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Statement of Assurance 2022/2023

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Although Fire and Rescue Services in England are run by local government bodies, the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 requires that local fire and rescue authorities must have regard to direction from central government. This direction, issued in the form of a 'National Framework', sets out the Government's strategic aims and requirements for Fire and Rescue Services in England. The most recent National Framework was published in May 2018. This maintained the requirement, introduced by Government in 2012, that every authority must publish an annual statement of assurance of compliance with the Framework that:

“should outline the way in which the authority and its fire and rescue service has had regard – in the period covered by the document – to this National Framework, the Integrated Risk Management Plan and to any strategic plan... prepared by the authority for that period. The authority must also provide assurance to their community and to government on financial, governance and operational matters”.

- 1.2 The purpose of this document is to provide the public and Government with assurance that Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority ('The Authority') met the requirements set out in the National Framework and accompanying Government guidance¹ during the 2022/23 financial year.
- 1.3 Where relevant, the document draws on, consolidates and summarises the findings of existing assurance processes relating to financial, governance and operational matters that were set up to meet other statutory and regulatory requirements of fire and rescue authorities.
- 1.4 During the year, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) carried out a revisit to review progress in relation to 'causes of concern' raised following its second formal inspection of the Service in 2021. An overview of the findings from this revisit is set out at section 6 of this document.

¹ 'Guidance on Statements of assurance for fire and rescue authorities in England, Department for Communities and Local Government, May 2013.

2. FINANCIAL ASSURANCE

- 2.1 It is a statutory requirement under the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 for authorities to publish the financial results of their activities for the year. This 'Statement of Accounts', shows the annual costs of providing the Service and is determined by a Code of Practice which aims to give a "true and fair" view of the financial position and transactions of the authority.
- 2.2 The financial statements are required to be audited under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014. The auditors are responsible for:
- forming an opinion on the financial statements;
 - reviewing the Annual Governance Statement;
 - forming a conclusion on the arrangements that the Authority has in place to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.

At the time the Statement of Assurance for the 2021/22 financial year was published, there had been a delay to the audit of the annual financial statements for the year ending 31 March 2022. The audited accounts were subsequently adopted by the Authority at the 8 November 2023 Overview and Audit Committee:

[9overview-and-audit-committee-8-november-2023-item-12-adoption-of-the-audited-statement-of-accounts.pdf \(bucksfire.gov.uk\)](#)

The delay to the audit of the 2021/22 Statement of Accounts had a consequential impact on the preparation of the 2022/23 Statement of Accounts and these were subsequently published on 20 March 2024:

[https://bucksfire.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Statement_of_Accounts_2022-23-unaudited.pdf](#)

- 2.3 Regarding the requirement to consider whether the Authority has put in place 'proper arrangements' to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources – known as the 'value for money conclusion' - the auditors, will assess this within their Audit Planning Report. Previous reports did not identify any risks of significant weaknesses against the three reporting criteria of financial sustainability, governance and improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness, and there is no reason to expect this will be any different when the value for money opinion is provided for the

2022/23 financial year. The most recently published Audit Results Report for the Year ended 31 March 2022 is available here:

[6overview-and-audit-committee-8-november-2023-item-10-audit-results-report.pdf](https://www.bucksfire.gov.uk/6overview-and-audit-committee-8-november-2023-item-10-audit-results-report.pdf)
([bucksfire.gov.uk](https://www.bucksfire.gov.uk))

The detailed results and conclusions from the appointed external auditors audit process would normally be expected to be published within the Audit Results Report for the year ended 31 March 2023. However, due to the systemic local government audit issues mentioned earlier, it is unlikely that report will contain much, if any, further detail.

