessary training and a zero-tolerance and early intervention approach to inappropriate behaviours, needs to come from the top. Unless managers receive support themselves, they can't effectively support their staff.

One service has heavily invested in openly discussing positive action and EDI-related topics. For example, it has established what it calls 'brave space talks', where sensitive issues can be discussed in a safe environment. As a result, staff are well engaged and have improved their understanding of positive action.

Staff need a secure way to raise concerns

Services need honest staff feedback so they can identify areas for improvement and take appropriate action where misconduct allegations are concerned. If they ignore these problems, serious issues may go unnoticed and potentially get worse.

All staff – and particularly those in emergency service roles where the lives of both staff and members of the public are at risk – need reporting processes they trust as safe, without fear of any reprisals. They also need to know that their concerns will be taken seriously and investigated properly and that outcomes or sanctions will be appropriate.

Staff reporting certain matters are protected by law under the [Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998](#). These include:

- a criminal offence, such as fraud;
- that someone's health and safety are in danger;
- risk or actual damage to the environment;
- a miscarriage of justice;
- that the company is breaking the law (for example, by not having the right insurance); and
- that they believe someone is covering up wrongdoing.

Making a declaration covered by this legislation gives an employee certain protections.

There is no consistent process, policy or standard for FRS staff to raise concerns either nationally or locally. This means we don't have evidence of the efficacy of any current reporting processes, besides the fact that staff don't always feel comfortable raising concerns.

Given the particular cultural issues set out in this report and the reluctance of some staff to raise concerns, the sector is in need of such a process.

Other sectors with such processes have reported successes. For example, the NHS in England has [freedom to speak up guardians](#). The freedom to speak up initiative gives staff an alternative route to line managers and encourages a “positive culture where people feel they can speak up and their voices will be heard, and their suggestions acted upon”.

One FRS has introduced a ‘speak up champion’, and concerns have been brought to its attention this way. This initiative allows staff to raise concerns in an informal manner. It has helped the service to see and hear the challenges it faces with regard to embedding an understanding of EDI. The process is seen as complementary to the grievance procedure and provides an alternative/informal way of raising concerns without fear of recrimination. We will consider how well this approach is working in our next inspection.

The police service in England has the [Independent Office for Police Conduct report line](#). Police officers and staff can email or call the line to report concerns of wrongdoing, that a criminal offence has been committed or where there is evidence of conduct that would justify disciplinary proceedings. While a reporting method of this kind for FRSs would help, it alone isn’t the answer to the challenges that surround raising concerns.

Recommendation 1

By 1 October 2023, chief fire officers should make sure their services provide a confidential way for staff to raise concerns and that staff are aware of whistleblowing processes.

Recommendation 2

By 1 October 2023, National Employers, the [Local Government Association](#) and the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#) should review any current independent arrangements whereby staff can raise concerns outside their FRS. They should then ensure that all FRS staff have access to an independent reporting line that can be used as a confidential way to raise concerns outside their own FRS.

Recommendation 3

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should review the support available for those who have raised concerns and take any action needed to make sure these provisions are suitable.

Recommendation 4

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should assure themselves that updates on how concerns are being handled are shared with those who have raised them. The updates should be given in an accessible way that encourages trust and confidence in the service response. Consideration should be given to creating a professional standards function to handle conduct concerns in service (or from an external service) to have oversight of cases, to make sure they are conducted in a fair and transparent way and to act as a point of contact for all staff involved.

Recommendation 5

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should make sure they provide accessible information for all staff and members of the public on how they can raise concerns and access confidential support (including through external agencies). Chief fire officers should also make sure accessible information is provided on how concerns and allegations will be investigated in a way that ensures confidentiality and is independent of the alleged perpetrator.

Background checks of fire and rescue service staff need to improve to reduce risk of harm to both staff and the public

FRS employees hold positions of trust, especially given the role of the firefighter in prevention and protection activities. Each service has a duty to make sure that its staff and volunteers are equipped and trained to support and carry out their safeguarding work. They should also ensure that robust and rigorous checks are in place to make sure staff are suitable for their jobs.

Services also have a legal obligation to have appropriate safeguarding arrangements in place. These duties are underpinned by the standards set out in [section 11 of the Children Act 2004](#) and sections [42](#) to [46](#) of the [Care Act 2014](#).

But there are no consistent standards for FRSs to follow in relation to background checks, and there are no specific legal obligations for fire and rescue services/authorities to conduct particular checks on new or existing staff. Therefore, despite the above obligations, it is for authorities to decide if and how they conduct any background checks before appointing staff. Greater consistency of approach is needed.

A recent review of information provided by FRSs regarding their employee background checks showed that there is wide variation and inconsistency in approach.

As we said in our 2022 report, [An inspection of vetting, misconduct, and misogyny in the police service](#), police forces need effective systems to prevent unsuitable job applicants from joining. FRS staff are also in positions of power and have access to vulnerable individuals. We see no reason why FRSs shouldn't also have effective and robust background check processes, especially as FRS staff face less professional scrutiny than their policing peers, as there is no equivalent to the [Independent Office for Police Conduct](#).

We also see no reason why these processes can't be applied retrospectively to make sure not only that new recruits are suitable and safe to work but that the current workforce is, too.

The public deserves assurance that the FRS staff they come into contact with have been subject to background checks prior to carrying out these roles. This is particularly important when considering the link between effective background checks and cultures of misogyny and predatory behaviour seen in policing. It is also important in light of the examples of inappropriate behaviour from firefighters towards members of their communities set out in recent allegations.

We welcome the progress made by the Home Office and the [National Fire Chiefs Council \(NFCC\)](#) to incorporate members of FRSs in the [Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 \(Exceptions\) Order 1975](#). This would mean staff must disclose any caution or conviction to the service.

We also encourage services and authorities to consider the need for an increased level of checks for those roles that carry out specific or regulated activities as defined by the [Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974](#), the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exceptions) Order 1975, and the [Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006](#).

Where there is a public protection risk and a pressing social need to share information, [Common Law Police Disclosure](#) gives police forces in England (and Wales) a power to pass information to the employer or regulatory body. However, it was beyond the scope of this report to examine the extent to which police forces are currently using this power to pass information to fire and rescue services about their staff. Chief constables should make sure they are appropriately using this power in circumstances involving employees of fire and rescue services.

Recommendation 6

By 1 January 2024, the Home Office, working with the Ministry of Justice, should make sure that the Government incorporates fire and rescue authority employees within the [Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 \(Exceptions\) Order 1975](#) so that they are eligible for the appropriate DBS checks.

Recommendation 7

By 1 May 2024, the Home Office, working with the fire and rescue sector, should make sure that the [Police Act 1997 \(Criminal Records\) Regulations 2002](#), or a similar appropriate legislatively enabled solution, makes detailed provisions for fire and rescue services.

Recommendation 8

By 1 December 2023, the [Fire Standards Board](#), in liaison with the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#), should review the existing relevant standard(s) and underpinning guidance. It should:

- clearly state the requirements for background checks undertaken by services;
- clarify the minimum requirements (including levels of DBS checks) for all roles, particularly roles where staff have access to vulnerable members of the public;
- define the standards required to embed a culture across fire and rescue services that empowers all members of staff and local communities to report concerns; and
- be subject to review following any legislative change.

Recommendation 9

By 1 January 2024, chief fire officers should:

- immediately review their current background checks arrangements, and make sure that suitable and sufficient background checks are in place to [safeguard](#) their staff and communities they serve; and
- make sure that appropriate DBS check requests have been submitted for all existing, new staff, and volunteers, according to their roles as identified by the [Fire Standards Board](#).

