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Statement of Assurance
2024/2025

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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 2024/25 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 In January 2025, after placing the Service into the 'Engage' process in 2023, HMICFRS conducted a revisit of the Service and on [7 March 2025 it announced](#) that it had decided to return the Service to its default phase of monitoring, which is known as Scan and closed all the Service's causes of concern. An overview of the findings from this inspection 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.

The impact of the backlog in local government audits meant that for the financial year 2023/24, the auditors were not able to obtain sufficient appropriate audit evidence in respect of the 2023/24 opening balances and the comparatives balances relating to 2022/23 resulting in a disclaimed opinion for the 2023/24 Statement of Accounts. Significant work was undertaken as part of the audit of the 2024/25 accounts to build back assurance. This resulted in moving from a disclaimed opinion for the previous set of accounts, to them now being qualified only based on the Authority's comparative income and expenditure for the year ended 31 March 2024.

The 2024/25 statement of accounts were presented to the Overview and Audit Committee on 11th February 2026. They can be found in the following link: [Audited Statement of Accounts 24/25](#)

- 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, assessed this within their Year End Report to the Overview and Audit Committee. The VFM report did not identify any risks of significant weaknesses against the three reporting criteria of financial sustainability, governance and improving economy, efficiency

and effectiveness. The most recently published Audit Results Report for the Year ended 31 March 2025 is available here:

<https://bucksfire.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/SPECIAL-OVERVIEW-AND-AUDIT-COMMITTEE-MEETING-AGENDA-AND-REPORTS-11-FEBRUARY-2026.pdf#page=23>

- 2.4 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 internal audit work undertaken allowed us to provide a reasonable conclusion as to the adequacy and effectiveness of the Council's system of internal control. Examples of good practice were noted through audit work performed this year; however, there are some areas of weakness and non-compliance in the control framework which may put some of the system objectives at risk. From the control weaknesses identified, none are understood to have had a material impact on the Authority as a whole."
Source: Internal Audit Service Annual Report of the Chief Internal Auditor July 2025

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

[\(Public Pack\)Agenda Document for BMKFA Overview & Audit Committee, 16/07/2025 10:00](#)

- 2.5 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 A comprehensive review of internal officer board meetings was conducted. This review aimed to enhance accountability and decision-making processes.

3.3 To ensure the effective delivery of our objectives, three key delivery groups have been established:

Service Delivery Group: Tasked with ensuring that all Prevention, Protection, and Response & Resilience objectives are met.

People Delivery Group: Focuses on ensuring that the People enabling functions are operating effectively

Finance, and Assets Delivery Group: Focuses on ensuring that the finance, assets, and digital enabling functions are performing effectively and efficiently to support the achievement of our objectives.

3.4 The CRMP Performance Board plays a crucial role in the governance structure by monitoring performance across our Objectives and Enablers on a monthly basis. Ongoing analysis of performance data supports decision-making across the service, with management teams regularly reviewing and monitoring data and information.

3.5 The Programme Board is established to drive and support the changes required to deliver our CRMP and Annual Delivery Plan. It provides strategic direction, monitors progress, and addresses any issues that may arise during the execution of projects.

3.6 Strategic oversight is provided by the Strategic Leadership Board and ultimately the Fire Authority and its committees. The Strategic Leadership Board acts as the 'clearing house' for decision and information papers to the Authority's committees.

3.7 An Improvement Board was established after the Service was moved into the supportive 'engage' process by HMICFRS in November 2023 has also operated throughout 2024/25 to drive improvements against the findings

of HMICFRS 2023 inspection findings. The service was removed from the enhanced monitoring (engage) process during 2024/25 however the Board remained in place until every improvement finding from the last inspection process was complete.

- 3.8 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.