- 2.4 The Authority is required to report annually on progress against the financial strategy 2020/21-2024/25 which was approved by the Fire Authority in December 2020. The financial strategy is the link between the organisation's long-term service objectives and its financial capacity. It also helps organisations to consider the feasibility of different options in terms of affordability and financial sustainability. An update on progress made during the second year of the strategy was provided to the Fire Authority Executive Committee in July 2023 (see Agenda Item 11 at pages 47-74):
([Public Pack](https://www.bucksfire.gov.uk/Public%20Pack%20Agenda%20Document%20for%20BMKFA%20Executive%20Committee%2012%2F07%2F2023%2010%3A00))[Agenda Document for BMKFA Executive Committee, 12/07/2023 10:00](https://www.bucksfire.gov.uk/Public%20Pack%20Agenda%20Document%20for%20BMKFA%20Executive%20Committee%2012%2F07%2F2023%2010%3A00)
([bucksfire.gov.uk](https://www.bucksfire.gov.uk))
- 2.5 The Authority's internal auditors also produce an annual report on the internal control environment. In this report, the Chief Internal Auditor stated that:
- "The results of the audit work undertaken, when combined with our experience and knowledge of previous years' performance and the current climate in which the Authority is operating, form the basis for the overall opinion. As such, in my opinion the system of internal control provides **reasonable assurance** regarding the effective, efficient and economic exercise of the Authority's functions. The work undertaken during 2022/23 has identified areas that require further improvements to ensure that the internal control framework remains adequate and effective. Findings raised from the 2022/23 internal audit reviews have not identified any material weaknesses. Overall, the Fire Authority has continued to demonstrate a robust and effective internal control and risk management environment."*

The full internal audit report containing the Internal Auditors opinion can be viewed via the following hyperlink:

[2022-23-annual-audit-report.pdf](https://bucksfire.gov.uk/2022-23-annual-audit-report.pdf)
(bucksfire.gov.uk)

- 2.6 In addition to the statutory requirement to publish annual financial results, the government is committed to increasing transparency across local authorities. One of the steps in this process is for the publication online of information relating to spend items in excess of £500. In accordance with that requirement, the Authority is publishing monthly schedules of payments, which can be found on our website:
<https://bucksfire.gov.uk/authority/financial-transparency/>

3. GOVERNANCE

- 3.1 The Authority is responsible for maintaining a sound system of internal control that supports the achievement of its policies, aims and objectives whilst safeguarding public money and organisational assets. There is also a requirement to ensure that the Authority is administered prudently and economically and that resources are used efficiently and effectively and that sound arrangements are in place for the identification and management of risks.
- 3.2 The Authority's approach to governance is based on the seven core principles of good governance set out in the CIPFA / SOLACE Framework for Delivering Good Governance in Local Government (2016):

Principle A Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law.

Principle B Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement.

Principle C Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social, and environmental benefits.

Principle D Determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of the intended outcomes.

Principle E Developing the entity's capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it.

Principle F Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management.

Principle G Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting, and audit to deliver effective accountability.

- 3.3 There is already a statutory requirement for the Authority to produce an annual governance statement to demonstrate and evidence that it operates an effective system of internal control. The internal control systems underlying the annual governance statement are assessed by Internal Audit to ensure that they are adequate and effective so that:
- The Authority can establish the extent to which they can rely on the whole system; and,
 - Individual managers can establish the reliability of the systems and controls for which they are responsible.
- 3.4 Details of the Authority's governance arrangements and the internal auditor's findings in relation to these (summarised at paragraph 2.5 above) can be found in the Annual Governance Statement 2022/2023:
[6overview-and-audit-committee-19-july-2023-item-13-annual-governance-statement-2022-23.pdf \(bucksfire.gov.uk\)](#)
- 3.5 The Annual Governance Statement also confirms that the Authority met its statutory obligation to review its Pay Policy Statement annually. This sets out its policies on the remuneration of its chief officers, the remuneration of its lowest paid employees and the relationship between the remuneration of its chief officers and the remuneration of its employees who are not chief officers. This was approved and adopted by the Authority at its February 2023 meeting, and can be viewed via the following link to the Authority's website:
[6fire-authority-meeting-15-february-2023-item-10-pay-policy-principles-2023-24.pdf \(bucksfire.gov.uk\)](#)

4. OPERATIONAL ASSURANCE

- 4.1 The Government requires Fire Authorities to provide assurance that they meet the requirements arising out of the legislative and policy framework for fire and rescue services. In particular:
- Details of specific events that raise issues of operational competence or delivery such as advice received under health and safety or other legislation together with assurance that these matters have been considered and, where appropriate, acted on;
 - That integrated risk management plans are consulted on and that during the consultations appropriate information was provided to enable active and informed participation;
 - Details of any agreements and / or mutual aid arrangements with other relevant bodies such as neighbouring fire and rescue services.