Recommendation 10

By 1 September 2023, chief constables should make sure they are appropriately using their Common Law Police Disclosure powers in circumstances involving employees of fire and rescue services.

Allegations of misconduct should be handled appropriately

There is no room in any FRS for someone who behaves inappropriately or perpetuates toxic cultures. As we have reported in relation to police background checks, some individuals who are assessed as suitable when they first join a service may become unsuitable later in their career. When this happens, services need effective systems to identify these individuals and, if necessary, dismiss them.

We have seen a recent instance where, despite serious allegations amounting to gross misconduct being upheld following an investigation, a senior officer was able to retire rather than be dismissed. This sends the wrong message to staff, would-be perpetrators and the public.

Information shared by services in relation to a misconduct, grievance and complaint case shows that in the course of the associated investigations, approximately a quarter of individuals were dismissed, and almost half of those individuals were permitted to resign or retire. The proportion of staff who can apparently avoid sanction points to a significant flaw in current misconduct arrangements.

Recommendation 11

By 1 December 2023, the [Fire Standards Board](#), in liaison with the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#), should review the existing relevant standard(s) and supporting guidance to clearly state how services should handle staff disclosures, complaints and grievances.

Recommendation 12

By 1 March 2024, chief fire officers should provide assurances to HMICFRS that they have implemented the standard on staff disclosure, complaint and grievance handling.

Recommendation 13

By 1 December 2023, the [Fire Standards Board](#), in liaison with the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#), should review the existing relevant standard(s) and supporting guidance to clearly state how services should handle misconduct and safeguarding-related allegations and outcomes. These should include requirements to:

- conduct and complete investigations, whether or not the staff member under investigation leaves;
- consider whether the incident requires immediate dismissal;
- provide training for staff who are carrying out investigations; and
- ensure the diversity/neutrality of the investigation panel/person.

Recommendation 14

By 1 March 2024, chief fire officers should provide assurances to HMICFRS that they have implemented the standard on misconduct allegations and outcomes handling.

Recommendation 15

By 1 October 2023, the Home Office should work with the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#) and fire and rescue service employers to make sure there is a process to handle misconduct allegations against chief fire officers. The Home Office should immediately notify HMICFRS of any allegations and outcomes that it is aware of.

Recommendation 16

By 1 October 2023, the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#) should develop and manage a national barred list that holds details of staff who have been dismissed for gross misconduct (including staff who have already left services). It should ensure that this list is referred to in all appointment processes to prevent those who are barred from rejoining another service. After the College of Fire and Rescue has been established (see recommendation 25), it should take responsibility for managing the list.

Recommendation 17

With immediate effect, chief fire officers should notify HMICFRS of any allegations that have the potential to constitute staff gross misconduct that:

- involve allegations of a criminal nature that have the potential to affect public confidence in FRSs;
- are of a serious nature; or
- relate to assistant chief fire officers or those at equivalent or higher grades.

Recommendation 18

By 1 August 2023, chief fire officers should provide assurances to HMICFRS that all parties are supported in relation to ongoing investigations.

Recommendation 19

By 1 July 2023, the Home Office should examine whether any appeal processes for fire and rescue misconduct cases are appropriate.

A positive culture is created in services where the leadership is visible, transparent and fair

How individual leaders behave sets the tone for the rest of the service. In our Round 2 staff survey, 94 percent of respondents said they are aware of their service's statement of values. But only 27 percent of those respondents agreed that senior leaders consistently model and maintain service values. This apparent gap indicates a disconnect between policy intent and observed behaviour.

In our inspections, we have found that services with leaders who are visible to their staff, lead by example and are open to challenge appear to have fewer bullying, harassment and discrimination issues than services with less visible, autocratic leaders. For example, the new chief fire officer in one service has reportedly had a direct positive influence on the service culture.

In services with a clear understanding of discipline and grievances, promotions, retention and successful recruitment processes, a lower proportion of staff who responded to our staff survey indicated that they had experienced bullying, harassment and discrimination. These services provide good training, use equality impact assessments effectively and promote positive action while ensuring that staff understand it. Senior leadership teams are visible and consult with staff.

These services also have strong internal staff networks, clearly understood and demonstrated values and a positive health and safety culture. All of this helps to create a sense of inclusion, trust and support.

We found that staff were also more positive about the culture of the service when leaders were accountable for their behaviours. For example, in one service, staff told us managers admitted when they had made a mistake and were open and honest about it. And in another service, the deputy chief fire officer gave a personal apology to staff who had been subject to bullying and harassment. In both cases, staff felt that this was a positive demonstration of service values.

But these behaviours aren't reflected in all services. In one service, it was clear that limited senior leader visibility had led to mistrust across parts of the organisation. We saw a similar lack of visibility in several other services. This was often attributed to either an unwillingness to listen or to an autocratic style of management. Lack of visibility makes it difficult for senior leaders to create a positive culture where staff adhere to the values expected of them.

The British Army has also encountered cultural issues and inappropriate behaviours. As part of an independent audit of army culture, it is seeking to "reinforce the best and weed out the worst", including extending its reporting to include middle-ranking officers, to improve transparency and identify the very best contemporary leaders to drive cultural change throughout the organisation.

Leaders at all levels of all FRSs should know if they are meeting the needs of their staff, including how they respond to allegations of bullying, harassment or discrimination. They should use staff feedback to make improvements and continually assess how they can lead compassionately and improve the cultures in their services.

The [Fire Standards Board](#) has recently implemented two professional standards, called [leading the service](#) and [leading and developing people](#), which build on the [Core Code of Ethics](#). We discuss these further in the section titled [National work is supporting fire service improvements](#).

Recommendation 20

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should have plans in place to ensure they meet the [Fire Standards Board's leading the service standard](#) and its [leading and developing people standard](#).

Recommendation 21

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should make sure there is a full, 360-degree feedback process in place for all senior leaders and managers (assistant chief fire officer equivalent and above) in service.

Recommendation 22

By 1 September 2023, chief fire officers should make sure there is a full, 360-degree feedback process in place for all other leaders and managers in service. The process should include gathering feedback from a wide range of sources including colleagues and direct reports.

Recommendation 23

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should seek regular feedback from staff about values, culture, fairness and diversity, with due regard to the [leading and developing people standard](#). They should show how they act on this feedback.

Recommendation 24

By 1 October 2023, chief fire officers should put plans in place to monitor, including through the gathering and analysis of staff feedback, [watch](#) and team cultures and provide prompt remedial action for any issues they identify.

Supervisors and middle managers need to be better trained in how to effectively manage, develop and support their staff

Services generally focus heavily on maintaining the operational competence of their staff, but in too many services, we found little or no training about the leadership and management skills that are needed to effectively manage staff. Leadership and management training is an essential element of handling grievances, managing absences, conducting performance development reviews and supporting the development and progression of staff.

This lack of leadership and management training means that managers sometimes aren't equipped to appropriately challenge, or that they lack the confidence to address, poor behaviours, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination. This can be a particularly acute problem in watches, where poor behaviour often goes unchallenged. It can also be very difficult for newly promoted staff, as many services don't provide appropriate or timely training, instead expecting them to learn on the job.

In one service, staff reported that they felt managers aren't always able to empathise. We found that one watch commander hadn't had any training in relation to mental health, despite being in the role for 14 years.

Most services to which we issued good or outstanding grades in relation to this area have good performance development review processes and completion rates. We found that services with gateways for promotion processes showed the most

improvement between our inspections in terms of values and culture, and the processes were received positively by staff.