- 3.9 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.
- 3.10 Details of the Authority’s governance arrangements and the internal auditor’s findings in relation to these (summarised at paragraph 2.4 above) can be found in the Annual Governance Statement 2024/2025:
<https://bucksfire.gov.uk/publications/annual-governance-statements/>
- 3.11 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 2025 meeting, and can be viewed via the following link to the Authority’s website: [Pay Policy Statement - Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service](#)

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 robust and well-established structures and processes for assuring its operational effectiveness, aligned to the NFCC Operational Learning Good Practice Guide and the NFCC National Operational Learning Fire Standard. The Operational Learning & Assurance Team (OLAT) monitor, review and evaluate performance at operational incidents and training activity, capturing learning in accordance with NFCC methodologies for identifying risks, monitoring trends, recommending remedial actions, and ensuring lessons lead to meaningful improvement. The OLAT coordinates all learning inputs received through National Operational Learning (NOL) and Joint Organisational Learning (JOL) through the Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles (JESIP), ensuring the Service fulfils the Fire Standard requirements to act on national learning and maintain an open learning culture embedded within organisational processes.
- 4.3 All identified learning and required improvements are captured within the Operational Learning & Assurance Improvement Plan (OLAIP), which provides a structured, risk-based approach to prioritising enhancements to operational practices, procedures, training, and guidance. Oversight is provided through the Operational Learning Assurance Group, with governance and progress monitoring conducted through the delivery groups, performance boards and Strategic Leadership Board, ensuring continuous organisational improvement consistent with NFCC good practice.
- 4.4 The Operational Learning & Assurance Team (OLAT) maintains strong alignment with partner fire and rescue services across the Thames Valley and the wider South East region, supporting a consistent, collaborative approach to operational learning and assurance. The Service actively

participates in regional operational learning forums, contributing to shared analysis of incidents, dissemination of lessons, and development of consistent practices aligned to NFCC national arrangements.

This collaboration reinforces the Fire Standard requirement to engage with national and regional learning arrangements and to ensure learning is shared and embedded both within the Service and across neighbouring and multi-agency partners. The Service's involvement in these regional groups enhances interoperability, strengthens collective assurance, and supports continuous improvement across the Thames Valley and South East fire sector.

- 4.5 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 and Rescue Authorities must produce a Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP) 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 CRMP 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 CRMP consultations and, in particular, that appropriate information was provided to enable active and informed participation.

- 5.3 The Authority regularly reviews the fire and rescue related risks to the community it serves and updates its CRMP in response to any material changes to the nature and level of the risks identified and assessed.

- 5.4 On 11 December 2024 (Item 13) <https://bucksfire.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/FIRE-AUTHORITY-SUMMONS-AND-AGENDA-11-DECEMBER-2024-min.pdf> the Authority approved the successor to its Public Safety Plan, which is now known as - [the Community Risk Management Plan \(CRMP\) and covers the period 2025-2030](#)
- 5.5 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 Executive Committee and to the Authority 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 2024/2025 the framework of indicators and measures can be viewed on the Authority's website by following this link (Agenda Item 16) : [\(Public Pack\)Agenda Document for Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority, 11/06/2025 11:00](#)

6. HMICFRS INSPECTION

- 6.1 The 2023 HMICFRS inspection report for this Service identified three causes of concern, accompanied by 10 recommendations, and 26 areas for improvement. The report states 'The service has made some progress since our 2021 inspection. For example, it has addressed the areas for improvement to understand its decreasing number of prevention visits and the recommendation to review its prevention strategy. It has also made good progress in raising awareness of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), although it has more to do. But we were disappointed to see that the service hasn't made enough progress in more areas. The service has only fully addressed 4 of the 22 areas for improvement identified in the 2021 inspection. Furthermore, it has only fully addressed three of the eight recommendations following the identification of two causes of concern: one in prevention and the other in fairness and diversity" " We recognise that the service has faced challenges over recent years, and there is a clear commitment from staff in the service to improve"

Source: Buckinghamshire - HMICFRS (justiceinspectorates.gov.uk)

Cause of Concern

The Service was issued with two causes of concern that continue from Round 2 and one new cause of concern, relating to Protection, on 19 October along with the full report publication.