Statutory Duties and Operational Effectiveness

Fire and rescue authorities operate within in a clearly defined legislative and policy framework comprising of:

- The Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004;
 - The Civil Contingencies Act 2004;
 - The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005;
 - The Fire and Rescue Services (Emergencies) (England) Order 2007;
 - The Localism Act 2011;
 - The Fire and Rescue National Framework for England;
 - Policing and Crime Act 2017.
- 4.2 The Service has well established internal structures and processes for assuring its operational effectiveness. A dedicated Operational Assurance Team (OAT) monitor and review performance at operational incidents as well as coordinate any information that is shared through National Operational Learning (NOL), Joint Organisational Learning (JOL) through the Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles (JESIP) as well as relevant findings from HMICFRS inspections. An Operational Assurance Improvement Plan (OAIP) captures and prioritises any recommended changes to processes, practices and procedures. The work of the OAT and

the OAIP is overseen by the Operational Assurance Group comprised of Service officers. Progress in relation to the OAIP is reviewed by the Performance Monitoring and Strategic Management Boards and also reported to the Fire Authority's Overview and Audit Committee on a regular basis (for example, see agenda item 12 at pages 105 -126):

[\(Public Pack\)Agenda Document for BMKFA Overview & Audit Committee, 09/11/2022 10:00 \(bucksfire.gov.uk\)](#)

4.3 The Operational Assurance Team have arrangements in place to ensure close alignment of process with partner Services in the Thames Valley. The Service are also represented in the South East regional operational learning group.

4.4 Independent, external assurance of the Service's operational performance is now provided by HMICFRS as part of their inspection framework.

5. INTEGRATED RISK MANAGEMENT PLANNING

5.1 The National Framework requires that Fire Authorities must produce an Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) that identifies and assesses all foreseeable fire and rescue related risks that could affect its community, including those of a cross-border, multi-authority and / or national nature. The plan must have regard to the community risk registers produced by Local Resilience Forums and any other local risk analyses as appropriate. Each fire and rescue authority integrated IRMP must:

- be easily accessible and publicly available; and,
- reflect effective consultation throughout its development and at all review stages with the community, its workforce and representative bodies, and partners.

5.2 The Government guidance relating to statements of assurance requires that they should include details of IRMP consultations and, in particular, that appropriate information was provided to enable active and informed participation.

5.3 Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority regularly reviews the fire and rescue related risks to the community it serves and updates its

IRMP in response to any material changes to the nature and level of the risks identified and assessed.

- 5.4 The Authority's current IRMP, known as the '2020-25 Public Safety Plan', is published on its website. This sets out the Authority's strategy for achieving its vision of making *'Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes the safest areas in England in which to live, work and travel'*:
[Public Safety Plan - Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service \(bucksfire.gov.uk\)](https://www.bucksfire.gov.uk/public-safety-plan)

- 5.5 The plan was approved by Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority on 12 February 2020 following the outcomes of a public consultation which took place between 23 September and 18 November 2019. The consultation process embraced key stakeholder groups including the general public, Authority staff, neighbouring fire and rescue services and a range of other organisations with a potential interest in the development of the plan. It also included the use of qualitative consultation methods via focus groups which encourage participants to reflect in depth about their priorities for the Authority while both receiving and questioning background information and discussing service delivery issues in detail. Full details of the consultation process and its outcomes are available on the Authority's website (see pages 107-226 of linked document):
[Public Pack\)Agenda Document for BMKFA Executive Committee, 05/02/2020 10:00 \(bucksfire.gov.uk\)](https://www.bucksfire.gov.uk/public-pack-agenda-document-for-bmkfa-executive-committee-05-02-2020-10-00)

In December 2022, the Service's plan for developing the next IRMP, which will cover the period 2025-30, was presented to the Fire Authority. The new plan will be aligned to the Fire Standard for Community Risk Management Planning (CRMP) and henceforth be known by that name (see page 57 – 70 of the linked document):
[Public Pack\)Agenda Document for Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority, 07/12/2022 11:00 \(bucksfire.gov.uk\)](https://www.bucksfire.gov.uk/public-pack-agenda-document-for-buckinghamshire-milton-keynes-fire-authority-07-12-2022-11-00)

The Authority has also established a framework of key performance indicators and measures to help it assess progress towards the achievement of its vision. Performance in relation to these is reported to the Authority's Overview and Audit Committee on a regular basis whose role is to scrutinise any areas of under-performance together with proposals for corrective action. A report on performance outcomes for

2022/23 against the framework of indicators and measures can be viewed on the Authority's website by following this link:

[14overview-and-audit-committee-8-november-2023-item-16-performance-monitoring-report.pdf \(bucksfire.gov.uk\)](https://www.bucksfire.gov.uk/14overview-and-audit-committee-8-november-2023-item-16-performance-monitoring-report.pdf)

6. HMICFRS INSPECTION

The HMICFRS published the findings from its second formal inspection of the Service on 15 December 2021:

<https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/publications/frs-assessment-2021-22-buckinghamshire/>

The report found that the Service required improvement across the three inspection 'pillars' of effectiveness, efficiency and people. It also identified 22 areas for improvement, and two causes of concern, accompanied by eight recommendations. Additionally, the previous cause of concern arising from the first round of inspections in relation to the Service's financial position at the time, was closed. Also, the work undertaken to address key areas from the last report against the context of a global pandemic and only a short period since the first inspection was acknowledged:

'Since there was a gap of only 18 months between our first and latest inspections and much of the intervening time was overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it isn't surprising that many of our findings are like those in our first report. The Service has worked hard to address the cause of concern from our 2019 inspection about whether its resources can meet its unique model of operational response. It has increased its capacity to meet its public safety plan and so this cause of concern has been closed.'

Further details of the two new causes of concern, relating to prevention activity and equality diversity and inclusion, together with the Service's response to these and approach to addressing them, are available to view via the following link (see pages 103 – 160):

[16/02/2022 11:00 \(bucksfire.gov.uk\)](https://www.bucksfire.gov.uk/16/02/2022%2011:00)

In January 2023, the HMICFRS revisited the Service to ascertain progress made in relation to the Causes of Concern. The findings from this together with an internal review of progress with the Service's HMICFRS Action Plan to address the full findings from the 2021 inspection can be viewed here:

[9overview-and-audit-committee-meeting-15-march-2023-item-12-hmicfrs-bfrs-improvement-plan-update-march-2023.pdf \(bucksfire.gov.uk\)](https://www.bucksfire.gov.uk/9overview-and-audit-committee-meeting-15-march-2023-item-12-hmicfrs-bfrs-improvement-plan-update-march-2023.pdf)

7. MUTUAL AID, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL RESILIENCE

7.1 The National Framework requires fire authorities to consider risks of a cross-border, multi-authority and / or national nature and to make appropriate provision for dealing with these. The Authority does this via:

- Its active participation in the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum which comprises other Category 1 and 2 responders. The forum maintains a community risk register which the Authority considers as part of its integrated risk management planning process;
- Review of the National Risk Register, National Risk Assessment and National Resilience Planning Assumptions which are maintained by the UK Government Cabinet Office to inform planning in relation to major civil emergencies of a national or regional nature;
- Mutual aid agreements with neighbouring fire and rescue authorities which enable authorities to provide each other with additional resources to deal with emergencies that cannot be dealt with by an authority acting alone. Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority maintains formal mutual aid agreements with all six of its neighbours – Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, London, Royal Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Northamptonshire.
- Working with South Central Ambulance Service (SCAS) to enhance the level of both medical and trauma care training delivered to operational frontline Firefighters, provide co-responding services to medical emergencies and allowing SCAS crews to use Authority premises.

7.2 The Authority maintains specialist assets to enable it to deal with major civil emergencies such as major transport incidents, natural disasters and terrorist incidents. The capabilities, which include Urban Search and Rescue (USAR), Detection, Identification & Monitoring Officers (DIM) and water rescue are available on a local, regional and national scale, and have been deployed in support of other Authorities during major emergencies. The Authority's USAR and water rescue assets are included on the National Asset Register. The National Asset DIM capability is overseen by Oxfordshire FRS, with support from specially trained officers from across the three Thames Valley FRS's.