Also, formal and informal conversations about learning, development and performance are more likely to take place in services with positive cultures. Staff in these services are more likely to have had a conversation with their manager about their learning and development. Services with a positive culture have a better understanding of their workforce's skills and capabilities and how to manage them.

One service has a range of online learning resources. It also has access to external learning providers to help all staff (not just supervisors or managers) to do their jobs effectively. Clear training plans are in place, and it provides learning hubs where staff can access additional learning and development.

Aspiring and current managers would benefit from acquiring leadership and management skills to become more effective leaders. Training to improve these skills would improve the cultures within their services and could include the following:

- inclusive leadership training
- training on how to create compassionate working cultures
- training on how to handle difficult conversations for managers
- specific development opportunities for staff with protected characteristics.

The NFCC's leadership project was commissioned in response to the challenges facing current and future leaders in the fire sector. It consists of a suite of national products and tools that are being developed in line with the [NFCC leadership framework](#).

A lack of leadership and management skills isn't a problem unique to FRSs, and other organisations have found ways to mitigate it. For example, the [NHS leadership academy](#) develops NHS leaders at a national level through a variety of programmes, resources and activities.

The [Civil Service accelerated development schemes](#) aim to develop high-potential individuals to build a robust and diverse pipeline to the most senior and critical Civil Service roles. As part of this, the future leaders' scheme provides a leadership development curriculum, which supports civil servants in accelerating their development as well as learning more about their personal leadership effectiveness.

In May 2022, the Home Office published the [White Paper Reforming our Fire and Rescue Service](#), in which it set out a proposal for a College of Fire and Rescue. The college could provide a central, consistent source of learning and development resources for staff to use to help them become better managers and leaders. But progress towards its inception has been too slow.

Recommendation 25

By 1 January 2025, the Government should establish a College of Fire and Rescue, as proposed by the [White Paper Reforming our Fire and Rescue Service](#). There should be no further delay to its implementation.

Recommendation 26

By 1 October 2023, as a precursor to the development of the College of Fire and Rescue, chief fire officers and the [National Fire Chiefs Council](#) should work with the Home Office to consider how they can improve the training and support they offer to staff in management and leadership development. This should include authority members in respect of their assurance leadership roles and should ensure that opportunities are offered fairly across all staff groups.

Most services need to do more to improve their equality, diversity and inclusion

Culture and inclusion go hand in hand, and greater diversity improves performance and innovation.

As set out earlier in this report, during our second round of inspections all but one of the 17 services that we issued a requires improvement or inadequate grade in relation to values and culture were also issued requires improvement or inadequate grades in relation to their fairness and diversity. This is no coincidence.

Throughout all 44 services, we issued requires improvement or inadequate grades to over half (26) and causes of concern to five in relation to fairness and diversity.

These problems are long-standing. In 1999 (19 years before we started inspecting FRSs), the then Fire Service Inspectorate carried out its *Thematic Review of Equality and Fairness in the Fire Service*. It issued 23 recommendations targeting greater equality and fairness for FRS staff. And since 2018, when HMICFRS started inspecting FRSs, we have highlighted the lack of fairness and diversity across all services in England.

Progress to improve EDI in FRSs is far too slow.

There isn't enough diversity in fire and rescue services

It is important that FRSs reflect the diversity of the communities they serve to maintain public trust and provide a better service to the public.

But the workforce of England's FRSs still doesn't represent many of the communities that it serves.

In 2018, [according to data gathered for a government report](#), only 4 percent of firefighters were from an ethnic minority background compared to 16 percent of the working-age population. The FRSs were the least ethnically diverse workforce out of the 12 public sector workforces explored in the report.

The proportion of firefighters from an ethnic minority background increased from 3.8 percent in 2014 to 4.1 percent in 2018. This was the smallest increase out of the 12 public sector workforces. It is clear, therefore, that services must do more to recruit and retain people from diverse backgrounds.

One service has introduced a ten-week course which aims to give support, training and guidance to people from under-represented groups who are interested in joining the FRS. It is run at fire stations, before the formal recruitment process, and gives applicants a realistic understanding of the varied role of a firefighter.

Another service is investing in recruitment and using positive action to improve recruitment diversity. It has adapted and targeted how it approaches and interacts with potential candidates and has employed a positive action officer. The chief fire officer is also the 'positive action champion'. It makes sure its assessment panels are diverse so that all candidates can relate more to the service, including under-represented groups.

In 2017, another service implemented an effective and successful apprenticeship programme. The apprentices have been recruited to a variety of roles across the service. This has helped positively change the organisation's culture. In the last cohort, 50 percent were women and 25 percent were from an ethnic minority background.

Services need to be more inclusive to support and retain staff

Our most recent public perceptions survey found that the diversity of a service was a prominent barrier to considering a career in the FRS for 23 percent of respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds compared to only 9 percent of White respondents. And inclusivity of the FRS was seen as a barrier for 19 percent of respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds compared to 10 percent of White respondents. Services need to promote EDI meaningfully to both current staff and potential joiners.

Some senior leaders have pointed to challenges in recruiting diverse workforces as being connected to the issues surrounding fairness, diversity and culture within their services. But representation of different walks of life alone isn't enough. Recruitment isn't the sole solution to improving services' values, cultures, fairness and diversity.

As an example, the NHS is very well represented by staff from ethnic minority backgrounds. In 2018, 46 percent of hospital doctors in England were from an ethnic minority background. But despite this representation, NHS staff still face discrimination. In more than three quarters (77 percent) of all NHS trusts, staff

with ethnic minority backgrounds reported higher rates of bullying, harassment and abuse from colleagues than White staff did.

Senior leaders who are focused on recruitment would do well to also consider if they are doing everything they can to improve the inclusivity of their organisational cultures. Their existing staff who should feel respected and valued are more likely to be positive advocates for others to join.

As a minimum, senior leaders should encourage staff to report discrimination and inappropriate behaviour, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination, and then act on these reports promptly and appropriately. This is one reason why the steps outlined earlier in this report, about raising concerns and handling misconduct allegations, are so important.

While some services have attempted to improve their EDI, including the production of EDI plans, these good intentions often don't lead to actual changes in the diversity of the workforce or to improvements that staff can perceive. This may mean potential staff don't join or current staff may leave services prematurely.

Discrimination is prevalent

Failing to deal with issues of fairness and diversity may have a wider negative effect on services' cultures and if unchallenged, may in turn perpetuate unacceptable behaviours. Some groups of staff, such as those from ethnic minority backgrounds and those who are disabled, neurodiverse and/or from the LGBTQ+ community, are more likely to experience bullying and harassment.

In our Round 2 staff survey, we asked staff throughout England about their experiences of discrimination. We found:

- Of the 11,486 staff survey respondents, 17 percent (1,920) had experienced discrimination in the past 12 months.
- There were higher rates of reported discrimination from respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds than from White respondents: of the respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds, 20 percent had experienced discrimination compared to 16 percent of White respondents.
- Of the female respondents who had experienced discrimination, 41 percent said gender was a factor compared with 16 percent of the male respondents.
- Those who self-reported as disabled, neurodiverse or from the LGBTQ+ community were also more likely to report that they had experienced discrimination in the last 12 months.

In one service, staff told us of homophobic and racial slurs being dismissed as banter. They gave us examples of racist and sexist comments and behaviours which had gone unchallenged.

Previous reviews have found that bullying, harassment and discrimination were a daily feature of some female firefighters' lives. Some reviews have found that women, staff from ethnic minority backgrounds, LGBTQ+ and neurodiverse staff experience poor treatment and do less well in their careers. One review cited an example where a Black firefighter had had a noose put above his locker.