- 1) The first cause of concern from round three relates to Prevention activity.

The report states:

Some improvements in prevention have been made since our last inspection. The service has revised its prevention strategy, and this is giving its prevention and response teams better direction. But the service is still not adequately identifying and prioritising those most at risk from fire.

Within 28 days, the Service should review its action plan to make sure that:

- It has an effective system to define the levels of risk in the community.
- Its systems and processes for dealing with referrals from individuals and partner agencies effectively manage and prioritise those referrals with the highest identified risk

- 2) The second cause of concern from round three relates to Protection activity.

The report states: The service hasn't done enough since our last inspection to address its areas for improvement and provide clear direction to make sure that its teams can prioritise work according to risk.

Within 28 days, the Service should provide an action plan that:

- clearly defines its risk-based inspection programme, within a revised protection strategy, which is aligned to its next public safety plan;
- makes sure its increased number of staff complete a proportionate amount of activity to reduce risk and work to effective targets;

- assures the system to record fire safety activity is robust and well supported to enable prioritisation of highest risk;
- makes sure it has an effective quality assurance process so that staff carry out audits to an appropriate standard;

3) The third cause of concern relates to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.

The report states: The service hasn't made enough progress since our last inspection to improve equality, diversity and inclusion. The service has done enough to complete one of our recommendations by reviewing its equality impact assessment process. But the other recommendations still require action to be taken or completed.

Within 28 days, the Service should review its action plan, detailing how it will:

- give greater priority to how it increases awareness of equality, diversity and inclusion across the organisation;
- make sure that it has appropriate ways to engage with and seek feedback from all staff, including those from under-represented groups;
- make improvements to the way it collects equality data to better understand its workforce demographics and needs;
- be more ambitious in its efforts to attract a more diverse workforce that better reflects the community it serves.

Source: [Agenda MKC](#)

6.2 On 15 November 2023, the Service submitted an action plan setting out how it would address the causes of concern and our recommendations.

On 8 November 2024 formal correspondence was received from the HMICFRS with a progress update stating "We were pleased to see the significant steps the service has taken in response to the causes of concern we issued. The action taken to address the prevention cause of concern has made sure that the service is now prioritising those most at risk of fire for a home visit. This cause of concern is closed."

Source: <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectrates.gov.uk/publication-html/buckinghamshire-frs-causes-of-concern-progress-letter-november-2024/>

The Service was later removed from Engage on 7 March 2025 following a virtual revisit due to good progress made with both outstanding causes of concern, on protection and equality, diversity and inclusion. All causes of concern have now been closed.

HM Inspector Roy Wilsher has responsibility for Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service. He said:

“I am pleased with the progress that Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service has made so far. Whilst there is still more to do, I have recommended removing the service from our enhanced level of monitoring, known as Engage, and return it to routine monitoring.

“I am reassured by the plans Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service has in place to continue making improvements. This decision is supported by the fact we have been able to close its causes of concern. We will continue to assess their progress to make sure the people of Buckinghamshire are getting the service they deserve from their fire and rescue service.”

Source: <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectrates.gov.uk/news/news-feed/buckinghamshire-frs-removed-from-enhanced-monitoring/>

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. The 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 the 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 through 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 and rescue services, Thames Valley Police and South Central Ambulance Service, 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, assess threats and risks, identify objectives, and decide actions.
- 7.9 Single- and multi-agency lessons identified, along with examples of notable practice, are shared with partner organisations through submissions to the Joint Organisational Learning (JOL) online platform. The Service also uses this platform to receive national learning, enabling continuous improvement and supporting beneficial, sustainable change across our operational activities.
- 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 Forensic Fire Investigation team. This ensures that all four agencies will comply with changing regulatory requirements related to Fire Investigation, in a cost effective and efficient manner.

8. DECLARATION

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



Louise Harrison
Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive



Councillor Stuart Wilson
Chairman, Overview and Audit Committee