- 7.3 The Authority has an established a team of National Inter-Agency Liaison Officers (NILO) who are trained and qualified officers who can advise and support FRS Incident Commanders, police, medical, military and other government agencies on the FRS's operational capacity and capability to reduce risk and safety resolve incidents at which an FRS attendance may be required.
- 7.4 The Authority collaborates with all the other South-East Fire and Rescue Services to jointly fund the post of a NILO who is seconded to the Counter Terrorism Policing South East (CTPSE). This post acts as a focal point for advice to and from the unit.
- 7.5 As a Category 1 responder as defined in the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, business continuity is a high priority for Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority. This includes a number of employees who work on flexible resilience contracts. These contracts ensure the Authority maintains availability of local, regional and national assets during the full range of foreseeable business continuity events.
- 7.6 The Service maintains a team of trained USAR technicians at Aylesbury fire station who provide a local, regional and national response to major incidents in line with the USAR Concept of Operations. The team also provides a specialist rescue capability for major transport infrastructure and working at height risks.
- 7.7 The Service continues to work with other emergency services and responders thorough the adoption of the 'Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles (JESIP). This is supported and delivered by nominated Strategic, Training, and Joint Organisational Learning (JOL) leads.
- 7.8 Operational multi-agency exercises are routinely undertaken, utilising the fire-ground facilities at the Fire Service College, with learning captured during a facilitated debrief. The learning and best practice from exercises or incidents are considered for sharing with Joint Organisational Learning, to ensure that lessons identified are available to other responder agencies. All operational commanders, along with colleagues from the other Thames Valley fire & rescue services, Thames Valley Police and South-Central Ambulance, complete training that allows the opportunity to demonstrate and apply knowledge of

JESIP, utilising the Joint Decision Model (JDM) to help bring together available operational information, objectives, and decisions.

- 7.9 JESIP training activity is submitted every quarter to the JESIP team, via a self-assessment which provides assurance that JESIP is being embedded across the Service.
- 7.10 Since 3 April 2017 section 2 of the Policing and Crime Act 2017 has placed a duty on the Authority to keep opportunities for collaboration with the police and ambulance services under review. Where two or more of the emergency services consider it would be in the interests of their efficiency or effectiveness to collaborate, there then arises a duty to enter into a collaboration agreement.
- 7.11 A Thames Valley Emergency Services Collaboration Executive Board was established in 2017, comprised of the Chief Fire Officers from the Thames Valley Fire and Rescue Authorities, the Thames Valley Police Deputy Chief Constable and the Chief Executive from South Central Ambulance Service, as the forum to determine collaboration opportunities and enter collaboration agreements.
- 7.12 Following the move to a jointly funded Thames Valley Fire Control Service (TVFCS) in April 2015, the Authority has continued its commitment to collaboration through a Thames Valley Operational Alignment Programme. Amongst other things, the programme sets out to align:
 - 7.12.1 Operational Alignment - Equipment, procedures, training and practice across the region. The key benefits are improved interoperability, enhanced resilience, a reduction in cross border mobilisations and maximised Best Value through collaborative contract negotiation and joint procurement. An example is the jointly procured red fleet replacement, which has standardised the frontline fire appliances and equipment across the Thames Valley. More recently all three services have procured the same Breathing Apparatus set as part of a 10-year contract, these joint initiatives have and will continue to generate significant savings for the public purse;

7.12.2 Fire Investigation – in partnership with Thames Valley Police and the three Thames Valley fire services, we have developed and established a singular Tier 2 Fire Investigation team. This will ensure that all four agencies will comply with the new International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO)/ International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) 17020 - Accreditation for Fire Investigation standard, in a cost effective and efficient manner.

7.12.3 The months of July (16 - 19) and August (9 - 15) 2022, brought record high temperatures and dry weather. This included the 19 July 2022 when the UK recorded its highest ever temperature of 40.3°C (104.5°F). These conditions resulted in severe wildfire outbreaks across parts of England. Major incidents were declared by fifteen fire and rescue services including BFRS and neighbouring Services in London, Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire, as a result of the devastating outbreak of fires. Thames Valley Fire Control Service (TVFCS) received, and BFRS attended, an unprecedented number of calls, including many fires in the open / wildfires.

An initial evaluation of the Service's response to these incidents can be viewed here (see pages 73 – 80):

[\(Public Pack\)Agenda Document for Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority, 12/10/2022 11:00 \(bucksfire.gov.uk\)](#)

A further report containing more detailed learning from the incidents together with recommendations for enhancing the Service's capabilities for dealing with extreme incidents of this type was presented to the Fire Authority in June 2023:

[https://bucksfire.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/5fire-authority-annual-meeting-14-june-2023-item-18.pdf](#)

8. DECLARATION

Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority are satisfied that the financial, governance and operational assurance arrangements in place across the organisation meet the requirements set out in the National Framework.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Louise Harrison'.

Louise Harrison
Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. S. Carroll'.

Councillor David Carroll
Chairman, Overview and Audit Committee