In November 2022, the Home Office published a report on [Pathways and barriers to leadership in fire and rescue services](#), based on research carried out in 2020. The report found:

“Many (predominantly female) staff consider the workplace a very male-dominant, macho environment with some hostility towards women’s place in the service. There were also a couple of reports of hostile comments towards the ethnicity of some staff; some participants, however, mentioned that the culture in their service had improved in recent years with the recruitment of new staff.”

Inclusive practices are crucial to give all staff a voice and influence

Inclusive practices mean people from all backgrounds are able to influence key decisions and processes in their teams and organisations. This results in a wider range of experiences, perspectives and views being available, leading to more comprehensive decision-making and better staff attitudes. Services should take steps to make sure that the needs of staff more likely to be perceived as outsiders or under-represented are considered and that these staff have a voice and influence.

In eight services we inspected in Round 2, we found examples of innovative and promising EDI practice. In most cases, the services have invested in promoting EDI, with measurable strategies to improve diversity. Each service has introduced a broad range of new initiatives internally as well as positive action programmes to improve recruitment from under-represented groups.

One service has established a positive approach to EDI through several staff networks and an equality and inclusion working group. These groups organise a range of different activities in the service and are led by senior leaders. Staff are confident to address inappropriate language and behaviour. They also feel sure that the service will act on matters raised using the most appropriate and open approach.

Services should complete equality impact assessments to a high standard

While services are generally completing equality impact assessments, their quality varies, and some don't seek staff input. By not involving their staff with the equality impact of their processes, services may exacerbate existing divisions relating to EDI. Services should understand the effect their work has on those with protected characteristics, both in their communities and at work.

Recommendation 27

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should make sure their equality impact assessments are fit for purpose and, as a minimum, meet the requirements of the [National Fire Chiefs Council equality impact assessment toolkit](#).

Staff aren't being trained well enough in equality, diversity and inclusion

Our inspections show that a lack of robust EDI training is directly linked to staff not properly understanding EDI. We found that too many services don't give staff enough ongoing and relevant EDI training. It is in these services that staff rarely understand the benefits of positive action. Some services rely heavily on e-learning rather than using face-to-face interaction and workshops which can be more beneficial for staff understanding.

Services often don't carry out training frequently enough. And, while most services provide some form of EDI training, in some it isn't mandatory and is focused on new recruits. As a result, it isn't always completed by the longer-serving staff, who invariably need it most. At one service, we found that formal EDI training hadn't been carried out in ten years.

Our local representative survey found that EDI training is offered more readily in services with good culture. In services that we issued a good grade in relation to this area, there is a big difference between those who are simply ticking a box by providing EDI training via e-learning every two or three years and those who are providing regular update EDI sessions through different learning platforms and methods, such as webinars, 'lunch and learns' or lived-experience discussions. When we spoke with staff on inspection at these services, we found strong evidence that this training was being well received by them. This is in contrast to other services where staff simply stated they have completed the expected mandatory learning.

As the staff in services aren't representative of the communities they serve, services must make sure they are receiving EDI training.

Positive action is misunderstood by many staff, and can lead to division

We found that across many services staff didn't understand the benefits of positive action. In one service, many staff incorrectly believed that the service lowers its entry standards to recruit individuals with specific protected characteristics. And in another service, staff described positive action as "positive racism". This could lead to some feeling that diversity is 'being done to them'.

Some staff from ethnic minority backgrounds told us that positive action made them uncomfortable and felt that, rather than seeking high-calibre staff, services were trying to fill quotas. One group of staff we met said they felt the lack of understanding of

positive action wasn't just a service problem but a societal one, including a belief that women aren't strong enough to be firefighters.

Some services are doing well to improve staff understanding and appreciation of positive action, but awareness of the nature, purpose and benefit of positive action needs to improve across the sector.

At one service, new recruits are given positive action awareness training as part of their induction. The service has also provided a range of information (including 'myth-busting information') for existing members of staff to help improve understanding. This information is distributed through, for example, in-person visits by the executive team.

Services don't understand the diversity of their staff

Services that view activities to support EDI as box-ticking exercises also tend not to recognise the value of equality impact assessments and gathering quality diversity data.

Many services don't have a good understanding of the diversity of their staff at all levels, including in senior leadership teams. And many aren't using their data or making it readily available. This means services aren't using diversity data to drive their EDI plans. And they aren't clear on what action they need to take to improve the diversity of their workforces. Therefore, EDI initiatives risk being aimless and lacking momentum. This also limits understanding of these issues nationally.

From our inspection evidence, we have found there are a few possible reasons for this, including:

- staff not understanding the reasons and benefits of declaring their diversity;
- staff not understanding the benefits of positive action;
- staff being actively hostile to declaring their diversity to the service; and
- services not effectively gathering the data, particularly at the employment stage.

One service encourages all staff to provide their diversity data, but the current level of declaration of this information throughout that service is consistently below the England level. As of 31 March 2021, 22 percent of the service's staff hadn't declared their ethnicity. This is higher than the England figure of 9 percent.

Another service doesn't have enough meaningful workforce equality data to inform its impact assessments. This means it can't effectively understand how potential changes may affect its workforce. It also can't accurately say how well its workforce represents the residential population, as it doesn't hold ethnicity data for a high proportion of its workforce. As of 31 March 2021, 38 percent of this service's staff members hadn't declared their ethnicity to the service.

This lack of understanding might prevent services from identifying and remedying problems. For example, there are still some services that don't have adequate facilities for female staff at operational stations. This includes female and male changing lockers located next to one another and beds in dormitories only separated by a row of lockers or a privacy curtain. At one station in a service, there are no changing facilities for females, so female firefighters have to get changed in the toilets.

More publicly available equality data is needed to better understand the challenges the sector faces. In particular, more published data is needed to understand the diversity of leadership in FRSs nationally.

Recommendation 28

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should review how they gather and use equality and diversity data to improve their understanding of their staff demographics, including applying and meeting the requirements of the [National Fire Chiefs Council equality, diversity and inclusion data toolkit](#).

Recommendation 29

By 1 December 2023, the Home Office should publish greater detail on the protected characteristic data it collects about FRS staff, including joiners and leavers, by rank and role.

Recommendation 30

By 30 December 2024, the Home Office should align the data it collects on protected characteristics with the [Office for National Statistics harmonised standard](#) and publish this data.

Recommendation 31

By 1 December 2024, the Home Office should collect and publish experimental statistics on public complaints and conduct matters in relation to FRS staff, similar to that which it currently publishes on police forces in England and Wales.

Not all staff are treated fairly

We found that in many services, staff experiences of being treated fairly are dependent on their job type. Non-operational or on-call members of staff often report experiencing worse treatment than their operational or wholetime counterparts.

Negative behaviour towards certain groups of staff can adversely affect career progression and opportunities for them in the service. It can also lead to poor treatment from other staff groups and, in some cases, senior managers.

Compared to other staff groups, on-call staff reported greater levels of discrimination in services with requires improvement or inadequate grades for values and culture. All staff should be treated fairly and with respect. They should be given the same opportunities, regardless of their role or rank.

In one service, we found there are different recruitment arrangements in place in the fire protection team for operational and non-operational staff. In another, some non-operational staff told us they felt their career paths were limited and that they were pigeonholed. In another service, the chief fire officer excluded non-operational staff from a staff engagement session, perpetuating an 'us and them' culture.

In one service, non-operational managers can't investigate a grievance against an operational member of staff. In another, some staff told us they felt it was difficult for operational staff to raise grievances, as they felt "it creates an awkward atmosphere" in the station. They said that in stations there is a lot of mistrust around the grievance process. This may lead to fewer issues being raised and resolved, increasing the likelihood of a poor culture prevailing.

In another, some groups of staff told us that they felt they were treated differently. Some on-call staff felt ostracised in some locations, and some non-operational staff said they don't always feel valued.

But there are examples of services that are making sure there are opportunities for all staff.

In one service, there are good opportunities for non-operational staff to develop and progress. It gave us examples which included a staff member being given an opportunity to embark on a two-year management apprenticeship qualification. The service acknowledged that, given there isn't a gateway process for non-operational staff, these opportunities should be better advertised. A 'metro map' is being produced to show staff what development and qualifications are needed to get from one place (role) to another.

Since our last inspection, one service's fire prevention department has created non-operational line manager roles. Operational staff previously carried out these roles. This means there are more progression opportunities for non-operational staff, and the service can better select the right people for the job.

Progression opportunities limit diversity in leadership teams

Effective understanding of workforce skills and capability is linked to culture. We have highlighted here, and in our annual and national reports, that progression opportunities aren't equally available for all staff – on-call and non-operational staff generally don't receive the same opportunities as their wholetime operational colleagues. This can lead to services failing to recognise and develop talent. It can also reduce opportunities to improve diversity in senior leadership teams; most female staff and staff from ethnic minority backgrounds work in non-operational roles so this affects them disproportionately.

Some leadership job adverts require incident command experience, which would generally be gained from operational roles. This experience should only be required if absolutely necessary for the role or to maintain operational rotas, particularly for senior management roles.

In one service, promotion processes aren't fair and accessible for all staff. We were told that if female members of staff who work flexible hours are offered a promotion, the service tries "to force [staff] back into normal shifts". One woman had to decline a promotion offer because she couldn't work the shift pattern.

But we did find some positive examples. One service runs a high development potential scheme which is open to internal and external applicants. The most recent intake was two female candidates who applied after seeing the posts advertised at their local rugby club.

In its research and analysis report, [*Pathways and barriers to leadership in fire and rescue services*](#), the Home Office found that staff felt there were few opportunities for promotion. It found that non-operational staff who participated in the research "felt especially aggrieved by limited opportunities, citing no visible pathway in their specialism". And it found that on-call staff and non-operational staff "believed they had fewer promotion opportunities compared with wholetime staff".

The Home Office also said that barriers to progression can include:

"Issues related to personal characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, family situation and age. Meanwhile, other wider barriers were linked to organisational cultures, such as issues related to perceived favouritism in leadership chains. These perceived barriers were typically considered to reflect the culture and attitudes within FRSs and leadership chains and were often seen to impede staff progression."

The Home Office points to several areas in which FRSs could focus their attention regarding talent management and progression. These include:

“Providing greater levels of consistency in the delivery of development programmes, which may be fostered through nationally backed programmes to increase the consistency in delivery and access.”

This is an area that some services have spent considerable time and effort improving, and the [NFCC's talent management toolkit](#) was developed to support FRSs at every stage of the talent management cycle, making sure people with the right skills, behaviours and values are in the right roles at the right time. But when the career pathways for staff are ineffective, and when combined with poor succession planning, it isn't surprising that staff in these services don't think the process is fair.

We hope that the College of Fire and Rescue proposed in the [White Paper Reforming Our Fire and Rescue Service](#), when established, will give greater support to services and a more consistent approach to developing staff and nurturing talent.

Poor talent management, promotion processes and succession planning can lead to unfairness

We found that most services have a fair and transparent promotion process, but many staff (49 percent of our Round 2 staff survey respondents) perceived them as unfair. Recruitment and promotion processes are perceived to be fairer by staff in services that are good or outstanding in relation to values and culture.

Some staff in one service described its promotion processes as “feeling corrupt”. They expressed this frustration after applying for promotions many times and, despite being unsuccessful, not receiving any feedback or support. They told us: “If your face doesn't fit – you won't get in.”

Some staff in another service talked about a “new club in town”. They commented that it was easy to predict who was going to be promoted based on who they socialised with.

Perceptions of nepotism are particularly apparent in services where there is no effective talent management in place and where staff development is limited.

In one service, we heard that the promotion policy is distorted or blatantly ignored when individuals are cherry-picked for senior roles. We were told some individuals are permitted to “leapfrog” through the promotion progress. This is despite them not having the necessary accreditations or even sitting the exams that are required.

A senior leader at another service was offered a temporary promotion while a replacement was found. Once this period ended, they were offered another senior position without needing to go through any promotion process. The role they were offered didn't previously exist in the service.

Some services need to improve their succession plans, particularly at a senior level

Perceptions of, and actual unfair, promotion processes are sometimes linked to poor succession planning. We found that some services didn't actively seek to diversify their senior leadership. This can lead to staff lacking confidence in the services' promotion processes.

One service has improved the way it manages succession planning for senior leadership roles. This service has signed a regional agreement to allow opportunities for the secondment of senior managers between services. This is to fill gaps while a full and open recruitment process takes place. The secondees gain experience of working as a principal officer, while the service benefits from a mutual exchange of knowledge and development.

Recommendation 32

By 1 June 2023, chief fire officers should, as a priority, specify in succession plans how they intend to improve diversity across all levels of the service. This should include offering increased direct-entry opportunities.

Recommendation 33

By 1 August 2023, chief fire officers should develop plans to promote progression paths for existing staff in non-operational roles and put plans in place to reduce any inequalities of opportunity.

National work is supporting fire service improvements

The Fire Standards Board recently introduced its leadership and people fire standards

In December 2022, the [Fire Standards Board](#) introduced two professional standards called [leading the service](#) and [leading and developing people](#). They build on the [Core Code of Ethics](#).

The leading the service standard sets out how senior leaders in the fire and rescue service (FRS) can make sure organisations provides excellent service to the community, built on positive relationships and trust.

The leading and developing people standard sets out how to establish, maintain and deploy a competent, diverse and motivated workforce. This includes carrying out robust workforce planning, having effective policies and processes and developing a variety of entry routes to attract and recruit a diverse workforce.

HMICFRS takes fire standards into consideration when conducting inspections but doesn't assess FRSs directly against these standards.

The National Fire Chiefs Council is promoting values and culture

The [National Fire Chief Council's \(NFCC\) people programme](#) is committed to making sure that the public has the most capable FRSs and that their cultural values and behaviours make them great places to work. As the [NFCC](#) is a strategic organisation, it is the responsibility of the leaders in each service to implement NFCC guidance.

The programme's work includes promoting equality, diversity and inclusion in FRSs, highlighting the values of their services and encouraging open, flexible and inclusive cultures. It does this by working with FRS employers, the workforce and trade unions to identify and promote best practice.

The NFCC's people programme is in its second phase. It is focusing on cultural reform and strengthening leadership, including working on diversity and recruitment.

The NFCC produces tools and guidance for FRSs to use and has started to map the Fire Standards Board's standards against the programme.

A key development has been the introduction of the Core Code of Ethics. The code was developed by the Fire Standards Board in partnership with the NFCC, the [Association of Police and Crime Commissioners](#) and the [Local Government Association](#), in response to our recommendation in the [2019 State of Fire Report](#). The Fire Standards Board published the code in May 2021.

The code sets out five ethical principles:

- putting communities first
- integrity
- dignity and respect
- leadership
- equality, diversity and inclusion.

The NFCC suggested that services use the Core Code of Ethics to carry out a gap analysis of their existing behavioural frameworks, values, and cultural approaches, and to make sure that the principles of the code are incorporated into them. Everyone in every FRS in England is expected to follow the code.

Most services are adopting the Core Code of Ethics

In our Round 2 inspections, we found most services are adopting the Core Code of Ethics, though to varying degrees.

One service has incorporated the Core Code of Ethics into its own 'code of ethical conduct', which has been signed by all staff. And members of the senior leadership team have signed up to a 'senior code'. The service has also laid out a set of behavioural expectations in its initiatives 'a customer promise' and 'a promise to each other'. We saw during our inspection that these initiatives have worked well. Staff gave us positive accounts, such as people being respectful of each other and feeling looked after by the service.

Another service has a workplace charter that incorporates the Core Code of Ethics. It sets out the standards of behaviour expected in the service. It was evident throughout our last inspection that there was a positive culture in the organisation. Senior leaders have a clear plan for the service. All staff understand that having a positive culture is a service priority. Positive behaviours are firmly in place, accepted, carried out and understood across the whole organisation.

In our Round 3 inspections, we hope to continue to see services taking the implementation of the code seriously.

Recommendation 34

With immediate effect, chief fire officers should review their implementation of the [Core Code of Ethics](#) and make sure it is being applied across their services.

The Fire and Rescue National Framework for England should be strengthened

The [Fire and Rescue National Framework for England](#) is prepared by the Secretary of State. It sets out guidance and priorities that fire and rescue authorities must comply with. The Government has a duty under the [Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004](#) to produce the framework and keep it current.

Recommendation 35

By the end of this Parliament, the Government should consider the findings and recommendations in this report when refreshing the [Fire and Rescue National Framework for England](#).

Conclusion

Implementing the recommendations in this report is crucial for change

Some services have improved since our first round of inspections. And national efforts, including the [Core Code of Ethics](#), have certainly helped bring the issue of poor cultures in fire and rescue services (FRSs) into focus. We also understand that many people working in FRSs have made a significant effort to improve their values, culture and diversity. But the findings from our most recent inspections have shown that a great deal more work is needed to improve values and culture. Even some services that are good in this area have more to do. This isn't a time to be complacent.

The recommendations in this report are designed to guide the relevant individuals and organisations in the right direction. But they are the minimum of work that we expect those involved to carry out. Services and national organisations should continuously consider what more they can do to improve values and culture in FRSs.

Some changes may take time, but for others, there is no reason why they can't be implemented immediately. A joint, concerted effort is needed by every single person and organisation at every level of the fire and rescue sector and those aligned to it. Every single person working in an FRS, and every member of the public, deserves to be treated with respect and compassion.

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Wendy Williams CBE
His Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary
His Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue
Services

Sent by email:

Chief Fire Officer/ Chief Executive Simon Shilton
Avon Fire and Rescue Service

8 March 2024

Dear Simon,

Follow up revisit

It was good meeting with you on 4 March 2024. I am writing to update you about our next steps on the causes of concern which we found during your service's inspection in summer 2023.

We intend to conduct two revisits of your service to follow up on the causes of concern and assess the progress you have made. The revisits will take place on the following dates;

- 19 and 20 March 2024 (virtual revisit to review progress against the mobilising system only); and
- week commencing 2 September 2024 (on site) and week commencing 9 September 2024 (virtual) to explore the remaining causes of concern.

We will take a flexible approach to the revisit timetable. Our SLL Amerpal Sidhu will work with your SLO to programme activity around these commitments. The programme will include a limited number of interviews, focus groups, reality testing, desktop reviews, document reviews and a further review of your action plan.

The revisit will conclude with a debrief session with you by the chief of staff, Jo Hayden, to update you on the findings. After the visit we will write to confirm our findings. As with our previous letters, this will be published on our website.

If you have any questions about the revisit, please discuss these with Amerpal Sidhu Amerpal.sidhu@hmicfrs.gov.uk who will be able to help.

Yours sincerely,



Wendy Williams CBE
His Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary
His Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

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AVON FIRE AUTHORITY

MEETING:	Policy and Resources Committee
MEETING DATE:	Thursday, 18 April 2024
REPORT OF:	Statutory Finance Officer
SUBJECT:	2023/24 Capital Programme Update as at 29 February 2024

1. **SUMMARY**

This report provides an update on spend against the Capital Programme for 2023/24.

2. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

2.1 The Committee is asked to:

- a) Note the 2023/24 current Capital spend position and to consider the updates provided to gain assurance on the 3-year approved Capital Programme.

3. **BACKGROUND**

3.1 The Capital Programme approved for 2023/24, including adjustments for the final 2022/23 carry over, is £6.332m. An adjustment of £350k to Fleet to take account of reprofiled (pulled forward) costs and additional equipment costs approved from capital receipts from disposal, has increased this to £6.702m as reflected in **Appendix 1**.

3.2 The updated 3-year Capital Programme is shown in **Appendix 2**, demonstrating the net-nil impact of the £370k pull forwards on the Fleet line, with the total Capital Programme of at £12.477m across the three years.

4. **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 The updated Capital Programme, year-to-date spend and forecast for the full year are detailed in **Appendix 1**, and the full Capital Programme is detailed in **Appendix 2**.

5. Key Considerations

Year-to-date Capital Spend

Premises

- 5.1 As at 29 February 2024 £2,528k has been spent on capital projects relating to Premises. £1,960k of this relates to the Bedminster projects works and the remainder relates to various small works within the Premises ongoing maintenance plan. The forecast spend for 2023/24 for Premises is expected to be £2,766k with costs of £695k relating to Bedminster being carried over into the next financial year as a result of changes in the payment schedule for this project.

Fleet

- 5.2 Fleet spend as at 29 February 2024 is at £1,800k relating to planned payments due on Type B appliances plus some additional equipment relating to these appliances and the purchase of the replacement Pioneer boat. Because of the additional spend in 2023/24 some additional funding has been brought forward from the 2024/25 capital programme to cover this reprofiling, giving an overall Fleet budget of £1,800k for 2023/24 which has now been spent in full.

Other spend

- 5.3 There has been a spend of £119k on operational equipment in line with the updated capital programme. £172k has been spent on MDTs (Mobile Data Terminals) against the Transformation budget as agreed and there has been a spend of £115k on ICT capital which is made up of hardware purchased to support infrastructure developments. The underspends in these areas will not be carried forward into future years and are not a result of rephasing of projects.
- 5.4 Control spend of £189k relates to the radio replacements approved by the Service Leadership Team in September against the 2023/24 Control capital allocation. The underspend on Control is as a result of rephasing of the Control projects which were allocated funding so the underspend is accounted for in the revised Capital Programme.

Capital Programme in Future Years

- 5.5 As per **Appendix 2**, Prudential Borrowing is currently expected to be required to fund the Capital Programme from 2024/25 onwards. The updated Capital Programme was presented at the Fire Authority meeting on 20 March 2024 for approval.
- 5.6 There are several significant upcoming capital projects, for example Bath and Weston redevelopments. Neither of these projects are included within the

current Capital Programme at **Appendix 2**, but do form part of the updated Programme. Both will involve significant spend and increase the requirement to seek external borrowing to fund the Programme. The Mobilisation Upgrade required within Control is also over and above the current Capital Programme allocation and will have a similar impact.

- 5.7 Prudential borrowing will have a twofold impact on the revenue budget, both in terms of servicing the debt with interest payments, and the statutory requirement to contribute to the repayment of capital in the form of the Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP). This has been considered whilst compiling the revised Capital Programme and will be an added pressure for the Service when balancing the budgets in future years and has been taken into account when preparing the Medium-Term Financial Plan, presented to the Fire Authority on 20 March 2024.

6. RISKS

- 6.1 This report primarily relates to CR20 (Funding and Resource Pressures), CR17 (Building Asset Condition & Physical Security) for the Premises programmes, CR19 (Change and Transformation) and CR13 (Loss of IT Systems) for the ICT programme.

7. LEGAL / POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 None.

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- a) AFA report: 17.02.2023 (Paper 6)
[Agenda for Avon Fire Authority on Friday, 17th February, 2023, 10.30 am - Modern Council \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#)
- b) PRC report: 13.12.2023 (Paper 10)
[Agenda for Policy and Resources Committee on Wednesday, 13th December, 2023, 11.30 am - Modern Council \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#)
- c) AFA Report: 20.03.2024 (Paper 11)
[Agenda for Avon Fire Authority on Wednesday, 20th March, 2024, 2.00 pm - Modern Council \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#)

9. APPENDICES

1. 2023/24 Updated Capital Programme
2. Approved Capital Programme 2023/24 – 2025/26

10. REPORT CONTACT

Verity Lee, Statutory Finance Officer, ext. 266
Claire Bentley, Head of Finance, ext. 235

2023-24 Capital Financial Summary

Funding and Expenditure	Approved 2023-24 Programme £'000	Reprofiling/ adjustments £'000	Updated 2023-24 Programme £'000	Actual Expenditure (Apr 2023 - Feb 2024) £'000	Forecast Expenditure (Apr 2023 - Mar 2024) £'000	Forecast Variance (Apr 2023 - Mar 2024) £'000	Director Lead
Capital Reserve	6,182	367	6,545	4,766	5,040	-1,505	
Capital Receipt from house sale	125	-125	0			0	
Capital Receipt from fleet disposals	25	128	157	157	157	0	
Prudential borrowing			0			0	
Total Funding	6,332	370	6,702	4,923	5,197	-1,505	0
Premises	3,461		3,461	2,528	2,766	-695	Angela Feeney
Fleet	1,450	350	1,800	1,800	1,800	0	Richard Welch
Control	450		450	189	189	-261	Steve Imrie
ICT	300		300	115	150	-150	Angela Feeney
Transformation	571		571	172	172	-399	Simon Shilton
Operational Equipment	100	20	120	119	120	0	Richard Welch
Total Expenditure	6,332	370	6,702	4,923	5,197	-1,505	0

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POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE**Approved Capital Programme 2023/24 to 2025/26**

Funding and Expenditure	Approved 2023/24 Programme £'000	2023/24 Brought Forward Amendments £'000	Revised 2023/24 Programme £'000	2024/25 Programme £'000	2025/26 Programme £'000	Total Programme £'000	Director Lead
Capital Receipts (from sale of HQ)	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Capital Receipt from house sale	125	-125	0	125	0	125	
Capital Receipt from fleet disposals	25	0	45	25	25	95	
Capital Reserve	6,181	126	6,657	2,772	0	9,429	
Prudential borrowing	0	0	0	165	2,663	2,828	
Total Funding	6,331	1	6,702	3,087	2,688	12,477	
Premises	3,176	285	3,461	688	1038	5,187	Angela Feeney
Operational Equipment	100	0	120	100	100	320	Richard Welch
Fleet	1,834	-384	1,800	1,749	1,000	4,549	Richard Welch
ICT	300	0	300	300	300	900	Angela Feeney
Transformation	471	100	571	0	0	571	Simon Shilton
Control	450	0	450	250	250	950	Steve Imrie
Total Expenditure	6,331	1	6,702	3,087	2,688	12,477	

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AVON FIRE AUTHORITY

MEETING:	Policy and Resources Committee
MEETING DATE:	Thursday, 18 April 2024
REPORT OF:	Statutory Finance Officer
SUBJECT:	2023/24 Revenue Budget Monitoring Report as at 29 February 2024

1. **SUMMARY**

This report provides an updated revenue monitoring report for the current financial year, based upon spending to the end of February 2024.

2. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

2.1 The Committee is asked to:

a) Note the forecast spending position against the 2023/24 Revenue Budget.

3. **BACKGROUND**

3.1 The 2023/24 net revenue budget was approved at the Fire Authority meeting in February 2023. It is important that the Authority and the relevant committees receive regular budget monitoring reports which provide a forecast of spending against this budget.

3.2 This report provides forecasts of spending against each agreed budget heading based upon actual spending to the end of February 2024.

4. **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 This latest report forecasts that spending against the net revenue budget will be £141k underspent. This compares to the budgeted break-even position.

4.2 Forecasts of spending against each of the agreed budget lines are shown within **Appendix 1 and Appendix 2.**

5. KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Explanations of Significant Variations

Income

- 5.1 Income from Unitary Authorities is in line with budget overall. The updated figure for our Business Rates Relief grant has now been confirmed which has resulted in an over-recovery of £357k against the income from Central Government line, this now includes the final reconciliation adjustment notified in March 2024.
- 5.2 There has been additional investment income year to date resulting in a forecast of £292k over-recovery against this line. Other income is also showing a £338k over-recovery with some additional one-off income receipts in year including reconciling SWAST (South-West Ambulance Service Foundation Trust) income, additional training income to support apprenticeships, recharges and secondment income.
- 5.3 The combination of the above results in a forecast over-recovery on income of £987k for the year. This is being used to mitigate some over-spends in other areas of the budget, reducing the need to utilise reserves and contingency in year.

Employee Costs

- 5.4 Forecast employee costs now reflect both the previously agreed Grey Book pay award and the recently approved Green and Gold Book awards which have been paid. The Green Book pay award came within the allocated budget for this staff group, so no use of contingency has been required to cover these costs.
- 5.5 There is currently an underspend on On-call firefighter pay costs of £355k as a result of lower-than-expected call outs for this staff group. The Corporate staff budget is currently showing a forecast overspend of £552k due to additional staff posts created to support work in key areas such as the Improvement and SSRI teams and dedicated resources relating to the HMICFRS work that is being undertaken. These costs have been mitigated by underspends and over-recovery of income so although reserves have been allocated to support these projects they have not currently been transferred into the position and can be retained in reserves to support future investment.
- 5.6 The Chief Executive Office and Fire Authority costs are over budget as a result of an increased pay award backdated for 2022/23, as well as the January 2024 pay award, and additional costs relating to changes in staff and hours worked.

- 5.7 The Transformation team budget line has now been amended to reflect the expected costs for the Service Improvement team, so this line is showing an overspend of £141k.
- 5.8 There has been an increase of £347k in pension costs as a result of an additional payment to mitigate the impact of the LGPS (Local Government Pension Scheme) contribution deficit in year of £368k mitigated by slightly lower than expected additional ill-health retirement costs in year. The payment of £368k was unbudgeted due to the timing of the receipt of the information, but is part of a three-year payment profile, with similar payments required in 2024/25 and 2025/26. By paying this additional cost in year the Service will mitigate the impact of future pension contribution deficits and reduce overall costs, this is in line with previous adjustments based on pension revaluations and has been reflected in the 2024/25 Revenue Budget and Medium-Term Financial Plan.

Premises Costs

- 5.9 It is forecast that net spending against premises costs will reflect an overspend of £169k. This is largely as a result of increased business rates costs which are higher than expected and additional rent payments on the HQ site for capital improvements which have been made in year.

Transport Costs

- 5.10 It is forecast that net spending against transport costs will reflect an underspend of -£121k, mainly as a result of reductions in workshop maintenance costs.

Supplies and Services

- 5.11 It is forecast that net spending against supplies and services costs will reflect an underspend of -£432k as a result of additional costs relating to our work on actions within the HMICFRS Spotlight Report and an increase in legal costs, mitigated by a one-off benefit of stock recognition in the Stores department of -£325k and lower than expected training costs overall. This has meant that although a reserve has been earmarked to cover both the HMICFRS work and legal costs, based on the current view, those reserves are not expected to be utilised within this financial year.

Other Costs

- 5.12 It is forecast that net spending against other costs will be £500k overspent because of our intention to contribute £500k from revenue to capital reserves utilising the current forecast over-recovery on income through an adjustment to the 2023/24 budgets. This contribution will help to delay the requirement to pursue external borrowing to fund the Capital Programme in future years.

Future Years

- 5.13 The Service is currently in a fortunate position for the delivery of the 2023/24 budget and needs to ensure that any underspends are utilised effectively to assist in ensuring a balanced budget and delivery of the Capital Programme in future years. The current forecast for 2023/24 shows an overall underspend position of -£141k, with an assumed £500k contribution towards capital reserves already taken into account. Despite this, with funding settlements still uncertain and increasing employee costs and inflation, savings are still expected to be required to balance the budget in future years.

6. RISKS

- 6.1 This report primarily relates to Corporate Risk 20 (Funding and Resource Pressure Risk), within the Corporate Risk Register. This risk has been minimised due to the effective budget management of revenue budgets throughout 2023/24.

7. LEGAL / POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 None

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- a) AFA Paper: 17.02.2023 (Paper 7)
[Agenda for Avon Fire Authority on Friday, 17th February, 2023, 10.30 am - Modern Council \(modern.gov.co.uk\)](#)
- b) PRC Paper: 13.12.2023 (Paper 11)
[Agenda for Avon Fire Authority on Wednesday, 13th December, 2023, 2.00 pm - Modern Council \(modern.gov.co.uk\)](#)

9. APPENDICES

1. Revenue Financial Summary – 1 April 2023 to 29 February 2024
2. Detailed Revenue Financial Summary – 1 April 2023 to 29 February 2024

10. REPORT CONTACT

Verity Lee, Statutory Finance Officer, ext. 266
Claire Bentley, Head of Finance, ext. 235

POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE**Revenue Summary - 1st April 2023 to 29th February 2024**

Income and Expenditure	2023/24 Original Annual Budget £'000	2023/24 Revised Annual Budget £'000	Movement on Annual Budget £'000	2023/24 Forecast Expenditure £'000	2023/24 Forecast Variance £'000
Income from Councils	-36,858	-36,858	0	-36,858	0
Income from Central Government	-18,504	-18,908	-403	-19,265	-357
Investment Income	-200	-200	0	-492	-292
Other Income	-60	-60	0	-398	-338
Total Income	-55,622	-56,025	-403	-57,013	-987
Employees	42,792	43,156	364	43,885	729
Premises	2,820	2,820	0	2,989	169
Transport	1,480	1,480	0	1,360	-121
Supplies and Services	7,756	7,936	180	7,504	-432
Investment Fund	242	0	-242	0	0
Capital Financing Costs	741	741	0	741	0
Contingency	391	391	0	391	0
Revenue Contribution to Capital	0	0	0	500	500
Reserve Transfers	-600	-499	101	-499	0
Total Expenditure	55,622	56,025	403	56,872	846
TOTAL UNDERSPEND/OVERSPEND					-141

Note: A minus refers to Income budgets and denotes an underspend

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Appendix 2**POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE****Detailed Revenue Financial Summary - 1st April 2023 to 29th February 2024**

Income and Expenditure	2023/24 Original Annual Budget	2023/24 Revised Annual Budget	Movement on Annual Budget	2023/24 Forecast Expenditure	2023/24 Forecast Variance
	£000s	£000s	£000s	£000s	£000s

SECTION A: INCOME:

Income from Councils	-36,858	-36,858	0	-36,858	0
Income from Central Government	-18,504	-18,908	-403	-19,265	-357
Investment Income	-200	-200	0	-492	-292
Other Income	-60	-60	0	-398	-338
TOTAL INCOME	-55,622	-56,025	-403	-57,013	-987

SECTION B: EXPENDITURE:**1. EMPLOYEE COSTS**

Full-time Firefighters	27,523	27,347	-176	27,245	-102
Retained Firefighters	3,165	3,165	0	2,810	-355
Auxiliary Firefighters	80	80	0	15	-65
Control Room Staff	2,023	2,023	0	2,090	68
Corporate staff	6,728	7,246	518	7,798	552
Fire Authority and Chief Executive Office	1,098	1,098	0	1,200	102
Service Improvement Team	458	480	22	621	141
Ill Health Retirement Pension Costs	1,607	1,607	0	1,954	347
Other employee costs - Inc Relocation, Medical Intervention, CRB Checks, Long Service Gratuities	110	110	0	151	41
	42,792	43,156	364	43,885	729

2. PREMISES COSTS

Property Repairs, Fees and Security	844	844	0	864	19
Rent and Rates	948	948	0	1,076	128
Cleaning and refuse	279	279	0	347	68
Utilities	687	687	0	636	-51
Property Insurance	62	62	0	66	4
	2,820	2,820	0	2,989	169

3. TRANSPORT COSTS

Vehicle maintenance, fuel, tyres and testing	1,045	1,045	0	925	-120
Vehicle hire	10	10	0	9	-1
Travel costs, inc subsistence & public transport	26	26	0	24	-3
Insurance - Vehicles	180	180	0	182	2
Car Allowances	220	220	0	221	1
	1,480	1,480	0	1,360	-121

4. SUPPLIES AND SERVICES

Equipment and supplies	1,281	1,281	0	838	-442
Fees and Services	1,623	1,803	180	1,969	166
Communications & ICT	3,102	3,102	0	3,102	0
Expenses and allowances	68	68	0	97	29
Scrap Cars & Extrication Challenge	53	53	0	50	-3
Training Costs	758	758	0	637	-121
Other supplies and services	871	871	0	811	-60
	7,756	7,936	180	7,504	-432

5. OTHER COSTS

Investment Fund	242	-	242	-	-
Capital Financing Costs	741	741	-	741	-
Contingency	391	391	-	391	-
Revenue Contribution to Capital	-	-	-	500	500
Transfers to/from Reserves	- 600	- 499	101	- 499	-
	774	633	-141	1,133	500

TOTAL EXPENDITURE	55,622	56,025	403	56,872	847
TOTAL UNDERSPEND / OVERSPEND				-141	-141

Note: A minus refers to Income budgets and denotes an underspend

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Procurement	Category	Status	Approval To Proceed Date	Approval to Proceed By	Award date
ISDN/PSTN	ICT	In progress	Dec-23	SLB	
Hovercraft + Vehicle	Fleet	Business Case Development			
Payroll Services	Professional Services	In progress			
Financial Services	Professional Services	In progress			
Type B Appliances x 4	Fleet	Not Started			
Mobilising System (tech refresh)	Control Comms	In progress	Dec-23	PRC	
Cleaning Services	Construction & FM	In progress		PRC	
Fuel for Appliances/Bulk Fuel	Fleet	In progress			
Drainage	Construction & FM	Not Started			
Bath Redevelopment/Build	Construction & FM	Not Started			
Rescue Pumps x 4	Fleet	Not Started			
Hydraulic Cutting Equipment	Ops Equipment	Not Started			
Weston Station Refurb	Construction & FM	Not Started			

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